



# OVERLORD

10

The Ruler of  
Conspiracy

Kugane Maruyama  
Illustration by so-bin

# OVERLORD

- オーバーロード -

- VOLUME 10 -

*The Ruler of Conspiracy*

-AUTHOR-

Kugane Maruyama

-ILLUSTRATOR-

so-bin

[ YEN PRESS ]





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Volume 10: The Ruler of Conspiracy

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OVERLORD, VOLUME 10  
KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Emily Balistrieri  
Cover art by so-bin

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## Prologue

# PROLOGUE

When Albedo entered the room, she breathed in deeply.

Unfortunately, there was no scent left behind to tickle her nostrils. Of course there wasn't. Her beloved master's body performed no metabolic processes, and he didn't even breathe, so how could he leave behind an odor?

But she could sense his smell—with her heart.

When she inhaled air from a room her master had been in, it put her heart at ease.

That's what it's like to be a maiden in love.

"Tee-hee-hee!" She let slip an intoxicated giggle and clamped a hand over her mouth.

It wasn't truly an issue that her teeth had been visible, since no one was around to see, but it simply wasn't ladylike.

Albedo sat softly on the bed and then lay down.

She sniffed a few times, but as she had suspected, her nose picked up nothing. Still, it gave her profound joy to lie in the bed of the one she adored.

This was perfectly normal behavior for a maiden in love. Anyone who took a woman doing the same thing in the bed of the man she loved, yet feeling nothing, and lumped her together with Albedo in the "maiden in love" category was offensive rabble who knew nothing of true love.

"Ahhh..."

She stopped her hand just as her fingers sought the pleasure below her waist. Now wasn't the time.

*I guess I'm getting addicted,* she thought, among other things, as she sat up.

For the moment, she had to finish the day's work.

With the establishment of the Nation of Darkness and the conquering of E-Rantel, her workload had increased dramatically. The reason being that the civil servants under the previous ruler, the Re-Estize Kingdom, had fled—that is, returned to the kingdom, leaving government posts understaffed.

Undead created by her master were supposed to take over those roles, but she was still educating them—which took time and added even more to her workload.

In the not too distant future, she would have some free time, but for now, she would probably stay busy.

Of course, Albedo didn't equate having lots of work with suffering. No, she was sure that not a single resident of Nazarick found laboring for their master unpleasant. On the contrary, it was only natural that the harder they worked, the more ecstatic they grew.

"I would like to see the results of my teaching soon, though..."

For a few days or a couple weeks. Even if a month was impossible, she wanted to leave the government up to the undead and see how they would do.

As luck would have it, she was thinking it was about time to visit the kingdom for some talks. She knew that, since her master was so overflowing with wisdom, he would be fine without her. But that would mean forcing the absolute ruler to do work that was beneath him—odd jobs.

A king had a king's duty.

"Speaking of which... I wonder what direction Lord Ainz is planning on taking the Nation of Darkness in."

The nature of the country itself...

Once that was decided, they could make laws and policies that matched.

For instance, if it was a country that made all humans work for Nazarick as slaves, they would have to create laws that completely enslaved humans. They would also have to decide all sorts of details such as how to interact with neighboring human countries and what approach they would take with the humans of other countries.

But she still hadn't gotten a clear answer on that from her master yet.

It was as if the Nation of Darkness was currently missing a critical pillar in its foundation and still based its overall structure on the old house—that is, the kingdom.

Was this the shape her beloved master's country would take? Or was he waiting for something?

If it was the latter, she felt endlessly ashamed that she wasn't able to discern his plans.

This was the struggle of serving a master with such a sage mind that it left everyone clueless.

Her master had the ability to plan in a way that allowed him to accomplish multiple objectives in one fell swoop. Sadly, that left her always feeling bad for not being able to think as far as he could.

Even Demiurge, who was as brilliant as her if not more, had grumbled, "I cannot even hold a candle to our master's wisdom. It's quite embarrassing." That being said...

"No matter what kind of country he creates, all I have to do is abide by Lord Ainz's decisions."

There was only one exception—Albedo didn't plan on obeying anyone but her beloved master.

"Though I really have to wonder what he's going to do..."

Of course, there was no one to answer her murmur.



# **CHAPTER 1**

## **THE NATION OF DARKNESS,**

## **AINZ OOAL GOWN**

# 1

*The King of Darkness—that is, the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick and the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown...* He was the leader of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, the one who stayed in Nazarick until the end, attended by his subordinates, and at the moment, he was lying on his stomach in a soft bed reading a book.

This bed, which had been brought from the Great Tomb of Nazarick to Ainz's room in the partially refurbished home of the former E-Rantel ruler, Mayor Panasolei, didn't give off the same nice fragrance of the one in his private chambers in Nazarick.

*It's probably because this one hasn't been spritzed with perfume,* thought Ainz as he lay on the bed.

Of course, as an undead, Ainz didn't require sleep.

Certainly, there were times he lounged in bed to cool his head and heart when the remnants of his humanity pled mental exhaustion, but those moments were brief. There was no point in long stretches of lying around like he was doing now.

But there's an exception to every rule.

For example—when reading. Especially when he was conscious of how he was perceived by other people.

*The sun should be coming up soon... Oh!*

Grasping the approximate time of day from the light spilling through the crack in the drawn curtains, he readily thrust the book he had been reading under his pillow.

Then he glanced at the corner of the room without turning his head.

A maid was there.

She was one of the regular maids of Nazarick, and today she was on Ainz duty— Well, technically she had been on shift since the day before. She was sitting perfectly straight with gorgeous posture, and she hadn't shifted at all since the previous night. As far as Ainz knew, not a single maid ever relaxed their posture.

Ainz was bathed in her stare. It was unceasing, barring a few blinks.

The pressure was indescribable.

Surely she didn't mean to intimidate him. She probably only wanted to be ready to assist him at a moment's notice, but the normal guy Satoru Suzuki wished she would give him a break.

This was probably true for anyone, but he felt awkward with someone constantly staring at him. Particularly when someone of the opposite sex was staring, he felt like he must have been doing something wrong even if nothing had happened.

The biggest issue was that anytime Ainz made the slightest move, she would sync up and silently begin to move with him.

Let's be frank.

It was torture.

Of course, Ainz was the absolute ruler. If he told the maid to stop, she surely would. But remembering the look on her face when he brought up the subject in a roundabout way, he couldn't bring himself to give her the order.

Almost immediately after coming to this world, he had set out adventuring as Momon, meaning this was the first time he really had maids working at his side. This explained the surprising degree of loyalty with which they performed every task. Ainz understood that, so it didn't feel right to simply enforce his will on them.

*Maybe they'll get sick of it after a little while.*

It had already been a month since he started thinking that.

Though he was mildly concerned at the possibility things might always be like this, he set the issue aside for the moment because it would take forty-one days for all the maids to take their turn at Ainz duty anyhow.

*So this is the struggle of being a ruler... There's the work to maintain Nazarick, planning for the organization's future, and living up to my subordinates' expectations... I sure do admire people at the top. No wonder they get paid so much.*

Ainz slowly sat up as he contemplated how off base he had been, once upon a time, thinking that executives were awarded fat salaries for doing next to nothing.

In the same instant, the maid soundlessly rose from her chair as if they were connected by string.

Despite being on watch the entire night, she employed brisk movements.

“—I’m getting up.”

“Yes, my lord. Then if you’ll excuse me, I shall take my leave. After I brief today’s maid, she will take my place.”

Instead of thanking her, Ainz merely uttered a dignified “mm,” waved a disinterested hand, and gestured for her to get going.

Even Ainz felt he was being awfully arrogant.

But apparently people liked it.

When he had Hamusuke survey popular opinion, their number one reaction was, *It feels like I’m being dominated and Lord Ainz is fully in charge*. At first he wondered if they were all kinky masochists, but after thinking on it further, he realized that there was a suitable way for rulers to comport themselves. He figured that was what his subordinates wanted.

At the office, employees naturally wanted their boss to carry themselves in a manner becoming of a company president.

In that sense, he felt this attitude was appropriate for the King of Darkness, and in actuality, whenever he had a free moment to spy on the ruler of the empire, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, he saw that he acted the same way.

Still, from Satoru Suzuki’s working-adult perspective, not expressing any appreciation was strange.

“...Then have a nice rest.”

“Oh! I humbly thank you for your kindness, Lord Ainz.” The maid bowed low in gratitude. “But thanks to this item you lent me, I can work for you without rest.”

*No, that's not what I was going for,* said Ainz in his head.

Certainly with the Ring of Sustenance equipped, the maid could stay awake day and night, no problem. But wasn't it hell sitting in a chair all night long doing nothing but watching him? He understood that attending him made his subordinates happy, but there was no need for this much service.

*I think we could at least get rid of night duty... bed duty.*

To the maids, it was only natural to give their all for their master.

One of them said something to that effect.

*Give their all for their master? What would happen if I said I was going to be their equal?*

Unlike when he was first transported here, he was now confident that his subordinates' loyalty was absolute. The possibility of a revolt, barring outside influence—and assuming Ainz didn't do anything to disappoint them—was zero. So perhaps changing their relationship and living among the NPCs as their equal was an option.

Then he would be free from this ruler lifestyle that was constantly tying his brain in knots. Plus—

*—maybe it could be like the old days with the guild.*

Sometimes when Ainz talked with the NPCs, he saw his old friends in them. That made him want to interact with them not as ruler and subordinate but—

*No.* Ainz mentally shook his head.

As long as he wasn't sure what might disappoint them, it would be dangerous to change the system too much. And if they wished for a master-follower relationship, then it was his job as their master to maintain it. It was his duty to the guild's NPC children as the last remaining creator.

The maid excused herself and left the room.

That moment, as if in direct response to her exit, Ainz got busy. First, he took the book out from under his pillow and replaced it with a different one. It was one with a difficult title; a single glance was enough to make anyone lose interest in reading it. He

took the book he'd been reading during the night and stored it in his space—his inventory.

Having put it somewhere it couldn't be stolen very easily, he breathed a sigh of relief.

This was one of his duties as a master.

He didn't want to spend all night reading books so hard they would make his head hurt. If possible, he wanted to read how-to books or fun stuff. But if the others found out he was reading that sort of thing, it would reflect poorly on him as a ruler. That was why he obsessed over details like this.

Incidentally, he came up with this plan because he knew that the maids would move the book when they made his bed.

After finishing everything he needed to do there, he pushed aside the delicate silklike fabric hanging down from the canopy and got out of bed.

Right then, there was a knock at the door. The next maid entered.

When she saw Ainz rising from his bed, her face filled with joy, and she approached. The one in charge of serving Ainz—"on Ainz duty"—must have been her.

"Morning, Fith."

Her face lit up so much, she was positively dazzling. "Good morning, Lord Ainz! I'm happy to serve you today!"

If Fith had a tail, she would have been wagging it with all her might. He suddenly remembered that Pestonia wagged her tail.

Fith wore the same maid outfit as Foth before her. Unlike the combat maids, all the regular maids wore the same uniform. But when their appearance changed—or more specifically, when the girls who wore the uniform changed—there was still something refreshing about them.

He recalled a friend's words, which had been stressed so often it was obnoxious: "Simple maid outfits are great, but ones with all sorts of accents are the best." They continued. "In other words, maid outfits are fantastic any way you do them. The maid outfit is the greatest invention in the history of humanity. Viva maid outfits!"

Ainz didn't know the word *viva*, but he guessed it had something to do with admiration. Or maybe his friend had made it up. Even moments like this reminded him of his old guildmates.

He gazed at the maid with a wry smile—although, naturally, his face didn't move.

"L-Lord Ainz, is something the matter?"

When Fith, clutching her apron, asked him that with an embarrassed look on her face, he realized how impolite he was being.

"Sorry. I was just... Yes, I guess you could say I was fascinated."

"\_\_!"

"Shall we go, then?"

"Yeegh? Er, yes. Understood!"

The maid answered in an energetic, albeit slightly flustered voice and followed behind Ainz as he passed through several rooms.

The difference between this place and the ninth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick was so great, the two were impossible to compare. For that reason, when Ainz announced he was moving in, the guardians were against it.

Because it wasn't luxurious enough for a Supreme Being.

Because it lacked the proper defenses and counterespionage measures.

Because, because, because...

But Ainz overrode all their concerns and declared the place as his residence—because it seemed to him that it was part of his duty as king, in the same way that Jircniv lived at the imperial palace in the empire's capital. And to Ainz and Satoru Suzuki, the mayor's manor was plenty splendid in the first place. Remembering his house in his original world, there wasn't even a way to compare the two. Besides, his room on the ninth level of Nazarick was a bit too big and showy anyhow.

When it was a game, the interior design hadn't bothered him, but when he actually

started living there, he didn't know what to do with himself. He had wanted to just curl up in a corner. Followed by Fith and the eight-edged assassins who came down from the ceiling of the room connected to his bedroom, Ainz walked over to his dressing room.

Several maids on standby there bowed reverently. Fith quickly took her place in line with them.

"Lord Ainz, what will you wear today?" Fith asked, full of energy.

*...Oh, her eyes sure are sparkling. Well, I have the feeling every maid's eyes sparkle at this. I've heard that women like clothes, but... is that why? Or do they enjoy coordinating outfits?*

He was slightly fed up with the fuss but didn't let it show. Instead he said, "Hmm," in a voice he thought sounded distinguished—and he was confident because he had rehearsed it.

Honestly, there was no reason for Ainz to change his clothes.

One night rolling around in bed with a magic robe wasn't going to wrinkle it. And his body didn't produce anything like sweat that would dirty it, either. All that would ever get on it was dust in the air, which would come off if he so much as brushed it. Everywhere he went had been meticulously cleaned by the maids, and he didn't eat or drink, so there was no way for him to get his robe filthy.

He would have had no problem wearing the same thing every day.

But none of his subordinates would allow it. Well, it made sense. If their absolute ruler never changed what he wore, it would affect his reputation.

That being said, Ainz wasn't very confident when it came to coordinating an outfit.

He could select the proper gear when he made battle preparations after taking the abilities and skills of his opponent into account while speculating about their likely tactics and devising a strategy to counter them, but...

Satoru Suzuki could tell to some extent whether a certain necktie went with a certain suit or not due to the limited experience he had accumulated. But for the question of whether this combination of a purple robe with a silver pattern and a silver necklace

with four large diamonds went well together or not, he had no idea. Plus, his body was all bones.

But if he didn't look sharp, there was a possibility that his character as a ruler would be brought into question. That would amount to a betrayal of the subordinates who served him so faithfully. He needed to put his all into clothing just like everything else.

There was just one critical problem.

Even if he looked bad, who would tell him? This was exactly like how no one would dare say a word when a major company's president's toupee was slightly off-kilter.

Given all those factors, he had only one choice.

“—Fith, I'll leave it up to you. Find something appropriate for me to wear.”

“Understood! You can count on me, Lord Ainz! I'll put my body and soul into the selection!”

*You don't have to get that pumped up about it*—is what Ainz always thought, but he never told any of the maids that.

“Red would look very dashing on you, Lord Ainz! So I think today's outfit will be built around the color red. Is that all right with you?”

“...I told you before that I would leave it up to you. No need to ask.”

“Yes, my lord! Understood!”

If he wasn't confident, he would have someone else decide—all he needed was to have the maids choose for him.

The crimson robe she brought out gave him pause. It was such a bright red that it nearly gave him a headache, and it had several large gems attached to it like buttons. It would have been fine if they were all one color, but the gems sparkled in a total of six various hues. On top of that, there were mysterious letters embroidered around the edge in gold thread.

*Is this a proper piece of clothing? Does this fall within the realm of fashion common sense?*

He felt like one of those guys sandwiched between signboards, decked out in neon lights. He never would have chosen this on his own. Moreover, he wondered why he had ever bought such a robe in the first place. He didn't recall any of the guild members forcing it on him, so by process of elimination, it had to have been his own doing.

*Was it a bonus item? Was I forced to accept it alongside something else?... Well, I guess it doesn't matter now.*

Remembering why he owned the thing wouldn't make it disappear.

It would have been easy enough to reject it, but that would have meant it was a lie when he said he was leaving everything to Fith. Besides, it was possible that the only one who thought the outfit looked lame was Ainz and that the majority of people found it fabulous. No, there was a pretty good chance that was the case.

Finally, although it sounded nasty, the one who chose the robe was Fith, so if anyone said anything, blaming her was an option.

*I'm the worst boss.*

Ainz felt guilty and realized perhaps this was what it meant to be corrupt. He was well aware that deflecting blame wasn't how a boss—or anyone at the top—earned praise. Still, there were things he had to protect.

In order to defend his position, he was willing to sacrifice his subordinate. This was what it was like to be forced into that situation.

“—Sorry.”

“Oh, my humble apologies!”

“No... I was just talking to myself. It's nothing you need to worry about. By the way...” He decided to try asking just in case. “I was wondering: You don't think this robe is too loud for me?”

“Not at all! You look great in anything, Lord Ainz! And while I think your mainly black and dark-brown robes are charming, if that's all you wear, there's other good sides of you we don't get to see! This one expresses your tremendous power and—”

He interrupted the torrent of words. “Ah, if it looks good, then that's fine. Will you

dress me?"

"Understood!"

Fith glanced at the other maids.

Ainz stood there, and the maids disrobed him without a word.

Being dressed by women was a slow-roasting embarrassment, even as a skeleton.

But apparently, for an absolute ruler, this was utterly normal.

Or rather, it was for Jircniv. The same thing was mentioned in a book Ainz had read, too.

He watched silently as the maids did their thing.

Before long, Ainz stood before the mirror in the crimson robe. It really was garish. That was the only word for it.

*...Well, aesthetics in this world are pretty different, right? There's a good chance this is the proper way for a ruler to dress... probably?*

To quash his lingering anxiety, he recalled the example of how people reacted to Hamusuke.

"Well then, shall we go?"

As he headed off with Fith, Ainz thought in his heart of hearts, *I could really use some time to relax.*

•

With his garish red robe fluttering behind him, Ainz headed for his office. When he reached the entrance, Fith hurried ahead and respectfully opened the way for him.

*I can at least get the door myself* was something he thought on a regular basis, but the maids always seemed to enjoy their work so much with expressions that seemed to say, *Yay, I'm working!* leaving Ainz no choice but to silently accept this automatic manual entry system.

Ainz brought Fith and the eight-edged assassins into his office.

In the center of the room, exactly like in Ainz's office in Nazarick, rested a massive desk that oozed dignity. This, like the bed in the other room, was spare furniture brought from Nazarick. In the back of the room was the flag of Ainz Ooal Gown—the flag of the Nation of Darkness.

Ainz crossed the room and went to the bay window. On top of a nearby shelf was a not terribly large glass box with a miniature forest reproduced inside. It didn't look like there were any creatures, but Ainz stuck a finger in and flipped up a leaf.

There, hidden from the sun, was a tiny animal.

Its slick, flesh-colored form was coated with a slime it apparently secreted, and on one end, its body resembled human lips.

Ainz observed the Lip Bug closely.

"Nice complexion. I'm glad to see you doing well."

He remembered being told that the color was important. He had been shown a few different Lip Bugs and learned how to tell which one was in the best condition. This one was definitely doing better recently.

Ainz took some fresh cabbage off a plate nearby.

"Look, Slimy Boy! Time to eat!"

When he moved the cabbage toward the Lip Bug, it chomped down. He let go and the bug continued munching away.

The creature finished the cabbage in the blink of an eye, and Ainz gave him a couple more leaves.

Entoma had warned him not to feed it too much, so he left it at that.

Having eaten its fill, the Lip Bug must have been satisfied. It slowly returned to the shade of a tree in the box, where it could relax.

"At first this thing creeped me out, but now that I've had it for a while, it's pretty cute,"

he murmured to no one in particular with a sunny smile on his face before replacing the box's thin lid. The fact that he used a lid that wouldn't pose much of an obstacle if the bug was serious about escaping showed that he was caring for it properly. Then again, it was a mercenary monster that he'd summoned with gold pieces, so he wasn't sure if it would just run away eventually on its own.

Ainz wiped his hands with the cloth sitting next to the box. He sat in his chair and leaned back after completing his morning routine.

*Work? It's not as if I have a set start time, but once it reaches around this hour, I begin feeling gloomy. I guess I haven't really managed to shake my old habits...*

There wasn't a single document on his desk or even a speck of dust.

It was very different from Satoru Suzuki's workspace.

The reason for the tidiness was that he didn't have any work that carried over to the next day. Ainz's job was to make big decisions not carry out miscellaneous tasks. Once the decisions were made, the rest was left to his subordinates.

*...It's so rough, though. For the first time, I've realized that it's the weight of responsibility that makes work so unbearable... That mental exhaustion—the pressure—is tougher to handle than physical labor. Also, I think it's about time for that thing to get started.*

He didn't even have to look at a clock.

Just then, there was a knock on his door. Fith, who was standing by, confirmed the identity of the visitors.

"Lord Ainz, it's Mistress Albedo and the elder liches."

Her tone was deferential even when speaking of the elder liches because Ainz had personally created them.

"I see. Let them in."

Fith yielded the way to the visitors. Albedo led six elder liches, each holding paperwork, into the room.

"Good morning, Lord Ainz."

Following Albedo's greeting, the elder liches all bowed deeply.

"Right. Morning, Albedo. Seems like we'll be having good weather again today."

"Yes, I heard the sky will be clear all day. Of course, the weather can be changed to whatever the absolute ruler of this world wishes. Do you have any requests, Lord Ainz?"

*All I wanted to do was use a benign topic as an excuse to have a conversation, and that's where you go?*

"That won't be necessary. I'm not against fluctuations in weather. Sun is nice, but rainstorms with lightning have their own charm, and silently falling snow is rather atmospheric. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that each day begins with the pleasures of capricious weather."

He wasn't opposed to the changing weather in this world. With its healthy environment, the rain was actually a blessing, just as Blue Planet had once explained to him.

It was good for nature to stay natural.

"Understood... I did notice that you weren't interested in controlling the weather, but I took the liberty of making the suggestion just in case—since you don't always order us to fulfill your desires."

"...I don't? I'm pretty sure I do..."

When he thought about it, there wasn't really anything specific he wanted. Back when he was Satoru Suzuki, there wasn't anything unrelated to *Yggdrasil* that he really pined for. And now there was even less. He wasn't sure if it was a side effect of becoming an undead or not, but there was a good chance it was simply his personality. If there was anything he wanted, it was rare items to add to his collection. And...

Ainz smiled sadly and shook his head gently.

"Well, maybe that's true. But it's only because there's nothing I truly desire. If I think of something, I'll give the order."

"When the time comes, I, as captain of the guardians, will promptly select those most

capable of satisfying your request." Albedo bowed her head slightly, and when she lifted it up again, her face was a little red. "By the way, your outfit today is delightful. It's radiant. No, the clothes are radiant because you're the one wearing them, my lord."

Albedo really laid on the praise.

*I'm gleaming because this thing has jewels instead of buttons. It's not like my head shoots out beams of light,* thought Ainz as he nodded.

"Is that so? Thank you, Albedo."

"You needn't waste your thanks on me, my lord. I only speak the truth. You really are—"

Albedo was getting excited. He sensed she was going to start rambling and held up a hand to stop her. "That's plenty, Albedo. Now then, those are the documents you guys processed yesterday, right?"

"...Yes, my lord."

Albedo's cheeks were pouting slightly in a cute way as she directed the elder liches to set the papers on the desk.

Each bundle was thick. Ainz didn't have that many things to deal with, but the information accompanying each matter was extensive. In this world, like at a company, solving complex problems required lots of data on a wide variety of subjects.

Ainz braced himself mentally. Morning was always a time to steel his resolve.

Satoru Suzuki had been a mere employee. He had never been involved in running the company he worked for. If asked whether such a person could rule an entire country, he could say with confidence: No. Even someone involved in operations at a company would undoubtedly have had a hard time running a nation.

Even worse, Ainz was an absolute ruler. Even if what he said was wrong, his subordinates would execute his orders to the letter.

Was there anything more terrifying than that? With one wrong word, Ainz could cause a mass suicide.

So what was a king to do?

The answer was simple—he would deal with it the same way he handled the clothes he was wearing. In other words, delegate matters to someone who had the ability.

The skill required of a boss was to assign personnel duties that matched up with their strengths.

That said, handing off every single thing would be bad. Sure, he could leave everything to Albedo, but even if he was king only for show, the position entailed responsibility.

There were certain times and jobs where it was impossible to run away by uttering the phrase *I don't know*.

Consequently, he always properly reviewed all the papers that came to him before stamping them with the state seal.

After clearing a few at a rhythmical pace, he paused, internally chose one as his goal for the day, then read everything he was supposed to know about it. But...

*...I don't understand this. It's about supplies, right? Is it important? I bet the elder liches know... I created them! What's with this gap in comprehension...? This is so hard to read. It's like a law or something.*

There were numerous points where it said to refer to the appendix, which sent him flipping through the documents, but then he encountered words at the bottom of some pages that negated the conclusions above. On top of that, there were multiple negatives in one sentence, which made it difficult to parse.

"Albedo."

"Yes, Lord Ainz! Is there something bothering you?"

"No, it's unrelated to this, but I just remembered: What's going on with the laws?"

Though they were calling themselves the Nation of Darkness, they didn't have any of their own laws yet and were simply using the kingdom's in the meanwhile.

"I'm in the process of drafting them, but if we force them on people, we can expect discontent to build in various corners, so I'm unsure how to go about it."

Albedo thought nothing of humans, so the statement was rather unlike her, but Ainz was relieved.

"I consulted with Demiurge, and... with the current laws of the kingdom, your powers as absolute ruler are weakened. Therefore, we were considering adopting only the first chapter of kingdom law and strictly enforcing that."

"I'm fairly confident in other matters, but"—that was a huge lie; there was almost nothing he felt sure about—"unfortunately I don't know much about laws. You guys can do what you think is best. I trust you."

"Yes, my lord! Understood."

Albedo looked happy. Her wings were also fidgeting. For some reason he couldn't fathom, she—and Demiurge—still thought that he was a genius who was always thinking one step ahead of them. So whenever he said he didn't understand something, it seemed that they were thrilled to have a chance to fulfill their purpose as beings created to be intelligent and knowledgeable.

"But I will say, Lord Ainz, there's no need to lie and claim you don't know much about laws..."

"No, it's really true. I have no idea how to handle legal issues."

"Ah, I see now. You're coming from the perspective of an absolute ruler, unbound by legislation. I understand."

Ainz had the feeling she was misunderstanding him, but he didn't say anything—mostly because he didn't know what to say. Instead, he let a suppressed laugh slip out. Though he was barely familiar with the concept, he felt like this might be like when a child wanted to proudly announce something to their parents.

"Did I amuse you?"

Albedo's puzzled face made Ainz even happier. But it was rude to laugh on his own.

"Sorry. You're cute when you're happy—or something like that. It's hard to explain."

The moment he said it, the eight-edged assassins flinched on the ceiling, but there was no further movement.

“Oh dear! How embarrassing!”

Albedo hid her face in her hands. Then Ainz noticed how hard she was blushing and finally realized how mortifying his words were. He cleared his throat and tried to look anywhere else. It seemed that he always ended up spewing cheesy lines whenever he interacted with the NPCs, whom he loved as his friends’ children.

While he chided himself, he stamped the last of the documents. For now, his work was done.

When he handed them to Albedo, who had been busy wiping her mouth, she turned them over to the elder liches.

“Okay, let’s do our usual thing. Here are today’s suggestions.”

Ainz took a sheet he’d prepared out of a drawer. This was a list of proposals from all the various members of Nazarick. He was collecting opinions and ideas about where the future of the Nation of Darkness might be headed.

Ainz always ran his eyes over it and presented a clean version to Albedo in the morning.

“It’s such a waste of your precious time for you to do things like edit this list.”

“No, there could be suggestions for me personally in there. And besides, I don’t sleep. I have to do something to keep busy.”

That was a lie. Well, it wasn’t a lie that if he was doing nothing, he would be bored, but he had no shortage of diversions: reading, soaking in a bath, rehearsing his acting, mock battles, etc. So to have to do this sort of thing *was* a bit...

Actually, some of the ideas were Ainz’s.

If he suggested them directly, he risked everyone bending over backward to realize an idea they were secretly unhappy with and ending up with miserable results. He wanted Albedo to consider the proposals fairly, so he kept everything anonymous. By the same token, his competence would never be brought into question, so keeping everyone’s true identities hidden killed two birds with one stone.

Ainz read the first proposal.

"Hmm... 'It would be good to build a facility to educate children. Discovering promising individuals and training them will lead to a future increase in Nazarick's power. Even if it isn't a direct boon, it could still lead to discovering new technologies and the fortification of the tomb,' is what this person has to say."

Ainz looked straight at Albedo and readied a question for her. "This is a solid proposal that clearly outlines the benefits of its plan. I can tell whoever submitted this has a great mind. We could even distribute this as an example of a strong proposal." After praising the document from the perspective of a working adult, he returned to a more serious expression—although his face didn't move, of course. "Who do you suppose wrote this?"

"I think it was Yuri Alpha."

She answered immediately. And Ainz agreed.

"Right. It must be Yuri. So what do you think about it, Albedo?"

"I think it's utterly stupid. Pigs should live as pigs, be useful to their owner, and then die. They shouldn't live any other way. There is no reason for them to know another lifestyle, nor do they have the right to choose one."

"That's a harsh way to put it, but I agree. You can become a cog in society with a bare minimum of education. Living and dying like that is good enough. Spreading technology is tantamount to giving away the power to threaten— Hmm?"

"What's the matter, Lord Ainz?"

"I remember having a similar conversation a while ago. Who was I talking to? Narberal and... oh, Lupusregina. Right, about potions... Oh, I didn't need to explain all this stuff to you, since you already understand. How embarrassing. Do me a favor and forget I ever mentioned it."

"N-no! I believe it's important for us to compare ideas! So please! Please continue!"

"O-oh... Well, it's embarrassing, but, well, I'll warn you that these are just my personal thoughts. If anything is wrong, correct me."

There was nothing more embarrassing than explaining something cleverly to someone who was already well versed in the subject. Though Ainz worried that Albedo would

think he was an idiot, he shared his opinions about technology.

Knowledge and education, as well as information, were the first weapons that humans—and in this world, other beings as well—could wield. While the spread of knowledge could increase a nation's strength, it also had the potential to foster discontent that didn't exist before.

That was why a ruler had to consider whether to give the people a weapon or not. There was a real chance that it could be turned against them.

Ainz had learned good lessons on the value of information back during his days in *Yggdrasil*. That was why he dispatched the two Baleares to make potions in Carne, a location that he had under adequate surveillance. He could monopolize the advancements and ensure they didn't leak.

Ainz wanted the ruled to remain under his rule and to keep the ignorant living in ignorance. But it was imperative to develop new technology and increase his nation's strength. Ultimately, it was a question of which way the weapon of knowledge was pointed.

"In conclusion, new technologies can be shared with and used among those who are absolutely loyal to the Great Tomb of Nazarick. Older technology that won't cause issues if the masses use it can be allowed to spread freely. I think the saying goes, 'The fruits of wisdom are only valuable if monopolized,' if I'm not mistaken." After speaking his mind, Ainz stole a glance at Albedo's face. She didn't seem confused or distrusting. "And here is my main point—Albedo. This is going to sound like the opposite of what I was just saying, but I think we should adopt this proposal."

Albedo's eyes grew wide for a moment.

"To what end, my lord?"

"Sentiment. And I think Yuri has a point."

"It seems to me that the disadvantages are far greater... Or is it that you would plan to establish the school in a remote region? Certainly if you made sure no information leaked to the outside world via brainwashing, there would be more benefits..."

"I won't be doing anything like that. It's a bit different from Yuri's idea, but I think it would be good to build an orphanage in this city."

While living as Momon, Ainz had learned that shrines ran orphanages. If that was the case, he figured he could open one in the name of Ainz Ooal Gown.

“Basically, the core issue we’re contending with is the possibility of Nazarick’s technology leaking to the outside world. To prevent that, all we’d need to do is simply operate the facility normally and not share any knowledge greater than what any local would know. And if someone shows promise, then and only then would we start to think about their future. That would work, right?”

“...I see. Certainly if that was all, then it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“And I’m thinking we could employ widows as the staff.”

“So you would be giving jobs to—and thus saving—women who must be struggling in poverty after losing their husbands in that battle where you displayed some of your great power. Rescuing widows and orphans sounds like a brilliant way to boost approval in your rule... I expected nothing less from you, my lord.”

“Indeed. However, taking action after various widows appeal to Momon with their plights will only improve his reputation. If that happens, mine will hardly budge. That means we need to act quickly, before anyone comes to him with the idea. In order to do that, first of all... I order Pestonia and Nigredo to be released from disciplinary confinement.”

Ainz was sharp enough to notice the light in Albedo’s eyes change slightly.

“With all due respect... I fear that pardoning the crimes of those who went against your judgment without punishment will upset the rule of order in Nazarick.”

“Didn’t we punish them by putting them in disciplinary confinement?”

“I find that extremely lenient. Your words are our everything, Lord Ainz. Going against them is the greatest sin. Personally, I suggest beheading.”

“That’s...” He had been about to say *ridiculous*, but he realized how much the denizens of Nazarick worshipped him and the other Forty-One Supreme Beings. To deny that would be cruel.

That was also precisely why they had to be forgiven. Ainz’s friends were the ones who designed their personalities. It could have been said that Pestonia’s and Nigredo’s

actions were the will of his friends.

If Ainz demanded it, Albedo would no doubt obey. But that was his last resort. First, he wanted to try to persuade her.

"Ultimately, the order I issued was to prevent the outside world from discovering that Nazarick was pulling the strings behind the incident in the kingdom. We needed to dispose of children as well, of course. But Pestonia and Nigredo saved an infant who won't remember a thing. That means there was never a need to eliminate the baby. You could say they accurately interpreted my intentions."

"They twisted your words as was convenient for them. That sort of behavior mustn't be tolerated."

"Albedo—"

Albedo was the captain of the guardians. He understood how she felt. That's why he was trying to find a good way to persuade her. The wry smile he wore when he wasn't sure what to do appeared on his—naturally immobile—face.

"Lord Ainz, making that face is no fair..." Albedo murmured, blushing slightly.

Ainz touched his face. "Hmm? Really?"

"Yes," she said in a faint voice before averting her eyes and sighing. When she looked back up, her expression was back to normal. "Understood. After all, your words are our everything. I will happily obey."

"I'd really like you to agree based on logic not emotion..."

"That's no problem. I doubt there is anyone in Nazarick who would be dissatisfied with their release other than myself."

"I see... That's good. Then I'll have those two run the orphanage."

"Understood. I will inform them of the decision."

"Thanks. I guess we should move on to the next item?" Ainz swallowed hard. Next on the list was something he'd suggested. "...Hmm. This doesn't seem like that great of an idea, but... well, I'll read it anyway." He continued, glancing at Albedo to observe her

expression. “Someone says we should create uniforms to increase solidarity within Nazarick.”

Albedo’s beautiful eyebrows angled downward immediately. “...What an outrageous, trashy proposal. Who submitted that?”

Ainz suppressed his urge to reply, *I’m sorry*, and instead appeared flummoxed. “Ah, well... I don’t know. I already got rid of the original slips of paper.”

“This is no good. I can’t believe someone would waste your precious time with this utterly inferior suggestion. I think we should perform a survey and come up with some punishment for whoever turned it in.”

“W—! We don’t need to do that! Got it, Albedo? Absolutely no survey.” Despite internally going, *Whoa—whoa—whoa*, Ainz stated his position with confidence. “I wanted to hear a diverse range of opinions from all sorts of beings who reside within Nazarick, which was why I declared I wouldn’t be upset no matter what kind of proposals are suggested. If you rebuke any of them, that would make what I said a lie. That could instill the belief that everything I say from here on is a lie. If everyone begins to shrink away like that, it’ll make asking for their opinions in the future more difficult... The moment you set foot outside this room, you erase that proposal from your brain, Albedo.”

“Yes, my lord! I shall do exactly as you say!”

“G-good. That’s the way.”

Ainz was grateful to have a body that didn’t sweat. Otherwise he would have been drenched. But despite his wonderful mind and body, he hadn’t completely recovered from the pain of having his idea called “trashy.”

“...Lord Ainz, this is just a suggestion, but perhaps from now on, I should screen them for you—so no ideas this bad get through.”

“Guh... No, that won’t be necessary. Then it would be you choosing them and me simply approving. If we did that, there wouldn’t be any point in us having this meeting.”

“Oh! Y-you’re right, Lord Ainz. This is our joint task, after all.”

Albedo's wings flapped, and as if in sync, the eight-edged assassins plastered to the ceiling all flinched.

"O-okay! Looks like you understand, so let's move on to the next item." Personally, he had no idea what that was all about, but it didn't seem like this was the right time to ask, and he didn't have the confidence to return to the topic later. "So up next we have..."

As he was about to read it, there was a knock on the door.

The two of them looked to Fith, who bobbed her head and identified the visitor.

From beyond the door, he could hear one energetic child's voice and another faint voice lacking in confidence.

*...Pretty sure this is the first time those two have come here at this hour. Is there some kind of trouble? If so, I'm lucky they came while Albedo is here.*

He knew who it was, so he could have given the permission to enter immediately. But if he allowed them to enter before Fith reported their names, he would be robbing her of the task she was so thrilled to be performing. Going over workers' heads would rob them of their motivation. It was important for those at the top to have that kind of consideration.

*You must think the same way, Jircniv. You have maids doing all sorts of things for you, too.* Ainz spoke in his head to the mental image of the person he was observing as a model king.

He wanted to be able to discuss their struggles as kings together someday.

"Lord Ainz, it's Mistress Aura and Master Mare."

Once Fith had fulfilled her duty, Ainz granted the pair's entry.

The door opened and two little dark elves came in. They were beaming, and it didn't seem like anything had gone wrong, so Ainz was relieved.

"Good morning, Lord Ainz!"

"G-g-good morning, Lord Ainz."

"Yes, morning, you two. I'm glad to see you both looking well."

After they both exchanged greetings with Albedo, Aura walked around the desk and stood beside Ainz.

Having come extremely close to him, she opened her arms in a V shape.

"Mm!"

In response to Ainz's confusion, she emitted a sound that wasn't a word and lifted her arms again. Then she looked at him expectantly, eyes sparkling, and hopped up and down slightly.

When he finally realized what she wanted, he scooted his chair back, put his hands on her sides, and picked her up.

"Wh-what are you doing, Lord Ainz?"

Albedo emitted a dry shriek, but he paid her no mind as he flipped Aura around 180 degrees and sat her down on his right femur. Without a soft thigh of his own, all he could offer her was hard bone, so he had her sit sideways in an attempt to mitigate her discomfort.

"Eh-heh-heh." Aura laughed half-bashfully, half-happily and smiled up at Ainz. Then Ainz shifted his gaze and waved over Mare, who was standing there fidgeting. Mare approached timidly, but Ainz lifted him up and put him on his left femur all the same.

"U-umm, L-Lord Ainz, m-me too..."

Ainz had just been thinking maybe he should prepare a cushion for next time when Albedo hesitantly approached him. But seating a grown woman on his thigh... bone was plain embarrassing.

"No, sorry... can't do it."

"B-but... both of them get..."

"...Albedo, they're still children. You're an adult, aren't you?"

For just a moment he felt like he saw a lightning bolt embodying her shock strike

behind her. He did feel like he had been slightly mean, but embarrassing things were embarrassing. In the first place, wasn't asking for that a form of sexual harassment?

"And what in the world is it, you two? Did something happen?"

The fortress they were building in the Tove Woodlands—the supply stockpile, the fake Nazarick—was complete. The next tasks he had assigned to Aura were the strengthening of its defenses and its concealment. Originally, the plan had been to flee there if any enemy had appeared—to save the real Nazarick from being discovered—but since he had already given the location of the Great Tomb to Jircniv, they were prioritizing the forest compound as a stockpile and evacuation site.

He'd also ordered Mare to build a subterranean tomb on the outskirts of E-Rantel.

There were no immediate plans to use it, but he didn't want any power to go to waste.

When employing people, personnel expenses were incurred, but with golems and the undead, he didn't have to worry about that, and Mare could create simple stone and other materials with his magic.

Incidentally, the other guardians had also been assigned jobs: Shalltear was guarding Nazarick and helping with transportation using Gate, Cocytus was in charge of overseeing the lizardman village and the whole lake area, and Demiurge was on business in the Sacred Kingdom.

Thus, at this time, all the guardians stationed in E-Rantel were present before Ainz.

So what had the siblings come for if they already had jobs?

Aura gave a simple answer to Ainz's question.

"We missed you, Lord Ainz!"

The innocence of the exclamation made him crack a smile. "I see. I'm happy to see you guys, too."

Ainz pet Aura's head. His hand must have felt good, because Aura snuggled against it. It was like he was petting a cute little puppy.

"U-uhhh, Lord Ainz, what were you doing? I—I hope we aren't annoying you."

“That’s exa—”

“Not at all. How would seeing you ever be annoying?” Ainz said to Mare before turning to Albedo. “Sorry, Albedo. You were about to say something, but I interrupted. Oh, right. Of course I’m never annoyed to see you, either.”

“Y-yes...” Her face was bright red, but she put on a dignified expression. Then she said, “Lord Ainz!”

*What?* he was about to ask, but instead his eyes grew large.

“Ogyaa!”

Ainz doubted his ears. *What is she saying?*

Proving that he hadn’t misheard her, she bashfully said it again. “Ogyaa!”

*...She’s definitely imitating a baby. I mean, if it was anything else, I’d be scared. Why is she doing that? Is it stress because I piled too much work on her? Oh! It could be something to do with Nigredo. We were just talking about releasing her from disciplinary confinement before.*

As Ainz was feeling confused despite being undead, Mare began to squirm.

“Umm, I’m, uh, okay, so... if Albedo wants to...”

Those words were a revelation to Ainz.

Basically, in response to him saying that these two were kids and she was an adult, she was putting on an act to say she was a kid, too.

*But why an infant? And I still don’t think having Albedo in my lap is...*

Then again, she had dared to do something so embarrassing in order to make her appeal. As the one at the top and as a man, he couldn’t ignore that. And Albedo was actually, like Aura and Mare, a being similar to a child. It wasn’t right to pick favorites.

“Sorry, Mare.” Having made up his mind, he let Mare down and waved Albedo over. “Come, Albedo.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Her embarrassed expression from a moment ago had vanished, and she seemed to be bursting with as much anticipation as a puppy about to be taken on a walk when she appeared beside him instantaneously.

For Ainz, still seated, trying to lift Albedo by putting his hands under her arms was more than a little difficult.

“...Sorry, could you sit down from where you are?”

“Yes, my lord! Understood!”

Having traded places with Mare and sitting on Ainz’s left femur facing away from him, she nestled in.

The first thing Ainz felt was softness. She had a mature softness to her body that the children didn’t. Then came a warmth that seemed to seep into him, making him restless.

*Wow, is she soft!*

She was a level-100 warrior, but it was hard to tell where she was keeping her muscle; to put it unkindly, she was as soft as a mollusk.

“Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

He heard her quietly giggling.

The fragrance wafting up from Albedo’s hair tickled Ainz’s nostrils.

“Hmm?”

That moment, a spark seemed to flash through the brain he supposedly didn’t have.

*I’ve smelled this somewhere before. Albedo’s clothes? No. Perfume?*

Ainz had definitely smelled Albedo’s somehow relaxing scent before. But he couldn’t manage to find the right memory.

“Hmm... Albedo. Are you wearing some sort of perfume?”

“Yes, I am. Does it displease you?”

“No, not at all. It smells nice.”

Albedo abruptly turned to look at him. Her eyes were open so wide, they scared him a little.

“You think so, Lord Ainz? If you like, you can smell me some more. For an hour—or a whole day!”

“No, I don’t think... An hour is a bit...” To tell the truth, though, he was ever so slightly interested. And if he smelled it more, perhaps he would recall the memory. “Mm, well, will you let me smell just a bit?”

Ainz moved his nasal bones in a little closer and inhaled Albedo’s scent. Since he was closer than before, the somehow comforting fragrance was a bit clearer. Yes, he had definitely smelled it before, but he couldn’t quite remember where. As he desperately followed the threads of his memories, he was interrupted by an icy voice.

“...Lord Ainz.”

For a second, he didn’t know who the speaker was, but then he realized it was Aura. When he nervously shifted his gaze, she had narrowed her eyes in disgust. Her lips jutted out slightly, her cheeks puffed and pouty.

“You’re being kind of creepy.”

“S-sorry.”

*She’s right.*

He cursed himself for being foolish enough to do something like that in front of a child. From a moral education standpoint, it was awful. At this rate, his old friends would call him out in the tone they’d use if they were angry at their little brother.

“A-all right, both of you. Time to get off my legs. Albedo, let’s continue the conversation we were having before.”

But they didn't move.

Neither of them budged. They seemed to be waiting to see who would go first.

"Sheesh..."

Ainz picked Aura up and set her on the floor. He heard Albedo chuckle to herself. "Tee-hee-hee."

"...Aura was the first one to sit, that's why. You get down, too, Albedo."

"B-but Aura was sitting there for three minutes and forty-one seconds. I've only been here for fifty-seven seconds. I humbly request that I should be allowed to stay for three more minutes."

"But, Albedo, you spend more time with him."

"That's just how it goes. It's work."

"Oh? So it's just work? I'm here because I wanted to see Lord Ainz."

"Ngh!"

Albedo's butt squirmed on Ainz's thigh, and the two girls glared at each other.

He knew why Albedo wanted to sit in his lap, but what was Aura's reason? Surely she didn't love him the way Albedo did. In the first place, he didn't remember doing anything that would be worthy of so much love, and it was too soon for a child like Aura to have romantic feelings. *So then...* Having thought that far, Ainz reached an answer.

*I see. She wants me for her own?*

It was possible she wanted a father figure. Aura and Mare had been created young. They were at an age where they should have had parents. So maybe she was trying to get what she was missing from Ainz?

He had been thinking that if there was a dark elf country, he wanted to go there to find the dark elf siblings some friends. But Satoru Suzuki had never yearned for a father figure, which was why he never noticed the possibility that Aura and Mare might.

*I wonder if the library has moral education books for kids.*

When they were merely data, it wasn't an issue, but now he needed something to make sure Aura and Mare had proper mental development.

*Yeah, they need to make dark elf friends! I'll make that higher priority. Speaking of which...*

"Aura. There's something I wanted to ask you. What happened to those three elves I gave to you and Mare?"

"You mean the ones who tramped into Nazarick with their dirty feet but were pardoned because you're so compassionate?"

Ainz nodded.

He had given the slave elves accompanying the workers he had summoned to Aura and Mare. Really, he didn't want to leave any uninvited trespassers alive, but they hadn't entered Nazarick by choice and they weren't there to steal his treasures, so he figured it was okay to have mercy on them.

He also thought that since they were elves, maybe they would have a good effect on Aura's and Mare's development.

"I see. We left them on our level for now."

"Left them?"

"Yes, for some reason they bustle around trying to take care of us. It's sort of annoying."

"I-it's like Aura said. W-we can dress o-ourselves, but they still try to help..."

"You need to get your act together, Mare. That's why they try to change your clothes for you. They don't do that to me."

*I see. So they try to take care of them, hmm? I guess they are acting sort of like my maids. I identify with your suffering, Mare. Still, it seems to have been worth saving those three. But are former slaves bad for moral education? Hrm.*

"Well, we spared them. Don't get angry and kill them or anything. If they're too much

of a nuisance to you, tell me and I'll send them somewhere else."

"Understood! Thank you."

After Mare nodded, Ainz said, "Now then"—and turned a cold gaze on Albedo—"Albedo, it's about time for you to get down. I'm sure it's been three minutes."

She looked reluctant for the briefest of moments but obeyed silently and got off his lap.

"By the way, what are you guys doing, Lord Ainz?"

"Hmm? Oh, we're going through the suggestions everyone in Nazarick had about making the country better. Do you two have any ideas? Anything at all."

Aura's face brightened up.

"I have a great idea, Lord Ainz!"

"Oh-ho. What is it, Aura? Let's hear it."

"Okay! I think boys should dress as girls and girls should dress as boys!"

*...BubblingTeapot!*

Ainz howled his old friend's name internally.

For a moment, he hallucinated a pink slime apologizing—*Sorry*—in a cute voice that didn't match its appearance at all.

"I see. Lady BubblingTeapot's idea, huh? Certainly, it's not a bad idea. And implementing the will of the Forty-One Supreme Beings in this country would be good."

*Really?* Ainz wanted to say out loud, but he couldn't.

Anyhow, he needed to veto the idea. But there was a problem.

These two dressed the way they did out of obedience to BubblingTeapot. If he was going to reject Aura's idea, he needed to come up with a reason why it was fine for them but not everyone else.

He couldn't think of anything on the spot.

"Lord Ainz. Shall I begin the process of carrying out Aura's proposal?"

*Why are you in such a hurry?*

*There's no time left.*

*If I allow this, it's as good as announcing that the Nation of Darkness is a country with deviant tastes. We can't have that. The only one who would be happy is BubblingTeapot. No, even if she were here, I bet she'd never visit our country.*

*There are a few people who, if they heard the NPCs they created had attained consciousness, would actively avoid them, never mind coming to visit. BubblingTeapot is definitely one. Yamaiko and Ankoro Mocchi Mochi would probably come, though. They're all women, so why is she so different...?*

Thinking back on her fondly, Ainz stood and gazed out the window. It wasn't as if there was any meaning in that gesture. He was just buying time. Once he had a way to start figured out, he spun around and looked at all three of them.

"I definitely reject that idea."

"B-but why?"

*Of course you would ask that... But giving all men without a partner on Christmas a mask would be a much better law than that one.*

He exhaled deeply. Of course, it didn't mean anything. He was simply buying more time.

"There are multiple reasons. Do you need me to explain each one, Albedo?"

"Y-yes, p-please."

He had intended the question for Albedo, but Mare intercepted. *He's normally so docile, so why is he being so vicious now?* Ainz thought to himself sadly. He was sure Albedo would have said, *No, that's all right. I'll explain to these two.* But under these circumstances, he had to explain it himself.

“...All right. I’ll explain. I wonder where I should start.”

Ainz brought a hand to his chin and *hmmed*. It goes without saying, but that was also to buy time. After thinking so frantically, he nearly broke out in a cold sweat, he had an idea.

“First, hmm. You probably thought that since you two are dressed like that, everyone else should, too, right? That that’s what BubblingTeapot would want? But that’s not true. Yes, you guys are special.”

“We’re special?”

“Exactly. BubblingTeapot has you two dress that way because you’re so special to her... Do you want to make everyone special like that?”

“Of course not!” Surprisingly, the one who shouted was Mare. “I would hate that! I don’t want a ton of strangers to have what Lady BubblingTeapot gave especially to my sister and me!”

“Y-yeah. That’s what I think. You get it, right, Aura?”

“Yes! It was stupid of me to not consider Lady BubblingTeapot’s feelings!”

*Whoosh!* Ainz suppressed his urge to do a fist pump.

“Other than that...”

Aura and Mare already agreed. Letting the conversation end on a vague note was probably fine. There was just one thing he was worried about.

Albedo murmured, “So we rejected a few,” and Ainz turned to look at her.

With her uncommon intellect, she might have been thinking about something beyond what he could follow. He was worried she might find it weird if he ended the conversation there.

When their eyes met, she cocked her head and smiled.

Ainz averted his gaze, unsure what her reaction meant. An elder lich happened to be standing where his eyes ended up, and his gaze was drawn naturally to the documents

in its hand.

"Ah, so you were thinking about that, too, Lord Ainz? That was the one you looked at the longest. I think it would be fine to discuss it with these two, if you like?"

The sudden remark made him shift his eyes back to her.

"Hmm. So you were thinking about it, too, Albedo."

"Yes. I was sure you would bring it up. You must have thought it would be all right to talk about it with them, right?"

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Albedo. Even if I don't say a word, you know what's on my mind."

"Nonsense, my lord." She bowed with a smile and Aura puffed her cheeks up crankily. "But more importantly, I hadn't considered what you said about Lady BubblingTeapot's feelings, either. Such is the brilliance of our creators, the Supreme Beings. Your points of view are simply beyond me."

"Oh, don't say that, Albedo. I think someday your abilities will surpass even my own."

She was already way better than him. Ainz wondered, embarrassed, what he was even saying, but Albedo nodded with a face full of determination.

"Yes, my lord! Someday, for sure!"

"Umm, were there any other reasons?"

"Ah yes, Aura. Albedo, tell the other two. Make your explanation simple so even children can understand. Yes, make it easy to grasp."

Having told her that, he turned once again to the window as if to say, *I'm not talking, you are*. But every bit of his attention was focused on his hearing so he wouldn't miss a word Albedo said.

"Yes. Actually I was thinking of suggesting it to Lord Ainz later, but there is a bit of a problem."

"What? Who's causing trouble? Should we go kill them quick?"

"No, it's not like that. Actually, we've learned that in the near future, there will be a supply shortage. If we told everyone to swap clothing now, it would be a headache unless we told everyone to exchange used clothes."

*What? Really?* It wasn't as if Ainz could actually ask. He frantically recalled what was written in the documents from before.

There was something about materials, but he felt like there was quite a good amount. But if Albedo said they would be running short soon, it must be true.

*Isn't that actually really bad? But couldn't we also just buy stuff from the empire or the kingdom? We should still have assets for that in the city.*

Albedo answered Ainz's natural question. "This is a commercial city doing a fairly good job fulfilling its economic role of supply stockpile. But since Lord Ainz took over, almost no merchants have visited from the three neighboring countries. For that reason, our supplies are gradually being depleted."

"Couldn't we just bring some in from somewhere that has some? What if we stole from the empire or the kingdom?"

"Sis, th—that's a bad idea. 'Cause, uh, umm, didn't Lord Ainz prohibit the use of military force against our three neighbors?"

That was right. He wasn't sure what the future would hold, but until the city was fully under his control, he wouldn't allow anyone to exercise military might. Of course, it would be a different story if someone attacked them first.

"Then what'll we do?"

"Uh—uh, we don't have to worry, I don't think. Umm, uh, Lord Ainz will figure something out."

Ainz wanted to say, *So you're dumping this in my lap now?* to Mare, but he held himself back. Who could betray the trust of these two kids as Aura chimed in with an "Oh!" while she stood beside Mare?

But as a run-of-the-mill company employee, there was no way he could come up with a proper plan to assuage the city's economic woes. That was why he played one of his two trump cards.

He slowly turned around and said as if he was completely confident, "Albedo, you're already working on it, right?"

In other words, he was throwing it at someone capable.

"Yes, soon we'll be reaping the seeds Demiurge sowed."

"There you have it. You two don't need to worry about a thing."

He did feel a bit guilty when everyone in the room looked at him with gleaming eyes as if they were observing someone amazing—as well as fear of the disappointment that would appear in their eyes when they found out it was all a sham.

*But Demiurge, huh? I dunno what kind of plan he's been concocting, but I'd expect nothing less from him.*

Ainz wanted to ask more about this harvest, but there was no way he could do that—because Ainz Ooal Gown was supposed to have a handle on everything.

*I know I should probably study economics, but when I read difficult books, my eyes just kind of glaze over... Like, c'mon, there must be a simpler way to explain Keynesian economics. Is my mind simply not as flexible anymore because I'm getting older...?*

Ainz had been plenty capable of learning the game systems in *Yggdrasil*. He never bragged, but he had astounded his guildmates by memorizing over seven hundred spells he had acquired. On top of that, knowledge of spells he didn't have was a weapon that allowed him to read his opponents' abilities, so he had done his best to learn about all the magic in the game. As a result, he was probably one of the top five in the guild when it came to magic knowledge.

He had accomplished all that, but academic books were simply beyond him.

*Hmm? Is it possible I can't learn anything else because I don't have a brain?*

That was impossible, since he had learned a ton of things since coming to this world, but the terrifying thought sent a chill up his spine.

"Lord Ainz, I was actually hoping to obtain your permission for something..."

"What? Permission?"

He didn't think Albedo's proposals required prior authorization. She was so sensible that she would surely make even better decisions than him. But an organization couldn't function that way. The job of the one at the top was to take responsibility for the actions of those below. For that, authorization was necessary.

"In order to get those humans moving, I was thinking we should send someone to the royal capital. May I go?"

"What?!" Ainz was so surprised, he raised his voice.

He was nervous to send Albedo anywhere with Demiurge out. Not to mention that the city wasn't fully under his control yet.

More than anything, though, his surprise was largely due to this being the first time Albedo had ever proposed anything like that.

"...It would be... pretty inconvenient to send you away..."

"Oh!" Albedo seemed happy to hear that. "Don't worry, Lord Ainz. I'll get the job done as quickly as possible and hurry back to your side."

"I see... Maybe it's not a problem if it's for only a short time. Who are you planning on having manage the city and Nazarick while you're gone?"

