

OVERLORD 3 The Bloody Valkyrie

Kugane Maruyama

Illustration by so-bin





OVERLORD

Volume 3: The Bloody Valkyrie

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Ainz Ooal Gown does not know defeat.



Chapter 1 Herd of Predators

1

"What is wrong with this food?"

A shrill, hysterical voice sounded, followed by the hard clatter of silverware hitting dishes.

Several people in the dining room turned toward the woman making all the racket. Her face was more than the word *beautiful* could imply. Her looks were perhaps equal to that most gorgeous princess of the kingdom, the one called Golden. Even warped in her rage, she was lovely. And despite the disturbance she was causing, her movements were elegant and even refined. She had to be a noble from somewhere—the daughter of an elite noble, at that. Pushing back her long ringlets in exasperation, she scowled disapprovingly at the food set in front of her.

The table was crammed with dishes. There were several soft white rolls, just baked and steaming faintly, in a basket. A thick slab of red meat, grilled rare and dripping juices, was arranged temptingly on a plate with sweet corn and mashed potatoes made with loads of butter. The salad of fresh vegetables was still crisp, and its dressing gave off a refreshing citrus scent.

The meals at Fortress City E-Rantel's finest inn, the Golden Glimmer, were prepared with food that had had Preservation cast on it to retain its freshness—by a more than first-rate chef, of course.

This dinner was like a work of art, born of the preparation of the finest ingredients by the most renowned cooks. It was a repast that only royalty, nobles, and successful merchants could eat—and this woman was openly expressing dissatisfaction with it.

It was only natural that the people hearing her remarks, in addition to being surprised, would take an interest in the food they'd always eaten without thinking.

"It's awful!" Her words seemed so out of place that everyone was dumbfounded for a moment.

During this scene, the only one with unwavering posture and an unchanging expression was the elderly butler in attendance behind her. Even when she whirled around, eyes full of intense emotion, his face remained the same, as if he had no other expressions.

"I can't stand this city! Make preparations to leave immediately!"

"But miss, it's already ni—"

"Shut up! I said we're leaving, so we're leaving! Got it?"

In response to the childish tantrum, the butler broke his posture for the first time and bowed his head. "Understood, miss. I'll make departure preparations right away."

"Hmph! If you understand, Sebas, then hop to it!" She flung the fork she'd been holding, and it *c-clang*ed. Then, indignant, she stormed out of the main dining room.

In the relaxed atmosphere left in her wake, like the calm after a cloudburst, a dignified voice spoke. "Everyone, please excuse the disturbance." After putting back in place the chair that had nearly toppled over when the woman stood up, the butler slowly bowed to the other diners. Upon receiving the fine old man's perfect apology, some gazed at him with pity.

"Sir—"

"Yes?" A man who had been standing by quietly moved next to the butler.

"Do excuse us. I hardly think it will suffice as an apology for the commotion, but please allow me to pay for everyone's meal."

The faces of the few people who heard what he said lit up with delight they couldn't conceal. The price for a single meal at the city's finest inn was something else. For such a price, tolerating a little disturbance was no problem.

Meanwhile, the manager was unfazed, and he responded to the butler's proposal with a bow. The natural flow of the exchange was evidence that this scene had played out several times since the arrival of this master-servant pair.

Sebas's eyes moved to a seemingly poor man stuffing his face in one corner of the dining room. Realizing this, the fellow hastily stood and trotted over.

He seemed extremely out of place compared to the other diners. For starters, his appearance didn't have any of the *quality* or *dignity* of the others', which made him stick out severely. His clothing was the only part of him that compared favorably with the other customers, but it was almost as if the clothes were wearing him; it was even comical how much he looked like a clown clad in finery.

"Sebas, sir..."

"What is it, Zach?"

The other diners furrowed their brows upon hearing Zach's obsequious way of speaking. With that brownnosing tone, it would be no surprise to find him rubbing his hands together greedily.

However, Sebas's expression didn't change.

"Though it may be bold of me as a hired hand, I think it might be best to reconsider leaving at this hour."

"Because it's difficult to drive the carriage at night?"

"Well, there's that, and also, I…uh…need a, I mean…must prepare for the journey, sir." Zach scratched his head. It seemed like he was freshly washed, but even so, he scratched so hard he scattered everywhere around him whatever he was picking off. Several people's brows furrowed further. Whether he realized it or not, the speed of his scratching increased.

"But I don't think the young lady will like your suggestion. No, given her disposition, I don't imagine she will change her mind," Sebas declared with a steely look. "So we have no choice but to depart."

"But yeah…" Eyes darting here and there, he tried to come up with an excuse but couldn't, and he grimaced.

"Of course, we can't leave immediately. I have to load the young lady's bags into the carriage, which will take a little while. Please make the necessary preparations during that time."

The poor-looking man had a crafty glint in his eye as he went to speak again, but Sebas nonchalantly ignored it—because everything was going according to plan. "So then, what time will we leave?"

"Hmm. How about two or three hours from now? That's probably the latest we can push it. If we wait longer than that, the highway will be pitch-black."

Another indecent, calculating gleam appeared in the man's eyes. And Sebas once again made an effort to ignore it. Licking his lips a few times, Zach spoke. "Heh-heh. That's probably fine."

"Good. Then will you go now and get ready?"

After watching Zach go, Sebas waved away the air around him—he felt unclean, like some kind of dirt was sticking to him.

Thanks to his stony demeanor, he was able to suppress the urge to

sigh. Frankly, he couldn't get himself to like inferior beings. His colleagues, like Demiurge and Shalltear, were able to find some joy in treating them as toys, but Sebas didn't even want to be near them.

The collective understanding inside the Great Tomb of Nazarick was "Those not of Nazarick are inferior creatures" and "With very few exceptions, humans and subhumans are weaklings who should be squashed underfoot." To Sebas, who agreed with his Creator's idea that "You can't claim to be strong if you don't save the weak," it was a puzzling way to think, but when he had to deal with someone like Zach, he began to think that perhaps Nazarick's fundamental opinion was right after all.

"Dear me. And humans are supposed to be such wonderful creatures..." Sebas stroked his neatly trimmed beard with one hand and switched gears to consider what he should do next.

The plan was going well, but he did need to check in with the overseer. As he was thinking about what he needed to do from here on out, he noticed a man draw near to him.

"Seems like you're in a troubling situation if you have to leave right now." He was probably in his late forties. His hair was neatly cut, and there were many white strands mixed in among the black. Due to his age and eating well, he had collected quite a bit of excess around his midriff. His grooming gave him a sophisticated appearance, and his clothing struck a balance between gaudy and high class.

"If it isn't Baldo, sir." Sebas gave a slight bow.

Baldo generously stopped him. "Ahh, no, no. Please don't be so formal."

This man, Baldo Lauffray, was a merchant who was involved in a rather large chunk of the food business in the city and had spoken to Sebas several times. Controlling a commanding share of the food market in the Fortress City E-Rantel, a critical base in wartime, meant that among all the merchants, he was one of the more powerful.

Once the ranks of soldiers grew to tens of thousands, carrying reserve provisions became costly and laborious. For that reason, the kingdom's general strategy was to march troops to this city carrying only the bare minimum and supply them here. As a result, unlike other cities, food and weapon merchants possessed quite a bit of authority here.

A man who could be counted among the most powerful in E-Rantel wouldn't talk to someone just because he found himself eating in the same dining room. Therefore, there had to be some reason he was talking to Sebas. But Sebas and the others had been hoping for this as well.

"Sebas, he's no good, that one."

"Is that so?" His expression broke for the first time into a faint smile, and he responded politely in a tone that showed he knew exactly which "one" was meant.

"He can't be trusted. Honestly, I can't understand why you'd hire someone like that."

Sebas got his brain's gears spinning and searched for the most appropriate response. Telling the truth about why he'd taken on Zach was out of the question, but if he said he hired him without knowing the man's reputation, Baldo would probably think he wasn't a good judge of character, and his opinion of him would go down.

They had decided to leave this city, but he needed to avoid damaging his relationship with Baldo. There could come a time in the future when he would want to use him.

"That may be, but no one sold themselves as well as he did. His character may leave something to be desired, but his enthusiasm impressed the young lady."

Baldo smiled awkwardly. His opinion of her must have just dropped another notch. Well, that was why she was along, although Sebas did feel a bit bad about it—forcing her to play the unlikable role, that is.

“I’m overstepping my bounds here, so please disregard what I’m about to say, but don’t you think you should make a complaint to your master?”

“You may be right, but when I think of the debt of gratitude I owe to this young lady’s father, I simply…”

“Well, there is something to be said for loyalty…,” Baldo murmured and then began hedging. “In that case, I could offer to send someone I trust along with you?”

“That won’t be necessary.” He spoke kindly, but it was a definitive refusal.

Baldo must have sensed his determination, and he tried a different angle. “Are you sure? I really think you should have a proper guard. It’s quite a ways to the capital. And unlike in the empire, the roads in the kingdom aren’t safe. I can set you up with a pretty trustworthy mercenary.”

The nobles who lived on the estates the road ran through provided highway security in exchange for tolls. Charging tolls was the nobles’ right. However, in many cases, they were just in it for the money, and the security they provided was often unreliable at best. As a result, travelers were often attacked by mercenaries turned thieves and bandits.

Thanks to the Golden Princess’s effort to address this problem, highway security forces under direct supervision of the king were out patrolling, but there weren’t very many, and it was not possible to gauge their effectiveness. Interference by the nobles, who feared their rights would be infringed upon, didn’t help matters.

The result was that the highways were not very well protected by the state.

For that reason, merchants generally practiced self-defense by enlisting adventurers or a gang of mercenaries they could trust. Someone as powerful as Baldo would surely know a number of

extremely skilled, trustworthy mercenary groups. But Sebas couldn't accept his offer.

"I imagine you can. However, the young lady isn't fond of keeping a large entourage. I must do what I can to comply with her wishes."

"Are you sure?" Baldo, seemingly at a loss, twisted his face into an exaggerated grimace, like a grown-up who was done trying to deal with a child's tantrum.

"My apologies for being unable to accept your kind offer."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Frankly, I'm eager to do you a favor. If that isn't possible, I'd like to make a bit of an impression, at least."

The daughter of a rich merchant from a certain city in the empire and her butler escort—that was the guise under which they had come to this inn, and they gave off the impression of having the means that such a wealthy family would have. The one Baldo wanted to make himself known to was the rich merchant father.

Sebas smiled gently at the fish who had bitten his hook. "I'll be sure to convey your kindness to my master."

Something sparkled in the back of Baldo's eyes, but a moment later, he had hidden it. It was a change normal people wouldn't even notice, like the twinkle of a star, but it was more than enough for Sebas to catch.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me, I'll be going now. The young lady is expecting me." He waited for the exact moment Baldo opened his mouth to forestall him.

Having been humored, Baldo observed Sebas's expression for a moment before talking through a sigh. "Phew, well, I guess it can't be helped. Sebas, next time you're in town, come and visit me. My door'll be open."

"Indeed. I look forward to your hospitality." As Sebas watched

Baldo go, he murmured, “So many men, so many minds, huh?”

Baldo’s actions weren’t entirely driven by the ulterior motive of profit. Sebas could tell he was genuinely concerned for the lone woman and her butler. *It’s because there are humans like him, because there are humans who try to save the weak, that I can’t dislike them*. A refreshing smile he didn’t have to force played across Sebas’s face.

After knocking a few times and excusing himself, Sebas bowed and entered the room.

“Please forgive me, Master Sebas.”

As he closed the door, he was met by a woman bowing deeply. If the people from the dining room saw this scene, they would wonder what in the world was going on. The woman was the spoiled young lady with a temper who had been making such a racket earlier.

Her expression now was so calm, it was as if all the hysterics had been a fit of the imagination. The attitude she assumed was appropriate toward someone who held a higher standing. Her face and clothing were the same, but the woman inside seemed to have changed completely. There was one other odd thing, however: One of her eyes—the left one—was closed, though it hadn’t been in the dining room.

“No need to lower your head, Solution. You were only performing your duty. That is all.”

Sebas looked around the gorgeous, spacious room. Of course, to Sebas, who knew what it was like on the ninth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, it was nothing special, but that was perhaps an unfair comparison.

They didn’t have much luggage, and he saw that it had been gathered in one corner of the room. They were already prepared to depart. Sebas hadn’t gotten their things together, and there was only

one other person it could have been.

"I would have done that. You did not need to trouble yourself."

"What are you talking about? I couldn't possibly force more work on you, Master Sebas." The woman who had bowed—Solution Epsilon, one of the Pleiades combat maids—shook her head.

"Oh? But I'm supposed to be your butler." Something youthful and mischievous appeared among the wrinkles on his face.

Seeing his heartfelt smile, Solution couldn't help but finally break into an awkward grin. "It's true that you're my butler, Master Sebas, but I'm also your subordinate."

"...Yes, that's right. Then I will take the liberty of giving you an order as your boss. Your work is done. I will handle everything else until we leave, so until then, please relax here."

"...Okay. Thank you."

"Mistress Shalltear has most likely grown sick of waiting in the carriage. I will go tell her what time we're leaving." Sebas lifted up one of the heaviest-looking pieces of luggage with ease. Then, as if suddenly remembering the question, he asked, "By the way, is he working out?"

"Yes. He's working out quite well." She pressed on her left eye through her eyelid.

"What fortune. What is the current situation, then?"

"He's currently meeting with a dirty-looking man. Would you like to hear what they're saying?"

"That shall not be necessary. I will move the luggage, so a summary of the main points later will be fine."

"Understood." Suddenly her face began to warp. The corners of her

eyes dropped, and her lips turned upward; it was a shape close to a smile, but this warping that could have been accompanied by a *byoo* sound was nearly impossible for a human face. The most apt way one might describe it would probably be "an expression made of clay that got squashed."

"Oh, Master Sebas, I was wondering about something…"

"What is it, Solution?"

"When we're done with that man, is it all right if I deal with him?"

Sebas fingered his beard with his free hand as he thought for a moment. "Hmm. If we can get Shalltear's permission, you can do whatever you like." Solution looked slightly disappointed, so to cheer her up, he continued, "Don't worry. I am sure you can have at least one of them."

"Really? Understood. Then please ask Mistress Shalltear for me. If possible, I'd like that one." Solution grinned from ear to ear. It was a bright face that would steal anyone's heart.

Along with some curiosity about the man who had made her look that way, Sebas felt some pity for him. He asked, "So what did he say to you?"

"That he couldn't wait to enjoy me. So I think I'd like to enjoy him as well." Her smile brightened.

She was like a child innocently looking forward to what would happen next.

2

It's been a rotten life.

Hurrying down the road at a trot, the thought echoed through Zach's mind: *It's been a rotten life.*

Life in a kingdom village—the life of a peasant—was far from happy.

After tilling the land, the fruits of their hard labor were taken by the lord of the estate. If it was 60 percent being taken, they probably could have tolerated it. They could eke out a living on the 40 percent they were left with. But when it was 80 percent being taken, that was a huge problem. They could barely make it on 40 percent, so it goes without saying that trying to live on just 20 percent of their crop made their lives very difficult.

One year they had been left only 20 percent, Zach returned home exhausted from working in the fields to find his little sister gone. At the time, Zach was so young he didn't realize what had happened. His little sister, whom he had loved so much, was missing, and his parents weren't even looking for her. Now, he understood quite clearly. She had been sold off. These days, thanks to the efforts of the princess known as Golden, the practice had declined, but back then the buying and selling of slaves was commonplace in the kingdom.

So whenever Zach paid for a prostitute or passed one in the street, he instinctively looked them squarely in the eye. He didn't think he would find her, of course, and even if he did, he had no idea what he could say. But he still searched in spite of himself.

The burden of conscription fell heavily on families who lived in extreme poverty. The kingdom rounded up healthy young men from the villages and sent them to the battlefield to align with the timing of the empire's periodic deployments. Losing their young men for even a month hugely impacted a village's labor capacity. But that didn't mean there weren't those who felt fortunate to be hit by the draft.

Fewer members meant a family's food consumption decreased. Since conscripted soldiers were given rations, some were able to experience a full stomach for the first time in their lives.

But that was, by and large, the only good part. Even though they were risking their lives to fight, unless they pulled off an amazing feat, there were no rewards. Actually, there were even times people got results and still didn't get a reward. Only the really lucky ones were rewarded. And when they returned to their village, they had to face the hopeless reality that next year's harvest would be down by however much labor had been lost during their absence.

Zach had been drafted twice, but it was the third time that changed his fate.

The battle ended, as usual, with little more than a skirmish, and luckily, he made it through alive. But when he thought to go back to his village, he suddenly stopped. As he looked down at the weapon in his hand, he was struck by divine inspiration: *Instead of going back to the village, I should find some better way of life.*

But as a peasant who had only the bare minimum of training he received on the march, there were not many options open to him. It wasn't as if he had superior physical strength, and he obviously didn't have one of those powers some people were born with. Even where knowledge was concerned, about all he knew was how to till the land, what seeds to plant, and when to plant them.

So what he did was to take the one thing he had, the gear temporarily issued him by the kingdom, and flee. He didn't consider whether it would make trouble for his parents if he ran away. Even if it was so the family could survive, they had sold his little sister. He no longer had any love for them.

It was no easy thing for someone who didn't know the lay of the land to escape without assistance, so it was fairly lucky that he met people who would help him.

The ones who helped him were a gang of mercenaries. Granted, as a peasant, Zach didn't have much value for them, but they had lost lots of men in the war and were aiming to increase their numbers as quickly as possible; they were accepting almost anybody. They

weren't a proper organization, just a group of wartime sellswords who moonlighted as bandits.

There's not much to say about Zach's life after that. Better to have something than nothing. Better to steal than be stolen from. Better to make someone else cry than cry himself. That was how he lived.

He didn't think it was wrong. He didn't have regrets. He was further convinced of that every time he attacked someone and heard their screams.

Zach ran through the slums. He ran desperately, at the moment the sun was setting, through a world stained a deep red.

He'd been running almost the entire way since leaving the inn, so his breath was ragged and sweat beaded on his forehead. Fatigue made him want to rest, asked him if he wouldn't like to catch his breath, but time was growing short, so he pushed himself to keep running.

And then when he turned tight around a corner—

"Watch out!" Someone who happened to be on the corner grumbled as they jumped out of the way with a metallic jangle.

It all happened so fast it took Zach by surprise, and he looked now at the black shadow.

It was a woman with a nice face. Because of the black cape she was wearing, she melted into the shadows, but from within the darkness shone two curious purple eyes looking straight at Zach.

His temper had grown shorter with exhaustion, so he yielded to his irritation and yelled at her. "That's what I should say! You're gonna get hurt! Look where you're going!"

Though he'd meant to overwhelm her with his shout, she didn't so much as flinch, just grinned.

The bone-chilling smile caused him to back up instinctively. He didn't have the courage to draw the knife in his breast pocket. He was like a mouse frozen by the glare of a lion.

That metallic noise he'd heard when she'd jumped out of his way must have been armor she was wearing. *An armed woman—so she must be an adventurer? I picked a fight with the wrong person.* Those thoughts went around in Zach's brain along with the danger alert.

He had no intention of making light of her because "women are weak." Zach knew that there were strong adventurer teams made up entirely of women. He'd heard the strongest man in the mercenary gang mention them once.

In comparison, Zach may have belonged to a gang of sellswords, but it wasn't an overstatement to say he was among the worst swordsmen of the lot. That's how he'd ended up with this kind of work.

As Zach regretted his actions, the flood of sweat elicited by his sprint quickly turned cold. Seeing the fear plastered on Zach's face, the woman's frightening smile mellowed into a satisfied grin.

"Mm, well, whatever. I don't have time anyhow. But if I see you again, I'm gonna kick your butt!" the woman said casually and slipped past him.

He was curious as he watched her go and realized that she was heading into an area of the slums where no one lived. What was a beautiful lady planning to do there at such a late hour? It kindled his interest, but he had something else he needed to do at the moment. Ripping himself away, he set off running once more.

Soon he was moving down a block of the slums where dingy shacks lined the street. He quickly ran his eye over the area to make sure no one was tailing him. Since twilight was waning and the world was sinking into darkness, he made extra sure there were no figures lurking in the shadows. He'd checked numerous times along the way,

but he still needed to look one last time.

Satisfied, he nodded, stood before a certain door catching his breath, and knocked three times. Then he waited five seconds and knocked four times.

The reaction to the sign came right away. He heard the squeak of wood from behind the door, and the plank covering the peephole moved. A man's eyes peered out from the opening. They rolled to take in Zach. "Oh, it's you. One second." Without waiting for Zach's reply, he replaced the plank. Zach heard the heavy sound of a key turning in the lock, and the door opened a crack.

"In ya get."

The faint smell of something that had gone sour wafted out. This place was the total opposite of where Zach had just been. Expecting his nose to get used to it, he slipped inside.

Once the door was closed, the shack seemed dim and cramped.

The cafeteria-cum–living room just inside the door had a single table. There was one candle standing on it, throwing a weak glow.

A grimy man giving off that vibe reserved for those who made violence their occupation moved the table's chair and plunked down in it. The wood shrieked. He had a firm build with a thick, muscular chest, and where his face and arms were bared, they had lingering scars. It was the weight of that kind of guy this chair was tasked with supporting.

"Hey, Zach. What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"The situation has changed... It seems like our prey is going to move."

"Agh. Now?"

Zach nodded silently, and the man scratched his scalp under his

long, shaggy hair, mumbling, “This late...? Their timing’s awful! Ugh, you can’t do anything about it?”

“Seems tricky. It’s the lady’s demand.”

The man had heard about this woman a few times from Zach, and he scowled. “Use your head, old man! Tell them there’re *scary bandits* or whatnot out on the roads at night. Come *on*! ...Even an idiot can come up with *something*. Arrgh. How about busting the carriage wheels? That’d make it so they’d have to leave tomorrow.”

“There’s no way! They’re already loading up the luggage! It’s better to just do it and get it over with.”

“Mm, I guess there’s that...” The man stared into space, thinking for a moment. “So when are they leaving?”

“In about two more hours.”

“Bit down to the wire, no? Agghhh, what should we do? If we get in touch now... There’s not much leeway, so it’ll be a bit of a pain, but they’re nice prey...” The man counted on his fingers as he figured out the schedule.

Standing by silently, Zach looked down at his own hands. “They piss me off, stupid rich people...” He thought of the girl he called the “young lady” and her beautiful hands. No one who had ever worked in a field had pretty hands like that. Peasant hands were all cracked from cold water and tough from hoeing—even their nails were deformed. There were only people with those kinds of hands in the country.

Zach knew the world was unfair, but—

He twisted his lips and bared his teeth. “I can have some fun with the lady, right?”

“I’m first, though. And we’re gonna be taking money for her, so you can’t go too hard. No major injuries.” A vulgar grin appeared on

the man's face. Perhaps driven by that lust, he stood up. "Okay, let's do it. I'll contact the boss."

"Gotcha."

"I'll get ten guys together in the usual spot. Make sure you're there in four hours. If you're not, we'll come to you, so be sure to make our prey go beddy-bye."

3

A single carriage left the Fortress City.

It was a large carriage, with plenty of room for more than six people, drawn by four solidly built horses.

The moon hung large in the sky, making it abnormally bright. That said, driving a carriage at this hour was an extremely foolish move. The smartest way to spend the night was to light a lamp, put someone on lookout, and camp.

Humans didn't rule the world of the night. Or to put it more accurately, anywhere the sun did not reach was no domain of humans. In the shadows of the night lurked animals, subhumans—all variety of monsters. There were many beings, with eyes that could see in the dark, who would attack humans.

The carriage drove down the highway through that dangerous night, transmitting slight vibrations to the passengers. The reason there were few bumps was not due to superior shock mechanics but because the road was paved with cobblestones.

The cobblestone highway maintenance was initiated due to a proposal by the Golden Princess, but so far only one area under direct jurisdiction of the king and the domain of one of the six great nobles, Marquis Raeven, was done being paved—because the nobility began

claiming that if the roads got easier to travel, it would make it easier for the empire to invade.

There was also confusion about who was to bear the cost of the road repairs. Princess Renner's proposal to get merchants to donate funds hit a setback when the nobles of each domain opposed it, feeling that their right to control the highway would be infringed upon. The result was the current heavily potholed state of the roads.

This area under the king's direct jurisdiction was well maintained. Even so, it wasn't perfect. The carriage suddenly lurched with a *clank*, and everyone inside felt it.

With the bump, conversation inside cut off as if they'd reached a stopping point for one topic. The passengers were Sebas and, beside him, Solution; across from them sat Shalltear flanked by her minions and beloved concubines, two vampire brides. Zach, of course, was in the driver's box.

After a brief period of silence, Sebas slowly began to speak. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Hmm? To ask me? What is it?"

"You do not seem to get along very well with Mistress Aura. Is there a specific reason for that?"

"...I do not truly think she is so terrible," Shalltear mumbled, gazing idly at the nail of her pinkie finger. It was pearly white and three-quarters of an inch long. She was toying with a file in one hand, but her nails were already well shaped and didn't need any work. She seemed to decide she no longer required the nail file, so she flung it at one of her vampire brides.

Then she went to reach out with her now-empty hands toward the chests of the vampires on either side of her until she noticed the expressions of the others, made an awkward face, and stopped.

"It doesn't seem that way...," Sebas continued.

Shalltear's face twisted up like she'd bitten something bitter. "I... ahem, I... Okay. I simply tease her as I see fit because my Creator, Lord Peroroncino, decided we do not get along. Well, Lady BubblingTeapot may have set it so that Aura does not think highly of me, either."

She waved a hand as if dismissing the topic as uninteresting, and her eyes met Sebas's for the first time. "Actually, my Creator, Lord Peroroncino, and Aura's Creator, Lady BubblingTeapot, are siblings. So in a way, it's like we're sisters."

"Siblings—Is that so?!"

"I heard Lord Peroroncino talking about it a long time ago while he was walking through my territory with two other Supreme Beings, Lord Luci★Fer and Lord NishikiEnrai." Unearthing the treasured memory of attending such great personages, Shalltear's gaze filled with longing.

"And he said that Lady BubblingTeapot is engaged in a trade known as 'voice acting' and that she is rather popular and even provided her voice to 'eroge' as well. Sometimes, when Lord Peroroncino bought a great work he had been looking forward to, it would bring to mind his sister's face, which depressed him." Shalltear continued on to say that she had no idea what it all meant.

Sebas cocked his head, puzzled. "'Voice acting'...? If I remember correctly, it involves a lot of talking. Apparently they also sing songs, so they must be similar to bards."

Shalltear chuckled. "No."

"No? What do you mean?"

"What I heard from Lady BubblingTeapot herself is that it involves using one's voice to give something a soul. In other words, her job is to impart life!"

"Oh! Is that so? What an embarrassing misunderstanding on my

part. I humbly thank you for informing me, Mistress Shalltear."

Sebas and the others were given some knowledge upon their creation by the Supreme Beings, but that was all they had. With no idea of the real things, sometimes misunderstandings arose regarding, say, the occupations of the masters they so worshipped.

Not wanting to make the same mistake twice, Sebas repeated the meaning of *voice acting* under his breath several times.

"Never you mind. More importantly, Sebas, we're traveling together and all, so you needn't be so stiff."

"Is that so, Mistress Shalltear?"

"To address me as Mistress... We both serve the Supreme Beings. The only reason a hierarchy exists is because of the jobs they gave us. Really, there's no gap between us."

That was true. The reason Solution served Sebas, too, was simply because she had been ordered to. Originally, they were equal in status.

"Understood, Shalltear. I will allow myself to refer to you by simply your name."

"Good. Speaking of not getting along, what about you and Demiurge?"

Sebas pursed his lips.

Seeing that, Shalltear narrowed her eyes like a mischievous child and continued. "It's not as if the Supreme Beings decided that you two should be that way, so what's your excuse?"

"...I wonder... I do not quite know myself. It seems almost instinctive; I simply dislike him. Well, he feels the same, so..."

"Hmm... I don't have anyone like that. Perhaps we harbor the

feelings of the Supreme Beings who created us."

"The possibility is high."

Sebas nodded with deep feeling, and Shalltear stared at him. Then, considering his line of work, she made up her mind to ask the question she had. "Who's on the eighth level? I know Victim is, but surely there must be others."

Sebas raised his eyes slightly at this sudden topic change and gave her a sober look, trying to figure out her motive for asking. Beside him, Solution's expression changed slightly, but it was such a small movement that it went unnoticed by the pair talking.

"When that large party of fools who opposed the Supreme Beings attacked, they broke through the seventh level but didn't invade the ninth level where the Supreme Beings were. That means they were intercepted on level eight, correct? I don't have any memory of it, but they must have come with quite a bit of war potential, so there would have to be someone with equal force to meet them. But nobody knows who. Well, Albedo knows, but that is because she manages things. It'd be strange if she *didn't* know." She continued without paying any mind to Sebas, who was silent. "...I somewhat loathe the feeling that she has one up on me. Who is this top-secret being? Could it be someone Lord Ainz created?"

Touch Me created Sebas, Ulbert Alain Odle created Demiurge, the Warrior Takemikazuchi created Cocytus. But Shalltear didn't know who the most elite of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, Ainz—Momonga—created. He had to have created someone, so guessing that it was someone on the unknown eighth level made sense.

"...No, I do not believe so. I haven't heard much, but the name of the one Lord Ainz created is Pandora's Actor. He is as powerful as me and all the floor guardians, and he guards the deepest reaches of the treasury."

"I don't think I've heard of him." Unlike Albedo, she hadn't been

given knowledge of all the beings inside Nazarick, so she was hearing this name for the first time. But even if one needed a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown to get to the treasury, it would be strange for it not to have any security—especially the area farthest inside. All of Ainz Ooal Gown's best magical items were enshrined there, and she had heard there were even some World Items. Someone created by the most elite Supreme Being was the ideal individual to guard it.

Shalltear's pride ached slightly at the thought that she couldn't be the one to do it, but she consoled herself that there was no choice and figured that guarding the first three levels as the primary line of defense was a duty on par with protecting the treasury.

Besides, I've been given an important mission.

"Indeed, I have never met him myself, since one must wear the guild ring to reach the treasury."

"Hmm..." Her reaction seemed to indicate that perhaps she had lost interest, but Sebas didn't show whether he cared or not. "So in the end, the eighth level remains a mystery, hmm? ...That's too bad."

"Indeed. We are not allowed to go there, so there must be something, no?"

"Something of what sort?"

"Perhaps something that would attack us?"

"Hrm. Not bad, but what of a death trap that activates with no questions asked?"

"I do not think opponents who were able to penetrate the impregnable Great Tomb of Nazarick—built by the Supreme Beings and protected by us devoted guardians—all the way to the seventh floor would be defeated by something so simple as that..."

"Shall we not sneak a peek, hmm?" Shalltear smiled like a kid who'd come up with a good prank.

In response, Sebas's face had his usual smile—just a bit bigger. "You would disobey Lord Ainz?"

"No, no, 'tis a joke. Please give me not that frightful glare."

"Shalltear, curiosity killed the cat. We must wait until Lord Ainz feels it's time to tell us."

"You're right... So, did our prey take the bait?"

Sebas replied without any mention of the sudden change in topic. "Yes, perfectly. All we have to do is reel him in."

After giving a shallow nod, Shalltear licked her lips and her crimson eyes lit up with a singular sparkle.

Sebas knew at once what that meant and judged this to be a good time to bring up Solution's request. "About that—there's something I'd like to ask you."

"...What?" She grumbled at being interrupted in the middle of her happy imaginings of the coming scene.

Sebas continued in a calming voice. "I wonder if you would not mind giving the driver to our Solution here?"

"...He's an underling?"

"Yes, about messenger rank, I think."

Hearing this, Shalltear closed her eyes and thought for a time. She must have considered various possibilities before giving her answer, but she nodded emphatically. "Then that's fine. He doesn't seem like he would taste very good even if I drank him dry, anyway."

"Thank you. We're grateful for your generous consideration."

"Thank you, Mistress Shalltear."

"Oh, 'tis nothing. Never you mind." Shalltear gave a surprisingly tender smile to Solution. Then she moved only her eyes to Sebas. "I hope with this, you would please forget my earlier gaffe."

"Understood. I never thought you would actually do something so utterly foolish in the first place. A fine joke."

"Yes, I know. If you had done something like that to me, I probably would have felt the same way. Then I wouldn't say a word, but I'd have some minions keep an eye on you, and if it seemed like you were going to rebel, I'd immediately rend you limb from limb, then take you in chains to Lord Ainz."

"I would not do such a thing, Shalltear."

"You wouldn't? That almost brings *your* loyalty into question! Surely you would!" Shalltear and Sebas laughed together, truly enjoying themselves.

"Well, I am an ally to cuties. Moreover, I'm sure it'll be fun in its own way to give him to Solution after we're through..."

"So how do you intend to capture them, Shalltear? Paralysis? Hold Person?"

Before leaving for E-Rantel, Ainz had given Sebas the order to "capture humans who can use magic or martial arts—but aim for people whose disappearance won't be an issue, like criminals." As part of that plan, Sebas was playing the role of a butler under the thumb of an airhead daughter of a successful merchant. They had been waiting, but then a fish named Zach took their bait.

Shalltear's role was to catch that fish along with the rest of his school.

"Ha, I don't want to do something so involved. Lord Ainz said he didn't mind if I drank their blood and made them slaves as long as I caught them. Investigating each one seems like a bother, so I'll just drink them all up."

Sebas nodded without vocalizing his, *I see*. But if that was her plan, he had some serious worries. It was due to this appraisal that he slipped up and said, "In that case, perhaps Demiurge would have been best for this mission. He can manipulate opponents like Aura can with her breath..."

Demiurge had a skill called Incantation of Influence, a powerful mind-control ability. It would have been incomparably useful for this type of job where they had to capture their opponents.

"...Huh?!" All of a sudden Shalltear emitted an unbelievably low grunt.

The atmosphere in the carriage was suddenly very heavy, flooded with a skin-penetrating chill. As if even the horses sensed it, the carriage suddenly lurched with a huge *clunk*. The pale skin of the vampires on either side of Shalltear grew paler, and Solution's whole body trembled. Even Sebas, who was, theoretically, as strong as her, felt a chill go up his spine.

She had the strongest genuine urge to kill out of all Nazarick's floor guardians. An animosity swirled that made it clear that all her scuffles with Aura were nothing but child's play. Depending on how this was handled, a battle only one would walk away from could break out.

From Shalltear's crimson irises, vermilion spread over the whites of her eyes like oozing blood. "Sebas—try saying that again. Or would you, a dragonman, want to fight me in your current form"—her fully crimson eyeballs rolled wildly—"to the death?"

"I misspoke. Please forgive me. I just worry that perhaps your Blood Frenzy may activate..."

Shalltear responded with silence.

Sebas could tell it was because she was worried about that herself.

In *Yggdrasil*, strong classes were given weak points and penalties to

make the game balanced. One of Shalltear's handful of penalties was that if she got too much blood on her, she would be at the mercy of her killing urge, and in exchange for a jump in combat ability, she would lose control—Blood Frenzy.

So Shalltear was liable to ignore orders and go on a rampage. Ainz had actually chosen her for this mission by process of elimination. Albedo had to protect the Great Tomb of Nazarick while he was gone. Then out of the two remaining guardians, Cocytus and Shalltear, Shalltear was the only one who could pass for human at a distance.

For a few seconds she breathed deeply in and out. It was probably to control her anger but perhaps also to suppress the anxiety that had welled up in her mind.

She took one last big breath and her face was the same as always—that of a bewitching, innocent little girl. The color of her eyes had also gone back to normal.

"...Anyhow, it's faster if we drink them up because then they're our slaves. And it's not as if we have to bring them back alive. Lord Ainz said it's fine. And I'll keep Blood Frenzy under control."

By sucking up all of someone's blood, vampires could create unconditionally obedient subordinates. Normal vampires could make only lesser vampires of inferior intelligence, but Shalltear could create vampires that had more or less the same mental faculties as humans. There was a limit to the number she could make, but when operating on the premise that it didn't matter if the captives were taken dead or alive, she was surely a superior hunter.

"Yes, I will do a splendid job carrying out the duties Lord Ainz bestowed upon me, and my praises he will sing: 'Nice job. You're my most precious slave.' And then he'll say, 'You are the one most fit to stand at my side.'"

"Please forgive my thoughtlessness." This was an honest expression of Sebas's feelings. What he had said was abusive toward Shalltear, and also... "I didn't realize it was a slight to Lord Ainz for choosing

you, as well—how rude of me. I hope you will forgive this unpleasantness."

Just as he was saying, "And you as well," with bows to Solution and the vampires, the carriage jolted and they heard the horses neighing.

"...We appear to have stopped."

"Yes..."

Shalltear had been deep in a daydream about the joy her successful completion of this mission would bring her master, but now she grinned like a little girl planning something naughty. Sebas stroked his beard with a silent smile.

4

The ten men who had come out of the nearby forest made a half circle around the carriage. They were all outfitted differently. Not all their equipment was well made, but it wasn't shoddy, either, and it was clear they took care of their weapons.

They were talking among themselves, wondering what to do with their prey, what order they should go in, and so on. They were completely unguarded. They had done this innumerable times—it would have been stranger if they felt randomly nervous for this one.

Zach hopped out of the box seat and trotted over to the men. Of course, he cut the reins beforehand to ensure no escape. He had also already rigged one of the doors so it wouldn't open—only the door facing the group of men would work.

The men flashed their weapons so the prey inside the carriage could see—a silent warning about what would happen if they didn't hurry up and get out.

As if in reply, the carriage door slowly opened.

A beautiful woman came into view in the moonlight. The mercenaries—no, the bandits—focused their vulgar grins and lusty stares on her. Delight was written on their faces.