Since Aura and Mare looked curious, it clearly wasn't them. Ainz figured it definitely wasn't him, so he had to ask.

"I was thinking of entrusting things to Pandora's Actor."

He heard Aura and Mare say, "Pandora's Actor should be fine."

"...Him?"

"As you created him, Lord Ainz, he's a highly valuable asset. The apple really doesn't fall far from the tree—do excuse me. I didn't mean to imply that we are like your children simply because you and the other Supreme Beings created us. Please forgive my rudeness."

Ainz was bewildered and blinked furiously at the unexpected apology—that is, the sparkle of the red points of light in his eyes dimmed.

"You don't need to apologize. He is, well, my child... Sorry. It's not as if I dislike him, but he is an incompetent child... No, I don't mean he's bad or anything like that... Agh, what the heck. He is like a child, yes."

They ended up facing each other in silence, and that wasn't going to get them anywhere, so Ainz posed a question.

"If Pandora's Actor is going to be managing things, then what about his job acting as Momon? Am I supposed to do it?"

"No, I certainly don't mean to foist such basic tasks off on you, my lord. I intend to set things up so that Momon takes on a request to patrol this area."

Ainz nodded with a grunt of approval.

He had been feeling like he'd like to be Momon for the first time in a while and stretch his wings, but when he thought about it, the situation was very different when compared to his first carefree adventures. There were more nuisances, more matters that required him to stay on his toes. Perhaps it was best to have Momon go on patrol.

"U-umm, but if S-Sir Momon leaves, will there be problems with the humans in the city?"

"No. Lord Ainz's ploy was a critical success. Because we haven't done anything nasty to the humans—not that anyone intended to in the first place—they truly trust this Momon character. So if Momon gathers the people of influence in the city before he leaves and tells them to do as we say, there won't be any issues. And I'm so impressed that they don't realize they're being manipulated by a puppet. All I can say is that it was brilliant of you to have seen so far ahead and planned for this right after we were transported here, Lord Ainz."

"Nnnn... it's sort of convoluted that they believe in Lord Ainz because they believe in Sir Momon."

"That's true, but what other choice do we have to govern the city peacefully? We'll gradually remove Momon from the picture as we cultivate their allegiance to Lord Ainz. It might take a few years, but that's just how it will have to be."

"All right. Albedo, leave things up to Pandora's Actor, and once you're done with all your preparations and handoffs, go harvesting. Is there anything you'd like to request

to get you started?"

"Understood. Well, I suppose while I'm there I'd like to meet with the human king and negotiate some things. I'll draft my proposal, so could I trouble you for a review?"

"Sure. Bring it over later."

He was confident that if it was Albedo's plan, all he would have to do was give it his stamp of approval.

"Also, this is somewhat awkward to ask for, but could I have a few outfits to wear? I think I'll need to change while I'm there."

"I see. Then I'll give you some things from my collection. Come by in a bit. By the way, is Demiurge—? Ah, never mind. It's fine. Shall we move on to the next item...? Since you two are here, I might as well ask your opinions, too."

## 2

Once their work was finished, the three guardians and the elder liches left the room, leaving only Ainz and Fith—plus the eight-edged assassins clinging to the ceiling.

Actually, Ainz's work was done now, meaning the rest of his day was free time. He had things he could do, but if he did them early, it just meant he would have nothing to do later. Ainz wondered how to best use this time for a while, then he stood up as he stumbled upon an idea.

"I'm going to go see Pandora's Actor."

When he made that declaration and set off walking, Fith followed behind him without a word. Naturally, the eight-edged assassins did, too.

When they left the house, the outside air was still cool—the calendar would've told him as much. Ainz thought there was a comfortable breeze blowing, but when he considered that he had complete resistance to chill, he couldn't help but glance quickly at Fith before they set off.

The complex was mostly made up of three buildings: the main house they had just been in, the offices of the domestic officials, and the second residence. Pandora's Actor—or

rather, Momon—was staying in the second house.

Really, it would have been appropriate for Ainz to have Momon come to him, as the ruler, but he wanted to enjoy a change of pace.

"Huh? What's going on?" Ainz murmured to himself as they approached the second house. He was peering at a little structure adjacent to it. They called it a stable, but the only one sleeping there now was Hamusuke. Or rather, that's how it was supposed to be.

As Ainz approached the little stable with a question on his mind, he heard some snoozing breaths. Sleep was a privilege of the living. Hamusuke must have been there.

The sun had already risen pretty high, but apparently she was still sleeping.

Hamusuke had eyes like a cat, so she could see in the dark, but according to her, she didn't operate in terms of day and night. Her lifestyle had been to eat and then sleep until she was hungry again.

Honestly, when Ainz heard that, the first thing he thought was, *How did you earn the title of the Wise King of the Forest?* He felt stupid for expecting more intelligent behavior.

"If I can get this close before she realizes it's me, does it mean she's gone soft? Geez... she's let herself go. Well, no, I guess I have to consider the possibility that she was up late working last night."

"She wasn't. Mistress Hamusuke was here all day yesterday."

Upon hearing Fith's damning remark, Ainz tried to come up with something to say in Hamusuke's defense, but he couldn't.

*Well, she's a pet anyhow, so expecting more out of her would be barking up the wrong tree. I don't care if she lets herself go... but it is kind of offensive to have someone around who is just hanging out while I'm working. Of course, that's just me taking out my frustrations on her...*

When he peeked inside the stable, a giant hamster was lying there asleep. It was an image of slovenly sleep that could be perfected only by a nose bubble.

But there was something else that caught Ainz's eye besides the bold sleeping posture more appropriate for a middle-aged man than any hamster he had ever seen.

Curled up in Hamusuke's tail was a death knight. That was the mystery undead Ainz had detected from outside.

He had a sensory link with the undead he created, so he had a general idea of where they all were. But when they moved to E-Rantel, he had brought so many that sometimes it felt like a big jumble. To be honest, it was difficult for him to tell exactly what undead he had and where they were at the moment. Still, he hadn't assigned any to this stable, so detecting one had surprised him.

"Wake up, Hamusuke."

"Mrrf, that I say."

Hamusuke rubbed her eyes dexterously—or perhaps it was best described as "in a human way"—and turned around, catching sight of Ainz.

"Ohhh! I wondered who it could be, I did. If it isn't my master!"

"Right now, no one's around, so that's fine, but normally you need to call me Lord Ainz. You're Momon's mount, not mine."

"Of course, that I will, master!"

"Okay. If you understand, then that's fine..."

Her reply made him want to ask if she really got it or not, though.

Magical beasts, due to their nature as beasts, were particularly susceptible to mind control. That was why he was lending her an item that gave her immunity to those types of spells, but he was still worried that she might end up leaking intelligence for some reason completely unrelated to magic.

"Well, you haven't made any mistakes yet. I'm putting my trust in you. Now about what I really wanted to ask you: What's with this death knight?"

"Ohhh! This is my training friend, that he is."

That's when Ainz remembered.

Apparently, this was the death knight he had assigned when Hamusuke was acquiring the warrior class—the undead they had used in tests to see if it could level up as a warrior and acquire martial arts.

Ainz had even equipped the death knight with an artifact that dramatically increased experience point gain in exchange for decreased ability points, but he never leveled up. Ainz wasn't particularly upset because the results were as expected, but Hamusuke began to protest about this and that, so after retrieving his artifact, he let her have the death knight.

*That guy...? But the spikes on his armor are rounded off... I didn't give him to her as a body pillow. I was hoping maybe she would master something as a warrior... Well, whatever. I have plenty of death knights. Letting her have one won't cause any problems.*

At this point, Ainz had so many death knights, it was overkill—he had even been creating them as part of his daily schedule.

"I see. Got it. But even if you're not a wild magical beast anymore, it's pretty bad if you don't notice someone until they get this close to you. We're not Aura, after all. Shouldn't you be a little warier?"

Hamusuke looked dejected, and her whiskers drooped. "I am sorry, that I am. In the forest, I was the strongest, that I was. I was never attacked, so I never really had to be on guard, no I didn't."

"Didn't you ever have a child... hood? But wait, what about the Giant of the East and the Magical Serpent of the West?"

"Who? That I ask. Who are they? East? West? What are you talking about? That I wonder."

A question mark appeared above Ainz's head. "...The other two you split the rule of the forest with."

"Oh-ho! I was not aware such creatures existed in the forest, that I wasn't! Brilliant, master, that you are! I'm impressed with your knowledge, that I am! I don't know much about the world beyond my territory!"

“You call yourself the Wise King of the Forest, but...”

“It was a human warrior who came into my territory a long time ago who named me, that it was. It was a rather cool name, so I let that warrior go, that I did. How nostalgic!”

Ainz had the feeling he had figured out what happened.

The warrior who had been allowed to escape must have exaggerated the story of facing off against Hamusuke. Even if it was only to justify why they survived while all their friends had been killed.

He could understand the logic of it. Hamusuke was actually quite strong by this world’s standards. The only humans he had met who could defeat Hamusuke were probably Clementine and Gazef.

Ainz suddenly thought of Gazef.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, master? That I ask.”

“Ah... it’s nothing. Just, right... You’re not qualified to be Wise King of the Forest. You’re the Hamster of the Forest.”

“If I remember correctly, a hamster is that animal you mentioned before, master, that it is. You really think I’m a hamster, do you?”

“Yep. You’re a giant hamster.”

“Ohhh! I’m a giant hamster, then, that I am. Do you know where I might find some more of me? That I wonder.”

“Nope.”

His firm negative depressed her.

Ainz felt like maybe he had been too mean, so he consoled her. “I guarantee those who work for Nazarick commensurate rewards. If you continue to work for Nazarick, I’ll make sure to find you some relatives.”

“Ohhh!” Hamusuke’s whiskers perked up. “I’ve always been loyal to you, master, that I have, but now I’ll redouble my efforts to be loyal, that I will!”

"Good, good. So, Hamusuke. Is Momon—I mean, Pandora's Actor—home?"

"Your double, master? I'm not sure if he's in, no I'm not. He rides in carriages the humans send around, so he doesn't always go around with me, no he doesn't."

"Ahhh, I seem to remember him telling me he was using the carriages to share information."

"Heh-heh." Ainz chuckled deviously.

That was all according to his calculations. The people were convinced that they were telling Momon things that Ainz was keeping secret from him and aiming to get him to defect, but actually, Pandora's Actor was feeding them lies without them realizing.

For instance, *Ainz is a very trustworthy king and is a compassionate being who thinks of the people.*

"I see. Got it. But hey... you can wear armor now, so if you have nothing else to do, how about putting it on and training?"

The prototype armor designed for Hamusuke should have been finished.

"Understood, that it is, master! In that case, I would like to see the lizardmen, that I would!"

"All right. I'll make that happen. If I tell Cocytus, he'll have someone summoned."

"I'm so very grateful, master, that I am! Okay, Sir Death Knight! Let's do our best together, that I say!"

Ainz paid no mind to the passionate friendship between the hamster and the undead and walked away.

From behind he heard her say, "Ugh, be quiet already, that I say!" but he couldn't imagine the death knight had said anything. He wondered what Hamusuke was going on about but decided to forget about it.

*Actually, that one time I gave her... I feel like I'm forgetting something. But if I can't remember, it must not have been that important.*

Despite that dissatisfying train of thought, like a sneeze that wouldn't come out, Ainz had arrived in front of the second house. He didn't do anything like use the knocker. Fith, who had been behind him, slipped by.

"Open it."

"Yes, Lord Ainz."

Her expression as she opened the door was attentive, but her lips were smiling faintly. She must have been thrilled to have been of use to him.

*I'm really glad I observed Jircniv. I really have gotten this ruler thing down now. I feel bad for him, but I'm going to keep watching. It'll help me learn how to act like a king.*

Ainz didn't thank Fith but gazed at the open door.

"Eight-edged assassins."

"""Yes, my lord! At your service."""

The several eight-edged assassins who had accompanied him appeared at his side.

"Go."

"""Yes, my lord!"""

When he gestured with his chin, the eight-edged assassins gave a more spirited reply than usual and pressed into the building. No one was there besides Pandora's Actor. Sometimes Narberal was around, but she was usually in the Great Tomb of Nazarick carrying out Ainz's orders.

He could have left a regular maid here, but he didn't want the humans who came to visit Momon to think they were being monitored, hence the current state of things. Still, considering the possibility that the enemy who brainwashed Shalltear might infiltrate, Ainz felt he needed to take some sort of precautions.

*...That is, if there's even anyone who could infiltrate this far. Well, only a fool lets his guard down... Mm, still. How long do I have to wait here in front of this door? Am I supposed to go in? Common sense would dictate that I wait here because the eight-edged assassins will return to this spot. But is it very kingly to wait at the entrance like this?*

After hesitating for a little while, Ainz decided, *Whatever*, and stepped inside the second house.

He walked with what he imagined was the dignified attitude befitting a king, which he had practiced dozens of times pacing around his room.

But before he went twenty paces, one of the eight-edged assassins returned and threw themselves at his feet.

“Lord Ainz, we’ve called Master Pandora’s Actor for you. He’ll be here momentarily.”

“I see. Then I’ll wait in the sitting room.”

He had been to this house before, so he had a general idea of the layout. He had Fith open the door and unhesitatingly sat in the most honored seat in the room.

It felt strange because his old company employee manners told him he was in the wrong spot, but this wasn’t a hard move for Ainz after all his ruler training.

A short time passed; then there was a knock on the door. He nodded at Fith.

Having received permission, Fith opened the door, and Pandora’s Actor entered—not using magic to transform into Ainz as Momon but in his normal military uniform.

“Lord Ainz, Supreme Being and my Creator—”

“No need for greetings. Sit.”

“Yes, sir!” He clicked his heels together and strode over.

Pandora’s Actor probably intended to display the brisk motions of a military man, but to Ainz it was all unnecessary. *Overblown* was how he would’ve described it.

Pandora’s Actor crossed the room and sat next to Ainz.

*Wouldn’t you normally sit across from me?*

Everyone has personal space, so Ainz was shocked to find Pandora’s Actor invading his so nonchalantly.

*...Well, I guess it's fine. But he's right in my face.*

He took a good look at Pandora's Actor. He wasn't quite as shocking as when he met him in the Treasury. Over time, some of his orders must have toned him down.

"What is i—?"

"N-nothing. Don't worry about it. Now then, I wanted to ask you a few things. First, tell me news about Momon. I know you're reporting in to Albedo, but... have there been any problems?"

"Not real—"

"Okay. That's good. Then I want to ask you, as Pandora's Actor: Have there been any problems?"

The atmosphere changed.

"Actually, Lord Ainz!" He leaned in so far that Ainz bent backward as if he'd been pushed. "I haven't the fortitude!"

Before Ainz could even retort with a *Who are you?* Pandora's Actor continued.

"I haven't touched a magic item in so very long. I haven't polished any of the magical objects created by the Supreme Beings. I wasn't done sorting the data crystals, either. I beg you, Lord Ainz! Give me some time to spend with the magic items!"

"...Is this how I made you?"

"Indeed! These are emotions I received from you, Lord Ainz!"

"...Oh."

Ainz racked his brain to recall the backstory of Pandora's Actor. He did remember giving him some sort of personality trait like enjoying the caretaking and keeping of magic items. It made sense, since Pandora's Actor was the only one in the Treasury. He was surrounded by things he loved and had basically gotten a job in heaven, was what Ainz's idea had been. But this seemed to be entering fetish territory.

"Don't you go back to Nazarick every day?"

Half of Nazarick's undead were made by Ainz, and the other half were made by Pandora's Actor. His creation's undead were somewhat weaker than the ones Ainz personally created but still within the margin of error, and there were tons of corpses kept on ice on the fifth level—so many that even with both of them creating undead, they couldn't possibly get through them all.

"But I don't have permission to return to the Treasury!"

What state of mind was he in if he wasn't making his over-the-top gestures like usual?

"I see. Then I'll have Shalltear give you a ring. And as for the gear you asked me about, I'll allow it. Just don't break it."

"Ye—"

"Cut out the gestures. I thought I told you to talk normally—er, maybe I didn't. Hmph. Pandora's Actor!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Our relationship is creator and creation. I'm very pleased that you endeavor to express yourself as I created you. But I also believe this: that children should surpass their parents."

"Ohhh... Lord Ainz. You think of me as your child..."

"Right, right. You're, yeah, my child or at least something... like that. No, you definitely are. That's why you don't need to speak German or salute or react so dramatically, and so on, in front of me. Though I created you, I want to see parts of you that I didn't create, as proof of your growth."

He turned to look when he heard a sniffle and saw Fith dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

*Why?*

*Are your tear ducts too loose?*

Amid Ainz's confusion, Pandora's Actor bowed low. "Understood, Father!"

“...Mm.”

“Just watch, Father. I’ll make all your wishes come true!”

*This was a bad idea. I was too hasty.* It was impossible, but Ainz felt assaulted by a headache.

“Pandora’s Actor, you mustn’t tell anyone what happened here today. You understand, right? If people learned you were getting special treatment, it could cause discord. And... for that reason, I’m lowering your importance to me. If I had to choose between saving a floor guardian and you, I would let you go.”

“Of course, my lord! Please let me go!”

When he said it so proudly, Ainz felt guilty.

“Sorry. And, Fith... know that everything that just happened must be kept between us.” When he saw that she nodded, he nodded as well. “Okay, I’m going to go now.”

“Please wait. Since you’re here, there’s something I want to ask you, Father. How do you plan to rule the Nation of Darkness?”

“What?”

“Many of the humans are wondering what direction you will lead this country in. Will you implement expansionist policies? In that case, will they be sent off to war? Things like that.”

Ainz stopped where he stood.

Where was Ainz Ooal Gown headed?

Ainz was just a normal guy, so when presented with the extravagant goal of world conquest, he had almost immediately quit thinking about it. He figured he could leave it up to the smart ones like Albedo and Demiurge.

But the decision of how to rule the country was one he couldn’t avoid.

“Is something wrong, Father?”

“...I’d like to tell you, but I’m still thinking it over myself. I’ll let you know after I’ve consulted with the guardians.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ainz stood silently. “All right, Pandora’s Actor.” He heard a return salute as he left the room.

Before he went outside, he contacted Shalltear using Message to relay Pandora’s Actor’s request before he could forget. If he put off work till later, it often slipped his mind.

When they reached the entrance, Ainz opened the door before Fith could for him.

Then he looked up at the sky.

It was blue.

“I’ll fly.”

That was all he said. He heard the flustered commotion of several people behind him, but he ignored it.

He sailed up into the sky using Fly. Then he landed on the roof of the second house.

E-Rantel was a fortress city built with three concentric walls. From this view, one of the walls blocked his vision.

“I guess I can’t see it. All I can do is go there.”

If he walked the streets, maybe he would get an idea, something he would never come up with if he stayed here.

An eight-edged assassin climbed up the wall.

“Lord Ainz, please wait! It’s too dangerous for you to go alone!”

He couldn’t laugh off what the eight-edged assassin was saying.

Standing out in the open alone was as good as saying, *Go ahead and snipe me.*

"Yeah, you're right. Certainly if Peroroncino was my opponent, I'd be a sitting duck."

Peroroncino was an archer and the most specialized in ranged combat of anyone in Ainz Ooal Gown, so he would probably have been able to shoot him to pieces. He was a man who had no trouble attacking targets from over a mile away. Lurking in the shadows and sniping—with a bow—was his specialty. That said, Ainz wasn't planning to get picked off, even against Peroroncino.

He was confident that he could employ several different methods of defense, run away, and switch to attacking. It was training in PvP with Peroroncino through which he had made that possible. He wasn't going to die so easily. But since here he had to be on guard against moves that existed only in this world, the eight-edged assassin was right.

Ainz couldn't die yet. At least not until they experimented with resurrecting a player. He needed to act as though he had only one life and prepare a shield.

The safe choice was definitely Albedo, since she was the toughest guardian. But then they would need someone to escort her. Soon it would be a whole procession. He didn't want to do that unless he was trying to lure the enemy to attack.

In that case, the best would be a disposable high-level minion...

*I don't really have any high-level monster minions. As for mercenaries, I used up most of my summons on Albedo's subordinates, so I don't really have the bandwidth to call many more.*

Ainz sort of regretted trying to look cool and splurging. But he consoled himself by thinking, *Sometimes bosses have to fake things for appearances.*

*Wait, wait. I need to think my options through one at a time.*

Ainz made a list in his head:

MERCENARY MONSTERS: Without money, calling on them was impossible.

THE SKILL UNDEAD ADJUTANT: No good, since it used experience points.

SUMMONS VIA THE STAFF OF AINZ OOAL GOWN: Walking around with the Guild Weapon was out of the question.

THE SKILL CREATE UNDEAD: Even Create Upper-Tier Undead resulted only in monsters with levels up to about 70, meaning they weren't strong enough.

*Well, I have a trump card.*

He could use Master of Dark Rites to strengthen his Create Undead skill.

Create Upper-Tier Undead could be used four times in a day, but by using up two of those, he could create an undead that was nearly level 90.

Ainz put a hand to his chin and pondered what sort of undead to make. A thief-type eternal death? Or an eyeball type specialized in detection?

Eternal deaths were fantastic but had a continuous passive skill called Aura of Death and Putrefaction. It was a great skill, like a mix of Ainz's Aura of Despair V (instadeath) and Aura of Despair I (fear), so this undead could deal instadeath and ability point penalties. It was especially adept at the latter. Since the aura wasn't a psychic effect, even those immune to psychic magic couldn't protect themselves from this tricky undead.

Using it in a setting where friendly fire couldn't be avoided would surely create a hellscape filled with agonized shrieks. If he gave the order, the ability could probably be turned off, but it still seemed insane to take an undead like that out and about.

A handful of other terrifying monsters came to mind and then vanished.

*...Man, it's like... they're all so unattractive... Even though they have great abilities.*

They all seemed so incredibly inappropriate for a king to take as his escort on a walk through town.

As Ainz was trying to figure out what to do, his eye landed on Fith as she desperately tried to climb up the wall. He said nothing and jumped down. Partway through his fall, he used Fly to slow himself and practically floated to the ground.

Fith, red in the face with her hands up on a window frame, hurriedly fell in line behind him.

“Fith.”

“My lord!”

“I’m going to town.”

“Understood! I’ll prepare a carriage!”

“No, I don’t need a carriage. I’d like to see the city, this place I rule over. So I think I’m going to walk.”

“What?! But your honored feet will get dirty! I’ll order the streets cleaned at once! And I’ll ready an entourage!”

Most of the streets in E-Rantel were not stone paved. If it rained, they immediately turned to mud.

“No need. I used to live in this city, you know.” That was only technically true, since the moment he had arrived at his inn, he would normally return to Nazarick to create undead... “And I’m going to create an attendant with magic. Nazarick doesn’t need to go out of its way to prepare anyone.”

“...If that’s what you wish, my lord.”

*Well, the problem is I’m not sure what to summon. A demon or undead will start bad rumors. Then I should summon something beautiful that will be good for my reputation. What should it be...?*

Having thought that far, he finally had his answer.

“I’m going to summon some angels. Let’s go.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ainz’s karma leaned negative quite heavily, but that didn’t mean he had any trouble summoning angels, whose karma was very positive. Some classes came with a penalty that didn’t let them summon anything with karma too different from their own, but Ainz didn’t have any such restrictions. Incidentally, for those classes who did have that issue, the closer the summoned being’s karma was to their own, the stronger the being would be.

With every con came a pro—that’s how things worked in the game *Yggdrasil*.

Ainz headed for the yard.

Breaking in horses, training hunting dogs—it had been used for all sorts of things, so the neatly trimmed lawn was surprisingly large.

“Okay, I’m ready. It’ll take some time, so please chat with me while we wait.”

“You want to chat with me, my lord?!”

“Yes. Right. Well, tell me something about the ninth level, or— Oh. Will you tell me about cleaning? About cleaning our rooms?”

Without waiting for Fith’s reply, Ainz changed some of his gear and began to cast.

He was using the super-tier spell Pantheon. It was a spell similar to the tenth-tier Armageddon: Good and the super-tier spell Nibelung I, the exact opposite of the super-tier Pandemonium.

Ainz stood there listening to Fith talk as he continued casting. If he needed to cast it in a hurry, he could have used a cash shop item, but it would have been a waste.

*Shooting the breeze with a maid isn’t so bad.* That was the sort of thing that was on his mind.

The fact that no maids were allowed in Albedo’s room was news to him.

“I see. That was all very interesting. I just remembered, though—go to my room on the double and bring me Slimy Boy. This won’t work without him.”

“Understood!”

After watching Fith’s maid uniform get disheveled as she jogged away, Ainz stared vacantly at the large open space. While he waited, he reflected on what Fith had said to him.

Albedo had told the maids she would clean her own room because she considered it part of her training as a bride-to-be. And she didn’t want anyone else in the room Ainz had given her.

Ainz grumbled to himself, “Sheesh. Albedo, I understand how you feel, but when

someone's as busy as you are, you should leave the odd jobs to the maids. This is a strange thing to say, but I guess I win as a ruler."

Eventually, he watched Fith come dashing back, out of breath, bearing Slimy Boy, and Ainz smiled at her good work.

"Thanks."

He expressed his appreciation briefly and took the Lip Bug from her. Then he stuck it to his bone throat, or rather his cervical vertebrae.

"Mm—mm. Mm."

He had no idea how it worked, but his voice changed. It had to be a special characteristic of the monster, but he couldn't quite understand it. All he could do was accept that that's what it did.

About the time he gave up on his questions, the super-tier spell finished casting, and six angels appeared in columns of light.

They were lion-headed angels with one pair of wings spread out and another wrapped around their bodies. They were clad in gleaming armor, each of them bearing a shield with an eye pattern in one hand and a fire-tipped spear in the other.

These were angels with levels in the 80s, cherubim gatekeepers.

Ainz didn't know much about mythology, so he had no idea why they were called gatekeepers, but he had a decent idea what sort of abilities they had as monsters.

Cherubim gatekeepers made for great tanks. They also had fairly good detection abilities, so they were plenty qualified as guards.

"Protect me. Don't kill any enemies; to whatever extent possible, incapacitate them without injuring them."

"Understood, Lord Summoner."

It wasn't a merciful order. He didn't have any qualms about killing his enemies—he was planning for the possibility that someone was pulling the strings from the shadows. Also, Momon had to be the one to kill them.

"We're off, then."

After setting up his defenses by deploying the angels around him, Ainz set off.

Summons—including this super-tier spell—vanished after a set amount of time, so he wanted to avoid wasting time as much as possible.

"Angels, Fith is also coming along. Protect her as you do me."

"Understood, Lord Summoner."

"L-Lord Ainz! I can't possibly be worthy of the same protection as your precious Supreme Being body!"

"...Fith. You may be a maid, but you're also one of my friends' creations. That makes you extremely valuable to me. Listen, I don't like repeating myself. Remember what I said and pass it along to your fellow maids."

"Th-thank you!"

Incidentally, he didn't mention the eight-edged assassins, who were also no doubt coming along. He could summon those as long as he had *Yggdrasil* gold. They had no value to him besides the fact that it would be a waste to lose them.

"Now then, let's go."

Ainz, with an entourage consisting of the six angels, Fith, and a few eight-edged assassins—the rest would stay behind to guard this place—approached the gate.

Standing there was the commander of over twenty death knights Ainz had created, a crypt lord.

He was an undead with a level in the 70s, wearing a purple robe that must have been gorgeous once but was now in tatters, plus a crown so radiant, it didn't match the rest of his appearance.

Crypt lords had commander skills that strengthened their subordinates, but since the death knights this one was commanding were under Ainz's control, the buffs weren't in effect. That said, he was still a great commander, and Ainz had stationed him there because of his appreciation of his abilities.

"I'm going out now. Let Albedo know."

The crypt lord bowed low as Ainz walked past him into the city.

He didn't have any particular destination in mind.

More than a walk, he wanted an answer to the question Pandora's Actor had lobbed at him. He wouldn't have been able to sort out even the things he could manage on his own if he had to endure constant disruptions.

Ainz set out on his walk, envisioning the future of the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, which he controlled.

### 3

Ainz and his crew proceeded straight down the broad street.

He couldn't say it was very lively. Compared to his memories as Momon, the difference was clear at a glance. The expressions on the people's faces were dark, and they were all in a hurry for some reason.

Meanwhile, death knights strode right down the middle of the street. It was probably the group he had patrolling the city as guards. He'd given them simple orders to apprehend anyone fighting or otherwise being violent and to protect anyone who asked for help.

Ainz shifted his gaze toward the wall.

Some of the many death knights he had created were on watch atop it. There were others, like the ones at the gate and the ones on patrol, but probably the weirdest way he was making use of them was having some accompany the slum dwellers he had sent to establish a village.

The people with a high likelihood of ending up in the slums were the second and third backup sons who didn't inherit fields. Those sorts of men came to the city with their dreams, convinced they would be able to make it there, but slipped into poverty when those dreams didn't come true. And that's why Ainz sent them out with the promise of land.

They were headed for the villages that had been rebuilt on the grounds of the lands that had been burned in the Theocracy's conspiracy. Since they were destroyed by external causes, it would be easy to repopulate them once the original threat was removed.

Those villages had a history of being attacked, so Ainz had death knights and soul eaters go along as guards. He also ordered the undead to help with the field work.

Maybe they weren't very good at farming, but when it came to basic physical labor, humans couldn't compare. The undead were heavy machinery that could run twenty-four hours a day without fuel—perfect for working the land or doing any other hard labor; they would surely contribute much to the coming harvest.

What Ainz demanded of them was to establish a village and reach minimal self-sufficiency within a year. From the second year, they were supposed to have harvests on par with any normal village.

Any crops he received as taxes were going straight into the exchange box to be converted into *Yggdrasil* currency. Albedo and Demiurge were thrilled about this project before he even told them the details, so he was sure it would go well.

And so he had lent out the undead so that establishing the villages wouldn't drag on for years.

Incidentally, the undead were rentals, and the contract stated that in future tax payments, a rental fee would be added on top. He didn't have to charge, but he put the plan in place because he figured in the future, all sorts of people would be using undead.

As part of that plan, he dispatched a large number of slum dwellers—prioritizing families—out of the city, but it wasn't as if that was why foot traffic in the streets had dwindled.

The reason there weren't many people out was probably that Ainz was taking a walk. There were too many people whose eyes became saucers when they saw him and either skittered back the way they came or dodged onto a side street.

It was like walking in an empty wasteland.

Being feared wasn't a bad thing. It was ten times better than being slighted.

*But is this lifeless town really my country?*

As long as the Great Tomb of Nazarick and the NPCs who lived there were happy, he didn't care about the rest. But what would his old friends have said if they saw this? Would they have been drawn in by their nature as undead or monsters and view humans as food? Or would they have retained intense human emotions?

*What the heck do I want to do with this country?*

As Pandora's Actor said, he needed to decide national policy as well as his goals for ruling the city.

For example, it could become a country that existed to produce wheat and other food to throw into the exchange box to obtain coins to fortify the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

It could become a country that bred humans for slaughter and to accumulate experience points in the equipment Avarice and Selflessness.

It could become a country where undead performed all the labor and the living didn't have to do any work at all.

It could...

From a country filled with love to one filled with resentment—what was Ainz supposed to do with this nation bearing his guild's name? He couldn't delegate this to his subordinates; it was his responsibility as Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness.

“Fith, what do you think about this city? How is this country?”

“My humble apologies. What kind of answer would be appropriate for ‘how’ it is?”

*Too abstract?* Ainz restated his question. “Do you think this country is easy to live in? Tell me what you really think without any flattery.”

“Yes, I think it’s very easy to live in this country under your rule, Lord Ainz.”

Ainz looked to the heavens. He should have known this was what an NPC would say.

“But...”

"Oh? What is it? Whatever it is, tell me."

"Yes, my lord. The ruler of this country is putting his precious body on display, so why has no one come to worship you? They only peek out from indoors... It's terribly poor manners!"

Fith was offended. Certainly, there were a lot of people in the shops along the street peeking out at them with bated breath. Some were even scared stiff at the sight of the angels.

"...Fith, you don't think humans are worth much, do you?"

"My lord, it's as you say. They are poor things who were not created by the Supreme Beings."

This was the basic attitude that most in Nazarick shared. A level-1 maid was no exception.

"Fith, what's most important to me is you guys."

"Thank you!"

"But I should probably show a little affection to my subjects. They're the people of the Nation of Darkness, after all."

"I humbly agree, my lord."

"Let's make an ideal town for them. A gentle world like a dream dipped in sweet nectar. It'll be a place that will make them want to be ruled by me forever."

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

"If I'm going to conquer the world, my target isn't only humans. All races shall kneel before me."

"As it should be, my lord."

*The ideal-homeland plan...*

The plan they'd been carrying out on the sixth level of Nazarick had originally been

started in order to show any players they encountered that they were a good guild, like, *Look at all the races we've welcomed to Nazarick!*

Ainz felt that as an experiment, it was a good one.

"Let's tell the whole world that under the rule of the King of Darkness is eternal prosperity."

"That's simply the truth, my lord."

If that was how it turned out, he might be able to show off the city proudly if he ever found any of his friends, the other guild members.

The shape of Ainz's country was surely one where all the races under his rule could coexist. He would take the form of the onetime guild Ainz Ooal Gown from the Great Tomb of Nazarick and reproduce it in this world.

It would be a place where his friends, who might be out there somewhere, could come and have a pleasant time with people of all sorts of races, even if they were grotesques.

Ainz's eyes sparkled even more brightly.

*The Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown should be a country where all sorts of races can coexist. Only the Nation of Darkness can achieve that.*

Even if one genius king established a country, there was no guarantee that his child would be an excellent king as well. And neither was there any guarantee that his grandson or great-grandson would be excellent kings. He had heard the saying somewhere that companies went bad in the second generation and went under in the third.

But that wouldn't happen if an ageless, immortal genius king was the ruler. The ideal government was dictatorship by a handful of geniuses. The presence of figures like Albedo and Demiurge made the Nation of Darkness capable—no, uniquely capable of producing an eternal paradise. Just like Ulbert said, "A dictatorship by a superbeing would be amazing!"

Ainz considered it further.

The guardians, with Demiurge and Albedo in the lead, were racing toward the goal of

world conquest, and Ainz hadn't been able to completely refuse—because he thought it would help get his name out to his friends.

But it wouldn't be bad to spread his name in a way that wasn't simply ruling with force, right? Promoting the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown as an ideal homeland and conquering people with that sweet nectar was one option.

It was a matter of carrots versus whips.

If Demiurge and Albedo were doing the whipping, Ainz could give out carrots.

*This is a terrific plan...*

Ainz made up his mind. This was the shape of world conquest conceived by Ainz and his vestiges of humanity, not the NPCs who looked down on anyone who wasn't from Nazarick: rule by overwhelming attraction.

*What do I need to do to reach that objective?*

As he began walking again, he worked his brain as hard as he could.

*Methods different from Albedo's and Demiurge's... Methods that don't rely on force...*

Ainz couldn't imagine the workings of a country. So he pretended he was an employee at a small company.

It was a tiny company that took up only one floor of the building. The only employee was Ainz.

Its product was the splendid governance of the Nation of Darkness. And he had to sell it.

First, he had to think of who would buy his product. He had to get it to the people who needed it. But he didn't have enough information about who wanted it. Why? It was simple. Because he hadn't advertised enough.

But it wasn't a matter of going to all different cities and handing out flyers at the entrance. That would be a waste of time. Ainz was the sole employee. He needed a different way.

There was no mass media to be found like there was in his old world. *There are networks of traveling merchants and whatnot by trade, so would it make sense to advertise within those systems?* Before he realized it, Ainz had arrived in front of the Adventurers Guild.

He had gone there so often as Momon that it had practically become muscle memory. *That's probably a symptom of workaholism.*

Ainz smiled wryly and opened the door.

The counter in the back came into view. There was one receptionist lady sitting there. On his left-hand side was a large door, and on the right was the board. Job requests written on sheets of parchment were posted there. And as for adventurers looking them over... there were none.

The guild was empty. It was impossible to even compare it to the times he had visited as Momon.

Ignoring the receptionist watching him wide-eyed, Ainz stood before the sheets of parchment.

He still couldn't read the writing, but there were a few words he had memorized. Among them were words for time.

A quick look told him the only jobs available were old ones from about a month ago. In other words, there weren't many urgent requests; it was mostly recurring tasks.

"...You at the desk. There aren't many jobs posted. Aren't there any new requests?"

"Eep... N-no. What's there is all we have, Your Majesty."

Were there fewer adventurers around because there were fewer requests?

If so, that was Ainz's doing.

Ainz had the streets patrolled mainly by his military—death knights—to keep the peace. The threat of monsters must have been eliminated as a result.

If he had the patrols continue, it was possible that the adventurers would completely disappear.

*I need to create requests to get them to— No, there's no reason I need adventurers here.*

Anything an adventurer could do, his death knights could do. Well, certain things, such as gathering herbs, would be tricky, but the answer was to lend out death knights to escort apothecaries.

Ainz could currently think of no use for adventurers. For one, hiring them cost money. E-Rantel's tax revenue had dropped—it couldn't afford adventurers.

*No one will be troubled if the adventurers leave.*

Having decided that, he was about to leave the guild.

*Besides, that job was so lacking in dreams and aspiration.*

He remembered the first time he had visited this city's guild with Narberal.

Adventurers traveled the world in search of the unknown. He used to think it was a job that embodied the correct way of playing *Yggdrasil*.

*If they're nothing more than anti-monster bodyguards, then once those are unnecessary, they'll be unemployed. That's how it goes with any job. If only it was more like in Yggdrasil, more dreamy... Dreams? Journeying across the land in pursuit of the unknown? Could that be...?*

Something lit up in the back of Ainz's mind.

If, hypothetically, the adventurer trade changed from being monster extermination mercenaries to seekers of the unknown like in *Yggdrasil*, then couldn't he have them promote the Nation of Darkness in uncharted lands?

Ainz didn't want to promote only to humans but to all races. If he wanted to advertise exclusively to people, using merchant connections might have been enough. But if that wasn't the case, maybe adventurers were the optimal choice.

Ainz hmmed with a nod.

The receptionist had a dubious look on her face, but he ignored that—because if he paid attention to her, the idea he had would fly off somewhere.

The CEO of his own little company, Ainz considered the next steps in his plan.

*But at present, the number of adventurers in the Nation of Darkness is trending downward. If nothing changes, it will continue to dwindle, and in the near future, they'll be pretty much gone. How can I prevent that from happening?*

Increasing their number would be easy. All he needed to do was the opposite of what he was doing now. In other words, have the Nation of Darkness pay for monster extermination. But that ran contrary to Ainz's goal of having adventurers pursue the unknown. One option would be to put in requests for promotion, but Ainz didn't have the money.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick had mountains of cash, but his personal assets had dried up. The NPCs would surely say that all the money in Nazarick belonged to Ainz, but he was starting this project on his own discretion, so he didn't really want to dip into their reserves.

As Ainz was thinking, he heard the door open.

When he turned to look, he saw a familiar adventurer staring back at him, immobile.

*Hmm? That's, uh, what's his name... Yokmoch? No. But it's something like that.*

It was right there, but he couldn't quite reach it. In that state of frustration, he dug as deep as he could into his memory.

"Moknach..." When he managed to unearth the correct answer, he inadvertently said it aloud.

Shocked to have been suddenly called by name, the adventurer completely froze.

*Crap!*

It was too late to panic. He could tell the guild staffer was looking over at them now to see what was happening, too.

There was no way the new ruler of E-Rantel, King of Darkness Ainz Ooal Gown, would know the name of a mere mythril-plate adventurer. What possible reason would he have for knowing that? He spun the gears of his brain, but before he could come up with something, Moknach spoke.

"D-did you hear about me from Sir Momon?"

"Yes, I did. That's right."

Ainz jumped at that explanation immediately. Two conflicting emotions streaked across Moknach's face at the same time: anticipation and fear.

Having recovered from the previous moment's scare, Ainz cautiously analyzed the situation.

If he remembered correctly, this man was the leader of the mythril team Rainbow. He first met him during the vampire hullabaloo. After that, he had spoken with him a few times as Momon, but he hadn't seen him in a while, so he had nearly forgotten him.

Moknach admired Momon as a hero like all the other adventurers and soldiers did. What did he think of the fact that he had been defeated by the King of Darkness?

*Why would Momon have spoken to the King of Darkness about me? Just shooting the breeze? Or did he sell me out?* Those were probably the sorts of ideas going around in his head.

Ainz looked for a chance to turn this awkward spot to his advantage.

"When I asked Momon about capable adventurers, he mentioned you—Moknach from Rainbow"

Moknach had been mostly keeping his eyes on the ground, but his face jerked up when he heard what Ainz had said. "I-is that true?!"

"You doubt me?"

"No! I would never..."

When visiting a client, the first order of business was to praise them. Most humans weren't averse to being complimented. Buttering up the customer before launching into a sales pitch was biz talk 101 but also the core of the art of negotiation.

Having successfully driven a wedge into the opening in the man's startled mental state, Ainz was determined not to let this chance slip by. He launched a question at him. "So why are you in E-Rantel?"

The best way to learn about adventurers was to ask an adventurer.

Moknach hesitated a bit, but then seemed to steel his resolve. “The undead, Your Majesty. The Katze Plain is nearby. There is no shortage of opponents to make money off of.”

Ainz didn’t really get it, but the guy was sweating bullets with a *There, I said it* rebel smile on his face.

Ainz intended to take over the Katze Plain before too long. The rumors of the ship that sailed on land were especially interesting to him.

“I see.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm?”

“No, I mean...”

This fellow wasn’t very articulate. Ainz endured the urge to sigh and pressed his question. “Is that the only reason?”

“...Besides that, well, yeah. Until Sir Momon showed up, we mythrils were the highest-ranking adventurers around, so we got lots of well-paying jobs.”

*So it’s about pay.* Maybe the best option was to allocate a portion of the nation’s budget to rewarding adventurers.

“I’m also from around these parts, so I know lots of people. And all sorts of magic items show up in this city, too.”

“Oh, magic items?”

“Yes. A single item can save your life, so it’s only natural for an adventurer to choose a place with a good selection on offer as their base.”

It was true that even in *Yggdrasil*, he had heard stories about parties being saved from annihilation by a single item, and come to think of it, there were lots of people who seemed to be adventurers at the market in the imperial capital. In other words, if he

could sell magic items on a larger scale than the imperial capital, he could lure adventurers to his country.

If he made random items with data crystals and held an auction, people would probably go nuts. But that would eat up Nazarick's assets, and that was before he even considered that any technology developed as a result could come back to bite him.

*I guess sprinkling them around like bait wouldn't be bad? But I'd really prefer to avoid using Nazarick's resources. I guess that means developing various items with the technology of this world? And things that can travel between nations? Mm... that's a tall order. I'll put this line of thinking on hold for now.*

"Umm..." Moknach's somewhat restrained voice brought Ainz back from the depths of his thoughts. "Your Majesty, I wonder... Why did you ask me that? Honestly..." Biting his lip, Moknach continued in a pained voice, "We can't stand up to a single one of your undead, even in a group. And those undead are protecting the city now. In the Nation of Darkness, adventurers have practically no purpose."

What could Ainz say? What kind of answer would make a good impression on the adventurer... plus the receptionist lady who was watching them closely along with the other staff members who had appeared at some point?

Would dissembling and saying, *There's no reason I need to tell you*, to avoid making a big mistake, be the safer route? But that could make them suspicious. He needed something more...

*No, believe in yourself. I'm a man who's gotten through plenty of sticky spots like this. I'm sure things will work out this time, too—probably!*

Ainz was filled with determination.

*But if you understand that much, then what are you doing here, Moknach? Is it because it's your hometown? Do you have a girlfriend or something?*

The direction the King of Darkness took the conversation would depend on the answer. "Before I tell you why, answer my first question. Why are you in this city right now?"

"B-because..." Moknach trailed off. Then, though somewhat nervously, yet with a resolute expression, he said, "Because of Sir Momon. If Sir Momon is staying here to

protect the city, someone like me—someone who was born here—can't very well run away. It'd be so lame."

That instant, Ainz smiled.

Though he was slightly acquainted with the man as Momon, Ainz was surprised that he was so open.

"I see. Then I'll answer your question as well." He left a weighty pause and then continued in a dignified manner, "Because of Momon. I wanted to know what adventurers with the potential to become like Momon desire, what they're after."

Moknach's eyes opened wide. Ainz heard a few of the staff members gasp.

"Momon is strong, but more than that, he's a noble man." Saying it himself was awkward, but he couldn't help it, since those were the characters he was playing. "And I see in adventurers the spark I see in Momon."

Perhaps his regular rehearsals were worth it. When he finished making his powerful remark, it was like a bolt of lightning struck the ground behind Moknach.

"B-but Momon is a Supreme Being—only a chosen few can reach his level. There's no way we could be like him..."

"Are you saying Momon doesn't have an eye for potential?"

"What?! D-did Sir Momon say we have that potential?"

"Not in so many words, but..." Ainz performed the laugh he had practiced—a kingly laugh. He made it seem like he thought it was funny even if it wasn't. "Even if you don't reach it, what about your child? Or your grandchild? Perhaps from among you, more like Momon will appear. I'm an immortal being, the king of the Nation of Darkness. It's only natural that I would work toward getting the next Momon to pledge his wholehearted loyalty to me. That is the purpose that I, as a ruler, see in the Nation of Darkness's adventurers. Well, there is another, but I haven't quite figured it out for myself yet, so allow me to omit it."

The area fell deathly silent.

*Huh? Did I say something wrong? Doesn't this guy adore Momon?*

Ainz was getting anxious when Moknach bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, I am grateful for the opportunity to have met with you like this and to have had the chance to hear some of your thoughts." When Moknach lifted his head, the earlier impressions of anxiety, fear, and suspicion had faded, and he was wearing a cheerful smile. "...You're a formidable man. The charming charisma you possess is even greater than your immense magical power."

"I'm glad, too—to have met one of the excellent adventurers I'm hoping to win over in the future."

Moknach's face relaxed slightly, in a happy way. "But, Your Majesty, the Adventurers Guild has always been uninvolved in politics. I'm the same way. Do you think you can change our minds?"

"Hmm. That was my goal in coming here. Not that the idea is set in stone yet... You at the desk. Tell the guild master the King of Darkness is here to see him."

"Y-yes, Your Majesty!"

The receptionist who had been listening intently dashed off.

"Then if you'll excuse me..."

Moknach, completely changed from when he had first entered, bowed politely and took his leave.

*Okay... now what?*

There were three important points to Ainz's half-formed idea of using adventurers to spread word of how wonderful the Nation of Darkness was.

The first was strengthening the Adventurers Guild. Acquiring an organization with only a dozen people in it wouldn't mean much.

The second was training them. Weaklings wouldn't be able to travel very far, and if it took too long to share the news about the greatness of the Nation of Darkness, there wouldn't be as many benefits.

The third was that he needed good-willed cooperation on the previous points. He

figured he could probably pull it off with Momon, but having Ainzach's voluntary commitment would make things easier.

*First I should negotiate with Ainzach to solve this third issue. But, man, making a presentation with no data is rough. Ahhh, my stomach hurts.*

All he could do was hope the guild master was out, but the first thing the receptionist said when she came back was, "Right this way."

Ainz looked up at the ceiling before following her.

## 4

Ainz traveled down the hallway he had walked many times as Momon and was led into not the guild master's office but a room farther back that was used to receive visitors.

There he met a man in the virile prime of his life with sharp features, Guild Master Pluton Ainzach.

Momon knew the man—and had even been dragged to an adult establishment by him before, but for King Ainz Ooal Gown, this was their first meeting, so he had to keep that in mind and be careful how he acted.

"What a surprise, Your Majesty. I'm overjoyed as a citizen of this country that you would grace our humble guild with your presence. It may be a shabby place, but please take a seat."

Ainz accepted Ainzach's offer and sat down.

Fith stood behind Ainz. There were three angels in the room. The rest waited outside.

"Really, I should be the one visiting you, so I thank you for coming." Ainzach had taken a knee and now bowed his head.

The attitude made Ainz wince.

The tone of the man's voice was totally different from when he dealt with Momon. It was warm and polite but only that. When Ainz realized it was only business talk, he smiled wryly—not that his face moved, of course.

Ainz shifted his gaze to the other door in the room, the one he hadn't entered through.

It was the door to the guild master's office. If he was Momon, they would be talking in there, so the fact that they were in the sitting room made him feel like there was a barrier between them.

"Is something wrong, Your Majesty?"

Ainzach had raised his head and was looking at Ainz. *I focused too much on the other room and neglected him.* Ainz scoffed at himself for his foolishness.

He was only laughing at himself, but Ainzach's expression stiffened.

Ainz hated himself for being rude, but the King of Darkness couldn't very well apologize. He decided to try to move the conversation forward and leave things vague.

But what was the proper way to behave with the guild master?

Ainz was only just starting to feel out this role of king, and he had no idea how to interact with the head of the Adventurers Guild. He eventually decided to go with what he thought might work.

"You may have already heard, Ainzach, but I have a proposition for you."

"My humble apologies, Your Majesty. I'm afraid I haven't heard, so if you would be so kind as to explain from the beginning..."

From their exchanges when he was Momon, Ainz knew that Ainzach was a shrewd man who could tell a lie with a straight face. It seemed like there was a fairly good chance he actually already knew what was going on. Perhaps that was why he didn't appear at all surprised to see the angels.

In that case, they could cut to the chase. Ainz spoke frankly.

"I'm absorbing this guild into the Nation of Darkness."

"...I see. I'm sure no one will stop you."

"Oh? I heard that adventurer guilds don't align themselves with any nation. You don't care?"

“Everything will be as you wish, Your Majesty. We exist under the rules of your country. If you decide to rule the guild, I cannot protest.”

Ainz chuckled to himself. It seemed like Ainzach noticed. The emotions deep in his eyes seemed to waver slightly.

“That’s true, but I imagine your plan is something like this, right? You’ll tell all the adventurers to head to the kingdom or the empire and then hand me an empty shell of an organization.”

As Ainz stared at him, Ainzach shrugged as if to say, *So you’ve already thought that far ahead?*

“Your Majesty is as brilliant as I expected. Adept at not only ruling and governance, you can even see through our thoughts... Did you use a spell to read my mind?”

“I didn’t use any magic. It’s simply experience.”

“Because you’ve lived a long time? Dear me, what a formidable man you are. What will happen to me, then?”

“Nothing.”

“...I won’t thank you.”

“I don’t need your thanks. I want you to listen to me. The reason the Adventurers Guild didn’t work for the country was because it existed to protect the people. That’s why it never gets involved in fights between people. That’s what I’ve heard—is it correct?”

“Your Majesty, what you say is true. Even when you occupied the city, we didn’t put up a fight.”

“There was that Momon fellow who stood in my way, though, yes...?”

“Urk,” Ainzach groaned.

Well, nothing good would come of forcing him into a corner. Ainz moved the conversation forward, taking care to defend Momon. “Well, we can let that go. Besides, we’re cooperating on one matter—the peaceful rule of the city, that is.”

Ainzach looked like he wanted to say something, but Ainz continued without reacting.

This was the most important part.

He had to convince Ainzach to cooperate on a friendly basis with the Nation of Darkness.

Ainz recalled all the gripes and grievances he'd heard as Momon.

"...All right, I wonder about part of what you said earlier. You agreed that adventurers exist to protect people, but how far does your definition of *people* extend?"

"What do you mean?" Ainzach's expression said he didn't understand what Ainz was getting at.

"Does *people* mean humanoids? Or just humans? Are elves, half elves, and the other races living alongside humans included?"

"Well, sure, they're included."

"That's strange. In the empire, elves are slaves, right? Does that count as protecting them? They aren't criminals who broke imperial law, right?"

Ainzach lowered his gaze. Then he looked back up at Ainz.

"...I'm one guild master from the kingdom. I can't claim to know what their philosophy is in the empire."

"Trying to escape with a vague answer...?"

Ainzach's eyes widened. Flames of fear blazed deep within.

"Your Majesty, I was being sarcastic..."

"Sarcastic? So it wasn't the truth? Then I'll ask again. Are you trying to get out of this with a vague answer?"

Ainzach looked down. "...It's as you say."

"You say you protect elves and half elves, yet you don't. Why is that?"

Ainzach prefaced his response with the fact that he didn't know how things worked in the empire. "Even adventurer guilds aren't completely immune to a country's influence. Adventurers claim to be free and declare themselves outside of any rule, but they still live under their nations' laws. We're armed. That's why it's particularly dangerous to use our force against the country. That's probably what the guild in the empire thinks."

"Yeah. But if you live under the laws of a country, then you should have no qualms about being absorbed. So why are you so against it?"

"The empire and the kingdom both have their eyes on us. Only adventurers have the power to fight strong monsters, after all. They won't make any impossible demands as long as that stays the same. But it won't work the same way with you, Your Majesty. If we were absorbed, it's conceivable that you would force us to use our might as a military force against the people."

"So the main reason you don't want to be absorbed by the country is that you're scared that your power as adventurers would be turned on the people?"

"That's correct, Your Majesty. We don't want to be used for oppression or war; we don't want to be involved in anything that will result in so much loss of life."

*Got him.* Ainz chuckled. He didn't say that he had known as much already.

"Sit down. I'm going to explain what I want you guys to do." Ainz ordered Ainzach to sit down facing him again. After the guild master nervously took his seat, Ainz began his explanation. "I'm thinking about having the adventurers perform a completely different job. I want them to discover the unknown and make the world a smaller place."

Ainz had the feeling Ainzach was looking directly at him for the first time.

"For example, in the south between the Theocracy and the Sacred Kingdom, there is a wasteland, but do you know the details of the terrain and what sorts of monsters live there?"

"No, there are many different subhuman tribes that live on that land, but no kingdom adventurers who went there ever returned, so we have almost no information about the area."

"Then how about the mountains southwest of here on the border with the Theocracy?"

"We don't know much about that area, either."

"Doesn't that strike you as pathetic? Well, no, considering the adventurers' jobs, I suppose it can't be helped. They're an organization for protecting the people. They don't need knowledge about places where there are no people, then, do they? Although there could be herbs growing there that might help people..."

Ainzach pursed his lips at the jab.

"Once the Adventurers Guild is under my control, I want to have adventurers fill in those blanks."

"...Couldn't you have your men do it, Your Majesty?"

"Don't be a spoilsport, Ainzach. I heard that you used to be an adventurer yourself, so could you say that again—keeping in mind the definition of *adventurer*? Do you really exist only to battle monsters? I thought adventurers were people who made the unknown known—at least, until I actually investigated."

Ainzach bit his lip—so hard that it seemed like it would break and bleed.

"We have to protect the people."

"No, you don't. In the Nation of Darkness, I, the ruler, will protect the people. You know it to be true based on the recent decrease in requests, right?"

Ainzach assented with a groan.

"So what will you do now? Leave the Nation of Darkness to protect the people in the kingdom and empire? Then you're no more than mercenaries who specialize in monster extermination."

Ainz paused. Now it was time for the invitation. He had to use his full brainpower when choosing each and every word. "Your suggestion to have my subordinates perform these tasks, it isn't wrong. While my subordinates are adept at killing enemies, however, in most cases I question whether they would be able to go into the unknown and build amicable relations with the people they find there, embarrassing as that is to admit. That's why I'd like the adventurers to take on this task, if possible."

He was extremely curious about Ainzach's reaction to this, but his presentation wasn't over yet. "Well, I'd be having them do such dangerous work, so I'd want to back them up in every way possible. In such a case, it would make sense for the guild to be under my umbrella, no?"

"...Couldn't you put in requests like normal?"

"Ah, I see. You must be very confident in your abilities. I can't fault you for that kind of courage."

"Wh-what do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"You're saying it's fine for the Nation of Darkness to disavow any adventurers who journey into the unknown and have an unlucky encounter in an area with people who espouse a different culture, right? And you'll clear up any issues that arise on your own as the guild? If you're going to exist as an independent organization, that would be only natural. You'll have to agree to resolve problems in a way such that the Nation of Darkness doesn't incur any losses."

Ainzach fell silent.

"That's what it means to exist independently and not under a nation, right? In other words, if a foreign country took action, you guys would be responsible for handling it... Does what I'm saying seem strange to you?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty." Ainzach shook his head to emphasize his position. "I agree with every word you've said."

"There you go, then. But if we did that, the number of adventurers—people in such a technical trade—would decrease. In the time it takes to develop capable people, attrition of already outstanding individuals would be a huge loss. That's why I want the guild under my umbrella. And then rather than issue orders, I'd do my utmost to provide you with support."

"That's quite an enticing proposal... If you don't mind me asking one question, though, would this exploration of unknown lands be for the purpose of helping the Nation of Darkness invade?"

"That's a difficult question to answer. There's no way I can claim that it would never turn out that way. We might even find that the people in the unknown lands are

planning to invade us and end up attacking preemptively. For the subhumans in the wasteland, it might be that we invade in the name of demonstrating our power to those ogres, orcs, and so on. If you found violent monsters sharpening their claws nearby, wouldn't you want to get the jump on them?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. But..."

"...Hmm."

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"No, sorry to break the flow of the conversation. You were going to say something more, weren't you? Go ahead and continue."

"...Understood. What I was worried about was the possibility of annexing peaceful people by force."

"For example, what race are you thinking? Elves?"

"Well, perhaps."

"That has to do with national policy, so I can't just lump them all together. If it would benefit the Nation of Darkness to invade and rule them, then I would do that, but if there are no merits, I wouldn't. Isn't that only a matter of course when it comes to a country? I will say, though, that if it's simply an invasion, I have an army plenty large enough. I don't expect adventurers to collect intelligence on enemy countries or test out invasion routes. I just want them to seek the unknown and make lots of discoveries. That I can promise. By the way," he began again and asked Ainzach a question. "You guys consider attractive races separate from the rest, huh? Why didn't you object to the annexation of peaceful peoples when I mentioned invading ogres and orcs?"

"B-because they're subhumans..."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. I see; I see. So that's how you think. I understand now, yes. So what's your answer?"

Ainzach seemed like he wanted to say something, but he shook his head right away. He must have had a change of heart. "Do you need an immediate answer on this, Your Majesty?"

"I'd like a reply, but I imagine there's a lot of groundwork to be laid down, consultations to be made. I'm sure it will take a little time. But first, I want to hear what *you* think, Ainzach." Ainz sat up sharply and fixed his eyes on Ainzach, the distance between them negligible. "I don't like that you're all merely exterminators. It's so sad—and you call yourselves adventurers. Ainzach, what do you think? Won't you adventure for the Nation of Darkness—for me? I really wish for you all..." Ainz paused momentarily. He put energy into his gaze and his tone. "...I wish for you all to be adventurers."

Tension filled the room. Ainz held his breath—not that he needed to breathe any air to begin with—and observed Ainzach, waiting for a response as if he was observing an opponent who had just collapsed from a special attack.

"...I think it's a very enticing proposal."

The light in Ainz's eyes seemed to dim. Usually in cases like this, the next comment would be the reason why it wouldn't work out.

"But I need to gather opinions from a lot of different people about whether we can accept it or not. Certainly, if you really want to utilize adventurers in that fashion, it sounds like a dream. And it would make sense for the guild to be structured under the country's umbrella. If you're asking for the opinion of one former adventurer... I'd like to cooperate."

*Huh? So this went well, then?*

"I see..."

Ainz leaned back on the sofa.

The joy of his presentation going well slowly overcame him. It was like the feeling of leaving a client's office and calling one's company from a café to report in, wanting to shout, *We did it!* He never thought he would be able to use his experience as an adventurer in this way. No, it was probably because he had that experience that he had even come up with this idea.

He remembered there was one other thing he had to bring up—about the Nation of Darkness's future.

"Oh, there's one other thing." Ainz held up a bony finger. "Earlier when you mentioned

protecting the people, you agreed that it meant humanoids, right? Regarding the fact that adventurers existed to protect the people.”

“Yes, that is what I said, Your Majesty.”

“And when I was talking about invasions, you said you didn’t care about subhumans, right?”

Ainzach nodded as if to say, *What about it?*

“The Nation of Darkness accepts all races as citizens. Not only humanoids but subhumans and grotesques as well. If you say that the purpose of adventurers is to protect the people, I’m going to have you protect subhumans and grotesques as well.”

Ainzach’s eyes widened. “What are you saying?!”

“...What’s wrong? I don’t understand what you’re all riled up about. My country doesn’t distinguish between humanoids, subhumans, and grotesques. As long as I rule over them, they are all people.”

“Th-that’s i-insanity. It can’t be done, Your Majesty!”

“You don’t think so? I heard there’s a country north of the kingdom called the Council State or something like that. Isn’t it true that all sorts of races coexist there?”

“I have heard that about that country, but... No! You’re telling us to coexist with races that consider us food?!”

“Aha! Yes, that’s right. I won’t permit free citizens of the Nation of Darkness to eat one another. I’ll enact a law against it. Does that make it better? I won’t stop anyone eating people from other countries, although I don’t mean to go poking my nose into my citizens’ diets... Well, wait, it’s probably not good for your mental health to see members of your own race being sold as meat at market... I guess there’s some room to think this over more.”

According to Lupusregina, the villagers in Carne were coexisting with goblins and ogres, so it probably wasn’t impossible for the city dwellers, although he understood that it would be more difficult to manage with more people involved.

“Wh-what in the world are you thinking?”

"Don't act like you're so confused. Or rather, why don't you cooperate with your fellow living beings? As an undead, I can't comprehend it. To me, there's no difference between humans and goblins. Everyone is equal under my rule. Of course, above you all are me and the people working directly beneath me."

Ainzach's face went through a flurry of expressions and eventually composed itself once again.

"So goblins will be beneath you—as citizens of your country?"

"Were you not listening to everything I just said? I told you ogres and orcs would be included, didn't I?"

"Of course I was listening. I thought you meant as slaves..."

"That's just the sort of thing I would expect someone from the race that enslaved elves to say. I'll repeat it: All citizens beneath me will be equal."

Ainz felt, as he looked at Ainzach, who seemed to be breathing raggedly, that the man wasn't grasping his intentions.

To speak in extreme terms, all citizens would be slaves of the inhabitants of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, but Ainz didn't phrase it that way. It wasn't necessary. If they didn't notice, he didn't care.

"There are already a number of goblins under my protection. A group of them will probably come to E-Rantel soon. You should try talking with them. I have no doubt your conception of what a goblin is will be shattered. And lizardmen apparently don't eat meat very often at all. They eat fish. Dryads and trents are fond of clean water and sunlight. They only attack humans out of self-defense."

"You rule over all those races already?"

"Of course. I've already had a number of subhumans and grotesques as citizens in the past. Oh, but we're getting off topic. Ainzach, I can assume your stance on the Adventurers Guild being absorbed as an organization of the Nation of Darkness is one of approval?"

"...If you're not lying, Your Majesty, then I'm fine with it."

"You sure are a worrywart. I'm not lying. I'm going to have adventurers pursue the unknown." If possible, he wanted them to go in composite teams of various races. "I'll leave the explanation to the adventurers up to you. Anyone who doesn't like the idea of being an adventurer in the Nation of Darkness as a constituent member of the country is free to leave."

"You're sure?"

"Forcing them to work won't turn out well for either of us. Still, I think making big changes to the way things work would be a pain, so let's maintain the current system to some extent. For the time being, the main change will be a review committee from the Nation of Darkness to preside over the guild master."

It was also important to provide added value so the adventurers would want to belong to the Nation of Darkness's guild. "As for national support, first I'll establish a training center. Having adventurers getting killed by unknown monsters in uncharted lands would be a major loss. I want training to be more thorough—at a training center that incorporates actual battles against monsters. Maybe building a dungeon and having them clear it would be a good idea. It would help get them accustomed to team combat as well."

He could have the auto-spawning undead from Nazarick work on that. And then once it was done, they could be the monsters in it.

"That's a wonderful idea. But it sounds like quite the construction project."

Ainz would use undead who didn't require a salary, so he would probably be able to build it cheaply. But he didn't have to admit that. It was important to make people indebted to him when he could.

"I'm sure it will require an unprecedented initial investment, but it's within the realm of necessary costs. Adventurers are important assets to the Nation of Darkness."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"It's nothing. So what do you think? Adventurers should find this an attractive offer, right?"

"Certainly... it's quite enticing for lower-ranking adventurers... But what if they switch to the kingdom or empire once they're trained up?"

“I won’t allow it. It’s going to be an organ of the state! That would be treason.”

“I see... I’ll need to explain that properly.”

“What would attract medium- and high-ranking adventurers?”

“That would probably be the amount of compensation.”

“Well, you can’t eat on dreams alone.”

“There’s that but also the fact that you can’t face powerful monsters without collecting powerful weapons, armor, and items. Those items are expensive.”

“Ah, so it’s about gear.” Mass-producing items would make them cheaper, but there weren’t very many high-ranking adventurers. That meant the items would be custom-order equipment, which would raise the price again. The other issue was probably a lack of creators who could produce such items. Perhaps it would be a good idea to solve that problem, too. “I also want to let as many adventurers as possible know about my proposal—the ones in the kingdom and empire, as well. Do you have any ideas how to do that?”

“The Adventurers Guild you’re creating will be far better than the ones in the kingdom and empire. If you spread information everywhere, the other countries’ guilds will take measures to stop you from poaching their members. Adventurers are like a trump card in some ways. I don’t think there would be very many rulers happy to see an exodus of talent from their country.”

“You’re right. What do you think we should do?”

“It’s difficult to provide an immediate answer. Could I have some time to think?”

“Indeed. I need to think about what to do going forward as well.”

He had the feeling he was biting off a bit more than he could chew with this major plan. He would probably need to take a step back and think, talk things over with some people.

Ainz stood. “All right...” He was about to say, *If you’ll excuse me, then*, but that wasn’t what a king would say. “That’s it. Farewell.”

Ainzach stood and bowed. "Understood, Your Majesty."

Without looking back, Ainz left the room through the door that Fith opened.

He wanted to sigh in spite of himself, but he was still in the other party's building. It was too soon.

Followed by his cherubim, Ainz left the Adventurers Guild. Then, after walking a little while, he finally emitted a small sigh.

*Ahhh, I'm beat.*

Ainz Ooal Gown wasn't saying he was tired, but Satoru Suzuki inside him was clamoring for a break to rest his overheated brain.

*I'll take a break before talking to Albedo about the idea to fold the Adventurers Guild into our organization. I have to think of some pros so she won't be able to pass on the idea... I guess I have a lot to do.*

Ainz walked on in silence. He prayed that something good would come to mind while walking and refrained from using travel magic.

•

Ainzach opened the door leading to his office, and a new guest entered.

The extremely lean, nervous-looking man with a delicate frame was Ainzach's old friend, the head of the Wizards Guild, Theo Rakheshir.

"What a surprise, Pluton. I never imagined the King of Darkness would show up while we were talking. Do you think he caught on to something?"

"I don't know."

Ainzach had been in a meeting with Rakheshir since early in the morning, as was their habit.

Since the city had been captured by the King of Darkness, they met only in the morning —because they knew many undead disliked the sun. Of course, given the undead patrolling the city, that measure was useful only for easing their minds.

Their meetings were generally for sharing information, but they hadn't touched upon the future plans of the guilds. Mainly because while the Nation of Darkness was being established, those who could leave for the kingdom or empire had already left. The Wizards Guild had sent most of their magic items away, and only a few members remained in the city. It was essentially as if the city's Wizards Guild had disbanded.

But in terms of intelligence analysis, there were many important matters that required attending.

Adventurers had weak national ties but would be accepted in the Nation of Darkness? Would he send people after fugitive adventurers? If they made it over the border, would there be international demands to turn them in? What about wizards?

How could they reach out to Momon, who had put himself in harm's way to protect the people? And how should the Adventurers Guild treat Momon?

The shrines had kept silent, and the King of Darkness had drawn a line, but would that status quo continue? Would a resistance rise up in the future?

These were all difficult problems the pair had trouble answering even after wringing all their knowledge out. If some sort of incident happened and they weren't prepared, they would be in trouble. The biggest problem was the shrines.

Would the shrines allow themselves to be ruled by a king who was one of their intolerable enemies, an undead? Their current silence made the question even more unnerving.

There were also the shrines from neighboring countries. If they weren't careful, it was possible that the shrines from other countries would independently declare a holy war on them, forcing the shrines within the city to make a move as well.

The reason no one from the shrines was present at these meetings was because their position was uncertain. Ainzach and Rakheshir were wary about inviting them only to end up embroiled in some conspiracy.

That said, they didn't think the shrines could beat the Nation of Darkness. What they were worried about was a massacre. If Momon became a sword for the King of Darkness and started slaughtering them, what would they do? And in case something like that truly came to pass, who would provide medical treatment for the citizens of this country?

That was what they had been getting headaches about when the King of Darkness showed up.

"But he did notice you were here." The fact that the king had looked at the door and laughed to himself proved it. "It's possible that he got word of our secret meetings somehow."

"What? Then..."

"Probably. I bet he meant for you to hear all that, too."

It didn't take much to hear what was going on in this room from the next, so he knew that Rakheshir must have been listening in on their conversation.

"It's not just in your head?"

"No, it can't be. At the very least, His Majesty knew someone was there. He might have thought it was someone from the shrines."

At the time, it was such a surprise, Ainzach had been shocked and confused, but thinking over it now, it was only embarrassing. He had snuck around hiding his friend and earned himself a king's snickering for his narrow-mindedness.

He should have called Rakheshir in; they could have had a frank conversation among all three of them.

Not that he felt his conversation with the King of Darkness had been a heart-to-heart. But the king had spoken to a citizen with all the dignity of a ruler. Meanwhile, how had he acted?

Amid Ainzach's brow furrowing, Rakheshir addressed him coldly. "So what are you planning on doing? No, you don't even have to say it; I already know. You're calling him 'His Majesty' now."

"Don't you think I did it because someone could be listening in?"

"If they are, then you gave away the fact that we noticed."

"You wouldn't consider the possibility that I was under some kind of Charm spell?"

"I wouldn't say there's zero chance of it, but no, it couldn't be that. Charm spells have a time limit. I'm sure even the King of Darkness can't keep one going indefinitely."

"You never know. Maybe the King of Darkness can."

"Please stop. You might be right, and that's disturbing. He can use the godly eighth tier of spells, after all."

The two of them smiled, and then Ainzach's expression grew serious once more. "I think we can cooperate with him."

"You're going to assist with the invasion?"

"...Isn't it only natural to see strong countries governing the weaker ones?"

"You'll tacitly allow it even though you know it will only end in misery?"

"We don't know that for sure. In the first place, has His Majesty made anyone miserable since he took over here?"

Rakheshir fell silent.

Actually, to their surprise, they were unable to name anyone who had met with misfortune.

"Aren't some adventurers out of work?"

"Well, yes, but that's... Don't get snide with me."

"Yeah, that was a cheap shot. Anyhow, he was here, so shouldn't you have asked him what he intended to do about the shrines?"

"Hold on. What would we do if by me probing, he said, *Now that you mention it, they're in my way. I'll abolish them?* I don't want to live with the weight of being the spark that led to a massacre."

"Do you think he would do something like that?"

"No, quite the opposite. He has an extraordinary intellect. Honestly, it surprised me. It almost makes me wonder if that undead face of his is just a magic disguise. Yes—he

reminded me of Sir Momon."

"I can't think of any way that's not rude to Sir Momon."

In response to his scowling friend's offended jab, Ainzach winced. "You're right. It's not very nice to lump everyone's hero and an undead king together. But they are the same in that they both possess power that deviates from the realm of what normal humans are capable of, aren't they? In a word... yes. I get a unique feeling from them, vibes they must only put out because they are both transcendent."

"I see. Then I suppose I sort of understand."

The pair fondly envisioned their hero Momon.

"All right," said Ainzach after a pause, fixing his gaze squarely on Rakheshir. "If you don't intend to cooperate with His Majesty, Rakheshir, could you stop visiting me?"

His reasoning was obvious. It was possible that documents related to running the nation would begin appearing in his room. It would be problematic for an outsider to come into the space at that point.

The King of Darkness's words had impacted Ainzach so much that he felt motivated to say such a thing to his friend.

The new image of what an adventurer would be called to him. Some people did become adventurers for a chance to trek through lands unknown. Most of them, however, either caved in when faced with the reality or died. Only a handful of adventurers were capable of such a journey. But if the King of Darkness, a caster with absolute power, was backing them, he could see new possibilities opening up.

This was the birth of true adventurers.

Rakheshir murmured, "Ainzach, you know our Wizards Guild is pretty much disbanded, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then as your old friend, I'll support you. And once this is over, shall we go off together in pursuit of the unknown?"

"Ha-ha!" Ainzach laughed. "At our age? Heh-heh, you want to?"

"Could you really resist? Make sure the King of Darkness doesn't have an age cutoff for the Adventurers Guild."

The pair's cheerful laughter echoed throughout the room.



# CHAPTER 2

## THE RE-ESTIZE KINGDOM

# 1

When the magic item in Climb's pocket vibrated, he pulled it out.

It fit in his hand and had three of its own—for hours, minutes, and seconds—as well as twelve numbers carved into its face: a pocket watch.

Some larger clocks were mechanical, but at sizes that people could carry around, they were all necessarily magic items, at least in the kingdom. Since clocks were so closely tied to daily life, they were fairly cheap as far as magic items went. Still, they didn't come at a price that made them easy for the masses to buy.

Climb was borrowing this watch. It had powers beyond a normal magic item.

The watch was called Twelve Magical Powers, and once per day, at the time it was set to, that hour's magic effect would occur. But in order to receive those benefits, the user had to have been in possession of the watch for at least a day, and Climb had only just borrowed it, which meant the powers didn't activate for him.

Gazing absentmindedly up at the blue sky next to him, the girl said, "Hmm? It's already time? That was fast."

"Seems that way," Climb replied to her—Tina, a member of the adamantite-plate adventurer team the Blue Roses.

"Huh. I guess it's hard to tell how time is passing when we're just taking it easy like this."

There were a lot of things he could have said about that remark.

First, Tina wasn't taking it easy. She was guarding the front entrance of this place, the building behind Climb. And though she was saying things like, "It's already time?" and "That was fast," her internal clock was actually correct much of the time.

Some adventurers had unnaturally accurate internal clocks. Thieves, especially, but that was the fruit of their training. They often worked alone on clandestine investigations, so it was extremely important for them to have a strong sense of time.

"Hmm? Is there something you wanted to say?"

“No, nothing.”

She replied, “Okay, then,” and looked back up at the sky.

Climb couldn’t very well have come out and asked, *Why do you lie?* to probe into what she was hiding.

He didn’t even have enough money to hire Tina’s team, but sometimes they ended up at the same destination; that was no excuse for him to act overly friendly. He needed to refrain from doing anything that would upset her.

“All right, I’m going to go talk to the princess.”

“Get goin’, then.”

Climb turned on his heel and headed toward the building they had been guarding.

He had seen it any number of times while it was under construction, but this was his first time inside since it had been completed.

When he opened the door, what must have been a freshly built smell—a unique woody fragrance—tickled his nose.

He proceeded inside and down a hallway, then opened a door to a room in the back.

His master was there.

She was a princess radiant with beauty—Renner.

And around her were several children.

Casting a kind smile on the noisy kids, she was the spitting image of the Holy Mother as she listened to their stories.

Climb was speechless when he walked in on the picturesque scene.

He feared he would disturb an inviolable, sacred moment. The women standing by the window, who worked at the facility, seemed to feel the same way, and none of them moved a muscle.

But one of the people in the room didn't seem concerned about that.

"Hey, the boy's here. It's already time."

At the sound of the cold voice from beneath the mask, Renner raised her head and looked right at Climb.

Climb could see he was reflected in her sapphire eyes.

"...My apologies, Princess Renner, but it's time to return to the palace."

"I see... Well, I hate to leave you all, but I must go."

The children emitted a disappointed "Reallyyy?" If she hadn't completely captured their hearts, they surely wouldn't have said anything like that.

Their response sent the staff into action. They consoled the children and forced the unreasonable ones to let the princess go.

"Can I come back and play again sometime, everyone?"

The kids all gave an enthusiastic response.

"Okay. Next time I'll come cook for you. Let's go, Climb, Evileye."

"Hmph. Even without you telling me, I know I'm here for your protection—well, no, I guess you haven't requested anything, so I'm merely accompanying you. Don't worry about it. I'll be right behind you."

As their party left the building, the carriage they had waiting nearby was just pulling up.

Tina jumped in first without bothering to say anything. It appeared to be an utter lack of manners, but she was actually confirming the carriage's safety. After her went Renner, Climb, and finally Evileye. Then the carriage began to move.

As they bumped along, Evileye suddenly said, "...Man, your job is tough, too, huh? Making these orphanages and stuff..."

"Is it?"

"Yeah. Didn't you hear as much from all sorts of people? That they don't have the money in this day and age to put toward a cause like that?"

Renner put a finger to her chin and cocked her head. "No, that didn't happen. My brother did what I asked right away. And it's precisely because of this day and age that we need to protect children."

Evileye gestured with her chin that the princess should continue.

"Well, as you know, many people died at the hands of the king of the Nation of Darkness. I figured there would be lots of children without parents, so I built the orphanage to take care of them. We also needed to create jobs for the women who lost their husbands."

"The King of Darkness, huh...? Setting that aside for the moment, isn't there something more important to invest in than street urchins...? It's only a matter of course that the weak die, don't you think?"

"No." Renner stated it firmly. This refusal had a power unlike her other words. "The strong rescuing the weak is the correct attitude. Besides..."

Climb felt her eyes on him.

*Is she...?*

Climb remembered himself as a child.

Did the princess think to establish an orphanage because she knew what his life was like back then? Was it to make sure no one else ended up like him?

A momentary heat flared in his breast.

Of course, he hadn't confirmed her true intentions, but he had an inkling he was right.

"Well, that's one way to think about it. And I don't think it's right to force my ideas on others. Still, did you really need to make it so big?"

"Yes, because it seems like lots of children will end up there. We're planning to gather children from all the territory directly held by the king, so it might even be too small. Those children are my treasures. I need to take care of them to make sure they don't

stray onto a mistaken path."

"Huh. Princess, you're so smart."

"What are you trying to say, Tina?"

"How do you think kids who lost their parents are supposed to survive, Evileye?"

"Well... Oh... We need the workers too much to have them fill in the ranks of soldiers. Which makes this a different way of keeping the peace...? I get it..."

"Even a person who is capable of living with integrity when people are watching can succumb to desire when unobserved. And if one crime goes well, they'll roll further down the path of evil with that momentum. A small crime grows like a snowball. We need to keep people where we can see them, but that's tricky, so we keep an eye on them in this way."

"Hmph. 'Not everyone is strong'?"

"So you were told the same thing, Evileye? Guess it must be a favorite saying."

"...I've heard it on at least three separate occasions already."

The latter half was something only Evileye and Tina understood, but hearing this much, the first part made sense to Climb.

Many children who lost their parents would get their hands dirty to survive. If that happened, even the Eight Fingers, who had had much of their power stripped away, could potentially make a comeback, and the royal capital might end up more dangerous, too.

His beloved master was taking these steps with the future in mind.

But then Renner asked Evileye, seemingly puzzled, "What's that from?"

"Hey... Are we trying to read too much into it? Or is she acting?"

"Mm, I think she genuinely just wants to help kids."

"If you say so, then she must be. I regret being impressed now."

"Ahem, it seems your impressions of me are arbitrarily fluctuating, but... You know... I've actually put some thought into this. If this orphanage goes well and we can give the children some degree of education to cultivate some outstanding individuals, I think other nobles will copy my idea. That's another reason we need a large number of children... though it's not a very praiseworthy one."

"No, if that's why you're collecting urchins, that makes sense to me, and I'm impressed. If you get results, then you *will* deserve praise. Just volunteering for no compensation is incredibly suspicious."

"Evileye, you're warped because you've been through too much!"

"Hey! I'm pretty sure you're the same as me!"

"No, I'm not. I'm pure. You're the only tainted one."

"Tch!" A click of a tongue sounded from beneath her mask.

"Oh yeah, the reason I established the orphanage was that Brain gave me the idea."

"Brain Unglaus? What happened to him? Haven't really seen him today."

"Brain is running around the capital on a different errand."

"Oh? There's something he prioritizes higher than protecting you, Princess?"

"Yes. He's working to fulfill the wishes of the deceased captain of the Royal Select. Oh, about him... I'm sorry to have caused you trouble."

Tina narrowed her eyes to conceal the emotions harbored within them. "I'm pissed about the scar on our demon leader's pretty face."

"I'm sorry. I apologize on behalf of my father."

"I know you already apologized to her directly, so I forgive you."

"Thank you."

"...Sometimes a dead person's words are more powerful than the living's." It looked like Evileye glanced out the carriage's window briefly. But it was only for a moment.

"To get back to what we were talking about... What's Brain Unglaus up to?"

"Apparently, the captain of the Royal Select told Brain he wanted him to take over as captain, but he felt like he couldn't do that. Now he's searching for the right person to take the job with the intent of training them."

"If a guy with no noble connections is on the hunt, then... Aha! Both Gazef and Brain came from commoner roots, so I see how they're thinking. And then you got inspired..."

"That's right. And I established the orphanage. I'm hoping I can have Brain come meet the children. It's possible that one of them might have the aptitude."

"I wasn't really looking back there," said Tina. "What did you think, Evileye?"

"Just seeing their magic ability doesn't tell us anything. If we trained them a few times, we'd know to some extent whether or not they would be able to cast spells, but that's only for arcane magic. If the kids had an aptitude for psychic or faith magic, I wouldn't be able to tell with my ability."

Renner *hmmmed* worriedly. Then she smiled like a flower just beginning to bloom. "In the future, I'd like to have all sorts of different people come evaluate the children at the orphanage." She was looking at the other two ladies in the carriage. Her eyes were more effective at conveying what she wanted to tell them than words would have been.

"...That's a bit optimistic. Maybe her, but..."

"Too bad, Evileye. Maybe our demon leader, but..."

"Right? But I won't agree so readily to even the stuff she says. And I'd need to be compensated—you'd have to hire me for at least some minimum amount of money. It wouldn't be fair to the others to work every time essentially for free. It's against adventurer rules. And passing on techniques is also something that should be paid for."

"Everything is just as you say, and I agree, but I'm sorry. I don't actually have any money..." Renner said dejectedly.

The third princess was the spare of the spare. There weren't any nobles who were willing to back her when all they could expect out of her was adding royal blood to their family line. For that reason, she had almost no money she could spend freely.

Renner was modest, so it hadn't bothered her so far, but the first or second princesses would have found this situation intolerable.

That was how Climb knew that Renner had imbued her feelings into the armor she had given him.

"But I hear that princesses wear glittering gowns and live a life of luxury."

"Reality isn't so simple. But I can't deny that there are princesses like that. It's something to aspire to..."

Climb was assailed by an emotion he couldn't pin down as her eyes sparkled.

He wanted to provide that kind of life to the world's most beautiful, purehearted woman.

But on the other hand, he had been saved because she was how she was and that was why he existed as he was now. Just as he was admiring her profile, she turned to look at him, her eyes radiating a lovely light.

"What are you thinking, Climb?"

"Oh, uh, nothing, Princess Renner."

"Are you sure? If there is something, please tell me. We need to help each other out when we're stuck."

"I—I will! Thank you!"

"Hey. Sorry to interrupt your flirting, but I really don't like the idea of teaching skills for free. I don't care what she says—when the time comes, I'll be getting what I'm owed."

"I hope it will be a sum I can pay." Renner bobbed her head.

"Mm, but you just want to know who has the aptitude, right? I'd only be there to watch their movements? What will you do, Evileye?"

"...Urk. Agh. I'll be honest. I can't see to the depths of their ability from just a few training sessions. Magic is more internal than external. And while I am a genius in the

sense of magical ability, that's all I am. I don't have the powers of the great caster from the empire, for example."

"So you want to see if they have an inborn talent or not?"

"A talent?" Renner sighed. "It'd be great if we could tell from childhood. Then the nobles might not be able to keep up with their inflexible *but they're a commoner way of thinking.*"

"Then shouldn't you build a system where all children are examined using magic that can detect talents? If all you need to know is whether they have one or not, there's a third-tier spell for that. Apparently, there are higher-tier spells that will tell you what specifically they have, but... I guess that's a fantasy."

"Really? You can tell who has a talent?"

"I'm not sure why your eyes are sparkling like that—don't expect too much! I just remember hearing that if a psychic magic caster reaches tier three, they can finally determine whether the target has a talent or not. Even if they have one, then comes the hard part. You have to figure out how it's expressed. And after all that work, there's a good chance it's something trivial."

"Oh..." The sparkle went out of Renner's eyes.

"Instead we should just try a bunch of different things. Standing under a waterfall, sniffing an herb that isn't too dangerous to go into a trance—apparently, stuff like that can suddenly reveal a talent, like something just clicks."

"Really...? Hmm, maybe that's true?"

"Oh? Evileye, do you have a talent?"

Evileye had been quite chatty up until then, but now she began to give off the air of a stone. It seemed they had entered into a topic she wasn't keen on.

But Climb's master innocently asked, "Would you tell us what kind of power it is?"

It's not that there weren't times she was surprisingly sharp, but usually she was like this. It was like she couldn't read the atmosphere or like she had no problem asking awkward questions.

It wasn't that she didn't consider the feelings of the other person, but maybe it had something to do with growing up as royalty?

"What? Are you that interested?"

"I don't know many people with talents. So I was just wondering what kind you have."

"I see. Well, if that's the case, then I'll tell you."

Evileye leaned forward, and Renner did the same with her face full of expectation.

Sometimes talents could be a hidden trump card. Especially for adventurers. Climb didn't think Renner would reveal it to anyone, but he didn't think it was something that should be shared so easily, either.

"I don't want too many people to hear, so can you bring your ear closer?"

"Yes." Renner turned her ear toward Evileye.

And then...

"You really think I would blab something so important like that?!"

The shout filled the carriage.

Tina, sitting next to her, must have guessed that would happen, because she was plugging her ears.

"You're so mean! My ear is ringing!"

Renner practically threw herself at Climb's chest. The sound effect probably would have been something like *fwump*.

With tearful eyes, she looked up at him from his breast.

Climb cast away worthless thoughts like *She's so cute* and *She smells good*. It was absurdly improper to have such feelings about his master.

"Lady Evileye, I understand how you feel, but if you would please have a little more mercy..."

“What? Isn’t she like this because you coddle her, kid?”

“N-no, that’s not it at all. Me coddling the princess?”

Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t.

“Right! I think it would be fine for you to coddle me more, Climb! I agree with Evileye!”

“E-er, Princess. I don’t think that’s...”

“No! If you would indulge me more, then if you got blamed for it like just now, it would make sense. So please coddle me! At any rate, let’s take naps together like we used to do when you were a child. Okay, Evileye, tell him!”

“That’s enough. I was stupid... Anyhow, young lady, I don’t talk about my talent. Got it?”

“Is it really so dangerous?”

“Yeah, it’s my last resort. If I used it... It would be like if our leader’s sword went on a rampage—it’s powerful enough to destroy a whole city like *that*.”

Evileye’s words carried weight.

But Climb heard a puzzled “Huh?” from his chest. He wanted to look, but if he did, he would become aware of how close they were, and he couldn’t take it.

Even if he wanted to push her away, she was so soft that he wasn’t sure how much force to use.

And all the while his heart was clanging like an alarm bell, the conversation continued.

“Lakyus’s sword?”

“Yeah. She said that if it goes crazy, it would level a whole city—or was it a country? She uses some of her power just to suppress it.”

“Really...? I had no idea.”

Climb hadn’t told the princess about the demonic sword.

"You don't have to worry about it. Our demon leader only keeps it to herself because she didn't want to stress you out. Pretend you didn't hear about it."

"...Hmm. All right. I'll do that."

"Speaking of which, what happened to Lady Aindra? I haven't seen her lately."

"Hmm? Didn't anyone tell you? Hey, Princess, you didn't tell him?"

"...I forgot. Uh, she's accompanying Gagaran and Tia on some training, Climb."

Evileye took over from Renner. "Those two died in the fight against Jaldabaoth in the kingdom. Of course, they've been resurrected, but they lost a lot of life force. To regain it, they're voluntarily putting themselves in danger and fighting through life-and-death battles to build their strength back up."

"We wanted to go along, too."

"But if we did that, it would feel a little bit too easy somehow. The best way to get tough quickly is small group battles."

"I wonder if that's really true, though."

"Well... There's supposedly a Level Up ritual that is more effective, but... Well, if they believed that and slacked off on training, we probably wouldn't even be able to buy time if that demon came to attack the capital again."

"Buy time? Ohhh, Evileye, you mean until your favorite guy comes again?"

"Yes! Until the great hero arrives!" Evileye's whole demeanor suddenly changed. The heat of her passion could be felt distinctly, even from beneath her mask.

"M— Sir Momon, right?"

"Right! The great hero Sir Momon! The most powerful warrior who dual wields gigantic swords with such ease, it's as if he's swinging twigs! He is without a doubt the strongest warrior of any country in the region! I'm sure that if he's around, he'll defeat Jaldabaoth for us! He nearly got him last time, but the bastard ran away! But this is Sir Momon we're talking about, so I'm sure he already has a plan to deal with him!"

She gushed so ardently, all Climb could do was chime in with an “Oh yeah.”

“But can he even come next time? Isn’t he under the King of Darkness’s rule now?” Tina asked in a tired voice that was rare for her.

Evileye’s hands had been joyously clasped together, but now she shouted, “Ahhh! Sir Momon! Shit, that damn King of Darkness! Even if heaven allows him to rule over our hero, I will not! If he could just defeat him and be free! What was he thinking? Maybe I should go to E-Rantel and hear what Sir Momon has in mind.”

“...Wait until after those two regain their power.”

“I would be right back, though. Once I know the location, I can teleport. If I use Fly for one way, it won’t take that long!”

“Evileye, you really fall apart when it comes to Momon... Didn’t our demon leader already tell you you couldn’t do that?”

“If you would just keep it a secret, then...”

“Actually, I’m awful at keeping secrets. They just bubble right up.”

“I can’t really imagine that, given your previous occupation.”

“Unfortunately, I’m Tina of the Blue Roses now. You can call me Loose Lips.” Then Tina got a determined glint in her eye. “...This is a good chance. I should ask you. Evileye—can you kill the King of Darkness?”

Evileye froze. All the giddiness of earlier was gone. Now it was the strongest adventurer caster who sat there.

“If all the stories I’ve heard are true... he has surpassed the power any single caster is capable of possessing. I personally investigated what happened on the Katze Plain after the fact, using all my contacts—I got in touch with the old lady and analyzed the information we had, but... honestly, it’s too absurd. I want to believe the witnesses were bewildered by illusions.”

“It was no illusion. So many people died...” Renner’s face twisted in grief. “Two hundred sixty thousand people participated in that battle. Of those, a hundred eighty thousand died. I heard there are also people mentally anguished to the point where

they can no longer lead a normal life. Some of the children in the orphanage have parents in that condition.”

“...From what the kid said, I can only imagine that to be true, getting attacked by that many monsters...”

“...Yes. It was truly hell. Luckily, I was with Brain and... the captain. With allies that strong, my mental state was spared, but I still glance behind me at times. For militiamen, that fear would be stronger, so I’m not surprised there are people with psychological issues.” Climb nodded.

“Okay, Tina. I’ll give your question a sincere answer. It’s impossible for me to defeat the King of Darkness.”

That was the answer they had expected.

“So it’s true.”

“Well, yeah. I might be able to do something about those monsters he summoned, but it’s hard to give a definite answer without seeing them myself. Honestly, a king with the power to summon more than one of those things shouldn’t exist in this world. Those powers are mythological.”

“Is it possible that he used an item to summon them? That it wasn’t his power?”

“That could be, but it would be dangerous to assume that’s what happened. Not that we have a way to confirm it.”

“It would be great if he would clash with Jaldabaoth.”

“That’s what everyone hopes will happen. Although the best would be if Sir Momon defeated him...”

“Who do you think is stronger, Sir Momon or the King of Darkness?”

The one who asked was Climb. Personally, he thought that the King of Darkness must have been stronger, since he could summon so many monsters. He was surprised to see Evileye take some time to think.

“I don’t know. Personally, I was thinking Sir Momon, since he repulsed Jaldabaoth, but

the King of Darkness's power is also difficult to fathom. Both are so much more powerful than the rest of us that I can't even imagine..."

"Having a guy like that under the King of Darkness's rule is the worst. No one can put up a fight."

She was right.

If the one person who could potentially fight the King of Darkness on equal ground was under his thumb, that was a problem. If anyone wanted to challenge the King of Darkness, they would essentially have to face double the strength.

As the atmosphere in the carriage grew gloomy, the driver tapped on the window separating the passengers from the box seat. "We'll arrive at the palace soon."

At the driver's voice, Renner sat up. Then she looked at the two adventurers seated before her. "Thank you so much for all your help today. Will you extend my gratitude to Lakyus and also tell her I'd like to have a meal together sometime?"

.

Having received word that his sister was nearly home, the second prince—Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself—left his room to go welcome her.

Their elder brother—Barbro Andréan Yeld Ryle Vaiself—had gone missing, and enough time had passed that they had lost hope he was still alive, so Zanac had practically been declared the heir; it was strange that he should go to meet his little sister. There was a clear hierarchy between elder brother and younger sister.

Still, he went. The reason being that he had an urgent matter to discuss with her. He didn't like it, but having lost an important counterpart, she was the only person he could rely on.

Eventually he caught sight of her.

Next to her stood Climb in his pure-white armor. He went almost everywhere Renner did, so there wasn't anything strange about that.

Climb was a destitute child Renner had plucked off the streets long ago.

Before, Zanac thought she did it only on a whim because her head was full of nonsense, but once he learned how bizarre and intelligent she was, he started to think there had to be a reason.

And the reason seemed clear in the aftermath of Jaldabaoth's attack on the capital and the King of Darkness's massacre.

There were almost no soldiers in the capital stronger than Climb. Even among Gazef's group of hand-selected warriors, only a handful were equal or superior to Climb.

Renner had also made personal connections with a man Climb had apparently brought over, Brain Unglaus, as well as Lakyus, the leader of the adamantite-plate adventurer team the Blue Roses. He was quite sure that his little sister possessed more military might than anyone in the royal capital.

*Could she be aiming to carry out a coup?*

It was only natural that Zanac should wonder.

Even if Renner wouldn't take such a simple, direct angle, he had to be on guard. As part of that, he was making great efforts behind the scenes to forge personal ties with orichalcum- and mythril-plate adventurer teams.

Zanac was grateful to his elder brother.

After all, it was due to his disappearance that Zanac had effectively been chosen as the next king and was able to have a hand in so many different matters. That his brother's annual allowance had been added to his was another boon.

Still, he was a bit concerned that his brother Barbro's corpse hadn't been found. It would be problematic if he was being imprisoned by the King of Darkness, and it would be equally annoying if he was injured and recuperating in a village somewhere.

"He's determined to cause me trouble to the very end..." he said under his breath so the people accompanying him wouldn't hear.

He needed to wait until his position was a bit more stable before provoking the nobles.

Zanac was worried about his backing at the moment.

Marquis Raeven had promised to help him develop the kingdom but then broke free when Zanac tried to stop him and returned to his domain. It was only natural, since so many people from his territory had died, but for some reason, Zanac got the feeling he would never come back.

He was sure that one of the reasons was the loss of the commoner strategist that Raeven was so proud of as well as his team of former orichalcum-plate adventurers.

Zanac felt a mild ache in the vicinity of his stomach. If he talked to his sister, would the pain fade a bit?

One question had been on his mind for several weeks—whether or not he should send the King of Darkness a gift, and if he did, whether it should be congratulations on establishing his country or for some other reason.

The appropriate choice at present was probably to not send anything. If a country that had its territory forcibly taken sent a gift to the new state that established itself on that stolen territory, it would end up being interpreted as a sign of submission by neighboring countries. On the other hand, it was terribly important to build an amicable relationship with the King of Darkness.

Though the power of the Nation of Darkness was still unclear, it was well-known that its king alone was more than powerful enough to annihilate an entire country.

Zanac knew he had to prevent the King of Darkness from gazing toward the kingdom any more than he did already.

That was why he wanted to send a gift—personally, Zanac didn't care if it was interpreted as a sign of submission—as long as it bought some time.

The tricky part was that he knew the kingdom's nobles wouldn't accept that.

Certainly, many people were aware of the King of Darkness's power. But they probably wouldn't stand for the heir to the throne making gestures of submission to the Nation of Darkness.

The nobles had suffered a major blow and were looking for someone to take their discontent out on.

King Ramposa III was tremendously upset—both shocked and devastated—by the

death of the fantastically strong Gazef Stronoff. Seeing him in that sorry state, the nobles backed off somewhat, but it wasn't as if they had discarded the animosity they felt toward the king who had been so thoroughly defeated and the royal family.

*She'll probably have a good idea.*

Really, he wanted to make the call on his own, but too much time had already passed. He needed an answer.

Zanac stopped. His shoes clacked loudly against the floor.

Hearing the sound, Renner turned to look at him. Then she changed directions and walked over to him. That showed that he had superiority.

She arrived before him, but he didn't say anything. It was a delicate time. He needed to continually assert his dominance over many people.

"I'm back, brother."

"I see, sister."

He benevolently answered her princessly curtsy with a bow. In his peripheral vision, Climb was bowing, but Zanac wouldn't return the courtesy of a mere soldier.

"Shall we walk part of the way together?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Zanac set off with her. He gestured with his chin at the people accompanying him to give them some space. He noticed Renner signal the same to Climb.

"You seem in a rush, Zanac. What's going on?" Renner asked in a low voice, her smile unchanged. "Did a messenger from the Nation of Darkness come or something?"

Zanac nearly had a heart attack. He was considering his own actions so deeply that the idea that she might say something like that never occurred to him.

She must have figured that it wouldn't be strange for the other side to make a move soon.

Zanac filed that away for reference and shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Is there any other reason you would come out of your way to meet me?”

“Yeah. I was wondering what to do about a gift.”

“If a messenger comes, I think you should give them double whatever you’re currently thinking. Half to express appreciation for the one who came and the other half—well, it goes without saying.”

Zanac said nothing as he let her words sink in.

It was a really good idea.

If he told the nobles it was to reward the Nation of Darkness for coming to them, there shouldn’t be any problem—even if internally he intended it with other meanings as well.

Once again, Zanac was struck by how terrifying his sister was. She had solved in an instant the problem he had been racking his brain over. But as long as her followers had more military might, even if he tried to kill her, he would only be met with revenge. Thus, his only option was gentle persuasion.

“...When I become king, I’ll give you a domain somewhere remote. You should go there.”

“Understood. I’ll obey you, brother.”

“Once I send you, I’ll never summon you back here. I can’t promise there won’t be inconveniences, but I’m preparing a domain that should provide you a decent life. Stay there for the rest of your life.”

“Yes, brother. Thank you.”

He felt like Renner would understand even if he didn’t say anything more, but saying it would make her feel more indebted to him.

“You can even adopt a parentless child there—I don’t mind. Do as you like.”

“Thank you, brother.”

The immediate response must have meant she was already thinking along those lines.

Zanac didn't understand why his sister was so in love with Climb, that commoner. He didn't have that great of a face, and it wasn't as if he owned anything of value. All Zanac could think was that he wasn't a good match for his sister.

*Ohhh, right. That one time, I heard about her fetish.*

Remembering the disgraceful part of his sister he wanted to forget, Zanac felt sort of bad for Climb.

"I can't wait for you to be king, brother. I hope that even once you're king, you'll sometimes think of me living off in the country."

"Yes, I will, sister. And I hope I can consult with you now and the— Huh?" Zanac noticed a soldier jogging their way.

He was one of the survivors from Gazef's group.

They had served the king well on that battlefield. That was why their positions were secure despite the loss of their captain and the king trusted them deeply. Incidentally, Renner's two subordinates were trusted to the same degree.

Zanac remembered the withered face of his father.

"Prince, the king is calling for you." After a pause, the soldier turned to Renner. "You too, Princess."

"What is it?"

"We've received word that a delegation from the Nation of Darkness is on its way."

Zanac glanced for a split second at his sister's profile and then replied, "Okay. Tell him I'll be there right away. Renner, I'll go ahead. Come once you're ready."

"Yes, Zanac."

The clothing she wore to go visit the orphanage was modest and simple. It would be an embarrassment in front of the nobles.

Having said as much, Zanac strode off with a grim look on his face.

“...Oof. There’s nothing at all appealing about that proposal—and it’s come far too late.”

## 2

Apparently, a delegation from the Nation of Darkness was traveling from E-Rantel to the capital over the course of a week.

And this was the seventh day. If the journey had gone according to plan, the delegation would arrive today.

Zanac, who had never really gotten the hang of wearing armor, was clad in it nonetheless and lined up alongside other knights facing the gate leading out of the capital toward E-Rantel.

A spell of overcast weather had cleared as if it had all been a hoax, and a pleasant spring sky stretched out overhead.

But thick clouds still hung off in the distance. The sky was blue only over the capital.

It was so unusual that the royal weather observer was left scratching his head. “It’s impossible.”

He had been employed at the palace for years and boasted an accuracy of over 90 percent when predicting the next day’s weather. If he said it was impossible, then perhaps the blue sky wasn’t natural.

Zanac exhaled—with a *phoow*—beneath his helmet.

His teacher had never told him about magic that could control weather, but it probably made more sense to suppose something like that was a piece of cake for the King of Darkness.

Zanac was annoyed by the fact that he didn’t have anyone beneath him who knew enough about not only magic but all the diverse sorts of powers that existed. More specifically, he had been relying too much on Marquis Raeven.

That man had been acquiring information from adventurers and compiling a compendium. It contained things like what magic items those adventurers knew of and their forms, the types of monsters and their abilities, and various kinds of spells.

Up until now, Zanac had been able to access that knowledge, since he and the marquis were allies. But now Raeven had left the capital and the compendium was gone.

Zanac tried looking for another noble who gathered information from adventurers like Raeven did, but unfortunately, he couldn't find a single one. It wasn't because the other nobles were fools. To nobles, the world of adventurers was another one entirely. Some nobles employed adventurers, but it was to take advantage of their strength not to learn their society and knowledge.

That's how nobles had been for the two-hundred-year history of the kingdom. In that sense, Marquis Raeven was the odd one.

*Is it that easy to find retired adventurers—and ones ranked mythril or higher at that?*

He had heard that adventurers tended to have an instinctive dislike of political trouble. Indeed, the world of politics was far removed from freedom. Would adventurers like that really come and work under him after they retired?

Zanac grew moody.

“Prince.”

The sound of the knight’s voice next to him brought him back to his senses, and when he looked down the road—there they were.

They were like specks, but it was the Nation of Darkness’s delegation.

Zanac had flexed his royal powers and made it so no one else could travel down that road. No one came through the gate behind them, either. For today only, the gate was shut.

“Okay, let’s review one more time. It’s the same as when any foreign noble visits: If anyone tries to do anything to the delegation, it’s a serious crime. Execute the perpetrator immediately.”

“Yes, sir!”

The line of knights made an energetic reply, and the sound of them pounding the swords on their hips rang out in unison.

“All right! Use all your manners and let’s get this national prestige battle started!”

“Yes, sir!”

They all stood at attention until the delegation arrived.

Eventually, a messenger approached.

It was a knight in black armor astride a jet-black unicorn with burning red eyes. But whoever was inside the armor, they probably weren’t human. The dense presence the figure emanated shimmered like heat haze and warned everyone watching of life-threatening danger. The full plate armor pulsed as if it were alive.

Zanac felt the warhorse beneath him shudder.

Clawlike gauntlets released the reins and pounded on the knight’s chest.

“Apologies for speaking to you from my mount! We are the delegation from Ainz Ooal Gown, Nation of Darkness!”

To explain it with a simile, the voice was like the earsplitting timbre of a rotting string instrument. Just the sound of it gave him the chills and tormented him with anxiety. Zanac raised his own voice to counteract the fear.

“I am the second prince of the Re-Estize Kingdom, Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself! The king has ordered me to guide you, noble visitors, to the palace! If you would, please follow us!”

“Very well. We accept your guidance. My name... Forgive me, but I have no name, so I’ll have you call me by my race name: Death Cavalier.”

The name surprised Zanac, but he couldn’t let it delay his reply.

“Shall I call you Sir Cavalier, then?”

“That would be splendid.”

"Understood. Then, first of all, could I greet the leader of the delegation here? I'm the second prince as well as the one responsible for the leader's conduct while in the palace. If possible, I'd like to make sure that person knows who I am ahead of time."

"I see. I'll go ask."

"You have my gratitude."

The messenger returned to the group.

There were already all sorts of things Zanac could pick on, but he was dealing with the Nation of Darkness. If this was a country that ruled undead and controlled monsters, then it was better not to expect common sense. It would be foolish to assume the leader of the delegation looked human.

"Okay, brace yourselves. Don't do anything that could offend them."

"Yes, sir!"

Hearing their reply, Zanac tensed his core.

The delegation had passed through several towns on the way to the capital, so he had an idea of its makeup.

There were five carriages.

Each was drawn by sinister horselike monsters. And there were monsters guarding the area around them. Many were Death Cavaliers, but there were other kinds as well.

He didn't know what they were called or how dangerous they were. But whether he knew or not, his job was the same. It was a delegation sent by the King of Darkness. He had to make sure they weren't offended in any way.

A Death Cavalier—probably the same one as earlier—came forward from the approaching delegation.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. The leader of the delegation—King of Darkness Ainz Ooal Gown's closest aide, Lady Albedo—said she doesn't mind meeting you. Right this way, Prince Zanac."

Zanac signaled to the knights that they should stand by where they were and stepped forward.

Honestly, he was scared—because he was walking among types of monsters he had never even seen before.

Still, he had royal family backbone. Zanac would probably be king soon. He would no doubt meet this representative more than once, so he couldn't humiliate himself. On the contrary, he had to sell himself and have this lady report back with the knowledge that the Re-Estize Kingdom was a great country.

Sweating uncomfortably, Zanac dismounted from his horse and stood before a carriage.

"This is the leader of the delegation, Lady Albedo."

He put all his energy into making sure his face didn't flinch no matter how horrifying of a monster appeared.

The carriage's door opened, and a figure made a leisurely exit.

She was... beautiful.

No, Zanac had no other words to describe her. He could only call her a peerless beauty.

*Surely no one could be as beautiful as Renner.* That's what he had always thought, but apparently he had been mistaken. The difference between them was that while Renner had a brighter beauty, Albedo's was darker, more bewitching.

She placed a foot on the step, and the faint tap of her heel brought Zanac back to reality.

He immediately dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

Though she was a representative from a foreign country, perhaps it was pitiful for the prince to take a knee. But considering the power differential between the kingdom and the Nation of Darkness, it was the correct move. What the kingdom needed right now wasn't pride.

It needed benefit.

"Would you please raise your head?"

A gorgeous voice wafted toward him from above.

"As you wish."

When he looked up, the beautiful woman was gazing down at him with a gentle smile.

It was the attitude of a person used to being superior—but was she human?

Zanac examined her without moving his eyes. First, he noticed the wings sprouting from her hips. Were they from a magic item or something else? And how about the horn-like things on her forehead?

They could have been magic items, or she could have been a grotesque—either was possible considering she was from the Nation of Darkness.

"I am Albedo, a representative from Ainz Ooal Gown, Nation of Darkness. I'll only be here for a few days, but I'm happy to meet you. Now then, on your feet, please, Prince. We can't have you kneeling all day."

"Thank you."

Even as he was standing, Zanac was thinking, *Now here's a problem.*

He was speaking directly to her, but he had been told only the name Albedo. Did that mean she didn't have any other names?

In the kingdom and the empire, the common people had two names and nobles had three—four including their nobiliary name. The royal family had four—five including their nobiliary name.

That was the reason the kingdom's nobles scoffed at Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, who had only four names, claiming he was not royalty, but would they behave as foolishly when they encountered someone with a name that sounded assumed or unofficial?

Zanac wanted to believe that his worry was unnecessary, but he couldn't rule it out completely.

After all, many nobles had died on the battlefield. Many houses lost their leader and retainers, so for many families, the next in line to rule was the spare of the spare.

Spares of spares. People he had few hopes for had managed to ascend to the highest ranks of nobility. No elegance, no knowledge—because they hadn't been given that kind of education.

Usually, the upper members of the factions would advise those sorts of people, but as one might expect, due to the war, no one had the wherewithal. As a result, buffoons had been thrown into those roles, allowing more buffoons to meet with one another, and buffoon factions were born.

Overall, the quality of the kingdom's nobles dropped precipitously. Under those circumstances, would they be able to welcome a woman named Albedo with proper manners?

“...If you'll excuse me, by what name should we call you, Lady Albedo?”

It was a rather forced question.

Really, he wanted to ask, *Lady Albedo, what is your title? That is to say, what is your position within the Nation of Darkness?* but he was worried someone would say, *You don't even know the position of the representative from the country next door?*

Still, this was the Nation of Darkness's fault. It hadn't released any information about what sort of people were in command. It had been several months since the country was formed. They had mainly been working domestically, and this appeared to be their first active effort in diplomacy.

All Zanac knew about Albedo was what he had just been told—that she was the leader of the delegation and the right hand of their king.

*The empire must know, but... it's not sharing anything. Well, they must hate us an awful lot if they asked him to use that kind of magic.*

Albedo seemed to sense his uncertainty and replied, “I would hate to seem conceited, but my position is captain of both the floor and domain guardians.”

“Ohhh, I see.”

He said he saw, but he had no idea what sort of captain that was. Or rather, he didn't know what she meant by "floor."

As if sensing the perplexity he attempted to hide, Albedo continued explaining, "Hmm, or perhaps I should say that I am the captain of the guardians, second-in-command to Lord Ainz—ahem, His Majesty, King Gown of Darkness."

"Ahhh, is that so?"

*Well, she must at least have a relationship close enough to call him Ainz. Is she a duchess? Marquess? This is something I'll have to remember to explain to everyone. Still, what's a captain... of guardians?*

"Very well, Lady Albedo. First, allow me to show you to the palace. We're thinking of offering you a residence for honorable visitors in the castle compound during your stay in the kingdom. Please forgive my elderly father—Ramposa III—for only being able to meet you at the castle gate."

"I don't mind."

Her smile didn't so much as twitch.

In an ordinary relationship, she would probably thank him. Her attitude conveyed the hierarchy between them.

Sweat oozed from Zanac's back—because he realized it would be hard to build amicable relations.

"...Also, normally we would ring celebratory bells, but because of a tragedy due to an unfortunate difference in opinion with another country, we're unable to do so. Please forgive us. We also haven't told the people that you're coming, so I hope to have your understanding on that point as well."

"Of course. That's fine."

He couldn't imagine how the people would react if they heard a representative from the Nation of Darkness was here, so he was happy to hear her reply.

*I suppose I owe her one.*

The visiting party didn't seem at all concerned that they might get run down by an angry mob. Not only the Death Cavalier but likely every member of their procession had been selected from the strongest that could be fielded in the Nation of Darkness. Zanac would believe it if someone told him that each of them was equal to Gazef Stronoff.

"Now then, may I ask you some questions?"

"Yes, I'll answer any questions I can."

"First, could you tell me what the plan is after we arrive at the palace?"

"Certainly. Tonight, the royal family is planning a banquet for you at the palace. Tomorrow you'll go to the theater, and in the evening, there will be a cocktail party with kingdom nobles. The next day the palace orchestra will give a concert—and after that, we've reserved some time for diplomatic negotiations."

"I see... Do you think it would be possible to add some sightseeing around the capital?"

"Of course. We have a group of elite knights ready to escort you." They were to protect her, yes, but also to keep an eye on her and act as a barricade. "Is there something in particular that interests you?"

It would be necessary to close off the area that day to make sure none of the people came anywhere near.

"No... not really. I'm not familiar with the sights of the capital, so it would be wonderful if you would pick a place."

"Understood. Then I'll make the arrangements."

Albedo nodded with a smile.

### 3

Phillip, for over a month now, had been thinking he was one of the luckiest men in the kingdom.

Personally, he felt he was the luckiest, but modesty is a virtue. And it was possible that

there were nobles luckier than him, so he decided the smart thing to do was to leave it at that.

*A noble, huh...?*

The corners of his mouth wanted to relax into a smile, but Phillip tensed his expression and smoothed the wrinkles out of his clothes. It was his second time participating in a party like this, but as one might expect, given it was being held by the royal family, it was so much more splendid than the other one; the two were incomparable.

The people participating in this one, too, wore superb, gorgeous clothes. He wondered what a single outfit like that cost.

Phillip looked down at his own lackluster garments and felt just slightly irritated.

Yes, the clothes the higher-ranking nobles wore were fabulous.

A well-dressed noblewoman was smiling at him, but was she merely scoffing at the shabbiness of his attire? He had no reason to think that, but he did anyhow. Looking around, he began to feel like all the people in attendance were laughing at him.

*This is all because I don't have any money.*

If his lands were more prosperous, he would have been able to dress better. But Phillip's domain wasn't very wealthy. The clothes he was wearing were hand-me-downs from his brother that he had a tailor do a rush job on. Hence the slight tightness in the shoulders.

*The reason we don't have money is because the ones in charge up until now have been incompetent. I'll make sure to do things right.*

Phillip was the third son of a certain noble.

This went for peasant families as well, but life as the third son wasn't a very desirable existence. No matter how affluent a family, if it continued to divide up its resources, it lost power. That was why for peasants and nobles alike, the usual practice was for the first son to inherit everything.