One among them was shocked—Zach. His surprise in a nutshell: *Who's that?* He didn't know. But he'd recognize the carriage anywhere. That discrepancy threw him into a sea of confusion, and he couldn't say a word.

When another woman dressed the same way appeared, a couple of the others began to look perplexed. Zach had told them all he was bringing a young lady who didn't know a thing about the world and her elderly butler. Then another girl appeared, who looked young enough to call a child, and all their doubts no longer mattered.

Her fine silver hair sparkled as it reflected the moonlight. Her crimson eyes glistened with a bewitching luster. Unable even to utter words of admiration, the bandits just sighed at her loveliness. It was a moment that proved how even animal lust would melt away in the face of true beauty.

An indecent smile played across Shalltear's face, and she walked readily up to the men, basking in their fascinated gazes.

"Thank you all for gathering here for me. And may I ask who is the most distinguished among you? I'd like to do some negotiating. Is it you?"

Noticing that all the bandits turned to look at one man, she judged that she had all the information she needed. In other words, every other man was unnecessary.

"H-hmm? Negotiate?" The one who seemed like the leader finally recovered from his initial encounter with this peerless beauty and took a step forward.

"Ahh, forgive me. That was just a mischievous joke to gather some

intelligence from you. Really, do forgive me."

"Who the hell are...?" whispered Zach, and Shalltear turned to him.

"You must be Zach. I'll hand over Solution as promised, so can we have you just wait over there?"

A few of the men looked at one another for an explanation, but—

"Heh. You have some pretty nice equipment there for a kid... Ooh, I'm gonna make you squeal."

A bandit who happened to be standing in front of Shalltear reached out an arm for her chest, which was quite big for her apparent age. Then—it fell to the ground.

"Please don't touch me with your filthy hands."

He gaped at his arm, now missing everything past the wrist, and let out a late scream. "Ahhhhh! M-my hand! My haaaaaand!"

"You needn't scream so much simply because you've lost a hand. You're a man," Shalltear said quietly, and nonchalantly waved her own. At the same time, the man's head thudded to the ground.

She isn't even holding a knife; how did she do that with just her pretty hands? All the bandits were reeling from the mental shock, dumbfounded by the dreamlike event—the scene was unreal. But fear of what happened next jolted them back.

The blood spewing out from the man's severed neck gathered, as of its own will, above Shalltear's head and formed a sphere.

Shalltear and the others from Nazarick knew it was made using the skill Blood Pool.

But the first thing the men thought, not aware of the true nature of the inhuman feat they were witnessing, was *She's a caster!*

If they were a bit more knowledgeable, they should have been able

to give a more specific warning. *Caster* was, at best, a broad category, and the way to approach them differed per class. The first thing one might think, seeing Shalltear clad in nothing but a dress, might be arcane-type magic. Or maybe psychic type. But since no one had cried out anything like that, it was safe to assume they had no understanding of magic; in other words, they thought anything they couldn't understand was "magic."

Shalltear looked at the bandits, who were scrambling to get their swords up, with disinterest. "Well, this is a bore. You two can take it from here. Just don't do *that* or *that*...understand?"

"Yes, Mistress Shalltear."

The vampires to her rear on either side stepped forward and punched the face off a bandit about to swing his sword at Shalltear.

It was like they'd hit him as hard as they could with metal rods. With a noise like a balloon popping, the bandit flew into the air. All kinds of matter—a mix of blood and brains—splattered out of his head. The fluids glittering in the moonlight were beautiful precisely because they were so horrifying.

The sound of the tumbling corpse pulled to the ground by gravity—with half its head blown away and pink brains spilled from the gaping wound—that was the bell that signaled the start of fear and agony for the bandits, joy to Shalltear, and the beginning of the battle.

Zach watched the scene unfold with a disbelieving, twitching smile on his face.

The scene before him was too much.

Just the smell of blood was making him sick. Human arms and legs were being torn off as if they were made from paper; heads gripped between two hands burst like pomegranates. Armor was ripped off, hands jammed into the torsos. Glistening-wet intestines, yards of them, were yanked out. That they didn't immediately die from all this

showed how resilient humans were.

On the ground was one who had tried to run and had both his legs smashed. There were white things—bones—protruding through the flesh and skin. He was frantically clawing at the dirt with both hands, trying to get even a little farther away from the fear, struggling to live even a little longer.

The young, peerless beauty's off-key laughter as she looked down at the man prostrate at her feet, begging for his life, grated strangely on Zach's ears.

Why is this happening...? Zach thought desperately.

No matter how one tried to sugarcoat it, the natural law at the root of this world was survival of the fittest. That the strong should take from the weak was completely and utterly normal, and Zach had done it himself. But he wondered still if things this awful should be allowed to happen.

There was no excuse. There was no way he could accept such horrific methods of killing. *Then what do I do?* They happened to not be attacking him at the moment, but if he tried to run, he was sure they'd do something to make it so he could never do such a thing ever again—something so painful it would make him vomit.

Through his clothes, he touched the dagger in his breast pocket. *How useless.* These monsters could tear off people's arms like they were nothing. There was no way he'd be able to fight them with that thing.

What did I do to deserve this? He'd never thought of doing a thing to these monsters.

Zach wrapped his arms around his body, as he was trying to hide himself, even a little bit. His rhythmically chattering teeth were too loud. *What'll I do if they hear me and come this way?* He desperately tried to stop the noise, but the chattering continued against his will.

What are they, anyway? I have no idea who these freaks are.

Just as he thought that—

"Zach. Come this way."

—he heard a voice behind him, a clear, refreshing voice that didn't match the brutal display before him. He turned around, terrified, to find the one who had hired him standing there.

She was usually raising her conceited voice to make a fuss—he never imagined he'd see this expression on her face. If he had any presence of mind, he would have been on guard, but confused in this strange world reeking of blood, he had no leeway to sense something was off.

"Who are those people?!" His voice trembled as he shouted shrilly at the young lady who hadn't seemed to know a thing about the world. "Don't you think you should have told me they were coming if they were coming?!" *Yeah. If she had done that, none of this would have happened. These horrors are all this unpleasant woman's fault.* "Don't just stand there. Say something! This is all your doing!"

Fed by impatience and fear, Zach's anger flared, and he reached out to grab Solution's breasts and roughly shook them back and forth.

"Understood. Come this way."

"...Y-you'll save me?"

"No. I thought you could entertain me some at the end..." She put her cold white hands over the top of his and squeezed. Still holding them, she set off walking. "Master Sebas doesn't much care for this sort of thing, so even though I have permission, let's do it over here."

Zach couldn't understand what she was saying to him. Being taken off somewhere separately made him feel like maybe, just maybe, he had a chance at surviving.

He shut his ears to the screams that could still be heard behind them.

What could I have done? Zach was weak. There was no way he could have saved guys who were supposed to be stronger than he was.

"Please don't be too rough. I'd like it…if you could be gentle." She'd invited him into the shadow of the carriage, and while she was whispering, she reached around her back to loosen her dress. Zach was dumbfounded. *What is she doing?* He watched her as if he was studying a strange creature, trying to make out what it was doing.

Still, her hands didn't stop, so he finally asked her, "Wh-what are you doing?"

"I wonder…" She loosened the bustier she was wearing underneath her dress.

As if waiting for that moment, the tightly restrained mounds jumped out. They came to conic points, and her white skin was almost translucent in the moonlight. Zach gulped in spite of himself.

"Go ahead." She thrust her bare chest at him, all but saying, *Touch me.*

"What…?" Forgetting everything, he simply stared at her.

She was beautiful. She had a body more beautiful than any woman he'd ever seen before. Up until now, the prettiest girl he'd ever had was, as might be expected, in another raid on a carriage. By the time his turn had come around, she'd been limp and could barely move a muscle—she'd just spread her legs like a frog. That hadn't stopped her from being beautiful, though.

But the woman he was with today was even more gorgeous *and* she would react. Desire lit a fire inside him. The area between his legs especially was growing warmer; panting like a dog, he slid a hand over her skin.

Silk—that's what it felt like.

No longer able to hold himself back, he dug his fingers into her perfectly formed breast and squeezed.

Glerp—his hand sank in.

Her skin was so soft Zach felt like his hand sank right into her—that's what he thought at first, but with one look at his hand, he saw and understood a moment later that he was wrong.

His hand had *literally* sunken into her body.

"Wh-what is this?!" he yelped, unable to comprehend the situation, and tried to pull out his hand. It didn't budge. And then, instead of coming out, it was dragged in farther. Inside, Solution's body had countless tentacles. She wrapped them around his hand and seemed to be trying to suck him in.

Despite the strange circumstances, Solution's shapely face didn't register any change. She just gazed silently at Zach. She had the cold, merciless expression of a scientist who had just injected a test animal with a lethal substance. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"Hey! Stop! Let me go!" Zach formed a fist with his free hand and slugged Solution in the face as hard as he could.

Once, twice, three times... He didn't care if his fist got thrashed; he delivered hits with his full body weight behind them. Solution took his all-out punches straight to her pretty face without so much as flinching. It didn't even look like she felt any pain. Meanwhile, what his hand felt when he punched her sent a shiver up his spine. It was like punching a soft leather bag submerged in water. The impact of hand to bone that he expected never came. She was definitely not human.

The hellish scene behind them that he'd forgotten in all the excitement flitted across his mind. He bit back a scream. He'd finally realized—that the woman baring her skin in front of him was a

monster, too.

"Do you understand now? Then I'm going to start, okay?"

Before he could ask her what they were starting, his swallowed-up hand was assailed by acute pain, like it was stabbed by hundreds of pins at once.

"Aaaaaaagh!"

"I'm melting you."

He heard her cold words through the pain, but he didn't understand what they meant. The idea was too great a departure from the world he knew.

"I love watching things melt. And you said you wanted to get inside me, so it works out perfectly."

"Gyyyaaaaagh! You fucking monster! Dieeee!" Zach spat, suppressing the pain as he drew the dagger in his breast pocket. In one smooth motion, he dug it deep into Solution's face. She jumped.

"That's whatcha get!" But he realized how shortsighted he was a moment later.

What happens to the surface of a lake when someone stabs it with a knife? At most, maybe it makes some ripples. And that's what happened now.

With the dagger still sticking out of her face, Solution rolled her eyes to fix them on Zach and began to speak.

"My apologies. I have physical attack resistance, so you can't hurt me that way. Anyhow, I'm going to melt you now, okay?"

A pungent odor filled the air and a few seconds later the dagger slipped out of her face and fell to the ground, its blade dissolved. Her beautiful face beneath it was unharmed as claimed.

“What even are you?!” he whimpered. The fear of his imminent death made him half forget the insane amount of pain radiating from his hand, and now his eyes were shedding big teardrops. The answer he received made him want to plug his ears.

“A predatory slime. I don’t have much time, so I’m going to swallow you up all at once, okay?”

His arm was slurped inside her instantly. Her power was so overwhelming that Zach’s resistance was futile. “Stop-stop-stop-stop-stop! Help-help-help!” He cried, screamed, and begged for his life, but the force that was sucking him into her body remained strong. It was strength a human had no chance at fighting, and it swallowed up his shoulder.

“Lilia!” With that name shouted as his last word, Zach’s face was sucked into Solution’s body. And the rest of his body was engulfed, just the way a snake eats.

In just a few minutes, there were no longer any living things in the area. Now, there was nothing but the pungent odor hanging in the air.

No, there was one man who still had his life. He worked his tongue furiously as he groveled at Shalltear’s feet—he was cleaning. She’d gotten some cerebrospinal fluid on her high heels when she randomly stomped on one of the bandits’ heads.

Once her heels had regained their pretty shine, she cast a satisfied look at him. “Nice work. Now then, as promised, we won’t kill you.”

The man’s face had been twisted in fear, but now he looked up at her from his bootlicking posture, moved with gratitude. He bowed frantically, giving thanks. Shalltear looked at the doglike man with a mother’s affection and then snapped her fingers.

“Drink up.”

The man realized what those words meant when the two vampire

brides came up next to him.

"You'll be given life as an undead, so I wasn't lying."

As she watched the vampire brides bite into him ferociously, his life draining swiftly out of him, Shalltear called to Solution, who was walking over from the direction of the carriage, adjusting her disheveled chest and neckline. "Oh, finished already?"

"Yes, I'm quite satisfied. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. We're both from Nazarick, after all. So, did Mr. Human feel any good?"

"We're still in the middle of it. Would you like to see?"

"Oh? Can I? Then could you show me just a bit?"

The man's arm suddenly popped out of Solution's face. A pungent odor filled the area—coming from the arm. Having been bathed in a strong acid, its skin was melting off, and the muscles smoked as the blood running over them reacted with the acid.

The arm, looking as though it had reached out of the surface of a lake, groped around frantically for something to grab onto. With each twist, fluids oozing from his dissolved skin went flying everywhere.

"My apologies, I didn't realize he was still so lively," Solution said with the arm still sticking out of her mouth. Then she began to casually cram it back into her face. Once she'd stuffed the flailing arm in all the way, she smiled again.

"Wow. It's impossible to tell from the outside that you just swallowed a whole person."

"Thank you. It's because I'm empty inside. And I think, since I'm this sort of creature, there must be some magical effect at work."

"Huh. Perhaps it's none of my business, but when will he die?"

“Hmm. If you told me to kill him now, I could secrete a stronger acid, but he seemed to want to get inside me so badly; I think I’ll let him enjoy it for a day or so.”

“You can’t even hear him scream. Did you burn his vocal cords?”

“No, they sometimes suffocate if you burn their throats, so I put part of my body inside him to hold them still. That’s also how I keep the smell from coming out.”

“I must say, the amount of care you take with these things, enjoying them up to the last possible second, is impressive. So, can you pick where you want to burn? For example, could you choose just one part you want to burn?”

“Yes, I can do that quite easily. As proof of that, I have various items such as scrolls and potions stored in my body right now, and none of them are being harmed. I could move around like normal even if I put you inside me, Mistress Shalltear—that is, as long as you didn’t run amok in there…”

“Really? Wow, predatory slimes are fascinating… Would you care to have some fun together another time?”

“Sure…but what will we play with?” Solution flicked her eyes to the vampires behind them.

Shalltear noticed her reaction and smiled in delight. “They’re not a bad idea, but I was thinking that if there was an invader, we could catch it and ask Lord Ainz for permission…”

“Very well, then please call me when the time comes. It would be fun to swallow one up to their chest and leave the rest hanging out.”

“Nice. You must get along with the Officer of Torture.”

“Mistress Neuronist? The special-intelligence-gathering officer? Unfortunately, I can’t keep up with her.”

Shalltear was about to open her mouth to speak again when a voice called out from behind them. “Solution. Everything is ready here. Let’s leave soon, shall we?” Sebas had changed the reins and was sitting in the driver’s box.

“Of course. I am coming now. Mistress Shalltear, I regret to take leave, but if you’ll excuse me.”

Shalltear looked up at Sebas while Solution bustled into the carriage. “Well, Sebas, we part ways here.”

“I see. So you know where the bandit hideout is now?”

“Yes, we’re going to attack it and see if there is anyone with the type of information Lord Ainz is seeking. This time was a disappointment.”

“I see. It was a pleasure to work with you, Mistress Shalltear.”

“Thank you for that. Let’s meet again in Nazarick.”

“Yes, now if you would excuse me—”



Chapter 2 A True Vampire

1

Two shadows were sprinting through the forest—Shalltear's minions and concubines, the vampire brides.

Most people would have had trouble with their footing on this animal trail cutting through the woods, branches sticking out from either side. But even in the darkness, the vampire brides hurried down the coarse path at an unbelievable speed in their high heels without getting their dresses caught at all.

The one running in front was carefully carrying Shalltear with two hands, and the one in back was dragging something that looked like a dried-up tree trunk.

They weren't far from where they had left Sebas and Solution. It wasn't as if they had an odometer, so they weren't sure how much farther it was to their destination, but they figured they still had quite a ways to go. But suddenly, a hard, metallic sound rang out, and the vampire in front stopped in her tracks.

There was one narrow path. If the individual taking the lead stopped, the one behind had no choice but to follow suit.

"Why did you stop all of a sudden?"

The vampire bride in front tried to answer the question that came from behind, but before she could, she shuddered from the cold glare

being shot at her from the small form held within her arms. The icy feeling creeping up her spine came from knowing her mistress had a personality that was neither gentle nor merciful.

Shalltear was still being cradled—like a girl swept off her feet—as she crankily moved her legs.

Keenly sensing the meaning behind the gesture, the vampire relaxed her arms.

Shalltear hopped down like a bird flying out of a cage. She floated lightly through the air; first the high heels she was still wearing touched down, and her dress slipped down afterward to cover her slender legs. Once on the ground, she pushed back her long silver hair in annoyance and turned her head slightly.

The vampire swallowed hard in the cold glare of her mistress.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The only reasons Shalltear didn't run through the forest herself were that it was simply a pain and she didn't want to get her shoes dirty. Actually, there was one more reason, but there was no one present who dared say or think it. In all of Nazarick, there was only a handful of people who could say it to her face.

As long as a vampire bride was acting as Shalltear's feet, it was unforgivable to stop without an order to do so. Shalltear didn't need legs that moved of their own free will.

The punishment depended on the reason. That was implied. One would think it would be enough if it ended in punishment, but Shalltear's question had contained a bit of murderous intent.

In the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the power of life and death over anyone not directly created by the Forty-One Supreme Beings rested with the floor guardians who ruled over them, or their domain guardians. Upsetting Shalltear any further could end in death.

With a sense of foreboding that they might be her last words, the vampire slowly opened her mouth to speak. “Please forgive me. I’m caught in a bear trap.”

Shalltear’s eyes moved, and she saw that one of the vampire’s slim legs was sandwiched in a roughly made metal trap.

This wasn’t something made to use against humans but more for tough wild animals, like bears. If a human’s ankle was caught in it, the bone would probably snap even if they were wearing protective greaves, just from the impact. But vampires were different from humans in every way imaginable.

Although the teeth of the trap had dug into her leg, there were no signs that she was experiencing pain or that any bones were broken. In fact, it didn’t seem like she was injured in any way at all.

Vampires had a power that reduced most effects of any physical attack not done with weapons made of silver (or a special metal equivalent) or weapons with a certain level of magical power. She may have been bitten by the bear trap, but because it was merely iron, it couldn’t hurt her. If she got it off, the holes would heal up instantly.

However, even if she was completely immune to the bear trap’s damage, it was fulfilling its other aim—of preventing her from moving—perfectly well.

It was clear from the fact that it wasn’t poisoned that this trap wasn’t meant to kill its captive. Its purpose was to slow down the target by giving it extra baggage. Shalltear shook her head, all but berating the vampire as hopeless.

“Hurry up and get out of it, then.”

“Yes, right away!”

Taking Shalltear’s order, the vampire reached down with her skinny arms, grabbed either side of the toothy jaw, and pried it open without

difficulty. The bear trap freed its prey, unable to cope with her bear-surpassing strength.

A beautiful lady prying open a bear trap. It was the kind of scene that seemed almost laughable, but those who knew a vampire's strength wouldn't have been surprised.

"If there's this sort of trap around here, we must be getting closer to our destination. I thought we had quite a ways to go still."

"One moment, please." The vampire following behind them threw on the ground the dead branch-looking thing she'd been carrying.

It was a human corpse that had lost all its moisture, completely mummified. But it wasn't *just* a corpse. As proof of that, it began to jerk and move with false life. Long claws began to grow from the ends of its withered hands, and in its vacant orbits, a red glow that was the same as the vampires' began to flicker. Oddly sharp canine teeth jutted out of its slightly open mouth. It was a monster called a lesser vampire—this was what had become of the bandit from before, after they drank all his blood.

"I have a question. Are we getting close to your hideout?"

The lesser vampire nodded deeply and made a sound between a grunt and a scream.

"—Apparently so, Mistress Shalltear."

"I see. I wonder why there aren't any linked traps?" It would have made sense for there to be a noisemaker and secondary trap, but there didn't seem to be anything like that.

Shalltear scanned the area. Perhaps she was checking for concealed enemies. The vampire brides followed her lead and looked as well. Then Shalltear shook her head.

"...Well, it's probably fine. I don't really have search skills, anyway..."

Hearing that quiet comment, the vampire realized why she had been forgiven. Since none of them, including their mistress, had any skills that could have discovered hidden devices, they hadn't been aware of the bear trap. That's what had saved her life—their mistress thinking it was perhaps unfair to punish someone for being unable to do something even she couldn't do.

"Perhaps we should have borrowed that girl..." Solution had the assassin class. With her thief skills, detecting traps and such was probably a piece of cake. "Well, it's no use asking for the impossible. Let's hurry onward to this den of thieves."

Eventually Shalltear's band reached the area near the mercenaries' hideout. Though still in the forest, they saw the trees grew gradually sparser, and when the three of them continued toward their destination, the trees disappeared, allowing them to emerge into a meadow with a large number of rocks jutting out of the ground—a type of topography called "karst."

It was among the bowl-shaped hollows that a hole opened up in the ground. Some light was spilling out of the cave. From the way it shone, the inside of the cave seemed like a gentle slope leading deeper into the ground.

Installed on either side of the opening to the cave were things that immediately indicated a human presence—barricades about as tall as a man's torso. Not that they were so tough looking; they'd just been thrown together with a few logs. There was, however, a guard posted on either side for a grand total of two.

They used the barricades as cover for their lower bodies, and if arrows started to fly, they would no doubt duck and sound the alarm.

In a normal battle, a charge from this distance would give their opponents time to ready their weapons and call reinforcements from inside the cave. They could try to sneak up on them, but anything big enough to hide behind among the rocks had been cleared away. Furthermore, the guards had large bells slung from their shoulders.

Even if they could take them out in a sneak attack, the bells would sound, alerting those inside to an enemy attack.

They had put quite a bit of thought into this.

But there was one way to break through a seemingly impossible physical situation: magic. Shalltear could cast Silence and kill them in one shot. She could approach using Invisibility. She could lure them away using Charm Person. She could also break the bells.

Which way is the most fun? Shalltear had gotten that far when she realized she was missing one vital piece of information. "Is there just the one entrance?"

The lesser vampire answered her question with a jerky nod.

Shalltear broke into a smile. Then there was no need to stand here thinking any longer.

Sturdy guards were effective against sneak attackers as well as against people who thought fighting outnumbered was a disadvantage—but Shalltear and her vampire brides were different.

They could crush the worms known as humans with their overwhelming power, so there was not a single reason they couldn't march straight up to them and attack head-on. Her caution was motivated purely by the possibility that their prey might have a back exit through which to make an escape.

"What? Well then, we've already come this far. No reason for us to stay hidden. I'm just not very good at this stealth business, all the tiptoeing around."

"That's because by Mistress Shalltear's presence alone, everything around shines more brilliantly."

"The obvious can't be flattery. If you want to flatter me, you're going to have to think a little harder." Ignoring the vampire's *Please forgive me* bow, Shalltear reached out to grab the lesser vampire.

“You’re going to do the big job of leading the charge. Now, go!”

With a swing of her slender arm, she sent the lesser vampire whistling through the air toward one of the guards. She’d put some spin on the former bandit, so he flipped end over end dozens of times on his way.

The impact caused an unbelievable amount of damage. The guard lost his head but also half his chest, and blood went spraying into the air. The other guard, unable to comprehend what he’d just witnessed, stared dumbstruck at the horrific corpse of his partner as the smell of fresh blood filled the area.

From the perspective of the one who threw the corpse, it was an extremely entertaining scene. “Strike!”

“Splendid, Mistress Shalltear!”

Shalltear pumped a fist and the vampire brides clapped. It goes without saying that although the lesser vampire had been blown to bits, none of these three cared one bit. He hadn’t been a member of Nazarick in the first place, just something they’d created for a lark, so of course, they didn’t get emotional when he was destroyed. And there was no way Shalltear would remember a promise with the likes of a human.

“Okay, one more...” Shalltear looked between the vampires. Alarmed, the two of them quickly found a suitably sized rock to hand her.

“Here we go.” Bells could be heard in the distance as she hefted the somewhat large rock.

Her slender arm whipped down at a tremendous speed, and in the next instant, upon seeing the far-off results of her action, she happily announced her battle performance. “Uh, next is...strike two! That’s what you say, right?”

Another round of applause.

They could hear a guard in the interior who, alerted by the bells, was shouting that they were under attack.

As the commotion in the cave gradually spread, Shalltear smiled tenderly at its entrance and gave orders. “Now then, let’s go. You, climb a tree and watch for anyone running away. And you, go in ahead of me. If there are any tough guys, let me know so I can look forward to them.”

“Yes, Mistress Shalltear.”

“Off you go.”

The vampire ordered to go ahead of her took a big step, slowly proceeded toward the entrance to the cave—and disappeared.

The ground had caved in. No, it hadn’t—it was a pitfall.

Shalltear may have been able to evade it, but apparently the vampire wasn’t fast enough to avoid losing her footing.

“Are you serious?”

This vampire was a low-level minion with no trap detection skills. There was nothing that could be done about that. That’s why Shalltear had forgiven her before, but she couldn’t help but let a disappointed comment slip out, even knowing all that.

Then she pasted a grin on her face. It wasn’t kind, full of goodwill, or embarrassed. Certainly a pitfall in front of the entrance to a cave should have been predictable. She felt foolish for not having thought of it and angry about being caught. It was those emotions that bubbled up and manifested as a smile.

That a minion of Shalltear Bloodfallen, guardian of multiple levels of the glorious Great Tomb of Nazarick, should have been caught in such a trap was inexcusable. Words brimming with murderous intent escaped her lips. “I’ll butcher you! Get the hell out of there!”

The vampire leaped out and appeared on the edge of the pit. She was unharmed; just her clothes had gotten dirty.

“Don’t be so disappointing!”

“My apologi—”

“Whatever, just go. Or should I hurl you in? Like that garbage from earlier?”

Shalltear made a clutching motion with one hand and the vampire acknowledged the order in a voice that was also a shriek and went trotting into the cave. Shalltear walked leisurely after her.

2

There was some kind of commotion going on. Pausing from the weapon maintenance he’d been doing in his private room, he pricked his ears.

A clamor, the thudding of multiple people running, a faint scream.

They were definitely under attack. But it was impossible to tell how many enemies or how strong they were, despite the fact that everyone was trained to shout that information.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t hear. His room was private, but it was still inside the cave. Instead of a door, there was only a curtain hanging over the hole in the wall. The fabric was thick, but he could still hear the voices fine.

The mercenary gang Sowers of Death had a little less than seventy members. Even if there was no one as strong as him, there were other battle-hardened veterans. A sneak attack by a small force wouldn’t cause this much panic, though, so it could have meant that there was a large number of enemies. But in that case, he couldn’t explain why

he was unable to hear them moving around or sense much of anything.

"Then...adventurers?" If there was a small number of enemies with high combat ability, then this off feeling might have made sense.

He stood up slowly and slung his weapon from his hip. His armor was a mail shirt. It took no time to put on. Then he hung a leather pouch filled with ceramic potion bottles on his belt and tied it fast. He was already wearing his necklace and ring containing defensive magic, so his preparations were complete.

He whipped aside the curtain so fast he practically ripped it off the wall and entered what could be called the base's main corridor.

Several stolen lanterns containing the spell Continual Light were hung at regular intervals along the wall, making it so bright it was hard to believe this was inside a cave.

Light illuminated his whole body. He had a slim build, but he wasn't skinny. The flesh under his clothes was solid as steel—a product of not only weight training but also actual battles. His hair had been cut haphazardly, so it just grew mop-like in every direction without lining up at the ends. His brown eyes gazed sharply forward, and he had a smile close to a sneer about his mouth. His chin grew stubble like mold.

All this combined to give him an undisciplined appearance, but when he walked, he practically glided; he had the grace of a wild predator.

As he walked toward the entrance that was under attack, a man rushed at him. It was a face he knew, one of the mercenaries. When the man saw him, he broke into a smile as if they had already won.

"What's going on?"

"Brain, we're under attack!"

Smiling wryly, he—Brain—replied, “I got that. How many? Who are they?”

“There are two enemies, both women.”

“Women? Two women? The Blue Roses? ...Nah, can’t be.” Cocking his head, he strode off toward where the clamor could still be heard.

The strongest party of adventurers in the kingdom, the famous Blue Roses, was made up of five women. What’s more, the one member Brain had a run-in with, which ended in a painful draw, was an old lady. He’d also heard rumors that the best assassin in the empire was a woman. Strong women weren’t a rarity. Even if there was often a gap in the sexes’ physical ability, magic was easily able to close it.

Of course, Brain was sure that piling the highest-level magic on top of the strongest possible physical body would simply make someone invincible, but still...

Brain’s mental state was gradually taken over by his building excitement, his respect for the opponents who pulled off a sneak attack with small numbers, as well as a will to fight that came close to a hunger to face powerful enemies.

“You don’t have to come along. Hang back and fortify the rear or something,” he said to the sellsword, and then set off resolutely toward his unknown adversaries.

He was Brain Unglaus.

In the beginning, he had been a simple peasant, but he had ability that could have come only from heaven. Ability with a sword, that is. And he was born a talent holder to back up his sword skills, so with a weapon, he was invincible. He was a combat natural who never got more than a scratch on the battlefield.

He had never been beaten with a sword and had planned to carry on his undefeated record. Everyone believed so, and he himself had

no doubts. Then the royal tournament changed his life.

He hadn't participated with any strong conviction to win. He just wanted the whole kingdom to know how strong he was. Then everyone would bow at his feet. But he met an unthinkable result: defeat.

His first defeat since grasping a weapon—no, perhaps the first in his entire life.

The one who defeated him was named Gazef Stronoff. He was the current captain of the Royal Select and known throughout neighboring countries as the strongest warrior in the region.

Up until their bout, both had amassed a pile of nearly instant wins. But their clash was a long fight that ended up taking all the time they had previously saved.

In the end, it was Gazef's martial art Fourfold Slash of Light that decided the match. The fight was still talked of, but the fact that the lowborn Gazef was now captain of the Royal Select really said it all. It was such an impressive fight that even the nobles who detested the captain couldn't say he was weak.

While the winner got the glory, for Brain, the loser, it was as if everything he had built up so far in life had been destroyed. Even though it had been a narrow defeat, he learned that he had only convinced himself there were no warriors stronger than him because he'd been living like a frog in a well.

After spending a month holed up in isolation, he broke through the despair that would drive many to the bottle and picked himself up.

He turned down multiple invitations from nobles and sought power for the first time in his life. He sought technique and trained his body. He sought magic and increased his knowledge. The prodigy put in the effort of a successful hard worker. Defeat took Brain to another level.

The reason he decided not to work for the nobles was that he didn't

want his ability to decline. To pursue the skills he had learned, he needed opponents. He wasn't interested in swordplay for sport or show. He wanted a job with decent pay that would give him frequent opportunities to fight real battles.

The reason he didn't choose to become an adventurer and earn their exceptional rewards was that adventurers didn't have much chance to cut down people. Monsters weren't bad opponents, but Brain's ultimate goal was to defeat Gazef, so he needed to fight humans.

From the slim number of options left to him, Brain chose the Sowers of Death, although in reality, he would have joined any mercenary gang. He was after only one thing—rewriting his defeat with a victory.

To acquire the weapon he wanted, the power he needed, he gave up everything. Magic weapons were expensive, but the one he wanted wasn't just any magic weapon.

There was a city far to the south of the kingdom in a desert. The weapons that found their way up from there every now and again could cut better than most magic weapons even unenchanted. People's eyes literally bulged at the extreme prices. This was the kind of weapon he was after.

Then he finally acquired a katana.

Now, he had arrived at the furthest reaches of strength. He was sure he would easily be able to beat Gazef, but he didn't let that make him arrogant; he never missed a day of training.

If he closed his eyes, he could see it: that tournament, Gazef's elegant fighting, his figure as he smoothly evaded a blow no one had ever dodged before, the four slashes he'd unleashed at once.

He couldn't remember himself being beaten. The only thing burned into his brain was the sight of the man who had beaten him.

As he proceeded toward the entrance to the cave, a faint smell of blood reached his nose. The fact that he couldn't hear any more screams meant all the men who had crowded into that area had already been killed. It had taken about two or three minutes.

The reason he had given at least ten men standing orders to rush the entrance was to buy time with defense for the ones farther in to get ready. If they had been killed already…

"They must be as strong as I am if there are only two of them."

Brain grinned.

Continuing with the same light step, he took a potion from his belt pouch and guzzled the contents. The bitter fluid washed down his throat into his stomach. Then he had one more—

The heat in his stomach ignited and expanded, flowing to every corner of his body. His muscles reacted by powering up with audible bulging noises.

This sharp increase in physical strength was a result of the magic in the potions: Lesser Strength and Lesser Agility.

Potions didn't need to be swallowed—sprinkling an appropriate amount over the body would also work—but Brain simply believed that the effects were greater when he drank them. Of course, it may just have been him, but sometimes faith in something could produce powerful results.

Next he took out some oil and dripped it onto the blade of his katana. It left a pale gleam on the blade and disappeared as if being soaked up. The name of the oil was Enchant Weapon. It was only temporary, but it increased the sharpness of his blade by imbuing it with magic.

"Engage one. Engage two." Reacting to the keyword triggers, his ring and necklace gushed magical energy that enveloped his body.

His Eye Necklace protected his eyes while it was active. It conferred Blindness Resistance, Infrared Vision, Lowlight Compensation, and more. If a warrior's weapon didn't connect, it wasn't worth a thing.

If their opponent's eyesight failed them, adventurers would take advantage of their weakness and use projectiles to safely attack from a distance as a matter of course. In fact, some adventurers had caught Brain in just that sort of trap before he acquired the necklace.

And his ring, which was a Ring of Magic Binding that could be injected with a low-tier spell for use when the wearer wished, casted Lesser Energy Protection to reduce attribute damage.

If they were really attacking in small numbers, then he had to go at them at full power. Better to cast it now than regret casting it too late.

Now all his preparations were complete. He expelled the intense heat erupting inside him with deep breaths. Brain, as he was now with the powered-up physical strength, probably stood at the peak of human swordsmen. The fierce look of someone completely confident in his abilities appeared on his face.

I'm all ready for you, so you're going to have to entertain me.

With each step, the smell of blood grew a bit stronger—

He saw two shadows.

"Hey there, looks like you're having fun."

"It's not so fun at all. Perhaps it's because none of them are very strong, but I can't seem to get a good pool going."

The unguarded reply reached him as Brain slowly showed himself. They must have already known he was there. He hadn't been trying to hide, so it wasn't so surprising.

His brow furrowed slightly upon seeing the invaders. *He said it was two women, but one of them is just a kid! And they're wearing...*

dresses? However, he abandoned those thoughts a moment later—because above the head of the girl, whose beauty could have been called peerless, he saw a sphere made of what looked like blood.

"I've never seen a spell like that, but you're casters, huh?" It was still strange for them to be wearing dresses, but if they were casters, he understood why they didn't wear armor.

"A faith-type magic caster. I believe in the origin of the bloodline, the divine ancestor Cainabel."

"The divine ancestor Kayne Able? Never heard of that god before. Is it a malicious god?"

"Yes, it's that type of deity, although I heard it was defeated by the Supreme Beings... Apparently he was a 'smoll fry e-vent bosse.'"

Brain looked away from the little girl as she murmured, "I would expect nothing less of the Supreme Beings"...and observed the woman who was accompanying her like an attendant.

She was also a beauty. She had voluptuous breasts and a sensual aura. Her white dress had spots of crimson here and there. *So she was the vanguard?* He shrugged and gripped his katana tightly. "Well, whatever. I'm ready to go. If you're not, I'll give you some time, so what do you say?"

The little girl looked at Brain in surprise and then covered her mouth and laughed discreetly. "Well, aren't you brave. Are you quite sure you're all right fighting alone? I don't mind if you call your friends."

"No matter how many weaklings there are, none of them will be able to lay a hand on you anyhow, right? In that case, I'm fine on my own."

"There's nothing I can do if none of you understand how high the stars are in the sky. Reaching out your hand because you think you can touch them should be left to little girls like Aura. When a grown

man does it, it's creepy."

"I think we need people like that. I guess little girls don't understand a man's romance." Brain held his katana with the tip pointed squarely at her eyes.

In response, she looked up at the ceiling, clearly bored, and then back at him.

"Go."

When the young girl gestured with her jaw, the woman leaped at him.

Her motion was truly gale-like, but it was no sweat for Brain to slice like the wind.

"Chest!"

He roared and simultaneously used all the power in his body to brandish his sword overhead and bring it down instantly. It was a blow with enough force to easily cut an armored warrior in two—they all felt the gust of air.

"Guh!"

"Hmm. Not deep enough?"

He intercepted her mid-leap, but she grasped her shoulder and jumped aside. His sword had sliced through her left collarbone to her chest.

Brain frowned. There was something else bothering him besides the fact that she hadn't been defeated in one strike—not a drop of blood came from her wound, despite the fact that a fountain of it wouldn't have been surprising.

Magic? He squinted when he saw what was happening beneath the hand she was holding to her shoulder. The cut was closing up, albeit

slowly. He'd heard rumors of rapid healing spells, but it didn't seem like one of those. Then there was only one answer: She was a monster with regeneration ability.

Her sharply pointed canine teeth, her crimson eyes brimming with hostility, her general appearance almost indistinguishable from a human... Once he had thought that far, he realized what she was.

"A vampire...? So special abilities include rapid healing, Bewitching Eyes, absorbing life force, creating lesser kin through blood sucking, resistance to weapons, and resistance to cold? I think there was more, but...well, whatever." He tightened his grip on his katana. "Whatever you are, I'll cut you down."

The woman opened her eyes wide. Her crimson pupils seemed oddly large.