An affluent noble family might be able to give a third son financial assistance. A noble family with connections might even be able to have him adopted somewhere. But that

wasn't the case with Phillip's family.

As the eldest son approached adulthood—that is, by the time his risk of dying of disease had decreased—Phillip was basically useless. He would either be given a little money and driven out of the household or be given a shabby home and forced to work like a tenant farmer. Those should have been the only two options awaiting him in life. But instead he was making his debut in glittering high society.

That's why Phillip was lucky.

His first stroke of luck was probably when brother number two got sick and died.

Once brother number one made it to adulthood, brother number two wasn't worth much anyhow, and since the domain didn't have any money, they didn't have a way to call on a priest. They had treated him with herbs, but he never recovered.

That was how Phillip had been promoted to backup. His worth climbed from farmer to about butler level.

That much luck wasn't so rare.

The reason Phillip felt he was one of the luckiest guys in the kingdom was that he got even luckier than that.

It happened a few years after he reached adulthood. Just as his elder brother was about to inherit the domain from their father, the war with the empire happened. In a normal year, it would have ended in a face-off. In a sense, it was the perfect sort of "safe" war for his brother to earn decorations in, and that's why he went.

But he didn't come back.

He had gotten caught in the King of Darkness's spell and died along with twenty farmers he had taken with him as levies.

Phillip would never forget how thrilled he was to get that report—the joy of learning he was no longer a spare.

The only somewhat upsetting part was that the body never made it back, so they lost the full plate armor that had been passed down through their family for generations. But when Phillip stepped back to think about it, that wasn't so important. All he had

to do was make an even more splendid suit of armor with money from the domain. The far more major thing was that he was now in position to inherit the household land, which was something he never thought would be possible.

And the timing was perfect.

If his brother had died after inheriting, Phillip would be in charge only until his brother's child came of age. Since he had died without inheriting, Phillip was sure to receive control.

It was almost as if the King of Darkness had done it for his sake.

For that reason, although Phillip had never even seen the foreign king, he felt close to him. If possible, he wanted to express his gratitude to the Nation of Darkness representative.

No—

*Right. I have to use this good fortune. I'm lucky. I can't let this chance go to waste.*

The smoldering flames inside him blazed up.

Up until now, he had watched the things his father and brother had been doing, thinking how foolish they were. *Why don't you do it more like this? It would be more profitable if you did things this way.* But he had never said a word—because he knew that even if he said something, none of the profit would come his way. That went for the credit of turning the domain profitable, too. He had been saving up his ideas for managing the land for a long time.

*I'll show the neighboring lords that I'm the one fit to rule this domain. I'll show Father how wrong he was in thinking to have my brother succeed him. I'll sell fine wheat and vegetables to the merchants—or wait, should I? If I drew attention like that, would someone steal my landmark idea? But if I don't sell them, I won't make money. I need a tight-lipped merchant—someone I can trust. Not that guy...*

Recalling the face of the government purveyor, Phillip scowled.

Even though he was delighted about his new situation, the offense at the memory of that man won out.

*Always looking down on me! For now, I'm putting up with it, but I'm definitely going to find a brilliant merchant in the capital and get rid of him. I'm already making the right connections!*

Phillip praised himself for beginning to network despite having been in the capital only a matter of weeks, which helped dispel his displeasure.

*Yes, I'm great. I'm already building a big pipeline. I'm absolutely going to make the domain rich and make a fortune. All the idiots looking down on me will learn just who they were ridiculing!*

As he was imagining the shining future that would most certainly come, a man's voice echoed throughout the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce the head of the delegation from the Nation of Darkness, the honorable Albedo!"

The orchestra that had been playing quietly paused, and the voices of the people chatting faded.

There was a ceremonial guard by the door who seemed to have just announced the guest of honor at this royal cocktail party.

"Albedo is said to be the right hand of the King of Darkness; serves as the captain of the guardians, which is equivalent to prime minister; and is attending alone this evening."

Phillip heard a nearby woman murmur, "Oh my, alone?"

The wealthy-looking noble standing next to the woman reproved her with an "Oh, stop."

Phillip's expression was puzzled. *I think it's fine to come alone. But I'm surprised they sent someone of such high rank to represent them. Is the Nation of Darkness that interested in us here?*

Wondering what sort of man it would be, he turned his attention to the door next to the guard.

"And now, may I present the leader of the delegation, the honorable Albedo!"

The door opened and the room fell silent.

Standing there was a woman who truly appeared to be a goddess. Her regular features were more beautiful than those of any farm girl Phillip had ever seen, any prostitute he had visited since coming to the capital, or anyone else he had ever met for that matter. Certainly, the princess he had seen earlier was beautiful, but his personal tastes put this woman above her.

Her clothing was also gorgeous: a silver dress, golden hair ornaments, and a shift over the lower half of her dress that seemed like black wings. The way the magic light reflected in the air made it seem like she was glowing.

Phillip took a sidelong glance at the woman who had spoken earlier. She stood there in shock with an oafish look on her face.

*Wow, I guess even the guest of an admirable noble makes faces like that. She looks like any old farm girl.*

Phillip felt triumph welling up in his breast. It was because the representative from the country he felt some sort of affinity with was superior.

“Welcome, Lady Albedo.” Ramposa III stood and greeted her.

“Thank you for having me, Your Majesty.”

Phillip could tell from her profile that she was beaming. *There simply aren’t words that do her beauty justice...*

“I’ve gotten old, so my apologies, but I’ll be using a chair. Now then, nobles of the kingdom. The guest of honor has arrived. Enjoy this evening. I hope you will as well, Lady Albedo.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” She wore a broad smile.

When he glanced around, he noticed that the noblewomen were saying incomprehensible rubbish like, “She’s not even bowing.” He put the nonsense of those vacuous women out of his mind and followed the peerless beauty with his eyes.

He wanted to burn the sight of her chatting intimately with Princess Renner onto the insides of his eyelids.

*It would be amazing if I could make her mine...*

Of course, he knew that would be difficult. But it didn't strike him as necessarily unthinkable.

*Once I make my domain rich, I'm sure there will be nobles trying to give me their daughters. And when it grows richer, I'm sure even higher-class women will come for me. It's not impossible that the princess or even that representative would want me.*

Phillip felt the heat in his loins creeping up.

*The higher-ranking nobles even have mistresses, apparently... Being with two women that beautiful at once would be just amazing.*

Albedo and Renner... He looked back and forth between them.

His fantasy nearly ran away with itself, and he abruptly went to go get a drink. He couldn't very well get a bulge in his crotch here. The cold drink sliding down his throat brought him back to his senses.

*I wonder how they made this ice. It must be magic, but...*

About the only people who could use magic in Phillip's domain were the priests. They could heal illnesses and wounds, but they charged for it. Did it cost a similar amount to get ice made?

*Maybe I should tell them that my illnesses and wounds should be healed for free, since they live in my domain. Isn't it strange for a resident of a domain to be taking money from their lord?*

Phillip made a mental note that this would be one of his new measures to do with priests.

Thinking about what he should work on first, he could hardly wait to return to his domain and get started. Each of his brilliant ideas would produce golden gleams.

*Hmm?*

When he looked back at Albedo, she was standing alone.

There were nobles standing near her, but they didn't seem to know how to break the ice.

*The Nation of Darkness, huh...? What's going to happen to the Re-Estize Kingdom?*

What did he care what happened to the kingdom? He was concerned about his own domain.

In that case...

Phillip's thought gave him chills.

*Hey, don't think such dangerous thoughts. But... I guess it wouldn't be a bad move...? I'm just surprised I even thought of it...*

He could see Albedo's lonely-looking profile.

*Third is no good. Second is pointless. It won't mean anything unless I'm the first...*

The representative from the Nation of Darkness looked like she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself, since no one was going over to talk with her. Phillip had read a book that said women weren't great at handling that sort of situation.

*I need to get in there. There aren't any returns if you wager nothing. Forcing a change in the situation is what gives you the chance to rise up the ranks. I'm a lucky man; I need to take advantage of it.*

Phillip's family had belonged to a certain faction for years and years, but counting up from the bottom of the hierarchy was the fastest way to find their house's name, and they didn't really seem to be getting any benefits from being in that faction.

Phillip remembered something he had been told recently. It was a skinny lady who had said, "Why not just make your own faction?"

He wasn't sure what to do with the rest of his drink, but having steeled his resolve, he drained it.

It was different from the watered-down drinks he had at home and blazed down his throat and into his stomach. As if propelled by the heat in his belly, he stepped forward.

“Lady Albedo, may I have a moment?”

When he spoke, she turned to him with a smile.

His face was flushed but not from the alcohol.

“Oh, nice to meet you...” She furrowed her brow slightly as if thinking, and Phillip knew immediately what she was waiting for.

“My name is Phillip.”

“Huh? Oh, Sir Phillip—I mean, Lord Phillip. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“The honor is mine, Lady Albedo. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Phillip sensed the atmosphere change around them.

When he glanced around, he noticed even the upper-class nobles were surprised.

Feeling all eye and ears in this royal cocktail party on him was sheer ecstasy.

*I’m... I’m the center of attention!*

He had been treated so coldly, but now the kingdom nobles, the most important people in the country, were paying attention to him. The thought of it made him unbelievably excited.

*Yeah! I’m Phillip! Just watch! I’ll be the most important man in the kingdom!*

Phillip worked his brain furiously and made the biggest gamble of his life—to ask Albedo to an upcoming ball.

•

“You idiot!”

This rained on Phillip’s parade, but at the same time, it fanned his smoldering embers into a blaze. The fuel he’d been stockpiling all his life burst into flames.

Phillip cast an insulting look on the conspicuously graying man in front of him.

"I didn't send you so you could go pulling something like that! You utter fool!"

Phillip had told his father what happened at the palace during the party. Now he sighed.

"There's no way we would be invited to a royal cocktail party! The reason I worked so hard to arrange an invitation was to create a chance to thank the count—and to introduce you!"

Nobles from various factions gathered at royal cocktail parties. And in their faction, a change of lord was a low-priority reason to attend. They didn't press that angle, and Phillip must have been approved on somewhat hazy grounds. And once he was approved, it was difficult for anyone to complain afterward.

In effect, Phillip's father didn't have faith in his abilities. He must have thought if he introduced him to the faction members in the usual way, there would have been some kind of trouble.

Understanding all that, Phillip desperately suppressed his discontent and put on a fake smile.

"Now, now, Father, please don't get so worked up. I'm going to make sure my house—"

"What do you mean, 'my house'?! What you've done flies in the face of all common sense!"

*Flies in the face of common sense?* Phillip snapped internally. *I simply made the first move because all the others were spineless cowards!*

*Do you intend to forever yield to those fools and chickens and content yourself with this miserable standing?*

"Father! I'd like you to please think for a moment! Our domain may be off the main road, but we're still between the capital and the Nation of Darkness. It's not hard to imagine that if the Re-Estize Kingdom and the Nation of Darkness went to war that we would be caught up in the chaos of the battle; therefore, we should make friendly ties with the Nation of Darkness."

"Y-you idiot!" his father shouted with a face even redder than before. "Those wretches

in the Nation of Darkness are the ones who killed your brother! You're saying you want to join forces with them?! Isn't that treason?!"

*What about it?* thought Phillip.

As long as the Nation of Darkness was stronger, it wasn't an issue to betray the kingdom. They could be vassals of the Nation of Darkness. What was wrong with the weaker adhering themselves to the stronger? Who could blame him?

"What are you thinking?!"

He was disgusted by his father's foolishness.

Saying something this obvious was absurd, but apparently it had to be said. "That's simple, Father. It's to protect m—" He had been about to say *my*. In the near future, it would be his, but it wasn't completely yet. "Our domain. To protect our vassals. The Nation of Darkness is far stronger than us—stronger than the kingdom. Don't you think it makes sense that they might attack in the near future? I want to have connections ready for when that time comes."

"Ngh! What do you mean, 'connections'? What will the neighboring lords think if we do that?"

"In this day and age, no one will blame us."

In Phillip's domain, many had died in that war. The situation must have been the same for the neighboring domains. That meant that no one had spare energy to get annoyed with them.

"There's really nothing else on your mind?"

"Huh?" Phillip asked, unable to determine the motive of his father's question.

"You're thinking too shallowly—convinced you've accomplished something by having a daydream. You—"

"—That's enough." The man who had been standing silently behind his father up until then spoke.

It was the butler who had served his father for many years. He was the stony-faced

type, and Phillip hated him. He was one of the people he was going to get rid of once his rule over the domain was secure.

At the butler's comment, Phillip's father worked to steady his breath. The red in his face drained away, and his complexion went back to its usual unhealthy look.

"I need to ask you..." He panted. "Phillip. Are you sure it won't antagonize any nearby lords? That would be even worse..."

"I don't think so."

His father's shoulders slumped. That attitude made him irritated and anxious.

*Am I forgetting something?* But he couldn't think of anything.

"Many young people died on the Katze Plain. All sorts of problems will crop up in the next few years, so we need to forge cooperative relations with neighboring nobles now. We'll have to have one domain growing food, another weaving cloth, and so on. None of us has enough land to produce everything ourselves. Neither do we have money to spare. Now who would want to cooperate with a house that had dealings with the Nation of Darkness?"

The thoughts that came to Phillip as he listened were enough to create a slick of sweat down his back. His father was right.

"And you know, don't you, that our domain doesn't produce anything special that the other domains absolutely need? So even if we were left out of any cooperative alliance, it would be no skin off their backs."

Phillip frantically worked his brain. *I'm smart. I can refute anything this old fool says.*

"That's exactly why we should go with the Nation of Darkness."

His father gestured for him to continue.

"If we align with them, we can get them to support us."

"...Then let me ask you this. If you were someone from the Nation of Darkness—no, say you were the king of some country, and a village from an enemy nation asked you to send them food, would you?"

“Of course. I would definitely send it.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It proves that I’m a benevolent lord.”

“And besides that?”

“Nothing else in particular, I guess.”

His father had his mouth slightly ajar. Was he impressed? But the reaction was a little strange if that was the case. But he did think that even the Nation of Darkness would want to be known as a benevolent nation. Especially since it was ruling the former Re-Estize Kingdom area of E-Rantel. He was sure the nation would want to put on a friendly face for them.

“I see. Is that what you think? I would probably support them, too—in order to have something to attack that country over. I would wage a war to liberate the village suffering under kingdom rule.”

“Ridiculous. That would just be letting your imagination get the better of you. Besides, that reasoning won’t fly anyhow.”

“Oh, you don’t think so?”

“In the first place, if what you said was true, wouldn’t that be even more reason to strengthen our ties with the Nation of Darkness?”

“You—” His father looked frustrated. “Have you no pride as a noble of the kingdom?”

“Sure I do. But not having that pride would still be better than being destroyed.”

“This is the king who savaged your brother and many other kingdom subjects with that horrifying magic spell. The king those *things* reverently hold aloft...”

“It’s war, Father. Does it really matter if you die by the sword or by magic?”

“...Why do you have so much faith in the King of Darkness?”

It wasn’t as if he had faith in him. It was true he felt an affinity. But more importantly,

the king was a pawn for them to create value as well as for him to enrich his own position.

*A pawn! That's right! To me, this king who everyone in the kingdom fears is a mere pawn!*

He envisioned himself playing a huge—nation-scale—board game and grew excited.

*Still, Father's concerns are valid. But not terribly serious, considering how simply I refuted them... Still, perhaps I should tell Lady Albedo next time I see her...*

“You have nothing left to say. Did you thank the count at the party? For recognizing you as the next lord of the domain?”

This was the thing that made the least sense to Phillip.

Why should he have to bow his head to someone he'd never met just because the guy was the head of the faction?

Choosing the next lord of the domain was within the realm of each domain's autonomy. The count had nothing to do with it. If the man had recommended him over his two brothers to inherit the domain, he would of course have thanked him, but that wasn't how it had happened. Phillip's current position was entirely due to luck.

In other words, there was no reason to lower his head.

That was why he hadn't paid his respects. But he figured his father would get upset again if he said that. This was a lie to protect his ailing old man.

“Of course.”

“I see. That's good. Then things might still work out. We should be able to ask him for assistance if necessary.”

Just as Phillip was feeling relieved, sensing the conversation might be over, the butler chimed in from behind.

“I still have a question. The first issue you brought up, Master Phillip, hasn't been resolved. You said you invited the representative from the Nation of Darkness to the ball we're holding. What are your plans?”

"Right, Phillip! What were you thinking? We don't have anywhere to hold a ball!"

Landholders from the country kept manors in the capital.

They were for residing in while they visited the capital and were consequently on the small side.

Of course, they weren't small like a commoner's hut. They used them only a few times a year, but in order to demonstrate their power as nobles, they needed a place large enough to accommodate the entourage accompanying them from their domain as well. Still, though the house was relatively big, it wasn't built for holding balls.

But that problem was already solved.

"It's all right. We can't do it here, but I have a place we can borrow."

"Ooh, is it the count's?" His father smiled faintly as he asked, but Phillip shook his head.

"No. The house of an acquaintance I met in the capital. The lady of the house will let us borrow it. I saw her before I came back, and she said it would be no problem."

"For how much?"

The butler's question made him sigh in his head.

*That's the first thing you ask?*

"For free."

"Free...? Really?"

"Really."

Phillip remembered what the woman had told him: *You seem to have a bright future, so I'll invest in you if you like. You can just pay me back double later.*

"That sounds a little too convenient... Are you sure she's not trying to swindle you?"

That irritated Phillip, but he knew how much his father trusted the butler, so he couldn't go flinging insults. "I made a debt, but I arranged to pay it back at the same

time. It's not a problem."

"...This means you have a venue, but what about the invitations? Are you going to ask the count to arrange them?"

*What are you talking about?* Phillip groaned in his head. *The whole point is to hold the ball to build up my name. Why should I have to give away the best job after doing all this prep work?*

*Is this how a slave thinks? How sad... I don't want to end up like that.*

"That's okay. I asked the lady lending me the venue, and she'll take care of it. Naturally, I'll select the guests."

"...It's rude to not include the count. It's not too late to ask him for help. Do you even know nobles to invite for polite company in the first place?"

"To an extent, but I also have a special guest planned. The lady mentioned him to me."

"Are you"—suspicion appeared in his father's eyes—"sure you're not being manipulated by this woman?"

"Father! That's awfully offensive no matter how you look at it! I planned this, and I'm carrying it out! It's true that I'm getting some help. But it's because she heard my idea and thought it had merit—she thought it would go well—and that's why she's funding it! Why are you being this way? I'm the next head of the domain, so shouldn't you be supporting me one hundred percent?"

It was true, too. She had said, "If you'll let a few nobles I'm close with attend, I'll help you." He asked for her assistance because she was clearly requesting benefits for herself as well. He wasn't being manipulated at all.

She was different from people like the count his father was bound to, who took all the profit for themselves.

Phillip wanted to tell his father, *You're the one being manipulated.*

"...Sorry, but could you tell me her name?"

Phillip contained his anger. He was talking to someone who still had a slave mentality.

The right thing to do was generously forgive him.

"Her name is Hilma Shugneus. Have you ever heard of her?"

"No, have you?"

The butler also shook his head. Phillip was satisfied to know of her before his father, who had lived in noble society a long time.

"I'd like to ask her about involving the count. There could be trouble if we go to him over her head. Is there anything else, Father?"

His father looked utterly exhausted and did not reply.

Phillip still had some complaints, but his project was underway. All that was left was to invite Lady Albedo of the Nation of Darkness and come up with a plan to solidify his standing with her.

## 4

Before Phillip's eyes was a splendid ballroom. It was no less grand than the royal ballroom—maybe it was even grander.

He was bursting with the desire to brag to someone. It was true that he had left the decorating up to Hilma. But she had said to him, "Is a standard ballroom good enough, or would you like something unparalleled? If the latter, the debt will be sizable." Phillip didn't hesitate to choose the latter.

In other words, Phillip had put himself in debt in order to arrange this space—that is, it was due to his efforts. And it was filled with nobles whom he had gathered.

It was perfect. Which was why there was only one thing that bothered him.

He had decided where to send invitations—though he'd borrowed some wisdom—and they were sealed with the crest of his house. And more than anything, everyone had come to meet the representative from the Nation of Darkness. Phillip was the one who had invited her.

In other words, he was the host and organizer, so the attendees should have been

thanking *him* with bowed heads. They should have expressed their gratitude for being invited and praised him for having the courage to invite the representative from the Nation of Darkness.

But what actually happened?

The first person everyone who showed up went to greet was Hilma. Then they finally came to him. And only after she mentioned him. How would things have gone if she hadn't nudged them?

He was heavily indebted to her, so he had to tolerate the fact that she stood out more than him, but he was nothing but offended by the other nobles. The nobles should have the common sense to know who to greet first.

*This is why you're all so hopeless. Tch. I guess it was a mistake to take Hilma up on her proposal after all?*

The nobles he invited were all based on suggestions from Hilma. The ones he selected were people who either had become or were about to become domain heads as a result of the battle with the Nation of Darkness. In other words, they could be said to all be in the same position as him.

The reason he had followed her advice was that he thought there would then be many people who could understand how he felt. He thought that a house where the lord wasn't changing was much more likely to have a negative opinion of the Nation of Darkness.

But...

*They're all incompetent.*

The next guest to arrive right before his eyes also went straight to Hilma.

*How rude, thought Phillip.*

The idle idiots really were fools to the bone. That must be why they didn't know who they were supposed to greet first. He didn't know what else to think.

*...Well, but isn't that a good thing? Isn't the whole reason they're afraid to take the initiative that they're stupid? If another noble was smarter than me, I'd never get to be*

*head of the new faction. Unfortunately, my house isn't powerful yet, either.*

This was another chance. He would count their blunder of not greeting him first as a debt and get it paid back sometime in the future when he needed it.

As Phillip was counting his eggs before they hatched, Hilma came over.

She was all skin and bones.

She looked sickly, she was so thin, like she must have been suffering a serious illness. If only she had a little meat on her bones, she would be beautiful, but that was already in the past.

"Lord Phillip. It seems like everyone you invited has arrived."

"Oh?"

In other words, *everyone* considered him number two.

Phillip thought he was doing a fine job of concealing that his inferiority complex was triggered, but Hilma seemed to notice it anyway.

"Hee-hee," she laughed. "You seem dissatisfied."

"No, not at all."

Phillip smiled. He was a noble, after all. He felt he had a knack for making his opinion felt.

"Please don't lie like that, sir. As your assistant in this endeavor, I'm getting my sips of the sweet nectar, too. We mustn't hide things from each other."

There was something humble and fawning about her words.

*This.*

Phillip's heart fluttered.

This was how common people were meant to interact with nobles.

It hit him that he was sitting in the position he had aspired to for so long. He felt the displeasure he had been experiencing up until now fade away.

“What is it, Lord Phillip?”

“No... you’re right. I wasn’t mad, just a little anxious.”

“Anxious how? Is something missing? If so, shall I get it ready before the representative arrives?”

“It’s not that.” Phillip cleared his throat pompously as he answered. “The people here just don’t seem very high quality. Even if we form a faction with them, I wonder if we’ll be able to compete with the other factions.”

“I see, so that’s what you’re worried about.” Hilma smiled.

She was too skinny to arouse any desire in him, but her charms were still captivating enough that he felt his throat wanting to swallow hard.

“But isn’t that precisely why you should be the one to lead them, Lord Phillip? Imagine your domain. Are the people who live there clever?”

“No...”

“Isn’t that exactly why someone wise needs to be at the top?”

“Yes, I see. You’re right.”

“I believe that you’ll be a good leader for the faction, Lord Phillip. And I’ll support you as much as I can.”

“To get your sweet nectar?”

“Of course. It will be profitable. I’m sure of that, hence my offer of assistance.” Hilma grinned.

Phillip’s anger had completely vanished.

What Hilma was saying was right.

He was thankful he was lucky enough to have met her.

Not only did she have all the things Phillip didn't have in the capital—like financial power and connections—she was friendly with him like this; she made it so easy to understand the merits involved and told him exactly what compensation he needed to provide, allowing him to feel comfortable working with her.

"If you stick with me, I'll make you the wealthiest woman in existence."

It seemed like her eyes widened slightly. Then she smiled in satisfaction.

"That makes me so happy. I've been thinking I'd like a necklace with a big jewel like the noblewomen wear. Work hard, Lord Phillip."

"Yes, leave it to me. By the way... there's something I wanted to ask you."

"All right. Go ahead. What is it?"

"...Why are you so thin? Is something wrong with you?"

He needed her cooperation going forward or the plan wouldn't work. If her sickness couldn't be cured by a priest, he would have to find a replacement for her as soon as possible; or maybe she could recommend someone to succeed her.

"No, there's nothing wrong..."

"I've heard the daughters of large families go on diets to lose weight. Is that it?"

Hilma smiled. It was a smile he'd never seen before that made him indescribably anxious.

"No. I just can't eat solid food. Which means I can only have liquids, and I can't have too much, so... that's why. If I do get sick, I'll have to get some treatment cast on me, so please don't worry about that."

The atmosphere reverted abruptly to the way it had been a moment ago.

"I won't die without sucking up lots of sweet nectar from you."

"O-kay. I see. That's fine, then. But you can't eat solid food? How come?"

He didn't mean anything particular by the question, but the results of asking it were major. It was like all the emotion drained out of Hilma's face.

Phillip panicked at the change, which was even more dramatic than the previous one.  
“Wh-what the—what's wrong?”

“Ah, oh. Do excuse me. I was just remembering...” She held a hand over her mouth as she said it. She looked awfully pale.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I must have brought up bad memories...”

What sort of trauma did one have to go through to end up incapable of eating solid foods? Now it seemed she was living a luxurious lifestyle, but perhaps there had been a period of her life where she was eating poorly? He wanted to ask, but it was clear to him that he couldn't.

“Lord Phillip, I think it's about time to welcome the representative. If you escort her in, everyone's eyes will be on you. That will convey more clearly than words who the host—who the most powerful person here—is.”

“Ooh! You're right.”

At the royal cocktail party, she had appeared solo, so he figured that was normal, but apparently that wasn't the case. He was embarrassed to not have known, so he pretended it had slipped his mind until now.

“I'm sure everyone will be surprised. A bunch of people who failed to greet you will get anxious and panic.”

Phillip felt a sadistic pleasure. There were nobles gathered here who had greater titles and more land than he did. What would the look on their faces be as they stood before him—the unnecessary burden of a child in the family...?

“Right. I shouldn't keep her waiting. Let's call her.”

“Then I'll lead you partway there.”

Hilma called a waiter, and he took Phillip to the room where the representative of the Nation of Darkness, Lady Albedo, was waiting.

He knocked and then opened the door.

The woman inside was simply too gorgeous.

She wore a raven-black dress different from any he had ever seen in the kingdom. Her bare shoulders were a radiant white. Around her neck was a string of large jewels, yet it wasn't gaudy at all but rather a modest accompaniment to her beauty.

*She's so pretty...*

He blushed in spite of himself.

"...Shall we go?"

"Yes, allow me to escort you."

He took her hand in its black lace glove and helped her to her feet.

Standing next to her, he noticed a pleasant smell. What perfume was it that made his heart so light? He was suddenly seized by the urge to smell more of it even if it meant snorting, but obviously he couldn't bring himself to do such a thing.

They walked together to the ballroom, but the silence weighed heavily on Phillip. He racked his brain to try to come up with a good topic but only thought of something right as they reached the ballroom's door.

"The ballroom is full of nobles. They're all here to meet you, Lady Albedo."

The choice of topic wasn't all that sudden, so she replied right away.

"Oh? I'm grateful for your support, Lord Phillip."

Albedo gave him a familiar smile.

Phillip's heart pounded.

He didn't think it could be possible, but did she maybe sort of like him?

In just a little while, he would be the man leading a large faction. The Nation of Darkness may have had an overpowering military, but it still had only one city.

So wasn't he a fairly good catch, then?

And it just so happened he wasn't married, either.

"By the way, Lady Albedo, do you have a husband?"

Her eyes went wide. He had seen her gentle smile a few times, but he had never witnessed an expression like this.

Realizing he had made things awkward, he felt slightly ashamed of himself.

"That's an interesting question, Lord Phillip. It's a terrible shame, but I don't. I'm lonely and single."

"Is that so? With your beauty, I assumed you would be inundated with proposals before you even said a word."

"Tee-hee. Oddly enough, I'm not. That said, even if I were, I wouldn't know what to do with them. So I actually feel like things are perfectly fine the way they are now."

"I see."

When they reached the door, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

He heard a strange creak and turned to look for the source of the sound.

"...Is something wrong?" Albedo asked with a smile, and the slight question in his mind slipped away.

"No, nothing at all. Now then, allow me to escort you."

\*

What could they see?

Hilma was just a little curious how these nobles dressed to the nines viewed this ballroom.

First-class cuisine, first-class waitstaff, first-class furnishings, first-class music, and

third-rate garbage nobles.

Most of the nobles at this ball were freeloading third sons or worse—the spares of the spares—disappointing and headache inducing for all sorts of reasons.

One look at their faces was enough to tell.

Many of them, feeling liberated, wore triumphant smiles, and likewise many of them were ablaze with ambition.

To people like that, this ballroom was a place to satisfy their vanity.

But really, this place was a feeding ground.

The kingdom's noble society had been thrown into confusion.

Even a few months after the battle with the Nation of Darkness, the scars were large and showed no signs of healing. Some factions disbanded while others formed. Noble houses that had been at the top suddenly found themselves on the bottom.

The kingdom's current chaos was a great chance for the nobles who for whatever reason hadn't belonged to a faction before. No, it was their last chance. If the factions re-formed, they would be driven into a corner. This place should have been a giant feeding frenzy for them.

They were starving fish trying to get the small fries in their bellies.

Meanwhile, the small fries would probably be eaten in a single bite without even realizing the larger fishes' aim. Or would they notice it and manage to swim away? Or perhaps there were small-fry nobles who would take a bite out of larger fish and feast.

After observing the ballroom for over an hour, Hilma had determined that there were no first-class nobles here—no one worth working with.

But she didn't despair. If there were any first-class nobles who could enter this dangerous ballroom unfazed, there was a good chance they were spies.

Though she had rejected them during the invitation phase, Hilma didn't feel she had managed it perfectly. She was sure a noble from some faction or another had managed to infiltrate.

She considered it amusing.

Her report would have more depth, which would make her more valuable, so it wasn't a bad deal for her.

*Okay, it must be about that time?*

It had been an hour and a half since the ball started. It was the appointed time.

Hilma's true job started now.

*I'm scared.*

Her arrogant attitude of earlier had vanished as if it had never been there to begin with.

A fear that the gentle word *scared* couldn't even cover welled up from the pit of her stomach.

The thought that if she displeased them, she would be sent back to that hell made her want to flee at top speed. Of course, if she did that, she would probably be punished in a way that would make even that place seem like heaven.

She had given orders to kill more than once as a member of the Eight Fingers. And she had even given orders to make people suffer before their deaths. But any of her orders seemed downright merciful compared to the treatment she received from that monster.

“Hilma.”

The voice from behind startled her.

When she turned around, it was the most idiotic man in the ballroom.

“Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“No, Lord Phillip. It’s nothing.”

Hilma hid her true feelings beneath a smile. She was annoyed with herself for getting caught off guard by such a piece of trash.

“Lady Albedo wanted to take a ten-minute break, so she was looking for you.”

“She’s been talking with nobles nonstop, so it’s only natural that she would want to rest. Understood. I’ll show her where she can relax.”

“I see. Then maybe I’ll go with you.”

*What are you talking about? Hilma was truly disgusted with him. Or has he sensed something?*

Wary, she kept up her act.

“I think it would be better if you refrained.”

“Why? I’ve been at her side all this time. I don’t think it would be strange for us to go together.”

Now she knew he really didn’t get it.

In other words, he was a moron among morons. He was an imbecile who had none of the manners or sense that a noble should have.

“If a man who is not a woman’s husband accompanies her to a room to rest, that gives everyone an opportunity to gossip.”

“Ohhh, but I was going to come right back after escorting her.”

“Even so. I understand your concern as her host. But as the one providing the venue for the ball, I can take her to the resting area.”

“Yeah...”

He seemed like he wanted to say something, so Hilma waited in silence.

Really, she wanted to tell him to spit it out already, but he was the host. She couldn’t be too rude to him.

“What do you think I would have to do to marry her?”

“Huh?!“ His question made her forget her act. “Eh?! What did you just say?!“

“About a way for me to marry Lady Albedo.”

Hilma wanted to scream, *Is this nitwit for real?!* but she reined in the urge. She didn’t think his stupidity was the bottomless kind. According to the information she had gathered, this woman was the right hand of the King of Darkness—essentially the prime minister. A low-level noble from the neighboring country couldn’t possibly have these kinds of designs.

She would have been less surprised if he had asked how to go about marrying Princess Renner.

“I mean, I managed to gather all these nobles together, didn’t I? I think I’m on her level, don’t you?”

Hilma clamped her hands over her throat in spite of herself.

Though she knew none of those *things* would slip down it, the fear and anxiety from the trauma of being shredded up made her do it.

No, *trauma* wasn’t the end of it.

How would *she* feel if she heard this nonsense coming from the mouth of this not-at-all attractive man? If the blowback fell only on Phillip, that was fine, but if any malice was turned on her, it was possible that dark hell awaited her again.

“Su-surely that’s going too far. I’ve heard she’s the prime minister of the Nation of Darkness. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s the equivalent of a duchess here.”

“But the Nation of Darkness only has one city.”

“Wh-what does that have to do with it?!”

His remark disparaging the Nation of Darkness gave her goose bumps.

Certainly, its territory wasn’t so large, even including the Katze Plain. But wasn’t its military mightier than anyone’s?

No matter how much effort they poured into trade or diplomacy, relationships between nations were decided by brute power disparity. No matter how vast a nation’s territory, once it was defeated, its land would be stolen.

If this idiot couldn't even figure that out, how could she make him understand?

Hilma's thoughts went around and around, but she didn't have an answer. Common sense and stupidity existed at odds with each other.

In the end, she gave him the conclusion.

"It's impossible. There is no chance of you and Lady Albedo getting married."

"...We have a pretty good vibe going, though. Didn't you notice when we entered the ballroom together?"

Hilma was shocked. *Is that what he was thinking up there?*

*Is he planning on tempting people to his faction by claiming he has the Nation of Darkness's backing? This guy is an extreme idiot... Give me a break. Don't provoke her.*

She felt something bitter creeping out of her stomach—at the same time, she felt she would like to give this fool a taste of the sensation of those things going down into his.

"...Our chat here has gone on a bit too long. I'll escort Lady Albedo, so I'd appreciate it if you would stay here and entertain your guests."

"Ah, when you put it that way, I suppose I have no choice. Take good care of Lady Albedo."

She didn't say, *You should have known that without me having to say anything...*, and instead bowed her head slightly. Then she went directly over to Albedo because she was sick of listening to that blockhead.

Albedo was speaking with some nobles. Normally, Hilma would have read the atmosphere and watched for the right moment to say something, but she was tired from interacting with the idiot, so she spoke right away.

"Excuse me, Lady Albedo, I thought perhaps you would like to take a rest."

"Hmm... Yes, I hate to be rude, but I think I'll rest for a little while." Albedo followed her out of the ballroom.

"Phew... Ah, I feel sick."

Hilma looked over her shoulder at the voice. She wondered what she would do if the lady really did feel unwell.

But when she looked, she saw her wiping at her shoulder with a handkerchief.

Their eyes met.

"That nasty man put his hands on me. There is only one man who is allowed to touch me out of desire for my body... That shit. That brainless shit."

Her teeth ground audibly. She, who wore that gentle smile at all times, openly expressed her disgust. It must have been that bad.

Hilma wasn't sure what to do. Was it all right to talk to her now? Or was she preparing to punish her?

"...What's wrong? Let's chat."

"Su-sure..." Hilma responded, internally terrified. "I understand how you feel, Lady Albedo."

"Oh. Then... would it be impossible at this point to get rid of that fellow and find a new one?"

"If you wish, Lady Albedo, I could find you a new toy"

Albedo's mouth opened, then closed, and that repeated several times.

It must have been an offer tantalizing enough to put her at a loss.

Either way, hell surely awaited, but all she could feel for Phillip was that he would reap what he had sown.

"Phew... Don't worry. I was merely complaining. He made an impression on a lot of nobles at the royal cocktail party with the extent of his stupidity. In that sense, it would be a shame to trade him out now... If he's acting that way on purpose, he might be more fun than I thought. But there's no way."

Hilma remembered the conversation from earlier, that delusional man saying he wanted to marry Albedo.

How would she react if Hilma told her?

She was far too scared to bring it up—because it was possible it would start a fight.

“He hasn’t done anything, yet he thinks himself special. What an outrageous idiot.”

“Yeah. Eventually we’ll bring him crashing down to earth. This body belongs to Lord Ainz—he needs to be punished for touching it with his filthy hands.”

Then without saying anything else or meeting anyone along their way, Hilma led Albedo to the entrance of a certain room.

Before the door, she wanted to sink to her knees in relief. How stressful it was to accompany her alone—she, the right hand of that king who even ruled over Jaldabaoth. But she would never be permitted to slump like that.

Hilma mobilized every last bit of her physical and mental energy, and at the same time, she promised herself that when this was all over, she would spend an entire day sleeping.

“This way.”

When Hilma opened the door to the room, the men sitting inside all stood at once. They were as bone thin as she was.

They were her colleagues.

Five Eight Fingers division chiefs plus their leader for a total of six.

In other words, her most reliable friends in the world. Once they had quarreled, but the thought couldn’t possibly cross their minds anymore. Having learned the connection between Jaldabaoth and the Nation of Darkness, they were all in the same boat. Until this country was swallowed up, until they were liberated, they would have to work together as slaves.

When her friends, with whom she felt even intimate, set eyes on the embodiment of fear that was Albedo, they bowed deeply. Their shoulders shuddered with a terror they couldn’t fully conceal.

Albedo had Hilma close the door, and she took a seat in the highest-quality chair in the

room, which had been placed in the most honored position. Neither the men nor Hilma made to sit down, instead standing at attention while waiting for orders.

"All right, I have orders for you. First, I want you to transport all kinds of materials to the Nation of Darkness."

"Understood. It will be our pleasure to offer them to you."

The smuggling division chief answered without a moment's hesitation. How could he possibly hesitate? Now that he had been summoned, all he could do was agree to any and all orders.

The chief of the smuggling division had lost a ton of goods during the Jaldabaoth disturbance, so he didn't have power over the Merchants Guild any longer, but his position was still secure. That was because when he did business with the nobles fighting the Nation of Darkness, he had done all his deals in cash up front. The merchants who had permitted payment after the fact were all struggling now, so perhaps it was more accurate to say that his reputation was once again on the rise.

"That's not what I mean. Sell them at the appropriate prices. And with the money you make, buy food to prepare the kingdom from the food shortage that is sure to hit. There's a lot of food that the kingdom army wasn't able to move—no, let's have foodstuffs be handled under a forward contract. Lord Ainz has already begun producing large amounts of food for that purpose."

Given how many workers they had lost, the future she described was sure to come to pass.

"Understood. We'll have the merchants get started right away."

"These are what we want the most. Make sure to have them bring plenty in the first batch."

He reached out reverently for the bag she'd tossed onto the table.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"And how is the magic item research going?"

A different person answered with zero delay. "My humble apologies!" He bent over so

hard, he whacked his head into the table. The sound it made was surprisingly loud.

"We've enlisted the help of the Wizards Guild and are investigating as we speak! Please give us a bit more time—or rather, if you don't mind an in-progress report, I'm happy to give it."

"Sure, that's fine. Work as fast as possible. Oh, and another thing. Have you decided on your new members yet? If you have, I need to take them back and baptize them."

The new members were to fill the empty seats—new division chiefs.

Recalling what "baptism" entailed, Hilma felt nauseous. She desperately tried to keep her expression steady, but her colleagues all had the same look on their faces.

The demonic baptism had broken their spirits and obliterated their will to resist. If any of them had been told they would have to endure it again, they would have burst into sobs like a child.

"Unfortunately, we haven't decided yet," their leader said.

It was true, but it was also a lie.

There wasn't actually any reason to appoint new heads. The chiefs missing were the security division's and the slave-trafficking division's. The latter's deals were mostly done, so there wasn't much benefit to choosing a new one. As for the former, they weren't sure if there was any point in having one. Besides...

"The ones you've lent us are outstanding, so it might be a good idea to have them as chiefs."

They were borrowing undead, and all of them were unbelievably strong.

When they heard the Six Arms were dead, a group of mainly former-worker riffraff had gathered. One undead was sent in to put them down and massacred a group that numbered nearly forty without letting a single person escape.

And there was another laughable reason: No one present wanted to make anyone go through what they had. The rulers of the underworld, who put out bounties on people like it was nothing, didn't wish even a taste of their own despair on anyone else.

“...Okay. If the organization will function properly, then I have no problem with it. Do you have anything to ask of me?”

“I don’t mean to trouble you, but in the mine I’m borrowing, the skeletons you lent me are doing a fantastic job, so I was wondering if I could borrow them a bit longer.”

“Yes, of course. If you’ll pay the fee, I’ll continue lending them to you.”

“Thank you.”

The man who spoke wiped the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief that was so wet, it had changed color.

The most formidable thing about the Nation of Darkness was that it gave not only whips but carrots.

The strong didn’t simply steal from the weak but wheeled and dealed like capable merchants, following the rules. In fact, as long as they didn’t show any desire to rebel, it was like having an immensely powerful protector—it was incredibly comforting. Of course, when they actually stood in front of that protector like this, they wanted to flee in terror, but still.

“Now then, it goes without saying why I’m here in person. I believe I’ve already said this, but you will cooperate with the Nation of Darkness as we absorb the kingdom. Gain as much influence in the outside world as you can.”

“Understood!”

They all hurriedly bowed their heads.

There was no way they could object to the kingdom being taken over. If those monsters wanted to do something, it would happen sooner or later.

At first, they considered going to the Blue Roses, Drops of Red, and Raven Black for help, but when they learned that the Nation of Darkness was so overwhelmingly mighty that even Jaldabaoth was under its control, they realized there was no hope. Their only choice was to bow their heads and wait for the end.

“Oh, right...”

Hilma and the others' shoulders twitched.

"There's one last thing I forgot to say. There's a magic item I personally want you to search for using your intelligence network. Send regular reports of your results on parchment to Albedo of the Nation of Darkness. I have no idea what it even looks like, but..."

"...What sort of item is it?"

"It's an item that allows you to control your opponents' minds."

"Mind control... like a charm wand?"

"No, I think it's something much more powerful. What I want you to collect are rumors about legendary items, not anything commonly available. Tell me anything you find out, even the smallest detail. Got it?"

Mind control was a terrifying effect.

They understood right away why she would be wary of it.

.

"P-Princess!"

A frantic maid entered the room.

She didn't even knock. It wasn't praiseworthy behavior, but she must have been just that distressed.

Renner realized immediately what had happened. But in front of the maids, Renner was a naive princess. She responded with a dopey question accompanied by the appropriate expression on her face. "What's wrong?"

The corners of the maid's eyes moved slightly.

Perhaps she was inwardly angry—at the princess for being so spacey when she was this visibly upset.

Renner leisurely placed her cup on its saucer.

It was as if the sound spurred the maid to speak. “U-uh, umm...”

“It’s all right. Please take some deep breaths and calm down.”

The maid followed her suggestion and tried to catch her breath.

When Renner saw she had regained some degree of composure, she asked, “What happened? Are the demons here again or something?”

“N-no. The representative from the Nation of Darkness wants to meet you, Princess!”

“That woman?”

“Yes, she’s very beautiful.”

There was only one representative from the Nation of Darkness, so Renner’s question should have come off as strange. She wanted the maid to point that out, like, *Hellooo*, but she was so distraught, she gave a straight answer.

*Well, I don’t care*, thought Renner. It was the accumulation of these sorts of things that gave her the reputation she could use. These were all moves made in advance.

Climb was standing by near her, and she heard his armor squeak.

Perhaps he had cocked his head.

The innocent behavior of her puppy dog filled her heart with love.

She guessed that he didn’t understand why the representative had come to see her. He had seen them greet each other. He probably assumed there wasn’t much in it for the Nation of Darkness to talk with the—in the end only decorative—third princess.

Renner smiled kindly in her head.

The saying “The stupider the child, the cuter to the parents” was really true. Or maybe it was more like, “Even pockmarks look like dimples when you’re in love.” Probably both—because if anyone besides Climb had done it, the emotions that rose up in Renner would surely have been different.

She was seized by the urge to gaze endlessly into his twinkling eyes, but she held

herself back—until she could coat him in sweet, sweet sugar.

“Why ever has Lady Albedo come to see me?”

Cocking her head was key. She knew from several tests that this annoyed someone who was in a hurry.

And in reality, tiny flames flickered deep in the maid’s eyes.

It was anger. At the same time, Climb’s armor made a faint noise again.

Perhaps he detected the maid’s feelings and had an opinion about them. But the sound quickly ended. He must have gone back to stoically standing at attention.

*So cute.*

He was a puppy who was unsure whether to step forward and defend his master.

He must have decided that if Renner didn’t notice, not moving was the better course of action. The maid was the daughter of a good noble household. If Climb from who-knew-where made some remark, it would get back to her parents and cause trouble for Renner in the end.

He trusted Renner so much, he must have been shedding tears inwardly. If only his family were more important, then he would never let this happen...

Renner suppressed her desire to look at Climb standing behind her—because that meddlesome maid had opened her mouth.

“I’m afraid to say I don’t know that much—only that she wants to see you.”

“Hmm... Well, Lady Albedo is a woman, so it’s possible there are things she wants to discuss with a woman... Perhaps about makeup?” she asked innocently—or more like brainlessly.

“I don’t know. May I show her in?”

“Of course!” Renner answered happily and then turned to Climb. “Umm, Climb. My apologies, but this is going to be girl talk. Could I get you to leave the room?”

“Understood.”

He was a bit disappointed, but it wasn’t his choice to make. He didn’t need to know all the complicated details as long as she would look at him with those pretty eyes.

When Albedo entered the room, there was only one person present.

Albedo had four objectives in coming to the royal capital.

The first was to transport supplies, the second was to create an excuse to start a war, the third was to make some arrangements regarding a personal goal, and the fourth was to make a deal with the mistress of this room.

No, “deal” wasn’t quite right. It was more like giving her a reward.

Without getting permission, she crossed the room and sat in the chair that was there.

Then she spoke to the young girl who had taken a knee and was bowing.

“Raise your head.”

“All right.”

The girl, Renner, looked up.

“You’ve performed brilliantly.”

“Thank you, Lady Albedo.”

“Oh my...”

Seeing a girl entirely different from the one she had dealt with so far, her curiosity was incredibly piqued.

This was the Renner she had heard about from Demiurge.

Though she had betrayed her family, her blood, and her people, there wasn’t a hint of regret in her expression. She was human but inhuman. Mentally, she could be called a grotesque. Surely she understood good and evil, but understanding them was as far as she took it. She was the type who, unfettered by such concepts, would work toward

her objectives unfazed.

“...In praise of your work, I come bearing a gift from Lord Ainz.” She pulled the item he had entrusted to her out of space. It was a small box with multiple seals on it. It would never open unless all the conditions were met.

“It’s...”

Albedo watched like a researcher observing a guinea pig as the girl received it with gratitude.

And the girl was a guinea pig. That was precisely why their interests aligned.

“Thank you. Please extend my gratitude to Lord Ainz Ooal Gown as well.”

“I will. Regarding the other thing you wanted, that goes without saying, right?”

“Of course. Nothing will make me happier than receiving your mercy upon paying the fair price.” She smiled.

It was an adorable smile.

Which was why Albedo asked, “If you open the box, your wish will come true, but are you capable of that?”

What would the members of Nazarick think if they knew Albedo was worried about a human? But once the girl’s wish came true, she would be given a position equivalent to a domain guardian. Albedo wouldn’t be punished for showing a little concern for a future subordinate, would she?

“Yes, Lady Albedo. I’m already preparing.”

“Oh. Then make sure you’re ready by the time we invade.”

“Understood, Your Greatness.”

When the girl bowed her head, Albedo looked behind her.

The thing lurking there appeared and bowed its head as well.

She felt like it might be wise to give this girl more troops, but she held back.

If this girl's activities were discovered before the Nation of Darkness attacked, there would be no point in bringing her into Nazarick.

In other words, this was a test.

"Then that's enough formal discussion." The tone of Albedo's voice changed. Renner looked confused. "It's too early to leave. Shall we discuss—chat about something? Have a seat now. Why don't you tell me about your puppy dog?"

Albedo was met with an ear-to-ear grin.

"It would be my pleasure, Lady Albedo. And if you don't mind, could I hear about Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, too?"

# INTERMISSION

*Deep in the Slane Theocracy...*

There weren't many people who were permitted to enter this sacred room.

First, the one with the loftiest status in the Theocracy, the high priest superior.

Then the six high priests, each in charge of a denomination—for each of the Six Gods. Incidentally, it was from these high priests, excluding the denomination of the current high priest superior, that the next high priest superior would be chosen.

*The high priest of fire—Bérénice Nagua Santini...*

The sole woman in this gathering. She was over fifty, and perhaps due to her age, she was rather plump. The motherly smile on her filled-out face calmed all those who saw it.

*The high priest of water—Zinedine Delan Guelfi...*

An old man like a withered tree branch. His face had wizened to the point that his age was a mystery, but his skin had already grayed. That meant his health was a concern, but he had no rivals when it came to knowledge and wisdom.

*The high priest of wind—Dominic Ire Partouche...*

He appeared to be a gentle old man, but he was a former member of the Sunlit Scripture, a holy warrior who had massacred many different races. It was said that his rage was like a roaring fire and his murderousness like ice and snow.

*The high priest of earth—Raymond Zurg Laurencin...*

The youngest member, a man with a sharp gaze. Even so, he was in his forties, but for all his life force, it was hard to tell. A former Black Scripture member, he was a hero who had been fighting to protect the country for over fifteen years.

*The high priest of light—Yvon Jasna Delacroix...*

With his tapered eyes and slight frame, he looked dangerous, but everyone present knew that wasn't so. As a faith caster, he ranked first or second in this gathering.

*The high priest of darkness—Maximilian Oleo Laguiller...*

A man with round glasses who used an improved form of the spell Floating Board to keep several books hovering around him. He originally worked in the judicial administration, so many of the books were about law.

Aside from these people, the three heads of the judicial, legislative, and executive branches were allowed, plus the chief of the research org where they developed new magic and the most superior military officer, the generalissimo.

The group composed of these twelve members was the supreme executive agency.

When they entered the room, they purified it using the cleaning tools they brought with them. Dusters. Dry wipes. Wet wipes. A magic item for sucking up dust.

They cleaned the room with practiced hands and not a single wasted motion.

Though they were the most elite of the Slane Theocracy's population of fifteen million, they cut no corners, getting their neat robes dusty and sweating as they continued cleaning in order to not let a single speck of dirt remain.

When they were done, the room—which had been clean to begin with—gleamed.

They wiped the sweat from their brows, lined up, and bowed deeply to the six statues watching over the room from its rear.

“We thank the gods that we mere humans live another day.”

After the high priest superior spoke, the others intoned their thanks without missing a beat. “We thank you.”

Bringing their heads back up, they put all the cleaning implements in a corner. Then they cast Clean. The dirt vanished from their clothes and tools. The towels they had used to wipe their sweat smelled freshly laundered.

The first-tier spell erased all dirt and dust in an instant. By casting on the scale of the whole room, it would have been simple to clean it. But none of them was so impious

as to do such a thing in this shrine room.

After finally purifying themselves, they sat at a round table—including the highest-ranking person in the Theocracy, the high priest superior.

In this place, the people sitting there were all equal. There was no hierarchy; they cooperated as friends—yes, for the prosperity of the human race.

“Well, I’d like to bring this meeting into session.”

The one leading the meeting today was the high priest of earth, Raymond Zurg Laurencin.

“Our first topic is the country that occupied the Re-Estize Kingdom’s fortress city E-Rantel and established itself in that area about two weeks ago: the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

There was no matter more pressing than the mysterious country that had appeared so suddenly.

But the people who knew details were few, so the intelligence they had gained was only hearsay.

For starters, they had heard that the King of Darkness was an undead, that he was an immensely powerful caster, that he had wiped out the kingdom’s army, that he controlled a military of undead, and that among those undead was a death knight.

Raymond, the leader of the six scriptures and the leader of the meeting today, was supposed to report on what they had found.

Someone spoke abruptly. “Perhaps we should have intervened instead of watching on in silence.”

“...What are you saying? We agreed that it would be too dangerous to face a caster who could control a death knight head-on. You seemed to be against it, so let’s not rehash it all. Still, I can’t believe they formed a country.”

Everyone nodded.

“What is the empire planning to do? It’s founding the country jointly with the Nation

of Darkness as an ally, but is that because it's suddenly become its backer? Or is it being manipulated?"

"It's not manipulation. They have Paradyne."

"Were we wrong to think we could trust the emperor?"

"...The real problem is that we're not making effective use of one of the few deviants. Couldn't we launch the plan to bring that one over to our side?"

"Well"—a sudden clap rang out, chilling the heated atmosphere—"Star Reader—Second Sight of the Black Scripture observed the war between the empire and the kingdom. Please forgive the late report; some issues have caused delays."

*Was the issue that strange incident of her locking herself up in her room and refusing to come out?* is what everyone thought.

"First, I'll pass around this report of what she saw. Nothing we learned later is included here. This is just her words regarding the Nation of Darkness's army on the field."

Everyone thought that was rather inconvenient, but they quietly read the papers when their turn came.

When they flipped to the final page, their hands froze. They read and reread the same passage.

Everyone's expressions reached a stiffened state independently. And their faces paled.

Raymond watched those changes, smiling. It was a smile of solidarity only someone who knew the same pain could wear.

Eventually, Maximilian shouted on everyone's behalf. He opened his mouth so wide, his glasses tilted, but he didn't have the presence of mind to fix them. "Lies! I don't think this... This could never happen!"

"As I mentioned, this is strictly a record of what she said."

Raymond was so calm that Maximilian was lost for words.

While Maximilian caught his breath, as if he had just come running over at full speed,

Bérénice asked her colleague for confirmation.

“Can I ask one more time? Is this really true?”

“If you believe Star Reader–Second Sight, then...”

Everyone looked down at the pages again with a bitter face.

The part they had all stopped at was the description of the King of Darkness’s army.

“Hundreds of death knights—at least two hundred. Hundreds of soul eaters—at least three hundred. This army is... worse than bad! If it went berserk, the kingdom, empire, the city-state alliance, and the Sacred Kingdom would be obliterated!”

“We would be, too. If they surged for an attack, it would take centuries to recover from the damage.”

*Death knights...*

Estimated difficulty rating: 100-plus. They created squire zombies, and those created regular zombies. The zombies themselves had no fighting ability, but they could contribute to stronger undead spawning in the area.

*Soul eaters...*

Estimated difficulty rating: 100–150. An undead with a bombardment ability that ate the souls of those it killed. It had an ability that made its powers stronger the more souls it ate. It also gave off an aura that caused fear, meaning anyone who wasn’t a caster who could use tier three or higher would have a rough time facing them.

Even just one of each could destroy a city—or a country if it was unlucky.

“She didn’t mistake them? Or could the King of Darkness have realized we were watching and created illusions of them to confuse us?” Yvon stuck a withered finger in the air and brought up several possible explanations.

Some voices *oohed* that it could be that, but Raymond cut them off.

“Black Scripture members have knowledge about all sorts of monsters pounded into them. Certainly, it’s unclear if she remembers it all, but she—Star Reader–Second

Sight—oversaw the knowledge side of things. It's unthinkable that she would make a mistake like that. Additionally, we've confirmed the presence of death knights and soul eaters at the capital of the Nation of Darkness, what used to be E-Rantel."

There came the sound of several exhausted sighs.

Everyone sounded incredibly tired, forced to accept this truth, as their murmured consultations began.

"What should we do? Our job is to protect people, so what is our best course of action? What can we do about five hundred monsters so powerful that a single one could destroy a country?"

"So they have the military might of five hundred small countries...? That's insane. What a balance-breaking nation."

"The question is what the King of Darkness will use that might for. If he just has it for defense, then there shouldn't be any issues for a while."

"Don't be stupid. That's far too much to protect his own country. And in the first place, isn't he an undead? They hate the living. I have no doubt he'll attack neighboring countries."

"There's no point in thinking about what he might do with the power he has. We should be thinking about how to counter him."

That was right, so their conversation changed course.

"Then... the most important thing is whether the Black Scripture can handle it or not."

The Black Scripture was the Slane Theocracy's most powerful trump card. It was a special unit made up of heroes—similar to a team of adamantite-plate adventurers but definitively different. Adventurers barely managed to obtain gear spoken of in the heroic sagas, left behind by the gods, at the end of a hard search, but members of the Black Scripture all possessed multiple pieces.

And even if they couldn't beat their opponents, all they had to do was perform a ritual to summon high-level angels to fight for them.

Surely high-level angels wouldn't lose to death knights and soul eaters. But when they

considered the numbers, they were left anxious.

Everyone looked at Raymond.

He cracked a smile. The ones who inadvertently responded to his smile with their own smiles froze stiff upon his next words.

"It can't. As former third chair of the Black Scripture, allow me to say that going up against five hundred of those things is begging for death. Once we're evenly numbered, we've already reached despair. No, if that wasn't the case, Star Reader-Second Sight wouldn't be holed up in her room..."

His smile morphed into a different type.

"Of course, it's different for demigods."

The others *oohed*.

"I'm sure even if death knights and soul eaters attacked, those two could handle them. Of course, we should have a surefire backup just in case."

"So those two can do it?"

"That's encouraging."

Amid the flood of cheers, Zinedine sighed. When they heard how gloomy and tired he sounded, the rest of them lowered their voices.

"...What are you hiding?"

"Zinedine, what do you mean?"

"The laws don't prohibit perjury, fabrication, or concealment, but we're comrades with a common goal, so we should have tacitly agreed that those things are deadly sins. With that in mind, I'll ask again. What are you hiding?"

"Really, Zinedine. What are you talking about? Why are you asking that?"

"Dominic, there's something bothering me. Why is Star Reader-Second Sight locked in her room?" When he realized no one could reply, he continued, "Out of pessimism.

Or perhaps shock. That undead army was probably terrifying. But would a member of the Black Scripture hole up in their room over that...? It's because she witnessed a power that not even demigods could defeat. This isn't the end of the report, is it?"

Everyone looked between Raymond and Zinedine.

"...What were you planning to accomplish by keeping it secret? I trust you. I know you're not the kind of man who would use the scriptures for your own ends. But what is it you feel you can't discuss here?"

"Brilliant. So perceptive as always, Zinedine. I was going to see what was possible first, but... well, let's just talk about it now. It was giving me stomach pains thinking about it on my own, so it's best if I can share with all of you." Raymond scanned everyone's faces. "How much have you all heard about the war between the kingdom and the empire—no, the Nation of Darkness?"

The one who spoke up as representative was the high priest superior. "I heard the King of Darkness cast an immensely powerful spell. It demolished the Re-Estize Army, and the kingdom was defeated. As a result, E-Rantel was turned over in a deal that appeared to have been decided prior to the fight, and the Nation of Darkness was established. That's as far as I've heard."

"Do you know how many people died?"

The high priest superior shook his head in response to Raymond's question. "I haven't heard that much. If I haven't heard, then probably the rest of you haven't, either, right?"

"Right. Since that country with a monster leading it took over E-Rantel, none of the priests or merchants go there anymore. The only news we can get is unverifiable hearsay."

"That's what we have the scriptures for. For this one, probably not the Flurry Scripture but the Springwater Scripture, right?"

"Oh. So there's information that only you as the leader of the six scriptures are privy to. All we get are leaks and rumors."

"...Is that so? Then next I'll hand out a detailed report of the war Star Reader-Second Sight saw."

After they read the new document, the room was filled with nothing but silence.

Perhaps Yvon thought things couldn't keep going on like that? He suddenly asked a question. "I see; I see. You didn't show us this first thing because you didn't want our hearts to stop?"

"It was nothing like that. Your hearts are plenty tough, I'm sure. But I did wonder, if I gave you this first, if you would even believe it."

Yvon grudgingly nodded. "That's a good point. Had I seen this first, I might have doubted it. I certainly wouldn't have been sure about it. But once we understand that the King of Darkness's army from the previous document is the truth, then the rest of this that she saw must also be true."

"But... I don't want to believe it. Over half the kingdom's army died from a single spell? The army mobilized two hundred sixty thousand troops for this fight. Even just half of that would be one hundred thirty thousand! I heard the kingdom's army was annihilated, but this is..."

"This is just what she saw, right? It's common enough to overestimate casualties."

"Still, even if you just take the line about the single wing being obliterated, that's eighty thousand dead. And then he sacrificed them to summon those hideous monsters...?"

"We can't deny what she saw. This is divine magic. Tier eleven, don't you think? Which can only mean one thing..."

"The advent of a god?"

"It does say here that he looked like... Could it be a second coming?"

"That's impossible. According to the oral tradition, Lord Sulshana, the god of death, was killed by those horrible Eight Kings of Avarice. This has to be someone different. Besides, if it were the second coming of Lord Sulshana, I'm sure we would hear something from his number one follower."

"Another one has come, then?"

"Probably. It's been two hundred years, right?"

"The oral tradition indicates about that much. Of course, there's the chance one could have appeared somewhere on the continent during that time."

"Since that lousy plan got thrown off, our national power hasn't improved as much as we wanted it to."

"Those idiots in the kingdom..."

That one remark made hatred shine in everyone's eyes.

The kingdom was the country established in the safest location. The Theocracy assisted with that because it hoped that the kingdom would be humanity's salvation. Thanks to the safe, fertile land, many children would be born, including many outstanding characters who would grow up into heroes who would fight off the onslaught of other races. Comfort and affluence, however, invited corruption, and the kingdom had gone rotten from the inside out.

The biggest headache was that they produced narcotics and spread them all over another capable country, the empire.

By the time that had happened, the Theocracy changed tack.

Their second plan was to have the empire annex the kingdom and train promising individuals.

The reason the Theocracy didn't annex the kingdom itself was that with the council state next door, public opinion could swing toward destroying it.

The Theocracy's philosophy was that humans were the race chosen by the gods and that other races were to be wiped out. By having everyone believe that they were surrounded by enemies and they had to work together, they were able to focus national energy tightly and strengthen it. But if they were next to the council state, their doctrine could zoom off in a dangerous direction.

The people gathered in this room knew the other countries' strengths, their own country's strength, and their priorities, which was why they were able to think about what the Slane Theocracy's next moves should be. But it wasn't hard to imagine the people calling for war against the council state in order to eliminate the races that were the enemies of humans.

That would be the worst.

The council state was strong.

More specifically, an individual from the council state was strong: the Platinum Dragonlord. He was the child of the dragon emperor—and dangerous. Fighting with one of the strongest living dragonlords could end with their country becoming a mound of ashes. But what would people ignorant of that fact think—about simply sitting there alongside a neighbor who should be destroyed?

The people in the room could hold them back with force, but the resulting resentment would surely chip away at their nation's strength. They couldn't even deny the possibility of war breaking out.

Which was why the Theocracy couldn't be adjacent to the council state or rule the kingdom directly. And the kingdom was too big to rule from the shadows.

“Let’s focus on the King of Darkness timeline. For starters, he has to be the one who annihilated the Sunlit Scripture we sent out.”

The atmosphere froze stiff.

“That caster calling himself Ainz Ooal Gown appeared in the village around the same time.”

“Then what was that vampire the Black Scripture encountered?”

“I think there’s a good chance that it was another being in the same position as the King of Darkness, one of them.”

“That could be. In that case, there’s precedent for multiple appearances at once. Perhaps Jaldabaoth is one, too? Then the power he displayed in the kingdom would make sense. And it explains why such a powerful monster would show up so suddenly.”

“Then what about Momon? Supposedly he came after the vampire, but if our earlier guesses are right, then he’s the same sort of being as the King of Darkness. That explains why he’s equally matched with Jaldabaoth. The question is whether he’s friends with the King of Darkness or not...”

"Momon obliterated the vampire and opposed Jaldabaoth. There's a good chance they're the same type of beings but enemies. Or maybe they were enemies up to that point? Then they made a deal with the King of Darkness and became friends?"

"It's not clear whether he's against the King of Darkness simply because he vanquished the vampire. He could have been under orders to kill it. Maybe he killed it because it was being controlled by the supreme treasure. By why is he hostile to Jaldabaoth...? Could Momon be aligned with the King of Darkness but against Jaldabaoth?"

"...So there's the version where Jaldabaoth and the vampire are a team and Momon and the King of Darkness are a team. There's the version where the vampire, Jaldabaoth, Momon, and the King of Darkness are all against one another. There are all kinds of other conceivable combinations. We just don't have enough information."

"The worst case would be if they were all allies, but that seems unlikely. Momon is too quiet. Normally, if you had that much power, you would be more daring. Yes, like the Eight Kings of Avarice. Or like our gods."

"Aha! So the reason they aren't doing that is because they're wary of one another? Or they could be worried about others."

"We should assume that since the King of Darkness has actively established a country, there will be others who will move to gain equal fighting power. If what Momon said was true, Honyopnyoko has a friend. We should be on the lookout for that one in addition to Jaldabaoth."

"Overall, we're merely speculating. The only way to know for sure would be to ask Momon or the King of Darkness."

"That's too dangerous. Much too dangerous. First, we should draw information out of the empire. We should try to get in touch with the emperor."

"That would be best. If the emperor isn't already the King of Darkness's pet."

"We can't avoid a bit of a gamble. If we're timid, we'll be too late."

"But will 'a bit' really be all? If we're not lucky, couldn't it be used as an excuse to declare war on us? First, we should bring things up casually with the emperor to find out his stance."

As everyone agreed with those proposals, one of them suddenly asked a question. "...But won't the masses in E-Rantel revolt against undead rule? They weren't all killed, were they? Or has he established total rule by fear?"

It was addressed to Raymond, and he gave an unbelievable answer. "According to reports, governance is proceeding peacefully."

It was only natural that uncharacteristic yelps were emitted here and there. "Huh?!"

"It's true that once you hit our age, your ears start to go, but mine seemed to have worsened dramatically. I heard you say 'peacefully,' Raymond."

"Yes, yes. I heard the same. Ha-ha. Peacefully with an undead!... Hmph, a peaceful undead."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the sun rose in the north tomorrow."

"...Setting aside jokes for now, if what Sir Raymond says is true, it's so difficult to imagine. Are you sure the ones bringing the information aren't morally bankrupt or being sarcastic?"

"The reports say that death knights are on guard, elder liches run the administration, and soul eaters pull carriages to transport cargo."

The jaws of everyone besides Raymond dropped.

"Whoa, whoa, wait. What? Say that again?" Maximilian's glasses were still tilted as he asked his question.

Raymond repeated the news word for word.

This time everyone emitted an uncharacteristic "Huh?!"

Those were all elite undead. Or they should have been. But those knights of the netherworld were patrolling the streets like useless officials, the masters of the labyrinth were managing distribution, and monsters that could ruin walled castle towns were being used as donkeys. That sort of country was just beyond their borders.

"What in the...? What sort of hell... is that?"

In a city where the undead threw their weight around managing municipal affairs, they could only imagine that the humans had been annihilated.

"No, the people of the former city of E-Rantel—the subjects of the Nation of Darkness—are living normal lives. There was a bit of confusion in the beginning, of course, but things are calm now."

"...Perhaps we underestimated the kingdom."

"Indeed... What mental fortitude."

*Life-hating undead stalking by right next to me...* The thought gave everyone the chills.

It was like having a starving beast right there. Any normal person would be terrified.

"I imagine it's because they believe in the great warrior, the hero-level adventurer Momon of Raven Black, that they can tolerate it."

Raymond began to explain what happened the day the city was opened to the King of Darkness.

Everyone listened with sober expressions.

"It does seem like Momon and the King of Darkness might have been on the same side originally."

"My. This does seem to be the proof that Momon and the King of Darkness are in cahoots. They did both appear around the same time, right?"

"Hrrrm." Everyone cradled their heads.

Either was possible, but they didn't have confirmation one way or another.

"Is there some way we could set Momon and the King of Darkness against each other? Maybe using the citizens of E-Rantel...?"

"It's dangerous. Much too dangerous. We might end up with both Momon and the King of Darkness standing against us."

"That's exactly right. We're suffering a great many losses at present. Though they've

been resurrected, the members of the Black Scripture, the destruction of the Sunlit Scripture, the loss of the crown, the deaths of the shrine princess and Lady Kaire... It will probably take decades to recover. I doubt we need to be grilling meat beneath a sleeping dragon's nose."

"Right. To begin with, we must avoid a two-front war."

The hostility in the room ballooned instantaneously.

"Those grimy traitors?"

"Damn elves."

The Theocracy was in the middle of a war with the elf country in the woodlands to the south. Originally the two countries had a cooperative relationship. But ever since that fell apart, the Theocracy had been using all its energy to wage war against the elves.

At present, they had succeeded in building a forward base near Crescent Lake, where the elven capital was situated. The plan had been to destroy them within a few years, but it wasn't working out.

"Should we pause the war with the elves for the time being?"

"Don't be stupid. How much blood do you think we've shed thus far? And in the first place, we'll never be forgiven if we don't avenge her"

"That girl..." The old man who spoke winced.

She always ended up getting treated like a child because of her appearance—though she was actually older than everyone present.

"What about her?"

"She's standing by in a room nearby as usual."

"Hmm. We have to give her a chance to avenge her mother, too."

"Indeed. It would be too pitiful if we didn't. Once her revenge is complete, perhaps she'll be calmer, too."

Everyone in the room wore a sad expression.

“...Honestly, I’d like to give the high priests of that time a piece of my mind. I can’t believe they raised the poor girl to have a personality like that.”

“Once you say that, let’s end it by remembering that it was the fault of those savages in the forest. Even the high priests thought it was a bad idea to take her from her mother.”

“...It’s a tricky thing.”

“But if we send her, it’s possible that the dragonlord awakens.”

“I doubt that the power of the gods, Ruinous Beauty, would reach one who uses primeval magic, though it reached the Catastrophe Dragonlord.”

“Shall we use it on the King of Darkness?”

Silence descended on the room. The idea had been on all of their minds, though they didn’t say it.

“...It wouldn’t be a horrible move. But I’m quite concerned, given that we still don’t know how powerful his underlings are.”

“If we could charm without limits, there would be no issue...”

“That’s disrespectful! How could you complain about the great treasure the gods left? The gods who protect humanity and gave their lives for us! Have you gotten so full of yourself?”

The reproaches flew, and the old man who had spoken hung his head. “It was irreverent of me.”

“Watch what you say!”

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand. Am I correct in thinking that we’re all against using Ruinous Beauty on the King of Darkness?”

“It’s too risky.”

"If the Catastrophe Dragonlord appears, we could use it on him and use him as our advance guard..."

There was no point in wishing for things they couldn't have.

"Well, we probably have no choice. Regarding the elves, let's send a messenger to that dragonlord and try talking."

"But we have no idea what kind of demands they'll make!"

"Well, let's be flexible and at least listen to what they have to say. For the girl's peace of mind."

No one objected. They were all in various postures of contemplation.

"Hee-hee." Someone chuckled, and the rest of the room's eyes gathered. "Hee-hee. That's so kind of you... even though everyone who knows what happened at the time is dead." It was a nasty thing to say, but the tone was completely different. "We, including her, are a band of friends who protect weak humanity from the other races. I'd like some abuse of authority to be permitted when it's about saving our friends."

"If no one dies, I won't stop you..."

The generalissimo's response evoked a wry smile.

"Wouldn't it be better to spread this knowledge more widely than word of mouth between individuals can? Someone with power shouldn't have any trouble unless they go into hiding afterward. Once word gets around, information will come together quickly."

The often-proposed plan was said to have originated hundreds of years ago. And it was always rejected in the same way.

"The fewer people who know that our world is a fragile boat hurled into the wide ocean, the better. Or that we might get a bad storm every century or so. How would anyone be able to sleep at night? The strong can't simply lurk in the shadows forever. They stick out even if they simply go about living their lives."

"If that's true, then what will that former high priest do?"

"I don't know, but there's a good chance of something... Perhaps some kind of ace move is in the works."

"Maybe the former ninth seat, Storm-Wind Distance-Runner, knows something..."

"This is no good. It's happening so near us this time. It's a pain in the extreme."

There were several audible sighs.

"What about asking the retired Black Scripture members for help rebuilding our strength—no, tightening up our watch? As reinforcements to send to the Dragon Kingdom. If we sent them, there wouldn't be many deaths."

Since the Black Scripture was always leaping into dangerous situations, the chances of dying were high. But as long as there was a corpse, resurrection was possible. The only issue was that being brought back from the dead used up a lot of life force. Returning to pre-death levels of power required time and training. It was natural that those people would choose to retire.

Of course, there were also those who quit when they started feeling their age, but in either case, they were given priority for the jobs they were interested in. Some chose not to work and lived a life of debauchery, but in the majority of cases, the gazes of their multiple wives and the *Why don't you work, Daddy?* from their children compelled them to get back in the game.

It was necessary to train those people to get their combat senses back, and there were some who could never hope to return to the level they were at in their prime, but they were still definitely more reliable than some random person.

"For now, let's tell them what's going on and what we would like. Just don't expect them all to take up their weapons again."

"Of course not. It would just be an appeal. And for anyone who actually responds, we'll have to offer even better compensation than they wish for."

"They should get paid as much as we do."

Ironic laughter erupted.

Their salaries were a joke.

In the Theocracy, salaries began to decrease above a certain rank. It was a self-purification measure to ensure that the people at the top weren't tainted by greed. The result was that most of those who climbed up that high were there to dedicate themselves to their country and the people.

The laughter stopped and the high priest superior spoke. "Very well, everyone. Shall we move on? Raymond, if you please."



# **CHAPTER 3**

## **THE BAHARUTH EMPIRE**

# 1

The day Albedo left for the Re-Estize Kingdom was sunny. Ainz was in the yard of his residence to see her off.

There was a line of five luxurious carriages. The one Albedo was riding in had her luggage in it. Of the others, one was filled with presents for the king. They were gifts meant to show the power disparity between the kingdom and the Nation of Darkness. Twenty-six Death Cavaliers created by Ainz surrounded the procession.

It would have been simpler to use Teleport to travel, but that wasn't the method they chose.

Part of Albedo's mission was to show off the might of the Nation of Darkness. That was why she used monsters instead of horses to pull the carriages—it was a demonstration.

"Well then, Lord Ainz. I'll be away for a little while."

"Right, be careful. We haven't found the guys who brainwashed Shalltear. We can't rule out the possibility that they might be plotting to mind control you and deal massive damage to Nazarick."

"Of course, my lord. I'll make sure not to let this leave my person."

She cradled a World Item.

"With that, you should be safe from World Item brainwashing, but we don't know for sure that what our opponent has is a World Item. And in the first place, don't forget that although it's the strongest anti-material World Item, it isn't terribly useful against personnel."

"Is that true? My main weapon is a portable version of this that looks different..."

"It's not as powerful as a specialized god-tier weapon. Well, considering that it can't be broken and won't degrade, it is quite strong, but you know. My point is: Don't let your guard down because you're strong. Not that I think you would make that sort of mistake, Albedo."

Come to think of it, Ainz had never sent Albedo outside before.

He had always stationed her in Nazarick to protect the rear. So Ainz was worried in much the same way he would be sending a child on their first errand.

"Stay wary. Don't let your guard down. If anything seems even the slightest bit dangerous, withdraw at once. Do you have a teleportation item? Some of them take time to activate. Do you have one that allows you to move instantaneously? Some enemies have attacks that prevent teleportation. Have you decided how you'll deal with those? Some enemies will distract you with a decoy and sneak up on you. Don't get tricked by your enemies' strengths. I heard you've been doing some combat training so you'll be able to handle more, but you still have a lot to learn. And besides that..."

Wishing he had given the same advice to Shalltear before he sent her out, he considered how he would fight her if he was the PKer, all the while speaking rapid-fire.

How many different attacks had he explained? He realized that Albedo was looking at him awfully happily. Then he came back to his senses with a start.

What a terribly embarrassing way to act.

Ainz cleared his throat.

"Let's leave it at that. This is you we're talking about, Albedo, so I'm sure you've prepared countermeasures for each of these. I'm sorry to have kept you. You can go. Come back safe."

"Understood, Lord Ainz."

"I don't mean to ask as you're leaving, but has Demiurge—? Ah, never mind."

"Are you sure?"

Ainz nodded.

He really wanted to ask if any word had come from Demiurge. Albedo wasn't against his plan with the Adventurers Guild, so he wanted to ask Demiurge, but he could do that in person when he returned. Albedo seemed curious, but perhaps sensing that he wasn't going to reply, she returned to her usual calm expression.

"All right, Lord Ainz. I shall do a job worthy of the captain of the guardians."

"You always uphold the dignity of your title, Albedo." As soon as he said it, he thought of the times he had been tackled, but this wasn't the time to bring it up. "One last thing: I know you have immunity to sickness, but in this world, there might be illnesses that can infect you. Take care of yourself. I heard it's easy to catch colds when the seasons are changing."

In the world where Satoru Suzuki lived, there had been four clearly defined seasons.

He suddenly wondered how Blue Planet would have reacted if he was here. He probably would have had the same sparkle in his eyes that Albedo did... setting aside the question of whether he could even make such an expression.

With that smile like a flower in full bloom, Albedo made a proposal. "Lord Ainz! I know a wonderful way to ward off sickness!"

"Oh?"

He was surprised that she knew a preventive measure specific to this world.

Albedo shouldn't have had any contact with Nfirea the apothecary. Was it knowledge from *Yggdrasil* or Tabula Smaragdina? His curiosity piqued, Ainz waited for her to continue.

"A kiss!"

"..... A kiss?"

"Yes, kissing relieves stress and activates the parasympathetic nervous system. If the parasympathetic is more active, your immunity increases. A kiss will keep you from getting sick!"

"Now that you mention it, I seem to remember hearing something like that before."

He remembered someone saying something about the parasympathetic nervous system back when he was playing *Yggdrasil*. That must have been what he was thinking of. But he couldn't imagine it was valid in this world as well.

"So a kiss!"

Albedo closed her eyes and puckered up.

A fish face.

He thought it would be a waste of her beauty, but actually, it didn't detract as much as he expected. *I guess beautiful women are beautiful no matter what kind of face they're making*, thought Ainz, though it was a bit beside the point at the moment.

Ainz decided that was enough escapism and began to think.

He wanted to tell her no way, but it was clear from a glance that she wanted a kiss. Since she was about to go on a business trip, he wanted to fulfill her wishes to some extent. And ignoring the request of the daughter of Tabula Smaragdina would pain his heart.

Ainz held Albedo's chin and kissed her forehead. That said, he didn't have any skin. So he didn't have any lips. So his kiss consisted of pressing against her with his front teeth. And since he didn't have any spit, either, it should have felt just like a dry, hard object touching her.

It was just so... so-so that he could only hope she would endure it.

*I haven't eaten anything, but I still wish I would have brushed my teeth.*

When he took his hand away from Albedo's chin, his eyes met hers, which were popped wide open.

"Wh-what's the matter? I thought on the lips would be a bit much, so I kissed your forehead, but should I not have?!"

"...I never thought you would choose me."

Before Ainz could ask what she meant by that, round droplets formed at the corners of Albedo's eyes.

"Fwaaaaah!"

She burst into tears. And she wasn't faking it—she was actually crying.

Ainz was so flustered that his mood was forcibly calmed for the first time in a while, and he flailed a bit—because how would he know what to do?

When he made Albedo cry in the Treasury, he came up with something comforting to say right away. But he had no idea how to console someone crying from a kiss. *What would that stud the emperor do?* he thought, but he hadn't witnessed any scenes like this during his spying.

"Albedo, please don't cry."

He wanted to glance at today's Ainz duty maid behind him for help, but this was already a pitiful scene, so he didn't want to make himself any more pathetic.

"Albedo, don't cry."

He embraced her and patted her back.

After a little while, she sniffed. It seemed like she had stopped crying.

Relieved, Ainz released the hands around her back.

"Are you all right, Albedo?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz. My humble apologies for that shameful display."

Though her face was stained with tears, she was wearing a great smile.

There could have been only one reason she cried.

Realizing what a horrible thing he had done, he felt little stabbing pains in his nonexistent stomach. If he hadn't thought, *Well, the game is almost over...*, he never would have made her cry like this.

"Okay... Well, it must be about that time. If there isn't anything else, you should get going."

"Understood, Lord Momonga!"

The curtains in the window of the carriage opened, and he could see Albedo waving. Ainz waved back.

It was like a scene he'd seen on TV of people parting as a train pulled away.

The carriage slowly began to move and the escorts followed.

After watching the carriage until he couldn't see it anymore, he spoke solemnly.

"Forget all that just happened."

"Understood."

Ainz walked past the maid as she bowed. He couldn't see what the look on her face was.

## 2

The Fresh Blood Emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, was at his wits' end.

Not for the past couple days but all the time lately.

This was the man who had never gotten confused or panicked no matter what nobles he purged, what empire-destabilizing plot of rebellion he heard of, or how bad relations with neighboring countries got, but faced with this unsolvable problem, he could only hold his head in his hands.

"You! You bastard! Drop dead! Die and rot!"

It was possible to kill an opponent with a curse, but Jircniv didn't have that power. For that reason, his shouts were merely insults, but if he could kill the hateful man who had been giving him so much mental and gastric trouble the past few months, he almost wanted to train up and learn the technique.

"...No, wait. Maybe 'live' is actually correct. Should I say, 'Get wrecked!' instead? I heard that priests can destroy undead with holy power."

He was even thinking such nonsense as that.

The reason Jircniv's stomach hurt so much, the reason that when he woke up in the morning, so much of his hair stayed on his pillow—it all stemmed from the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.

He didn't have a fail-safe way to address the problems the King of Darkness had

caused.

The first issue was the imperial knights who had died in the fight on the Katze Plain.

There were 143 of them. If they had fought the enemy head-on, that level of attrition would be par for the course. But the dead from the Katze Plain self-destructed.

Not only that, but upon returning to the empire, the number who wanted to quit the knighthood was 3,788. Six percent of the sixty thousand knights who participated in the battle on the Katze Plain lost their courage.

On top of that, there were already several thousand who complained of anxiety or sleepless, frightened nights. According to the reports he'd seen, at least two hundred were mentally unstable.

Knights were professional warriors, and there were costs to cultivating them.

And it wasn't just money. It took time to train them. It wasn't just a matter of grabbing a random guy off the street and telling him, *Starting tomorrow, you're a knight.*

Where could he pull funding to cover the expenses the empire would need to fill this hole?

Under these circumstances, it would be a big risk to purge nobles and use the seized assets as funding.

But then the second issue was the knights' petition.

Jircniv allowed the knights to express their opinion directly to him. Nominally, the reasoning was that there were certain things only those who shed blood in battle could understand, but he also hoped to lessen the clash between the civil servants and the military officers, and his other objective was to make his military backing—the knights—feel like they were getting special treatment.

Of course, the nominal reason wasn't completely devoid of substance, but this petition was awful.

It was a joint letter from the upper echelons asking him to avoid war with the Nation of Darkness.

Jircniv knew that without being told.

Warring head-on with that country would go past stupid to crazy. He wouldn't go picking fights with an opponent who could mow down two hundred thousand soldiers with a single spell.

The reason the knights sent that petition anyway was that they had lost confidence in him.

The higher-ranking knights knew that Jircniv had requested that the king use the most powerful spell he had, so they counted him as one of the largest factors in causing that gruesome hellscape.

In other words, he was being treated as the perpetrator.

When he realized that, it really pissed him off—he was furious.

If he had known such a spell existed, he never would have said such a thing.

And in the first place, the only reason he asked him to use his strongest spell was to see what the extent of his power was.

Shouldn't they be grateful? *Thank you for drawing out a glimpse of the King of Darkness's power. Now we know he's not someone to be trifled with.* If their luck had been worse, the king might have set that spell off in a city.

But the knights wouldn't see it that way.

Since they felt he was such an outstanding emperor, they suspected him of knowingly requesting that spell.

It was the first time Jircniv found his reputation unpleasant.

But moaning about it wouldn't get him anywhere. If someone would do something in his place, he would wail and rest until his stomach quit aching, but there was no one who could function at his level. He had to do something himself.

“Damn you, King of Darkness! This is all your fault!”

Holding his sore belly, he thought, *No.*

Perhaps it wasn't his *fault* but his *conspiracy*.

It was possible that the empire's circumstances were all what he had calculated. Actually, thinking with a clear head, it seemed highly probable.

Jircniv took out a key, opened a desk drawer, and retrieved a bottle from the row of them inside.

Then he moved the silver ring on his left hand near it.

When the Unicorn Ring—which could detect poison, boosted the user's defense against sickness and poison, and could heal a wound once a day—didn't react, he drank the bottle's contents in one go.

He quietly set the bottle on the desk, furiously wrinkling his nose.

To get rid of the now-familiar bitter taste spreading throughout his mouth, he gulped down the glass of water sitting on his desk, then went back to holding his stomach.

Whether it was a placebo or he had actually been healed, he didn't know, but the pain subsided.

“Ahhh...”

Emitting an extremely heavy sigh that had become a daily occurrence, he got back to work. First was the paperwork that had piled up.

Just as he reached out, there came a reserved knock on the door as if someone had been waiting for that moment.

It was one of his secretaries who entered. All the secretaries Jircniv had selected were outstanding, but this one was on par with Reaunet.

Incidentally, he didn't have a single female secretary. Unfortunately, there was only one woman he would trust that work to.

“Your Imperial Majesty—”

Jircniv waved off the greeting that seemed like it was going to drag on. “No need for all that. Leave off the greeting. It's a waste of time. Just tell me what you're here for.”

"Yes, Your Majesty. A merchant from that nation bearing goods of quite high quality has contacted us. He's coming to the capital."

"Oh!"

"That nation" meant the Slane Theocracy, and the "merchant"—it goes without saying—was actually a messenger.

This room was protected against espionage, but after witnessing how powerful the King of Darkness was, their defenses felt flimsy as paper. And actually, Jircniv felt like he was being watched sometimes.

He had had several people investigate, but as no surveillance agents were discovered, it ended with the suggestion that perhaps he was paranoid. And certainly once they mentioned it, he noticed how frayed his nerves were, so he began to think it could just be in his head. But he still couldn't get rid of the feeling that someone's eyes were on him.

Previously, Fluder had taken on one part of the espionage-proofing, but Jircniv couldn't use that traitor any longer. All he could do was operate under the assumption that his palace had been infiltrated.

So for certain sensitive topics, they employed code words. Of course, it caused some issues, but it was much better than having the plot to join forces against Ainz Ooal Gown leaked.

"So when will he arrive?"

"Within the next few days, he said."

He would have liked to invite him to the palace, but that would be too conspicuous.

*It would be best to pretend we were meeting by coincidence, but where would be the least suspicious seeming?*

Even if he felt like there was nothing he could do, he couldn't give up as though it was merely a game. He couldn't ignore a being who could cast such an atrocious spell, someone who told Nimble it was only natural for him to take lives because he was an undead.

Increasing their chances of victory even a tiny bit was the job of the emperor of Baharuth.

And one method of doing that was a behind-the-scenes alliance with the Slane Theocracy. The Theocracy had a longer history than the empire, and faith magic was one of its pillars. It was the ideal country to request cooperation from for confronting undead.

But it would be extremely bad if the Nation of Darkness found out that the empire was in contact with the Theocracy.

The empire was supporting the establishment of the Nation of Darkness as an allied country. The reason it put itself in that position was to learn as much as possible about the country's power, organization, and so on. It was obvious that if word got out that Jircniv was working against the Nation of Darkness, the first country that power would be turned on was the empire.

"May I say something, Your Majesty?"

Jircniv said nothing but gestured with his chin for the man to continue.

"Isn't it a bad idea to fight against the Nation of Darkness at this point?"

Jircniv shot a sharp look at the secretary—to say, *Are you on about that, too?* Then he glanced at the parchment in his private wastebasket and asked a question.

"So then what should we do?" *My spirit is already nearly snapped in half—are you trying to shatter it completely...? Still...*

"Well..."

Jircniv smiled wryly, seeing his secretary gulp like that.

"Relax. I won't fault you no matter what you say. Speak your mind."

"All right. Then I beg your pardon, but..." The secretary cleared his throat and explained his thoughts. "As we strengthen our alliance with the Nation of Darkness, if it comes to us with a request... I think our only option is to take a knee and comply."

Though Jircniv had made a promise, the secretary's face was deathly pale.

He must have been battling the fear that his life could be in danger for that potentially treasonous remark.

Jircniv smiled wryly once more. "You're right."

"What?"

Knowing what an excellent secretary he was made the man's gaping mouth amusing. Jircniv continued with a different sort of smile on his face.

"I said you're right. If I was in your position, I'm sure I would make the same suggestion. No, it'd be more of a problem if I had a secretary who didn't say that."

Frankly, the Nation of Darkness was too powerful.

They were only aware of its military power, but even just that was so extraordinary that doing anything about it was impossible.

The King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, was more than enough of a threat on his own, and then the undead army he brought with him to the battlefield was supposedly made up of monsters who could each single-handedly destroy a country.

He was basically from another dimension, so it started to feel absurd to even think about it in a serious way.

"I agree that that's the best plan of action, but we should probably have a plan B as well. If the King of Darkness was trying to destroy the empire, I'm not sure he'd forgive us simply because we got on our knees."

Currently, he hadn't heard anything about a massacre in E-Rantel.

When he wondered if there weren't any undead there and had the data collected, the place was crawling with them. Monsters were stationed all over the place, and the city had transformed into a dark capital.

Perhaps they didn't intend to kill the people living in the occupied territory, but it was too soon to assume that. Assuming the empire would be on the receiving end of the king's mercy was risky, given the rumor that the king had even gotten the adamantite-plate adventurer Momon under his thumb.

"As you say, Your Majesty. It seems I was so scared of the King of Darkness's overwhelming power that something obvious like that didn't come to mind. I'm terribly sorry."

"There's no need to apologize. I thought the same thing... But let's get back to our discussion. Where will the merchant from that nation be staying?"

"He'll be staying at the largest two of four place."

"Two of four" was a fire shrine. *The largest place* wasn't a code word, but he could guess it meant the largest shrine in the empire—the central shrine.

Then they began chatting nonchalantly, mixing in lies.

Every now and then, they would say something random that sounded significant so that if anyone was listening, they would have a hard time ascertaining whether it was true or not.

*Seems like this brain-taxing work will continue,* thought Jircniv, and after a few minutes, he steered the conversation toward its main purpose.

"So what about your family? Are they still well?"

"Huh? Er, yes. Thanks to you, we're doing great."

"I see. That's good. Health is so important. Actually, I haven't been feeling so well lately. Medicines are only helping me endure temporarily. What do you think about calling a priest?"

"The shrines don't seem very pleased with you of late. If you get high-handed with them, it could invite a rebellion. What if you went to one instead?"

"That's a good idea."

For the shrines, who fought against undead, the appearance of a country ruled by an immensely powerful undead right next door was cause for serious concern. As such, they had sent many letters to Jircniv asking to hear his thoughts on the matter, but he had been refusing.

One of the reasons he didn't jump at that chance even though he wanted all the help

he could get was that he couldn't trust their espionage prevention skills. But the other was that he couldn't predict what they would do once they heard everything he had to say.

If, after he cooperated with them, the priests decided to go to war with that king just because he was undead, the outcome would go without saying. It would be like getting caught up in a suicide.

Ultimately, the issue was that he didn't want the King of Darkness to interpret contact with the shrines as hostility. In other words, he was scared.

Jircniv sighed again.

He had wanted them to wait for a good opportunity, but the Theocracy hadn't read that far. Still, if the party of diplomats snuck into the empire and met with the shrines, maybe they could aim for a reversal of fortunes.

"Then I suppose I should go get checked within the next few days."

"I think that's a good idea. I'll make the arrangements."

"Yes, please do. And what about the arena? I was planning to go watch, so can that still happen? Don't stop me just because we're talking about getting my health checked. I'll let whoever of you wants to come with sit in the noble guest seats."

The secretary's eyes contained a sharp glint that indicated he was trying to reach the truth.

*Yes. You're right. It's only natural to question. See through it.*

Jircniv was thinking he wanted to avoid meeting with the Theocracy diplomats at the shrine.

In addition to providing healing services, shrines archived all sorts of information. If the central shrine was chosen as the first target, they would lose too much. There were some times when amassed knowledge was more important than anything else.

"Understood regarding the arena. But I thought that day you were going to visit the people injured in the war."

That news hadn't reached Jircniv. It must have been a bluff.

In other words, he was probably suggesting the hospital instead of the arena as the meeting place. The reason Jircniv proposed the arena was because he had heard that priests had been summoned there to heal the injured before. That meant they could show up under that guise.

"Let's put the hospital visit off. Arrange my schedule according to the plan I just mentioned."

The topic of the merchant disappeared halfway through the conversation. What would a spy think of that? What would they be able to glean from the numbers "two of four"?

No matter how demonic the King of Darkness's ingenuity, he couldn't make a move without gathering information. And his subordinates couldn't all be as intelligent as he was. Plus, the more spies he had, the more likely they would be found out. Since they hadn't found any yet, there were surely only a few. At least, Jircniv wanted that to be the case.

The King of Darkness's absolute magic powers had tricked his brain; some corner of his mind was whispering, *All the King of Darkness's henchmen are elites*. The ones Jircniv had seen in the Throne Room had been overwhelmingly powerful, so maybe his spies were like that, too.

*If that's the case, we're just out of luck... I guess being a vassal country would be the most we could hope for?*

Even though he had just drunk a potion, the griping pain in his stomach started up again.

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Two weeks later, Jircniv was in a carriage on the way to the arena.

The nominal reason was to be a spectator, but the real objective was the meeting that had been arranged with the messenger from the Theocracy and high-ranking priests from within the empire.

His guard was not mobilized, because he wanted to avoid sticking out, but two of the Four were in the carriage with him as escorts: Lightning and Storm Wind.

He would have liked to have all four of the exceptionally strong knights with him, but he couldn't trust Heavy Bomber, so he left her behind—his excuse was that she was to guard the palace. No, “couldn't trust” wasn't accurate. The more correct reason was that she had expressed interest in visiting the Nation of Darkness, so he wanted to keep her away from any information that would make a good souvenir.

She once said, *If my curse was broken, I would even turn my sword on the emperor*, but there were reasons that he had her working for him despite that. Even if she betrayed the empire, he couldn't blame her. But that didn't mean he could let her make off with important intelligence.

If she did steal state secrets, he would have to send someone after her, but if he wanted to kill her—one of the strongest people in the empire—he would have to send someone on her level. In an even fight with the sword, that meant only Lightning or Storm Wind were options; the wrong choice would end only with the pursuer getting killed instead. And if he sent a whole group, the defenses of the capital and he himself would be weakened.

In that case, he would need someone with skills besides hand-to-hand combat—one of Fluder's leading disciples, or workers, or maybe assassins like Ijaniya, but no matter which one he chose, he would have to be prepared to pay for them.

Leading disciples were paid annually—although Fluder himself had been given a domain and trapped as a noble—so it was easy to assume there wouldn't be many additional costs, but there were invisible losses such as delays in their usual work. And the loss that would occur if there was retaliation was incomparable to the latter two options.

So the best option was to not let Heavy Bomber near any critical intelligence so she couldn't take anything with her to the Nation of Darkness. That was probably the way to make everyone happy.

He had already discussed that with her in a roundabout way.

But Heavy Bomber was still at the palace. Her response had been, *I will remain until my debt to you is repaid.*

He would have liked to take it at face value, but he couldn't.

It was true that Heavy Bomber was one of the empire's Four, but that didn't mean the

Nation of Darkness would be impressed by her abilities. The undead in the big unit reporting directly to the King of Darkness were surely more powerful than her, so she was just biding her time until she could sell herself for a higher price.

Thinking about the presence of over a thousand undead stronger than the empire's strongest knight—not even counting the King of Darkness—made Jircniv's stomach hurt.

*What am I supposed to do?!*

It wasn't that they couldn't change the tides of battle with one strong addition.

Gazef Stronoff of the Re-Estize Kingdom was a man who could make that happen. And the empire's principal wizard, Fluder Paradyne, was even more powerful—he could tip the balance of the entire country.

An individual was sometimes equivalent to an entire army or state.

In other words, even without its fearsome undead king, the Nation of Darkness still had an army a thousand strong.

*...Isn't this just impossible? Assuming there are a thousand soldiers in his army, there's no way to stop them... Would it be better to give up?*

He couldn't say so in front of his subordinates, but it was the answer that had occurred to him more than once. It was the first thing he thought when he heard about the fight on the Katze Plain.

"All right, Your Majesty, so you're going to meet with Argenti at the arena and then move on?"

Jircniv moved only his eyes to look at the man sitting before him.

It was one of the Four, Lightning Baswood Peshmel.

Jircniv nodded in silence.

For escorts this time, he had hired an adamantite adventurer team. Nominally, they were guards, but their main purpose was countering espionage. Unfortunately, he had been unable to get in touch with one of the candidates, Ijaniya, and so learned that it

would be extremely difficult to get them onto the empire's side.

"Your Majesty, it's true that adamantite-plate adventurers are the peak of humanity's fighting power. But ultimately, they can't go beyond the human realm. Please don't let your guard down."

Jircniv understood to a painful degree what Storm Wind Nimble Arc Dale Anoch was trying to say. Or rather, he had seen a massive slaughter, so he knew. He had seen the monsters lined up in the Throne Room.

"Of course not. Still, though, we might be able to fend them off somehow. There's the adamantite-plate adventurer from the kingdom, Momon. I've heard he faced the King of Darkness with his sword drawn and protected the people. So these are adamantite, too. I would sure hope they can fend them off." As he said it, he smiled sadly. "And if... they can't?"

The pair of knights' faces grew grave at Jircniv's question. Their expressions spoke louder than words—to the point that before he knew it, Jircniv was making the same face.

"Your Majesty, please don't look at us that way. We may be powerless, but we'll do all we can."

"You can bet on that, Your Majesty. Please get rid of that gloomy expression and put your usual bold, confident one back on."

The pair's kind words were like stakes in his heart. Unable to bring himself to say, *You had the same looks on your faces, too!* he took the advice sincerely—because it had undeniably permeated his turbulent mind, just like water falling on a desert.

"...Sorry. I appreciate your feelings. And... since it's just you guys here, I wonder if it would be okay for me to vent a bit..."

The two knights silently nodded.

"What should I do? Why did a monster like that have to show up next to the empire? Why? What did I do wrong? How can we defeat him—or even just seal him away? Is there really even a way to come back from the worst-case scenario of the empire's trump card defecting to the enemy's side?"

He hadn't intended to say so much.

If Jircniv didn't walk out front, no one would be able to make it. The person at the top needed person-at-the-top attitude—especially when that person was the Fresh Blood Emperor, who had purged so many nobles.

His father, whom he respected, had taught him that the emperor could never show weakness.

But as long as one was human, there were limits to what was possible to endure.

The human, Jircniv, screamed in a way he could only in front of his closest aides. "I did ask him to use a spell. But I had to! We needed to know some of what he could do in order to figure out how to combat him! Yet I'm the one in the wrong?! It's all my fault?! That's what everyone and his brother are saying!" Jircniv bit his lip and tore at his hair with both hands.

Actually, that was just the beginning. He wanted to scream all the deepest emotions welling up inside him and thrash around. He only just managed to maintain imperial appearances.

But he was aware that he had pushed the limits.

*This seems to be turning into a habit*, he thought as he regained composure. "Sorry. I got a bit agitated. The stress lately is so bad, you know."

When he glanced down at his hands, there were a couple of his hairs there.

Judging from the portraits, none of his ancestors had thin hair. He ended up at the pointless thought that he might be the first emperor to go bald.

He brushed off his hands in a way that might not alert his two guards. Sometimes sympathy hurt more than insults. Hair issues were precisely that sort of thing.

"Now that you've seen me like this, I'm sure saying this will only cause you trouble, but don't worry about me. There must be a way to handle this. I won't let him have his way with the empire."

He put on what he felt was a fearless grin. His two subordinates smiled slightly.

But they didn't seem relieved.

They must have realized that Jircniv's remark was little more than consolation. Even Jircniv himself thought that unless a weapon that could definitively slay undead or a person with amazing powers appeared, it would be impossible.

*Hence the Slane Theocracy. It has a longer history than we do. Maybe they have a weapon that can kill undead in a single blow. No, I can keep fighting even if all they bring us is knowledge!*

Wishing for that was the only option he had left.

The carriage drove on—with Jircniv's last hope aboard.

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The arena was circular. One section had an entrance, which the carriage drove through. It was the entrance and exit for the handful of people with access to the noble guest box. Aside from that, there was the general admission entrance and the shipping entrance, for a total of three ways in and out.

Naturally, the first to disembark were the two knight bodyguards. After they made sure the area was safe, Jircniv got out.

Five men were there.

They didn't appear the type to be anywhere near the VIP entrance.

Jircniv could usually guess the price of a piece of art from looking at it, but he couldn't tell the value of the men's equipment. That was because it wasn't the work-of-art armor the guards of nobles wore but combat gear of people who had been through battles.

Etiquette required that the lower-status person introduce themselves first, but some adventurers didn't pay attention to status. These men were that type.

But was it really all right for the ruler of the empire to humble himself before an adventurer?

Perhaps sensing Jircniv's conundrum, one of the five men spoke. "Your Imperial

Majesty, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix. It's an honor to meet you. We're Argenti, the adamantite team who will be handling your request. I'm the leader of the team, Freiwaltz. Thank you for hiring us." His commanding voice boomed.

On his back, he had a lute and on his hip, a rapier. The mail shirt he was wearing had a strange shimmer about it.

All of his gear was giving off a glow that wasn't merely light reflecting but magic. Apparently, they were all first-rate magic items—especially the lute, which was supposedly called Star Symphony.

Seeing him so filled with confidence, Jircniv recalled his self of several months ago and felt a bit envious.

"You're the greatest adventurer team in the country, so I've heard much about you. The story of how you defeated Radiant Crawler was simply thrilling. So, of course, I feel as though I know each of you very well. But in any case, can I get the heroes of the nation to introduce themselves from their own mouths?"

"Then since I'm a bard, I'll make the—"

"Would you cut that out? Hearing that from you gives me gooseflesh. The sparkling blade and whatnot... please don't. Oh, my apologies, Your Imperial Majesty. I'm not from anywhere very respectable, so I don't have much way with words, but please forgive me."

The man to the right of Freiwaltz took a step forward and bobbed his head.

He was small statured and had his hair cut very short. His mouth was smiling, but his eyes, which were too small for his head, weren't as friendly. He was Keila no Södersten, a fixer, which was a thief-type class.

Not much was known about the fixer class, so many points were unclear, but they were most likely further underground than thieves, lurking in the darkness more like assassins.

When Jircniv told the slightly bowing man that he didn't need to worry about it, Baswood barked a short laugh.

"Ha-ha. The emperor has been trained on me, so he'll be fine."

"Oh, who's this? Lightning, of the Four? Are you by any chance from the same thereabouts?"

"Hmm? No, probably somewhere else. I come from a dirty back alley, but I bet you're from somewhere rougher."

"So it seems. I do get different vibes from you... Well, that was rude. Sorry to jump to conclusions."

"No worries, Dark Cloud."

"I don't remember introducing myself as Dark Cloud... Agh, this is all your fault."

When he glared over at Freiwaltz, the leader made his lips pouty. "If you're going to be getting weird nicknames, maybe you should lead. Excuse me, Your Majesty. This is the eyes and ears of our time, Söder. Next, I'll introduce our warrior. You may be surprised by his appearance, but of his abilities, I can assure you."

"No, the emperor has no doubt. He looks stronger than me!"

"I'm glad to hear such a strong guy say that. The name's Fahn Longuu."

The one who was introduced was a monkey with bright-red hair who stood about five and a half feet tall. He wore armor that seemed to be made out of white animal skins and had a well-used battle-ax on each hip.

He was a subhuman race called a monkey, and in the report, it had noted that of the warrior-type-class beastlords, who harbored spirits of forest animals, he was one who possessed ape powers. Still, the shock of actually meeting him was quite intense.

And though he looked like this, he was stronger than Baswood, the strongest person in Jircniv's party?

Fahn Longuu raised his right hand in greeting.

"Uh, okay. Next is our healer."

A bit flustered, Freiwaltz introduced the next member. Perhaps he thought Jircniv would be displeased.

This time the man on Freiwaltz's left took a step forward.

"Pardon me." The strange staff in his hand made a jangling sound. Apparently, it was called a Priest of Buddhjin's Staff. "My priest name is Unkei. I believe in Buddhjin. I hope everything will go smoothly."

He was clad in strange clothes, but they were more civilized than the beastlord's outfit.

On his head was a big hat—yet again strange—made of woven bamboo grass. He had no hair underneath. If Jircniv didn't know he had shaved it, he would have turned a compassionate eye on him. *And so young...*

This man, wearing combat gear seen only very rarely in the empire, a kasaya, was a type of faith caster who, while perhaps a bit forced as a healer, was adept at fighting undead—a priest of Buddhjin.

This Buddhjin was a relatively minor deity with believers rather a ways to the south and said to be subordinate to the Four Gods. Jircniv was slightly embarrassed that he didn't realize there was a shrine to Buddhjin in the empire, but apparently it was causing trouble.

Generally, healing magic was managed by the shrines, and the prices were set. So how to deal with someone who didn't fit into that system at all and had their own healing magic? Especially if that person was an adamantite-plate adventurer?

There were no close ties between politics and religion in the empire. Jircniv felt lucky it had nothing to do with him.

He didn't want to get embroiled in any more trouble than he already was.

Still, it was true that when he had investigated the feats they could perform, he was captivated by the mention of their outstanding ability to combat undead. Maybe it was necessary to put some pressure on the shrines. Of course, first he would have to see whether the man's powers were truly useful or not.

"I see. Then the last one is Powapon?"

"That's right, Your Majesty."

When Freiwaltz introduced him, someone even weirder—perhaps the most unusual-

looking one of them all—bowed.

Maybe because he had acquired the eccentric class of totem shaman, his tanned upper body was bare with a mysterious white pattern scrolled across it.

“...You’re not cold?”

“I have a magic item equipped that protects me from temperature fluctuations, so it’s no problem at all.”

Jircniv was inwardly surprised to get such a normal answer. The document had mentioned his strange appearance and also that he was a decent person. Still, the gap caught him off guard. When he took a closer look, he noticed the man had a fairly nice face and didn’t seem terribly old.

Half of Jircniv wanted to know why he had chosen to throw himself into this class, and the other half didn’t.

He took in Argenti.

It was a weird team made up of weird members. The only thing they had in common were the feathers decorating various parts of their gear—for the totem shaman, only around his loins—from the Argenti bird the team used to keep.

The feathers sparkled such a brilliant silver that it seemed like they had been plucked mere moments ago.

“Understood, gentlemen. Thanks for your help today.”

“Leave everything to us, Your Majesty. You’re in good hands.”

Hearing that from Freiwaltz, Jircniv had to stop himself from wincing and then strode on ahead. But...

“Could you wait a moment, Your Majesty?” Söder stopped him in a flat voice. “We were hired to protect you, so we’d like you to not walk out front, if that’s all right with you.”

“It’s not about what’s all right with me. I did hire you for that purpose, so if you think that’s what I should do, then I’ll comply, and that’s that. Also, if you ever think these men’s abilities would be useful, feel free to use them as you would—although I would

appreciate it if you didn't take them too far away from me."

"Hooey, we've come up in the world if we get to give orders to members of the Four. But you two don't need to leave the emperor's side. As long as you follow our instructions and escape or run on ahead if something comes up, then you're fine. All right, leader, a song if you please."

"Got it. Your Majesty, I apologize that Söder's mouth is so rough around the edges. I don't mean to repeat myself, but..."

"It's nothing to worry about. Although in public it could be a problem."

Perhaps his feelings got through? Freiwaltz bobbed his head. It seemed to mean that he would have the man consider the time and place before speaking.

Then he sang a song. No, it was less like a song than a collection of mysterious sounds. That is, despite being able to hear it, Jircniv couldn't understand it. The song was only a few seconds long, but its impact remained awfully strong. When it was over, Freiwaltz began to move.

The description would probably be something like *sway* or *slither*, but either way, it was a movement that would have been impossible for Jircniv.

"Okay, please follow ten yards behind."

The party set off after following Söder's instructions. Jircniv asked Freiwaltz next to him about the song.

"What in the world was that?"

"You aren't familiar, Your Majesty?"

"It's a bard skill called an intonation. Some perform them with instruments, but I can get the effects by singing."

"So that's what it was..." Jircniv murmured, and Freiwaltz smiled. Then Jircniv remembered something he'd been meaning to investigate but never had the time to, and it seemed like a good chance, so he decided to ask. "...There's something I want to ask you. Can intonations manipulate people?"

"There's one called Suggestion that I think would do it. It has the same effects as the magic spell. Some others like Charm Person can to some extent as well."

Jircniv exchanged glances with Baswood. "I see... Is that right...?"

"Yes, it must be that."

So was it a monster that could use bard abilities? Or...?

"So do you know anything about frog-like monsters?"

He couldn't say for sure that some monsters weren't born with that sort of ability. It was important to clarify that first.

"Frog-like? You mean like giant toads?"

"No, not like that. More intelligent. A monster that walks on two legs and can activate something like an intonation instantaneously."

"...Maybe a toadman? A toadman bard would fit those parameters... but I didn't get the feeling toadmen were very accomplished subhumans. Apparently, when a chief-level toadman gets older, he gains the ability to confuse enemies with a special call."

Confusion was a bit different from what Jircniv was thinking.

He had read about toadmen in a book before, and he had the feeling Demiurge looked quite a bit different from them. He couldn't rule out that he was a variety of a lord, but it seemed more likely that he was something else.

"It seems like you must be thinking of something else. My apologies, Your Majesty. I don't have enough information. If you can give me any more details, I might be able to come up with the answer."

That was just what he was hoping for.

"Oh? Then I'll give you a detailed description of his appearance, so can you lend me your knowledge? Or could you tell me more about intonations?"

There couldn't be anyone in the empire more knowledgeable about them than this adamantite adventurer.

"Your Majesty, isn't that asking a bit much? That's how a bard makes their living."

But he chuckled at Baswood's concern. "No, no, I can't talk about my ace move, but it's no problem to teach you the ordinary things. But... wouldn't it be better for you to ask the great caster? I'm sure he knows more than I do..."

At the mention of Fluder, Jircniv endeavored to keep his expression steady.

Jircniv had a gag order out about Fluder's betrayal, so not a word had spread outside. For the time being, he was keeping him on as principal wizard, gradually robbing him of his powers when he wasn't looking and groping for a way to compensate.

The size of the hole to fill showed him just how much the empire benefitted from Fluder, but it was too late.

"I can't rely on that old fellow for everything. It's like doing your homework as a student. Just because you have a great teacher doesn't mean you should wait to ask them the answers—you'll get an earful."

A few people laughed at his remark.

"You're exactly right, Your Majesty. Understood. I was just thinking the payment for this job was too high for what it is. I'll tell you a little about intonations later on."

"Oh? That would be great."

There were multiple box seats at the arena—for wealthy people who donated to the management of the arena, for high-ranking nobles, and for the emperor. They went straight toward the emperor's box. Perhaps they had checked the place out ahead of time? Söder proceeded without needing to ask for directions.

Soon they came to a point where the door was just around the corner, but Söder held out a palm to stop Jircniv.

"There don't seem to be any people around, but I'll go on ahead just in case, so can you all wait here by this corner?"

He spoke low and didn't wait for an answer before moving quickly down a corridor. Curious, Jircniv poked his head out and took a look.

Having reached the door without making a sound, Söder did something, and the door cracked open. It scarcely seemed open at all, but apparently it was enough for the fixer to slip through, and he disappeared inside.

In less than a minute, the door opened wide to reveal Söder's face.

"All clear. This room is safe."

Everyone moved into the room that had passed the safety check.

Jircniv looked around.

It was a bit small, but the elegant furnishings were all pieces of the highest quality, and everything was immaculate despite the fact that he almost never came here.

There was a large opening in the wall of the arena, so they had a full view of the scene below. When he took a glance, he saw that everyone in the packed seats was going wild.

The reason so many people had come out was that a martial king match had been scheduled at short notice.

The king of the arena—the martial king—was so strong that a proper match couldn't be found for him. For that reason, it had been quite a while since he had fought.

The stands were overflowing with people eager to see how he would perform.

*Certainly, many people admire the power on display. And since we have professional soldiers, the battlefield is another world to civilians. That must be why they're able to enjoy death matches as spectacle.*

*No, I've heard that even some knights enjoy going to the arena.*

*So is it about expressing and liberating your savage nature?*

While Jircniv was absentmindedly pondering those things, Argenti had finished their search of the room.

"Any sign of any intelligence spells or the like being activated?"

“We found nothing, Your Majesty. Right?”

“You got it. First, it’s hard for me to tell if something has been cast or not, so I had them check to see if there were any magic items around. And there weren’t any! But there’s one thing I want you to remember, and that’s that I don’t have as good of examination skills as a thief. Please don’t assume we’re perfectly fine... Although, I did have our leader boost my detection abilities with an intonation, so we’re probably okay, but you know.”