The inside of Brain's head felt hazy for a moment. He even felt some fondness for the enemy before him. But with a shake of his head, he cleared it away. "Bewitching Eyes? I'm not so mentally weak that I'd fall for a charm of that level."

When Brain's katana was drawn, his mind was like his sword. He could easily shake off typical mind-control techniques.

The vampire menacingly bared her fangs in hate, but there was also fear in her display. If she was confident she was stronger, she should have been able to just attack. In other words, she was on guard after being injured or she had decided he was a tough opponent.

"Clever girl, but I suppose even a wild animal could figure out that much." Brain approached her with steady footsteps. She responded by gradually backing away.

Well, this is no fun. Brain snorted. He wondered if she comprehended his provocation. Seemingly responding, the vampire stopped her retreat and advanced ever so slightly.

They were about three yards apart. This was a distance the vampire could close in an instant. The reason she couldn't charge was her uncertainty about how skilled Brain was; it made her cautious. Then, with a faint smile, she thrust out her arms.

"Shock Wave!"

The wave warped the atmosphere as it approached Brain. This spell could easily dent full plate armor. If he took a direct hit in nothing but a mail shirt, it would surely cause a lot of damage. And if he took even one hit, the battle's balance would change; their baseline abilities were very different.

"If you're gonna celebrate, you should do it after you land a hit—if you don't want to give away your moves, that is."

Unharmed.

Brain had no trouble dodging the invisible shock wave and smiled coolly. The vampire panicked and pulled back from him. She had considered all humans an inferior species, looked down on them, but now her face showed that she realized her mistake.

Brain didn't show it in his expression, but he realized he needed to rethink the way he was fighting. He hadn't expected her to use magic.

Brain's target was Gazef, so he would be challenging him to a sword fight. For that reason, his magic wasn't nearly as sharp as his swordsmanship. He lacked the knowledge to guess what his opponent would do next.

As a result, they both ended up cautiously staring each other down. This made the little girl impatient, and she found the scene unpleasant.

"Okay, time to switch." She snapped her fingers—*pa-ching!*—and the dry sound caused the vampire's whole body to shudder.

Keeping the vampire, who was looking around, in front of him,

Brain didn't move. It was the perfect time to attack, but he didn't. He took his eyes off the vampire and observed the little girl.

She had a slim body. She was very thin considering how bizarrely big her chest was. Her arms were so slender they looked like they'd snap like twigs if Brain went all out.

There were all kinds of faith-magic casters: She could be a cleric, well accustomed to melee combat; a priestess, proficient at magic; or a bishop, who completely specialized in magic.

But if she was swapping in, that meant she was confident she could fight even without a vanguard. Brain cracked a smile.

It doesn't seem like she summoned that vampire, so she must be one, too?

What's more, from her attitude, it seemed she was the vampire's superior. For a monster, it was a given that external appearance didn't have to match the inside. It wouldn't be strange if this little girl had higher physical strength than the vampire. She had seen Brain's strength as a warrior and still chose to fight him. And wasn't the vampire scared of her?

A master the vampire fears... She must be fairly strong—I can't let my guard down.

Continuing to observe her, he furiously worked his brain to figure out what she must be. *If she's a vampire's master, could she be one of the legendary vampire lords? Supposedly there was one called Nation Breaker who destroyed an entire country... The old stories say that the Thirteen Heroes slayed him.*

The fact that one of the Thirteen Heroes did it meant it wasn't impossible. Brain tensed his sword hand and slowly moved into a fighting stance. "I'm Brain Unglaus!"

He got a puzzled frown in response to naming himself to a powerful enemy.

Feeling a bit sheepish, he asked, "…What's your name?"

"Oh, you wanted to know my name! You should have just said so. Cocytus would have understood immediately, but I don't think of humans in that way, so it took me a while to realize. My apologies." She picked up the skirt of her dress and curtsied as if she'd been invited to dance at a ball. "Shalltear Bloodfallen. Allow me to one-sidedly enjoy this."

•

She bowed gracefully to the man pointing his sword at her. Was she assuming he wouldn't attack? Or was she just confident that even if he did, she could handle it? The girl's expression gave a clear answer: the latter. She wasn't worried about him in the least.

I'll wipe that smug look off your face. Brain silently sent her a sharp glare that would frighten even battle-seasoned warriors. He really didn't care for that look on her face. But he was also glad she had it.

The arrogance of the powerful.

That was one thing humans had over monsters whose physical strength far exceeded theirs. Brain had taken advantage of it many times to defeat monsters stronger than him.

And what really mattered was being able to sneer at them after slaying them, after teaching them that there are some opponents you can show your confidence to and some you shouldn't.

"Are you not planning to use any martial arts?"

Martial arts.

They were special abilities warriors learned with intense training as they strove to reach the peak of their abilities. From their chi or maybe their aura, martial arts produced things that still couldn't be explained and were called magic achieved with weapons.

If a warrior was up against an opponent with a much larger build, the martial art Fortress would absorb the shock of incoming attacks and give them the edge to fight head-on.

Fatal Edge, an intense slash attack unleashed by focusing on their blade, could slay enemies in one hit, even ones with high health.

If a heavily armored enemy appeared, it was a good time to use the blunt weapon martial art Heavy Blow.

With the temporary increase in physical ability from Ability Boost, victory was a simple matter of leveraging the momentary gap in strength.

For a warrior, learning a wealth of arts and developing their own to use in a variety of situations was the type of preparation done as a matter of course, especially if one was an adventurer, since their profession required them to be highly adaptable.

But as for Brain...

"Hah! I wouldn't use them on the likes of you." That's how he replied to Shalltear, but of course, it was a lie. He wasn't foolish enough to show his hand.

Slowly exhaling, he lowered his hips and put his katana back in its sheath.

He was preparing to draw.

Long, shallow breaths.

At the moment when he'd reached extreme focus, with his entire consciousness zeroed in on a single point, it counterintuitively *expanded*. The area's sounds, air, signs—he had reached an awareness of the world where he could perceive everything. This was Domain—his first original martial art.

The three-yard radius it covered was not so large, but he was aware

of everything that happened within it. Put simply, the art raised his attack accuracy and evasion ability to the limit. Add to that Brain's trained body, and the power he gained from this art was beyond compare.

Even if a thousand arrows were to rain down on him, he was confident he could pick out only the ones that would hit him and cut them down to emerge unscathed. Not only that, but he was able to move precisely enough to slice a grain of wheat, and only that grain of wheat, at a distance.

And then...

Chopping a vital point with one's blade would kill a living thing, so pursuing that was all that mattered. Rather than being a jack-of-all-trades, Brain was instead an extreme specialist. He aimed to deliver a fatal blow even just one second faster than his opponent. It was from this intention that his second original martial art was born—Instant Strike.

His sword reached a speed that made it impossible to dodge, but his training didn't stop there. His discipline from then on was extraordinary. He performed Instant Strike tens of thousands of times, no—probably millions of times, to the point where he developed art-specific calluses and his hand warped around the hilt of his katana.

By pursuing Instant Strike to the extreme, another art was born. His speed was such that no blood remained on the blade at the end of his swing. He felt he had reached the realm of the gods and called it Divine Strike. It was impossible for his opponent to even perceive him unleash it.

By using those two arts, his guaranteed hit and godly speed—Domain and Divine Strike—the resulting blow was both impossible to dodge and a one-hit kill.

He would aim for a vital point—most often the neck.

And then the hidden technique, Whistling Wind. He named it for the sound of the fountain of blood that resulted from him severing a head in one blow.

Even if a vampire didn't bleed, surely severing its head would essentially mean victory.

"Are you almost ready?" Brain stayed silent, breathing in and out sharply, and Shalltear shrugged at him, seemingly bored. "Then I'll assume you're ready and attack. If you have any objections, please speak up now..."

A short time went by.

"Here I come," she announced playfully and began her approach.

Shut up. I'd like to see you keep up that attitude once I've chopped off your head. He didn't say it out loud. He had the feeling if he spoke, the energy he'd been gathering would disperse.

Shalltear casually stepped forward. Her gait showed no caution whatsoever. Her steps were so light she might as well have been heading to a picnic.

It wasn't the walk of a warrior, and Brain suppressed his wry smile. He could only consider her foolish, but he wasn't about to give her any chances.

Using Ability Boost and his Domain martial art, he eagerly awaited the instant she would be at the right distance for him to strike. The foolish monsters who behaved as though they were the strongest were generally like this. Humans were certainly fragile creatures. Their physical skills were inferior, and they didn't have any special abilities.

But I'm going to teach her how dangerous it is to make light of humans.

Martial arts were created so that humans might oppose creatures

far stronger than themselves.

She'll fall with one slash.

The more conceited a monster was, the more desperately they floundered when forced into a corner. If he didn't kill her in one hit, she'd probably appeal to the vampire for rescue. Then it'd be two against one. That would be a hard fight, even for Brain.

So it had to be a one-hit kill.

He scoffed at her with a straight face, at the way she approached so casually. *As if she doesn't know she's walking up the steps to the guillotine.*

Three more steps, two more...

...one more.

And then—

Your head is mine! He spat the words in his mind as he flung himself at her.

"Tsut!" His exhalation was sharp and short.

The katana flew out of its sheath and stretched toward Shalltear's neck, cutting the air itself. If one was to liken its speed to something: a bolt of lightning. By the time the flash registered, the head was falling—that's how fast he was. Millions of repetitions had created a strike that truly reached the realm of the gods.

Got it.

He was sure—

—and his eyes widened in spite of himself.

He had cleaved through the air. If his strongest attack was

completely dodged, then he would've admitted that an unimaginably strong enemy had finally appeared before him. But—

Shalltear had caught it—his strike that was as fast as a bolt of lightning.

As gently as if she were pinching the wing of a butterfly.

Brain felt as if the air had frozen. He breathed desperately in and out.

"...That...that can't be...," he panted in an almost silent whisper.

He felt like his whole body was going to start trembling, but he restrained himself with everything he had. He couldn't believe what he'd just seen, but Shalltear's two slender, snow-white fingers—a thumb and an index finger—were right there, on the end of his sword.

She didn't catch the cutting edge, in front of the tempering pattern, and instead pinched the ridge on the flat of the blade, with her wrist bent at ninety degrees. She hadn't stopped it in its path but caught up with it from behind—caught up to his Divine Strike.

It looked like she wasn't putting any effort into holding it, but when Brain tried to push out of it or pull back with his full strength, the sword would not budge. It was as if he was pulling on a chain connected to a massive boulder hundreds of times larger than himself.

Suddenly the pressure on the sword increased, and it was Brain who found his posture crumbling.

"Hmm. Cocytus has a few of these, but when the one using it is as weak as you, I can't be bothered to feel any wariness." Shalltear raised the tip of the sword to eye level and examined it closely.

As her words sank in, Brain felt his mind go blank. He felt the despair of having his entire way of life refuted. The reason he wasn't

crushed in spite of it was his previous defeat. In the same way a broken bone grows back thicker and harder, his tolerance for defeat had gone up.

This couldn't be happening, but he had to accept it: She caught his godly fast strike without breaking a sweat.

Shalltear frowned quizzically at Brain, who was all but pale from shock. Then she heaved a theatrically disappointed sigh. "Do you understand now? You can't win against me if you don't use martial arts. If you understand, then stop holding back and fight for real."

Those were the brutal words he heard. The reply spilled out of Brain's mouth unconsciously. "You monster—"

Shalltear responded with a pure, innocent smile, like a flower in full, glorious bloom. "That's right. So you finally understand? I'm a merciless, cruel, inhuman—and lovely—monster." She let go of his blade and sprang away. She was back where she started, probably not even a fraction of an inch off.

"Are you almost ready?" She smiled playfully at him.

A hot flash of anger filled Brain's mind upon hearing the same words as before. *How much can she belittle me?* Then, a shudder because he realized she was at leisure to make fun of someone who had supposedly reached the limits of human strength.

Should I run? Brain valued his life. If he couldn't win, he should run away to fight another day. It was enough to stay alive and win in the end because he still thought he had room to get stronger.

But even if he chose to run, there was nothing he could do about the gap in their physical abilities.

He carefully selected his target, making sure she couldn't detect where he was looking.

He would go for her legs. He would destroy her ability to move

quickly, and then all he needed to do was run away.

He would stay out of the range of those hands that had caught his critical hit earlier and attack an area that was difficult to defend.

Having decided that, he continued staring at her neck and put his sword back in its sheath. With Domain activated, he could slice through his target, even with his eyes closed, so using them for a feint was the obvious move.

"Here I come." Shalltear once again began her approach.

Whereas before he had been waiting eagerly for her to enter his Domain, this time was the reverse. Ideally, he didn't want her to get that far.

How did you get so fainthearted? he desperately scolded himself in his head, but try as he might to rouse himself, he didn't get fired up. His will to fight was like a flame that had run out of fuel. He clicked his tongue and observed Shalltear's steps with Domain.

Three steps, two steps, one—

—she was in range.

Brain's field of vision as he fixed his eyes on her neck included the borderline sneer on Shalltear's face.

He would aim at one point—the ankle of her right foot—as she stepped forward.

He slashed his sword down, managing to raise the attack speed a fraction. He cast off any mental pressure and confirmed that he was moving faster than last time. If he had been on the receiving end, he wouldn't have been able to block against this speed.

This'll work!

He was about to cut off that foot, peeking out from beneath her

skirt, right at the slender ankle that was befitting such a young girl—

—when his hand slipped off the hilt of his katana.

With his gaze fixed to one place, Brain didn't see what had happened. But his special perception abilities from Domain alerted him that his beloved katana had fallen to the ground, and that toward the back of the blade the point of a high heel was holding it down.

There was no way that could have happened. But it was true.

The katana had slipped out of his hand because the impact of her stepping down on it had traveled down the blade.

There was one reason he didn't want to believe it: Even in his most highly attuned state of focus, he hadn't been able to detect it. Not even from within his Domain he was so proud of.

She was close enough to touch. From that distance, Shalltear looked down on him icily. The terrible oppression of her gaze made it feel like the atmosphere alone would crush him.

He breathed roughly in and out.

Every pore in his body was pouring sweat, and a wave of nausea assailed him. His vision wavered.

He'd made it through so many fights, escaped the jaws of death a pile of times. But compared to the situation he was in now, they all felt like pale imitations, as if everything up until now had been child's play.

The heel lifted off the blade of his sword, and Shalltear sprang back.

"Are you almost ready?"

"Ngh!" What he felt more than anything this third time she called to him was despair. *Next she'll probably say, "Here I come."* But she said something else.

“Are you…incapable of using martial arts?”

The voice contained pity and surprise, and Brain just inhaled.

He couldn’t respond. Well, what should he say? Was he supposed to play the fool like a clown and say, *Well, I used them, but you broke through them like they were nothing.*

Biting his lower lip, he picked up his beloved katana.

“…Could it be that perhaps you’re just not so strong? I thought you were stronger than the ones by the entrance, but you seem… My apologies. My strength scale measures in yards—I can’t detect differences that amount to a fraction of an inch or two.”

His unceasing effort.

The time with Gazef he’d overestimated his ability. He hadn’t pushed himself at all, and he’d lost to a man who had. And that’s why the defeat had been incorporated within him, become a part of him.

Everything he was after clawing himself up from there and training for real—the monster before his eyes mocked his entire existence.

Something’s wrong. Up until now, I slayed every monster no matter how lightly they took me, no matter how much stronger they were—I slayed them all, so why…? His thoughts welled up that far, but he suppressed the rest of them.

“AAHHHHHHHHHH!” he roared and slashed at Shalltear. He put all his power and weight into his katana, aiming it at her as she watched him quizzically.

This slash, mobilizing every muscle in his body, could have sliced a human in two from head to toe whether they wore a helmet or not. Brain thought that maybe he had caught her, since she didn’t try to dodge his incoming blow; she simply watched the white flash as it came down.

But the impossible scene he'd witnessed just before dismissed that thought immediately. *It can't be this easy to kill her—*

A moment later, his hunch was proven correct. A sharp noise rang out, and Brain saw another unbelievable sight.

Shalltear had swiftly parried with the three-quarters-of-an-inch fingernail of her left pinkie. And it didn't even look like she had put any effort into it. There was a gap in her fist, and her pinkie finger was gently curled.

She had parried his all-out attack with a movement that could not even be considered playful—his attack that could slice through full plate armor, break swords, and pierce shields.

Frantically gathering up his shattered will, he tensed his arm to stop the vibrations from the impact, brandishing his sword once more—and again Shalltear blocked it without really trying.

"Fwahh…" She yawned ostentatiously. With her free right hand, of course, she covered her mouth. She seemed to be deliberately looking up at the ceiling. She was no longer even giving Brain the time of day.

Still.

Still, Brain's blade continued to be repelled—by her one pinkie finger!

"RRAAAAGHHH!" A howl emerged from his throat. No, not a howl, a scream.

Horizontal swipe—blocked.

Diagonal swipe—blocked.

Forward swipe—blocked.

Diagonal strike—blocked.

Vertical strike—blocked.

Horizontal strike—blocked.

No matter what angle, no matter where he aimed, all his attacks were blocked. It was like his katana was sucked to wherever the nail was. At this moment, Brain finally understood.

Absolute strength.

Even if he worked hard, even if he had natural ability, there were beings whose realm he would never be able to approach, much less reach.

"Oh? Are you tired? But your nail clipper is rather dull, wouldn't you say?"

At those impatient words, Brain's sword hand stopped. Could he chip away at a mountain with a katana? That would be impossible. Any child could come up with that answer. So, could he win against Shalltear? Any warrior who faced her would know the answer: There was no way to win.

There was no way a mere man could win against an opponent with strength beyond human conception. The only ones who would be able to put up a fight would be more than human. Unfortunately, Brain was only a warrior who had reached the pinnacle of human capability. That's right. No matter how much effort he put in, from the moment he had been born as a human, he would never be anything more than an infant waving around a stick.

"I...put in so much effort..."

"Effort? That word doesn't mean a thing. I was created strong, so it was never necessary to strive for strength."

Brain laughed.

All his hard work meant nothing. *Why was I so cocky? Why did I think I was so talented?*

His arms and legs felt so heavy it was like being pressed between weights.

"...? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What are you crying for? Did something upset you?"

He knew Shalltear was saying something, but it was as if she was saying it somewhere far away, and he couldn't hear.

Swinging around a heavy iron rod had been pointless—even more so when the blisters on his hands popped doing it. Jogging in heavy armor had also been pointless. Facing monsters all alone and just barely clinching victory all those times had also been pointless.

Everything was pointless, and his life was also pointless.

Before a truly strong opponent, Brain was no different from the unskilled weaklings he used to sneer at.

"I'm an idiot..."

"Are you satisfied? Shall we finish up here soon?" She drew nearer, snickering, with her pinkie finger up, and Brain cried out.

But it was no longer the cry of a warrior as before. It was practically the wail of a child.

He set off running—showing his back to the enemy.

He'd seen enough of Shalltear's physical ability to make him sick, so he figured she would catch up to him instantly. But he didn't think about that. No, he wasn't at leisure to think about it. He just showed her his wide-open back and ran desperately toward the back of the cave, his face twisted into a tear-streaked grimace.

The innocent voice of a little girl—part sigh, part sinister—called after him, "Now we're going to play tag? You're just full of games, aren't you? Well, let's have fun then, shall we? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

3

Cold air blew across the hall, coming through the gaps in the barricade, brushing at the bodies of the forty-two remaining Sowers of Death.

This hall was usually used as a place to eat. Well, that was because it was the most spacious area in the cave. But now it had been converted into an improvised fortress.

The cave that served as the mercenaries' hideout had this long, thin, open area at the far back, and sub-caves opened up radially from there. Those were used as private rooms, weapon storage, food cellars, and so on. The men always made this their last line of defense in a raid, because if they could hold this area, they could take on their foes in a controlled way.

Not that they built the fortifications out of any fancy materials. First, they tipped a plain table onto its side and stacked wooden crates against it to make a simple barricade. Then, between the barricade and the entrance to the hall, they strung up some ropes at about the height of a human's stomach. By doing that, they obstructed any enemy attempts to charge them and kept the invaders from pressing right up against the barricade.

Behind this defensive base, almost everyone was standing by with a crossbow. They were split into center, right, and left wings.

Even if it became a ranged fight, considering the width of the entrance compared to the size of the hall, the hall would have the overwhelming advantage. And because the Sowers of Death were fanned out, the enemy would be taking fire no matter where they tried to assault. Even an area-of-effect attack would be far from effective. They were using the tactic of crossfire, based on the principle of mutually supporting strongpoints.

It was that simple, but the men still had anxious looks on their

faces despite being in a base that would allow them to fight on an equal footing even if they were outnumbered.

The chain links of their mail shirts jangled from the men's shivers. It wasn't that warm in the cave—to the point where in the summer it was quite comfortable—but the chills assaulting them now were a little bit different.

The loud laughter coming from the front of the cave had echoed off the walls, so it wasn't even possible to tell if it was a man or a woman cackling. It chilled them to their very cores.

Brain Unglaus was the strongest member of the Sowers of Death. Some had said that if he was out there intercepting, they didn't even need the barricade, but the sound of that laughter blew away those opinions.

An opponent who could defeat Brain. No one like that existed. That's what they'd thought until now.

Brain's strength was on another level. Not even the empire's knights could match him and neither could monsters. He could kill ogres in one blow and would jump solo into a mob of goblins and mow them all down. If they couldn't call a man likely capable of taking off the heads of all the other Sowers of Death the strongest, what could they call him?

And now *he* had lost. What could it mean?

The fact that someone was laughing in a fight against Brain could mean only one thing. Everyone knew what it was, but no one could say it. It was all they could do to look wordlessly at one another's faces.

Everyone there stared silently toward the entrance to the hall—the entrance to the cave. Their tension grew bit by bit. And then—

There came the sound of someone running. It grew gradually louder.

Someone swallowed hard audibly.

Silence reigned in the hall, except for the overlapping sounds of crossbows being drawn.

The one who flew through the entrance as the mercenaries watched was a man out of breath. It was a miracle no arrows flew at him.

“Brain!” the head of their mercenary gang shouted. A second later the hall exploded into a cheer—a howl of happiness because the invader had surely been defeated.

They slapped their neighbors’ shoulders, and voices praising Brain echoed.

They cheered his name over and over. During the applause, Brain just stood there in the entrance, holding his sword limply in one hand, looking quietly out over their faces.

No, something was wrong. He was looking for something else.

The cheers petered out as if dampened by Brain’s unusual attitude.

He ran at the barricade.

“Hey! Wait just a sec! We’ll move it!”

He ignored the voice and proceeded to force his body through. After breaking in, as if he didn’t have a moment to lose, he set off running again without a word.

As the bandits looked on, shocked, he opened the door to a cave used as a storehouse and leaped inside.

“Huh? Was there something he left in there or something?”

“Who knows? He did seem different, but...he wasn’t...crying, right?!”

Even looking at the door that had been loudly slammed behind him, they still didn't understand the mysterious events they had just witnessed.

Among them, there was one man whose face twisted into a grimace—the leader of their gang. Because only he—no, only he and Brain—knew the truth. But he didn't have time to see if his thought was right or not.

With a clicking noise, someone else appeared in the entrance to the hall. Of course, they didn't recognize her. Since no one in the gang knew her, that meant she had to be the invader who was causing so much trouble. The stir among them died down in an instant.

This couldn't be. That would change the meaning of Brain showing up here. If the invader was alive, that meant he had run away.

There was a single invader. She had an oddly stooped posture. Her frame wasn't so big, more like a little girl's. Her arms hung limply at her sides, and her head was lowered, with her face completely hidden. The strange thing was, considering the position of her head and shoulders, it seemed like she had a neck three times as long as a normal person's.

She slowly entered the hall, paying no mind to the fact that she was dragging her long silver hair along the ground. Her well-sewn dress was so black it looked like she was clad in darkness.

No one said a word. Her appearance was too bizarre, and the chill in the air threatened to stop their hearts.

Her head moved slowly. Her face was entirely covered by her fine silver hair, but behind it, two red lights burned. They slowly flattened into needlelike lines.

Everyone understood that—unfortunately—she was smiling.

In a swift movement, the horrifying girl raised her head. She had a shapely face, but for anyone who knew what she had looked like a

moment ago, there would have been nothing creepier. Her features were so regular that her face seemed almost like a mask made by an extremely talented top-class artist.

"Good evening. My name is Shalltear Bloodfallen. Is this the end of the line? Are we done playing tag?"

The girl—Shalltear—saying things they didn't understand, scanned the room. But perhaps because she didn't find the one she was looking for, her beautiful face frowned. No one dared speak up, and the girl's voice rang through the hall once more.

"Is it hide-and-seek this tiiiiiime?" She snickered. She must have found it quite funny, because she continued laughing with downcast eyes. Her long silver hair hid her face.

As the mercenaries held their breath, unsure how to deal with the strange situation, Shalltear's laughter grew louder and louder.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ha! Ha! Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha-haaa! Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha!" She slowly lifted her head as she laughed.

The sight of her face gave the bandits a shock as though their hearts were being squeezed; it felt like ice had been injected into their veins.

There was no beauty there. Her eyeballs had been dyed completely bloodred by the color that oozed from her irises. Her mouth that had been lined with pretty white teeth now sprouted multiple sharklike rows of countless long white things reminiscent of syringes. Her oral cavity, gleaming an obscene pink, sparkled moistly, and clear drool spilled out of the corners of her mouth.

"Ah-ha! Ha-hah! Haaaaaa-ha-ha-ha!" With a smile that split her face open ear to ear, she laughed with the timbre of an off-key bell ringing out over and over.

The air was practically shrieking with the trembling tension. Even considering they were in a cave, this echo was unnatural. It was

almost as if the atmosphere itself couldn't handle her laughter and had to join in.

A girl?

A monster?

A beast?

They were all wrong.

She was an embodiment of fear.

The scent of blood on her breath was so thick they could smell it even at a distance. Even the air seemed to be turning red.

"Wahhhhhh!" A scream went up and one of the mercenaries, terror driven, fired his crossbow.

The arrow sliced through the air and stuck itself deep in Shalltear's chest. She swayed slightly from the impact.

"Fire!"

At the sound of their leader's voice, the mercenaries came to their senses and, wanting to deny fear, fired their crossbows all at once. The bolts flying downrange sounded almost like rain as they pierced Shalltear's body.

There had been a total of forty crossbow bolts launched. Thirty-one hit their target. Each one bit deeply into her body, which was to be expected given that at this range they could pierce even metal armor. There were even four burrowed into her head. If she was human, these wounds would have been fatal.

"We did it...," someone whispered, laying bare the hope they all clung to. She was still standing, but she was a pincushion of crossbow bolts. Common sense said she had to be dead. But even if they could think that logically, the spark known as fear still smoldered in a

corner of their minds.

Spurred on by something like animal instinct, the mercenaries loaded another volley.

Then Shalltear moved.

Like a conductor raising her baton, she raised both arms and then slowly opened them. The projectiles stuck in her gradually began to move, then were spat out of her body and finally landed in the dirt. None of them had any blood on them. Nor was there any wear on the arrowheads. It was exactly as if they had never been used.

She smiled—it was an ugly smile that could be perhaps better described as a derisive grin.

Shrieks of fear went up here and there, and as if that was the push they needed, countless arrows once again sliced through the air and rushed into Shalltear.

An eyeball was pierced, her neck was shot through, her stomach was skewered, and her shoulder was gouged. In the midst of all that, she seemed no more put out than she would be by a light rain.

"You guys are trying so harrrrrrrrrrd, but that doesn't work on meeeeeeee."

She took one step forward—and then leaped.

The ceiling was about sixteen feet tall. After jumping high enough to easily touch it, she floated elegantly down on the other side of the barricade. Her high heels clacked on the floor. Then all the bolts fell out of her body. Her neck made a grinding noise as she turned her head, and she looked at the mercenaries behind her loading their crossbows.

She rushed and threw a punch. She didn't even use her hips—it looked like she had just thrust out her hand. Even so, its speed was on another level and its destructive power was from another dimension.

Her fist went effortlessly through the mercenary's body and slammed into the barricade. With a noise like an explosion, the wood was crushed, and splinters went flying in every direction.

In the heavy silence that had descended, the noise of the falling wood scraps echoed throughout the hall.

The shocked mercenaries stopped loading their crossbows and stared at Shalltear.

She inserted a finger into the glob of blood floating above her head. When she drew it out, a string of blood followed and formed a character in front of her. It was what was known as a magic letter and looked like Sanskrit or a rune.

This was a skill she'd gained from one of her classes, blood drinker, called Blood Pool. It saved up the blood of any slain enemies as a glob of malicious magic that could then be used for various purposes. And by sucking energy out of it, she could cast magic-boosting spells without using any additional MP.

"Penetrating Magic: Implosion!"

Shalltear cast a tier-ten spell—the highest tier of magic—causing the bodies of ten mercenaries to swell up. They didn't even have time to scream. They could only look down at their bodies, realize something strange was happening, and screw up their faces in horror. The next moment, with the light popping noise of a balloon, they exploded.

"Ah-ha-ha! Haaaa-ha-ha-haaaa-ha-ha! Fireworrrrrrks! So prettyyyyy!" She pointed to the sprays of blood and clapped with a nasty grin on her face.

"Uwaaagh!" The estoc thrust at the same time as the roar pierced Shalltear's chest and came out her back, about where her heart was. Then it wiggled up and down to widen the wound.

"Go to hell!" Next a broadsword was brought down into her head, cutting it in half and stopping with the blade sticking out from her left

eye.

“Keep it up!” A war cry went up mixed with shrieks and howls, and three mercenaries swung their weapons at her.

The swords were swung over and over and over. But even with a broadsword sticking out of her face, Shalltear was unfazed. She didn’t seem to be experiencing the slightest pain and just stood there with that abominable smile on her face.

The mercenaries left their swords, fatigued from the multiple attacks, and continued hitting her with their fists and kicking her, tears streaming down their faces. Even though they were built bigger than her, she didn’t budge an inch and they felt like they were beating on a giant rock.

Shalltear cocked her head at them and began to think. Then, as if she came up with something good, she clapped her hands together. “Haaaaaahhhhhahhhhhhh!” She exhaled as if emitting built-up heat. A stiflingly thick smell of blood swirled through the area.

She leisurely removed the broadsword from her own head. Of course, there was no wound or anything left behind once it was out. About to wield it, she stopped. Rust covered the sword, and it began to crumble. She threw it away, disappointed as she remembered in her bloodthirsty brain—it was a penalty for one of her classes, cursed knight. Then she nonchalantly brandished her delicate hand.

Three heads rolled across the dirt.

“Run! Run for it! Hurry!”

“There’s no way we can win against that monster!”

Several mercenaries screamed as they all tried to flee.

Shalltear grabbed the head of one whose will to fight was completely broken as he tried to run, and she squished it with all her strength at once. With the crunching noise that sounded exactly like

forcibly ripping off a crustacean's shell, his head was smashed and his brains splattered.

"Ah-ha! Ha! Haaaaa-ha-ha-ha! What's with that faaaaaace?! Are you scaaaaaared?! Ah-ha-ha! Ha-ha! Haaaa-ha-ha! Wait up! Tag's not over yet!"

The bloodthirsty queen of nightmares laughed—"You're not getting away"—at the men who, curiosity piqued by the strange noise, had turned and witnessed the sickening spectacle. Then she charged.

A mercenary who tripped over his own feet as he tried to flee fell at Shalltear's feet, prostrate. "Please spare me! I beg you! I won't do anything bad ever again!" He grabbed her feet, crying, and she pasted a smile like a fissure across her face. He realized instantly what that meant, and his face went past pale to white as a sheet.

"Up you goooooooo!"

"Don't! Oh, please doooooon't!" He clutched desperately at her feet, but she took hold of his back and hurled him lightly toward the ceiling.

Having been unable to resist her strength, the mercenary lost his grip and felt weightless for a couple of moments, his eyes shut tightly. Then gravity kicked in, his hands hit the floor, and pain shot through his arms. "Nghaaa!"

Pain was proof he was alive. Grateful for that, the mercenary cracked his eyes open—and realized he had acted too soon. Shalltear had caught him gently in her slender arms; *that* was why his entire body hadn't slammed into the floor. He still hadn't escaped her.

But more importantly—a huge mouth gaped before his eyes. He'd never smelled anything so foul—it was like a glob of coagulated blood.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ha-haaaa! This is fuuuuuuuuun! Did you think I would let you diiiiiie? Lickity-lick-lick!"

"H-help..."

"Noooooooooo, you don't! I haven't had a drink in foreverrrrrrrr!" Her mouth ripped past her ears with a pop and opened wide enough to swallow a human head whole.

No one there knew what a dangerous monster the true vampire from the DMMO *Yggdrasil* was.

Her extra-wide mouth made a huge half circle, and her two upper canines extended past her chin. Her crimson eyes sparkled, and sharp nails a couple of inches long tipped her withered-looking arms and legs. She moved almost stooped over and pounced to attack.

A regular vampire was like a mixed-blood human-bat monster. And the elite race of original vampires looked even more like a monster. About the only vampires that could be said to be beautiful were vampire brides like Shalltear's concubines. The only reason the true vampire Shalltear was beautiful was simply because the guild member who designed her was good at drawing and the 3-D modeling happened to go well.

This was her true form. In other words, her normal appearance was nothing but a front.

She latched onto the mercenary's neck like one of those sticky rubber toys or a hideously fat leech.

No sooner had he processed the sensation of his neck being punctured by numerous needles—or was it no sooner than the vulgar noise of all his blood being drunk?—he felt, with a chill, that he, as an entity, was being rapidly sucked out of his body. It was a horrifying sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced before.

Even if he tried to struggle, his arms and legs felt heavy. His field of vision rapidly darkened.

Eventually Shalltear had drank enough of him; she cast away the

dried-up corpse and then licked the fresh blood from the corners of her mouth with her long, slimy tongue. Then she grinned broadly at the scrambling mercenaries.

"There are sooooooooo many of you leeeeeeeeeft!"

Countless screams, cries of enmity, and despondent wails echoed throughout the hall.

•

A hush had fallen over the hall where nothing moved any longer, and Shalltear stood there smirking. The glob of blood floating above her had gathered quite a lot and was now just a bit smaller than her head.

"Sooooooooo fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!"

The vampire brides, who had been tasked with preventing anyone from running away through the entrance to the hall, bowed their heads in reply to Shalltear's scream of delight. "If you're enjoying yourself, that's what is most important, grand mistress."

"My maiiiiiiiin diiiiiiiiish!"

Shalltear put her strength into wrenching open the door Brain had escaped through. The lock popped out and the door, hinges and all, ended up in her hand.

It was a small room, but there were many bags and wooden crates inside. And there was something she hadn't expected. Mixed in with the dust came the smell of fresh air, a breeze from outside. She simultaneously felt the presence of a human, growing fainter. Even having lost herself in her Blood Frenzy, Shalltear still vaguely remembered her orders.

"Kwaaaa!" Unleashing a cry of what could have been anger or war, she went after the presence, throwing the bags and crates out of her way.

Behind all the stuff was a hole. Not even a yard in, it was filled with dirt and sand, but fresh air was streaming through a slight gap.

"An escaaaaaape paaaaaaaaath?!"

The lesser vampire hadn't lied. He just hadn't known about this escape route.

It's an easily misunderstood fact, but even when charmed, a target can tell only what they know. They can't say something they don't know, and if they were convinced something untrue was true, the charmer would acquire bad information.

Unlike Mare, Shalltear didn't have any magic to move dirt out of the way. If she used a shock wave, there was the possibility the ceiling would cave in.

He got away. When those words appeared in her train of thought, she understood, albeit vaguely, that that meant she had failed part of her mission.

She grimaced in rage. Why didn't worthless humans act how she, a guardian of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, wanted? She wanted to make his pointless life serve the glorious purposes of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, so why couldn't he understand that and rejoice? She was noisily grinding her teeth when she heard the voice of one of the vampire brides who had been stationed outside the cave.

"Mistress Shalltear!"

For one moment Shalltear's vision flashed red in annoyance; perhaps she should have just destroyed the vampire bride if she couldn't even hold her position, but she frantically suppressed that anger. She could be spared if she was here with something important to say.

"What iiiiiiiiiis iiiiiiiiiit?"

"There are several people headed this way."

“Hmmm? Surviiiiiivors? Thennnn shall we go ouuuuuuut to meet themmmmm? Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-haaaaaa-ha-haaaaa!”

4

Shalltear jumped up. She leaped like a bird taking off into the night and alighted on one foot atop the logs that made up the barricade at the entrance. The vampire brides also slowly headed up to the entrance.

Still smiling, Shalltear stared down her target.

It was a party in tight formation. The vanguard was made up of three men, warriors. Their gear was all different, but they wore scale armor, had their weapons drawn in one hand, and wore large shields on their backs. Behind them was a woman warrior with red hair wearing banded armor. And behind her, walking as if he was under everyone else’s protection, was a lightly equipped man with a staff—probably an arcane-type magic caster. In line next to him was a faith-magic caster wearing priestly garb over his armor with a sigil shaped like a flame hanging from his neck.

The six of them were astounded to see Shalltear, but there was no confusion and they kept their guard up—a composure gained through experience.

“He’s nooooooot heeeeeeeeere.”

It was fine to kill humans who held up about as well as tofu, but something with more crunch to it was definitely better. With anticipation in her crimson eyes, she smiled at them.

“It talked?!” The arcane-magic caster was shocked but for only a moment. His face hardened immediately. “Assume it’s a vampire! Only silver or enchanted weapons will work. We can’t win! Withdraw! Don’t look at its eyes!” he shouted in an overly loud voice

that could be heard throughout the hollow.