“As far as magic, I used a detection spell, and there was no sign of anything being cast. I put up detection obstruction, so it doesn’t seem like we’ll have any issues.” Unkei struck his staff against the floor and it jangled refreshingly.

“Then can I request something else? Is there a spell we can use to detect anyone approaching? Something you know is there even if it’s invisible would be great.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any spells like that. I’m fairly certain our leader does, though.”

When the ball landed in his court, Freiwaltz made an *okay* sign and left the room.

“What else? If someone tries to listen in, what kind of countermeasures come to mind?”

Jircniv thought frantically about what Ainz Ooal Gown might be capable of. Frankly, he couldn’t imagine the unimaginable. As a result, it was practically impossible to underestimate him.

“...Honestly, I think with all we’ve done, we’ll be fine. We’ve already got multiple spells protecting you.”

“He’s right, Your Majesty. I’ve also cast Obstruct Detection, so I’ll be notified immediately if anyone tries to investigate us using magic. Please don’t worry.”

Söder and Unkei soothed him in turn.

They probably thought he was a touch paranoid. Or maybe they thought he was nervous because he sensed an assassin.

But he was very curious how the pair would react when he told them they were up

against the King of Darkness. Would they understand that no matter how cautious they were, it could never be enough? Or would they say they couldn't do a job like this for so little money?

The best for him would be if they knew nothing about the King of Darkness and just did their best to handle the job.

But though he had restrictions on King of Darkness-related matters in place, it was impossible to keep sixty thousand mouths shut.

It had to have leaked already. In that case, he heard that the higher the rank of the adventurers, the more regularly they collected information, so there was a good chance these guys already knew how powerful the King of Darkness was.

*Plus, I don't like the idea of anyone figuring me out.*

Having thought all that, Jircniv smiled vaguely to gloss over it.

The pair seemed to think they had convinced him, and it looked unlikely that they would say any more.

An even larger roar went up from the stands.

When he took a look, it seemed the fight between two swordsmen had been decided.

In the old days, the loser would be put to death, but now, though people sometimes died during matches, they were never killed after the outcome was decided.

The rule was said to have been abolished after a swordsman, who just happened to be saved during a losing streak because he was fun to watch, ended up awakening his abilities and becoming champion. Apparently, it was thought that there could be more like him.

*What number martial king was he? He wasn't as strong as the current king, but he was still something. I need to think of a way to bring powerful people who have no intention of belonging to a nation into my corner...*

"Anyhow, we're done, Your Majesty."

He turned around at the sound of Freiwaltz's voice. "Thanks."

Since he was dealing with adamantite-plate adventurers, he felt he should probably express a bit more gratitude, but his usual terse appreciation had already slipped out.

"It was nothing. Then regarding our escort duties, do you mind if we stand by in this room?"

He had hired them as bodyguards. With that in mind, it was an utterly obvious suggestion.

But could he have private talks with them around?

There were plenty of pros to getting them involved, but once they learned his aim, there was a risk he would end up making enemies of people he should definitely not make enemies of.

*Still, they're nothing compared to hi— What am I thinking? Being fine with that monster as an enemy is proof I've gone insane... Only a fool would make any more enemies at this point.*

Jircniv shook his head.

"Unfortunately, this is a very important meeting. I can't have you in the room."

"It will be awfully difficult to protect you if we're not in the room, Your Majesty..."

"I trust these two, and they'll be here with me. I'm sure they would be able to buy time until you arrive."

"Well, that's true." It was the gibbon, who had been silent until now, who spoke. "But if your opponent was an assassin on par with Söder, you might be in trouble."

"Someone on par with me? Like the little lady from Ijaniya. She uses ninjutsu, so she pounces at you from the shadows."

"Your two warriors will be unbeatable against an opponent who relies on a sword. But what about magic? I can't help but be anxious about that scenario. Besides, I think we would be so absorbed by the match that we wouldn't have any interest in your meeting."

They all tried to persuade him, but after having gone this far to avoid any leaks, he

couldn't accept their proposal.

"Your worries are valid. But as the emperor, I mustn't yield on this point."

The eyes of Argenti gathered on their leader. He heaved a sigh.

"Then I suppose we have no choice. As the emperor, you must have conversations we can't be privy to. Very well—we'll be on watch outside. Could you tell us what sort of people will be coming?"

"That's a natural question. But you fellows didn't see anything. Got it?"

"Of course. No matter who comes, that information will never spill from our lips. And if it does leak, we'll take responsibility and handle it."

"Then I'll trust you. It's the high priest of the fire shrine and the high priest of the wind shrine, plus four priests who will probably accompany them."

"I see. Then if anyone else arrives, we'll be on our guard."

"Yes, that's what I would like from you. This guest box is somewhat removed from the others. No one should end up here 'lost.'"

"Understood... And, Your Majesty, do you mind if we break the lock on the door?"

"If you think it's necessary, go ahead and do it."

Fahn strode forward. The handles of his battle-axes were creaking with a sound that a human grip would never produce. Jircniv felt that kind of force might be a bit overkill for just breaking the lock, but he was no warrior, so he couldn't say anything.

But his two knights were whispering to each other enough that it bothered him.

Fahn slowly lifted the battle-axes over his head.

"Oh, don't break the door!"

At Freiwaltz's shout, Fahn paused.

Jircniv couldn't help but shift his eyebrows.

“...Why not? We aren’t going with the ‘Sorry, I was going to break the lock, but I accidentally broke the door, too, so we’ll just stay in here with you’ plan?”

“No, not this time. I don’t want to get involved in messy politics.”

“Me neither. I have no interest in being any more suspect in the eyes of the shrines.”

“Got it. Then this should be enough.”

A battle-ax glided down to strike the lock, easily breaking it.

Was he supposed to be disgusted? Or offended? There were surely many reactions to choose from, but Jircniv was impressed. *Just what I’d expect from adamantite adventurers*, he thought.

Not that the battle-ax had broken the lock like nothing but that they had the guts to talk like that in front of the nation’s highest authority. And the arrogance it took to ignore the client’s wishes, even if the client was the emperor, in order to do their best job possible.

Those were things Jircniv had lost.

“...Maybe I should drag these guys deep into a political mess. So deep and sticky they can’t escape.”

The moment he murmured that, the members of Argenti ran out the door as fast as fleeing rabbits. Their movements seemed to have been prearranged.

The three left in the room looked at one another.

“That was amazing. Being able to move as one like that without saying a word is just... Well, it’s as expected, isn’t it? They’re adamantite precisely because they can move like that.”

“...I’m not sure what to say, but I think we admire them for slightly different reasons... Your Majesty, shall I prepare beverages?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Will you do that?”

“Understood. You too, Sir Baswood.”

At the suggestion that he help prep, Baswood made a sour face. “Huh? Me too? Your Majestyyyy. See, shouldn’t you have brought along at least one maid? The drinks will taste better if a girl pours them instead of us grimy old men. At least, they definitely would for me.”

“Yes, yes, that’s enough whining. Get twice as busy with actual drink prep now, Sir Baswood.”

“I’m counting on you, Baswood. There’s no sense in worrying about what we lack. We have to make do with what we’ve got. It’s the same as the empire’s current situation.”

“That comparison is no good, Your Majesty,” Baswood said as he got to work.

They could hear the cheers from the arena below, and a war cry that was a bit different from a beast’s went up.

It seemed as though the next match had begun.

Jircniv searched his memories.

The match before the one with the martial king would be adventurers versus a monster. When adventurers were in the arena, the fights were often flashier due to bursts of magic, so they were popular with the crowd.

Looking down at his enthusiastic subjects, Jircniv remarked, “This is what peace looks like.”

“You think so, Your Majesty?”

He was talking to himself, so he hadn’t expected a reply. When he turned to look, it was Baswood standing there. Nimble was behind him with a disapproving face, doing enough work for the both of them.

“It doesn’t seem very peaceful to me—look.”

One of the adventurers took a beast claw, and blood sprayed into the air. The crowd’s shrieks and cheers grew louder.

“It’s not about the match but the audience.” Jircniv gazed at the roaring spectators. “Isn’t this quite peaceful compared to what’s going on in the empire right now? I just

think, if they knew that a monster was lurking just beneath the surface, would they be able to enjoy this as much?"

"Isn't it fine that it's peaceful? Giving all the people stomach pains wouldn't get us anywhere, would it?"

Baswood was right.

Jircniv regretted being so petty.

"It's just as you say, Baswood. Now then, our guests will be here soon. Are we about ready?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. *Someone* didn't help me at all, so I wasn't sure I would make it in time, but the drinks and papers are all ready. We also have plenty of ink."

They had prepared such a surprising amount of documentation as a precaution against anyone listening in. The cheers were loud and there were no adjacent rooms, so there was only a handful of ways to spy on them, but extra caution never hurt.

He knew it was a pain. He had done it in the palace, and it was exhausting.

All of these complications stemmed from the fact that the Nation of Darkness's power was an unknown.

Once he knew what it could and couldn't do, he could change their countermeasures accordingly.

The scheme to investigate it during the war had borne painful results and caused a tragedy. But that didn't mean he could give up. If he didn't come up with a new plan and look into things in a safer way than the previous time, he would be jumping at his enemy's shadow forever. And not only that, he would be driven into a situation where he jumped at shadows and abandoned even a good plan.

But he still couldn't forget that awful feeling.

"If we could just figure out Ainz Ooal Gown's—the King of Darkness's—limits. Then maybe we wouldn't need to do so much prep work."

Back then, he had been able to make requests as a supporter, but now that they were

both rulers, it was practically impossible to ask anything of him. Or rather, he could, but when he thought that there was no telling what would be demanded in return, his head hurt.

“It’s not only the King of Darkness, Your Majesty. Don’t we need to figure out what his retainers are capable of, too?”

“Right.”

“...There’s no way his subordinates would be more powerful than him, right?”

“Ha, I think not,” was Jircniv’s answer, but as he said it, he broke out in a cold sweat.

Considering the fact that he had the Four, who were much stronger than him, as subordinates, there was no way he could say he thought not. What the one on top needed wasn’t simple brawn but something else.

So what if that went for Ainz Ooal Gown as well?

“No, it couldn’t be. Listen, Nimble. Your thinking is flawed. Got it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty! Do excuse me.”

If that was the truth, they would be done for. He wanted them to at least be equal, but he would pray to the gods if the subordinates could be lesser.

He really didn’t have enough information.

*Maybe we should move ahead with the plan to get intelligence out of that dark elf girl despite the danger. I’ll talk to the Theocracy about importing a ton of elves and use those, too, somehow... And what about that boy Aura? Nah, he’s still such a child, I doubt he’s interested in women. Besides, he seems pretty aggressive.*

Just as Jircniv was settling into some lengthy contemplation, there was a knock on the door.

As expected, it was Freiwaltz.

“Your guests have arrived, Your Majesty. Six in all. I’ve met the high priests before, so I’m sure it’s them.”

“Then let them in—”

As he said that, he heard Söder’s challenging voice from the open door.

“Oops, not so fast. You fellows in the rear. The numbers are as expected, but a couple of you smell like me. I’ve heard of disciplinary squads belonging to shrines—for rubbing out priests who break the precepts—but I thought they were a rumor.”

“I’m surprised, too.”

“Who do you guys work for?”

“Oh, brother, what’s all this? You could have just let us through... For starters, you seem to have misunderstood something, but I—we were invited here by His Imperial Majesty with proper reason. If you show us hostility, you’ll only be displeasing him.”

“Hmm. Then how about you wait right there a minute. I’ll ask him if what you’re saying is true or not.”

When Jircniv poked his head out, he saw the high priests of the fire and water shrines, plus four others he didn’t know. They wore deep hoods that hid their faces; nothing could have been shadier.

Since it was his first time meeting them, there was no way to know if they were really from the Theocracy or not. But the high priests were there, and if he didn’t trust them, the conversation wouldn’t even get off the ground. If they argued and everything fell through, the only one who would be happy was the King of Darkness.

“These are the people I was waiting for. Sorry, but could you let them in?”

The members of Argenti looked suspicious, but they let everyone through right away.

Even once the door was shut, his guests didn’t remove their hoods.

Jircniv couldn’t comment on that breach of etiquette. They were probably on guard just as he was—against the King of Darkness, of course.

“I’m terribly sorry my guards caused you trouble.”

“You needn’t worry. And actually, those two are just as the adamantite adventurers

said."

Two messengers from the Theocracy took seats, while the two in back remained standing.

Jircniv wrote "scripture" on a piece of paper with the pen in his hand. The slight smile in reply said more loudly than words that he was correct. The Theocracy was said to have special ops units called "scriptures." It had to be members of one of those six groups.

"Now then, more importantly, let's enjoy the match. The main fight should be starting soon, right?"

Jircniv nodded.

The main event meant the audience would be at peak excitement, totally worked up. That would make it extremely difficult to listen in on their conversation, hence the choice of this time and place for their meeting.

The messenger seated next to Jircniv reached into his breast pocket, took out a letter, and handed it to him.

Jircniv unfolded the letter slightly, taking care that no one could peek from the side or behind him. There were questions written on it.

The gist of it was: *Why did you ask the King of Darkness to use a spell like that?*

Next was about the empire's position going forward.

*How much intelligence do you have on the Nation of Darkness?*

It was written politely, but in essence, they were grilling him.

Was the reason they had brought it here instead of sending it ahead of time that the Theocracy was also wary of how far the King of Darkness's reach might extend? Or that they didn't trust the empire?

Jircniv was mildly offended, but considering the empire's relationship with the Nation of Darkness so far, it was only natural that the Theocracy would have trouble trusting it.

As Jircniv was about to write his reply, a cheer louder than the rest sounded. It seemed like the match had begun.

"His Imperial Majesty Emperor El Nix will be watching the main event today. Everyone, please turn your attention to the box seat up above."

The announcer's voice boomed via magic item amplification.

"Excuse me for a moment."

Jircniv stood to show his face to the crowd below.

All his subjects cheered for him at once. A gentle smile graced his regular features as he raised a hand in reply. Women sent up shrill cries. Jircniv was satisfied that his popularity hadn't waned.

"Thank you! Now then, everyone, the first martial king match in quite some time is about to begin. It seems to be taking a little while to get ready, so please be patient a bit longer!"

"The martial king..." Jircniv murmured.

Once he asked Baswood what would happen if all of the Four challenged the martial king. Baswood laughed and said they didn't have a chance. The answer disturbed him, so he had Fluder collect information about the fighter. What he learned was that the martial king was so strong, it was unfair.

"Your Majesty, who is even facing him?"

The messenger asked a natural question. And actually, Jircniv didn't have the answer to it.

"I don't know, either. Apparently, this match got set up quite suddenly. They seem to have kept it secret to make an even bigger splash, and it's not even on the program."

"I see," said the messenger.

"Well, I'm sure that to go up against the martial king one-on-one, it would have to be an adamantite-plate adventurer. But the members of Argenti are here. Is it someone from the Eight Ripples? Honestly, I'm hard-pressed to approve of precious adamantite

adventurers participating in a death match spectacle.”

“I can’t deny that, but power is alluring. This is the prime place to put power gone wild on display and inspire people to dream of being so strong one day themselves.”

The one who interjected was the high priest in service of the fire god—the supreme authority in the empire for fire god believers.

“That’s true, but considering the empire’s current situation, I’m not sure if doing something that could result in weakened fighting power is the smartest move... The martial king is the strongest person in the empire. Couldn’t we get him involved somehow?”

“...I didn’t expect that coming from you gentlemen.”

The Slane Theocracy was a nation that valued humans. No, it was probably more accurate to say they didn’t accept any other races.

In this world with its diversity of races, that they could maintain their country despite other countries knowing that factor was impressive. Or was a single race a condition for building a powerful nation?

“I was just suggesting an idea personally. The country has nothing to do with it. That’s enough chitchat, then. May we have your answers, Your Majesty?”

“Yeah. An—”

“All right, sorry to keep you waiting, everyone. The challenger is about to enter the arena!”

Jircniv had taken up a pen to write an answer to the first question, but his hand stopped—because he was curious about who was brave enough to challenge the martial king. If he was accepted as a challenger, it meant they could at least expect a good fight. Was there even anyone left in the empire like that?

If it was someone valuable who felt like serving the empire, he would be fine hiring them even if they lost. He might be fine giving them the slot in the Four that opened up with the loss of Unshakable.

“...I’m sure many of you have heard whispers of our challenger’s name. And now he’s

here! The king of the Nation of Darkness, His Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown!"

"Huh?" Jircniv yelped idiotically without thinking.

It was like the meaning of the MC's words had passed straight through his head.

As the arena descended into confusion, the noble box was silent.

Jircniv looked around to confirm that everyone had heard the same thing that he did.

"Ainz Ooal Gown?"

*It can't be.*

Of course it couldn't. A king would never appear in combat at another country's arena. Anyone with common sense knew that as the obvious truth. Ainz Ooal Gown wasn't some savage.

In the first place, he'd been keeping a close eye on the Nation of Darkness's movements. If the King of Darkness entered the empire, alerting Jircniv had been designated as a top-priority matter. Whether he was in the inner palace or whatever state he was in, arrangements had been made to get word to him.

So then why hadn't he heard anything?

*Did he enter the country in secret? Would he do that? And show up at the arena? What is he thinking— Huh? It couldn't be. Could it? Of all the... ridiculous...*

Jircniv shuddered.

Then, moving just his eyes, he looked at the messenger from the Theocracy.

Their eyes were sharp beneath their hood. There was only one thing that gaze could mean. Well, if their positions were reversed, he would have arrived at the same conclusion.

They thought Jircniv was the one who called the King of Darkness here.

"Wait! This is a trap."

Yes.

This was a conspiracy orchestrated by Ainz Ooal Gown. He had to get them to understand—no, come to terms with—that fact, or he was in trouble.

"The Nation of Darkness's? Or? You're the one who chose the location, Your Majesty. And we only learned it a few hours ago."

That was true. He had waited to the last minute to avoid leaks.

Jircniv frantically tried to think who knew. There were extremely few. All people he could trust—or could he?

*Agh...*

"It's possible someone was manipulated for information using magic. This definitely isn't my scheme. As proof, why would I be so panicked if this was something I planned?!"

"You expect us to believe that? You didn't mean to get us caught in the cross fire? Or have you sold us out?"

He couldn't get them to trust him at all.

Well, of course he couldn't. If their positions were reversed, he would be just as accusing.

*But how did the info leak? Or wait, did it? Maybe this is all according to his plan? He put out the bait and waited for me to bite...?*

Chills ran down his spine.

How far ahead had the King of Darkness read his moves?

There was a good chance that everything from the beginning until now was part of his calculations.

*That's the sort of opponent the King of Darkness is,* was the answer Jircniv's intelligent

mind gave.

*How far does this plan of his go? No, this is no time to be terrified of his plot. I've got to hurry!*

"This is bad. We need to get ou—"

But it was too late.

The intruder's voice sounded. It was a voice like a hunter glad to see his prey caught in the trap he set.

"Sir Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix. Long time no see."

When he turned around, desperately trying to get his breathing under control, the King of Darkness had risen from the center of the arena to the level of the guest box.

The reason he had revealed his horrifying face had to be to prove it was really him.

"Yhez, id—phew. Yes, it has, Sir Gown. I never imagined we would meet in a place like this..."

He didn't know what to say. The feeling that anything he said would be taken as a commitment made his lips as impossible to open as if they had been glued shut.

"I thought the same thing. Coincidences sure are astounding." He snickered with a sinister smile. It was clear that he didn't believe it to be a coincidence in any way.

*There's no doubt about it.*

Jircniv was sure. This was all part of Ainz Ooal Gown's plot.

He was putting pressure on Jircniv by occupying the site of the secret meeting with the Theocracy while at the same time preventing the two countries from joining forces and putting pressure on the Theocracy as well.

He was a monster of a genius.

Jircniv wiped the sweat from his hands on his clothes.

*There has to be a fairly extensive leak of empire intelligence. So how much does he know?*

Jircniv frantically spun the wheels of his brain, and the horrifying light in the King of Darkness's orbits shifted to the messenger from the Theocracy.

"Are those acquaintances of yours, Your Majesty?"

Ainz's question rendered Jircniv speechless.

This was no simple question.

It was a test.

*Should I lie and protect the Theocracy? Or should I take the King of Darkness's side and sell them out?*

It was so crafty, it made him feel sick.

He had the feeling the expressionless skull face was warped in a wicked way. Jircniv being unable to open his mouth probably amused him.

"What is it, Sir El Nix—er, Sir Jircniv? You've gone a bit pale. Are you not feeling well?"

It was creepy—and terrifying—because it sounded like he actually cared. It was only natural as a human being to be frightened of that sense of someone gleefully cuddling a small animal writhing in their grip.

"N-no. I'm fine. Just a bit of a head rush."

"I see. Your body is your capital asset. Take care of it."

He must have gone along with it even though Jircniv's excruciating excuse failed because he was waiting for the right moment to nail his prey. Or did he have a torture fetish? Or...

"Could you introduce them? I'm Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness."

*So he wanted to say that?*

Once a country's king had introduced himself, it was impossible to leave the room

without another word. If he gave fake names, how would the king react if he knew their real identities?

*Stop toying with me!*

It was like his expression didn't move at all. Or rather, since he had neither skin nor flesh, his face was all bone. On top of that, he didn't have any eyes, just red flames flickering deep in his skull. There was no way to grasp his emotions. But Jircniv just knew that his sinister smile had grown even harder.

"Thank you. Normally, I would introduce myself, but a matter of some urgency requires me to leave just now. I'm sure His Imperial Majesty will be kind enough to tell you who we are." The messenger from the Theocracy rose.

"I see. That's an awful shame. I hope to meet you again sometime, then. Take care until then... Well, I have a match, so I should get going, too."

With those no doubt sarcastic parting remarks, the King of Darkness floated down.

When the king could no longer be seen, the Theocracy's messenger turned a sharp gaze on Jircniv.

"You set us up, didn't you?"

"N-no, I didn't!"

"What didn't you do? No matter how you look at it, he seems to have known who we are. He was obviously mocking us for operating as expected... How much did you tell him? How much did you sell in order to protect your own country? Is it true that you requested that violently destructive spell?"

Jircniv looked to the high priests for assistance.

The emotions in their eyes weren't confusion and doubt but hostility and disappointment.

This was the King of Darkness's most effective attack, perfectly timed. It gave the empire a thorough beating—brought it to its knees. It showed Jircniv and his nation that they had no choice but to betray humanity.

"Please believe me. I honestly didn't tell him anything."

"...Even if we believe you, it doesn't change the fact that there was obviously a huge leak. It's a shame, Your Imperial Majesty. I suppose we shan't meet again."

With that, the messenger from the Theocracy took their leave. And the high priests followed.

"Wait! I forbid you from leaving this room until I've heard your thoughts!"

Nimble and Baswood leaped into action with their hands on their weapons.

Jircniv roused his crushed heart and stared down the two high priests.

The Slane Theocracy messenger left without even turning around.

"You two, tell me what the shrines think. What do they think about the King of Darkness?"

"...The King of Darkness is an evil undead, and we can't allow him to be acknowledged as a king." Before Jircniv could get a word in edgewise, the high priest of the fire god continued. "But we can't fight that thing and win. So we're trying to find a way to destroy him."

"If you're going to sell us out, then sell us out, Your Majesty. If you've been so charmed by his darkness..." The high priest of wind's comment showed that they were completely against Jircniv.

This was extremely bad.

The shrines didn't stick their necks into politics. But they might try to banish an emperor who joined forces with one of their archenemies, the undead.

He couldn't purge them. The shrines were the people's mental salvation and also administered medical treatment.

If he purged them, the empire would collapsed from the inside out.

The blow Ainz Ooal Gown had struck might as well have been the god of death striking with his scythe for how frightened Jircniv was. Even if that guy did nothing else, the

empire was on its way to collapse. Then he would fabricate some reason and show up after the fact.

If it were Jircniv, he probably would use an excuse like, *Our friend and neighbor is in trouble, so we'll move in our army to keep the peace.*

Judging from the messenger's reaction before, the Slane Theocracy probably wouldn't even condemn the Nation of Darkness if it did something like that. The Re-Estize Kingdom certainly didn't have the extra energy. And the city-state alliance would need time in order to come out against it.

*What could I offer them to assuage their suspicions—no, more like swallow their doubt and promise to cooperate?*

Jircniv had this on his mind no matter whom he was talking to. The easiest way to shift someone's feelings was to stimulate their desire. He knew quite well from his life so far that that was true. He had seen enough people with pretty faces smeared with greed underneath.

But at this moment, he couldn't think of an answer.

There was no benefit he could offer to break through this situation of them thinking he betrayed humanity to team up with an undead.

So the only thing he could do was speak sincerely from his heart.

"Please let me say just one thing. His plot goes beyond me. All of this is happening according to his plan... If I were in your position, I probably wouldn't be able to believe me, either, but... I really didn't sell any intelligence. And you may not believe this, but I'd like to warn you: The King of Darkness's rule is merciful. The people of E-Rantel are living in peace."

"But we don't know how long that will continue."

"Perhaps not. But they're safe right now. If we try to fight with no chance of winning, our country will go straight down the path to ruin. So I'd ask that you avoid doing anything too hastily."

The two high priests looked at each other.

And when they turned back to Jircniv, the hostility in their eyes had lessened.

“...It seems we got a little emotional. Certainly from the rumors we heard, it’s impossible to rule out that everything was part of that undead’s conspiracy. Let’s meet again sometime.”

“Thank you. And before that, I have one favor to ask of you. I want you to watch his fight in the arena. And if you can think of a way to defeat him, tell me.”

Jircniv bowed.

He couldn’t win against Ainz with conspiracies and other strategizing. If they were going to fight on an equal footing at all, the human spirit was probably their trump card.

A cheer went up from below and Jircniv looked over.

“...Do your utmost, martial king. Oh gods!” He prayed in all seriousness for the martial king’s victory.

### 3

It had been a while since he had visited the imperial capital.

The scene Ainz could see through the sliver of open window was enough to make him feel defeated.

It was full of life.

The people’s faces were cheerful, and it was noisy—completely different from his own country, where the flame seemed to have gone out.

But the defeat assailing his heart vanished almost immediately. It was only recently that he had taken control of that city. It was only natural that while accepting a new leader, the changes and anxieties would cause a temporary lack of vigor.

Squishy Moe once taught him about strategy games. Apparently, when occupying territory won in a war, the emotional states of the people in the cities dropped precipitously. And then...

*You end up with partisans. I think that's what he said? Why would a bunch of weapons be brought out because of that?*

The first part and the second part didn't seem to have any connection. He had the feeling he was misunderstanding something.

Since the game they were discussing didn't have much to do with *Yggdrasil*, he had only been half listening—that must have been the problem. But there had to be some connection.

*Maybe "end up with" means they sell? Is it some kind of gamer lingo...? Partisan... I know that's a type of polearm. Does lots of weapons selling mean they have a reason to fight, then? The citizens? Hmm? Does it mean they'll fight against this new ruler? Like a civil war? Then why not just say there would be a revolt? Why "partisans"? Well, whatever...*

The reason there wasn't a revolt in E-Rantel must have been that his public safety efforts with the death knight patrols were working. And probably using Momon in the beginning had a major deterrent effect. Or perhaps it was because Ainz was doing good politics.

*The best is if I can rule peacefully. Strangling a chicken that can lay eggs is the height of stupidity. "Sometimes when PKing, you need to return drops so that people don't hold a grudge against you." Right?*

Remembering what was written in *No Fuss PKing*, Ainz realized he was on a tangent and did some course correction.

*Oops, I was thinking about liveliness, right? Well, I'm ruling a single city. And this is the capital of an empire with multiple cities. I can't help it if there's a liveliness disparity. The population is different, too... If the population increased, maybe the Nation of Darkness would be more energetic, too. Maybe I should casually suggest to Albedo the strategy of giving birth, multiplying, and increasing our population.*

Ainz consoled himself and, in a ruler-like way, came up with a new plan.

"U-uh, Your Majesty."

The voice of the man looking out the carriage window like him interrupted Ainz's contemplation.

"E-excuse me, Your Majesty. I believe this is the imperial capital, Arwinthal..." The voice of the man he had practically forced to come with him shook as he spoke.

"Yes, that's right. Just what I'd expect from the Adventurers Guild master. I'm impressed that you knew it on sight."

"Thank you very— Wait! I don't recall going through a checkpoint. Are we entering illegally?"

That was true. He had used Gate to come directly to the capital. They hadn't passed through any checkpoints.

"A trivial matter."

"It is not a trivial matter! It will most certainly be an international issue if a king illegally enters another country!"

He couldn't mention that Jircniv did the same thing when he came to Nazarick. Common sense was on the guild master's side. Ainz was undoubtedly in the wrong.

No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't come up with any way to convince Ainzach. Or rather, he was impressed with how serious he was. He expected him to be the type to say, *As long as we don't get caught*, so he adjusted his appraisal of the man.

"...Guild Master, Sir El Nix and I are on good terms. I was even kind enough to do a favor for him once." Ainz recalled the war. "Not that that's why, but I'm sure he would be kind enough to allow this. It would be an ex post facto approval, but... as long as he allows it, what more do we need?"

"Th—that's true, but..."

"And in the first place, it's not as if you're some sort of illegal import. That means it's no big deal, right?"

"Mmrf." Ainzach couldn't think of anything else to say.

Seeing that he had coaxed him into it, Ainz smiled inwardly.

In truth, he had entered the country in secret on purpose, and there were two reasons for that.

*If Jircniv knew I was coming, he would undoubtedly want to entertain me. No matter how wary of Nazarick he is, outwardly he would have to welcome me as the king of an allied country. But I can't have that.*

Ainz knew nothing of noble society, so he definitely wanted to avoid any kind of ceremony where the emperor welcomed the king of an allied nation.

If he became a laughingstock there, how could he show his face to the guardians working so hard in the Nation of Darkness?

Then there was one other reason.

*I need to think of a way to get Ainzach involved. Would the best be to do like I did at the guild? Talk about dreams and request his cooperation?*

His intention was to force the Adventurers Guild master to get involved.

Ainz was here to recruit adventurers.

He wanted to absorb the guild as an organ of the state. But even if he got the box made, it would take time for it to fill up. That is, the Nation of Darkness had only one city, so the adventurer population was low. With an eye on incorporating lizardmen and other races in the future, he first needed to increase the number of human adventurers.

Hence the scouting. If he didn't have enough adventurers, all he had to do was bring them in from neighboring countries.

But, as everyone knows, recruiting is no easy feat. Especially the type Ainz needed to do: Cold-calling was no different from the toughest types of sales job.

As Ainzach had said, though adventurers were free, in reality they did figure into the national anti-monster defense strategy. Removing them by force would invite an intense backlash from all corners.

Of course, even if the adventurer guilds of all the countries joined forces to resist the Nation of Darkness, Ainz didn't plan on losing. But if that happened, the morale of the adventurers he did have would surely plummet. It was very likely that they would lose

motivation seeing the new organization fighting with their old buddies.

So he wanted to get Ainzach, who knew Ainz's goals and concept, involved and use him as a go-between to smooth things over. If he had told him that in the kingdom, he figured he would have refused to come, so he dragged him along.

He also thought that Ainzach would be able to suggest some good conversation topics.

That was a major business skill. Having something in common with people made it surprisingly simple to get them to pay attention. Ainz—no, Satoru Suzuki had seen his coworkers get a customer on board by being from the same area or rooting for the same sports team.

As Momon, Ainz had gotten to know a fair amount about how adventurers worked. But since he had climbed the ranks in a single bound, he had no knowledge of the struggles they faced—hence putting the guild master, who had been watching adventurers in addition to once climbing the ranks himself, in the middle to foster a sense of familiarity.

In other words, it could be said that the success of his activities in the empire during this trip depended on Ainzach.

*The question is how to get his motivation up...*

If it depended on compensation, he would pay a decent sum, but he didn't think that would work on Ainzach.

“Go.”

When Ainz called to the box seat, the carriage silently began to move. The driver was a Hanzo, a monster over level 80 Ainz had summoned with what little money he had.

Hanzo, one of the most ninja-like humanoid monsters, excelled at discovering clandestine operations. The same level range included monsters such as Kashinkoji, who excelled at illusion; Fuma, who excelled at unarmed combat and special skills; and Tobikato, who excelled at armed combat.

The carriage continued on, and the passenger compartment bumped along—because rather than using an enchanted carriage that might stick out, he had chosen a regular one.

“...So, Your Majesty, King of Darkness. You haven’t told me yet, so may I ask? What are you planning to do now that we’ve arrived in the imperial capital?”

“We talked about my objective in coming here, so you must know.”

“Huh?” Ainzach furrowed his brow.

“To invite adventurers to my country.”

Ainzach’s expression was subdued. He clearly didn’t approve. “...You’re going to recruit adventurers from the empire?”

“That’s right. I’m going to poach adventurers from this country.”

Though it was war, he had just killed an awful lot of Re-Estize soldiers, so it would be difficult to pull adventurers from there. Plus, Albedo was visiting the kingdom; he didn’t want to cause her trouble. If that was the case, then his best option was his ally the empire.

Places that were a bit farther away, such as the city-state alliance, he was gathering information about via Fluder, but he was scared to mess with them without consulting Albedo or Demiurge first.

“How are you thinking to do that? I...” Ainzach took a deep breath. “...Your Majesty, when I encountered your ideas about adventurers, I was deeply impressed. So I would like to cooperate as much as I can. But that might be because I’m really more on the system side of things. Will active adventurers really give up all they’ve been doing until now? Honestly, I think it’s a lot to ask. Especially when it comes to imperial adventurers.”

A refreshing happiness welled up in Ainz’s breast.

*Yes, this is the sort of opinion I wanted to hear.*

There wasn’t anything wrong with the guardians, but since they operated as if everything Ainz said was absolute, he often wondered if he was really giving them the right orders. For that reason, Ainz had been wishing someone would give him negative feedback. Then he would know what he was doing wrong.

Ainz found himself feeling more favorable toward Ainzach.

But he couldn't just be impressed and accept his ideas.

It was a true mystery, but Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness, was considered wise by his subordinates. He couldn't do anything that would ruin that reputation. He didn't want anyone to be disappointed in him.

"...It's strange. When you compare the pros and cons, there seem to be more pros, but it's tricky. I guess I still don't know enough about adventurers."

He was so lucky to have his expressionless face—because no one could tell when he lied. It was the ultimate poker face.

Ainz punctuated their conversation there and looked straight at Ainzach. He wanted to avoid making it seem like he was waiting for his response.

"What would you do? What kind of offer is tempting enough to get an adventurer who has chosen their home base to switch sides?"

"...Your Majesty. Do you need to poach them right away?"

"What?"

"Are you in a hurry to pull adventurers from the imperial capital?"

Ainz put a hand to his chin and thought about it.

If possible, he wanted them right away. But if that wasn't possible, he could be patient. His main goal was to spread the name of the Nation of Darkness far and wide.

"It's true that I'm not in a huge hurry."

"Then perhaps the first thing you should do is build your scaffolding. First, build the organization you spoke of and all the other facilities. Couldn't you make the skin now and worry about the insides later?"

"That's a very good idea. I thought of it, too, but there's one problem. If you don't make it with an estimate of how much will go in, you could end up with a skin that is too big or too small... Can you give me an estimate?"

"Th-that's definitely impossible for me. I don't know the scale of the adventurer

training organization you envision or what proportion of the Nation of Darkness you intend it to be.”

“Yeah. Actually, I’m just feeling my way along. Especially when it comes to— Well, you’ve shown an interest in my plans, but I have no idea how many other adventurers will be moved. That’s why I want to do a test recruitment in the empire—to see what kind of results I get.”

“I see... It’s very impressive, Your Majesty, that you’ve already thought through these things. I’m ashamed of my shallow analysis.”

“No, no. I’m a different type of being from you guys. That’s why I might be mistaken when it comes to human reactions. I might say something that offends someone. If I do, please advise me. I need someone to cooperate with me in that way... Ainzach.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“I hope we can continue working together.”

For a moment, he seemed to be thinking, but then he bowed deeply.

It was a bow just like the ones the guardians of Nazarick made.

Ainz nodded benevolently and reflected on their conversation.

*So does this mean I can leave the enticement of imperial adventurers entirely up to him?*

This was a very important point.

He could give a decent presentation, but he didn’t like them. If there was someone who could do a better job, delegating was the right thing to do. No...

*I shouldn’t toss it all in his lap. At the very least, I should take care of any issues that arise, as his boss...*

As Ainz was resolving not to be a horrible boss, he noticed that Ainzach seemed to be pondering something.

“What is it?”

“...You want to have adventurers explore the unknown, and that’s not only existing adventurers but new ones, too, right, Your Majesty?”

“That’s my intention.”

“As I said before, it might be difficult to poach currently active adventurers. But you might be able to get people who hope to become adventurers interested in going to the Nation of Darkness. You can gather up and raise fledglings.”

Ainz had thought that adventurers didn’t have borders, while people who weren’t adventurers yet still did, but if a man with more knowledge of this world than him said that wasn’t the case, then he supposed it wouldn’t be a problem.

“I see. And how would I do that?”

“People admire the strong. So how about putting your power on display as promotion?”

*How would I do that, though?* thought Ainz.

But promotion was critical. The whole reason he was creating an adventurer guild was to promote the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.

“...To show that I’m strong, maybe I could mimic the things adventurers do?”

Ainz was thinking maybe he could create an empire version of Momon, but Ainzach shook his head.

“Your Majesty, this is the imperial capital. How about showing off your power at the arena?”

“Ooh... Now that seems interesting. Tell me more.”

•

The carriage came to a stop before a huge house.

Ainz had come to the imperial capital once as Momon with Nabe in tow, but he didn’t recall ever seeing a private residence this large. In any case, there weren’t any of that size in E-Rantel.

"This is the arena manager's house? Seems pretty big."

"That's not exactly right," Ainzach replied. "The arena itself belongs to the country. People borrow it to put on shows—more like promoters. This man is one of the most powerful among them."

"I see... Do you know him?"

If he did, that would make things easy, but unfortunately, Ainzach shook his head.

"There are a wide variety of arena shows, so sometimes he has adventurers fight monsters. I've only met him a few times when capturing and delivering monsters."

"I see. But that's useful; I have nothing but gratitude for your connections. Still, what kind of monsters was he after in the E-Rantel area?"

Ainzach frowned. "Apparently, he wanted to capture undead from the Katze Plain. Undead don't require food, so once they're captured, there are no additional costs."

"Oh? I like his way of thinking. He seems to know what's what."

"You think so? I'm not so fond of him... And Your Majesty, I beg your pardon, but we were just talking about members of your kind being captured. That doesn't bother you?"

Ainz looked straight at Ainzach.

*What is this guy talking about?*

"Being undead and all..."

"Ohhh, I see. Well, there are all different kinds of undead. It's not as if I feel like all of them are my brothers."

"Do excuse me, then... What race are you, Your Majesty? If it's not rude to ask, I hope you'll tell me."

"I'm an overlord. Have you heard of them?"

"No, my humble apologies, but in my ignorance, I haven't."

*Well, it makes sense,* thought Ainz.

In *Yggdrasil*, there were all sorts of monster overlords, including overlord wise men, who excelled at magic; overlord chronomasters, who employed special abilities related to time; and overlord generals, who excelled at leading undead armies. Even the weakest of them was level 80.

Ainz had gotten a fair grasp on the average strength here and what people considered powerful were capable of, and with those things in mind, he was sure that the appearance of an overlord would cause quite a panic. Especially since undead didn't age. Unless someone killed it, it would continue to reign over the land, immortal.

And since he hadn't heard any stories like that, he had guessed that there weren't any overlords around.

"I see. I'd like to have adventurers leap into the unknown and gather that sort of information. If there are other overlords out there and they harbor a hatred of the living, they would be pretty problematic. You realize that, right?"

Ainzach's eyes widened and he nodded. "Yes, it's just as you say, Your Majesty. I'm now convinced that I understand the true form adventurers should take."

"Yeah. You should consider me an exception to undead. I understand the value of humans, so I won't kill them without reason, but other overlords may not act the same way."

"They won't?"

"There's no guarantee. Am I the exception, or is my whole race the exception? We should probably assume the worst."

"...You're right, Your Majesty. I'll keep that in mind."

Ainz nodded.

If they found traces of one and it had been defeated, it could lead them to the people who brainwashed Shalltear. Or there could even be an overlord out there being mind controlled in the same way Shalltear was.

"All right, I'll go make an appointment."

“Thanks.”

Ainzach got out of the carriage. After watching him go, Ainz took out a mask and put it on. He walked around E-Rantel without it now, but he figured that in the imperial capital—especially having snuck in—it would be better to do at least the minimum to conceal his identity.

He also changed from his usual robe to one that was more subdued.

Its magic tier was one lower, but that couldn't be helped. Ainz had only one god-tier robe. There were also all the things his guildmates had left, but their armor was even more customized to the individual than their weapons were. They had allotted lots of data to buff specific skills they possessed. So while he could use those items, he couldn't take full advantage of their abilities.

If that was the case, then Ainz preferred something he built for himself, even if it was a little weaker.

As he was adjusting all of his gear, there came a knock at the carriage door, and Ainzach spoke to him.

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty.”

“What is it?”

“Unfortunately, he can’t meet you today and would like to do it tomorrow. If you wish, I’ll tell him you’re here and try to convince him. What do you think?”

“That’s not necessary.” There was no way he would make a good impression on someone by forcing himself on them when they were busy. On the contrary, from a sales point of view, he had made a cold call and actually gotten an appointment instead of being turned away at the door, so that was a fantastic success. “Let’s just do it tomorrow. We should be thankful he’s available so—sooo— What is it?” Ainz asked, noticing Ainzach’s eyes had gone round.

“O-oh, I was just thinking how tolerant you are, Your Majesty. Some nobles even look down on merchants, so...”

“You thought I would order you to force him to meet me?”

The fact that he didn't reply immediately spoke louder than the words *Yes, that's what I thought* would have.

Ainz wondered if that would have been the more correct way for a ruler to act. It was too late now, but Ainz Ooal Gown was a king. He needed to act like one, even when it felt weird to Satoru Suzuki.

"This is the first time I've ruled over humans. If you think that's correct in human society, then I'll do it."

Ainzach frowned. "I don't know, Your Majesty. I don't know any kings, so I'm not sure if it's proper or not. Personally, I prefer the way you were thinking just now, but perhaps high-ranking nobles should exercise their power."

"Human society sure is complicated."

When Ainz grumbled that in the end, he still didn't know what to do, Ainzach gave him a friendly smile. "You may be right about that, Your Majesty. There really is a lot to deal with."

The two of them chuckled inside the carriage.

Ainz pumped his right fist where it couldn't be seen, secure in the knowledge that he had loosened Ainzach up quite a bit.

"Did you tell him that I would be accompanying you tomorrow?"

"No, I didn't. I wanted to hear your thoughts first. Is it an issue if I give your name?"

"...If he won't make a fuss, then it's fine. You know him better than I do, so you should decide."

"Understood. Then I think I'll keep it secret for now."

After deciding the specific time, Ainzach left the carriage again.

Ainz felt a little bad treating him like a gofer. He knew this wasn't a seniority-based society, but Satoru Suzuki didn't like ordering his elders around.

*I get why so many people dislike having subordinates older than them...*

If it was someone from an entirely different society, it probably wouldn't have bothered him. For example, if Ainzach were from the empire, he wouldn't have any problem jerking his chin at him. The reason he did now must have been that he saw Ainzach as one of his subjects.

*He should be given fair compensation. If I don't remember that people who don't seek rewards like the members of Nazarick are an exception, I'll be the worst ruler ever. I don't want to be a king like a black company!*

Ainz made a vow to the voice of HeroHero he could hear skimming across the back of his mind.

*When it comes to Ainzach's reward... As a king, how much should I actually pay him? Is market rate for a mythril-plate adventurer enough? No, he should get a managerial allowance, so 10 percent—no, that's too much—5 percent more...? Could someone just give me advice about compensation?*

He could consult with Demiurge and Albedo, but he was skeptical about whether they actually understood what proper compensation rates consisted of. He had the feeling they would just say, *Anyone should feel happy to even have a chance to work for you, Lord Ainz.*

*Which means... I need a smart human. I can rely on Fluder for magic, but he even said himself that his knowledge on other realms is patchy.*

Nazarick was practically invincible, but in the realm of knowledge about human society, Ainz felt a bit anxious.

*...Start with what you have? I'm glad I went with Demiurge's plan. Of course, by the time Demiurge is suggesting something, I don't have any intention of rejecting it.*

As Ainz was letting his mind wander, there came a knock at the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Majesty.”

He hadn't been waiting in particular, but he received Ainzach in the generous way a ruler should and urged him to go on.

“I made an appointment as you wished, tomorrow at ten o'clock.”

"Good. Then just until tomorrow... I'm going to send you back to E-Rantel. Now then, relax and accept the spell: Greater Teleportation."

Ainzach disappeared instantaneously.

With Greater Teleportation, it should have been no trouble to get him outside the outermost of E-Rantel's three walls. If there was anything in the way of his landing position, he would zip to a nearby safe place, so there was no need to check up on him with another spell.

"Now, I guess I'll get in touch with that one using Message," Ainz murmured to himself. It wasn't something he enjoyed doing, so he said it partially to get himself going.

He was contacting the one who said he would give everything to Ainz: Fluder. The reason he was dragging things out with him even though he knew what the old man wanted was that he wasn't confident he could pay him.

The compensation Fluder wanted was Ainz's magic knowledge.

But Ainz's magic ability wasn't learned by accumulated study. So even if Fluder threw himself on the ground and begged to be taught, Ainz didn't really know what he could do.

If it were *Yggdrasil*, he could share what he knew about magic, but unfortunately this world seemed to have a different system.

He did wonder why the same spells existed if they learned them in a different way, in addition to some other things, but he hadn't figured out the answers yet. There was a mountain of things he didn't understand. He even had to consider the worst-case scenario that he might suddenly lose the ability to use his *Yggdrasil* abilities.

Maybe he could get the answers to his questions if he took a multilevel hit when casting the spell whose effect had changed in this world, Wish Upon a Star—to lose several levels at once in exchange for a powerful way to get a wish granted.

But that was an extremely dangerous gamble.

He could use it, but whether he would get his answers or not was a mystery. There was a plenty good chance it would end as a total waste. More than anything, he didn't have the courage to use this spell that could be considered his ace move. Things would

be different if he had a way to gain massive amounts of experience points, but he hadn't found one yet.

Ainz sighed—not that he had lungs—and, feeling like a salesman who had to apologize to a customer that the product he promised would come in hadn't arrived yet, cast Message.

"Fluder Paradyne. It's me, Ainz Ooal Gown." After saying that much, he said what he always said next. "You're from the village of Vermut. And your first experience with magic was... if I remember correctly, a mystic there."

"Oh! Master! I've been waiting to hear from you!"

Fluder's gratitude was palpable.

What he had said were the passwords. Fluder said the person on the other end of a Message could be someone impersonating someone he knew, so Ainz had promised to say the name of his village, which had already changed, and that memory.

But even all that couldn't assuage Fluder's fears about Message.

Ainz felt it was an unhealthy paranoia, but if that was the case, there was nothing he could do about it.

Mildly weirded out by Fluder's blazing passion, he answered back, "Sorry it's been a little while. I thought I would finally teach you some magic soon like I promised. Do you have a little time now?"

"Of course! No matter what's on my schedule, I can always make time for you, master!"

*No, you really don't have to do that,* thought Ainz, but this passion for magic was Fluder in a nutshell. That kind of magic maniac wanted lessons, and this ordinary guy had to bullshit his way through somehow.

The job—as much work as dealing with the complaints of an unbearable complainer—made Ainz's stomach hurt.

*...I have no doubt that I'm the one with the worst stomachache in the entire imperial capital.*

But he couldn't turn back now.

In order to teleport into Fluder's room, he readied an intelligence spell to confirm his positioning.

"All right. I'm going to go to your room using Greater Teleportation."

"Ooh! Not Teleportation but Greater Teleportation? What tier is that?!"

"...Let's discuss that later. This Message won't last forever—because I don't have a commander class, you know?... But there's something I need to confirm with you first. What kind of measures do you have in place to counter intelligence magic? Do you have anything to obstruct teleportation?"

"N-no. I'm not using anything like that."

Hearing that, Ainz's nonexistent eyebrows twinged. "Isn't that a bit careless? To have nothing at all?"

It was possible that any conversations had in Fluder's room were overheard by a third party.

"My apologies, but those sorts of spells are a weak area for me..."

"Then wouldn't using a magic item instead be elementary? I've seen all sorts of things in the imperial capital. I heard you were making them."

Ainz recalled the market he'd gone to the first time he visited the imperial capital. He had been surprised to see things similar to refrigerators.

"It's as you say, master, but I'm sure you know that in creating magic items, it's important that you be able to use a similar sort of spell. For instance, for a fire-enchanted weapon, Fireball or another fire spell. But the spells for defense against intelligence magic aren't very popular..."

*I see, thought Ainz.*

In *Yggdrasil*, players could acquire only three spells per level through the usual means. So at level 20, they would have sixty spells. Expecting someone to choose Obstruct Detection as one of those was pretty harsh.

For the uninformed, sixty might sound like a lot, but if someone asked Ainz to pick sixty spells from up through tier three, he would spend all day mulling it over.

First, he would want to know what they would be used for, then if a class change was possible—there were a lot of factors to juggle.

In that sense, he did feel a bit bad for getting annoyed with Fluder.

“You’re right. This time was my bad. It’s just as you said. Certainly, when you’re getting attack and defensive spells, detection and intelligence spells end up low priority.”

In the game, it was easy to say, *I’ll take this one, so you take that*, but for these people, selecting spells practically meant deciding the course of their lives. It probably took quite a bit of bravery to choose unpopular spells.

And detection magic had some depth to it. It involved anticipating what spell one’s opponent would use to collect intelligence.

Frankly, being a caster specialized in detection magic was like gambling with the chips of one’s life.

“...Okay. I’ll give you an Obstruct Detection item. Stay on your guard with that from now on.”

“Yes, master!”

He couldn’t see him, but he knew that Fluder was bowing low. He might have even thrown himself on the floor.

“Your compassionate words have been received!”

*Relax, it’s just an item*, thought Ainz, and it pained his heart. “R-right... Now then, I’m going to peek into your room.”

Ainz cast the spell and looked into Fluder’s room.

From above, he could see Fluder on his knees.

When he searched for magical auras—perhaps it was to be expected from Fluder—there were several different colors in the room. But none of them indicated the danger

of teleportation obstruction. Upon confirming that much, Ainz used Greater Teleportation.

His field of vision changed; his teleportation into Fluder's private quarters was a success. Though he knew from the lack of delay or feeling of being observed that he wasn't in enemy territory, he still swept his eyes around.

He didn't need to be that cautious. But enemies were most likely to time their attacks for the unguarded moments following a teleportation. In order to avoid that, Satoru Suzuki had gotten totally used to anti-PKing moves.

"So good of you to come, master!"

"...Raise your head," Ainz ordered.

Fluder had bowed deeply upon seeing him. *Honestly, you really don't have to do that,* was what Ainz felt.

This guy's loyalty—more accurately, submission stemming from greed—was abnormal.

It could be termed similar to that of Nazarick members. He had finally gotten used to the people in Nazarick being so loyal, but when he got that sort of devotion from someone he barely knew, it put him on guard.

"Yes, master!"

"Now then, I don't want to stand the whole time I'm talking, so I'll take a seat."

"Yes, master! What's mine is yours. Use it all as you would!"

Feeling like he would like to get accustomed to this attitude but also like he wouldn't, Ainz sat down on a sofa, but Fluder didn't move to sit across from him. He remained kneeling on the floor with only his head lifted.

"That's enough. Sit down."

"A-are you sure? I can sit in the same way as you, master?"

"...I'm pretty sure you used to have disciples. Is this how you did it?"

The way of thinking that seemed liable to be found at a freakishly hard-core company creeped Ainz out, but Fluder shook his head. “No, I never did anything like that. But between you and me, master, is a gap that makes us incomparable. I could hardly consider us the same—”

“—I don’t mind. I permit you to be seated. Now sit.”

“Yes, master!”

Ainz made sure Fluder sat down and then—thinking, *Agh, my stomach hurts*—asked a question.

“First, what happened with that thing I a...”—he nearly said *asked* but caught himself—“ordered you to do? Did you copy down all the inside facts of other countries as far as the empire knows?”

“Yes, master! I finished recording the data for nearby countries. The only thing is...”

“What? Is there some kind of problem?”

“Master! I suppose it’s no less than I would expect from the emperor.” His face looked proud. It was the face a teacher would turn toward his outstanding pupil. “It appears he’s discovered my betrayal.”

It was only natural when switching jobs to make a vow not to leak secrets from one’s previous employer all over the place. From that perspective, forcing Fluder to spy and give up insider information made Ainz a brute.

But Ainz already knew quite well that he was ruling a country not a company. Anything he did so that his nation would flourish—so that people who belonged to the Great Tomb of Nazarick were happy—was correct.

He didn’t have anything against Jircniv. But that didn’t matter when it came to profit for his country. If Jircniv’s unhappiness would make the Nation of Darkness wealthy, then Ainz would make him miserable.

That said, rather than a full-on brawl, he was aiming for coexistence and mutual prosperity.

Squishy Moe had once told him a random story about what would happen if Mr. Nash

got imprisoned or something, and apparently the point was that if chance was limitless, then cooperating would lead to great profit.

Ainz knew that the two countries would use each other, but on a personal basis, he wanted to get along with Jircniv.

*In exchange for poaching Fluder, I made sure no one from the empire got hurt on the Katze Plain, so we're even. And since I'm spying on him so much, I feel closer to him...*

“...What is it, master?”

“Ah, mm, nothing. I was just thinking.”

“You were? I’m terribly sorry for interrupting, master!”

“You weren’t being rude or anything. I came here to see you, after all.”

“Ohhh! Thank you, master!”

*He seems to be awfully moved. What’s that about?* thought Ainz as he got back to the point of their conversation. “Uhhh, oh, we were talking about poaching, right? I don’t care if word gets out, but there’s a problem: your safety.”

“Ohhh! Master! That you would concern yourself with my safety is simply...!”

*Why is this old man getting so emotional about every little thing? If you’re not planning on cutting someone off from the beginning, isn’t it the job of the person at the top to guarantee at least minimal safety to the people below them? Or is that not how it works in the empire?*

*If the latter, that’s scary... If someone gets in my way, I might kill them, but I don’t really like the idea of killing someone I’ve had working under me...*

“Fluder, don’t get so excited. If there’s someone nearby, it’ll look suspicious.”

“Don’t worry, master. This floor belongs to me and only me. There’s no one else here.”

Ainz had visited once, and the tower was fairly big. He was certainly the empire’s most powerful caster if he could have an entire floor of that to himself.

"Now then, getting back to the topic of your safety. Has anyone come to kill you as a result of your betrayal?"

"There's no sign of that, but my work for the government has been cut. And the emperor used to consult me often, but ever since we returned from the great lands you rule, he hasn't summoned me a single time."

"I see... Then, Fluder. Would you like to come be with me?"

"Ohhh! Gladly!"

*That was fast...*

"Then once I figure out what your role will be... Oh, there's something we need to discuss before that. Your reward. Now then..." Ainz reached into space. He had rehearsed the rest of this conversation repeatedly, calling himself out and correcting himself as he went.

He had no idea if Fluder would really do what he imagined he would, but he had practiced enough.

"As promised, I'll bestow a piece of my wisdom on thee, Fluder. Take it. And decipher it."

Ainz handed him a Book of the Dead.

It was a musty old volume, but the pages themselves were in mysteriously good condition, no bookworm holes or the like.

Fluder accepted the book with trembling hands. Ainz was thankful he was undead. If he were human, the book may have been trembling, too, from his nerves.

What Fluder desired was to peer into the abyss of magic. But Ainz didn't know anything about any abyss of magic. He could teach him what he had learned in the game *Yggdrasil*, but the abyss of magic was beyond him.

But not providing it would be a betrayal of Fluder's loyalty. One good turn deserves another, and Fluder deserved a reward for his faithful service. So Ainz gave him the book that appeared to contain the most magic knowledge. Although as far as Ainz could tell, it was just arcane gibberish.

“I beg your pardon.”

After flipping through a few pages, Fluder’s giddy expression changed to disappointment.

“What is it? Is it not what you wanted?” Ainz asked coolly, suppressing his anxiety. If it wasn’t what he was hoping for, that was no problem. He had already rehearsed a response for that.

“N-no, it’s not that. I can’t read it.”

“Oh, I see.”

Ainz took the book from Fluder’s hands and flipped open to a random page.

“This chapter is about the... heterogeneity... that occurs in a soul when transforming into a lich.”

It made sense that Fluder couldn’t read it, since it was in Japanese, but...

*It’s less like a fantasy novel than a collection of lore for a fantasy world. What the heck is “heterogeneity”? It’s something about what happens to souls, but this is such a wall of hard words that I can’t process it. It’s like I’m just looking at the surface... Maybe it’s purposely written so that even if you can read it, you can’t understand it?*

Basically, it was something occult. Yes, it was definitely related to the occult. To Satoru Suzuki, who didn’t have any knowledge of such things, it seemed to be random bullshit, but maybe it was borrowed from some place’s mythology? If Tabula Smaragdina were around, he would have filled him in on all the details.

“Ohhh!”

When Fluder looked at him with so much joy in his eyes, he felt guilty.

“Oh right... I only have one of these, so I can’t just give it to you, but go ahead and use it.”

Ainz placed a monocle on top of the book and handed it back. When Fluder put it on, he flipped through the pages in a tizzy.

"Th-this is! This means that souls are like the spray from the flow of the vast world, and all souls are the same regardless of size, which means that...!!!!!"

*Yikes, he's gone insane.*

The change in Fluder was so abrupt, Ainz nearly recoiled in surprise.

His eyes were wide and bloodshot. He was snorting like an animal and seemed like he might pounce at someone any second.

"H-how is it?"

Fluder's eyes rolled to look straight at Ainz. "I-it's wonderful, master! This is exactly the knowledge I've been hoping forrr! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Perhaps Ainz's shock from the old man's mad racket surpassed a certain level? His psyche abruptly calmed.

"Oh. Then I'll start by taking the glass back."

"What?! But I..."

"Translating the book is part of your training. It's by deciphering and understanding that text that you'll be able to ascend to the next realm. Using the glass would be meaningless."

"This is quite unexpected... Would you allow me to read through it once first?"

"If you want to read one page, that's fine, but if you read any more, it won't contribute to your growth."

Fluder snapped the book shut and closed his eyes.

After nearly a minute, he finally opened his eyes and spoke. His voice was utterly tranquil. "Understood. I shall adhere to your teachings. But, master, if there's something I don't understand, will you lend me your wisdom?"

"Su-sure. If I understand it, I'll help you."

"Thank you, master!"

Fluder removed the monocle and returned it.

*Yes! Now I won't hear anything from Fluder for a while. Oh, but I do have to give him one stern warning. Uh... what am I supposed to say again?*

Ainz struggled through his memories. Then he called Fluder's name in a heavy voice that he felt was fitting for a ruler.

"Fluder."

"Yes, master!"

"I trust you, so I gave you this book of hidden knowledge. Make sure it doesn't end up in a third party's hands. That goes for any notes you take while deciphering it, too. Don't tell anyone a thing about this book."

"I won't, master!"

"I'm sure the reason why goes without saying, but this book contains knowledge beyond what humans should know. If others learn of it, there will be trouble... Well, there might still be some hope if the person who got it had your kind of ability, but... In any case, I don't want to still be cleaning up after you ten years from now."

"Of course not, master. I won't leak any of the information I learn from these pages to anyone. I promise!"

"I'll trust you, Fluder. Don't disappoint me."

"I won't, master!"

Fluder had gotten out of his chair and now prostrated himself on the floor.

*You don't have to go that far,* Ainz thought, but he supposed it must have been an impressive threat and was satisfied that his ten hours of acting practice and voice exercises had paid off.

"That's fine, then. If you understand, then I have nothing else to say on the subject. Now, back in your seat. I get that it's awfully difficult to decipher an unknown language without any assistance. Do you have any ideas what to do about that?"

"Yes, master! It's terribly inefficient, but there is a reading comprehension spell. I think I'll use that and go bit by bit."

"Oh, I see! That's wonderful."

That was the best answer Ainz could have hoped for. It would be a decent challenge and buy him time, but it wasn't so difficult that Fluder would give up.

"Then I'll give this to you... Wait, right. I'll lend you a box to keep it in. I don't imagine you'll be reckless with it, but this is just in case someone tries to steal it from you."

Ainz took a box out of space. It was the same sort of box he used to keep his notebook.

"If you keep it in here, it will take a while to open even if it gets stolen. If someone steals the password along with it, there would be no point, but... just be careful."

"Of course, master. I would never give away the password."

"Good."

Ainz turned his gaze from Fluder, who was happily caressing the book, to the ceiling. He needed to remember what else he had to talk to him about.

"Oh right. We didn't finish discussing your coming to be with me, since your defection is out of the bag. First of all, when can you come?"

"Whenever you wish, master. I have nothing tying me to this country."

Ainz moved his mental eyebrows.

Was this personality—someone who would readily cast aside the responsibilities of his position—acceptable? Ainz was worried he might do the same thing under him.

He subtracted points on Fluder's résumé with red pen.

"...Then, Fluder, I intend to have you involved in the development of magic in the Nation of Darkness. But we're not releasing any of the spells you develop to the outside world. They'll be for you, me, and those close to me. Can you tolerate that condition? Can you give up your desire for fame?"

"I have no problem with that. I'm happy if I can peer into the depths of magic. I have no other desires."

As Fluder made that declaration, Ainz kept a close watch on his face.

Ainz didn't have any gift for seeing through to the true nature of people. In terms of humanity, Fluder, who was a genius caster who had lived far longer than people do and been involved in running a huge empire, was certainly ahead of him. If Fluder was to try to trick Ainz, there was no way Ainz would be able to see through it.

But *can't* is different from *won't*. Ainz observed Fluder with that in mind and eventually said, "That's fine, then. I'll give you full privileges when you arrive in the Nation of Darkness. I'll support you in developing magic as much as I can. Now, then..."

This meant he had an additional human supporter of Nazarick in addition to the Baleare family. Once he could get the woman Demiurge and Albedo recommended, the strengthening of Nazarick would proceed nicely.

He had to get as strong as he could before his invisible enemy revealed itself.

His opponent had a World Item. He needed to acquire powers that didn't exist in *Yggdrasil* as soon as possible. He had to assume that anything he could do, his opponent could do as well.

But there was one problem—how to protect the empire.

Demiurge was of the opinion that the empire was a latent enemy, but Ainz didn't agree with him.

He wasn't sure what the future would bring, but he didn't think conquering the world with might alone was the smart way to go about it. If the Nation of Darkness gained a reputation for destroying all its enemies, it would end up antagonizing countries that it could have been allies with.

So then how about deepening the friendship between the rulers, Ainz and Jircniv, and conveying that to their retainers?

*Then Demiurge and the others will keep their conquer-by-power plans to a minimum. That's a great idea. A friendship across national borders. In other words, a friendship across guilds... Friends, huh...?*

Ainz's grotesque friends came to mind.

*Still, though, how do you make friends? Giving someone what they want probably isn't the right way... The best in this case is probably to protect what's important to Jircniv—the empire... There's a good chance my enemy will target it.*

Ainz had an idea of what he would do if he were the invisible enemy who had brainwashed Shalltear. It entailed...

*The worst-case scenario would be if Iä Shub-Niggurath was used on the capital of the empire, my ally. No matter who did it, it would definitely be blamed on me... And then they would work to spread word of it all over the world. And that would slow the expansion of the Nation of Darkness's influence.*

Ainz remembered his days in *Yggdrasil*.

Once, since it was foolish to challenge a huge guild head-on, they had incited a bunch of smaller guilds to start a war. It should be possible to use the same tactic in this case. And if Ainz was in the opposite position, he would surely do so, which meant there was a good chance that his opponent would.

In order to thwart that plan, Ainz had been thinking to casually spread the rumor via Fluder that he would never use that spell again—though it was a lie. But he couldn't use Fluder anymore. He had to come up with another way.

*This is like trying to devise a way to prevent people from smuggling in a palm-size hazard... Maybe I should order Demiurge to come up with a plan. But would he think that's weird? Agh, I don't know what to do.*

The best would be if he could just have those two do everything for him, but all that would do was put his image as an absolute being into question. He would be in trouble if he couldn't come up with a solution that also protected his reputation.

“Master, is something wrong?”

“...Fluder. I want to protect the empire for a while. Do you have any ideas how to do that?”

“...Why do you want to do that?”

"Conquering it would be easy, but I'm not interested in being king of a mountain of rubble. I want to annex the empire in pristine condition. To that end, I want to prevent any harm being done to the empire as a result of the loss of power it will experience with you gone."

The amount of wrinkles on Fluder's face increased.

"That's a tough question out of the blue. Even with me gone, I don't think there is any immediate danger to the empire. That said, it's true they don't have anyone to fill the gap I would leave... If there's no issue, then I'll stay here for now."

"Will you? I'll debate it on this end and get back to you at a later date."

"Yes, master!"

"...Oh. Lastly, there are two things I'd like you to do for me. One is that I want detailed information about the martial king. And then there's the death knight thing."

•

Just before the appointed hour, Ainz used detection magic. Usually, he would use several counter spells first, but he didn't want to waste a ton of scrolls. Unlike that time in the graveyard, where there was clearly an enemy, he cast it on its own.

Still, he did take care to do it in a place where he wouldn't involve anyone else if he did get hit with a counterintelligence spell.

He could see a place different from his current location. It was the interior of a carriage. He manipulated his field of vision to look outside.

Then he used Greater Teleportation to go there.

Having succeeded without any hitches, he opened the door to the carriage. Ainzach, sitting inside, looked surprised. Without paying any attention to that, Ainz climbed into the carriage, shut the door, and canceled the invisibility spell he had been using.

"So it was you, Your Majesty. I somehow had the feeling it was, but do you mind not coming in invisible anymore?"

"If I wasn't invisible, someone would see me."

“You’re wearing that mask, so I think you’re all right...”

“Maybe, but I used teleportation magic. I want to avoid as much trouble as I can.”

“That’s true...”

“If you understand, then let’s get going.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The carriage went through the open gate and stopped where indicated by the guard. It was a place where multiple carriages could be parked.

“All right, let’s go.”

Ainz followed Ainzach out of the carriage.

Waiting there was a maid and an old man dressed like a butler.

He may have been a butler, but he didn’t have Sebas’s depth of character. The vibes he gave off were those of any sophisticated elderly man. And the butler seemed to be human, but the maid was not.

From the top of her head came ears that weren’t human but animal. Ainz couldn’t tell for sure because of her hair, but there didn’t seem to be anything where human ears would have been. Her face was cute, but it was different from human cuteness—more primal.

“We’ve been waiting for you. Sir Ainzach and... Your Majesty, the King of Darkness, I believe? My master is expecting you. I’ll lead you to him, so would you kindly follow me?”

“Wha—?!” Ainzach yelped slightly at the butler’s question.

He hadn’t spoken of Ainz’s identity the previous day, so he must have been shocked that the man had managed to guess it. But Ainz didn’t find it so surprising. He may have been wearing his mask, but he hadn’t changed anything about his clothes. Anyone with connections had probably heard of him. More importantly, it was rude to leave the man hanging.

"I appreciate it. We'll follow you."

"Your Majesty." The butler bowed and the maid followed a beat later.

As they set off after the pair, Ainzach spoke to him in a low voice. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Ainz figured it was for replying to the butler before.

He considered saying, *No worries*, but he simply accepted it in silence.

From Satoru Suzuki's point of view, he was a boss covering for a subordinate's mistake. Ainzach's gratitude was natural, so as a boss thinking of his subordinate's future growth, it wouldn't do for him to shove it aside.

*Being a boss is no cakewalk.* He felt the struggle keenly.

Suddenly he realized that since he was role-playing a ruler, he hadn't said a heartfelt thank-you in quite a while.

*At some point, I should really gather the guardians—well, all the NPCs—and express my gratitude and acknowledge their work.*

With those things on his mind as the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, aiming to be a white company, he kept walking after their guide without pause.

"What a surprise to see a rabbitman, huh, Your Majesty?"

*Shouldn't you say that after she's gone?* thought Ainz, but he was curious, so he continued the conversation. "Not rabbitwoman?"

"No... well... it's because the race is rabbitmen."

"Ainzach, what am I supposed to do if you take a little joke so seriously?"

".....She must have come from even farther east than the city-state alliance. They're quite rare."

"Mm..."

Ainz didn't know how far away east of the city-state alliance was. He hadn't acquired that much information yet.

But he had never seen a rabbitman in the kingdom, and neither had he seen one besides her yet in the empire. Even if other races didn't reject her, it couldn't be easy to live in an environment where there were no other members of her own race.

He was curious to hear what she had to say, but he couldn't. It would be troublesome if it triggered her.

Before long, they had been led before a room.

"Please go in and wait here."

Inside, a number of weapons and pieces of armor had been oiled and were on beautiful display with not a speck of dust to be found.

When Ainz took a closer look, he noticed that most of the armor was scraped and dented. The pieces had definitely been used in combat.

Rather than a weapon merchant's display, this was more like a collection of gear that represented the master of the house's glorious memories.

After taking a cursory look at everything, Ainz returned to the first sword.

It was the nicest sword in the room.

It didn't have any scratches, but given that it was placed in such a way that it naturally caught one's eye immediately upon entering the room, it had to be its owner's favorite.

"Does it please you?"

"Yeah, this is quite a good collection."

The owner of the room—the master of the house—stood before two sofas facing each other in the center of the room, and Ainz answered his question. The man had a substantial physique and hair cropped so short, the skin was visible from underneath.

They continued their discussion of the arms without introductions.

"Which is your favori— Oh, that one, right? That's what everyone who enters this room says."

Ainz crossed the room and stood before the sword.

"Can I try holding it?"

"Of course. I don't mind."

Ainz thanked him and picked up the sword. If he tried to equip it, he would drop it, but just holding it was no problem.

As he admired the blade, he noticed there were letters carved into it. He had seen the strange characters somewhere before. He frantically sifted through his memories, and before long, he arrived at the answer.

"Runes?"

"Ohhh, I'd expect nothing less from the King of Darkness. You know them?"

*What? They actually are?... Does this world just have runes, too?*

As far as he knew, runes were old characters from Satoru Suzuki's world. If they existed here, there was a good chance that someone from the other world had brought them. Ainz answered carefully, "...Well, I only know of them. I don't have the ability to create items inscribed with them. Which of the master craftspeople made it?"

"Ohhh, what an astute question. This sword was made by a rune artisan from the dwarf country in the Azerlisia Mountains—probably over a hundred and fifty years ago. The blade can harbor lightning. Do you see the symbols carved into the handle?"

The master of the house came next to Ainz.

When he stood there, the strong scent of cologne hit Ainz's nose.

"It's from one of the most famous dwarven rune workshops, Stone Nail."

*Dwarven rune workshops?... I should collect more details on that.*

"Oh-ho. That sounds like a very famous workshop. Are there any other pieces from

there?"

Ainz scanned the room, and the man laughed good-naturedly.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. Not here there aren't. I have them stored elsewhere. But the only one this enchanted is this sword."

"Oh-ho." Ainz hid his disappointment with an exclamation of awe.

Still, he had picked up the name of the workshop, Stone Nail. He needed to investigate and see if there were players there.

"I've heard that weapons made by dwarven crafters don't come to market very often, and yet you have pieces besides this one?"

Ainz mentally gave Ainzach a thumbs-up for his question.

"That's right, Ainzach." The man grinned. "Whenever one goes up for auction, I make sure to attend. Last time, I dueled a stubborn adventurer and ended up paying three times what I planned."

Ainzach shook his head slightly in amazement, while Ainz nodded, thoroughly impressed. *That's what collectors are like. Understood by no one—and sometimes they can't even understand their past selves.*

Ainz wanted to examine the sword much more, but he put it back.

"I was captivated by this fantastic piece before we even really introduced ourselves. I hope you'll forgive me."

The man's face was all smiles. "You've got a way with words, Your Majesty. Allow me to properly introduce myself: I'm Osk, a humble merchant."

"Won't the other merchants in the empire get upset if you call yourself 'humble'? I'm Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness."

"There isn't a day I don't hear your name, Your Majesty. Please have a seat. I'll have some drinks made."

"...I appreciate the offer, but I'm all right."

Osk's beady eyes were small compared to the rest of his face, and he squinted with them at Ainz. "Your Majesty, I've heard the rumors. How about if you took off your mask?"

"...If it's the master of the house asking, then I suppose I have no choice."

Ainz removed the mask, revealing his actual face.

Osk didn't appear to be surprised. His eyes were so tiny that when he smiled, it was impossible to look into them.

"Ohhh... I see; I see." Osk spoke again after nodding a few times. "Actually, given the rumors, I was worried if I would be able to rustle up some tea to your liking, but I guess I didn't need to worry about that," he said cheerfully, shaking his stout belly with laughter.

"So, Osk, why did you think His Majesty was the one with me?"

"I mean, it's not that hard to guess, right? If you, the head of the Adventurers Guild in the conquered city of E-Rantel, are coming with someone superior to you, there's only one person who comes to mind." He continued, "There was a chance it was his right hand, but I just had a hunch."

"Can I ask the next question? Are the weapons lined up over there all ones you have used?"

Osk smiled, clearly amused by Ainz's question. "Ha! Your Majesty, take a look at my physique! I may have held tools for making calculations but never a sword. These are my hobby... I've admired the strong ever since I was a child, and I've always liked swords and other weapons."

"I see..."

"You seem to understand. Then I would also like to ask a question, if I may. I've heard that Your Majesty possesses incredible power. Have you been alive very long—well, you must have been, right?"

"Compared to the life spans of you humans, yes." After he said it, he wondered what sort of being Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness, would become.

He couldn't very well have said, *No, you guys are older*, and even if he could have, they wouldn't have believed him. So he was creating the character of the King of Darkness as he went; pretty soon he had to make some decisions or he would run into trouble.

*So far we know that he's lived a long time, since he's an undead. If anyone asks why I don't know something even though I've been alive so long, it's because I was shut in doing magic research. That'll be the basis of my King of Darkness character.*

"Then do you have any old weapons?" Osk didn't even try to conceal his curiosity.

"Of course I do. But I can't give them to you."

"I would pay the appropriate price—or I could even swing three times the going rate."

Ainz couldn't immediately refuse. He remembered how very unreliable the inside of his wallet was. But as a king he couldn't say, *Okay, here ya go.*

"...Money doesn't do much for me."

"Certainly, toward a king such as yourself it was a rather impolite thing to say—my sincerest apologies... So what would you be willing to trade for?"

*Could I have him praise the actions of my country or something like that? Hmm? In which case...*

Ainz took out a dagger. It oozed a shimmering haze effect. The slightly transparent blade was made of blue crystal. The magic inside it was only so-so, but overall it was still an upper-grade magic item and immensely powerful compared to the average items circulating in this world.

"“Wh-what in the—!””

There were two voices.

Ainzach was staring wide-eyed at the dagger, too. "Hmm," Ainz murmured and set the dagger in front of Ainzach. "It's yours."

"“What!?””

Once again there were two voices.

"Ainzach, it's a reward for your services. But I'm not conferring it on you, and it's not a guarantee of your status. I gave it to you because it's the type of reward I'd like to be able to give in the kind of country I'm hoping to have. If you'd rather have money, I don't mind if you sell it."

Given the size of the data, it wasn't a weapon that could kill Ainz, and it wasn't a sentimental weapon that one of his guildmates had created for him, either.

"I—I don't think I can accept such a powerful..."

Ainzach was shaking.

"It's not really that great. Well, if you won't accept it, I'll give you something else later. Like a potion for healing wounds or something. What do you think?"

After taking plenty of time and hesitating, Ainzach took the dagger.

"I accept. Thank you, Your Majesty! I'll do my best to serve you and live up to this blade!"

"Congrats, Ainzach. If you ever need anything, I hope you'll remember your friend here," Osk said, glancing at the dagger.

But Ainzach made a face like a mother dog protecting her pup. "Never. I definitely will not."

Ainz changed the tone of his voice just a tad. "All right. Shall we get down to business?"

Osk reluctantly ripped his eyes away from Ainzach wrapping the blade up in a handkerchief and agreed. "..... Understood. What is it you came to talk to me about today?"

"Hmm... I'm not very good at making things flowery, so I'll get straight to the point... I want you to set up a fight in the arena with the martial king for me."

Osk's eyes widened slightly but then immediately returned to their previous expression.

"I heard that the martial king doesn't belong to the arena but is your pet swordsman. Ainzach told me that if you gave me permission to fight the martial king, the card could

be drawn up right away.”

“Hoo-ha-ha-ha-ha. Are you serious, Your Majesty? The martial king is the strongest man in the arena—the body of a monster and the skills of a warrior. He’s probably the strongest ever. I’m sure you have strong subordinates but against this guy...” Osk boastfully shook his head.

“...Is he stronger than Fluder?”

“No, they have to be in the warrior division. Casters are no good. I absolutely refuse anyone flying through the sky firing off spell after spell.”

Ainz hesitated when Osk began to grumble, but Ainzach explained, “Once there was an adventurer team that won by flying and using bows and other long-distance attacks, and it really killed the mood. Since then, Fly, Teleport, and other spells like that have been prohibited.” By that time, Osk had returned to himself and looked at Ainz.

“Ahem! Do excuse me, Your Majesty. I recalled a bitter memory... Okay, so who do you want the martial king to fight? A human?”

Ainz and Ainzach exchanged a glance. Then Ainz answered.

“Me.”

“.....Huh?!”

“I, Ainz Ooal Gown, will be his opponent.”

A period of time passed in total silence. Osk was utterly flustered and said, “B-but, Your Majesty, you’re a king—of a country!”

“Yes?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, but... I just...”

“Yes, I understand your concern. You’re thinking about what happens if I get injured, right?”

He pretended he couldn’t hear Osk murmur, “If injured is all, that’d be fine...,” under

his breath.

"Relax. I won't make an issue out of it no matter what happens to me. And I'll draw up paperwork to that point."

"But if something like that happened, I'd be out of business. Word on the street is, the empire and the Nation of Darkness are allies. If the king of our allied nation got severely injured, the country would hate me."

"I promise I won't cause you any trouble like that."

"You can say that, but..." Osk seemed to think a bit before continuing. "This isn't the right way to put it, but could you offer something as collateral?"

"Collateral? Such as?"

"...Please lend me something like you gave Ainzach earlier. If, should anything happen, I can have it, then I'm fine with it."

"If that works for you, then I'll make that promise. But I can't give it to you right this instant. I promise to deliver it tomorrow."

"Thank you, Your Majesty... I have a question for you, if that's all right?"

Ainz waved a hand to gesture that he should continue.

"As a bit of an entertainment manager, I collect a lot of information—especially about the powerful people and monsters I'm going to have appear at the arena. Among those rumors has been one about you, Your Majesty. Is it true that you killed tens of thousands of kingdom subjects with a single spell?"

"Ahem!" Ainzach coughed, seemingly on purpose. He was shooting an accusatory glare at Osk, but it wasn't as if Ainz was trying to hide, and neither was it something he was ashamed to talk about.

"That's right. I killed them with my magic. Are you going to condemn me?"

"No, I just wanted to hear how much magic power you have. It would be extremely bad if you used a spell like the one in the rumors. The arena is in the capital, you know."

“No, no, of course I wouldn’t use that sort of spell.”

Not even Ainz would use that spell in the middle of an allied country’s capital. What kind of terrorist would that make him?

“Naturally, that’s what I thought. Your Majesty is so intelligent, you’d hardly think you’re an undead. You don’t seem like the type to hate life and perpetrate huge massacres. Just sometimes I screw up by neglecting to check something that seems obvious.”

Ainz felt the same way. That was always the danger when someone new came in. Actually, Satoru Suzuki had made mistakes like that, too.

“It’s only natural to think along those lines. I’ll say it once more: I wouldn’t use that sort of spell.”

“Why not? Does it have something to do with the positions of the stars?”

“It’s nothing to do with anything like that...” A little light bulb went on in Ainz’s head. “Uh, it’s actually my most powerful ace move. It was Sir El Nix’s earnest wish, so I had no choice but to use a major spell I can only cast once every ten years. So now I have to save up energy for ten years.”

“Oh-ho!” A strange light twinkled in Osk’s eyes. “Are you sure it was okay to tell me that? In a way, you just revealed a weak point, Your Majesty...”

“It’s fine. Even if I can’t use that destructive of a spell, it’s simple for me to kill any fools who antagonize me. It’s not as though all my magic is incapacitated, you know.”

“I’d expect nothing less from the King of Darkness. So you’re saying it would be a simple matter for you to defeat the martial king, is that right?”

When Ainz nodded boastfully, Osk plastered on a smile. But Ainz couldn’t tell by looking if it was genuine or not.

“I see. There’s one more thing I’d like to ask, please. Why do you want to fight the martial king?”

“I heard he was someone strong... I want to know if he is stronger than Gazef Stronoff. In the kingdom, there was Gazef. So how about in the empire? I was curious—that’s

the biggest factor.”

Of course, that wasn’t actually the reason he was fighting. It was the result of his meeting with Ainzach.

Ainz wouldn’t mind telling the truth, but he just didn’t feel like he could trust this guy. He seemed like the type to prioritize his own interests. He judged that opening up to a person like that wouldn’t yield very good results.

“I understand. Thank you... Let’s set you up for a match with the martial king, then, Your Majesty. But...” Ainz was going to thank him, but Osk held up a hand to stop him. “I want you to follow the rules of the arena. And even if for you and the martial king, it’s a serious fight, for us, it’s entertainment. A one-sided fight is no fun, so I want you to fight him with a sword—weapons, no magic. I humbly propose that that will make it a good match.”

“What?!”

It was Ainzach who leaped to his feet. His face was flushed with anger.

“Who could do that?! His Majesty the King of Darkness is a caster! How do you expect him to win like that?”

“Oh-ho. Right. Even the King of Darkness won’t be able to win if his magic is sealed away. Ugh, what an uninspired suggestion. But I didn’t expect you to say something like that. I didn’t think you cared whether His Majesty won or not. It seems I need to adjust my perspective on that.”

“Why, you!”

“Ainzach, don’t get all excited. I’m fine with it.”

“...Your Majesty, what did you say?”

It was so funny the way Ainzach and Osk both looked at him that Ainz let a chuckle slip out. But then he was worried it sounded like a scoff, so he rushed to gloss it over by adding a few more audible nose breaths.

But it was impossible with just holes in his skull.

He quit trying and decided to gloss it over with words instead.

"Apparently, you didn't hear me. This is what I said: It's fine by me."

Osk's expression didn't change, but it was clear that his head was hard at work.

"...Is that a promise on your honor?"

"You want me to swear on my honor?... All right. I, Ainz Ooal Gown, swear not to use any magic during the fight with the martial king."

"Wait a—! Your Majesty! You can't make a promise like that without even seeing what the martial king can do!"

Ainzach's comment was certainly true. But if the information he had on the martial king was reliable, then he didn't seem like such a challenge.

"Well, I'm sure it'll work out somehow."

"Surely 'somehow' isn't good enough!"

Ainz was a little moved by Ainzach's comeback. Since he became the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, no one had given him their opinion in that way. As Momon, he had gotten a bit of it at first, but once his rank jumped, it stopped completely.

"And you'll be in awfully hot water if the king of another country dies in the empire's arena!"

*That's true.* Ainz and Osk looked at each other.

"Well, it's only natural that you would say that. What do you think, Your Majesty? I don't mind if you take your loyal retainer's advice and back out."

In response, Ainz shrugged. He could understand Ainzach's concern, but he was the one who came up with this idea in the first place. He may have planned it with him casting in mind, but did he really think Ainz was so weak without magic?

"It's no problem. Or rather, Ainzach, you're embarrassing me, so quit shouting. And Osk. There's something I'm not clear on: How would my death benefit you?"

Osk blinked. It wasn't endearing at all for a man of his age to react that way. "There seems to be a misunderstanding, Your Majesty. There's not a single benefit-like outcome for me. As the guild master said, the cons are far greater."

He must just really have been thinking as a promoter and not scheming to have Ainz fight at a disadvantage.

"I see. Then that's fine."

"...Do you have a way to win against the martial king without magic? He's stronger than Gazef Stronoff."

"...Stronoff? I was jealous of how strong he was." Ainz noticed Ainzach next to him looking shocked, but he continued his reminiscence. "If the martial king is stronger than him, I'll need to be on my guard. But I'm saying he's strong in terms of his heart not his combat ability. If you're saying the martial king is stronger than Stronoff in terms of brawn, then it will be a simple matter for me to kill him instantly."

"I see. By the way, I have an additional answer to your question from before." Osk lifted his arms up—his meaty arms with no hanging flab. "I love pitting sword against sword and fist against fist. But I don't have a crumb of aptitude for hand-to-hand combat, so I can't win even if I work hard. So I had an idea: I could just create a warrior to represent me and have him win."

Osk sneered in satisfaction. His face was no longer that of a merchant. It was him as a human being.

Ainz had never met a human this strange before, but he knew everyone had their kinks. *In other words, this guy has a weird fetish*, thought Ainz, creating a folder for deviants and throwing Osk in it.

"Which is why... if you lose to the martial king who I trained, it will feel amazing for me."

"Oh?"

Osk and Ainzach both looked at him in surprise.

*You guys have been acting weird for a while now*, thought Ainz.

“Don’t make that strange face at me. If there’s something you want to say, go ahead.”

“N-no, just, is that all...?”

“I have no idea what you want from me, Osk. I really do struggle to comprehend humans. So? Does ‘is that all?’ mean you wanted me to say something else...? Then how about this? Will you be happy to win against me if I don’t use any magic?”

Ainz didn’t really get it, but Osk seemed a bit confused.

“Er, uh, that is... I don’t really care for magic that much...”

“I see. So that’s where this conversation ends, then.”

Osk and Ainzach exchanged glances. *If there’s something you want to say, spit it out*, he thought, but this was how society worked. If someone without much right to speak revealed their honest feelings, they would be tucked away somewhere they wouldn’t cause too much trouble.

“We’ve spoken so far without concealing anything, so let’s continue to be open and to the point. When can I fight the martial king? If possible, I’d like it to be a major event.”

“Then I’ll announce at today’s match that a challenger has appeared, and we can set it up right away. But I’d like to keep your identity a secret until right before the fight.”

“I can’t fathom why. Isn’t that kind of a waste as a promoter?”

“The king of an allied country appearing at the arena flies in the face of common sense, so... Hmm? I didn’t hear anything about a welcoming ceremony. Are you doing it later on?”

Ainz looked down in spite of himself.

*Crap.*

Thankful for his lack of a heart, Ainz spun up the gears of the undead brain he had to have somewhere in his empty skull. Then he shrugged cavalierly.

“I snuck in, so Sir El Nix probably doesn’t know I’m here.”

Osk's face was devoid of expression. He must have sniffed out something fishy. As a merchant, he surely had a nose for profit. He wouldn't go along with this if there were only losses in it for him.

"Understood."

*Huh?*

"If I publicize the fact that Your Majesty is the challenger, there will surely be people poking their noses in, so I'll keep it a secret. Any issues that come up after that I'm putting squarely on you."

"Of course. You can leave all of that up to me."

"Okay. Then can I have a bit of your time? Let's decide the date of your fight."

•

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, sir." It was the butler, who had returned after seeing off the King of Darkness, who answered Osk's question.

"I see," he said, his eyes shifting to the maid behind the butler.

"Decapitation Bunny."

*What?* He cocked his head.

Yes, "he." It was a man who looked very good in a maid uniform.

According to him, the benefit of wearing women's clothing was twofold: Opponents would underestimate him, and they wouldn't attack his crotch. Apparently, it was only that and not his preference. But since he often made such adorable gestures like the one just now, was it so groundless to wonder if he actually did like it?

Osk wasn't particularly put off by it, so he didn't care either way, but still.

Now then, his nickname: *Decapitation Bunny*.

It didn't go with his cute appearance at all, but he was a mercenary warrior-assassin known by that name who hailed from a country east of the city-state alliance.

Osk had paid a fortune to summon and contract him. He had personal escort deals with other worker teams and swordsmen, but this man was paid more than anyone.

That's how strong he was—at least orichalcum level. And since hiring him, Osk hadn't gotten mixed up in any trouble.

“Tell me what you think, having seen the King of Darkness.”

He possessed other abilities besides the ones he had as a first-rate warrior-assassin.

He could see through people. He had the power to appraise people, which came from all the bloodbaths he had fought through as a warrior-assassin—he could tell who was strong.

“He’s transcendently yikes.”

The only other one to ever get that rating was the martial king. In other words, this was the second person ever this man couldn’t defeat. Incidentally, the next level down were the empire’s Four at “yikes.”

“Is he a powerful warrior, as well?”

“I don’t know. From his footsteps, he didn’t seem strong. They weren’t the footfalls of someone who has been trained as a warrior or assassin. The older fellow next to him was more of a warrior. But—yikes. I felt sick when he was standing behind me. To the point that I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could.”

He quietly showed off his arms.

Osk’s eyes were drawn to his fists.

Round fists.

Perhaps he had punched tens, hundreds of thousands of times into blunt objects; his fists had transformed into perfect spheres. They were the hands of a fighting creature.

Osk shuddered, unable to hold back his arousal.

“What are you lookin’ at, pervert?”

“I was just thinking you had nice hands.”

He was really into hands, but unfortunately Decapitation Bunny wasn’t his type.

Sex wasn’t a big issue, but Osk’s ideal was the warrior from the Blue Roses. Decapitation Bunny wasn’t bad, but he was simply too slight compared to Gagaran. The martial king, on the other hand, was a bit too thick.

“...I won’t renew my contract for next year.”

“I can’t have that! There’s practically no one on your level... The woman heading up Ijaniya is about the only one. Oops, we’re off topic. So—” Osk averted his eyes from those round fists and looked up. Decapitation Bunny had goose bumps.

“I still don’t feel better. I’m really sick to my stomach.”

“So he’s not much of a warrior but still a dangerous opponent...?”

“He’s honestly another martial king.”

Osk realized what Decapitation Bunny meant. He really was another martial king.

In this world, there were strong races and weak races.

The weak races, of which humanity was representative, were meat bags who had neither special powers nor hard armor protecting their bodies nor the ability to see in the dark.

Meanwhile, a strong race was one like the dragons. Protected by hard scales, agile but still immensely powerful physically. Their claws and fangs could easily cut through steel; they possessed special abilities like fire and chill breath; they had wings for soaring across the sky.

They, as a species, didn’t need to train as warriors to be strong.

Decapitation Bunny was saying that the King of Darkness might be from a race like that.

Osk's knowledge said that undead were physically weak, but apparently the King of Darkness was different.

"Sir Osk, why did you take on this fight? The King of Darkness probably knows about the martial king, but we don't know anything about what he can do. It seems to me the odds are against you?"

"Wha—? You don't know why?!" Decapitation Bunny said in exasperation. "If it were me, I wouldn't be thinking about that nonsense."

The butler's questioning eyes turned to Osk. So he smiled and answered.

"Are you saying the champion should run from a challenger?"

"Is that all?"

"That's all. But it's important. If it were just to have a fight to the death, I wouldn't do it. But having a challenge declared as a match means I can't run away. I'm sure the martial king would agree."

"You're so stupid."

"Maybe. That's what it is to be a man. But we've seen that His Majesty is the type to put more of his powers on display outside a match setting. So would you rather fight him in a match setting or in a secret fight where anything goes?"

"Neither, thanks. I'll curl my tail between my legs and run away."

Osk smiled. That was the smartest move.

"All righty. Now it's your turn. What did you think of the king?"

It wasn't the tone to use with one's superior, but the butler standing behind him didn't change his expression.

He used to give off a silent disapproval—*You shouldn't talk that way to your employer*—but at some point, that had dropped off. Perhaps since the time Decapitation Bunny picked off an assassin.

"He does have charisma."

“Hrrrm.” Decapitation Bunny made a strange sound.

Osk had been watching Ainzach, but there was no sign of him being forced to do anything. In other words, the King of Darkness had something that made the people of a city he had occupied want to cooperate with him only a few months after being conquered.

“Did you see how confident he was? He definitely knows he’s strong. You can see it in the way he didn’t bring anyone besides Ainzach, the way he was able to promise not to use magic against the martial king. And he’s got a head on his shoulders, too. He seems to excel at these sorts of negotiations.”

He felt it was strange even as he said it.

The King of Darkness had treated him, a merchant, as an equal.

Usually, even nobles made more of a show of the hierarchy.

So he had a hard time understanding that.

If the king had at one time been a merchant, it might have made sense, but that couldn’t be. So maybe he really was just good at negotiating.

“Overall, I’d say he’s on the same level as our emperor.” Of course, he hadn’t seen the true extent of the king’s abilities, but he was frightening enough to make Osk feel that. “No, we should probably say he’s *at least* on par with the Fresh Blood Emperor.”

If, at the very least, he was equivalent to the empire’s most powerful emperor ever, this was a nightmare.

Osk shook his head. Thinking about it any more would paralyze him, and it wasn’t as if he wanted to peer into the abyss that was the King of Darkness anyhow. There was only one thing he needed to do now.

“...I’ve got to tell the martial king and make sure he’s in top condition for the fight.”

“Won’t he be annoyed?”

“He’s a warrior. If he learns we’ve accepted a challenge, he won’t run.”

“Hrrrm, well, I hope he can win.”

## 4

On the day of the match with the King of Darkness, Osk asked the same question he always asked.

“How are you feeling?”

“No issues. I’m in perfect condition.”

The one answering was a giant monster.

He was a troll, but there was something definitively different about him—that presence that only warriors who have battled through numerous fierce fights have.

But of course he would have that. He was a troll adapted for and specialized in combat. Of all the troll-derived races, his was the most exceptional—he was a war troll.

This was the martial king, the strongest warrior at the arena.

Osk gazed intently at his flesh.

Certainly in terms of caliber, there were many who outstripped him. At the head of that group came teams of silver or greater adventurers. But the martial king had beaten even them. The reason he could do that was extremely simple.

Basic war troll specs far surpassed those of humans.

Not only in brawn and endurance but also the wide-ranged attacks due to their enormous size.

They also had all sorts of special abilities that humans did not.

First, their skin. If the martial king wore armor on top of his thick, hard skin, he could repel nearly any blow; however, since his joints, where he needed mobility, were soft, many opponents aimed for those. But the wall that had thwarted all of those challengers was his regeneration ability.

Even if they took a hit that would definitely kill a human, a troll wouldn't die. Their astonishingly powerful regeneration ability would heal the wound. It was impossible to stop it without fire or acid.

Because of these creature strengths, the current martial king was the strongest in all of history.

The warrior whom Osk was so proud of suited up before his eyes.

It was enchanted armor made with materials Osk had hired an adamantite-plate adventurer team to collect. He had put 20 percent of his assets at the time into it. The magic metal club he held in his hand was the same.

The troll put on all his gear, including a magic ring and a magic amulet.

"I'm equipped now."

He spoke much more intelligently than he used to.

This always happened, but Osk felt warm in his chest when he looked at the martial king's brawny figure—thinking, *I'm the one who trained him to this level.*

"Then shall we get going, King?"

He walked with him—it was just the two of them—up to the entrance of the arena. That was their ritual.

The martial king kept silent after they left the room.

The reason he didn't speak was once anticipation of his opponent and excitement. Somewhere along the line, that shifted strongly toward disappointment in them. But what about this time?

The martial king suddenly stopped in his tracks.

As far as Osk could remember, this had never happened before.

Unprepared for this new behavior, when Osk anxiously looked up at him to ask what was wrong, the king slowly lifted the visor of his armet, revealing his face.

“I’m grateful to you...”

His voice was strained.

Osk blinked.

He had heard those words only three other times: when he gave him his weapon, when he gave him his armor, and after the fight with his strongest opponent yet—the previous martial king, Rotten Wolf Kullervo Parantainen. This was the fourth thank-you.

“F-for what, King?”

His eyes were fixed on the end of the hallway.

“Phoo, phoo.” His body shook slightly with the faint laughter.

*He must be trembling with excitement.*

That’s what Osk thought, but he was wrong.

“What a... What a challenger. No, am I the challenger?”

“Wh-what?”

“Phoo, phoo... I’m scared. Osk. I’m shaking in fear.”

Osk couldn’t believe his ears.

“This must be my instincts as a living being. My feet won’t move right... They’re telling me that if I go in there, I’ll die... Phoo, phoo...”

He wasn’t laughing. He was forcing exhalations of his agitated breath.

“You told me my opponent this time is the King of Darkness, but how strong is he...? Has my arrogance come back around to bite me?”

“What are you saying, King? You haven’t been arrogant.”

“I’m strong,” he declared, and Osk was about to agree with him. But the martial king

continued before he had the chance. “No, that’s a lie. My strength all stems from the characteristics of my race. It’s not true strength. Even so, there aren’t many I can count as threats—especially after gaining skill as a warrior. That’s why you never told me about the challengers’ abilities or gear. You had to do that to create a disadvantage for me. And now, finally, you’ve brought me an opponent from whom my instincts say to flee. Thank you. You’ve kept all the promises you made to me when we met.”

“King... Go Gin...”

Osk had met him nearly ten years ago.

There was a highway running through the imperial frontier where a powerful monster was said to appear. The stories went that this monster was extremely intellectual and wouldn’t kill a person who cast away their weapons. That piqued Osk’s curiosity, so he left the capital in a great hurry to meet it. He had heard that the mightiest person in the empire, Fluder Paradyne, would be dispatched to exterminate it soon.

At first, he was terrified. Of course he was. Maybe the people who had encountered it so far had been saved only by chance.

But when he finally saw him, he—the now martial king—didn’t show any interest in him. He glanced at him once, snorted, and turned to go.

That was why he forgot his terror and asked: “Why are you doing this?”

The reply he got wasn’t spoken as fluently as he could speak now: “Training to get stronger.”

Suddenly, Osk had felt like he could see.

Osk had one dream. He wanted to train a powerful warrior. His dream was to cultivate the strongest warrior to stand in for himself, since he had no aptitude. But what he realized was, *It doesn’t have to be a human*. No, on the contrary, since races other than humans had higher specs, if he wanted a warrior who was strong—the strongest—then wasn’t this the way?

There was already no sense in Osk’s mind that he was taking a monster home. He had scouted the strongest warrior, the champion of the arena, the future martial king.

Ten years later, the martial king was shaking in fear for the first time.

“King...”

Osk thought of several things he could say. The first was, *Do you want to abandon this fight?* Combatants died in these battles. Osk couldn't bear to lose the one he had trained to this level.

But he couldn't say it.

For someone strong, being worried about was a slight. So saying those words had the potential to destroy the bonds of their friendship.

There was only one thing he should say.

“Don’t lose, King.”

“Hmph. What are you talking about? I have no intention of losing. The challengers I’ve faced so far were the same. They all stood before me thinking they would win. Now it’s my turn.”

“Exactly!” Osk gave the martial king a pat. “The King of Darkness is a caster. But that would make the fight boring, so the match has been set with a rule prohibiting the use of magic on either side. You can’t lose against a caster who can’t cast.”

“...Magic? He agreed to fight me even under that condition?”

“Yep. He seemed like he couldn’t even fathom losing.”

“Ohhh...?” The martial king clenched his fists. They were like giant hammers. “The strong are so full of themselves. I’ll teach him how foolish he was.”

“That’s the spirit! But don’t let your guard down. He casually gave away the sort of fabulous weapon that would make your eyes pop out. He probably has a ton of surprisingly powerful magic items.”

Limiting the use of magic items would probably increase the martial king’s odds of winning. But that would be too big a handicap.

“That’s no problem. Right now I’m mentally prepared as a challenger. My guard is impenetrable. There will be no defeat for me besides one based on ability.”

The martial king strode forward with solid steps, and Osk hurried to catch up and walk beside him.

“Hey, by the way, did you consider that thing we talked about before?”

The martial king stopped short and made an extremely displeased face. “A thing we talked about before? You mean... that thing?”

“Yeah, a wife for you.”

“Why are you bringing this up now...? Hoo-haaa.”

The martial king laughed, and Osk blushed as he frowned. *If you understand, then don't act all weird.*

“Sheesh, aren’t there better ways for you to root for me? Don’t make me say it so many times... If I want a wife, I’ll go back to my hometown. The candidate you’re talking about is human, right? I’m grateful, but please spare me with the humans. I’m not into any perverted stuff. Or rather, how gross is it that a human would want to sleep with me? What kind of fetish would that even be? Plus, you want my kid, right? There’s no way for me to have one with a human.”

Children could be born with humanoids, but children with subhumans were heard of only in stories.

“Well, yeah... Then bring a wife back with you. If there’s anything you need to make your triumphant return, tell me and I’ll arrange it.”

“...Just so you know, humans are food to us trolls. My wife might not hesitate to eat you guys.”

Osk felt like he didn’t mind if useless humans were used as food, but he didn’t say that.

“I see. Then bring me your child before they acquire a taste for humans. If I give them a special education, they’re sure to surpass even you.”

The martial king twisted up his face in an amused way. “That’s very interesting. Yeah. I’ll give it some serious thought.”

"Your Majesty. Can you really win?"

In response to Ainzach's question, Ainz gave the same response he had already given over and over. "It won't be a problem."

To take on a fight with no hope of winning made someone either a true hero or a mere fool. This wasn't an encounter battle. It could be said that everything would be decided at the preparation stage.

Ainz recalled all the information they had gathered.

If the martial king was equivalent to the Giant of the East, he could win, no problem. If he was as mighty a warrior as Gazef, though, his race and class levels would combine to make him quite a handful.

But...

*This is such an unfair fight to begin with. That's why I asked Fluder for a favor.*

Ainz had abilities that made him completely immune to lower-tier attacks. His opponent may have been the martial king, but he didn't think he could breach that protection.

That was why he had canceled it.

A fight he could win for sure was no good.

In the war, Ainz had killed over a hundred thousand people with his spell. In *Yggdrasil*, experience points were adjusted for level disparity. The lowest number possible was one. In other words, he should have gotten over a hundred thousand experience points for that. Given the number of experience points he had saved up before being transported, it wouldn't have been strange if he had leveled up. But Ainz didn't feel that anything special like leveling up had happened.

In other words, Ainz really couldn't get any stronger than he already was.

But that didn't mean he could be satisfied.

If his level cap was 100, he couldn't do anything about that. He needed to polish his technique until he could make full use of the abilities from those 100 levels perfectly.

If he just assumed that he would always be the strongest and rested on his laurels, he would be ousted someday.

Ainz had judged himself capable with a magic class, because the abilities he had trained up in *Yggdrasil* were valid here as well. But he hadn't worked very hard back then on abilities and skills that were useful in the vanguard.

*I learned a lot in that fight with that one woman.*

He still felt nothing but gratitude for the woman who taught him that he was lacking in frontline skills.

It was that fight that inspired him to boost his close-quarters combat ability. And now he felt that not only with ability points but in technique and strategy as well, he was confident he was equivalent to a specialized level-33 warrior. He was looking forward to this fight with the martial king as a test of that.

Ainz looked at his neck.

*I probably didn't have the leisure to wear that collar thing. And frankly, that time against the workers, I didn't feel like I got a ton of experience points or learned any new skills. Honestly, it was probably pointless.*

As Ainz was thinking those things, he recalled a more important issue.

*Oh, Jircniv is going to be watching, right? Why is he coming? All the times I was spying on him, he didn't come once, so I thought it would be okay. He must know I snuck in... Well, I'll just apologize and beg for forgiveness. If he protests, asking if he requested permission from the Re-Estize Kingdom the time he came to Nazarick should get rid of any problems... Should I go say hi? If I don't greet him, I'll make an even worse impression...*

"Y-your Majesty, it's almost time for you to enter the arena." Someone from the arena came into the room with the announcement.

They had seen each other several times now, but every time the man saw Ainz's face, he stiffened up.

He did wonder if it would be better to fight with his face covered, but he had been given permission to hold a presentation for the audience after he won against the

martial king. Maybe some of the people in the arena today would come knocking on the Nation of Darkness's door to become adventurers. In that sense, he figured it was better not to hide anything.

All he could do was trust his choices.

Ainz walked slowly forward.

Usually, the person of higher status would enter later, but in the arena, Ainz was the challenger—the lower rank—so he entered first. Naturally, he took it in stride and said nothing.

Ainzach looked worried, and Ainz smiled at him.

It struck him as strange that Ainzach was more worried than he was even though he was the one fighting.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Ainzach. I’m not going to lose.”

•

After greeting Jircniv, Ainz returned to the arena.

He had promised not to use any magic, but the fight hadn’t begun yet. Surely they would be lenient about that much.

*...He didn’t seem very mad even though I entered the country illegally. Will I get an earful later? Or does he think I went through the proper channels? In that case, maybe I was a bit too self-conscious, thinking he might want to hold a welcoming ceremony for me and whatnot... I left off the rest of his name and called him Jircniv—did that bother him?*

Ainz scoffed at his own thoughts and shifted his gaze to the opposite entrance.

The martial king hadn’t appeared yet.

*Now, then...*

Ainz scanned the crowd.

A shocked silence reigned—to the point that the slightest stir made a racket.

*Well, I can't help it... No, guy, this isn't a mask.*

Ainz stroked his smooth face. Now he knew. The only humans who could see his face and remain unfazed had balls.

*That's why I can become a superstar all at once by getting everyone here excited.*

His goal wasn't to get popular, but it was better to be popular than unpopular. And if people's opinions of undead improved, couldn't that improve their opinion of the Nation of Darkness, where he ruled over undead, too?

Ainz tightened his grip on his staff.

The weapons he, as a pure caster-class build, could equip were rather limited. They were mainly staves and daggers. This time he chose a staff for physical attacks; he had crafted it during his *Yggdrasil* days but never really used it. And it was from so long ago that it wasn't very strong. Ainz as he was now could surely have created a much more optimized weapon.

But he didn't.

Considering the disparity in power between the martial king and him, he had opted to go with weapons he already possessed.

For the *Yggdrasil* player Satoru Suzuki, that decision was the height of folly and an unforgivable mistake. If his friends were here, they would have chided him—*You can't do that; c'mon now.*

But Ainz had heard from Fluder about the powers of the martial king's magic items, so he figured that, as training, he should push himself this much.

He didn't want to give the audience a one-sided trampling. He was aiming for a moderately crushing victory.

“Ladies and gentlemen! From the north entrance, here comes the martial king!”

An earsplitting cheer went up, one completely different from when he had entered. Among the screams, Ainz heard Jircniv hollering at the top of his lungs from his box seat.

*...Well he seems awfully excited. Is he really so into the martial king? I suppose the king of the arena is like an idol, so maybe it's the natural reaction? At PvP matches in Yggdrasil, the strong guys were always popular, too...*

Recalling fond memories from his *Yggdrasil* days, Ainz felt sorry for Jircniv.

*It'll probably be a shock if I win... There were times I had clients who were out of sorts when their favorite teams lost, too...*

He felt discouraged, but he couldn't very well throw the match.

A large shadow appeared in the opposite entrance.

He didn't think the cheer could possibly get any louder, but it did. It was truly like an explosion.

Honestly, he would have liked them to give him a bit of that applause, but he would simply steal it by force.

In his *Yggdrasil* days, when the challenger put up a good fight, the balance of the cheers slowly began to shift. That meant that if Ainz put up a good fight against the martial king, the number of voices cheering for him was sure to grow.

*And a reversal coming from practically no cheers will be pretty good in terms of promotion, too, I imagine.*

The martial king came slowly into view.

Full-body armor and a huge club.

At the sight of his figure like an impregnable fortress, Ainz's eyes—the red flames in his vacant orbits—narrowed and sharpened.

*Hmm... He looks as I heard. So— No, that's too hasty. I'll be cautious.*

He had analyzed the intelligence he received from Fluder Paradyne, but none of his opponent's gear would be fatal.

But in *Yggdrasil*, some people would prepare a set of gear that looked the same but was loaded with entirely different data. In one-on-one combat such as PvP, those kinds

of subtle bluffs could affect one's rate of wins. Spare gear tended to be slightly weaker than main pieces, but catching one's opponent by surprise had a bigger effect than stat strength.

There was nothing to guarantee that the martial king wasn't pulling that sort of trick.

With that in mind, Ainz continued to observe him.

He had heard about him, but now that he was right there before his eyes, he thought, *I see*. It was a case of a picture being worth a thousand words. According to what he'd heard from Fluder about what was beneath the armor, the martial king was similar to the war troll he'd killed and made into a zombie, but the atmosphere about him was entirely different.

It was like the difference between a wild boar and a pig.

"This is... interesting... Interesting?"

Ainz frowned at himself getting all excited. He felt the same thing back then, too, but he had grown warlike, or combat crazy, or, in any case, he seemed to look forward to fighting now.

It wasn't a very good trend.

The distance between them shortened, and his opponent called out to him.

"I am the war troll known as the martial king, Go Gin."

"I"—Ainz puffed out his chest—"am Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. I'm an overlord, which is the most powerful undead race."

"I see. Then I'll fight with all my might."

"...Oh?" Ainz found that strange.

He had two questions, but he asked the bigger one.

"You're not going to make fun of my name?"

"Why would I?"

“Why...?”

Having it asked back at him made Ainz cock his head. Back then, he was sure he had been made fun of for his name...

“Isn’t there something about long names or whatnot?”

“Oh. You seem to know quite a bit about my race, Your Majesty. It’s true that my race views short names as stronger. But I’ve been living in this country for years now. During that time, I learned that powerful humans have long names. So I don’t make fun of people’s names. And I sensed that you take pride in your name, Your Majesty. Insulting a fighter’s name should be shameful for a warrior.”

“I see... Apparently, I need to adjust my thinking when it comes to the war troll race.”

“Hoo-ha-ha-ha-ha. That’s not necessary. I’m an outlier. Besides, regardless of race, there is always a diversity of thought. That’s all it is.”

“...Ha-ha-ha-ha! Right you are. I like you, King... If I win, join me.”

Ainz slowly extended his right hand.

Previously, he had been rejected, but these circumstances were completely different. The martial king hesitated only briefly and then gave his answer.

“...Sure. If I lose, I’ll serve you. So what if I win?”

“That’s a difficult question. What do you want? Tell me your wish.”

“...To eat you.”

“.....Huh?”

“Until now, I’ve never met anyone worth killing and eating. But you’re stronger than I am, so if I eat you, I can absorb your power.”

Ainz was slightly relieved. Once, a guildmate of his had explained vore culture to him, and while it could all be called “people eating,” there were various different motivations for it, from absorbing spiritual energy like the martial king wanted to do to sexual predilections.

*I'm glad he's not about getting off on it. Not that I'm going to lose, but it would feel nasty to fight while being ogled like that.*

"That's fine. Either way, the victor holds the other's life in their hands. So don't refuse Resurrection if I kill you!"

When Ainz took a step forward, the martial king braced himself for an instant, but then relaxed his posture.

Ainz stood before him and held out his right hand, and the martial king responded with his own giant right hand.

It was less like a handshake than being wrapped up in the martial king's hand. The crowd sent up a huge cheer.

"So let me ask one more thing. Why are you using my title when you talk to me?"

The martial king's attitude wasn't the one a champion should use toward a challenger.

"It's only natural to show respect to someone with power."

"I see... That makes sense. Those were my only questions. Shall we begin? What do you want to do about our starting distance? How about like we were before—about ten yards? If the arena has a specific rule, I'll follow it."

"There's no rule about starting distance. But are you sure that's enough? Just a little closer and you're in my attack range."

"It's a handicap, a handicap."

The martial king didn't reply but nodded as if to say he understood.

Ainz couldn't see his face, but his movements and breathing were the very picture of composure.

Did he see through the provocation? Or was it not even enough to offend him?

Ainz mentally clicked his tongue.

This guy was tricky. If his opponent was emotional, he could take advantage of that,

but if he showed no signs of carelessness, Ainz couldn't underestimate him even if he was of lesser strength. The martial king turned his back to Ainz and took some distance.

With about ten yards between them, he turned back around.

"Shall we begin at the sound of the bell, Your Majesty?"

"Yeah... Hey, King. I've fought a member of the same race as you before, but have you ever fought one of mine?"

"An overlord, right? No, I haven't. That's an undead... race I haven't heard of before."

"Oh... Right. If you had ever met someone the same race as me, you probably wouldn't be standing here now. Overlords are the most elite undead... So have you faced any other types of undead?"

"I've never fought an undead—because the undead who get brought to this arena aren't worth my time."

"Ah... That means I can't tell you not to consider me the same as the undead you've fought before. I'm several times more powerful than an elder lich... Oh well."

It seemed like the martial king smiled slightly.

Ainz shrugged and held up the staff like a big sword. Ainzach was probably watching from behind him, but he had never seen how Momon fought, so it wasn't a problem.

The martial king held up his club.

The bell rang.

And at that moment, a large shadow fell over Ainz.

*Tch! He's fast!*

It was the shadow of the club being swung down at him.

*Take it with the staff*—was an idea he rejected immediately. Until he knew a bit more about his opponent, it was best to dodge any heavy attacks that seemed liable to cause

major damage.

So he decided he didn't mind losing his balance and threw himself out of harm's way.