His orders conveyed only the most important information and the others reacted quickly. The warriors out front grabbed the large shields off their backs and took up a defensive stance, holding them out. Their eyes strayed, focusing in on Shalltear's chest and midriff.

While that was happening, the woman warrior behind them took their weapons and began applying something.

A faint but disagreeable odor drifted into Shalltear's nose. It was alchemical silver, a special liniment created by alchemists. When it touched a weapon, it made an oil slick, covering the weapon in a glaze with the properties of silver.

Generally, for how expensive silver weapons were, their blades were softer than iron ones, so they weren't geared for long-term use. For that reason, many adventurers bought this liniment and applied the properties of silver for a limited time as necessary.

Brandishing their temporarily silver weapons, they began their retreat while keeping the enemy in check.

It was a magnificent retreat. All the party members moved smoothly as if they were one creature.

"Our god, god of Fire—"

"Don't push yourself! Prepare defensive spells!"

Stopping the priest, who was about to hold up his sigil, the arcane-magic caster began unleashing his own spells on the front line. The priest began casting as well.

It depended on the class, but the majority of priests made use of the power of the gods to exorcise, subordinate, or annihilate beings such as undead, demons, and angels. But they could do those things only to beings markedly less powerful than themselves. In other words, the priest had probably been about to attempt an undead exorcism, but

the arcane-magic caster had perceived the enormous power gap; decided that if the priest had leeway to try that, his efforts were better used for something else; and given instructions accordingly.

Thus, Shalltear picked out who the leader was and thought she should follow her orders and capture him, but the crimson urge to slaughter and see more blood flooded her mind.

She wanted to kill and crush and dismember so badly. She wanted to bathe in blood. Froth gathered at the corners of her mouth as she panted.

"Evil Protection!"

"Lesser Psychic Protection!"

The two casters bolstered the warriors in front with defensive spells one by one.

A feeling of admiration, however slight, was born inside Shalltear's maximally agitated mind. The spells they were using were the lowest level, tier one, but they were appropriate to the enemy they were facing. These opponents were different from the mercenaries who just repeated thoughtless attacks at random and the foolish warrior who faced her all alone but couldn't even use martial arts.

That said, futile was futile. In the face of the obvious gap in ability, their efforts meant nothing.

Their adorable resistance was what finally snapped the thin thread of her self-restraint. "It's no goooooood. I caaaan't hold baaaack any longerrrrrrr!" she shouted in an unhinged voice and charged.

She was so nimble. It was as if she were dancing, but anyone watching saw a gale-force wind. Flowing seamlessly, her arm came up.

She pierced a shield; smashed armor; ignored the magic defenses; ripped apart skin, flesh, and bone; clutched the heart that had just

been beating; and—all in one instant—ripped it out. Standing before the warrior who crumpled to the ground, Shalltear held out the throbbing reddish-black mass to show the rest of the party. The female warrior shrieked, and the priest twisted up his face in loathing.

Satisfied with the expected reactions, Shalltear grinned and cast a spell. “Animate Dead!”

The warrior who had lost his heart slowly stood up as one of the lowest-tier undead, a zombie.

But Shalltear wasn’t done there. She swallowed the heart and then reached into the glob of blood above her head. When she pulled out her hand, inside was a beating clot of blood—a caricature of a heart. She threw it at the zombie.

Wriggling like an insect and warping shape, it burrowed into the zombie’s chest. With that, the body jolted. Then, still having full-body spasms, it slowly transformed.

His skin became like the bark of a withered tree, as if all the moisture had evaporated from his body; his nails grew suddenly longer; and his canine teeth jutted out. Soon, that undead was no longer a zombie.

The adventurers were shocked by the appearance of the lesser vampire.

“This can’t be! I’ve never heard of a vampire using such high-tier spells without a penalty!”

“It just happened right in front of us. Calm down! Stay cool and we’ll handle this!”

“But...!”

“Withdrawal is impossible! We’ll take the offensive!”

“Okay!”

The priest's vague order caused some confusion wherein one warrior slashed at Shalltear and one at the lesser vampire who was once their friend.

"Our god, god of Fire! Cast out the impure ones!" Invisible holy energy radiated from the priest's sigil. Of course, it had no effect on Shalltear.

"Ahhhhh-haaaaa-ha-ha-hah! Ha-ha!"

One of the warriors' swords ripped into the lesser vampire, perhaps because it had been immobilized by the holy energy. It was probably vulnerable, since it was still unstable, having not completely transformed from zombie into lesser vampire yet, but the fact that her creation was weak against the power of the gods was enough to irk Shalltear.

She glared over at it dismally while fending off sword blows with her pinkie finger. "You'rrrrrrrre innnnnnnn myyyyyy wayyyyyy!" She swung her right hand in an offhand way. With that careless motion, the head of the warrior brandishing his sword was sliced off, and he crumpled to the ground, neck spouting blood.

"Lesser Strength!" The priest gave the last remaining warrior a buff.

Now the lesser vampire's dull movements were matched up against the magically enhanced warrior. The fight was going slightly in the warrior's favor.

Well, it seems like they're having fun, so I won't bother them. Plus, there's still other prey, Shalltear thought, still thirsting for blood, and turned to face the priest.

The woman warrior planted herself between them, holding her sword. It was only an iron weapon. How cute she was. Even twitching in fear, she did her best to take a combat stance—she looked like a little animal putting up a pitiful resistance. Shalltear was tormented by a hot, erotic joy.

How would she scream if I bit off her fingers? I could cut off her ears and make her eat them. Nah, I'd rather drink her blood. This is the first time I've been outside and had female prey. "Yooooooou'll be desserrrrrrrrrrt!" she shouted with her mouth open wide and leaped.

Her jump carried her easily over the woman, and she landed in front of the arcane-magic caster and priest. Faster than the priest could move, Shalltear gripped the hand that held his sigil and crushed it in one squeeze. Overwhelmed by the pressure, the bones crunched to pieces, and the flesh and skin, with nowhere to go, were mangled.

"Gyaaargh!"

Satisfied with the sound of his scream, Shalltear kindly had some mercy on him. She thought she would relieve him of his pain.

Her hand flashed, and she nodded with pleasure as the blood spurting from the priest's neck was absorbed into the glob above her head.

Then someone hit her from behind with all their might. But like a giant tree, Shalltear didn't budge an inch—though the sword sticking out of her chest was a little bit in the way.

"No way! It didn't work? This is a silver weapon!" the woman practically half shrieked, seeing that Shalltear was still moving despite the sword piercing her chest right through her heart.

The woman hadn't had a silver weapon. She must have picked it up off the fallen warrior.

The things the caster had said were right, but they were also wrong. The only weapons that would work on Shalltear were those made of silver and imbued with a certain amount of magical energy, equipment made of general materials but containing an overpowering amount of magical energy, or weapons of a certain attribute she was weak against. She wouldn't take damage from a mere silver weapon.

Shalltear continued to ignore the woman behind her and stared down the shocked caster.

"Magic Arrow!" He cast with a desperate look on his face, and two shards of light flew at Shalltear—and were easily neutralized.

That was due to her skill Magic Immunity. It had shortcomings that could be exploited depending on the ability of the attacking magic user, so it wasn't a perfect defense, but with this big a gap between their levels, she was practically invulnerable. In other words, there was nothing the caster could do against her.

"Booooooooooring!" Shalltear swiped a hand, and the head of the one she'd lost interest in fell to the ground.

When she turned around, the lesser vampire and warrior were still having a pretty good fight. Shalltear carelessly picked up the two fallen heads by their hair. As if bored, she threw them at the fighting pair. Each one was about thirteen pounds and flew at an incomparable speed. The results barely needed to be spelled out. Both fighters crumpled to the ground.

While Shalltear had been ignoring her, Dessert had been frantically stabbing her, cutting into her over and over. But what did she care? For Shalltear, who felt no pain, the woman's actions were meaningless. The only issue was the holes being ripped in her clothing, but since the outfit was magical, the damage would repair automatically as long as Shalltear was all right.

"Okayyyyy, tiiiiiiime for desserrrrrrrt! Let's eeeeeeat!" Like a kid saving a favorite food for last—only with a sinister grin that would make anyone want to vomit—Shalltear turned on the woman with the sword coming at her from behind.

The woman made momentary contact with Shalltear's crimson eyes before it dawned on her that she was the only one left standing. She backed up a step at a time, tears brimming. Then suddenly, she rummaged in her belt pouch to retrieve something.

Shalltear watched, at ease in her red-tinted world. She was a tiny bit curious what the woman was doing.

Eventually the woman took out a bottle and threw it.

One glance was enough for Shalltear to smirk at the bottle as it flipped end over end toward her. The woman had surely meant to throw it seriously, but from Shalltear's point of view, it was moving just too slowly. She could have easily dodged it, but her pride wouldn't allow that. Plus, there was something she wanted to see: the expression on the woman's face at the last second, when her final hope shattered.

The desire for slaughter was building, but Shalltear desperately held it back. She knew that the more patient she could be now, the greater the joy she would experience when she finally tasted the blood.

She wondered idly as the bottle approached, *Is it holy water or maybe a bomb? No matter what it is, it's futile. What a sad excuse for resistance. First, I'll slowly suck her blood up to the point where she's just barely still alive. If she's a virgin, I could just drink from her till she dies. If not, we can have all kinds of fun—in ways that cause her to lose as little blood as possible.*

Having decided that, she thrust the flying bottle away with one hand. The impact caused a red liquid to splash out of the open mouth and wet Shalltear's skin.

There shouldn't have been anything but a faint pain.

But for a moment, Shalltear's mind went completely blank. Her thirst for blood went right out the window. She stared dumbstruck at the place the pain had radiated from. It was the hand with which she had brushed away the bottle. From the spot the liquid had landed came a pungent smell and wisps of smoke.

She moved her eyes to look at the ground, at the bottle lying there. A faint but pleasant aroma came from its open mouth. She had seen containers like this many times before. It was a potion used often in

the Great Tomb of Nazarick, probably a Minor Healing Potion. Undead took damage from healing items. That's why her skin had melted slightly.

"Impossible—!" Her angry shout caused the air to vibrate. "Capture that woman unharmed!"

At her orders, the vampire brides, who had been just standing behind her watching, began to move. The woman had used the time Shalltear had been dumbstruck to turn her back to them and run, but the vampire brides closed the distance in an instant and grabbed her hands.

The woman struggled, but the muscular strength of humans couldn't be compared to vampires'. It was so easy for them to bring her back before Shalltear.

"Look into my eyes!" Shalltear grabbed the woman's lower jaw and forced her to look up to charm her with Bewitching Eyes. Of course, she took care with how much strength she used. It would be a mess if she pulled too hard and accidentally ripped off her jaw. Shalltear could employ some priest spells, but because she was undead, she couldn't use the usual healing spells.

After being forced to look, something like a thin film covered the woman's eyes and all that was left on her face that had been filled with hostility and fear was a blank, friendly expression. That was the charming effect of Shalltear's skill Bewitching Eyes. When they sensed the effect was strong enough, the brides let go of the woman's hands.

Shalltear had several questions. But there was one thing she had to ask before anything else. She picked up the potion bottle and thrust it before the woman's eyes. "Where did you get this potion? Who gave it to you?"

"I got it at an inn from someone clad in black armor." She answered as if it was no big deal, but Shalltear felt her entire body freeze.

"...Could it be...? No, there's no way... But...an inn in which...which city?"

"It was an inn in E-Rantel."

The surprise jolted Shalltear's sense of balance. She had some idea who this someone in black armor might be.

If she was right, then the greater question was, why did this woman have this potion? *He* wouldn't have given it to her for no reason.

"Could he have...?" Did he give this woman some kind of order? Or was it possible he gave the potion as a gift to strengthen a relationship as part of his networking outside of Nazarick?

She pictured the absolute master of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, in all his bravery. The worry that she might have ruined their master's plan shook her to the core.

"Whattaya doin' here? Whattaya after?" She didn't have time to speak with her usual attempts at refined language. Desperate to gather information, Shalltear now gazed intensely at the woman with bloodshot eyes for a different reason than before.

"Usually we do highway security, but we heard some thieves had a hideout in this area, so we came to check it out. Then it seemed like something strange happened, so we split our team in two. I'm here as part of the reconnaissance-in-force mission."

"You split your team?"

"Yes. We didn't know how many thieves there would be, so our plan was to probe their defenses and then lead them to where the other group is preparing a trap."

"So there's another team." *What a pain*, she thought as she clicked her tongue. "And how many people came here?"

“Seven including me, and then—”

“Huh? Wait a minute. Seven? Not six?” Shalltear eyed the corpses scattered throughout the area. Three warriors, one priest, one caster, and this woman. The numbers didn’t add up.

The woman responded to Shalltear’s anxious look just like that. “Right. There was one ranger who would go to E-Rantel for help in an emergency.”

“What...?”

The caster’s voice had been awfully loud before. Yes, it had been loud enough to be heard all throughout the hollow.

“GAH!” Eyes open wide, Shalltear ran up out of the hollow at a speed far surpassing any gale-force wind. When she reached the top, she scanned the area, but even with her superior night vision, she couldn’t see through trees. She strained her ears but couldn’t pick up anything besides plants rustling in the wind. Shalltear didn’t have any perception abilities or search magic. It was virtually impossible for her to find one human in this forest.

“Dammit!” she spat. The ranger had gotten away. Frankly, she hadn’t been taking them seriously enough. The result was two escapees. She ground her teeth noisily.

“My kin!” The shadow at Shalltear’s feet began to wriggle, and a number of wolves appeared as if overflowing out of it. Of course, they were not normal wolves. Their jet-black coats made them seem as though they were clad in the night itself, and their crimson eyes harbored a malevolent wisdom. They were a type of level-7 monster, vampire wolves. There were many monsters she could call upon with her skill Summon Kin, but these were the only ones that seemed able to track and pursue.

“Go! Find any humans in this forest and devour them!” In response to her screamed order, which could also be called a howl, ten wolves raced off all at once into the woods. Watching them go, she still felt

the chances they could take care of it were slim. Aura came to mind. Even if this ranger wasn't as adept as her, they'd probably know a way to evade pursuit.

In other words, she had to think of a next move, assuming the ranger had gotten away. She hurried back and asked as if clutching at the woman.

"First, is there anyone else who received a potion from this person in black armor besides you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh! Then, next question. Is there a chance that ranger will meet up with the other team?"

"No. The plan was for him to abandon the other team and go back to town in the event our group was wiped out. That option gives us the best chance of surviving."

They were operating with plenty of caution and had carefully considered a plan for what to do in the event they were defeated. That was why Shalltear felt cornered. This realization set the flames of her rage blazing.

"You're a bit too smart for humans! If I end up getting permission to rule over you vermin, I'll treat you like the worms you are!" Roaring at them wasn't going to change anything. The news of a vampire at large would almost certainly reach the city. It wasn't clear if her appearance was known or not, but it seemed unlikely that a human's vision could make her out clearly in the middle of a low-lying depression at night. Still... "Shit!" she cursed and dove even deeper into her own thoughts.

Her orders from Ainz... *Your prey this time is criminals—people no one would miss if they disappeared. For example, if among the thieves there is someone who can use martial arts or magic, I don't care if you suck their blood and make them your slave as long as you capture them. If among the criminals you find there are some who*

seem knowledgeable about world affairs and fighting, don't let them get away. And don't cause a disturbance. If people found out Nazarick was behind this, it could cause trouble for us down the line... Clearly, she had failed big-time.

She desperately held back the feeling that she wanted to rip out her hair. "I'm still okay, I'm still okay, I'm still okay," she repeated as if trying to convince herself.

The news of a vampire may reach the city, but neither her name nor anything about Nazarick had leaked. In other words, there was no way to connect the vampire who attacked this place with Nazarick. Speculating along that line, she decided the people in town would probably just think that the mercenaries were massacred by a wild vampire, if such a thing actually existed.

Granted, the scenario was full of holes, but she couldn't come up with anything better without more information.

But she was swallowed further into her maelstrom of thought. The next question was what to do with this woman, considering the situation. Being charmed didn't mean that she had lost her memories. The safe thing to do would be to kill her. The problem was Ainz's intention in giving her a potion.

If he had a purpose or reason for giving it to her, then killing her could impede his goals. That would be excessively bad. If she let her return alive, the people who'd hired her would surely wonder why she was the only one who made it back. Then they'd learn all kinds of things—including what Shalltear looked like. It wasn't such a big deal at present, but she couldn't foresee the effects it might have in the future.

The best thing would be to contact Ainz, but Shalltear couldn't use Message.

So what should I do?

"Ahhh, Lord Ainz will scold me...," she whispered so low no one

could hear and held her head in her hands. “If only I didn’t have Blood Frenzy... No, that’s disrespectful to my Creator, Lord Peroroncino. If only I had repressed it...”

She could regret it all she wanted, but it was too late. It didn’t matter how she got rid of the woman—she would be reprimanded either way. But which way would do the least harm? Bad was better than worse.

Shalltear thought, thought, and thought some more till steam was practically erupting from her head, and she reached a conclusion. There was a greater number of possible outcomes if she let the woman live. Killing her couldn’t be undone, but if she let her live, it seemed like things would work out one way or another.

That’s what she decided. No, she was kidding herself with all her might.

“What’s your name?”

“Brita.”

“Okay. I *won’t* forget it.”

She had the woman called Brita stand still and gathered her two vampire bride minions in a slightly removed location.

“For now, collect everything that is here. We’re withdrawing.” She wasn’t really sure if they had time for looting, but she would risk it to cultivate a ruse that she’d been after treasure. She was failing her orders, so she should at least make an effort to disseminate false information.

“Mistress Shalltear, what shall we do with the rest of them?”

Shalltear eyed Brita, looking somewhat lonely standing by herself a little ways away. “Leave her.”

“No, the other women.”

"...Huh? Other women?"

"Yes, Mistress Shalltear. When we searched inside for any hidden survivors, we discovered several women who seemed to have been used to handle sexual desire. What should we do with them?"

Shalltear's face twitched. *What the heck?*

She got the gears in her head turning again. *They haven't seen my face, so it's probably fine to abandon them, but is that the right thing to do? It's so complicated—maybe it'd be better to just kill them? But then it would seem strange to leave only Brita alive.* She cradled her head with no idea what course of action would be the best for her.

"Mistress, what should we—?"

"Huh? How should I know?!" Shalltear's expression plainly said, *Why did you tell me something unnecessary?* If she hadn't known, she could have defended her actions no matter what she did or how it turned out, but now that she knew, ignoring them without thinking would be a clear act of rebellion against her master. "Whatever! I don't know! I have no idea! We'll leave them. We'll leave them and go! Stick Brita in with them!"

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know if it's okay or not! Shit! Could you just shut up?"

"My apologies, Mistress Shalltear."

"We're pulling out! Move!"

The vampire brides bowed their heads, and as they set about their tasks, Shalltear curled into a ball, cradling her head.

"...I'm going to be in trouble... What should I do...? But...? Huh?" She looked up toward the woods the vampire wolves had gone into. "...You found him?" She felt the kin she'd summoned disappear in the blink of an eye. They hadn't been returned with magic but

slaughtered by something.

"After you've thrown that woman in with the others, follow me! I'll set up some markers!" She'd made her decision quickly. After shouting only that, she set off at a wind-shredding speed.

Inside the forest, her speed did drop a bit, but even if a human were riding a horse, there was no way they could have escaped Shalltear as she was now.

She ran through the woods and arrived almost immediately at the place where she'd last had contact with her kin.

There were twelve people there. They all wore different gear. It wasn't plain, but rather, their looks were all customized; it wasn't unlike Shalltear's things. She could also sense they had great power. Shalltear didn't have any skills to tell how powerful magic items were, so she could only guess, of course, but she had the feeling their gear might have even been legend tier or higher. She wondered who they were. They had a completely different presence compared to the other people she had seen so far in this world—it was the difference between lions and mice.

She scanned all of them and stopped her eyes on one of the men. *Is he...strong?* Surprised, she tried to gauge how strong he was, but since she wasn't specialized as a warrior, all she could tell was that he far surpassed not only her vampire brides but also Solution of the Pleiades. She took a look at him.

His gear was shaped for a man's profile, so she assumed he was male, but his looks were more androgynous. Was he a man or a woman? He seemed to be both and neither. It was even harder to decide because he was short with a young face—was he still growing? His glossy black hair was long, to the point where it almost reached the ground. His ruby eyes were wary of Shalltear. He was wielding a spear that looked shabby compared to the rest of his gear.

"Use it." His voice, issuing orders that unsettled his party, gave the impression of the cold surface of a lake. Shalltear couldn't tell what he

meant, but it must have been a fairly powerful piece of equipment, perhaps even her sole god item's equal.

The humans began acting on the order, but Shalltear ignored them completely; she was wary of only one of them and didn't consider the others a threat.

Moving in the center was a woman wearing strange clothing. One could maybe call it a woman's dress with a standing collar and slit down the side. It was silvery white. A five-clawed dragon taking off into the sky was depicted in gold thread. In Ainz's world, the dress would have been called a *cheongsam*.

But this woman wearing it was old, her face wrinkled, the legs sticking out of her dress reminiscent of burdock root or dried sweet potatoes. The dress really didn't suit her, or rather, the sight of her in it was brow furrowing, to the point that Shalltear purposely looked away.

But that would probably be their last little disagreement.

Something happened that changed everything just like that.

If Ainz hadn't captured Nigun, if Ainz hadn't countered the theocracy's intelligence magic in what seemed to them like such a violent way, if the theocracy hadn't mistaken it for the resurrection of the Catastrophe Dragonlord, if Shalltear hadn't been distracted—everything could have been different. But with that many ifs piled up, perhaps it was inevitable.

The name of the garment was *Kei Seke Koku*, "Ruinous Beauty." It was left by the gods that these people believed saved mankind. It had more power than even Shalltear.

—*Shudder*.

Shalltear, a guardian of the Great Tomb of Nazarick at the highest level, trembled. It was an alert from a keen sense—one could call it a

sixth sense.

As if her intuition were sounding an alarm, Shalltear's eyes moved to the old woman. That was who she truly needed to kill.

Realizing this, she tried to move, but the man with the spear blocked her.

"Out of my way!" She sent him flying. A fragile human body would have been smashed by the blow, but he was simply knocked back not killed. He even retained his will to fight where he landed.

Shalltear cast a spell, mainly at the old woman. "Mass Hold Species!" She would capture several of them. She had the feeling they would make up for her previous error with change to spare.

Just after she thought that, however, her mind started going blank. It was as if parts of her thoughts were peeling off her brain. She couldn't understand what it was, and when she finally realized what was happening, she was utterly shocked and terrified despite being undead.

It was mind control.

She was being mind controlled even though she should have had total resistance to it as an undead. The parts of her mind that weren't yet whited out contained a frantic hatred. A million worst-case scenarios flitted across them—

"Eeeeeegh!" she shrieked and shed tears of blood as she resisted the controlling power threatening to sully her, a guardian of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

But the taint continued to seep into her consciousness, ignoring her desperate struggle. She didn't have leeway to use teleportation magic. If she let it distract her, she would be controlled immediately.

She created a Purifying Lance with a skill from one of her classes. It was huge and imbued with the holy attribute, and even though her

alignment leaned toward evil, it could still do a fair amount of damage. Best of all, by using additional MP, she could tack on the ability to aim perfectly.

As she struggled with all her might in desperation, she glared at the woman wielding the power, threatening to violate her. The man with the shield like a giant mirror standing in front of her didn't even register.

Then she threw.

The lance left her hand as if it had a mind of its own. From within her whiting-out consciousness, she had used a jumble of her skills to strengthen the attack. The flash flew true, piercing the man in front, shield and all, and then reached the woman behind him. The two of them vomited blood. The group was in an uproar. This was the world as Shalltear last saw it.

Intermission

The Re-Estize Kingdom, at the royal capital...

The royal castle compound, Ro-Lente, was situated in the innermost part of the city, surrounded by walls linking twenty huge cylindrical towers standing at even intervals. On its grounds was Valancia Palace.

In one of its rooms, which generally valued function over splendor, a meeting of the court was being held. Many of the great nobles and chief vassals were gathered.

At the center was the captain of the Royal Select, Gazef Stronoff. He was kneeling before King Ramposa III, seated on the throne, to whom he'd sworn loyalty.

It seems he's aged even more... That's what he thought upon examining the king, comparing him to the last time Gazef saw him just two weeks ago. The hair of Gazef's beloved and respected master had grown gray and stringy, while his thin body couldn't be called healthy even in flattery, and his complexion was sickly. The hands gripping his cane-length scepter were withered, and the crown looked heavy on his head.

He'd reigned for thirty-nine years and was sixty years old. Normally he would have given the throne to his successor by that age, but the problem was he didn't have one.

It wasn't that he didn't have an heir. There were two princes, but neither could be said to be terribly bright, and it was clear that if either one of them became king, he'd make a perfect puppet for the great nobles.

The old man spoke in a listless voice. "Captain, you've returned. Well done."

"Yes! Thank you, Your Majesty." Gazef bowed low in response to the king's considerate words.

"Well, then. I've received a short report naturally, but I'd like to hear the details of what happened straight from the source."

"Understood."

Gazef explained the details of what happened after he left the capital and went to the village of Carne. He gave a particularly minute description of the mysterious caster, Ainz Ooal Gown, but didn't mention the agents who seemed to be from the Slane Theocracy. Very few people needed to know about them, and he didn't think anything good would come of bringing them up in this setting.

Instead, he spoke volubly of the marvelous man who boldly dove into danger to save the villagers despite only being a passerby.

"I see. What a wonderful story. Not giving danger a second thought and rescuing the weak is really something..."

In response to the king's admiration-filled words, several of the nobles called out their suspicions.

"There has to be something shady about him!"

"He's a shifty character who hides his face."

"Just a caster with a weird name."

There was even someone who suggested that he set up the attack in advance to make himself look good.

Hearing his life savior talked about in this way while he wasn't able to say anything in his defense made Gazef feel pathetic, but he couldn't let his anger show.

Of course, he had a reason. The nobles insulting Ainz all had one thing in common: They were members of the large faction that supported the great nobles.

The Re-Estize Kingdom was a feudal nation where 30 percent of the territory was controlled by the king, 30 by the great nobles, and the remaining 40 by various other nobles. And now, the country was engrossed in a two-sided struggle for power.

One side was the king's faction, and the other was the great nobles', which included more than half the kingdom's six great nobles.

Although they were before the king, their behavior was an extension of that fight, and this was just another venue for it.

That's why Gazef, of the king's faction and the king's right-hand man, couldn't go shooting his mouth off. He wasn't a great talker and knew he couldn't defeat them in a battle of words, so he needed to avoid situations where they could pick at his speech.

The appearance of the Slane Theocracy's secret squad coincided with our movements, so...there's a good chance the kingdom has been infiltrated. If that was the case, the great nobles' faction must be involved...

Gazef looked at one of the nobles present, one with an exceptionally cold glint in his eyes. The man's blond hair was slicked back, and he had blue almond-shaped eyes. His complexion was a special pallor reserved for those who rarely see the light of day. That combined with his tall, lean figure gave him the impression of a snake. Age-wise he should have been just under forty, but his sickly skin tone made him seem far older. He was one of the six great nobles, Marquis Raeven,

and he flitted between factions like a bat, seeking advantage. He'd also gotten close to the king's second son.

If someone's betraying the kingdom, maybe it's him?

Noticing Gazef's gaze, the marquis stretched his thin lips into a faint smile, making them even thinner.

In response to that provocative attitude, Gazef kept his face even stonier.

"Now then, I think we've heard enough from the captain for now. There are other things we need to attend to." At this exhausted-sounding utterance from the king, the nobles settled down for the time being.

Gazef moved closer to the king and scanned the room. After getting his position on the king's staff, he'd gotten used to receiving unpleasant looks.

"Now, let's discuss the war with the empire that will no doubt start in several months as it does every year. Marquis Raeven, if you please."

"Yes, Your Majesty." He glided to the front of the group almost like a ghost and began to speak in a quiet voice.

No one heckled. He was a man with influence in both factions, as well as being the most powerful of the six great nobles. Everyone was scared to make an enemy of him.

After Marquis Raeven finished speaking about the plan going forward, who would contribute how many soldiers and so on, without receiving any objections, a slight smile played across his face and he bowed to the king. "That is all."

"You have my thanks, Marquis Raeven. Does anyone have an opinion on any of that?"

The crowd stirred again and many people spoke up.

"After driving them off this time, we should keep marching straight into the empire."

"You said it. I'm so sick of fending off their invasions."

"The time has come to show the foolish empire how formidable we can be."

"It certainly has. Just as you say, Count!"

The laughter of the well-dressed men filled the room.

In your dreams! How gratified Gazef would feel if he could just say that.

The kingdom and the neighboring empire clashed at a rate of about once per year on the Katze Plain. Neither side experienced heavy casualties, but that was because the empire wasn't taking it seriously. If they really wanted to take down the kingdom, there was no reason for them to pitch camp on the Katze Plain and wait for them to show up. Gazef and any nobles with even half a brain considered the empire's purpose as reducing the kingdom's strength.

The kingdom built its army by drafting commoners, while the empire's was made up of soldiers given the title of knight as proof of their specialization—it was obvious at a glance which soldiers were stronger.

And so the kingdom had to mobilize twice as many commoners. And a large force meant the army needed a vast supply of food. Sure, there were magic items that could produce food, but they appeared to be concerned only with nutrition; the flavor was so unappetizing, even a starving person would hesitate to eat them. That could never become a staple.

Then, since the empire's invasion was always during the later wheat harvest season, there were never enough hands in the villages,

so they were always behind on the reaping of wheat and other grains. The empire didn't even have to fight so hard and the kingdom's strength still declined, causing the power of the royal family to decline with it. That's why the great nobles' faction turned a blind eye—they were happy the power of the opposing faction was in decline.

If the country weakens, the empire will strike. Do they really think it will end with these little skirmishes? How can they be so naive? Gazef was angered by these nobles who thought their absolute authority would just hold forever.

"By the way, about that caster who saved you, Captain. He might be from the empire, you know—to infiltrate as a spy or something!"

"Ah, I see. That could very well be. I hear the empire has a magic academy for casters. It's definitely a possibility."

"The order of his name with the baptismal name in the middle is in the style of the Slane Theocracy, but perhaps that's part of his disguise."

"It doesn't feel very good to have that sort of character in the kingdom. Should we not do something about it?"

"Perhaps we should consider capturing him. Really, even having an adventurer guild with a bunch of casters doing what they please is a problem. We should do everything we can to place them under our direct control."

"And the amount of money we pay to the guild is ludicrous! It's ridiculous that we compensate adventurers to exterminate monsters inside their own kingdom!"

"We should haul him in and listen to what he has to say."

At this point, Gazef had to say something. He couldn't let the man who saved not only himself but also the villagers and his men be abused any further. "Hold on. That caster showed the kingdom a great deal of goodwill. I do not believe it wise to capture such a—"

Gazef went off in a different direction in an attempt to change the flow of the court meeting.

Some of the nobles had put on overtly sour faces.

Since Gazef had reached his current position on the merits of his swordsmanship alone, the nobles, with their histories and lineages, regarded him as an upstart.

They hated him. His skills with a sword, unrivaled within the kingdom, ended up causing even more animosity. These men of lofty standing couldn't handle being inferior to someone who came from a lower class.

Several nobles opened their mouths to talk over Gazef. They expressed negative sentiments toward Ainz Ooal Gown, and other voices sounded in agreement.

The king on his throne spoke, half sighing. "...That's enough. I declare that nothing is wrong with the captain's judgment."

"Nrgh... If Your Majesty says so..." The nobles took the borderline sneering smiles off their faces for the time being.

Gazef beamed a grateful look toward the object of his loyalty who had appointed him.

The king responded with a slight nod.

•

The court meeting ended, but not before it was rife as usual with power struggle and brownnosing. Though he was exhausted in both body and spirit, Gazef hid it as he walked down a hall in the palace with the king.

The king relied on a cane after injuring his knee in battle, and his gait was unstable, but thinking of his pride, Gazef never offered assistance. Besides, if the king was seen unable to walk without help,

the voices of the great nobles' faction calling for abdication—in favor of a puppet prince they would control—would grow stronger. Gazef did feel bad, but it was imperative that the king walk on his own.

They proceeded down the hall at a snail's pace, and when they were just about to reach the royal family's quarters, the king suddenly spoke.

"...We need the nobles' strength to prevent an imperial invasion. Opposing them head-on would break this country before the empire even gets here."

The topic came up suddenly, but it was because Gazef knew so well what the king was trying to say that he bit his lip. "I envy the empire." He didn't have a way to console the king.

The empire had also been a feudal nation until three emperors ago. But they whittled down the nobles' influence, and by the time the current emperor ascended to power, they had switched to absolute imperial rule.

The current emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

He was a young man known as the "Fresh Blood Emperor," alluding to the amount that was spilled at the time of his ascension. Gazef remembered seeing him on the battlefield—when he'd been invited to join Nix.

Now that *was a ruler. He was born for it.*

"I'm sorry that politics got in the way of my protecting you. Please forgive me for not even being able to outfit you before sending you out on such dangerous orders... That's why you lost some of your men, right?"

"No, that's not why it—"

"Gazef, it's okay. I don't think it will count as an apology to the families of the dead, but I'll send monetary consolation. I would also

like to extend my personal gratitude to Sir Gown, a heartfelt thanks for saving my most loyal aide."

It was nice of the king to want to thank him directly despite not even being saved from those villains himself, but it would be difficult. Still... "I think those words will be enough coming from Your Benevolence."

"Do you think so? Hmm?"

They noticed two people coming down the hall. Especially eye-catching was the beautiful woman in front. Words could not express her beauty, and it was said that painting her portrait was impossible.

The king broke into a smile. His love for his youngest daughter was even stronger than that for his other children.

Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself.

The third princess had inherited her mother's radiant beauty and was known as the Golden Princess. She was sixteen years old. It wasn't uncommon at that age to take a husband—one reason she was constantly fending off nobles. One of the origins of her name was her long golden hair that flowed lustrously behind her. The color of her lips, which were often turned up in an enigmatic smile, was the pale pink of cherry blossoms, but it was a healthy tone. The deep blue of her gentle eyes brought sapphires to mind. The detailed design of her white dress made a particularly trim impression, and the golden necklace around her neck seemed to symbolize her noble spirit.

Behind her in attendance was a boy right on the edge of adulthood clad in white armor. To sum him up in a word: *inferno*? Thick brows slanted over his eyes, which showed too much white around his irises. His iron will shone through as if to challenge anyone within range, and his tanned face was fixed in a singular expression. His golden hair was trimmed short so it wouldn't get pulled in battle and also because it was easier to move around that way.

The boy's name was Climb, and Gazef never felt at ease with him.

It wasn't that he disliked him—on the contrary, he was rather fond of him. He just had a hard time dealing with the heavy atmosphere Climb carried with him. Gazef didn't mind that he took things seriously; he just thought the boy could stand to relax a little bit.

Still, he understood how Climb felt. Many envied his position in attendance at the side of the kingdom's greatest beauty. He probably didn't have anyone he could call a friend. And he was from the same commoner background as Gazef—no, lower. That probably made him extra cautious not to show any weakness or do anything that would harm his master's reputation.

"Father, Captain."

The king smiled at her as she ran up to them and nodded in response to Climb's deep bow.

"Is the meeting finally over?"

"Yes. There was a lot to discuss."

"Oh. I've been thinking about some things. I've been waiting to talk to you."

"I see, I see. Sorry about that."

Golden. Her nickname also came from how bright she was—establishing epoch-making institutions, proposing new laws—and her shining spirit.

The majority of her proposals were measures to aid the common people, anyone of lower status. And they weren't about saving people from above but about putting systems in place that gave them a chance to help themselves. Plus, while improving the commoner position, her methods also led to greater loyalty to the royal family, increased productivity, and other benefits for the kingdom's royalty.

Most of her proposals were scrapped after interference by the nobles, who hated the idea of the common people's positions

improving, but she was very well regarded among those who benefited and the informed.

"Let me hear what you have to say when we get home."

"But Father, it's time for my walk, so I'll be out wandering around with Climb for a little while."

Hearing that she prioritized her walk over speaking with the king, Climb's face hardened even further, and Gazef felt a bit bad for him. *But that's just how Princess Renner is. All you can do as an attendant is go along with it.*

"I see. Then have a good walk. When you get back, let's talk in my room."

"Got it. Okay, let's go, Climb."

"Then please excuse me."

When Climb bowed, Gazef spoke in his capacity as a warrior. "Keep working on your swordsmanship, Climb! You never know when or under what circumstances you'll have to defend Princess Renner."

"Yes, sir!" Climb gave a firm nod, but Renner pouted.

"Climb is fine! He'll definitely protect me no matter what." There was no basis for those words, but when this princess said them, they felt like they might just be true. "Okay, Climb, let's go."

Renner's delicate white fingers grabbed the edge of his shirt. She probably did it unconsciously, but Climb took notice and his expression hardened to diamond levels. "Yes, Princess."

Tugged along by Renner's hand, Climb's face was blank, but as he was taken away, his eyes held shades of pain or grief.

The two had forgotten their manners, but the king didn't say anything. He simply looked after them as if seeing something

heartwarming he'd lost long ago.

"...As king, I probably shouldn't pity him..."

They didn't know where Climb had been born. Renner had picked up the slum child during a visit to the castle town. The emaciated kid had seemed like he was liable to die at any moment, but he worked hard to protect the one who had saved him. No, it wouldn't be fair to sum up his efforts with the phrase *hard work*.

He had no ability with a sword. He had no magic ability. He wasn't blessed physically in any way, either. But one by one, he managed everything, all of it. Granted, he lacked the ability to reach Gazef's, the hero's, realm, but he had gotten strong enough that he could probably be counted among the higher ranks of the kingdom's soldiers. There were just certain things that couldn't be overcome—status, authority, and how he was valued as a person.

Renner's value, as a princess, was extremely high—she was too good for Climb, so to speak.

"I sympathize deeply."

"I know it's foolish, but I want to let at least one of my daughters... do what she pleases. Mm, I guess I'll be scolded by my other daughters? ...I must have grown truly old to be thinking things like this..." The king looked into space, almost as if someone was standing there. "In the end, I may have to make her unhappy as well..."

If she was to marry under present circumstances, it would probably be to a member of the great nobles' faction, Gazef thought, but he said nothing. He had nothing that needed to be said or spoken of. The only one who could understand the king's anguish was someone in the same position. That wasn't Gazef.

A silence fell between the two, and as if to shake it off, they began walking again.



Chapter 3 Confusion and Understanding

1

What popped into Ainz's field of vision after he teleported was a hill. Well, it wasn't really tall enough to be called a hill. It was a gently sloped mound of at most twenty feet. Plants with pointed leaves about as tall as the meadow grass made it feel as though the ground had risen up like this a long time ago. Looking around, he saw other mounds, enough to make him think the entire area was made of similar topography. But of course, that was not right.

These landforms had been created by Mare, one of the Great Tomb of Nazarick's guardians, with his magic. And hidden beneath this land were the surface-level walls of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

Ainz cast Fly and flew diagonally over it all at once. With his expanded view, he could see the grass-covered earth stretching into the distance and couldn't make out any sign of the graveyard that made up the surface-level part of Nazarick. It seemed to have been completely buried.

Without stopping to admire the scenery, Ainz sped across the sky. The moment he reached a certain point, he experienced the sensation of penetrating a thin film, and the view before his eyes changed completely. The mounds of dirt disappeared, and the familiar sight of his home greeted him.

He'd broken through the protective wall of illusions.

Without slowing down, he flew toward the largest and most solemn Central Mausoleum—it was none other than the entrance to the Great Tomb of Nazarick. He approached the vicinity of the white mausoleum's stairway still flying, and when he noticed a large number of figures below, he quelled his anxiety and landed lightly before them.

"Welcome back, Lord Ainz." Following the gentle female voice's lead, a number of others echoed the sentiment.

The woman at the front of the line in the snow-white dress was Albedo, the captain of the Great Tomb of Nazarick's guardians. She was the one with the most up-to-date information on their status. The four maids behind her were members of the combat maid group, Pleiades. A pack of level-80 minions was lined up behind them.

After Ainz had talked with Albedo via Message, he'd immediately given orders to Narberal and teleported. One could infer Albedo's skill as a manager from the number of people she'd gathered to welcome him back despite not even five minutes passing since the end of their Message.

Impressed, Ainz held up his hand lightly to return the greeting. Normally some words of appreciation would be appropriate, but now was not the time.

"Albedo, about what we discussed via Message..." *...Is it true that Shalltear betrayed us?* He closed his mouth without finishing his question. He was gripped by the feeling that if he put it into words, it would come true. That and it was too dangerous a topic to discuss in front of minions.

"Yes, would you like to change locations?"

"I see... Then the Throne Room?"

"Yes, sir. Then, Yuri. Please give Lord Ainz his ring."

From the maids behind her, one with glasses swiftly stepped

forward. The clothing she wore was a combat maid uniform, same as Narberal's, but there were several small differences. Narberal's uniform prioritized defense while hers emphasized ease of movement, as evidenced by the lack of metal plates on the front of her skirt. Spikes stuck out of her gauntlets and probably created a brutal weapon when she made fists. The semitransparent jewel set in her rather thick blue choker shone not with the reflection of light but with a flickering flame. Her hair was done up in a French twist, and her shapely face displayed an intelligence that others surmised from just a glance was both sharp and cold. Her name was Yuri Alpha and she was the deputy leader of the Pleiades. A man—Sebas—was their leader, so it could be said that among the maids, she was the coordinator.

She held out a tray with both hands. On it, a ring was enshrined on a purple cloth—a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown.

Ainz took it and put it on his ring finger. He was apprehensive about the possibility of this ring, which allowed free movement within the Great Tomb of Nazarick, being stolen while he was out, so he'd had the guardians of Nazarick hold on to it for him.

Gazing at the ring on his finger bone, he nodded, satisfied that the off feeling he'd experienced while out the past several days had gone away.

"Okay, let's go, Albedo."

Since teleporting directly into the Throne Room itself was forbidden, they activated their rings and went to the closest room, Lemegeton.

Then they opened the heavy door and proceeded toward the crystal throne in the back.

Ainz fired the questions that he'd wanted to ask before. "Okay, before we start, allow me to ask a few questions. You say Shalltear rebelled, but what about Sebas? He was at the same location. Sebas hasn't rebelled?"

"No, there is no sign of rebellion from him."

"Then have we gotten his information?"

"Yes, that's been done. According to him, they encountered some bandits. After that, Shalltear headed to their headquarters to capture them. There was nothing suspicious at that time, and in fact, she was apparently speaking of her devotion to you."

"I see. So something must have happened to make her revolt after that?"

"Yes... Also, it appears she had two vampire bride minions with her, but they both seem to have perished."

"Hmm. Well, weaklings like that—No, wait. That means something must have happened to kill them. Okay, now let me give you the gist of what happened on my end."

By the time they reached the base of the throne's steps, he'd mostly finished, but he hadn't gotten to the part about the graveyard yet; that was important, so he continued.

Albedo listened quietly and then bowed her head in acknowledgment when he finished.

Ainz felt compelled to ask if there had been any mistakes in his handling of events, but there was something else he wanted to know more urgently.

Looking up at the throne, he uttered the necessary phrase. "Open master source."

A translucent window that looked like the menu but was different opened up. The board was full of countless words divided up by tabs. This was the Great Tomb of Nazarick's administrative system. Things like the daily upkeep cost, current locations of minions and their types, what kind of devices (including magic traps) were currently active—all this information was displayed there, and it was set up so

that general admin tasks could be completed right from the menu. In the *Yggdrasil* days, there was a different way to view it, and it could be seen from anywhere at any time, but through experimentation, Ainz had learned that in this world it was possible to view it only from the heart of their headquarters, the Throne Room.

It's a pain to have to come here every single time I want to use it, that's for sure, but...I have a ring, so I guess it's not a big deal.

With a practiced hand, Ainz opened the NPC tab. The names of the NPCs he and his guildmates created were listed there. Ainz changed the sorting from alphabetical to level, starting from the highest, and scanned down until his eyes stopped at a certain point. Then he looked silently at Albedo.

"Yes, that's her current status."

Among all the names written in white letters, only Shalltear Bloodfallen's was black. Ainz knew what that change meant, but... He looked twice, three times, and when he realized it wasn't his eyes playing tricks on him, he screamed in his mind, *That can't be!* If his bony face could have moved, it would have no doubt been twisted up in shock.

"...Is she dead?" he asked Albedo, not wanting to accept it yet. He was hoping maybe something had changed since coming to this world, but Albedo's words were hopelessly brutal.

"In the event of death, the letters disappear and the space becomes temporarily blank. I believe this means rebellion."

"Ahh... Yeah..." He remembered the times he'd seen letters change like this in *Yggdrasil*.

Despite what Albedo had said, the truth was a little different. Certainly in a broad sense, it could mean rebellion, but the change indicated that the NPC was taking hostile actions temporarily as a result of being mind controlled by a third party.

But that can't be! he spat again in his mind.

Shalltear was an undead, same as Ainz. In other words, for better or worse, they were a race immune to psychic effects. How could she be mind controlled?

It made more sense to think that she had betrayed Nazarick on her own, that she'd had issues with the way she was being treated or that someone outside had made her a better offer. If that wasn't the case, it stood to reason that the cause was something specific in this world about which Ainz had no knowledge.

Nfirea's face flashed through his mind. Yes, if someone possessed one of those mysterious congenital talents like he had, perhaps they could make psychic effects work on undead.

"...So it's possible she's under the special influence of some power or being unique to this world?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. But it's a fact that Shalltear has risen against us. I advise organizing a suppression party at once."

Ainz realized something with a start: It was possible the minions gathered to greet his return were all meant to suppress Shalltear. Thinking back on it, many of them possessed holy attacks, which would be effective against undead—fairly rare within Nazarick.

Albedo continued in a steely voice. "I'll take command. I'm thinking of choosing Cocytus and Mare as vice-commanders if you'll allow it." That was a perfect lineup for eliminating Shalltear; it was obvious how serious she was.

Shalltear Bloodfallen was strong. Based purely on strength, she was the strongest guardian besides Gargantua. It would actually be difficult to ensure victory against her without the party members she mentioned.

"What do you think?"

“Mm, it seems a bit hasty. Why in the world did she rebel? We need to figure that out first.”

“Just what I thought you would say; you’re so kind, Lord Ainz. But I see no need to have mercy on someone who’s shown hostility to a Supreme Being, no matter what the reason.”

“That’s not it, Albedo. I’m not being merciful. I simply don’t understand why Shalltear would rebel.”

If there was the possibility of this happening to others, he needed to find a way to handle it. If the cause was her treatment or some other dissatisfaction, there could be other NPCs and minions harboring the same feelings. He needed to come up with countermeasures in case the same thing happened with someone else in the future. Even if she was being inescapably compelled by someone with a talent, they needed a plan for that scenario as well.

When he’d heard via Message that one of the NPCs his guildmates created had rebelled, he had the feeling he hadn’t been able to gain acceptance from the members as guild master, which was so shocking it felt like his knees would give out. But this was no longer an issue that could stop there.

He had to solve this not as guild master but as the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. It was far too early to give up hope. If—although it shouldn’t be possible—Shalltear was being forced to rebel, he had to save her. Managers who acted all-important but couldn’t save their subordinates when they were in trouble weren’t fit to lead from the top. Ainz was a ruler, so he had to protect his followers.

“So where is Shalltear right now? Have you pinpointed her location?”

“My apologies. It is still unconfirmed. The first thing we did was to restrain her direct subordinates and simultaneously boost our defenses by mobilizing some minions on the first floor, for we thought that Shalltear might attempt to attack Nazarick.”

“I see. Then first, let’s figure out where she is. We’ll pay a visit to your sister.”

2

The fifth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick was a freezing cold place designed to be like a glacier. Mountains of pale ice that tricked the eyes into thinking they were glowing from within jutted out of the endless snowy landscape. Flakes of white whirled out of the heavy, overcast sky, toyed with by a capricious wind that picked up a freezing chill whipping past the ice. Frosty trees in the distance were caked with snow and looked like giants concealing themselves from head to toe with pure-white robes.

Ainz’s clothing whipped wildly in the cold, biting wind. Remembering Albedo was with him, he asked her, “Are you cold? You can put on armor if you want. We can spare the time for that.”

Chill attacks had no effect on Ainz, and he would never freeze no matter how cold it got. But that wasn’t the case for Albedo. She certainly wouldn’t take any damage from this level of cold if she was properly equipped, but all she had on at present was her white dress. He’d asked her before they teleported as well, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was enduring it to show how tough she was.

But she smiled gently in response to his worries. “Thank you for your concern, Lord Ainz, but I am all right. This level of chill is no problem for me.”

Ainz nodded an okay.

Normally the chill damage came with an area effect that slowed movement, but it cost extra maintenance, so it wasn’t currently activated. Had that worked out in their favor? Or did Albedo have a magic item or skill that cut the chill damage?

Generally, an NPC's gear was given to them by the guild member who created them, and the only ones Ainz could list with confidence were Pandora's Actor and a couple of others, although he had taken another look at everyone's data right after they'd been transported.

Ainz chased the questions out of his mind and looked at the large two-story, Western-style building in front of him. In this wintry world covered in ice, only this building gave off a different vibe. It felt exactly like a mansion out of a fairy tale, but its surface was frozen, and the cold gave the place a disagreeable atmosphere. Actually, the name of the place was far removed from anything fairy tale–esque; it was called the Ice Prison. All who opposed Nazarick were consigned here.

"Shall we go?" Ainz said and pushed open the ice-covered door. It opened quite easily despite the thick layer of ice caking it—as if welcoming those entering.

A chill poured out the moment the door was opened—the inside of the building was even colder than the freezing world outside. When the wind blew over her entire body, Albedo shivered for the first time. Noticing this, Ainz reached into extra-dimensional space and removed a red cape. The hem had a pattern like blazing flames.

"You should put this on, Albedo. It doesn't have any particular magic effects, but it should still keep out the cold."

"What a wonderful cape! Thank you! I'll treasure it as long as I live!"

He never said he was giving it to her, but seeing her ear-to-ear smile, he couldn't say anything.

He looked through the open door. A dark, quiet corridor ran deep inside.

"Actually, the survivors from the Sunlit Scripture are in here, too, huh?"

"Yes. Neuronist is taking proper care of them. This is so warm... It's almost like being wrapped in your arms, Lord Ainz... Tee-hee-hee."

"Oh? That's good." There would be nothing warm about being wrapped up in arms with no flesh or skin, but he couldn't very well point that out. He wasn't that dense.

Keeping Albedo, who was writhing in the cape, completely outside his field of vision, Ainz slowly went inside. "What are you doing? Our time is...this time it's limited."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Ainz's passive skill Immortal Blessing told him where every undead in the building was located. It was annoying, so he turned it off and, ignoring them, walked down the hallway coated in pale ice. If he hadn't taken measures against travel obstruction, he probably would have slipped.

"...Shall I call Neuronist, Lord Ainz? For Nazarick's highest ruler to walk here unguided seems..."

"That's not necessary. We could, but she just talks so much. We have an issue that needs to get resolved immediately. I want to avoid wasting even the shortest amount of time."

"Understood. Then I will tell Neuronist in no uncertain terms that she must not make any small talk until this incident is over."

"No, no, that's not necessary. I'm not that bothered by it."

"But..."

Next to Albedo and her frown, Ainz smiled wryly with his unmoving face. He was glad he was valued as a leader, but soon he wouldn't even be able to make a simple idle complaint.

"It's fine. I love all of you. Your good points, your bad points—they were all created by my old friends. If I feel displeasure at something

they put so much care into, I'm the one who should be sorry."

That's right. If Shalltear had rebelled in accordance with her settings, he'd have to forgive her, because in that case she'd only have been following her creator Peroroncino's will. But he wasn't the type to sow seeds of discontent within the guild. That was puzzling. If anything, he was the kind of joker who loved the harmony he had with his guildmates.

Considering that, this must be an outside job. And the board indicated that she's under mind control... Still, there are a lot of things that aren't certain, and I can't say for sure that none of the programming has changed since coming to this world. But then, it's not as if I memorized all the NPCs' personality settings, either. Besides, it seems like parts of their personalities resemble the guild members who created them... I guess there is no one who could have set up every single thing, so maybe that's just how it works? Then is it something to do with Shalltear's...settings? Like maybe she was built like a time bomb? He likes eroge, *so maybe he programmed a climax event...? Ugh, that's totally possible...*

Ainz sighed weakly and finally noticed the strange changes that had come over the woman at his side. She was still facing straight ahead, walking along quietly, but there was no longer any sign of her trying to match his pace. Furthermore, though her eyes were fixed forward, it was less like she was looking ahead than that her gaze was simply locked in that direction. He discovered that she was mumbling something and strained his ears.

"Loves... Loves... Loves..." She repeated only that, skipping over the word like a broken record.

"...Hey, Albedo. *Everyone.* I said *everyone.*"

Her head twisted in an odd way to look at him. "B-but that means you love me! Is that correct?!"

"U-uh...well, yeah."

“Tee-heee!” She put her feet together and hopped in a cute, charming way—and crashed into the ceiling.

That’s what it was like to have strength on a different scale.

Crack—or more like *snap!* The ceiling reacted in a surprisingly loud way, making it quite clear how much momentum she’d had. Upon hearing the sound like a cannonball impact, a number of ghostly monsters revealed their semitransparent forms. They were the undead that lurked in this building, all of whom Ainz’s skill had registered earlier.

“Ah, you all can go back. It’s nothing.”

He looked at Albedo, who seemed so pleased she might break into song. Despite having crashed into the ceiling, she must not have felt any pain due to a racial skill that reduced her damage taken.

The various undead bowed before disappearing again, returning to their job waiting for raiders.

“...Albedo. We’re almost to your sister’s room. Are you ready?”

Her elated expression tensed up in an instant.

“Understood. Then we’ll need a doll.”

“Yeah, give it to me.”

When Albedo held her hand out toward the wall, a transparent hand emerged and dropped a doll into her palm. It was a baby doll, roughly the size one might expect a real infant to be.

Accepting it, Ainz took a hard look. “It’s so creepy.”

It was a caricature of a baby. It looked like a twisted kewpie doll, and especially creepy were its big googly eyes. Ainz furrowed his nonexistent brow and looked toward the end of the corridor. There was a fresco painted over the whole wall with the door in the center.

Perhaps a mother and child? It was a painting of a gentle mother cradling a baby.

If that were all, it would have been a fine painting, but over time, the plaster had come off in places, creating a horrible scene. The baby in particular was mostly gone, its remains almost skeletal.

Ainz pushed open the door. It glided open without a sound—but the crying of babies echoed inside. Not one, or two, or repeating echoes. The crying of tens, hundreds of babies—countless crying voices became one noise and swept over them. But there were no babies to be seen in the room.

They couldn't be seen, but they were there.

In the middle of the unfurnished, empty chamber stood a cradle and one woman quietly rocking it. In spite of Ainz and Albedo's entrance, the woman, who wore black mourning clothes, said nothing and just kept rocking the cradle. They couldn't see her face. Her long black hair completely covered it.

Normally if there was an NPC who ignored Ainz when he appeared, Albedo would reprimand them, but now she didn't say anything. Ainz knew why, and the way she had braced herself, a bit on edge, spoke volumes.

"Should we get started?"

"Yes, I think so. Do be careful."

As if Ainz's question and Albedo's response were a signal, the woman's movements stopped dead. Then she slowly reached into the cradle and took out the baby. No, it wasn't a baby. It was a doll.

"No, no, no, no!" She raised it high over her head and threw it with all her might. The doll hit the wall and shattered to pieces. "My, my, my, my babyyy!" The woman gnashed her teeth, and as if the clacking sound were a cue, the crying voices from the walls and floor grew stronger, and the ones emitting the cries became visible. The

floor was littered with lumps of meat like semitransparent babies.

"I wonder how much Tabula spent to station so many monsters here."

The baby-like, squirming lumps of meat were monsters with levels in the late teens called carrion babies.

In *Yggdrasil*, by using in-game currency or completing a microtransaction, players could station in their dungeons monsters that didn't spawn automatically; however, since they didn't respawn after being killed, most players considered this an extravagance, and unless they were focused on role-playing, they didn't do it.

That Tabula Smaragdina would station this many—albeit low-level—carrion babies here gave a glimpse into the kinds of things he cared about.

While Ainz was busy being impressed, the woman had produced a huge pair of scissors from somewhere, gripping them tightly. Her eyes bore a hole in Ainz and Albedo through a curtain of her disheveled hair. "You people, you people, you people, you people kidnapped, kidnapped, kidnapped, kidnapped my baby, my baby, my baby, my baby, didn't you, didn't you, didn't you, didn't youuuuuu?!!!"

"She sure is your big sister. You're so alike."

"What?! R-really?"

Perhaps taking their leisurely conversation as an act of aggression, the woman whipped into a wind of murderous intent and flew at Ainz. She ran with a bizarrely long stride, effectively reducing the distance between them to zero in no time, her mourning clothes flapping behind her. She then poised the scissors way up as though to stab him and—

"Here is your child."

When Ainz thrust the doll at her, she froze as if someone had

pushed the stop button. Then she put away the scissors and slowly took it from him.

"Ohhhhhhh!"

She would never let her precious child go again. It was in that gentle way a mother has that she embraced it, and then she returned her baby to the cradle. After that she turned her face, hidden by her hair, to Ainz and Albedo.

"If it isn't Lord Momonga and the cutest of my little sisters. Good day to you both."

"Long time no see, Nigredo. You...well, I'm happy to see you haven't changed a bit."

The only reason he'd been able to handle the situation in stride was that he'd seen her madness back when this world was a game. *But I did scream back then...* The memory of being invited to see a new character and then attacking with all his might along with the other screaming guild members who were there was nostalgic for him.

"It's been a while, sister."

Yes, Nigredo was Albedo's elder sibling, another NPC created by Tabula Smaragdina. If Albedo was a strong expression of his fondness for personality gaps, Nigredo was an embodiment of his love for horror films.

He wasn't a bad guy, but he sure was intense. If you talked to him normally, he came off as a clever, respectable guy, but if you dug in a bit, he could be..."passionate."

As Ainz was remembering his old guildmate, Nigredo parted her long black hair in the middle to reveal her face. She probably thought it was rude to keep it hidden, but Ainz would have preferred it that way.

Her face was truly grotesque. It had no skin; the muscles were all

exposed. Her teeth, which came across as gorgeous as pearls for her lack of lips, and eyes, which seemed to sparkle for her lack of eyelids, would have been pretty taken on their own, but all together, they were just revolting.

The face straight out of a horror movie warped into an even weirder shape. Since she didn't have skin, it was hard to tell, but unlike Ainz who lacked muscles, it was possible to guess that she was smiling.

"So, Lord Momonga, what can I—?"

"Oh, sorry. You weren't in the Throne Room that day. I don't go by Momonga anymore. Now I'm Ainz Ooal Gown. Call me Ainz from now on."

They heard a surprised gasp, and then Nigredo bowed her head. "Understood, Lord Ainz."

"So, Nigredo, I came because I have a favor to ask you. Will you lend me your power?"

"My power? For living or nonliving?"

"Uh...living...living, right...? I'll just say it. The target is Shalltear Bloodfallen."

"The floor guardian? ...Please excuse me. If it's your order, Lord Ainz, I will begin immediately." Her voice was incredulous for a moment, but she quickly recovered.

"Thanks, Nigredo."

After replying to Albedo with a playful thumbs-up, Nigredo began casting a number of spells. There were many different types, and Ainz recalled that he had heard most of them recently—the various spells he'd had Narberal perform the night before.

Nigredo was a caster and a high-level NPC occupying one of the

highest positions in Nazarick. Her face had nothing to do with it, but she was actually built with classes specialized in investigation and intelligence-gathering magic. That's why they'd come here to locate Shalltear.

At a speed worthy of the power she possessed, she gave the results. "I've found her."

"Use Crystal Monitor."

She cast the spell and an armored figure standing among some trees in a forest clearing appeared in a floating crystal monitor.

Ainz groaned. "Brilliant. It's great you could pinpoint her exact location. Guess you're not specialized for noth..." His words of admiration trailed off when the image came into focus.

The figure standing in the picture wore full crimson body armor that looked as if it was wet with blood. The helmet with the open face looked like a swan's head, and bird feathers stuck out from either side. Decorations designed to be like wings draped across the figure's chest from its shoulders, and its waist was wrapped in a crimson skirt. In one hand, it held a strange large spear that resembled a pipette or almost like a baster used for cooking. Shalltear Bloodfallen had acquired, among others, the faith magic–caster class most highly specialized in combat, walküre, and this was her final combat form.

Albedo raised an alarmed voice upon seeing Shalltear's weapon. "The Pipette Lance! That's the god-tier magic item Lord Peroroncino gave her!"

Ainz also had god-tier items—enough to fill all his gear slots with them—but that didn't mean they were easy to make.

In *Yggdrasil*, players could enhance items by inlaying them with data crystals, but the crystals monsters dropped varied wildly in level of performance. Creating a god-tier item required collecting multiple "high rare" drops. Not only that, but also creating the vessel—a weapon like a sword—required metal so rare people called it *super*

rare. For that reason, it wasn't uncommon to see level-100 players who didn't have a single god item. Even in Ainz Ooal Gown, one of the top ten guilds, the NPCs weren't completely outfitted with god-tier gear. At most, they had one or two items.

And Shalltear's was the Pipette Lance. The name sounded stupid, but its power was sinister. There existed a data crystal that would allow a percentage of damage dealt to return as healing for the one equipping the item, and the Pipette Lance had specialized in that ability.

"...I'm going over there right away."

"Huh? P-please wait! If Shalltear is fully outfitted, we can anticipate a battle on the spot. We must select some guards for you!"

"We don't have time for that. If negotiations break down, I'll withdraw immediat—"

"Lord Ainz, please excuse the interruption." A woman's voice echoed in his head. It was Narberal, whom he'd left in E-Rantel.

Ainz was a bit irritated at being contacted now of all times. "What, Narberal? Right now I'm—" He'd been about to say "busy," but he stopped himself—because he remembered what happened last night when he'd ended the Message with Entoma. At the time, he hadn't thought there was anything he could do, but if he had acted sooner, maybe things would have been different. He could have left Nfirea's rescue to Narberal. This hint of regret brought back Ainz's levelheadedness.

The NPCs respected him as their absolute, so it was easy for them to put the highest priority on his words, even if he'd misjudged the situation. That was why he had to do everything as carefully as possible, with a clear head—so he made no mistakes.

That's asking too much of a normal guy like me. He sneered at his holey decision-making skills and smiled wryly, thinking how impossible this all was. But then, sensing the retainer-like vibes from

Narberal across the Message as she waited for her master's commands, he shuddered as if struck by lightning.

What am I saying? I'm Ainz Ooal Gown. I'm the ruler of Nazarick, the one who goes by everyone's name. That's right. I'm not Satoru Suzuki. Impossible? No. If I'm going by this name, then it's something I just have to do.

"...Never mind, it's nothing. What is it? It must be an emergency if you Messaged me, right?"

"Sir. Actually, someone from the adventurers' guild is asking for you."

"...If it's about last night, have them wait... No, that can't be it. It must be something else, right?"

"Yes. As you so wisely perceive, my lord." She spoke vaguely and the following silence showed her hesitation. Eventually she seemed to reach some kind of conclusion and continued. "Another problem has come up that is unrelated to that one. It's...a vampire issue."

"What? A vampire?" His eyes moved to the crystal monitor where Shalltear continued to stand stock-still. "Did they say something about it? Like maybe that it had silver hair or crimson armor?"

"No, unfortunately the one who came calling for you is only a messenger. They'll discuss details at the guild, so they want you to go there immediately. They said they've gathered a few adventurer teams already... The messenger is actually still waiting nearby. What should I tell him?"

Ainz closed his eyes. Not that he had any—he just extinguished the flames in his orbits. "Give me your opinion, Albedo. I got this message from Narberal..."

When he finished his explanation, she lowered her eyes for a few moments, and then looked back up at him. "Under the circumstances, since we're lacking information, there are pros and

cons to either course of action. I don't think there's anything to do but choose according to your preference, Lord Ainz. Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with ignoring *humans*..."

Ainz thanked Albedo and contemplated his options.

If he prioritized Shalltear and something went horribly wrong...

If he prioritized the guild and Shalltear's status changed...

When he imagined worst-case scenarios, they just got worse and worse.

If his guildmates were there, they could have all decided right away by majority rule. But they weren't. As the one taking care of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the one who had taken on their name, Ainz had to make the decision on his own.

He couldn't make up his mind, but then he did. "Albedo, send someone out to keep an eye on Shalltear. I'm going to the guild in E-Rantel. When that's done, take me to Shalltear."

"Understood."

"Did you hear that, Narberal?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell the messenger you're on your way."

"Okay, please do. Then, sorry, Albedo, but I'm heading out."

"All right. I will do as you said and send out a few minions."

"Thanks. Oh, and I'm giving my ring to Yuri. I'm counting on you to pick it up later."

There was something he wanted to give the librarian, but he decided he didn't have time and used his ring to teleport away.

The sisters were left alone in the room and the atmosphere relaxed. As if she'd been waiting for that moment, Nigredo's eyes twinkled

with curiosity. “So what is it? What did Shalltear do?”

“Oh. Seems like she betrayed us.”

“...I can’t believe it... Really? Are you serious?”

“I can’t believe it, either, but that’s the conclusion we’ve reached.”

“Then shouldn’t you just kill her? From the looks of it, Lord Ainz doesn’t want to do that, but...?”

“Yeah. He’s so kind... No, he must have decided that it could be a huge mistake to kill her without investigating the reason for her rebellion. Lord Ainz is always taking those kinds of things into consideration.”

Nigredo sighed a satisfied yet unsatisfied response. “Got it. Well, until the minions you dispatch begin their physical surveillance, I’ll keep an eye on her with magic from here.”

“Thanks, Nigredo.” She judged the conversation had ended and was about to unleash the power of her ring, when she realized it seemed like her sister wanted to say something more. When she was in her right mind, she was the type who said what needed to be said; there was only one reason she would hesitate to speak.

Albedo didn’t want to ask, but on the off chance it was about something else, she felt she had to. “What is it, sister?”

“I’m not allowed to leave the Ice Prison, so I’m not up-to-date. Is Spinel still doing well?”

...*I knew it*, thought Albedo. She regretted asking, but she continued the conversation without letting it show. “Nigredo, you shouldn’t call her that.”

“I hate her. Even if she was made by Lord Tabula just like us—No, she was created by some completely different process. She can’t be trusted.”

“No, c’mon, sister. She’s precious.”

“To me, it seems like you’re being tricked. She’s going to bring great misfortune on Nazarick. I would bet money on it.”

“...Well, we’ll never see eye to eye on that. I don’t believe she’ll cause any harm.”

“Oh? Well, if the captain of the floor guardians has decided that, then I won’t say any more. But do remember—in your capacity as captain—that I worry about it.”

“Okay, I will.” Albedo suppressed her sigh and teleported. Normally she would have laughingly dismissed Nigredo’s worries, but today they stuck in her mind like a thorn.

Everyone created by the Supreme Beings was absolutely loyal. That’s what she’d thought, but then Shalltear betrayed them. Did that mean there was a chance others might betray them as well? *There might be a chance my little sister would rebel.* She couldn’t get the thought out of her mind. It could actually even work in her favor...

When she appeared after teleporting, her eyes were in a trance. “Lord Ainz, my love. I am your loyal dog and slave,” she declared to the man who was not present. “Even if all of Nazarick turns against you, I will remain at your side.”

3

“Okay, Momon, take any open seat.”

There were six men in the room. Three were armed and brawny. Then there was the one who had stood to prompt him to sit—robust but not armed. There was also a lean, nervous-looking man in a robe. Lastly, there was a portly fellow in the back.

As Ainz sat down with all eyes on him, the standing man spoke again. “First, allow us to introduce ourselves. I am the head of this city’s adventurers’ guild, Pluton Ainzach.”

He was a man in the virile prime of his life. The vibes he gave off were those of a veteran soldier, and Ainz had no doubt that he was considered by all a brilliant warrior.

“And this is the mayor, Panasolei Grouzé Day Rettenmaier.” Panasolei responded to Ainz’s slight bow with a brief wave of his hand.

He was portly—No, to come out and say it, he was obese. There was an overgenerous amount of fat around his abdomen, and so much flesh gathered under his chin, it left onlookers in disbelief. With that much meat on his face, he had the look of a depressed, overweight bulldog. His hair was thin enough that his head was reflecting the light, and the hairs that were there had turned white.

“Nice to meet you, Momon.” Due to a congested nose, he exhaled a “pfe-hee.”

Ainz bowed to the piglike man.

“This is the head of the wizards’ guild, Theo Rakheshir.”

The extremely lean nervous-looking man with a delicate frame bowed to Ainz.

“And these three are, like you, some of E-Rantel’s finest adventurers who’ve responded to our summons. From the right is team Kralgra’s representative, Igvarge; the Celestial Wolves’ representative, Bellote; and team Rainbow’s representative, Moknach.”

The three men who were introduced all had impressive bearings suitable to the hue of the plates—mythril—hanging around their necks; their strength was palpable. The gear they had equipped, too—though junk from Ainz’s perspective—was better than that of most adventurers he had seen around town. All of them had different

emotions in their eyes, but the one they had in common was curiosity.

One of the men—Igvarge, representative of the team called Kralgra—spoke in a stern voice while staring daggers at Ainz. "First, I'd like to ask a question, Guild Master Ainzach. I've never heard the name Momon before, but he must have performed quite a feat to be a mythril plate. What did he do?"

There was a vague hostility in his voice, but Ainzach replied cheerfully as if he didn't notice. "He performed the deeds of taming the Wise King of the Forest and, yesterday, promptly resolving an incident in the graveyard."

"An incident in the graveyard?"

Instead of the puzzled Igvarge, it was the representative of the team called Rainbow, Moknach, who raised his voice in surprise.

"You mean the incident involving the appearance of large numbers of undead?"

"*Pfe-hee!* Your ears work fast, don't they?! We got some troublesome news, so I had given orders to let out as little information as possible. Where did you hear about it?" Perhaps because of his congested sinuses, he kept making that stupid "poo-hee" noise all throughout the conversation. And then maybe because he was breathing through his mouth, there was almost no variation in his pitch. It felt exactly as off as it would have if he were reading preprepared dialogue in monotone.

"Do excuse me, Mayor. I only happened to hear it and would have trouble specifying from whom exactly. Naturally, I know none of the details."

The two caught each other's eyes and smiled—Moknach plastically, the mayor bitterly.

"Hmm. That doesn't sound like the truth, but oh well. There are

probably a lot of people who know there were undead on the rampage. *Pfe-hee,* sorry to interrupt."

"No, it's no trouble, Mayor. Anyhow, the guild judged he was an adventurer worthy of a mythril plate."

"Based on that one thing? For resolving one incident? The ones who went through all the promotion exams in order aren't going to be too happy about that!"

Igvarge had done away with his courtesy toward Ainzach and was now openly hostile, but a cool voice came from the side. "Hmph. Set him straight, Guild Master. I, too, am dissatisfied with Sir Momon being mythril." The one who had interrupted was the head of the wizards' guild, Rakheshir. There was something cynical in his expression, but Ainz could see it was aimed more at Igvarge than himself. Somehow, that was lost on the target, and Igvarge smiled at Rakheshir with goodwill.

"It seems like the head of the wizards' guild agrees with me."

"Heh-heh-heh." Rakheshir pressed his thin lips together in a sneer. It was as if he'd just heard something hilarious. There was no goodwill in his expression—his eyes were clearly filled with contempt. "Oh? I think there's a big difference between you and me."

"What do you mean by—?"

"Stop it, Igvarge. Some at the guild believe the deed he performed was orichalcum rank."

"Hngh!" Igvarge's face was screaming, *Of all the ridiculous nonsense!*

In response, Rakheshir twisted his face into a derisive grin. "Sir Momon, with a party of only two—well, three if you count the Wise King of the Forest—broke through a mob of undead estimated to be thousands strong and defeated the man performing an evil ritual."

"That just shows how good he is at sneaking around!"

Rakheshir sighed audibly. "Honestly, I agree with you. If it were just that one thing, I wouldn't call Sir Momon orichalcum rank, but the remains of one of those undead proved his strength." Here he paused to gaze intently at Ainz in his black armor. "...A skeletal dragon. That horrific monster has absolute magic defense, and he slayed it."

"W-well! S-skeletal dragons are certainly strong! But a mythril-rank adventurer could defe—"

"Two at once?"

"What?!"

The yelp of surprise went up from not only Igvarge but also the other two adventurers as well, and something changed about the way they looked at Ainz. It was as if they were investigators testing the depth of a lake.

"There were remains of two of them. Could your teams break through a mob of thousands of undead, exterminate two skeletal dragons, and kill the ringleader behind an unknown phenomenon, all in a short amount of time? Adventurers who went to the graveyard said they witnessed strong undead like soul-warping wraiths. Could you walk into those jaws of death?"

Igvarge bit his lip and said nothing.

"I'll ask you something else. We are told that there was only one other person in Sir Momon's party, a woman. She is a caster and would therefore be powerless against skeletal dragons, with their absolute magic resistance. With that in mind could you, with a party of only two—well, three if you count the Wise King of the Forest—accomplish all that?" Rakheshir bowed his head slowly to Ainz. "As a resident of this city, Sir Momon, I thank you. If you hadn't moved as swiftly as you did, who knows how many victims there would have been? This is only my personal thanks, but if you ever need anything,

please let me know and I'll do my utmost to support you."

"There's no need, Guild Master. I merely resolved the incident at the request of Mrs. Baleare."

"Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...," Rakheshir laughed. It was an emotional one. "I really do believe you deserve the rank orichalcum—or even adamantite. To accomplish such a feat with such small numbers and then to remain humble about it—you say it as if it was all a piece of cake. Rumor has it your partner can use up to tier-three magic, but that can't be true, right?"

"I thank you for the compliments...but I'd rather not reveal our hand."

"Ah, how unfortunate."

Ainz and Rakheshir smiled at each other, in response to which Igvarge's face reddened as he raised his voice. "If we had all worked together, we could have taken care of it! In the first place, having a small team is their problem! They probably just have personality issues that make it hard for them to keep members!"

The air in the room was heating up when the stupid "pfe-hee" breathing noise cut in. "How about you leave it at that? We didn't gather you here to fight."

Igvarge, deflated, sat down with the "pfe-hee" that followed. His angry eyes were still pegged on Ainz. The guild masters shook their heads at him. *Sheesh*.

"You value strength, so I understand how you feel, but that's not what we're here to discuss. Let's get this problem solved, chop-chop!"

"Thank you, Mayor."

"Hmm? I don't know what the issue is, but do continue. I'm eager to hear the details."

"Yes, I should have reported to you sooner?"

"Don't worry about it. I was a bit busy with some business concerning Stronoff." He pfe-heed.

"Then let's get down to—"

"Before that, wouldn't it be the bare minimum of etiquette to remove one's helmet?" Igvarge derailed the conversation again, and the bite in his voice made it irritating no matter how right he was, to the point where the other adventurers frowned slightly.

"No, I think this time he's right. That is a bit lacking in courtesy."