He just barely succeeded in dodging, and the club slammed into the ground. A sound like the rumbling of the earth echoed out. Dirt and dust went flying as if there had been an explosion.

Fearing a follow-up attack, Ainz took a few more steps back.

The cloud of dust cleared, and he could see the figure of the martial king with his club clearly once more.

A huge cheer echoed throughout the arena.

*Was that some sort of martial art? But wow... everyone sure is excited.*

The roar was loud enough that it hurt his ears, but he could hear Jircniv's voice clearly. "Kill him! Now's your chance!" He was shouting like a child.

Ainz chuckled at the uncharacteristic behavior. He couldn't have guessed he would act like this from what he had seen of him inside the imperial palace.

*...Maybe he's more fun than I thought.*

Jircniv's likability points shot up in Ainz's head. He thought he was more of an emperor-like perfection of a man, but seeing him like this at the match, he felt as though they might be able to get along even better than expected—he sensed an affinity.

Ainz refocused himself on the martial king.

He was pointing the club at Ainz and seemed like he would intercept if Ainz approached or pursue if he withdrew. It was a stance that made for the best check on one's opponent's movements.

It used the length of his weapon for defense, like a shield.

Frankly, Ainz couldn't think of a way to break that stance.

*I... don't really know what to do... When you're evenly matched, I guess it is pretty tough*

*to go without magic. I mean, I am a caster after all...*

Then his only option was...

“What is it? Not going to attack? You’re huddled up like a turtle in its shell!”

“Your Majesty, I won’t be careless. Even with the no-magic rule, I can’t underestimate you if you can dodge an attack like that.”

“So you’re telling me to attack, then? Then how about you move that club a bit? It’s in my way, so I can’t really do much.”

The martial king didn’t answer, but Ainz could feel his sharp eyes peering through the slit in his visor, trying to take in his entire form.

“I see... Then I suppose I’ll go.”

Ainz took his staff and hit the tip of the club with all his might. The club whacked into the ground, and at the same time, the martial king groaned, “Guh!”

The shock should have left his hands numb, whereas Ainz’s body didn’t have that issue.

That instant, Ainz charged head-on into attacking distance.

He sent a mental order to his staff to shoot flames—although in this case, “shoot flames” merely meant enveloping itself in them; it wasn’t as if he was attacking with the fire. But Ainz felt the martial king’s eyes shift from him to his weapon.

*Yep. You have a troll’s regenerative ability, so it’s only natural that you would be distracted by a weapon that can inflict wounds—via fire or acid—it won’t work on. But that will prove fatal.*

Ainz lightly touched the martial king’s armor with his free left hand. The martial king abruptly spasmed as if he’d been struck by lightning, and the club swung around.

“Guh!”

Ainz failed to dodge, and his body was thrown with a cracking sound. Since he didn’t have Greater Physical Damage Immunity on, the damage dealt to his body, affected by Battering Weapon Vulnerability, was major. Ainz spun through the air like a ball for a

few—no, over ten yards.

Then he crashed into the ground and rolled.

A thunderous cheer rose.

Ainz could hear Jircniv loudly celebrating the fact that Ainz was tumbling across the ground, and he felt the likability points he had had until a moment ago drop away.

*Our countries are allies, you know. If the king of an allied country falls down, you should at least worry a little! C'mon!*

He had taken damage, but Ainz no longer felt any pain; he remained lying on the ground and watched the martial king.

There was no follow-up attack.

The cheers slowly died down, and a suspicion began to grow in their place. Why wasn't the martial king attacking? No, more pressingly, why was the martial king bent over like that? Why was he moving so slowly?

Ainz stood up nimbly and brushed the dust off his body to boldly show that being thrown like that had caused him no pain.

Meanwhile, the martial king was moving through molasses.

Ainz chuckled to himself.

This was a good show.

Amid the growing murmur, Ainz returned to his previous position. The suspicious voice of the martial king reached him there.

“Wh-what...? This isn’t... poison, I don’t think? So what in the world...?”

“I wouldn’t break the rules like that. This fight is fair and square. That said, although poison isn’t correct, it’s not so far off, either. I can pour negative energy into someone via touch. But you should be able to heal it with your regeneration power as a troll.”

Ainz gave the fingers on the hand he used to touch him a threatening wiggle.

"But there's one other power I can use via touch, and that is to harm a person's physical ability. I injured your strength and agility. You probably can't heal that, can you?"

As far as Ainz knew, a troll's regeneration ability was only good for healing damage. It couldn't fix debuffs.

"In other words, King, the more I touch you, the weaker you'll get. And eventually you'll be crawling around like a caterpillar."

Of course, that was a lie.

It was true that he could subtract points from an opponent's stats, but there was a limit. They would never hit zero. But there was no way for the martial king to know that.

That said, other undead had similar abilities, so Ainz wasn't sure if he was really so uninformed or not. The martial king may have been bluffing when he said he had never fought any other undead, or he could have the knowledge without the experience.

That's why Ainz was honest about his race.

By burning it into the martial king's memory that overlords were an immensely powerful race he'd never heard of, he had made him think that Ainz's abilities were completely different than any he knew of. Mentioning that they were "elite" was another way to punch up his anxiety.

And the reason he had explained his power to the martial king just now, though he certainly didn't have to, was to confound him with false information.

*In a broad sense, fighting is trading in deceptions.*

Ainz calmly observed as the martial king didn't attempt to heal the stat hit.

He was watching to see if he was bluffing.

It was possible he had a way to heal but was refraining from using it to try to lure Ainz into opening up a critical hole in his defenses. Or maybe he had one of those inborn talents Ainz knew nothing about.

The only time it was possible to stomp someone head-on was if the power gap was overwhelming.

“...The penalties my ability gives don’t fade with time. I’ll chip away at your physical ability and then finish you off with my staff. Do you understand? Then let’s get back to it.”

Ainz took a step forward, and the martial king slowly braced himself.

Since he was wearing a helmet, Ainz couldn’t see his face. Was he smirking or agitated?

*Hopefully the latter...*

When he stretched out his left hand, the martial king moved. He was plenty on guard.

He was probably wondering, though, if all he needed to be wary of was that left hand.

And that was the correct way to think. Ainz’s experiments had yielded the result that touching with any body part activated the attack. He could even do it with a head-butt if he wanted.

When Ainz continued going forward, the martial king gradually put more distance between them.

Ainz smiled faintly.

The way they were moving now, did the audience even understand who was leading?

*Do you know anything about the gap between you and me, King? You may be the better warrior, but there’s one definitive disparity.*

The biggest gap was between their hit points.

Ainz was level 100 and had the health to go with it. If they both abandoned defense and decided to slug it out, Ainz would emerge victorious.

The issue was martial arts and other attacks outside the realm of Ainz’s knowledge.

“...In this fight with you, I added another rule besides prohibiting magic spells. It’s about magic items. There wasn’t any limit on what sort of magic items we could equip.

But that would have given me way too big an advantage."

Ainz had acquired a plethora of magic items in *Yggdrasil*. All were pieces of gear without parallel in this world. Which was why if he had used them, he probably would have easily claimed victory over the martial king. He just didn't feel that was the correct way to fight.

So he had clad himself only in lesser magic items.

"So I put a limit in place. I decided I wouldn't use anything on a level higher than what you might have. But I thought of it as a chance to use newly acquired weapons."

Ainz stuck his staff into the ground, gripped two of the four stilettos at his hips, and drew them.

"I'll go ahead and use the weapons I borrowed from Momon."

The martial king probably didn't understand Ainz's joke. And Ainz didn't intend him to. He was basically just talking to himself.

"So here I come!"

Ainz couldn't do that odd stance—that crouching start—but with training, he had managed to acquire a similar running style. Like a loosed arrow, he whipped toward the martial king as fast as he could.

It was a short distance. But even though he covered that space in the blink of an eye, the martial king's club came swinging after him. Due to the strength penalty, it was moving a bit slower than before, but it was still on a direct collision course.

Ainz couldn't evade with the magnificent skill of that one woman. But there was something he could do that she couldn't.

When he released the ability, the martial king froze for just a moment.

In that opening, Ainz closed the distance between them and thrust a stiletto into his right shoulder. He moved fast and used all the energy in his body, so it was like an arrow attack.

The attack back then had been able to dent the armor harder than adamantite that

Ainz had crafted with magic. An equivalent attack now pierced the martial king's armor, went through his skin, and stabbed a stiletto into his body.

But at that moment—

“Reinforce Outer Skin, Super Reinforce Outer Skin!”

It seemed like the martial king's arts activated.

As if something were being emitted from inside, the tip of the stiletto was pushed back.

The full force Ainz could currently generate was, surprisingly, only enough to give the martial king a tiny scratch. It was a superficial wound that the troll's regeneration ability would heal in seconds.



There was no doubt the martial king was relieved. Ainz could sense it in the club that came to bat him away. The fact that Ainz's strongest attack could deal him only a scratch guaranteed his victory.

But that was a foolish way to think.

“—Activate.”

“Goh! Gwahhhhhh!”

The magic was released, and the Fireball Ainz had had Fluder load into the stiletto burned the martial king's body where it was stabbed. Then he drove another stiletto into the opposite shoulder, but the blow wasn't forceful enough, and it was repelled by the martial king's armor.

Changing his strategy to aim for the gaps in the armor, Ainz sensed the martial king's movements and ran up alongside him without looking.

The gust of wind behind him had probably been the club.

After running about ten yards as if he was fleeing, Ainz turned around.

The martial king was holding his shoulder with his club hand, and his other hand hung down limply, seemingly immobile. *Was Fluder's magic too strong? I should have gotten a weaker caster to load the spells for me.*

When the crowd realized the martial king was at an overwhelming disadvantage, a cheer like a shriek rose.

Ainz scanned the arena.

No matter where he looked in the stands, no one seemed to be supporting him.

*That's strange... In Yggdrasil, it wouldn't be weird for some people to start rooting for me about now... I guess it's rough being the away team.*

“Whatever. I give up on grabbing their hearts. Now then... King. Next up, I'm killing you.”

Ainz put away the spent stilettos and took out the other two. These contained tier-three acid attack spells. They were a precaution for the case that the martial king had

prepared himself with perfect immunity to fire.

The martial king seemed to have taken damage from the fire, but Ainz didn't know for sure that he wasn't acting. Monsters with regeneration abilities weren't able to fully protect themselves from every type of attack that would prevent them from being used—but that was how it worked in *Yggdrasil*.

Maybe in this world, it was possible.

Of course, if that happened, he planned to activate a skill that would make it clear in the crowd's eyes—in anyone's eyes—who would win and kill him, but still.

"If you admit defeat... we can leave it at this."

"No... Your Majesty. I'm not finished yet. I'm still the martial king, the king of this arena. I will fight to the death."

"Then take off that helmet and show me your face."

It was probably a strange request, but the martial king removed his helmet to reveal his face.

His forehead was flooded with sweat, and his face was twisted into a grimace, perhaps because he was enduring an excruciating amount of pain. Still, his eyes were energetic.

"Those are good eyes. They remind me of Gazef Stronoff."

"Thanks. I'm glad to be praised by one as strong as you."

"...I'll ask you: Do you have any moves that will allow you to beat me? Can you make a comeback?"

"No. But I'm still going to fight."

Ainz felt a little pathetic for his various bluffs. Of course, to make this a good fight, he had sealed off a lot of his powers.

Wasn't fighting his hardest the correct thing to do if his opponent was taking this seriously?

He found the martial king and his head-on, all-in combat style extremely admirable.

"I wonder what the guardians would make of the sparkle in your eyes..."

They would probably still look down on anyone from outside Nazarick. In that case... Ainz felt mild anxiety and loneliness welling up inside him.

He shook it off and slowly held up his stilettos.

The martial king wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm and replaced his helmet.

"Come at me, King!"

"Graaahhhhhhhh!"

With a roar, his hulking form closed in on Ainz.

His increased speed compared to before was probably due to a martial art.

He was surprisingly fast and huge. The overwhelming power of that synergistic pairing would surely paralyze some. No, any normal person wouldn't be able to move. But those kinds of psychic effects didn't work on undead.

Ainz glared calmly at the martial king.

He was fast—but that was all.

Perhaps because the shoulder Ainz had stabbed wasn't moving, he was off-balance.

*He's definitely inferior to that guy...*

But more importantly—

*Have you figured out the true nature of my detainment ability? If not, this is it for you.*

Ainz activated the same ability as before.

Aura of Despair I (fear).

There were five levels to this ability:

I caused fear.

II caused panic.

III caused confusion.

IV caused madness.

V caused instadeath.

Fear was a status ailment that debuffed all sorts of functions.

Panic was a strong version of fear that demanded full-speed flight—which meant that the target couldn't take any combat actions.

Confusion was literal. Unless it was cured, the confusion would continue for a set time period.

And madness was a particularly troublesome negative status effect that lasted. With magic or other treatment administered by a third party, it would never go away.

It goes without saying that instadeath meant death.

The effect changed in that way as the level increased.

Of these, the one Ainz used was fear. He activated it just for a moment and then canceled it. By doing that, Ainz created a gap between what his opponent's brain thought it was doing and what the opponent's body was actually doing. That induced a feeling of being frozen.

But the martial king must have known that would happen if he went at him swinging. He brandished his club despite the collapse of balance between his brain and body.

There were debuffs from Ainz's touch and the debuffs from fear. All things considered, it should have been easy to dodge his attack, but—

“Strong Blow! Godly Flash!”

Ainz saw a light.

The same moment, a horrible pain—which was instantly suppressed to a bearable level—and the feeling that his body was floating assailed him.

“Flow Acceleration!”

Then from above, a dull pain and another in the next instant.

For a moment, Ainz had trouble grasping his situation and was nearly confused, but then he returned to himself.

It had probably been a chain attack. He had been thrown up with the first blow and slammed into the ground with the second.

Satoru Suzuki probably would have descended into confusion, unable to figure it out, but Ainz Ooal Gown wasn’t affected by such negative status effects.

He knew he was on the ground and that the club was swinging again.

“Tch!”

Ainz rolled out of the way just as the club crashed down. Perhaps it was a martial art? The shock traveled through the ground to hit Ainz.

But it didn’t do him any damage.

Just as Ainz jumped to his feet, the club jerked out of the ground where it had burrowed slightly. The scoop-like blow contained enough impact to indicate that the martial king intended to end the fight with it.

Ainz made the split-second decision to take it with the dagger in his hand. He went flying again. The crowd roared even louder than before, but the martial king emitted a disappointed curse, “Shit!” He had probably wanted to keep the pressure on and finish him off.

After flying a few yards, Ainz rolled, nimbly regained his stance, and murmured bitterly, “No way to come back, ‘ey? You tricked me. Squishy Moe would give me a talking-to.”

Like Ainz, the martial king was keeping his ace moves under wraps until the last moment. It meant he was also a first-rate warrior.

Ainz put away one stiletto to free up a hand.

In his arrogance, thinking he would end the fight quickly, he had taken not one but two hits. He was done being so naive. He would decide this fight by precisely shaving down his opponent's energy.

*Geez, they're loud...*

The yells from the crowd were annoying. The shriek had turned into a huge cheer. Especially—

*Jircniv, what the heck! What do you mean, "Kill him"?! Sheesh.*

Ainz slowly began to move. The damage wasn't much, but he had learned the pain of carelessness. He wouldn't make that mistake twice.

*Still, I really don't understand martial arts. Those moves didn't exist in Yggdrasil... Could they have been created as a way to counter Yggdrasil players, or am I overthinking it...? Whoops, so should I assume that that earlier art was for putting some speed on that strike? He may come at me with the same move again, so... if he draws blood, I'll... be sure to pick a bone?*

Ainz entered the martial king's attack range, and the martial king swung his club down. Ainz didn't dodge.

He barreled straight ahead, taking the blow.

Along with the heaviness, some pain coursed through him, but with their gap in HP, he could pull this off. Everything was fine. Plus, Ainz's body instantly suppressed pain. A living being might not have been able to endure it, but for him, it was no problem.

In the same motion, he touched the martial king. Right after attacking—and with the effects of fear from Ainz's aura—sure enough, it was too hard for him to evade.

Hugging in close, he moved around the martial king's back to touch him more. Of course, while he was debuffing his stats, he was also pumping negative energy into him through his armor.

“Uohhhgh!”

This time the one to roll and take some distance was the martial king.

Ainz wondered if he should follow up or not, but he stayed still, unsure if the martial king had a secret up his sleeve.

The king sluggishly held up his weapon. His breath was rough, and he had none of the vigor he had when Ainz first met him.

Ainz clenched his hand around the stiletto.

He had made his preparations. All that was left was to finish him off.

Perhaps the martial king noticed the change in his energy. He took off his helmet and hurled it away.

As Ainz watched, perplexed, the martial king removed the rest of his armor. Despite the debuffs, the armor shouldn't have been so heavy that he couldn't move freely.

But when he saw the king's expression of resolve, he understood what his plan was.

*Aha! The armor might block the stiletto, but it won't do anything against the debuffs. And I sure threatened him enough. So he's gotten even just a little lighter and will throw himself into attacking, betting on my HP being low.*

That was his last—bad—bet.

“Tell me... Am I weak?”

“What?”

“Your Majesty hasn't been fighting seriously at all this whole time. Though your wings of magic are clipped, I can see that you're still at ease. Am I really... that weak?”

Ainz closed his eyes, thought for a few seconds, and then opened them. “Yes, you're weak.”

“..... Oh.”

The arena had fallen silent.

Their voices couldn't have reached the crowd. But maybe it was obvious to their eyes, too, that the fight had been decided.

"In this duel, I've made all sorts of magic items off-limits and prohibited myself from using all sorts of abilities."

"Because if you didn't, it would have been over instantaneously?"

Ainz nodded, affirmative. "Yes. But I know all about you. Which is why..." Ainz shook his head. This couldn't be consolatory. "Well, it's just too bad you had to face me. If you're the strongest in the empire, then... I'm probably one of the strongest in the world."

"I see... But... this has been fun. Knowing there are heights above the heights makes for good training motivation."

"I sort of get what you mean."

Some of his old friends, like Touch Me, he had never been able to beat in PvP, but coming up with the strategies and equipment to try was a fond memory.

Ainz smiled at the martial king, and the martial king smiled back.

"...Now then, shall we?"

"Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. In the end, I would like Your Majesty to show me your true power, even just a small part of it. I want to experience the peak!"

The martial king raised his weapon with determination.

"Ah... All right, then... Know the heights!"

Ainz unleashed a skill as he walked forward.

He entered the martial king's attack range. The martial king swung his club.

The speed of it coming down was on another level from the windup. Maybe it was being supported by an art. But it was still awfully slow compared to before the debuffs.

The club smashed into Ainz's body, but he didn't pay it any attention.

The martial king could no longer deal any damage to Ainz.

He continued walking forward as if the blow had been a spring breeze.

A storm of hits rained down on him, but he continued walking, looking the martial king in the eye.

Just as the martial king smiled in defeat, Ainz stabbed him—he didn't even try to back away—through the chest with the stiletto. Then he unleashed the spell inside it.

•

Ainz looked down at the fallen corpse of the martial king.

Then he activated the magic item he had borrowed. It was just a megaphone.

“Listen, people of the empire! I am Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness!”

The way his voice echoed forever in the silence gave him nerves. He decided to get this over quickly.

“I'm currently forming a state-run adventurer training organization in my country—because I think it will benefit my nation to cultivate adventurers, protect them, and have them travel the world for me. Many adventurers are tasked with surviving on their abilities alone. But how many of those meet a tragic end before their gifts blossom?”

Ainz thought of the adventurer team he had traveled with briefly.

“...That's why I'm making the Adventurers Guild an organ of the state to back them up! I'm sure some people worry that they'll be robbed of their freedom and chained down in a state-run organization. And I can't say that isn't one factor. But as I proved just now, we have plenty of martial power. I don't intend to make adventurers pawns of war. What the Nation of Darkness seeks is people who want to go on true adventures! If there is anyone out there who wants to seek the unknown and learn about the world and dreams of becoming an adventurer, come and see me! You probably can't even imagine the power that will be assisting you until you're full-fledged. I'll give you a peek right now!”

Ainz walked over to the martial king.

"The martial king is dead! Does anyone care to confirm this?"

There was no response.

"Death is the end. But... if there is anyone here with the knowledge, then they know—that it's possible to overcome it!"

Ainz took out a rod and touched it to the martial king's chest.

If he didn't resurrect, it would be a huge embarrassment. The heart Ainz didn't have was pounding.

"Behold!"

As he activated the rod, a breath escaped the martial king's mouth. And a beat later, his chest moved.

"Normally, only a high-ranking priest can use resurrection magic! But it's not difficult for me! That said, it does take a fair bit of money! I have overcome death, and I will back you up and support your training! Come to my country if you aim to be a true adventurer!"

Amid the commotion, Ainz cast Fly.

He was headed for the box where Jircniv was seated.

When he peeked inside, only Jircniv and two guards were there. It seemed like everyone else had left. Ainz was glad to have fewer nuisances, but he didn't say so.

"Apologies about before, Sir Jircniv. Oh, it looks like you've got some color back in your face. That's a relief."

*Apparently, it really was just a head rush. Yeah, he was cheering so energetically, so it must have only lasted a second.*

"Sorry to worry you, Sir Gown."

"No, no, never you mind. It's only natural to be worried if a friend seems ill."

"I'm grateful for your concern. And what a magnificent match that was. I'd expect nothing less from you, Sir Gown. You utterly crushed the empire's strongest warrior; the only word for it really is *magnificent*."

"No, it was a good fight. Either one of us could have won, but it seems luck was on my side."

*Jircniv was rooting so hard for the martial king, he must have been quite a fan. So it shouldn't hurt to praise him.*

Or more like—

*Dude, you didn't cheer for me at all. I was paying attention, you know.*

Of course he didn't say any of those things. If he thought it over calmly, it was obvious which a person would pick if offered a choice between their own country's warrior and someone from a different country.

If he had rooted for Ainz, his likability gauge—Peroroncino used to use that word—would have filled up some, but oh well.

"It didn't look like that to me, but if you say so, then it must be true. Now then, er—I beg your pardon. What are we doing chatting like this?"

"Really, ha."

Ainz agreed. Or rather, he didn't want to talk to Jircniv for so long in a place like this.

He wanted to avoid anyone noticing that Ainz Ooal Gown was just an ordinary guy.

He had been curious if Jircniv would say anything about the Nation of Darkness's proclamation or the fact that he had entered the country in secret, but it didn't seem like he was being reproached. In that case, all he had to do was get out of there.

"Well, this time..." He was about to say *was unofficial*, but he held it back, realizing that would be tightening the noose around his own neck. "...was nice, but I'll be going now. Let's meet again another day, Sir Jircniv."

Personally, he wanted to teleport away, but he had to go retrieve Ainzach. As he was thinking that he would land, grab him, and then teleport, he noticed that Jircniv was

watching him with a sober expression.

*He's definitely going to say something weird.*

Ainz looked back at Jircniv with a feeling that was familiar to him from being a company employee.

"Your Majesty. I have a suggestion, if I may."

What a wonderful world it would have been if he could have said, *You may not.*

Ainz cut the escapism and smiled—though his face didn't move—as he said, "Sure."

"Then I—no, the Baharuth Empire wishes to be a subject state to the Nation of Darkness."

"..... Huh?" Ainz murmured in spite of himself. It was so unexpected.

The words took a moment to sink in.

"S-subject state?"

The guards—Ainz remembered seeing them before—were also shocked, their eyes huge.

Ainz suddenly had the urge to put a hand on Jircniv's forehead.

Why was he suddenly asking to be a vassal? What kind of relationship would a subject state have to the kingdom anyhow? Though he understood the words, he wasn't sure what the definition would be. How autonomous would it be, and so on?

In any case, Ainz couldn't decide something this important on his own. He needed to consult with Demiurge and Albedo before replying.

"...Sir Jircniv. When it comes to your country being a subject state or whatnot..."

*What happened to building a friendship and being king buddies? Er...*

What was he supposed to say after "a subject state or whatnot"? Was it fine to say he had never even considered the possibility?

And it was possible that Demiurge wanted to have the empire as a vassal in the future, so he didn't want to screw himself over here by saying something that could be taken the wrong way.

What he needed to do was fudge it.

Having decided on a plan of action, he considered what words to use.

"It's dangerous to proceed with such an important conversation on a verbal basis. I'm afraid I can't respond immediately, so if I could at least get it in writing..."

"So you'll accept the proposal if I present it in writing?"

*What? You have it on you?* Ainz wanted to ask, but he managed to hold back. Perhaps because his psyche stabilized. The agitation he had felt up until a moment ago was also gone. He couldn't be thankful enough for this body.

But the problem hadn't been solved.

That's not what he had meant. He was merely trying to buy time. But it wasn't as if he could say that, so he had no choice but to come up with some way to make him understand.

"...That's fine. Then please draw up a document explaining the empire's proposed relationship to my kingdom as a subject state and send it to me. Then I'll think it over."

"All right, that's what I'll do. I'll have the proposal sent over in the next few days. For now, I'll continue addressing you as a fellow ruler, but I'm looking forward to your response."

Still unsure why this had happened, though his mental unrest had faded, Ainz nodded in reply.

Then, taking care not to appear hurried, he used Fly to land back on the arena ground.

"What the heck is going on? Or more like, what am I supposed to say to Demiurge and Albedo...?"

Ainz's shoulders slumped like those of a child who knew his parents would scold him when he got home.

After the King of Darkness left, the vacant atmosphere in the guest box smoldered. As if to break through that atmosphere, Nimble shouted, "Your Majesty!"

Jircniv appeared to frown on purpose and looked at him. "Why so loud? I'm not going deaf yet."

"D-do excuse me. But what was that all about just now?!"

"You mean you want to know why I made that decision?"

Nimble nodded. When he looked over, Baswood seemed to feel the same.

"I see... Well, what should I do?" Jircniv asked masochistically, with a dry smile on his face. "Because he showed up, the— Arrrgh! The negotiations with the Theocracy fell through. The shrines probably aren't happy with me, either. How long will it take before I can try again? Is it even an issue that time can solve?"

Jircniv put himself in the Theocracy executives' shoes. If the country he was dealing with made such an inept excuse as *Ainz Ooal Gown just guessed what I was up to; there's really nothing more to it than that*, he would probably deem it not worth partnering with and cut it off. Or he could use it to start a conspiracy.

It was probably impossible to ally with the Theocracy at this point.

"Since there's no chance of an alliance with the Theocracy, you're saying we should fight on alone? I mean, I would expect nothing less of Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. All I can say is that he's done brilliantly. His reach is far longer than I imagined. He gave me some space and then swooped in for the kill the moment I was careless."

Despite being enemies, he had to admire such a perfect plot.

Having received such a perfect blow, all he could do was admit defeat.

Reinforcements wouldn't show up for the empire anytime soon—and the Nation of Darkness probably had all the proof of conspiracy it needed. He was as good as fried.

Perhaps the two understood the situation they were in. Baswood shook his head.

"Man, I don't even know what to say. I guess he used the most powerful attack in the most vulnerable spot."

"Yeah. There's nothing we can even do anymore. My spirit is pretty much snapped in half. I almost feel like nothing matters."

"Your Majesty..."

Jircniv turned toward Nimble's gloomy voice. "He's more like a demon than an undead. He really knows how to break people mentally."

"But still, to become a subject state..."

Nimble seemed to be having a hard time accepting it, and Jircniv smiled kindly at him.

He knew how he felt.

But he didn't want him to express his feelings like a child; he wanted him to explain his logical plan of action. That said, there was no way Nimble would have a plan when Jircniv couldn't come up with anything.

"...I'll be straight with you. We have no chance of victory. If we have any move to make at all, it's as I said before, dependent on one of his subordinates defecting. I can't think of any way to defeat him individually. As we learned during the war, he's the most powerful caster in existence."

The two knights agreed.

"So how is he as a warrior? Can you kill him with a sword?" Jircniv shrugged. "You saw, right? The martial king couldn't beat him as a warrior. And what the hell was that? He took the martial king's blows unharmed! Was he using magic?"

"...I don't know, but it's possible."

"Ah. So if he uses his magic, he can make himself immune to all attacks? It seems like it would be practically impossible to assassinate him. Is he invulnerable?"

"If he has a form, he can't be invulnerable."

"Then how come he didn't get hurt at all?"

Nimble wasn't sure what to say and looked to Baswood for help, but Baswood's lips remained in a tight line.

"...For now, this is what I'll do. I'll gather information about the martial king's weapons and then talk with casters and adventurers to find out why they didn't do anything—that's all I *can* do. Luckily, he's made an enemy out of the Adventurers Guild. It'll probably cooperate with us."

"Wouldn't it be better to discuss being a subject state after that investigation is done? Luckily, he hasn't accepted yet..."

Jircniv was annoyed, but he didn't let it show on his face. Instead, he looked at Nimble with pity.

"Was it lucky? Do you really think so? I thought the reverse. I think we should secure vassalage as soon as possible."

Nimble looked like he had no idea what was going on, but Jircniv was the one to ask a question.

"Why do you think he refused?"

"I—I... don't know, but..."

"If he were some fool, it would be possible that he wasn't confident enough to deal with the changing circumstances—but this is him we're talking about! The way he schemes, I'm sure that during the short pause after I made the proposal, he was calculating what would happen. So if he didn't accept, that means that something about the proposal doesn't align with his aims."

"What could that be?"

Baswood's question made Jircniv's face twist up in disgust. "I don't know. But I'm positive that it can't mean anything good for the empire. Otherwise why not have us as a subject? We should probably assume he has some objective that he can't achieve with the empire around. So..."

Jircniv was working his brain so hard, it seemed like it might start smoking.

This was Ainz Ooal Gown they were talking about. There had to be a reason for his

actions.

*What would I want if I were the King of Darkness? What would I hate?*

Jircniv thought so frantically, he broke out in a cold sweat.

"The Adventurers Guild? Could he have put a stop on turning us into a subject state because of something to do with the Adventurers Guild?"

"You mean his announcement?... Can we allow that, Your Majesty? If we're unlucky, all the empire's best material will have gone to his side in a few years."

"...I didn't understand it. What did you think when you heard it?"

"Even if you lose some freedom, having someone so powerful as the King of Darkness at your back is incredibly tempting. More people die trying to be adventurers than succeed. But people who don't have confidence in themselves will think, *With a guy that strong supporting me...* Besides, here the knights do lots of the work that would normally go to low-ranking adventurers."

"Talent drain...?... And about those people with low self-confidence, it's not because they don't have aptitude, huh?"

There were plenty of outstanding individuals with low self-confidence, and who could feel confident from the get-go jumping into a new world anyhow?

"So is it that those sorts of people wouldn't want the empire to be a subject state? But... wouldn't everything be a lot easier if we were? He could probably just incorporate the entire guild... Ahhh! Ainz Ooal Gown! I guess his intellect just far surpasses mine! He's too smart—I can't get a read on him!"

"Maybe he's not thinking anything."

Jircniv responded to Baswood's joke with a harsh look that contained even hatred. "That couldn't be. He already foresaw so many of our moves... It's no good. I don't know. It could also be that he's still looking for a place to take out his hatred of living things and wants to torment us, or some other emotional thing that humans can't fathom..."

Maybe trying to understand the thought process of the undead was a mistake.

Maybe all this agony and skepticism was part of the plan already, and Ainz was waiting with open arms for Jircniv to panic and go through with the transition to subject state.

“What are you going to do?”

Nimble was probably asking about what moves the empire would make.

“My plan is to gather the secretaries to inform neighboring countries. We have to come up with a document that explains that the empire is aligning with the Nation of Darkness and will become a subject state. We’ll tell neighboring countries and establish it as a fact. We’ll make it so the Nation of Darkness has to accept us.”

“Your Majesty...”

The pair hung their heads. *Never thought I’d see you make a face like that, Baswood,* Jircniv wanted to joke. He wiped the bitter smile off his face and spoke kindly. “Why the long faces? There are all sorts of ways to be a vassal. If we’re allowed a great deal of autonomy, our lifestyles won’t even change. In fact, if we’re protected by the Nation of Darkness’s overwhelming military, we might be even safer than we are now.”

Hearing about their bright (potential) future seemed to cheer the two up slightly.

“To prepare for that, we need to resolve all our internal dissent. If the Nation of Darkness doesn’t grant us autonomy, the empire may split. And there could be influencers who begin to move out of dissatisfaction with the idea of becoming a subject state.”

Jircniv thought quickly over what sorts of powers existed in the empire.

The greatest faction was certainly the knights, but they probably wouldn’t join an opposition faction. They might verbally disagree, but they would never act on those feelings.

Next were the nobles. He wasn’t sure what they would do. There was only a minority now who disagreed with Jircniv’s decisions. But that minority might see this as a chance to dethrone the Fresh Blood Emperor, and there would probably be plots to become the ruler of the empire as it transitioned to a subject state.

The masses he could trick as much as he needed to. As long as the status quo in the empire continued, they wouldn’t care about the politics involved.

“The issue is the priests.”

The shrines would almost certainly be against it. And what would be especially problematic, in addition to their hostility, would be if they stopped providing all healing treatments. In order to avoid that fate, he would have to meet with them as many times as it took to persuade them.

“...Will you be all right, Your Majesty?”

“Who knows? I intend to tell him the transition to subject state will go more smoothly with me around and show him results, but... I just don’t know.”

*Why me?* The thought came to mind.

He had inherited the empire from his deceased father and strengthened it according to plan. He was sure he hadn’t made any mistakes during that time.

But ever since that monster showed up, everything had gone haywire.

He didn’t think he made any errors in his negotiations and dealings with the monster, either. Ainz Ooal Gown simply had abilities too far beyond what humans were capable of imagining.

In a few short months, the situation had changed completely.

Jircniv sighed. “I’m the unluckiest guy in the world right now...”

This is a side note, but a few days later, Jircniv was still in despair when he was astounded to receive word that Argenti had changed their hometown from the imperial capital to somewhere in the city-state alliance. *My bad luck is truly bottomless...*

## Epilogue

# EPILOGUE

Demiurge strolled the ninth level in good spirits.

It felt like it had been a while, but that was probably just in his head. He did come back now and then, so he had been away only two weeks at most. The reason he felt nostalgic even so must have been because it made him so happy to walk these grounds.

His mood grew even better the closer he got to his destination.

Ignoring the guards Cocytus had stationed on either side of the door, Demiurge straightened his tie and made sure he looked sharp. Of course, he always paid attention to his appearance, but it wouldn't do to look even the least bit frumpy before his master.

After checking over his appearance to excess, he finally knocked on the door.

A maid opened the door and peeked her face out.

He had the urge to try to see his master through the crack in the door, but he couldn't possibly do something so embarrassing.

“Is Lord Ainz in?”

“My apologies, Master Demiurge. Lord Ainz isn’t here right now.”

Demiurge’s spirits plummeted, but he didn’t show this on his face.

“Oh? Where did he go?”

“My apologies. I don’t know... But Mistress Albedo might know something.”

That made sense.

“I see. And where is Albedo?”

“She’s here.”

He knew that Albedo had made their master's quarters her office. He thought she could use the room she had been provided, but given her personality, he didn't comment. Their master had approved of it, so for Demiurge to say anything was wrong in the first place.

"Is she working...? Please ask if I may enter."

"Understood."

The door closed before him. Then a few moments later, it opened again.

"Come in, Master Demiurge."

When Demiurge thanked the maid and entered the room, the captain of the guardians was sitting at their master's desk.

Her lowered gaze shifted to land on Demiurge.

"It's been a while, Albedo."

"Yes, Demiurge. You've done a great job outside. What can I do for you today?"

"I came because I was hoping to get authorization to enter with the final stages of the project underway in the Sacred Kingdom. I would like to have a doppelgänger... Where is Lord Ainz?"

"He's sort of far away. I don't think he can come back anytime very soon..."

*So he's not in E-Rantel?* Demiurge gathered. If he was in the city, Albedo wouldn't have worded her response in such a weird way.

"That's a bit of an issue. Then until he returns, I'll be on the seventh level prepping for other work."

"If you're in a hurry, you can send him a Message."

Demiurge furrowed his brow slightly and observed Albedo's face.

She was wearing her usual smile, but Demiurge, with his excellent powers of observation, picked up on an emotion that was subtly different. In other words, she

was knowingly saying that. The question was: With what emotion?

It was no problem if she was only teasing.

He took a quick look, but he couldn't tell.

It was a bit frustrating, but then again, it wasn't as if they were competing.

And the only people in Nazarick he had met whom he couldn't see through with his observant eyes were his master and Albedo. Reminding himself that she was an exception was good for his peace of mind.

Demiurge shrugged.

"I'm not in that much of a hurry. I'll speak to him in person when he returns."

"Lord Ainz hasn't said when he'll be back. It might take a very long time."

"In that case, I'll go to him, Albedo. It's not worth using a Message for."

"Oh? Why not? Doesn't being loyal mean conveying important information as soon as possible?"

Albedo's smile changed. Up until a moment ago, it was her usual fake smile, but now it was a mischievous grin. *I guess she's being nasty now?*

Apparently, she wanted to get him to spill the reason.

*What a pain*, he thought but explained it anyway.

"I would like Lord Ainz to praise me for the work I've done so far, so I don't want to contact him via that method. Yes, it's possible to receive praise through a Message, but I prefer to hear his voice directly, that's all... I'm sure any member of Nazarick feels the same."

"Yes, that's right, Demiurge. It's just as you say. Probably everyone feels that way."

"So where has Lord Ainz gone?"

"He's visiting the dwarf country, which we haven't established diplomatic relations

with yet and about which we don't even have reliable intelligence. That's why it's unclear how long it will take."

"Who's with him?"

"Shalltear and Aura."

In terms of fighting ability, that was no issue. But apart from that, he was slightly concerned.

*I doubt there will be any problems with Aura along, but I hope she doesn't cause our master any trouble,* Demiurge thought, bringing to mind the face of the other member of the party.

"If he's taking Shalltear along, does that mean he intends to destroy the dwarf country?" he asked, but in that case, he would have expected Mare to have gone, so perhaps there was some other objective for the choice.

"Where are all the other guardians currently?"

"Cocytus is managing the lake area. Mare is building a dungeon on the outskirts of E-Rantel. Sebas is working inside E-Rantel. I don't know what Lord Ainz is thinking, but since he didn't take an army with him, perhaps he means to meet the dwarves on a friendly basis..."

"...We don't have enough information. Why did he go there?"

"Demiurge, we cannot know what Lord Ainz's mind holds."

Albedo was right.

*Ainz Ooal Gown...* The highest ruler of Nazarick possessed a fiendishly brilliant intellect and had countless strategies for each move he made. Not even Demiurge, who was created to have an outstanding mind, could hold a candle to him. It was a mistake to even try to fathom his intentions.

But reading their master's emotions and preparing in advance, according to his wishes, was true devotion.

As Demiurge renewed his determination—*I must try harder*—Albedo picked a piece

of parchment up off the desk.

"This came yesterday from the empire. Ainz gave me permission via Message to open it. To summarize, it's a request from the empire to submit to us. They want to consult us at a later date about what sort of subject state it will be."

Demiurge was surprised. It had happened sooner than he expected.

"Why? I was sure the empire's submission would come after the destruction of the kingdom."

"It's the result of Lord Ainz's visit."

"Oh my... Well, I wouldn't expect less from Lord Ainz."

"Demiurge, did you really think the empire would become a vassal state after the kingdom?"

"Of course. That's what my plan was."

"No matter what it took?"

"...What is that supposed to mean?"

"Sometimes Lord Ainz starts to say your name. It's always in the context of 'Have you heard from Demiurge lately? Is it okay if we keep going like this?' In other words, there must be something about you—something about one of your plans, for sure, that doesn't sit right with him."

"What...? Albedo, why didn't you tell me sooner? Then I—"

"Then you would have done what, exactly?"

Demiurge wasn't sure what to say.

"...Can I ask you this? Was there a way to get the empire as a subject state before the kingdom?"

"...There was. But it would have involved having Lord Ainz make a move himself, which would have been shameful as his servant. And I thought that it would take a number

of steps—over about a month's time—and include a riot in a major city. I figured if it was going to require so much work, it would be better to conquer the kingdom first and then put pressure on the empire afterward... How long did it take him?"

"I was in the kingdom, so I don't know the details, but about three days."

Demiurge's eyes widened.

It was too fast.

How did Lord Ainz display enough power to get the empire to capitulate? How did he get through to the emperor who had been trying to build an alliance with other countries?

Demiurge had prepared a strategy that he knew the emperor wouldn't be able to handle, but his master had come up with an even better one.

"Three days? How in the world did he do that...?"

"Incidentally, I heard that no one died."

Demiurge's jaw would stay agape. But all he felt for the absolute ruler was respect: He had stood quietly behind the emperor just like death itself and squeezed his heart.

Chills ran from the tips of Demiurge's toes to the top of his head. It was a jumble of rapture, envy, awe, and respect that formed an indescribable passion and caused him to shiver.

"There's... there's no doubt that was Lord Ainz's work. I really can never hope to come close to matching him. He's simply wonderful. I can see why he was the leader of the Supreme Beings. I'm a tiny bit jealous of Pandora's Actor."

Albedo cracked a smile. It brimmed with a mysterious sense of superiority.

It was probably at having been ordered to love such a brilliant man.

"Lord Ainz has instructed you and me to decide what to do about the empire."

"Us? Why?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? Much of the current flow of events has been according to your plan. But Lord Ainz went ahead and got the empire to submit without consulting you. He's concerned!"

Demiurge didn't understand. If he was incompetent and offended their master, he would understand, but it didn't seem like that was the case.

"...Why? I'm afraid I don't follow."

Albedo emitted a tired sigh. "It's because he trusts you. In other words... How can I explain this? With your brain, I'm sure you can figure it out, but this is what I think it's about. It's natural for you to feel like he's doubting your abilities if he doesn't move according to your plan. He didn't want to do that, which is why he was waiting for word from you. But he must have thought that you were holding back. I think he moved first to tell you not to hold back."

That answer made sense to Demiurge. No, what else could it even be?

"Well..."

Demiurge was so ashamed, he hung his head. At the same time, he was wrapped in joy—at the news that he was in his master's thoughts to such a degree.

"Demiurge, in order to be worthy of our master's compassion, we need to act."

"Of course, Albedo."

Demiurge roused himself. "In order to live up to his expectations, I'll come up with a vassalage plan by the time he gets back!"

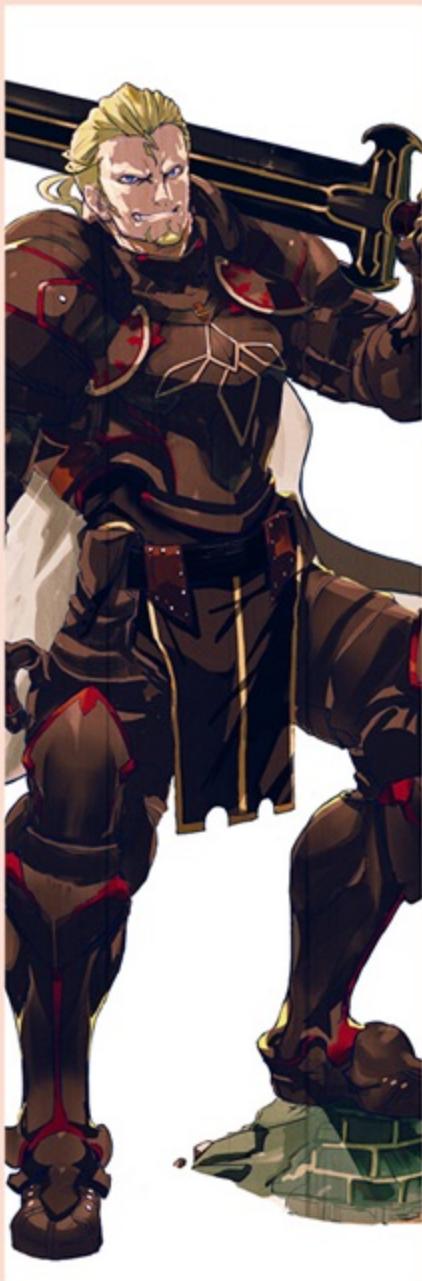
"Yes. Lord Ainz must have gone in person to the dwarf country because he had multiple objectives. I'm sure we'll be busy when he returns."

Demiurge grinned. "You're quite right, Albedo."

**OVERLORD**  
Character Profiles

Character

42



## BASWOOD PESHMEL

HUMANOID

Lightning

Position —— One of the Four

Residence —— A prime location in the imperial capital

|              |    |                 |       |   |    |
|--------------|----|-----------------|-------|---|----|
| Class Levels | —— | Fighter         | ————— | ? | lv |
|              |    | Imperial Knight | ————— | ? | lv |
|              |    | Guardian        | ————— | ? | lv |

Birthday —— 19 Early Water Moon

Hobby —— None really, but if he had to say,  
getting ordered around by his wives

personal character

A commoner from some back alley. He had been fairly strong, but it eventually dawned on him that if things kept on the way they were going, he would die in the gutter, so he aspired to be a professional warrior—a knight. Before long, he distinguished himself and caught Jircniv's eye. At first, he didn't feel terribly loyal, but after serving closely at the emperor's side, he grew to respect Jircniv and is now probably the most loyal in all the empire. He has wives and mistresses who graduated from brothels, and the five of them all live together. The girls get along with one another extremely well.

43

## NIMBLE ARC DALE ANOCH

HUMANOID

Storm Wind

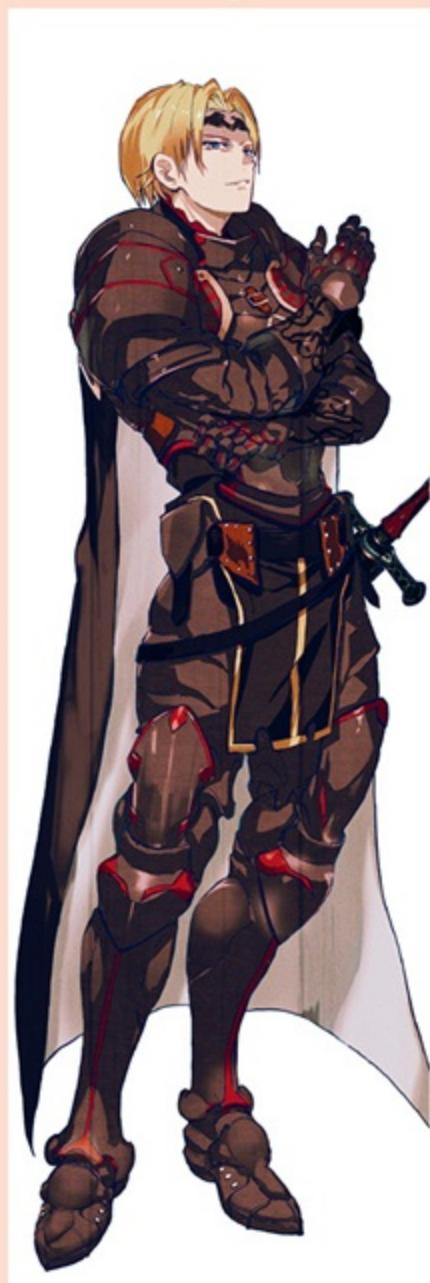
Position —— One of the Four

Residence —— A prime location in the imperial capital

Class Levels —— Noble Fighter ————— ? lv  
Rider ————— ? lv  
Bishop ————— ? lv  
Etc.

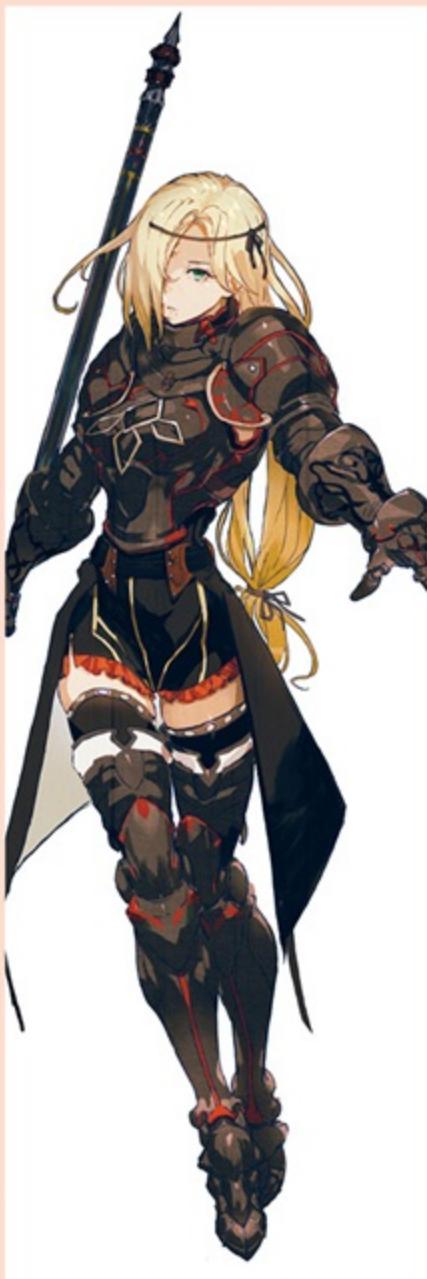
Birthday —— 8 Mid-Fire Moon

Hobby —— Holding tea parties; searching  
for delicious tea



{ personal character }

The second son of a baron, with one elder brother, one elder sister, and one younger sister. The family gets along well, and Nimble caught Jircniv's eye thanks to his brother's efforts to build his status (not that Jircniv would have overlooked an outstanding individual without that nudge, of course). At present, Nimble's own prowess has earned him the title of count. He worries about what family his younger sister will marry into, and both of his sisters are pestering him to get married.



## LEINAS ROCKBRUISE

HUMANOID

Heavy Bomber

Position —— One of the Four

Residence —— A prime location in the imperial capital

Class Levels —— Noble Fighter ? lv  
Priest ? lv  
Cursed Knight ? lv  
Etc.

Birthday —— Unknown (apparently she doesn't want to say)

Hobby —— Fantasizing about what she'll do when her curse is broken and writing in a revenge diary

{ personal character }

Originally the daughter of a noble, she took pride in the fact that she learned how to use a sword and kept the monsters in her family's domain under control. But when a certain monster she was exterminating died, it cursed her, and the right side of her face turned into a misshapen thing that oozes pus. Unable to break the curse, she was cast out of her home for fear of a scandal and dumped by her fiancé. As a result, she made breaking the curse her life goal and became the kind of person who would do anything to achieve that. She has already taken revenge on her family and fiancé thanks to Jircniv.

## Go Gin

SUBHUMAN

The Eighth Martial King

Position —— Martial king

Residence —— A prime location in the imperial capital

Race Levels —— Troll ————— ? lv  
War Troll ————— ? lv  
Class Levels —— Champion ————— ? lv  
Etc.

Birthday —— Sword Star, two stars (the troll calendar is different from the human calendar)

Hobby —— Combat training



{ personal character }

Here is a list of the nicknames of the martial kings. Of them, the first two died. The others didn't die in the arena. First: None. If anything, "Martial King." Second: None. If anything, "Martial King II." Third: Sword Demon. Fourth: Weak King, Mud Blade, the Strongest. Fifth: Quad-Bolt Whip. Sixth: White Brow. Seventh: Rotten Wolf. Eighth: Currently "Martial King," but in the future, perhaps he'll be called "Giant King."



S/41

## THE WARRIOR TAKEMIKAZUCHI

GROTESQUE

The Samurai!



| personal character |

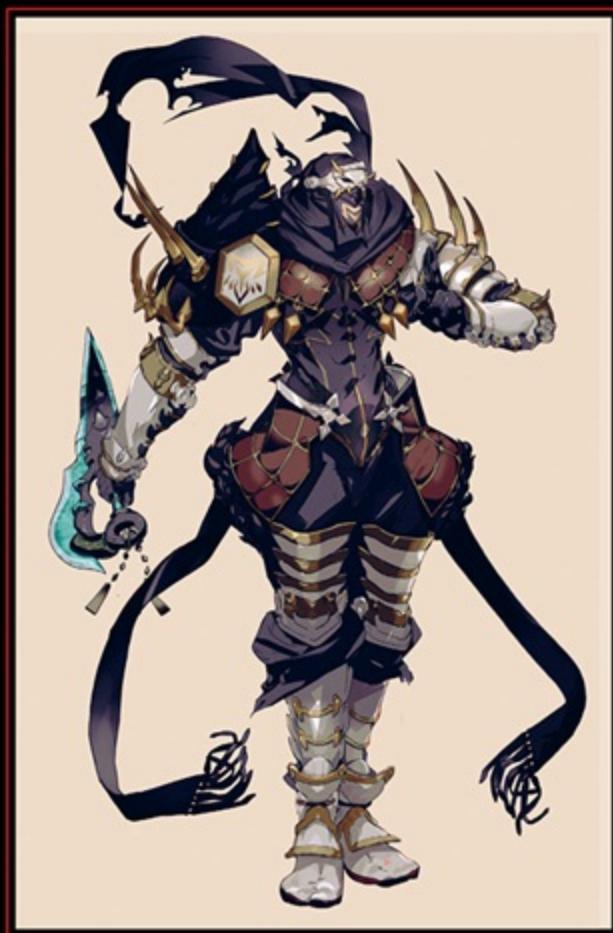
Joined Ainz Ooal Gown out of admiration for Touch Me's strength and was one of the First Nine. His friends thought his hobby was crafting weapons, but his true aim was to perfect a weapon to defeat Touch Me. It must have been a tragedy when, before he could complete it, that huge, thick wall went away. Having lost its target, his ultimate sword (incomplete) is on display in his spot in the Treasury.

6/44

## NISHIKIENRAI

### GROTESQUE

The Ninja!



| personal character |

Since his full body is wrapped in ninja dress, his flesh beneath veiled, even in Ainz Ooal Gown, almost no one has seen him. Incidentally, he's a grotesque called a half-golem, but he didn't put too much effort into building it, so his body is fairly otter-like. As evidenced by his nickname, he is pals with the Warrior Takemikazuchi, and because of that, Cocytus and Narberal actually get along rather nicely. If left alone together, they get on surprisingly well and sometimes even behave unexpectedly given their usual reputations.

# AFTERWORD

I heard it's not manly to make excuses, so I won't make any. But allow me to say this: If my memory is correct, this is definitely Septendecimber in the winter of 2015!

I also remember hearing that plans were uncertain and nothing had been decided. What alluring words! Chock-full of romance!

...I'm sorry.

I'm not planning on making you wait for Volume 11 like I made you wait for this one, so I hope you'll forgive me. And in this next volume—well, if you read to the end of this one, then there's no point in writing it here.

Apparently, there will be a special edition of the eleventh volume, the first one in a while. If you watch the anime, then many of you probably already know, but it'll include a new three-minute episode of *Ple-Ple-Pleiades*—what a surprise!

Now then, everyone who read Volume 10, what would you do?

If you were in charge of an organization—or more like if you were running a nation—what would you work on first? Ainz operates haphazardly, but I'm very interested to hear what you would all start with. It'd be fun if I could hear some of your opinions at some point.

I'd be even happier if this inspired you to write fanfic and even your own original novels.

That's how I got my start.

And this is promoted at the back of the book, too, but we're doing a popularity poll. Please tell us your favorite character. It's a type of popularity poll the likes of which has never been seen before—where the number one spot is already decided.

Even if there is a character who is more popular than expected, it won't mean they show up more in the books, but I am curious who you like.

Okay, from here on out, it's thank-yous.

I'm sorry I messed up your schedule. Thank you again, so-bin.

To proofreader Osako, designer Code Design Studio, my editor F　ta, thank you. And to my friend from my student days, Honey, thanks as always.

And most of all, thanks to you, the readers. The story has changed completely from the web novel, but I hope you enjoy it.

KUGANE MARUYAMA

Septendecimber 2015



Afterword by so-bin

Thanks to you, we made it to Volume 10.  
It's really awesome if you listen to the  
anime soundtrack while you read.

so-bin

AINZ VISITS THE  
DWARF KINGDOM  
IN THE AZERLISIA  
MOUNTAINS WITH  
AURA AND  
SHALLTEAR. WHAT  
CONFLICT AWAITS

NAZARICK'S  
MANIC COMEDY  
**PLE-PLE-  
PLEADES**

THIS WILL GO ON SALE AT THE SAME TIME AS A SPECIAL RELEASE!!  
THERE'S EVEN WORD THAT THE GUARDIANS  
WILL MAKE AN APPEARANCE!!

THEM THERE?  
THE NATION OF  
DARKNESS  
CONTINUES  
EXPANDING ITS  
INFLUENCE IN  
VOLUME

11  
Volume Eleven

11

I've seen this teaser somewhere before...  
I promise Volume 11 really is about the dwarves!  
— Kugane Maruyama

# OVERLORD

Volume 11: The Dwarf Craftsman

*Kugane Maruyama* | Illustration by so-bin

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PtF by: traitorATZEN