But Ainz himself coolly removed his helmet and revealed his fake magic face—a plain face that would never get cast in a leading role. "Since I come from a foreign country, I'd rather not invite trouble, so I keep my face hidden. Please forgive me; I meant no disrespect."

"Tch, a foreigner?"

"That's enough, Igvarge. Adventurers who protect people from monsters have no borders. To have to mention that unwritten rule out loud to a man in the same profession is embarrassing." A reproving voice rose against Igvarge, who was about to continue, and upon realizing that everyone in the room shared the opinion, he reluctantly fell silent.

"...Simply due to being from a different country, I often attract many stares."

Ainz's clever words caused several present to smile wryly. Igvarge's face was splotchy with anger, but no one complained when Ainz put his helmet back on.

"Now then, I pray we will have no further disruptions—I'd like to address our main topic."

"*Someone* was late so we haven't heard it yet."

“That was my fault. I do hope you’ll forgive me.” Ainz bowed and gave a serious apology this time. Even he had memories of being an office worker and having to repress his desire to go home because the meeting couldn’t start until all members had arrived. He understood their feelings all too well.

His genuine apology must have seemed to have a lot of integrity compared to Igvarge with his pronounced hostility and repeatedly cynical remarks. Someone emitted an admiring “ahh,” and Igvarge frowned harder—because he realized how far everyone’s opinion of him had fallen.

But there was someone more upset than Igvarge. “...That really is enough! If you derail our conversation any further, I’ll have to ask you to leave.” It was, naturally, Ainzach speaking. His eyes openly blazed in fury, and his mild manner from before had faded into the shadows. On the other end of his glare was, of course, Igvarge.

Igvarge gave a slight bow in apology.

Seeing the sincerity in his eyes made Ainz wonder. *Considering all the hostility he’s been aiming at me this whole time, it wouldn’t have been strange for him to now cop the attitude of a middle schooler rebelling against his parents. So why did he back down?* After thinking for a bit, Ainz reached what he felt must have been the answer.

What kind of reputation would being the only one sent out of a gathering of mythril-plate adventurers bring about? People might think that he’d been deemed useless and turned away, even if it was untrue. Then his standing among adventurers would drop like a rock.

“First, in brief: Two nights ago, adventurers patrolling the highway in the environs of E-Rantel encountered a vampire. Five of them were killed. That vampire is why I gathered you here today.”

Hearing the description of the monster, Ainz’s hopes were dashed. The surviving adventurers were so terrified, they remembered the vampire’s clothing and hair only vaguely, but apparently the

impression of “silver haired with a big mouth” had stuck.

It may have been vague, but for someone who knew Shalltear, it was easy to associate this description with her. Ainz was now certain of the vampire’s identity.

How did this happen? I really have no idea what’s going on. Well, I’ll have to adjust the survivors’ memories or there’ll be trouble. I’ll act when a chance opens up.

While Ainz was furrowing his illusionary brow, the conversation continued. “I see. But I’m not very well versed in such matters. I don’t want to make you take forever to explain it to me, either, though, so I’ll just listen to your discussion from the sideline and ask questions if I have them.”

“Understood. Well then, gentlemen, any questions?”

“Whereabouts in the environs?”

“About three hours walking from the city’s north gate. I believe you’re familiar with the forest out that way—it was in there.”

“What plates were they?”

“Iron.”

“...Can I ask something? Why did you gather so many adventurers about a vampire? Are we supposed to be bidding for the job?”

“My thoughts exactly. A platinum plate should be able to handle a vampire. I don’t understand why you’ve gathered so many mythril-rank adventurers here.”

“It’s simple. The vampire is strong,” Rakheshir chimed in and was bombarded with doubtful looks.

“A strong vampire...?”

“An elite vampire... You mean like the infamous vampire lord

Nation Breaker who appeared in the sagas of the Thirteen Heroes?"

"It's unclear if it's that vampire lord or not, but it used the tier-three spell Animate Dead when those adventurers encountered it. I trust I don't need to explain the significance of that to adventurers such as yourselves."

There were no words. Their tense faces spoke volumes.

"Hmm. I don't really get it. Can you tell me what you mean?"

"Yes, please excuse us, Mayor."

"To estimate simply, you could think of someone who can use that level of magic as platinum rank."

Panasolei, nearly grasping what they were saying, knit his brow.

"In other words... No, that's enough of that."

The look in Panasolei's eyes turned sharp. That small change made a huge difference in the vibes he gave off. His expression had gone from a dull-witted pig to ferocious wild boar. No, this must have been Panasolei's real face.

"In other words, what the head of the wizards' guild is trying to say is that a monster with platinum-rank skills is equal to a team of platinum-rank adventurers."

"Yes, it's as you suggest."

"Is it okay if I think of it as just more strong?"

"I think that's fine."

"In army terms, how strong would it be?"

"Against an army? That's a tough question." Rakheshir racked his brain and then began to speak again. "Allow me to first note that this is just a rough idea, and I can't say for sure that it's accurate.

Thinking of an army, undead don't get tired and don't require food or drink, so... Yeah, if I had to take a stab at it, I'd guess about ten thousand men?"

"What?!" The reality shocked Panasolei, and it showed on his face; he scanned the adventurers to seek their opinions.

Apart from Ainz, everyone was nodding in agreement with the guild master's opinion.

"Theo, I'll take it from here." Ainzach began to speak, taking the baton from Rakheshir. "A country's ratio of adventurers who are platinum rank or above is thought to be about twenty percent. There are around three thousand adventurers in the kingdom, so in the entire kingdom of over eight million people, the number of platinum-ranked adventurers or higher is only six hundred. Do you understand? That's how few there are."

"I see. I didn't want to understand, but I do now. Then I want to ask you adventurers as follow-up: Are you confident you can subdue this monster? If it's impossible...hmm. What about asking Stronoff for help?"

Gazef Stronoff—the kingdom's strongest warrior. He was said to be more powerful than an adamantite-rank adventurer. It was probably right to call him the kingdom's last resort.

But Ainzach promptly dismissed the idea of going to him. "It's true there are no warriors who can defeat Sir Stronoff, but if he fought a team of adventurers, though they'd be inferior in strength, they would definitely still win. An adventurer team has a myriad of hands they can play; compared to Sir Stronoff, they'd have about four times the number of spells and martial arts to work with. This gap would, frankly, be quite large when facing a monster possessing special abilities."

"Hrm..."

"The best plan would be to gather adamantite- or orichalcum-rank

adventurers. And until we can do that, we could gather this city's strongest adventurers to build a security net around the city to prevent incursions."

"Isn't that an overly defensive posture?"

"Assuming the worst scenario, that seems like the best plan. Our opponent is single-handedly equivalent to an army!"

"The terror of having a power equivalent to an army pop up in any random place... I don't even want to imagine it."

A ten thousand–strong army would be easier to find due to evidence of their march. Furthermore, because they'd need a vast amount of food to maintain themselves, a protracted campaign would be difficult for them. But how would it be as an individual? An individual adept at stealth and magic, including invisibility?

"But Guild Master, if I may give my perspective on your idea, as an adventurer, I don't think it would be very easy to create a security net. Coordinating our movements would take time and training..."

"Even if we don't go as far as that, what about coming up with a joint operation plan, gentlemen?"

The adventurers immediately opposed the mayor's idea.

"Can't be done. In order to coordinate ourselves, we'd need a minutely detailed plan, and the more detailed the plan gets, the easier it will fall apart in the event of something unexpected. If it came to that, I'd rather fight without cooperating. Why is that vampire around here in the first place? What have the guilds found out so far?"

"Due to the immense strength of the vampire, the guilds haven't been able to closely investigate, either. Right as we were forming an investigation team, the vampire incident from last night occurred without warning, and we had to send them over there on short notice."

"...I see, and you're worried the two incidents might be related?"

"Indeed."

"Momon resolved that graveyard incident, right? Is there anything about the ringleader's body or belongings that suggests a connection?"

There was a slight silence after that question.

Hmm? thought Ainz. The guild master hadn't had any trouble answering so far, but now he glanced at the mayor—questioningly. But when he thought about it, these were people who had been committing an act of terrorism on the city. There must have been information that was okay to share with adventurers along with information that was not.

"From the items left behind, we've determined it was Zurrernorn."

The three adventurers' faces became sober.

Meanwhile, Ainz was hearing the word for the first time and prayed —to a god he didn't believe in—that nobody would address this unknown topic to him.

Ignorance is seriously scary. I have to hurry up on gathering intelligence.

"That secret society that uses undead? So there could be a connection to the vampire, huh?"

"Maybe they were aiming to split our forces by causing trouble both inside and outside the city at the same time? Or it could be that both of them were feints, and they're currently working on their real objective... That would be the worst."

"For now, we need reconnaissance. We know from the ranger that there were caves in the vicinity of where the vampire was identified. Rumor has it there is a bandit hideout there..."

"Would the vampire still even be there...? The chance it moved is higher, but I guess the chance is greater than zero... First, we should have people go to the—" The adventurer who was talking stopped short.

Of course he did. Investigating the place the vampire was last seen was the same as ordering people to leap into danger. And if they met the vampire, and it had the combat ability they'd estimated, it meant certain death. What he had just said was basically a roundabout way of saying, *Get out there and die!*

"Let's...leave that for later. We should probably consider the city's security first. At this very moment, the vampire might already be inside."

"Yeah, it'd be easy to get in using magic... It's not like the capital of the empire, where they have aerial cavalry and casters on patrol..."

Using Fly, it was possible to invade the city from above, and using Invisibility, one could walk straight in. That's just how tricky magic was. The obvious first moves were to concentrate their military strength and fortify their guard.

"But if we can't get info, it'll be difficult to handle. First, we should investigate the caves!"

The room's opinion began to gravitate toward that extremely natural suggestion.

To Ainz, that was worrisome. It would be extremely bad for Shalltear's current form to be seen. It wasn't clear where things would go, but having her current appearance known by the city—or possibly even throughout the kingdom—would be a burden on future behind-the-scenes maneuvers. He desperately racked his brain for some way to steer the conversation.

In the end, however, there was only one way for no one to find out what Shalltear looked like. Ainz swallowed the spit his mouth didn't even produce and began to speak. "First, you're mistaken about one

thing: That vampire is not connected to Zurrernorn."

"Why do you say that, Momon? Do you know something?"

"I know that vampire well—because I chased it all the way here."

"What?!"

The atmosphere in the room was greatly shaken.

Ainz spun his mental gears at high speed. This was it.

"They are extremely powerful. Actually, the reason I became an adventurer was to gather more information about them."

Ainzach bit on the info Ainz had purposely dropped. "*Them*? You said 'them,' right?"

"Yes, there are two vampires. One is a woman with platinum hair named—" He was suddenly at a loss for words. He'd been about to say Camilla, but it seemed too clichéd for a female vampire name. It seemed like it would give him away if any players were nearby. He wasn't sure what to call her when a flash of inspiration struck, and he said, "—Honyopnyot."

"Huh?" Someone didn't get it. Not just one person, pretty much everyone.

"...Honyopnyoko." Even Ainz had the feeling what he'd just said strayed from the original, but if anyone asked, he would make them believe his tongue had gotten twisted.

"...Honyopnyo...?"

"Honyopnyoko."

He'd stuck *-ko* at the end of a feminine vampire's name without thinking, but he didn't think any *Yggdrasil* players would catch on to him just from that. Confident in his flawless denomination, he smiled proudly under his helmet.

"I-is that so? If you know this Hony—agh!—this woman vampire's name, are you about ready to reveal your true identity to us? What country are you—?"

"Unfortunately, I can't do that. This is a top-secret mission. If you were to find out my true identity, I'd be forced to take my leave of this place. I'd like it if you could deal with the vampire by yourselves, without involving my country. I don't want this to cause a diplomatic incident. I'm sure you can understand, Mayor?"

The mayor nodded slowly, and Ainzach, watching, bit his lip while he stared at Ainz with keen eyes.

The gaze of the guild master didn't bother him, but he wondered how far they'd believed his story. Were there any inconsistencies? Those two worries crowded his mind, but Ainz spoke again to clear them away. With a little bit of anger—*I'm not going to let anyone get in my way here*—he said, "My team will perform reconnaissance. If the vampire is there, we'll destroy it."

That's what the dark warrior who had shown up late declared. His confidence in himself and determination could be keenly felt, even if his face was hidden.

The atmosphere was under some pressure, as if things had been shaken up, and someone gasped. Everyone felt almost as if it had been his own voice.

"Then what about the other—?"

"Unnecessary. I don't need anyone slowing me down," he interrupted, waving a hand that said they'd be in the way. He'd spat the cruel words in an arrogant tone.

That wasn't how one should conduct oneself in a room of similarly ranked adventurers. But the men there, who had made it through many life-or-death battles, sensed that his remarks weren't born of insolence, narcissism, or conceit, but rather realistic calculation. They

also sensed he had the power to be able to say them.

This man was beyond the realm of normal humans.

It was as if the raven-black armor had expanded before their eyes. The oppressive atmosphere was palpable, and the room seemed to have gotten smaller. They sensed from this man that he was similar to people they had met and felt they could never catch up to, like an adamantite-plate adventurer.

He was a man who could be called a hero.

Ainzach clammed up and just breathed a few times. No, everyone there did the same thing. The atmosphere was heavy enough that the mayor was loosening his collar as he sweat.

Ainzach asked in a near whisper, “And for compensation?”

“We can discuss that later. But I’d like you to promise that if I take care of this, if I find and destroy this vampire, that you’ll make me at least orichalcum. That will make it easier for me to travel in search of the second one. It’s a pain to have to prove my strength over again each time.”

Everyone in the room thought that made sense.

It wasn’t as if adventurers served the city or country, but currently in this city, there was no one with the rank of orichalcum. If he became the strongest adventurer in town, his reputation would become known to everyone. Not only that, but due to the rarity of orichalcum adventurers, his name would travel far. He would also get requested by name for more dangerous jobs, and the chance that he would acquire information about this immensely powerful vampire was high.

But there was one man who couldn’t accept it emotionally, even if his rationality otherwise might have allowed him to do so.

A chair clattered, and when everyone looked, it was, perhaps as

expected, the one who had been picking on Ainz since before, Igvarge. "I'm not convinced of your power. I-in the first place, we don't even know if that vampire is strong or not! The magic to use a zombie could have come from an item. We're going with you!" He'd been able to move despite being overawed because of his dislike of and hostility toward Ainz, as well as the conviction that he didn't want to let him get away with this.

Perhaps feeling uncomfortable that a fellow adventurer would act like that, Bellote spoke up in a bristling tone.

"Igvarge, your attitude is—"

"Whatever, that's fine." Ainz granted him permission in an easygoing way; however, his action didn't stem from friendship. The next words he spoke were exceedingly cold-blooded. "But if you come, you'll definitely die, you know. I don't know if the whole party will be wiped out or not, but..." He said it extremely matter-of-factly. He was making neither a threat nor a joke.

Igvarge shuddered at the tone that implied it was just the fate that awaited him. No, it wasn't only Igvarge. Everyone in the room was chilled to the bone.

Ainz shrugged casually. "I warned you. If you want to come despite that, then come."

"Y-you bet we will!" He was putting up a brave front, but he couldn't back down here. There was no way he could back down. He couldn't bring any more shame on himself in front of adventurers of his same rank and these city authorities.

As the sparks flew between Ainz and Igvarge, Ainzach had gotten ahold of himself and now asked, "It's great that you're confident, but do you have any basis for it? Of course, we understand how strong you are. But we need you to understand that considering the vampire's strength, this job is no walk in the park. I'm not sure if we can really leave it all up to you. We'd need a plan for in case you were defeated, too, just in case..."

Ainz promptly replied, “I have a trump card.”

“And that is?”

In response to Ainzach’s interest, Ainz pulled a crystal out of his breast pocket.

“...Is that—? No, it can’t be...” Rakheshir suddenly shouted and continued, gasping, “I read about them in a rare book... Magic items containing immensely powerful magic considered supreme treasures...and among them, magic-sealing crystals. Why do you have such a rare item?!”

“I tip my hat to you—you’re correct. And it contains a tier-eight spell.”

“What?! Whaaat?!” Rakheshir screamed. Even a strangled chicken wouldn’t have made such a strange noise. His expression was also frighteningly warped.

Rakheshir wasn’t the only one surprised. Everyone else’s faces—well, everyone’s except the mayor’s—were frozen in shock and awe. Anyone with a little adventuring experience would understand what Ainz had said, as well as the value of that item.

“Tier eight...? Isn’t that just made up?”

“...It might be a fairy tale, but I wonder. A realm of magic that high—it’s truly mythic.”

“Nonsense! It...it has to be a lie!”

The three adventurers, Igvarge included, stared at the crystal resting on the raven-black gauntlet, awe on their faces.

“Sorry, but let me borrow it for a moment!”

“Why?”

“I’m just interested in it—as a caster. I swear I won’t do anything!

If you want some type of guarantee, I'll turn over everything I have on me right now. Like this belt—"

Ainz looked at Rakheshir with mild disgust. The man had stop talking mid-sentence and was fiddling with his belt impatiently to take it off. "Okay, you don't need to take it that far. Here, go ahead."

"Ah, can I touch it, too?"

"Me, too!"

The sealing crystal was passed from hand to hand the long way to Rakheshir. When he finally got to touch it, he just stared, entranced—like a woman who'd received the precious stone she'd coveted or a young boy obtaining something he'd been hoping for.

"Marvelous... By the way, Sir Momon. Do you mind if I cast magic on it?" After receiving permission, heart throbbing, he cast some spells. "Appraise Magic Item! Detect Enchantment!" And then his face slowly warped—"Amaaaazing!"

The aura of a capable adult he'd carried was gone. His eyes were filled with pure, innocent surprise, his tone of voice changed, and it was as if his childhood self had returned. "It's true! There is tier-eight magic sealed within this crystal! That's all I can tell with the spells I know, but...wow! This is amazing!" He screamed over and over as if he'd lost his mind, stunning everyone. Then he began holding it aloft, licking it, rubbing it against his cheeks—exactly the type of things an insane person would do.

"C-calm down! What are you doing?" Startled by this display of craziness he'd never seen from his friend before, Ainzach stood up and approached Rakheshir.

Everyone was looking on with something between shock and disgust in their eyes. This was horrible behavior for a man who held an important position in the city.

"Don't be ridiculous! Who could be calm in this situation? This is

amazing! There is *actually* tier-eight magic sealed in here! I don't know what spell, but still!" His excitement unabated, Rakheshir stared at the crystal with twinkling eyes. Then his gaze regained a touch of reason, and he asked Ainz, "Sir Momon?! Where did you discover this item? You must tell me!"

"I found it in some ruins. With a bunch of other items. Of course, the magic was already sealed inside. I had a certain great caster analyze it for me."

"I—I see. And where were these ruins located?"

"A very faraway place...is all I can say."

At the expected reply, Rakheshir bit his lip at what a shame it was.

"Now then, are you about ready to give it back?"

"Oh...yes..." Rakheshir glanced around and then reluctantly handed the crystal back to Ainz. Then, watching Ainz, who had begun wiping down the crystal with a sheet of vellum, out of the corner of his eye, he stated emphatically, "By the way, I'm...against you going out to exterminate the vampire, Sir Momon!"

An exhausted silence filled the air and Ainzach put a palm over his face.

Pained, Ainzach nonetheless asked, "Why, all of a sudden? I know even without asking, but tell me anyways..."

"Well, it'd just...be such a huge waste..."

Ainzach decided that his friend had gone completely insane and ignored his opinion. "Well then, we'll be disregarding Rakheshir's views on the matter..."

"Wait! Tier-eight magic is truly the divine realm! You mean to say you'd be fine using something so precious on a vampire?!"

Flames wavered in Ainzach's eyes. He couldn't allow any further outbursts. It wasn't the way someone in a superior position should act. Quelling his anger, he spoke to Rakheshir in a low voice. "... Sorry, Rakheshir, but please leave it at that."

Those powerfully emotional words were enough to bring even Rakheshir back to reason, and he was at a loss for words. The faint redness of his face must have meant he was embarrassed by his behavior.

After confirming out of the corner of his eye that common sense had returned to his friend, Ainzach made the request in as mild a way as possible. "...Well then, Momon, we're counting on you."

As he bowed, Ainz nodded confidently. "...Understood." Then he turned the slit in his helmet to Igvarge. "We're leaving as soon as possible—vampires receive a movement-impeding penalty in daylight."

"'Penalty'? Well, it is their weakness, and they do move more slowly. We can be ready right away."

"You don't need to discuss it with your teammates?"

"It's no problem. Everyone will be on board right away."

"...I see. Then I'll meet you at E-Rantel's main gate in an hour."

"One hour? Isn't that a little too hasty? We have plenty of time before the sun sets."

"I'm in a hurry. If you need time to steel your resolve, I'm leaving you behind. Got a problem with that?"

"No. We'll make preparations immediately." Igvarge stood after acquiescing to the terms in an openly irritated voice.

Ainz watched him go with a coolheaded gaze and then turned to those who remained in the room. "Then I'll be off. Everyone else, I'd

like you to take good care of E-Rantel. I want to avoid the scenario where we miss the vampire out there but come back to a... troublesome situation."

"Yes, I can't quite say, 'Leave it to us!' but we'll do our very best. And if you find yourself in trouble, please retreat."

Ainz nodded and left the room.

Eventually there were three people remaining—Panasolei, Ainzach, and Rakheshir, evidence of the reluctant parting still in his eyes.

"I apologize for showing everyone such an ugly spectacle."

"Well, eh, don't worry about it," Panasolei replied to Rakheshir's apology with a wry smile. But surely his opinion of the man must have changed dramatically.

Rakheshir himself found it shameful, but the excitement still hadn't completely left him. When he'd met Lizzy, the apothecary, she'd talked animatedly about that potion. *Is it really something to get that worked up about?* he had thought, but now he was full of the urge to sneer at his former self who'd looked at her so coldly. He'd learned it was difficult to suppress the astonishment and emotion that came from having something that should have been unattainable appear before one's own eyes.

"What was that item, anyway?"

Rakheshir hesitated for a moment. He had to hold back his heart from boyishly leaping like it had done earlier. "That item has the potential to change everything we know about magic in a huge way. Magic over tier six was actually considered only a rumor, theoretical. But now I've seen it with my own eyes."

Tiered magic, as the whole of magic was also known, was said to have been brought to this world six—or possibly five—hundred years ago. At the time, many caster heroes were born, but apart from the Thirteen Heroes, those capable of employing tier-seven spells and

higher were only rumors.

In the sagas, there was a hero who used spells that made one want to declare, *That couldn't have been only a tier-seven spell!* but after all, there was no proof, so it was common to consider it just a story. And then, it was still unknown whether the Thirteen Heroes really used tier-seven magic or not.

But— Rakheshir believed that maybe the sagas weren't just made-up stories, and he made a mental note to look up some things when he had time in the coming days: the goblin king who destroyed numerous dragons wielding an ash branch, the winged hero who raced across the sky, the evil warrior who rode a triple-headed dragon, the princess who ruled the crystal castle with her twelve loyal knights.

"So how far do you believe his story?" It went without saying that the man Panasolei referred to was Ainz.

When the surviving adventurer threw the potion she had received from a companion in magnificent raven-black armor at the vampire, it ran away—this was the testimony they had from her.

So he'd called the best potion maker in town, Lizzy, to ask her about the effects of this potion. From her reply, he gathered it was as rare an item as the magic-sealing crystal from earlier.

Possessing a single rare item colored one as suspect, but having two made them "just that kind of person." The issue was why the vampire stopped attacking.

There were two possibilities. One was that Momon and the vampire were enemies. The other was that they were allies and their interests were aligned. So was Momon, the adventurer who appeared out of nowhere, really enemies with the vampire?

"What are the chances he's in cahoots with the vampire?"

That's what they were worried about. The three of them recalled

Momon and their earlier conversation.

"Low, I think. What about you, Rakheshir?"

"I'm of the same opinion. If he wanted to shelter her and make it appear as though he'd killed her, there would be easier ways."

If Momon was in cahoots with the vampire, there was no reason for him to go so far as all this.

"What if he was after the orichalcum plate?"

"I don't think so, Mayor. Certainly adventurers get fame and recognition, but they are far from having authority. What are the pros of becoming an adventurer of that rank, Ainzach?"

"...You can get jobs with better compensation. Your fame increases. Depending on the circumstances, you might be appointed to a good position, but...that's about it. If a person wanted to infiltrate the system, there are faster ways."

The image of adventurers as monster extermination experts was strong. Maybe it was possible to become the head of an adventurers' guild one day, but that wasn't a position that enabled influence over kingdom matters. "If it's money he's after, I'm sure selling that crystal would allow him to live out the rest of his days in leisure. For someone as strong as him, getting more famous should be no problem. Actually, some of the guards involved in the graveyard incident were calling him a legendary hero."

Panasolei nodded. Slaying an undead tall enough to reach the heavens in one blow and then breaking through a mob of undead so dense and numerous it was impossible to see the ground—he was truly a great hero.

That's what the guards who had glimpsed Momon thought of him. Some even said they felt that as long as they had him, they weren't scared of any monster.

“That said, it’s too bad, but there isn’t really any evidence we can trust him completely, is there? Still, Momon’s story was consistent, and if he was an enemy, I don’t know why he would have shown us that sealing crystal. We can probably trust him, right?”

The others responded to Rakheshir with bitter expressions. The fact that it was hard to trust him after seeing his craziness earlier was written all over their faces.

“Mayor, Ainzach. The reason you can’t fully trust Sir Momon is his sudden arrival coincident with the appearance of the vampire, correct? But personally, I think Sir Momon’s story accounts for that.”

The other two nodded their agreement with a “That’s true.”

“And about how the vampire stopped attacking when she saw that rare potion, that would make sense if she’d been chased there by a guy who had one. And the reason she left the woman adventurer alive could have been to let him know she was there.”

“I see... She’d make Momon think she was in the area to pin him here. So she let the woman with the potion go because she seemed connected to Momon? So that all that info would get to him as soon as possible? That doesn’t contradict anything we know...”

“When you think that Momon essentially drove that vampire over here, it’s hard to feel genuinely happy that he came...”

“I know what you mean, Mayor. Still, we may not know what country he’s from or what kind of person he is, but until he defeats the vampire we should probably just continue treating him well and keep our guard up. Personally, I don’t think we have much reason to doubt him... Phew. I’d really like to talk with Sir Momon about that item. That armor seems quite excellent as well...”

“Speaking of Momon, Mayor, what about the Zurrernorn corpses?”

“They’ve gone missing,” the mayor answered with a sour look.

The Zurrernorn members, who had died a horrible death when Ainz defeated them, had been laid out in the guardhouse's mortuary, but by the time the sun was up, there was no trace of them. The guards supposed that someone must have broken in and stolen the remains, but none of the guards who had been on duty were harmed, and none of them saw anybody.

The mortuary was wary of teleportation magic and the like, so it was built to obstruct their use in or out of the building—a type of locked-down room. For that reason, it wasn't clear how anyone could have gotten in, and all they could think was that the bodies seemed to have disappeared like smoke.

A search of the city was secretly taking place but had uncovered no information that might lead to the discovery of the missing Zurrernorn remains, and the chance that they would seemed slim. In other words, they'd lost any clues they might have gained from the corpses.

"This guy was performing an undead ritual. Is it possible he turned undead and ran away?"

"...I can't say no for sure."

"Well, this is a problem. We can't prove anything yet. I guess our only chance now is the shrine beneath that mausoleum? It'd be great if there was some evidence there..."

"By the way, I don't think Momon has been in there, but if we find any valuable items with unspecified owners, is it okay if we give them to him?"

"If it's something that doesn't have to do with their ritual, please give them to him in line with the adventurers' code."

Ainz flew down the highway. A lukewarm wind penetrated the slit in his helmet and hit him where his eyes would have been. Someone with eyeballs would have been blinking repeatedly, but Ainz, who had none, only thought, *Seems windy*.

As he looked down, the ground shot past like an arrow to his rear. Was it because he was close to the ground or some other reason? He felt like he was going faster than he was, though it wasn't as if the sensation inspired fear. He did tense his legs every time his body bounced into the air, though.

Hamusuke kept her balance well, but besides her enormous size, she was still shaped exactly like a Djungarian hamster. It was partly because the only way to ride was with his legs spread wide, but even someone with a superior sense of balance like Ainz had to pay a lot of attention in order not to fall from that perch with no saddle or stirrups.

It'd be hard to swing a sword while I'm on Hamusuke. Maybe I should get a saddle and stirrups made soon. I could have the blacksmith do it after he finishes the dummy armor I might use. Ainz's unstable riding posture was one primary motivator of this line of thought, but another was the silhouette of the rider running parallel to him.

Right next to him was Narberal, riding a horse. It was a large horse in heavy metal barding, summoned with an item called Animal Statue: Warhorse. She managed it admirably and looked so cool running down the highway. Her ponytail fluttering, brown robe blown back by the oncoming wind—it was like a scene straight out of a movie.

Feeling depressed about the gap between that and his riding this gigantic hamster, he looked farther over and saw the men. They were a team of four adventurers, and they had better gear than the Swords of Darkness, whom Ainz had traveled with before. Driving those thoughts into a corner of his mind, freeing himself from those memories, he gazed absentmindedly at the horses the men were

riding.

What magnificent animals.

Ainz didn't know much about horses, but with their beautiful coats of hair and impressive physiques, they must have been fine specimens.

Their isosceles triangle riding formation also seemed like a movie scene. *I look like an idiot riding Hamusuke. So lame...* He began to succumb to gloomy feelings, but it seemed like he was the only one who felt that way.

"That's one amazing magical beast you're riding there!" One of Igvarge's teammates called out to him, riding parallel. Unlike Igvarge's, his tone contained no hostility. Perhaps stimulated by the curiosity of an adventurer, he was brimming with interest and admiration. "What's it called? It must be pretty famous, right?"

"...It's the Wise King of the Forest."

"Huh? What?! The legendary magical beast?!" the man shouted, eyes nearly popping out of his head in surprise.

I'll never get used to that reaction. Is Hamusuke...? Hmm? Out of the corner of his eye, Ainz noticed Hamusuke's whiskers twitching proudly. Her ears moved in the same way, and it was clear from how her back bounced sharply that she was paying more attention to their conversation than to a smooth ride. He brought his gauntleted hand down on her head—*clink*—as a soft voice reached his ears.

"Man, according to Igvarge... I see, he must have gotten jealous again..."

"How did he describe me? Ahh, no, you don't have to tell me. I have a good enough idea from the look on your face."

"Ha-ha-ha, sorry. He's not a bad guy, per se. Just lets his ambition get the better of him sometimes."

"...With a guy like that as a teammate, I'm surprised you're all still around. Or have there been new members swapped in?"

"Nope, since forming our team not a single member has died—because we all have different personalities and abilities. He's a very accomplished adventurer, you know!"

"*Accomplished*, you say?" Ainz turned to face Igvarge and was shot a penetrating, hostile glare. "Good on him," he said with a derisive snort and raised a hand in an order to Narberal to curb her continual violent dislike of the man. He didn't want to start a fight here. He had more important things to do.

After that was done, Hamusuke looked up at him. "Master, my head hurts, that it does." Her black eyes sparkled, brimming with tears.

He felt a bit guilty for hitting her a little too hard, but he didn't want to get thrown off going at this speed.

Even if he slammed into the ground, Ainz wouldn't take any damage. In an experiment using a minion with the same damage reduction ability he had, it hadn't felt pain even being dropped from over three thousand feet in the air.

The problem would be if their traveling companions found his toughness strange. The unembellished truth was that they had come this far on friendly terms, so Ainz was hoping to continue in that way.

"Don't bump me around so much. I don't want to have to hold on so tight with my insane strength."

"Understood, that it is. My master is worried for me, is he?" Hamusuke's eyes shone with emotion.

When Ainz ordered her to "face forward and run," Igvarge's friend was impressed. "It's amazing you can keep your balance in a posture like that! Even if you're good at it, seems kind of dangerous!"

"I guess because I'm used to it? That said, I am considering adding a saddle sometime soon."

"A saddle, you say? I would hate that... Of course, I'm only joking, that I am! If they do be my master's words, I, Hamusuke, will obey with all my might, that I will!" Bathed in the gleam of Narberal's stare, Hamusuke emphasized her position as a loyal retainer. Ainz felt a different tremble than that of running travel ripple through her hips.

He frowned under his helmet. *I don't think it's necessary to hit Hamusuke with a death glare. I'm happy to have Narberal's devotion, but she goes too far. Furthermore, it's fine to look down on humans, but there's a time and a place... She doesn't really understand that. I wonder if it's just how her settings are. If that's the case, then I guess there's nothing I can do, but still...*

Just by walking around with Hamusuke, the fame of the adventurer Momon grew. But the impression made on other people could be either that the Wise King of the Forest was proclaiming loyalty of her own free will or that she was captured and afraid—very different. The ones who saw it in the former light probably thought of Momon in a good way as a great adventurer. Even though he was the one in charge either way, he wanted to angle things so that his fame increased more. He wanted to be called a hero, not a tyrant.

Plus, it seemed like it would come in handy in the future to have someone from outside Nazarick swearing loyalty to him.

Ainz deemed his treatment of Hamusuke too rough and gently stroked the spot he'd chopped earlier, like he was petting a small animal.

"Master, you'll make me blush, that you will..."

The squeak of grinding teeth reached his ears over the sound of the horses galloping. *It's half your fault, Narberal! Why do you take everything so seriously? ...I know she's jealous, so I should probably do something...as a reward for all her loyalty. But what should I give*

her?

As Ainz was fretting about whether to give her a ring or treasure, Igvarge called out to him without an ounce of kindness in his voice. “Hey, Momon. We’re here.”

After Ainz responded that he understood, Hamusuke slowly started dropping her speed. The best thing about riding Hamusuke was that, unlike a horse, they had a simple mutual understanding. With no equestrian experience, Ainz wasn’t sure he could have managed a horse. *I was embarrassed about riding Hamusuke, but I should probably be thankful I got through this without having to ride a horse. That said, it’s possible that sometime in the future I’ll have to be on horseback for whatever reason. Maybe I should practice a little bit just in case…*

Ainz leaped off Hamusuke and pet her as a thank-you while Narberal turned her horse back into a statue and the men left their horses to graze.

“Okay, should we go in? What’s our formation?”

“We’ll go out in front. All you need to do is follow behind us.”

“I don’t care what happens to you, but you’d better remember we’re here and act with caution.”

Upon receiving Igvarge’s obnoxious reply, Ainz walked into the forest, followed by Narberal and Hamusuke.

The forest near Carne was the same way, but a forest untouched by human hands is a very difficult place to walk. Ainz, however, was enveloped in numerous magic items, so he could walk the same as on level ground. On top of that, his worry for Shalltear naturally caused his feet to move faster, so now and then, Igvarge had to tell him to slow down.

He was right in doing so, but his language was rude and outright hostile, and Narberal nearly exploded in rage several times. Ainz

forcefully held her back. “Just a little farther. Be good.”

As Ainz was chuckling under his helmet at the dubious look on Narberal’s face, he noticed Hamusuke was moving in a strange way. Her ears were flapping as if trying to hear something. Ainz had some idea what she was reacting to, and he leaned in to her ear.

“Stop it.”

“Hmm? Master, what is it you are talking abo—?”

“If what you’re listening to is a metallic sound, it’s under control. Don’t worry about it.”

“Is that so, hmm? Do excuse me, master, that I ask.”

“By the way, is there anyone else tailing us?”

He’d ordered Nigredo to do surveillance again and had taken numerous other measures, but just in case…

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone else, no, there doesn’t.”

“Hey there, is something wrong?” asked the man who had been riding parallel to Ainz when they were mounted. It was obvious why it wasn’t their team’s representative, Igvarge.

Ainz responded with a slight wave and said it was nothing.

“You sure?” He didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, but when Ainz didn’t look like he was going to say anything more, he shrugged and fell silent.

Mm, I don’t have any grudge against you guys, but… Ainz breathed inaudibly and then silently advanced into the forest.

After they’d gone a ways in, there came the sound of weapons being rapidly drawn behind him. He stopped and leisurely turned around. “What’s up?”

“Not ‘What’s up?’! If you’re gonna walk in front, at least be on your guard!” This time, Igvarge’s men expressed agreement with his hostile tone. “Hey! You, there! Show yourself, but no quick movements!” Igvarge shouted in the direction of a tree that was big enough a human could hide behind it.

In that savage atmosphere, Ainz strolled calmly over to the tree. Some panicked voices called out behind him, but he ignored them.

Narberal and Hamusuke both followed him, Narberal with an expression that showed she expected this, and Hamusuke with a bit of hesitation.

As they approached, a figure wrapped in armor the same color as Ainz’s responded to the order and stepped out of the shadows. In its hands it gripped a bardiche giving off a faint, sickly glow.

With the appearance of this intimidating warrior, a peculiar atmosphere dominated the scene. Well, saying it dominated part of the scene would probably be more accurate.

Ainz raised a hand and spoke. “Good work.”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz.” The person—Albedo—took a humble posture.

“So is Shal—?”

“Who the hell is that?! Your teammate?! ‘Lord Ainz’?!” Questions were being fired off one after another behind him.

To Igvarge and his men, this was a natural reaction, but to Albedo, still in her humble posture, it was behavior that warranted death. The flames of her anger crackled with a severity that signaled they were about ready to burn down the whole area.

Hamusuke shivered, and all her hairs stood on end, as stiff as they possibly could be.

Those in the third party reacted the same way. All color drained from the faces of the men who were the targets of those angry flames, and their foreheads broke out in a cold sweat as they sensed death approaching.

"I'll introduce her to you. This is my companion Albedo."

"Lord Ainz, for you to call one in my humble position a companion is... I am your loyal retainer."

"Right. I take back what I said. She's my retainer. Does that answer your questions? Okay, Albedo. Start the next phase, as we discussed when I contacted you."

While the men were rolling their eyes in shock, Albedo stood up and moved toward them.

"Oh, oh, there was one I forgot to answer. My real name isn't Momon, but Ainz—not that there's any need for you to know that."

Albedo snickered adorably at the men with their perplexity plain on their faces, but the laugh was ice-cold.

"Now, then... Albedo, dispose of them. Capture one... No, in case we need a spare, let's get two. I already cast Jamming, so you don't have to worry about them communicating with anyone via magic." While Igvarge and the others were shocked at his low voice betraying no emotion, he gave further orders. "Take the bodies to Nazarick. With specimens this strong, we can experiment to see if they can be a medium for creating upper-tier undead."

"Understood." Albedo swung her bardiche lightly through the air.

There was no murderous intent in the action, no enmity. Obviously there wasn't. Being told to sever the heads of lower life-form humans was no different to Albedo from being told to cut the tops off some daikon radishes. If Ainz hadn't been there, she probably wouldn't have even swung through the air once to confirm that her movements were all right.

Although Igvarge and the others didn't understand what was going on, they sensed the danger they were in and got into attack stances.

Ainz shrugged in response to their shocked stares.

"Sorry, I misspoke back at the guild. It should have been not 'If you come, you'll die,' but 'If you come, I'll kill you.'"

He sentenced them to death.

"I warned you, but you didn't listen. This is the result of your choice. Just accept it."

Igvarge and his team moved to retreat.

The reason they chose to flee instead of trying to gesture and communicate was because they were acutely aware of the gap in fighting power that existed between them. They even chose to scatter instead of move as one, because it gave them a higher chance for survival.

Seemingly caught off guard by that, Albedo flew into action a moment later. Even though her physical strength was far superior to Ainz's, cutting down opponents who had scattered in a forest was a bit of a hassle.

She caught up to her first choice in an instant and used a skill to trap and stun him.

Albedo's keen sense of hearing picked up metallic sounds mingling with the sound of the human crumpling to the ground. But even as the sounds faded away, she couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from because the trees obstructed her vision. That and the only sound that adventurers wearing no metal armor made was the parting of vegetation underfoot. Albedo was frustrated by her lack of classes like thief or ranger.

She shook her head thinking, *Good grief*, and gave orders. "Mare, take care of two of them. Oh, right. I'll dispose of the man who was

rude to Lord Ainz."

5

Igvarge ran.

He'd known Momon was a greater adventurer than himself since back at the guild—he'd just frantically denied it. But when he saw the imposing figure of the magical beast he was riding—the Wise King of the Forest, a legend passed down since long ago—he had to acknowledge the fact whether he liked it or not. To bend such a beast to his will, he had to be more powerful than a mythril plate.

When Igvarge learned that everything said in that room hadn't been a bluff, he swelled with anger. *I dunno what country's celeb you are, but don't bother us. If you want information, I'll give it to you, so just sit quietly over there.*

He saw it as Momon trespassing on his territory. He couldn't think of anything except how awful it felt to have a dream—to repeat the cycle of hellish training, risking their lives adventuring, gradually crawling up the ladder—only to have someone show up and skip a bunch of rungs.

Given the opportunity, he wanted to take down Ainz. He would spread bad rumors to lower his reputation. In fact, that was his purpose for coming along on this trip. That was why, when Momon's friend in black armor appeared and Momon declared he was going to kill them, he'd been able to choose to retreat without a moment's hesitation. Despite the fear, he'd been able to move more swiftly than anyone, driven by the insidious urge to deliver unfavorable information about Momon—no, Ainz—to the guild. *That's what you get! You bet I'm gonna live! And I'm gonna tell everyone what you did, you bastard!* He didn't know yet whether Ainz was in cahoots with the vampire or not. But he could still spin the story that way.

Despite the chance that that horrible weapon could be swung behind him at any second, despite being scared for his life, he couldn't hold back the emotions erupting deep from within—and smirked.

He wasn't concerned for his teammates' safety. No, all the better if they bought him time to escape alive. *I'll be the best. I'll get orichalcum and then adamantite plates and be called a hero.* He didn't need any tough guys except himself. Friends were just stepping-stones for him to reach the top. He would become a hero equal to one of the Thirteen Heroes who saved the world. That was Igvarge's dream, the one he'd had since he was a kid listening to the poet who'd come to his village to recite the heroic sagas.

Now this guy was messing it up, threatening to surpass him and his team. And it was even more unforgivable because the guy was just doing it in his spare time.

He ran, and ran, and ran.

The fact that he could flee through the forest without running out of breath was a sign that he was a mythril-rank adventurer. However —

Igvarge felt a ripple go through his mind—a fairly big one. *Where am I? I took a detour because they might have ambushed me near the place where we left the horses, so… Huh?* According to his senses, he was on course. His sense of direction told him so. But his sixth sense said differently. Even in a forest he'd come to for the first time, he shouldn't have been lost, but for some reason, he didn't know where he was.

Maybe I'm just imagining things.

That's what he decided. But he didn't really feel like he was imagining things. He might not have liked it, but he had to admit it.

"…Lost? Me? A forest stalker? How stupid…"

Igvarge had acquired classes specialized for operating in the

outdoors. In a way, the forest was like his backyard. But in this place, he was seized by the strange feeling he'd stepped into a predator's mouth.

"It's like a maze..." Anxiety and impatience welled up inside him from the sudden change in what should have been familiar forest.

That's when it happened.

He heard a quiet rustling.

Recalling the executioner in black, he whipped around to face the direction the noise had come from and saw a child peering at him from behind a tree.

It was a dark elf, a relative of the elves. They were humanoids who lived deep in the forest. *What's it doing here?* The large dark-elf settlement was supposedly farther to the south in the unexplored area, deep in the woodlands. Dark elves usually settled far from human civilization. That was one big difference between them and elves, who traded with humans. It was very strange for a dark elf, and a child at that, to be all the way out here.

As Igvarge was wondering about that in his head, the dark elf nervously showed itself. *A girl?* The clothing was a girl's; the fear on her extremely well-shaped face triggered his sadistic streak. The idea that she was with Momon did cross his mind, but her attitude was so different from the others' that he dismissed the idea with a laugh. *There's no way*.

More importantly, if she was a dark elf who lived in this forest, she might know a safe route out. If nothing else, if the black-armor person showed up, he could use her to distract them. Having calculated that, he stepped forward, intending to threaten her into doing what he wanted.

"Hey."

The dark elf jumped at his voice, which he'd made deep and

menacing on purpose.

"Um, s-sorry..."

Igvarge grinned at the timid figure. Things seemed like they would proceed smoothly. "You don't have to apologize. I just want to ask you something. C'mere."

"Ah...uh, um...er...er, sorry."

Igvarge couldn't understand why the dark-elf girl was apologizing, but before the question mark could appear over his head, she waved a staff that looked like it was made of ebony.

Plants became chains and restrained him.

His whole body shuddered in shock.

I'm a mythril-rank adventurer and I can't resist this brat's spell?

He put all his strength into escaping the bonds, but he couldn't budge. His chest tight with panic, he barked a bluff with all his might. "You little bitch! If you don't cancel that this instant I'm gonna kill you! Argh!"

With her timid eyes lowered, the dark elf walked in front of him.

That was when Igvarge noticed the splendid outfit she was wearing. Her clothing and armor were too extravagant. Each piece was more magnificent than anything he'd ever laid his hands on. And her eyes—he remembered something he heard once from an elf he knew.

But before the thought was fully formed, a shadow hung over him.

The girl was holding the staff up high. She still looked scared, but there was no emotion in her eyes. She didn't feel anything about what she was about to do to him. It was like her fear was all an act someone had told her to put on.

The image of the black-armored figure overlapped with this girl in his mind. “W-wait a minute! What do you think you’re d—?”

Albedo arrived at the exact moment Mare’s staff came down on the man’s head. The helmet crushed, then the man’s skull underneath it dented, forcing his eyeballs to squirt out. His head was completely demolished—like a watermelon being split on the beach during summer.

“Nice work.”

“Oh! Uh, Albedo. I’m a-all done. I-is this good enough?”

Albedo, who’d removed her helmet, smiled down at Mare, who was trembling a bit as he looked up at her. “It’s perfect. That was maybe a bit of a messy way to kill someone, but it got the job done. Lord Ainz will praise you, too!”

“R-really? Eh-heh-heh-heh…”

Looking from the happily smiling dark elf to the corpse, Albedo asked, “What did you do with the other one?”

“Oh, uh, um… I already killed him. Er, the…the body is behind that tree…”

“Okay, perfect. Then, Mare, can you take those bodies back to Nazarick for me?”

“U-u-understood.”

Albedo smiled again at the boy holding his bloody staff and nodding. He was such a good, honest kid—if only he could be a little more proud of himself.

6

“Lord Ainz, we’re finished.”

Albedo returned carrying her helmet under her arm, and Ainz nodded emphatically at that first thing she said.

“Good work.” Now no one would see Shalltear.

He made his armor vanish and, enjoying the resulting sense of freedom, asked her, “And the plan for collecting the bodies?”

“I already gave the order to Mare, and he’s carrying them back for us.”

“Oh, then that solves that. Too bad they got *killed by the vampire*, but we survivors have to forge on.”

“Understood. And then…what will you do about that…thing clutching the hem of your cape?”

When Ainz looked, he found that Hamusuke was unobtrusively holding on—although he couldn’t understand how that worked when she was so huge. Her eyes were clearly teary, and her hairs were standing on end in fear. Of course, she was looking at Albedo.

“This is basically like my pet. I named her Hamusuke.”

“What! You gave this thing the position anyone in Nazarick would yearn for?!”

“…Huh?…Hamusuke, this is my loyal retainer and the manager of my castle, the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Albedo—your superior. Greet her.”

“As my master introduced me, I am Hamusuke, that I am. I look forward to working with you, that I do, Mistress Albedo.”

“…Nice to meet you, Hamusuke.”

“Okay, that’s it for formalities. From here on out, it’ll be Albedo and me. Narberal, take Hamusuke and return to Nazarick with Mare.

Hamusuke, be a little careful with that thing in your mouth."

"Yes, sir!" Narberal replied briskly.

Then Hamusuke, mumbling with the intelligent item rolling around in her mouth, said, "U-understood, master, that it is. But this thing, it's a little noisy, that it is! But there's something more important... You, in my mouth! Quiet down in there, that you do! I have a question, Mistress Narberal, and it is...will I be okay, hmm? I won't get eaten, hmm?"

"If you're Lord Ainz's pet, no one will eat you without his permission. I'll let everyone know, so you don't need to worry about it."

Ainz's face didn't move, but he smiled. It appeared the two of them had grown closer due to his leaving them alone in E-Rantel.

"Okay. Then let's go, Albedo."

"Yes, sir."

Narberal and Hamusuke saw Ainz off as he headed toward Shalltear's location with Albedo.

"By the way, Lord Ainz. I remembered what we were saying about those men's corpses in the Throne Room, but it made me wonder if it was okay that we didn't collect the bodies of the people you killed last night."

"That..." He was going to repeat what he'd said the previous night —*We needed to turn them in as ringleaders of the disturbance*—but swallowed his words when Albedo continued.

"During their fight with you, they might have gleaned some information. Isn't it dangerous not to collect the bodies, considering there exists magic to raise the dead? Did you have a special reason for leaving them?"

He stopped breathing. Well, no, he'd never been breathing.

Albedo had hit that nail on the head.

...This is bad.

In this world, there was magic that could bring the dead back to life. In other words, it was possible to get clearer and more detailed information out of them than an autopsy would provide.

Ainz recalled that night. His true identity, Nazarick's name, Narberal's abilities—that man and woman knew all of it. The woman in particular was especially dangerous.

This was a failure too serious to sweep under the rug with an "oops." It was fatal.

Hopefully there wasn't anyone around who could use resurrection magic, but according to the information they'd gotten out of the Sunlit Scripture, there were a few in the Slane Theocracy. There was also a high probability adamantite adventurers were capable of employing it. It was also possible that the country's leadership secretly had someone on hand for the job.

So, if the higher-ups in E-Rantel decided these people had crucial information, they would be making preparations to use resurrection magic. If what those people had been trying to do could have put E-Rantel in a precarious situation, the city officials would surely try to get information out of them.

Ainz's heart, which shouldn't have even existed, was beating so hard he practically felt he could hear it. *What should I do?* That was obvious. They needed to seize the corpses now. But who would he send?

At the time, he'd ordered Narberal to leave the bodies there. Was exposing that as a mistake the right choice? *No, I should avoid that...*

He wanted to avoid saying anything that could further reduce

loyalty while it was still unclear why Shalltear had rebelled. He thought it best not to rush into giving orders.

Ainz had the feeling he knew why the managers at work never wanted to admit their mistakes, and he gave his conclusion practically praying. "...It's as you say, but I had a special reason for leaving them. Don't worry. I have everything under control...besides Shalltear."

"Oh! I would expect nothing less, Lord Ainz. So you'd already considered the matter I was thinking of, huh? Please excuse me...for my insolence. By the way, why don't you ever use resurrection magic, Lord Ainz? I was thinking you would use it on all the dead humans to gather intelligence..."

"...Huh?" Caught by surprise, he made a dumb-sounding noise. "Didn't I tell you? Do you know about Demiurge's healing experiments?"

"Yes. The one where he cuts off all four limbs and then casts healing magic on them?"

"Yes. So here's the next question. Do you know where you cast resurrection magic?"

"On the corpse, no?"

"...No! Er, I don't think so?"

Ainz and Albedo both ruminated on that until Albedo's face suddenly brightened.

"Oh! I was wrong. It's as you said, Lord Ainz, not the corpse but the soul."

"That's right. In Demiurge's experiments, the severed limbs vanished and then grew out of the body. So what happens to the body when you cast resurrection magic on the soul?"

In *Yggdrasil*, there were four outcomes when casting resurrection magic on someone (which also dealt the penalty of lost XP). The first was that they would revive on the spot. The second was that they would revive at the entrance to the dungeon or wherever. The third was that they would revive in a safe town nearby. And the fourth was that they would revive at their designated home point, such as their guild's headquarters.

So what would happen when resurrection magic was cast in this world? It goes without saying that Ainz was most worried about the fourth version, the home point revival. If Nigun's home point was inside the Slane Theocracy, it would be like idiotically doing his enemy the favor of bringing him back to life and sending him home armed with intelligence.

That's why they hadn't been able to do resurrection experiments, although refraining had some negative consequences for them as well.

"I see, so that's why. That is definitely something to be careful about. I would expect nothing less, Lord Ainz. I'm impressed by your wise inferences."

As Albedo bowed her head, sighing in admiration, Ainz quickly shook his head. "It's fine, really. But we do need to do those experiments sometime...ngh. Okay, let's cheer up now."

Ainz walked farther into the forest with Albedo guiding him.

A clearing deep in the forest.

Standing in that pastoral setting was a crimson suit of armor that looked out of place. Sparkling in the sun, it did have the air of a hallucination about it, but the smell of fresh blood ruined that.

It was Shalltear.

She hadn't changed a bit from when they'd seen her using Crystal Monitor. They couldn't even detect any sign that she'd moved. Ainz

was even assailed momentarily by the illusion that he was still staring at that screen.

But this had some reality to it: the raw scent of spraying blood.

Ainz breathed in and out. Of course, his body couldn't actually breathe, so he just pretended. Or he just approached things as if he were breathing.

"Shalltear," he called out to her—not in a pathetic, quietly hoarse voice, but one that Ainz thought was filled with gravity.

But there was no reply.

Before calling out again, Ainz took a good look at her. She wasn't ignoring him. Her wide-open crimson eyes were vacant; it was hard to imagine she was conscious.

Upon seeing Shalltear, Albedo's anger flared up. "Shalltear! Not only do you have no excuse, you dare be so rude to our mas—"

"Albedo, you're in the way! Silence! Don't move! You're not permitted to go anywhere near her!"

Albedo had put one foot forward, but Ainz held her back with his harsh tone. Normally Ainz would almost never take that attitude with the NPCs his guildmates created, but this time he lost control of himself. That's how shocked he was by the state Shalltear was in.

"...Could this be...? Is it possible? ...I can't believe it."

A scene he'd witnessed once overlapped with the way Shalltear looked now, and it disturbed him deeply. Just at that moment, his emotions stabilized, and he calmly concluded that that possibility was the most likely.

Ainz began talking to Albedo. By telling someone else, maybe he would be able to digest it himself. "Now we know for sure. Shalltear is currently under mind control."

"Is it due to the reason you mentioned in the Throne Room?"

"That I don't know... When we were gathering information from the Sunlit Scripture captives, it was similar. This is definitely the result of mind control. There's still the question of why it worked on Shalltear, since she's undead, but it must be something special, unique to this world."

Ainz crossed his arms and looked hard at her as she remained standing stock-still. "Someone put her under mind control, but something must have happened before they could give her orders. Perhaps they defeated each other at the same time... So her orders are blank. That's just a guess, though. But if we get into point-blank range or attack, she may take defensive action. For someone with an alignment that leans toward evil, that generally means an attack. Don't approach her carelessly."

"Understood. But that means we can't just restrain her by force and take her back to Nazarick... Spending time here is fine if the one mind controlling her is dead, but if they're still alive, it could be dangerous to linger..."

"You're exactly right." How Shalltear was put under mind control was a mystery. Maybe there was some ability that also worked on undead and existed only in this world. If that was the case, staying there could put Ainz in danger of being mind controlled as well. "Using this is a bit of a waste, but I want to cancel the mind control as quickly as possible."

Ainz moved his fingers. The ring he was wearing was a plain band, no jewels. The silver light revealed engravings of three shootings stars. This was the most powerful ring Ainz owned.

"Is that...?"

In response to Albedo's curious expression, he flashed a triumphant smile (although his face didn't move) and said its name. "This is the super-ultrarare item Shooting Star that lets you use the super-tier spell Wish Upon a Star three times without using any XP."

This was the gacha item he'd blown through his bonuses trying to get. It was an item so rare that the only two Ainz Ooal Gown members who possessed one were Ainz and Yamaiko. Or maybe it was just proof of how much money he stupidly spent in-game.

The spell it contained, Wish Upon a Star, was set up so that the user was granted random wishes in proportion to how many experience points were spent—i.e., 10 percent granted one, 50 percent granted five.

There were quite a few possibilities. In fact, according to one strategy site, there were over two hundred. And there were some that were more likely to be granted and some that were less likely to be granted, so it was a spell that came with the fear of using all of one's experience points for nothing.

Also, to even acquire this spell, one had to reach level 95 as a caster. Even in *Yggdrasil*, where leveling went quickly, experience points were pretty important at such a high level, to the point where players were reluctant to mess around with spending them.

The wishes that were granted by this item's casting of Wish Upon a Star were also completely random, but useful ones were more likely to be granted than jokey ones, so it wasn't an exaggeration to say this version of the spell was even more elite. And the most wishes it could grant at once was ten. The cast time for the super-tier spell was also zero—this ring was truly one of the best cash items in the game.

Using this extraordinary item—even if it was a gamble—did seem like a bit of a waste, but it wasn't worth losing Shalltear. Still, he hesitated because he knew he had other skills that would use up his surplus experience points.

Ainz gazed at the ring.

The wish he was aiming for would cancel all status effects on his target. He had a few other candidates in mind, but that seemed the most direct way to do it. Since it also canceled beneficial status effects,

it wasn't a very popular choice in-game, and he laughed at himself now.

"Okay, ring. I wish!" Of course, he could activate the item without shouting, but the fervent hope that out of over two hundred wishes, something that fit the situation would be granted made him do it. It was like how people yelled when rolling the die that would decide their bet.

Yggdrasil's magic worked in this world, the same way it had in the game, so Ainz was sure the ring's power would cancel the mysterious mind control Shalltear was under. At least, he wanted to think that it would.

Ainz's biggest fear, that it wouldn't cast, hadn't been necessary. The ring unleashed its power in this world as well—and the red flames in Ainz's eye sockets shrank. "What…is this…?"

It was like new information was being loaded into his brain—an unpleasant feeling. At the same time, he felt connected to something enormous—a happy feeling. Ainz was assaulted by a bunch of sensations he'd had back when he was human.

When the wave subsided, Ainz realized that Wish Upon a Star in this world was something totally different from what it had been in *Yggdrasil*.

When he'd learned of Nfirea's talent, he had fantasized that maybe he could steal it using Wish Upon a Star, and it turned out that that was not off the mark. Wish Upon a Star had changed into a spell that could grant his wish. It did depend on how many experience points he spent, but it was a spell that could make the impossible possible. It had also transformed in this world so that by sacrificing five levels—using 500 percent of his experience points—it could grant more powerful wishes.

Now he was convinced he could cancel the effects of the spell Shalltear was under, and he shouted victoriously, "Remove all of Shalltear's status effects!" His voice echoed, and a second later, the

flames in his eyes blazed larger.

"Wh-what?!"

Sensing the change in their situation from how shaken Ainz was, Albedo asked anxiously, "Wh-what's the matter, Lord Ainz?"

He couldn't manage a reply. He put together all his experience playing *Yggdrasil*, all the info he'd gotten off the strategy sites, and the various things he'd learned since coming to this world. And most critically, he also had the information about using Wish Upon a Star that had flooded into his head as if to overwrite his knowledge when he'd tried to use it before.

When he finally came to a conclusion, he was assailed by unbelievable levels of panic and rage. And despite the fact that he should have stabilized if he felt anything more, what he felt most of all was...fear.

Flustered, he shouted, "W-we're withdrawing! Albedo, get over here! Now!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Ainz immediately cast a teleportation spell, and in the next instant, they saw a hilly landscape. They'd arrived back at home, which was safe, but he still gave orders as if there was no time to lose. "Albedo! Be on guard for anyone teleporting after us!"

"Sir!" She drew her weapon and stood right next to Ainz. Ainz also braced himself with both arms free so he could react flexibly to their situation.

Some time passed like that, and finally Ainz's tension began to ease. Albedo also returned from a fighting stance, with hips lowered, to her normal posture.

"Shit!" After the tension passed, Ainz felt intense anger. Since becoming an undead, strong emotions were automatically

suppressed, but every moment a new fury swept over him. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” He kicked at the ground a few times. His uncommon strength caused a lot of dirt to get kicked up. If it hadn’t rained a few days ago, he probably would’ve made a huge cloud of dust. But his anger still hadn’t abated.

“L-Lord Ainz, please still your…anger…”

Hearing the hint of fear in Albedo’s voice, he finally realized he wasn’t acting very much like an absolute master. His calm made a swift return, and he exhaled deeply, despite not being able to breathe, to let out the flames that were burning him up.

“Sorry, it seems I lost it a bit there. Please forget what you just saw.”

“That’s no problem at all. More importantly, thank you for listening to me! If you order me to forget it, Lord Ainz, then forget it I shall. But…what happened? What upset you so much? If you tell me, I’ll make it so it never happens again!”

“…It wasn’t about you, Albedo. The ring activated, but I found out it couldn’t grant the wish.” From Albedo’s silence, Ainz realized he needed to explain further. “…There’s only one power that the super-tier spell Wish Upon a Star can’t beat.” Before, there had been the possibility of something unique to this world being the issue, but Ainz spoke with the conviction that he now knew that wasn’t the case. He had felt it when he tried casting the spell.

“Y-you mean…a…?”

“Yes, Albedo. There’s only one thing it could be—a World Item.”

There were two hundred of them in *Yggdrasil*, items far stronger than even Guild Weapons and god items. Yes, for a World Item, it would probably be simple to put an undead, who should have been immune to psychic effects, under mind control.

Then Ainz remembered the other guardians who were outside

Nazarick. It was possible they were also being targeted. Kicking himself for not thinking of it sooner, he said, “Albedo, have all the guardians in the field return. When they get back, we need to check if they are under any mind control like Shalltear. To the Throne Room immediately! After that...the treasury.”



Chapter 4 Before the Death Match

1

What Ainz saw upon teleporting to the treasury was like the collected twinkle of every star in the sky.

The ceiling above was so high and the walls so long it was hard to fit a whole one in one's field of vision. The room was that gigantic, and it was chock-full of treasure that dazzled the eyes.

Gold coins and jewels were piled up in the center, forming a mountain range. There were so many it was impossible to take an interest in counting them. And partially buried in the mountains were super-first-class artisanal items.

At just a glance, one noticed a golden mug, a scepter inlaid with various types of jewels, a beast's pelt that sparkled silver, an elaborate tapestry that made free use of gold thread, a gleaming pearly horn, a fan made of feathers the colors of the rainbow, a crystal pitcher, an absolutely exquisite ring that was emitting a faint glow, a mask made with some kind of animal skin inlaid with black-and-white precious stones, and more. Of course, that was just a handful of what was there. There were probably two or three hundred similar works of art buried in the mountains of gold coins.

Ainz heard two of those who'd come with him gasp at the sight of these literal mountains of treasure. *Sixty-six percent?* Ainz looked back at the three women attending him.

Albedo, who had changed out of her armor and wore a white dress, looked around with her admiration plain on her beautiful face. Yuri Alpha, who'd given him his ring when he'd returned to Nazarick, was the same.

The one who hadn't gasped in wonder was quietly looking back at Ainz. Her face was so well-formed it looked artificial. Only one of her emerald eyes, glinting coldly like a jewel, was visible—the other was covered with an eye patch. Her strawberry-blond hair, grown out long, glittered in the light coming from the ceiling. She was an automaton, a type of grotesque, and her name was CZ2128 Delta, Shizu for short. A member of the Pleiades, she wore a maid uniform similar to Narberal's and Yuri's, but the things that set hers apart the most were her urban camouflage accessories and the cute sticker on her skirt that said ONE YEN in kanji. Then there was the weapon slung on her hip. It was a white gun, but she was wearing it exactly like a sword.

Incidentally, this magic gun, automatons, and the gunner class Shizu had were all added in the supermassive update "The Fall of Valkyria."

Pushing up her lens-less black glasses with a finger, Yuri, perhaps unable to allow such clutter as a maid, spoke. "Lord Ainz. Why isn't everything properly stored? Even if it's under protective magic, this doesn't seem like a very good way to keep everything. If you but give the order, we will begin work on it immediately..."

"You should take another look around."

In the space of one breath, Yuri scanned the room and then apologized. "Do excuse me. Please forgive my thoughtlessness."

"It's not a big deal. But...well, it's just that: The items buried in the gold coins are, in the end, just not worth very much." Ainz was looking at the things that made Yuri apologize when she saw them—the countless shelves that towered toward the ceiling and the items enshrined on them, sparkling brighter than the golden mountains.

A wand set with a bloodstone, scarletite gauntlets set with garnets, an eyepiece with black diamonds set in a small silver ring, an obsidian dog statue, a dagger carved out of purple amethyst, a small altar embedded with countless white pearls, lilies made out of a material like rainbow-colored glass, delicate artificial roses carved from star rubies, a tapestry depicting a soaring black dragon, a platinum crown decorated with a huge diamond, a golden censer studded with gems, a lion and lioness made out of sapphires and rubies, cuffs like flames set with fire opals, an elaborately carved rosewood cigarette case, a mantle made from the pelt of a golden beast, a set of twelve apoitakara plates, a silver anklet studded with gems in four colors, a book of evil ways with a cover made of demantoid wootz, a life-size statue of a woman done in gold, a belt with imperial topazes sewn into it, a chess set where each piece had a different precious stone set in its head, a fairy carved out of a lump of emerald, a black cloak with innumerable tiny gems sewn into it, a wineglass carved from the horn of a unicorn, a golden pedestal studded with crystal spheres…

That was just a tiny slice of what was there.

Besides that, there was a full-length mirror incorporating plenty of blue topazes; a red crystal the size of a human; a huge, elaborate statue of a warrior, sparkling silver; a stone pillar with inscrutable letters carved into it; an armful of alexandrite.

The countless treasures were a clear answer to Yuri's question: *Where could we put it all?*

"Let's go."

Two of the women gave spoken acknowledgment; only Shizu nodded without saying anything.

Ainz cast Mass Fly, and all four of them floated into the air together. Once they were airborne, it became apparent—the air was faintly tinged a dangerous, toxic purple color.

Yuri glanced around looking for the source of the coloration. But she didn't see anything on the ceiling or walls that was giving off a

purple light. A look of mild confusion crossed her beautiful face.

A level voice addressed her. “Yuri, the air is contaminated with a deadly magical poison.”

“Huh?” Her puzzled look was met with a cold stare.

It was Shizu’s empty green gaze.

More precisely, her eyes were blank. Extremely shapely though her face was, put in its most negative light, it gave the impression of a mask.

As an automaton, Shizu was built that way—to not display her emotions.

“Blood of Jörmungandr?” At Shizu’s mention of the most effective deadly poison item, Ainz replied:

“Yeah, you got it. I didn’t tell you guys, but the air around the treasury is polluted. If you didn’t have an item or ability that made you immune to poison, you’d die in three seconds.”

“Is that why you chose us to accompany you?”

Yes, it was.

Yuri the dullahan, who quickly pushed up her glasses, and Shizu the automaton with the frozen face. Both were grotesques who possessed, as racial characteristics, an immunity ability. Poison would work on Albedo as a demon, but she had other means of protection.

“Yes, that’s why I brought you. But the reason I brought Shizu isn’t just that. I wanted to check something.”

Ainz and the others arrived at the door across the room without needing to scale the golden mountains.

But could it really be described as a door? Something like a door-shaped bottomless pit of darkness was stuck flat on the wall. Ainz

stood pondering before it as if it were a painting.

"This is the weapon storeroom. What was the password...?"

"Lord Ainz, if this is the weapon storeroom, does that mean there are other treasures stored elsewhere?"

Hmm? Albedo doesn't know about the inside of the treasury? Ainz cocked his head in response to Albedo's question. But it did make sense. The treasury was cut off from the Great Tomb of Nazarick and was made so that it was nearly impossible to reach without teleporting using a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown. Albedo hadn't had a ring until ten days ago, so it wasn't terribly surprising that she didn't know much.

It was hard to know how much knowledge the NPCs had, and Ainz replied after briefly considering this. "Yes, it does. My friend Genjiro liked to keep things tidy. Everything should be organized according to its purpose."

"He's the one who created our teammate Entoma, right?"

"Yes, that's right, Yuri. But maybe 'liked to keep things tidy' isn't quite right. If that was the case, he probably would have organized those mountains of gold coins, and he probably wouldn't have called his room the Chamber of Filth. To get back to the point, though, everything should be organized into categories like armor, weapons, accessories, other items, consumables, crafting materials, etc. There's also a room dedicated to the upkeep of Nazarick... Oh, and there's one where all the data crystals are stored." Sure enough, as they looked along the wall in the direction Ainz had chattily pointed, there were more of the 2-D black things. "Actually, they all connect in that back chamber, so it doesn't matter which one you enter... Oh, I guess I'm talking too much."

"Not at all. We thank you for willingly answering the question." The two combat maids bowed in tandem with Albedo's words.

What am I doing? We don't have time for this. Once I start

bragging about Nazarick, I end up blabbing on forever… Shrugging, Ainz faced the darkness.

This was a type of door that opened with a password. There were ways to force them with magic or thief abilities, but Ainz didn't have that spell or skill. So he had to say the password, but—

Yup. Forgot it.

Of course he had.

There were quite a few tricks like this inside Nazarick. He remembered the ones for places he went to often, but even if he came to the treasury, he almost never had occasion to come to this room. There was no way he would remember the password to this door.

About the only time he came to the treasury was to pay Nazarick's upkeep costs with money he'd earned. He hadn't been this far in a few years.

Unable to draw the answer out of his deepest memories, Ainz recited the password that worked on almost everything. "Glory to Ainz Ooal Gown!"

In response to the password, writing appeared on the pitch-black door as if floating up to the surface of a lake. It said: *Ascendit a terra in coelum iterumque descendit in terram et recipit vim superiorum et inferiorum*.

"Crap, Tabula was always so into it…"

He hadn't meant to say it aloud, and Albedo reacted slightly.

Ainz thought of one of the people who had been in charge of coming up with gimmicks. Twenty percent of the minute tricks in the Great Tomb of Nazarick were his work. His extremely detailed designs somehow ran through the guild's sizable, customizable data budget. That made the other members complain that they couldn't design freely, so he took responsibility and bought a cash item to

increase the amount of data they could use.

Ainz looked earnestly at the writing on the door. No doubt it was a hint, but what did it mean? He took more time searching to see where in his memory the answer had sunk.

Finally, he remembered the password.

“Pretty sure it was, ‘Thus, you will possess the light of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly away from you,’ right?” Ainz glanced at Shizu for confirmation.

She nodded.

Shizu was an NPC made not by Tabula Smaragdina but by one of the other guild members who came up with gimmicks, and her settings were such that she was familiar with how to get past all of them. She would have known the solution to the hint, too.

The only reason Ainz hadn’t had her answer was because he selfishly wanted to be the one to solve it.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick had come to life when he arrived in this world. He wanted to be the one to leave the first footprints on its lands, like on newly fallen snow.

As if reading his mind, the darkness began to be sucked up into a single point. The darkness vanished almost immediately, leaving behind only a black fist-size sphere hanging in the air.

Now that the darkness that had been acting as a lid was gone, they could see into the room through a hole. Inside was a well-ordered world, nothing like what they’d seen so far. As a metaphor, nothing could be more apt than a museum gallery.

The room with somewhat reduced lighting was long, stretching far back. The ceiling was high—perhaps sixteen feet. It was a height that assumed beings besides humans would enter. Across, the room was thirty-two feet. The floor was lustrous black stone laid down with no

gaps—it was as if it were one big slab. The way it reflected the faint light coming from the ceiling gave the place a quiet, solemn atmosphere. On both sides of the room were beautiful weapons that were not only organized but also magnificently displayed.

"Let's go." Ainz didn't wait for the three attending him to respond before stepping into the weapon storeroom.

Awaiting them were broadswords, great swords, estocs, flamberges, scimitars, patas, shotels, kukris, claymores, short swords, sword breakers…

Of course, it wasn't just swords. There were one-handed axes, two-handed axes, one-handed battering weapons, one-handed spears, bows, crossbows…

Even going by broad classification, there were too many to list.

Besides that, there were countless weapons so gaudily ornamented it was unclear whether they should still be called weapons or not. They were the type that were impossible to sheath, that focused on appearance only. Actually, there might have been more of those than actual weapons.

And most of them were not made of common materials like iron. There was one with a blade of blue crystal, one with a pure-white blade and gold designs, one with a black blade that had purple runes engraved on it, and a bow that looked like its string was made of light.

Then there were some where one glance was enough to tell they were dangerous: a two-handed ax with a blade that oozed fresh blood, a gigantic mace that had pained expressions appearing and disappearing in the black metal part, a spear that was made by linking up things that appeared to be human hands… These, too, were impossible to count.

Ainz could guess that most of them were magic, but he didn't know what they all did. Even if one whose blade flickered like flames was fairly easy to guess, there was no way to tell what the sword that

looked like a whip squirming like a centipede did.

They looked as they walked by in silence. After going a little over a hundred yards—past probably several thousand weapons—they reached their destination and entered a rectangular room.

Perhaps because it served as a waiting room, the only things inside were a sofa and table. Looking to either side, there appeared to be a corridor leading out, similar to the one through which they had come in. At the end of that corridor, the atmosphere completely changed.

If they'd been in a museum so far, this place was an ancient tomb. The width and height were about the same, but the lights were dimmer and it continued fairly deep. Then, they weren't at a good angle, so it was hard to tell what, but there was something resting in a big hollow.

Ainz responded to the quizzical looks he felt staring from behind him.

"The Mausoleum is up ahead."

"The...Mausoleum, sir?"

"Hmm? You don't know the name of this room we're about to go into, Albedo?" *I named it... So does that mean she doesn't know about the guy who manages the treasury, either?* "Then, have you heard of Pandora's Actor?"

"Yes. I'm aware of his name and appearance, as well as that he has an administrative job. Pandora's Actor...domain guardian of the treasury, about as strong as Demiurge or myself. His job is to manage this place as well as ready funds in the event Nazarick's defense system goes into action. In other words, he is the one responsible for financial affairs."

"Yeah. But that's not all. He—"

Interrupting Ainz's reply—a figure suddenly appeared from the

other corridor and the three NPCs turned to look at it.

It looked very strange. It had a human body with a head that resembled a creature like a warped octopus. A tattoo with broken letters covered the right side of its face. They looked like the letters that had appeared on the door. Its skin was the purplish white of a corpse and had a strange sheen to it, as if it were covered in mucus. Its hands had four slender fingers with webs between them. It was wearing a perfectly tailored outfit of gleaming leather, all black with silver accents. Several belts were hanging loose. There was also a black cape wrapped around its shoulders, fastened in front. What else besides *grotesque* could really be said of this being's appearance? Waving the six tentacles that sprouted from the sides of its mouth and hung to about its thighs, it turned its pale, clouded, pupil-less eyes on Ainz and the others.

Albedo screamed, her face flushed with shock, "Lord Tabula Smaragdina!"

It was one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings. Compared to Ainz in terms of sheer firepower, he was the superior caster.

"No, it's not!" Albedo howled immediately.

At that, both maids leaped into action. Shizu drew her gun, held the stock to her shoulder, and pointed the barrel at the figure who had appeared. Yuri punched her fists into each other in front of her chest. The gauntlets bumping together made a metallic sound like a gong. Then she moved smoothly to stand next to Albedo, in front of Shizu and Ainz. Her position was meant to protect those two, since as a caster and gunner, they were at a disadvantage in close combat.

"Who are you?! Even if you take on the appearance and presence of one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, I won't mistake my own Creator!"

In response to Albedo's challenge, the being that looked like Tabula Smaragdina didn't respond, just cocked his head.

“I see. Kill him.”

Her cold voice rang out, but the Pleiades displayed slight hesitation. Though they didn’t know his true identity, fighting someone who looked like one of the Creators felt wrong.

In this case, it should probably be said that the Pleiades weren’t wrong, but Albedo had just performed superiorly, making a levelheaded judgment with zero hesitation. It was a response that prioritized the safety of the one under her protection, Ainz.

She clicked her tongue at the other two who weren’t moving and was about to charge, but Ainz, displeased, spoke faster.

“That’s enough. Change back, Pandora’s Actor.”

Tabula Smaragdina twisted and warped. After a moment, the one who was standing there was still a grotesque, but a different one.

His face was smooth, with all protuberances, like a nose, grated completely off. There were holes where his eyes and mouth would have been. He had no eyeballs, lips, teeth, or tongue, just black holes —the kind of features a child would draw with a pen. His slick head, reminiscent of a pink egg, gleamed and not a single hair grew from it.

This strange being was—like Narberal—a doppelgänger.

He was Pandora’s Actor, the level-100 NPC created by Ainz and manager of the treasury. He could take on the appearance of forty-five different beings and even use their abilities, albeit at 80 percent power.

The badge on his regulation cap was the crest of Ainz Ooal Gown. That being said, he was wearing an outfit that looked an awful lot like the uniform of the neo-Nazi SS that had created a buzz twenty years prior in the European arcology war.

He clacked his heels together and brought his right hand to his cap in an exaggerated salute. “Welcome and thank you for coming, my

Creator, Lord Momonga!"

"...Well, you're pretty lively, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am! Lively going about business here! Speaking of which, what can I do for you? You've even brought the captain of the floor guardians and a pair of maids—hello, young ladies."

With the appearance of the domain guardian, Albedo and Yuri retreated to a more subordinate position behind Ainz, and the three women all reacted in different ways. Yuri was proud of her position in the Pleiades, and upon being referred to as a "young lady," she quickly pushed up her glasses, displaying displeasure so slight as to be almost nonexistent on her face. Next to her, Albedo was jealous that Ainz was his Creator and pushed her lips forward in a pout, since Ainz couldn't see. Shizu's attitude didn't change at all; she just put away her gun.

"I came to get some of our greatest treasures in the deepest room, the World Items."

"What?! The time to unleash their power is upon us?!" His surprise seemed purposely overblown. Ainz furrowed his nonexistent brow at his behavior. *The clothes, too, but why did I make a guy who does everything in such an exaggerated way?*

No, he knew the answer.

Ainz made Pandora's Actor. In other words, at some point he had thought everything he did was "cool" and had made him while inwardly thinking how proud he would be.

"Ugh... Somehow, I..." He used to think guys in military uniforms looked cool, and he figured since his name contained the word *actor*, he should do everything in a theatrical way. But when he saw him actually walking and talking—"Man, he's so laaaame." Ainz's true feelings leaked out in a truly tiny voice, lower than anyone could make out.

This is a past I want to pretend never happened.

A living past I want to pretend never happened.

If other guild members were in this Nazarick where the NPCs were alive, they'd probably faint in agony. He had that feeling anyhow—though he wouldn't say specifically who he had in mind.

"...Okay, I need to get back on track. I don't have time for mental disturbances, which shouldn't even happen if I'm undead...," he quietly told himself, regaining his composure. "...Indeed, it is time. I'm planning on taking Avarice and Selflessness, the Bowl of Hygieia, the Infinity Blade, and Sangashashokuzu."

"What about the other two?"

"Leave them. Those are single-use items. Their power is immense, so we need to consider carefully when to use them, or maybe we just can't use them until we find out how to get another one."

"That's true, huh? The powers of those super-dreadnought items truly are last resorts. They make the impossible possible and warp the very world—"

"Pandora's Actor, I want to test your knowledge. There are supposedly two hundred total World Items. How many do you know?"

"Apologies, Lord Momonga, I know only eleven."

Ainz nodded. That was the number of World Items the guild possessed. Pandora's Actor didn't know about the ones that had been stolen while they were in the process of acquiring them, like Atlas. So there were still some points that were unclear, but even though NPCs' knowledge was partially determined by their settings, it was probably best to consider some unreasonable settings canceled.

He'd also realized something about their settings after several days of observing them: Certain parts of their personalities that hadn't

been in their backstories and their relationships with the other NPCs seemed to be partially inherited from their creators. He could see it in the relationships of Shalltear and Aura, Demiurge and Sebas.

Ainz smiled without moving his face. *They're really just like kids...* The feeling like his lost friends were there with him made him happy and lonely at the same time. He shook his head to clear out the emotion.

"I see, Pandora's Actor. Sorry for the silly question."

"Not at all. I apologize for not knowing more." And a salute. The whole time every move he made was over the top.

"...Mm, it's fine. We'll be going deep into the Mausoleum now. Since you're the manager here, is there anything else I should know about?"

"No, sir. Everything here is yours to do with as you will," he said in a theatrical tone, gesturing grandly around the area. "It is a bit of a shame, though. I thought perhaps the time for you to use my powers had come, Lord Momonga."

Ainz stopped and took a close look at him as if observing something odd. He had, of course, been considering it. Pandora's Actor's backstory had him in possession of some of Nazarick's best brains and ingenuity. In peaceful times he used it in weird ways, but in an emergency, his intellect was worth having around. Plus, his abilities could be applied in any number of ways. Depending on this situation, he could perform the function of every guardian.

But the reason Ainz created him wasn't for combat or running the organization. It was to leave a record of Ainz Ooal Gown and his friends.

"...You're our last resort. I don't want to just send you on an errand."

"...Thank you, my lord." He looked like he wanted to say something

more—maybe?—and then exaggeratedly bowed his head. "Understood. Then I shall continue to devote myself to managing the treasury."

"I'll be counting on you. Also, from now on, call me Ainz—Ainz Ooal Gown."

"Wow! I will, my Creator, Lord Ainz!"

Pandora's Actor bowed, and Ainz turned on his heel to signify the conversation was over. Then came a voice from behind him.

"But Lord Ainz, I realize this is impertinent of me, but if the situation is such that you have to use World Items, I humbly wonder if it wouldn't be better for me to leave the treasury and work on other levels."

He had a point.

Pandora's Actor was a treasure, but to keep him on display only and waste the greater fortune would be foolish. Ainz should consider this an emergency and mobilize him. Plus, he needed to move some gold coins from the treasury to the Throne Room anyway.

Having made his decision, he turned around to catch Pandora's Actor putting his hand over his heart in appeal. Shizu, with her unchanging expression, quietly uttered a "wow" that Ainz was convinced couldn't be taken in a good way, either. It sawed at his heart—but then his mood was stabilized.

Pandora's Actor's actions were too over the top—especially the way he was clearly thinking, *I'm so cool, aren't I?* with every move and pose. That might come off well if the guy doing it was actually cool, but this guy was an egghead. He was too kooky—to the point where watching him was embarrassing.

Ainz looked at Pandora's Actor silently for a few moments. Then he took a ring out of space and tossed it to him.

The ring flew in an arc and landed perfectly in Pandora's Actor's hand.

"This is...a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown. It allows you t—"

Ainz put up a hand to stop Pandora's Actor from continuing. He would overlook the unfortunate reaction. "You're a reserve, though. Albedo, let the minions know about him. Until then, Pandora's Actor, keep your activities between the Throne Room and the treasury."

"Understood." Both their voices rang out, and Pandora's Actor clicked his heels together so hard the *clack* was audible, then bowed in such an extremely polite way (to put it negatively, it looked fake) that even his fingers were stretched perfectly straight.

Looking at that egghead, Ainz gently shook his head. *He's not a bad guy. And in terms of his abilities, he's pretty effective. Just...* "Yikes..." *Why did I have to give him this personality? How could I have thought that was cool? Well, I mean, the military uniform is still kinda cool, but...*

If Ainz had been able to blush, his face would have been bright red.

"Hey, Pandora's Actor." He clamped down Pandora's Actor's shoulders and pulled him away, saying, "C'mere a minute." Naturally, he told Albedo and the maids to stand by where they were.

"Tell me something—this is important. I'm your Creator, and I have your complete devotion, right?"

"You are correct, my lord. I was made by you. If you told me to go to battle against the other Supreme Beings, I would do so unhesitatingly."

"I see, so then... You can consider this an order from that being, er, man...your master, or a favor, or whatever, but cut out the saluting."

Pandora's Actor's gaping eyes looked hard at Ainz. There was no understanding of what he'd been told reflected there.

“Uh-huh. Look, how to say… Isn’t it weird to salute? Cut it out. The military uniform…well, you’re strong, so we’ll roll with it. But seriously, no more saluting.”

“Wenn es meines Gottes Wille.”

“Is that German? Cut that out, too. No, it’s fine if you do it, just not in front of me. Okay? I’m counting on you.”

“Y-yes, sir.” Pandora’s Actor gave a vague reply as if he was just now feeling picked on.

Ainz backed up a bit—at some point their faces had gotten so close it seemed like they were going to kiss at any moment—and weakly pleaded with him. “I’m really counting on you, okay? I never thought I’d have my mood forcibly stabilized by something like this. This is more embarrassing than riding a gigantic hamster? I can’t believe it. Really I’d like to hash this out further, but this is an emergency, so let’s leave it here for today.”

“Okay, there’s something we need to do before we enter the Mausoleum. Albedo, give your Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown to Pandora’s Actor.” She made a face like she wanted to ask why, so Ainz told her. “It’s the last trap. The golems and Avataras back there are programmed to attack anyone with a ring. That includes you and me.”

“I see… Raiders would need a ring to invade this place, so they would definitely trigger the final trap?”

“Pretty devious, right?”

“I—I thought nothing of the sort!” Having replied, Albedo took the ring off her left ring finger with extreme reluctance, wrapped it in a silk handkerchief, and handed it to Pandora’s Actor.

As he watched, Ainz took off his ring as well and placed it in a ring storage box he’d taken out of space.

"Oh!" Ainz remembered something and put all the rings in space that didn't have owners yet into the storage box. Even if they were stored in space, they would be perceived as on him, and the Avataras would attack when he entered the Mausoleum.

"Mistress Albedo, would you please let go...?"

Turning around at the frustrated voice, Ainz saw that the two of them were playing tug-of-war over the handkerchief.

"M-my ring..."

"But like Lord Ainz said, if you go in there wearing it, you'll get attacked. It's just for a little while!"

"What are you saying?! This is the ring Lord Ainz gave me! Yet you would—?"

"Albedo, we don't really have time for this. If you won't give it to him, then I'm—"

"My apologies! I'm ready to go now!"

She let go so abruptly that Pandora's Actor yelped as he fell off-balance and staggered a couple of steps.

"You are? Then let's go. Pandora's Actor, use Yuri and Shizu to help you move some degree of our assets to the Throne Room... Albedo's ring may be a burden to carry around, but please honor her feelings and use the one I gave you, not hers."

"Thank you, Lord Ainz! I was thinking how unforgivable it would be for someone else to use the ring you gave me. *That said*, I know we're in an emergency, so I wouldn't mind *so* much. But as I was thinking that, I wanted you to know how I felt about it. Then you understood without my even having to bring it u—"

"Understood! But who shall I leave here to meet you when you return?"

Albedo, whose passionate ramblings had been cut short by Pandora's Actor, was making a face no elegant beauty should ever make, and Ainz moved her out of his field of vision—he didn't want to have his dreams of beautiful women crushed any more than she wanted to be interrupted. "It'll probably take a little while. I'll shoot you a Message later. Come back right away when you get it—we can't leave without that ring."

"Yes, sir."

Pandora's Actor and the two maids sent Ainz off with deep bows as he walked into the Mausoleum accompanied by only Albedo.

It was a dimly lit space where not a sound could be heard—appropriate for enshrining spirits of the dead. Feeling slightly guilty for disrupting the silence, Ainz said, "By the way, Albedo, how much do you know about World Items?"

"I know that they are great treasures collected by the Supreme Beings and that I am allowed to carry one of them… That's about it."

"I see. Then sometime soon I'll write a list of the ones I know. It's safer to have more people aware of this information. Before that, maybe I'll tell you about some of the dangerous ones." As they walked along, Ainz gave a general overview of what he knew about World Items.

World Items.

They were items that bore heavily on the world of the game *Yggdrasil*.

The world tree Yggdrasil had countless leaves, but one day a giant evil beast appeared and started messily eating them. One by one, leaves fell until there were only nine left. Those leaves were the beginnings of the nine worlds: Asgard, Alfheim, Vanaheim, Nidavellir, Midgard, Jotunheim, Niflheim, Helheim, and Muspelheim.

But the evil beast's shadow loomed over the remaining nine leaves. The backstory of the game was that players had to travel unknown worlds in order to protect their own.

And a World Item was a fallen leaf, i.e., equal to one of those worlds in quality. That's why they had such immense power, and actually, many of them possessed power that was even *too* extraordinary.

Many players had the opinion that they broke the balance of the game too much, but the developers declared, "The world has bigger possibilities than that," and never offered a patch.

It seemed like the development company had strong feelings for the word *world*. In *Yggdrasil*, a class or monster with a name that included "world" was programmed to be far stronger than normal. For example, there were World Enemies such as the last boss of the official campaign that gained immense power by gobbling leaves, Devourer of the Nine Worlds, or the class World Champion, said to be "chosen by the nine worlds," that a player could acquire only if they won the associated tournament.

While Ainz was explaining all that, they had arrived at a place with armed statues lined up inside depressions in the walls on either side. It was similar to the atmosphere in the room before the Throne Room, Lemegeton. But while the Lemegeton golems were unequipped, these statues all had gear with absolute power. The power they contained was equal even to Ainz's own main gear set.

"L-Lord Ainz. Are these statues of the Supreme Beings?"

"Yes, they are. Good eye. The Avataras are modeled on my old friends. But really, I'm surprised you noticed. They look pretty crummy, right? I don't think the statues capture even a tenth of how cool they were…"

"As one created by the Supreme Beings, I couldn't miss the resemblance."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes, it is. But Lord Ainz, considering these statues and the name of this place... Did the other Supreme Beings pass away?"

"That's...not quite right." *No, it may very well be*, he thought, stopping to gaze at the statues.

How did Albedo interpret his silence? Her face wore a look of worry.

A peerless beauty with a sad expression—no man's heart would go unmoved by that. And when it was one of the precious creations his friends had made, even Ainz the undead felt guilty, like he had to do something.

But how would Ainz, who never had any women as friends, much less dated a girl in the real world, be able to come up with the right thing to say, words that would comfort her? Fretting in an inward panic, he surveyed the area and tried to come up with a conversation topic.

Then he noticed something and brought it up without thinking. "L-look over there, you see those four blank spaces?" Confirming that she looked, he gave a simple explanation of why there weren't any statues there. "One of those is where my Avatara will go."

That would never happen.

The one who had made all these statues was actually Ainz. So even if he retired, with no other guild members around, his Avatara would never be placed there.

When they retired, they told Ainz, "Please put this stuff to good use," and handed over their gear and cash store items. In order to have those items equipped, and in memoriam of the retired members, he'd used cash store items to create golems that could equip gear.

That was also the reason the Avataras looked so bad.

Everyone's appearance data was left over from when Pandora's Actor used it, but Ainz didn't have the skills to model them based on that by himself. So he bought graphics and forced them onto the golems, but the result was warped looks straight out of a nightmare, where the arms might be chubby or short, the head too big, and so on.

Their lack of unity, however, gave off a strange vibe, making any viewer intensely uncomfortable. That turned out to be an unexpected perk, considering the other reason Ainz had made them was to stand as final gatekeepers.

But hmm, it is kinda embarrassing, like being confronted with models I made as a kid.

There was another emotion that assailed him even more intensely than embarrassment—loneliness.

Ainz created the Avataras as a place to store his friends' gear as they kept retiring. That's what he'd said to the remaining guild members when they'd asked.

Or that they were final guards.

Really, though, the reason he'd started creating the Avataras back when members were dwindling like teeth falling out of a comb was simply because he was sad—sad that fewer and fewer of the friends he'd played with all that time remained.

He'd created the Avataras to indicate that he'd had friends in the Great Tomb of Nazarick and also to make up for their loss.

That was also why he'd named this place the Mausoleum. It used to just be called the deepest part of the treasury, but Ainz changed it. He changed it into a place to mourn the guildmates who left *Yggdrasil*—who vanished—a place for his friends to sleep.

Still, having been flung to this unknown world, I want to believe that they could be out there somewhere…

Ainz was lost in thought when a sorrowful scream echoed down the entire corridor.

“D-don’t say such horrible things!”

Ainz’s lonesome mood disappeared in an instant, and when he hurriedly looked at Albedo, he was in for an even bigger surprise. Her eyes were so full of tears that if she blinked they would probably have run down her cheeks.

“Lord Ainz, Lord Ainz, who mercifully stayed behind with us, Supreme One to whom we should all be devoted, please don’t say things like that! I hope from the bottom of my heart that you will always be here to reign above us.” She kneeled before him and prostrated herself. Her repetition of “I beg you, I beg you” mixed with sobs was like a prayer but also like a pained wail.

Ainz had never in his life seen someone lose themselves to that extent.

Feeling guilty that his half-joking words had shaken her so much, he kneeled down and put his arms around her to help her up. “Forgive me.”

Hadn’t he felt abandoned by his former guildmates?

When he was all alone in the Great Tomb of Nazarick, when he’d been spending each day hopelessly because no one else was there?

Hadn’t he been lonely and furious?

Despite knowing that hardship, how could he not have understood Albedo’s feelings? How could he have caused her this pain?

Albedo was sitting up, but her face was a mess of tears, and she was still crying fresh ones.

Ainz took out a handkerchief and, albeit awkwardly, wiped them away.

"..."

He tried to apologize again, but he couldn't get it out. He couldn't come up with the right words.

It was because he never had many relationships. *What can I say to stop her tears?* He didn't know.

Ainz was still confused when Albedo, hiccupping, spoke. "L-Lord Ainz, p-please promise me you won't abandon us and leave this land!"

"...Sorry, but..." He couldn't get further than *but* because he'd thought of something.

But Albedo took his silence in a different way. "Why not?! Why not?! You won't promise me?! Do you want to leave us?! Why?! Does something displease you?! If so, please tell me and I will eliminate it! If I bother you, say the word and I will kill myself!"

"No!" Ainz raised his voice, and Albedo's shoulders jumped. "Listen to me. First off, there is...practically no way to rescue Shalltear. The mind control is due to a World Item, and it is absolute. In order to not be affected by World Items, you either have to possess a World Item or have a certain class."

Getting her tears wiped by Ainz as if she were a child, Albedo hiccupped a question. "Th-that's why y-you came here, to get World Items, then?"

"Yeah. To give them to the guardians. Actually, there is a way to cancel the mind control Shalltear is under. It should be possible with a World Item. I just hesitate to use the ones we have back here. I value items more than one of my subordinates. I'm a wretched master..."

"Th-that's not true! The Supreme Beings worked hard to collect those World Items. I think they're worth more than we are, my lord."

"...You do?"

In the game, Ainz would have thought the same thing. But a feeling had grown in him that wouldn't let him think that way anymore. That said, realistically, he couldn't use their last resort here.

Among the balance-breaking World Items was a group called the Twenty, capable of unprecedented feats beyond the realm of the others. One of the most famous of these was Longinus, which if activated would completely delete the target but came with the price of wiping the user as well. Data deleted by Longinus was impossible to recover except via some other World Item. No microtransactions or resurrection magic would cover it. If used by a Nazarick NPC, it would cause the total amount of levels the headquarters was able to allocate to go down by the amount of his or her level.

Ainz could think of a few of the names of those insane items: Ahura Mazda, which had a powerful effect against targets with negative karma and could cover an entire world; Wu Xing Controlling Cycle, which allowed the user to demand the company that made *Yggdrasil* to change part of the magic system; Ouroboros, which let the user demand a change to a wider variety of things than Wu Xing Controlling Cycle; and the most powerful item, World Saver, which usually had only as much attack power as a club but could have allowed a solo fighter to take out Nazarick even back when all the guild members were around, since it could grow limitlessly more powerful.

These Twenty were so immensely powerful that they would be lost after one use. That was why they weren't so easy to resort to.

Both of the Twenty that Ainz Ooal Gown proudly possessed were to be brought out in the event their counterpart was used, because they were most effective when neutralizing their opposing item.

If their disappearing was all that happened, that would be fine.

But what if after those items left their possession, they ended up in someone else's hands—say, an enemy of Nazarick's?

Nazarick was protected by World Items, so an attack wouldn't be

able to affect the interior, but if they weren't careful, they might find themselves under siege.

That was why using a World Item to save Shalltear was not an option.

"Albedo, I'm grateful for what you've said. Let me tell you why I responded to your previous question with silence." Ainz took a deep breath and then exhaled, a vestige of his living self—he knew the weight of the words about to come. "I intend to fight Shalltear alone. I don't know...if I'll make it back or—"

"I know you're going to fight Shalltear. It would be stupid to just leave her like that."

Ainz nodded in his head. *Exactly*.

It wasn't clear why the enemy hadn't given Shalltear any orders yet, but things would get hairy once she got some. It was possible that everything about Nazarick would leak.

"But why do you need to fight her on your own? Why not crush her with numbers? Aren't we of any use to you?"

Ainz dabbed at the tears forming again in her eyes and said, "Of course, Albedo. I believe in you. But, hmm, there are three reasons. One is that...I don't know if I'm really cut out to be everyone's master."

"How could you think such a thing, Lord Ainz?"

He put up a hand to interrupt her. "If we think levelheadedly about the possibility of other players being here, then we have to also consider that there could be World Items as well. Is there any value in having an idiot like me rule?"

"Lord Ainz, your very presence here is valuable to us! And we will help you, even if we can't do much!"

"I thank you. But the one who is most to blame in this case is definitely me."

If Longinus was really in this world, it was possible for one of the guardians to be wiped out in exchange for the life of one villager. Shalltear being mind controlled was a horrible situation, but in a way, it was good luck. They'd been made aware of the danger.

"So you mean to make up for it by fighting her alone...? Who would punish our highest ruler?"

"That's not all, though. Here's reason number two: Shalltear is out there by herself. There's a good chance it's a trap—a fatal one." Albedo made a puzzled face, but Ainz continued. "When Ainz Ooal Gown would go PK-ing, we used a similar tactic to the setup Shalltear is in right now. We'd use guild members as bait and then attack and kill whoever bit. Of course, there was a high risk the decoys would die as well, but we definitely killed the guys who showed up to attack."

"But then, Lord Ainz—!"

"Well, hold on. I'm not finished yet. Do you know what we were most afraid of when setting traps like that?" He waited for her lack of response before revealing the answer. "The enemy attacking in numbers fewer than that of the decoy group. If they came in small numbers, we had to be on the lookout for an ambush. In other words, we had to be careful not to get trapped ourselves."

Upon confirming in Albedo's bloodshot eyes that she understood, Ainz mimed a sigh, *phew*.

"And the last reason is, I'm going to kill her."

"If that's the case, then I'll go! I have a World Item, so I'm the most appropriate for the job."

"...You think you have a chance of winning? Tell me straight which one you think has the higher probability."

Under Ainz's quiet gaze, Albedo bit her lip and looked down, frustrated.

"Albedo…you're right. Shalltear is strong."

Shalltear Bloodfallen. She was the strongest guardian in the Great Tomb of Nazarick and Albedo couldn't—No, none of the other level-100 NPCs could win in a fight against her. "That's why it has to be me. I'm the only one in Nazarick who can beat her in a one-on-one fight."

"W-well…certainly considering your gear, you might be able to win…"

Ainz was fully outfitted in god gear and had cash store items, while Shalltear's only god item was the Pipette Lance. He had the overwhelming advantage when it came to gear.

But there was still a reason Ainz's chances of winning were low, reflected in Albedo's vague reply…

Shalltear Bloodfallen was Ainz Ooal Gown's natural enemy.

Since Ainz had been role-playing as an undead caster, his build used classes focused on ghost magic. In other words, he was built for fun.

Shalltear, on the other hand, was a hard-core build. She was also a faith-type magic caster, who had several spells that were effective against undead, in addition to being great at melee combat. As if that weren't a big enough gap already, being undead meant the ghost magic that was Ainz's specialty wouldn't be very effective on her.

So Ainz's strength was meaningless, and Shalltear could fight with an advantage against undead.

Then there were Ainz's various items. If he didn't prepare for the possibility of them being stolen, he didn't have much of a chance fighting her head-on. One wrong step and maybe he had none at all.

"You probably want to say I'm at more of a disadvantage, right?"

Bull's-eye—Albedo looked down.

Right? Ainz felt the same way. *There's no way I can win against Shalltear.*

But—

I'll show you that you don't call me Nazarick's highest ruler for nothing.

"You're right. But you're also wrong. You have only the knowledge you were given."

"Hmm? What does that mean?"

"Have you accumulated experience?"

"Huh? *Experience?*" Her face went beet red in an instant.

"Yeah. Combat experience."

"Ohhh! That's what you mean! Yes, I'm fully capable of using all the powers within me as bestowed by the Supreme Beings, so I think I have enough experience."

Ainz shook his head in response. He'd learned his lesson in the fight with Clementine. "No. Using your power and experiencing something is different. Do you know what happened to Shalltear's memories of fighting against players in that huge raid on Nazarick?"

"I never heard the details, but it seems like she has a faint memory of being killed."

"And besides that?"

Albedo shook her head.

“My fellow guild members always dealt with solo raiders directly... I guess now we’re lucky we were so stingy. I have the experience, so I should go. I have the best chance of winning.” Ainz grinned, but of course his face didn’t move.

But it was almost as if that dazzling smile of the Absolute Ruler reached her somehow—she blushed like a little girl standing in front of a man she admired.

Ainz spoke to someone who was not present. “I’m the guild master of Ainz Ooal Gown, and my PvP record actually has more wins than losses. I’ve even won against people who built flawless characters. How could I lose to someone who relied on skill only? And most important of all, I was good friends with Peroroncino. ‘The battle is over before it begins,’ Shalltear!”

“Lord Ainz, I won’t try to stop you anymore. Just please promise me that you’ll return.”

Ainz looked at her silently and then slowly nodded. “I promise. I’ll defeat Shalltear and return to this place.”

2

A green world stretched out before him. Ainz surveyed the scene and chuckled at himself for making sure no one was around first thing after teleporting. If there had been someone he needed to be wary of, they probably wouldn’t have given him time to look before attacking. He’d teleported to a little over a mile away from Shalltear’s position as a precaution. He was keeping an eye on her with magic, but that still wasn’t proof that the people in possession of the World Item that was mind controlling Shalltear weren’t nearby. It appeared, however, that he’d been worried for nothing, and he turned, with a weight off his shoulder, to Aura and Mare, who had accompanied him.

"This is where we part ways," he told the two of them.

They were the only ones he'd allowed to accompany him before the fierce fight began. He'd canceled the orders of most of those who had been working outside and had them retreat into Nazarick. The only other members of Nazarick who were currently outside were Sebas and Solution. The major reason he'd selected Aura and Mare was that he'd thought of a plan to take advantage of human emotion. Humans might kill grotesques like Demiurge or Cocytus, but they would hesitate to kill a child.

Of course, there was a chance their opponent would deal with them brutally, but he still wanted to have some backup with him in the case of an unforeseen incident. *Although it might have been a bad move.*

Ainz looked at the two differently shaped and colored gauntlets Mare was wearing. The one on his right seemed to have been modeled on the hand of an angel with its smooth make, and it sparkled silvery white. The left one, however, was like a demon, sprouting thorns and claws; red sparkles poured from a rift that was reminiscent of hardened lava.

Then he turned his gaze to Aura, to the large scroll hanging off her hip.

"...If the enemy outnumbers or even matches you in numbers, retreat immediately to Nazarick."

"...Understood." Aura bowed her head with a hard expression on her face. Mare hurriedly followed.

"Got it? You have to retreat. That's part of my plan, too. And I've given you some of Nazarick's precious treasures—you can't let them get stolen. Know that in some instances they might be considered more valuable than your lives." Ainz pushed his point. Aura's slightly delayed response had made him anxious. Ignoring their orders out of devotion to him could wreck everything.

Hearing their acknowledgments—one spirited, one nervous—he cocked his head in his mind.

I wonder which I really value more... He wasn't going to use a World Item to save Shalltear. Judging just from that, he believed the items to be of greater importance. But as he had said to Albedo in the treasury, those were their last resort; they could turn the tables in any situation. Never mind if there was no way to save her; since there might be a way, it was wiser to not use a World Item.

So putting aside all that, which was more valuable: the NPCs, loyal retainers created by his friends that now moved as intelligent beings, or the World Items, proof of the guild Ainz Ooal Gown's adventures that elevated them to the highest ranks back in *Yggdrasil* where things were a game?

Ainz racked his brain but was puzzled at himself when the answer didn't come. Before he came to this world, he had a definitive declaration, but now he couldn't say it.

The result of his guildmates' obsessing over settings and backstories were these NPCs with all their myriad emotions.

I'm about to go kill a—what amounts to a child right now. Peroroncino's daughter... Ainz's heart was uneasy—with an emotion that could be called guilt. *But—*

Ainz glared with penetrating eyes in the direction Shalltear probably was. "This is the only way. This is the only way to break the World Item's mind control." The tough words that slipped out were to convince himself.

Catching Aura's and Mare's worried looks, Ainz thought it would be bad to make them any more anxious, so he changed the topic. "Okay, work with those things to scout the area." He was pointing at four lumps of flesh that were floating in the air as if ready to go.

They were pink, about six and a half feet in diameter, and covered with countless cloudy eyes. It was as if someone had gouged eyeballs

out of all different animals and then sewn them randomly together to make these monsters. They were undead called eyeball corpses, made with Create Upper-Tier Undead.

The reason Ainz created as many eyeball corpses as the limit allowed in a day was because of their stealth abilities—they were the natural enemy of magic and skill users.

The haze in their eyes was not for decoration—their vision was as penetrating as Aura the adept ranger's, or possibly even more so. Their combat ability was a bit low for their level, but this time he wanted them more for their detection skills than for direct combat. They were backup for Aura.

"Understood! But will they take my orders?"

"That'll be no problem. They'll listen perfectly. Or maybe make a magical mental link with them. Then you can be in charge, and it'll be easier to keep a safe watch."

"Yeah! I'm faster if I go on my own, but there's no telling what kind of guys are out there! Got it! Then we'll use a spell to up Mare's stealth and be lurking around this area."

"Sounds good. I'm counting on you!"

Ainz smiled gently (although his face didn't move).

•

The last one to enter the room, Demiurge crossed it with a quick step and sat down heavily in an open seat. He didn't even have to say anything—the uncharacteristically rough movements said plenty. "So? Let's hear it, shall we?" One of the other people at the table was Albedo, and he asked her sternly, with his eyes shut, "Why would you allow that?" His tone was gentle, but that was just a thin layer on top. Everyone could feel the irritation beneath.

When someone who is normally composed expresses emotion

forcefully, there's a gap and that makes it feel even more intense. But this wasn't even due to that. Demiurge was actually just in a more severe mood than his colleagues had ever seen him in before.

Albedo, however, whom he was hitting with those emotions that had gone past hostile and into murderous, seemed no different than usual. "It was what Lord Ainz decided! We can't—"

"Why?" He cut off Albedo's sentence like the blade of a guillotine. "Why did you, who so vehemently opposed him going to E-Rantel without a guardian, give him the go-ahead in a situation like this? You must have still been worried about him."

Albedo nodded and Demiurge's expression warped distinctly. "Then I'll ask again! Why did you let him go?!"

The room was vibrating with rage. It was a display of emotion that was unbecoming for Demiurge.

Cocytus looked on as the pair glared at each other, his expression worried.

"...And part of his explanation was a lie. You understand that, right?" Demiurge asked in a voice heavy with suppressed anger.

Albedo nodded again, and Cocytus clicked his jaws. The hard, high-pitched sound was one that both Albedo and Demiurge knew meant he had a question.

"...Just a bit ago you repeated Lord Ainz's reasoning for going alone word-for-word as you heard it, and you didn't think there was anything strange about it? When you consider what he said, don't you think it would be safer if we attacked in waves? Wouldn't it be safer if we all took turns chipping away at Shalltear's health and magic?"

"...That's what he means, Cocytus. There's no way Lord Ainz didn't think of a plan that we came up with so easily. He lied bravely—to hide some other reason."

“AND THAT WOULD BE?” Cocytus asked.

“That we don’t know…which is why I’m asking: Why did you let him go if you understood that much?”

“He was like a different person compared to a few days ago!”

I have no idea what you mean, said the look on Demiurge’s face. He opened his thin eyes a bit and urged her to continue.

“He didn’t have the face of a man. How to say… I realize this will sound disrespectful, but he had the face of a child who wanted to run away.”

“He didn’t look like that to me. Maybe it was just your imagination?” Demiurge had flicked his eyes to the Crystal Monitor. They could clearly see their master walking through the forest.

“I wonder… I don’t really think I would misread the face of the man I love, though…” She followed that up by shifting her gaze, the look of a charmed woman on her face.

Demiurge was already irritated, and that look really rubbed him the wrong way. “So?! Then what did it say this time?”

“This is where his true will lies. As a woman—and it may be rude to say so, but when the man a woman is in love with is trying to carry out his intentions, she doesn’t feel like standing there nit-picking. Besides, he promised me that he would return.”

When Albedo announced she had nothing more to say, Demiurge snapped at her with obvious displeasure all over his face. “As I thought, you were naive. Making decisions based on emotion and not reason. Lord Ainz is the last remaining Supreme Being. If danger finds him, it is *our* role to eliminate it. We should perform that role even if he reprimands us and puts us to death afterward!” There was a clatter and Demiurge stood.

“Where are you going?”

The voice calling after him was small.

"That's obvious. I'm mobilizing my subordinates and—" At the sound of a blade being unsheathed and the feeling that came with it, Demiurge turned around and stared at Cocytus, who had drawn a katana—a god-tier katana. "...I see... So this is why you gave strict orders to come here when you called me, Albedo?"

"That's right, Demiurge. The seventh floor has already been blockaded on a joint order from Lord Ainz and me, and the minions have been seized. It goes without saying whose orders I would follow when it was a question of yours or Lord Ainz's!"

"...You fool. How will you take responsibility for this if he dies?! He's the last of the Supreme Ones! We should be devoted to him completely!"

"He'll be back."

"Where's the guarantee?!" Demiurge opened his eyes wide. They weren't eyes—but jewels. He had neither pupils nor irises, just innumerable tiny sparkling facets.

"Believe in your master. That's the job of a creation."

Demiurge worked his mouth for a moment and then snapped it shut with a "well, maybe."

Even among the Nazarick NPCs, who all devoted themselves completely to the Forty-One Supreme Beings, their positions on loyalty were slightly different. Naturally, Demiurge's and Albedo's ideas of how to be loyal were different.

But Albedo's thoughts on loyalty had a huge impact on Demiurge. Still, he was anxious. How could he not be? That's why he'd been talking about a successor before. *If Ainz disappears like the other Supreme Beings, who will we devote ourselves to? We were created to be loyal, so would our existence lose all meaning?*

Trying to hide his emotions as they bubbled up, he returned to his chair and sat down in rough motions that didn't match his usual personality. "If something should happen to Lord Ainz, I'll have you step down from your position as captain of the floor guardians."

"...YOU WOULD HAVE HER STEP DOWN FROM A POSITION CHOSEN BY THE SUPREME ONES? DEMIURGE, THAT'S BLASPHEMOUS!"

Cocytus was shocked, but Albedo just smiled. "It's fine. But Demiurge, if Lord Ainz comes back safe and sound, then if something like this comes up again, you have to go along without complaining."

"Of course."

"So Cocytus, what do you think Lord Ainz's odds of winning are?"

Cocytus, looking discouraged, gave his assessment. "THREE TO SEVEN. LORD AINZ IS THREE."

Demiurge's shoulders shook slightly. Cocytus was the greatest warrior present, so he couldn't ignore his ominous pronouncement.

But Albedo was different. She heard and then smiled a sweet smile with confidence and conviction mixed in. "Okay. Then let's pay close attention as Lord Ainz overcomes that disadvantage and wins."

•

After leaving behind the other two, Ainz walked toward Shalltear's location. He was able to walk in a straight line without getting lost, even in the forest, thanks to his skills.

As he exited the trees, Shalltear, looking like a doll, having not changed at all since the last time they'd come, came into view, and Ainz found himself feeling pity. At the same time he was furious at himself, and even more furious at whomever had used the World Item.

“Shit,” he spat in barely a murmur. But the sentiment was violent. So much so that even the process by which his emotions were suppressed as an undead was insufficient to push it all down. “In order to search for my friends, I want to spread the name Ainz Ooal Gown far and wide, no matter what it takes. Still, to avoid getting caught up in needless fighting, I’ve been proceeding quietly, so why in the world did this happen?” He had no idea who had used the World Item on Shalltear, who they were affiliated with, or what their purpose was. “I don’t know who did this, but if they got any information out of her…I’ll kill them.” His dark thoughts slopped out. Even his supposedly immobile bone face seemed to twist with hostility and murderous intent. “I’ll make them heartily regret their foolishness. Did they think they could pick a fight with Ainz Ooal Gown and get off easily?”

Putting those thoughts into words, he was finally able to process his irritation. The real fight would start now. He needed to switch gears.

“This is so stupid, though. I know there’s an easier way to do this.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “…Is this guilt? Or do I want to avoid it…? Do I just want to run away?”

Shalltear was the strongest guardian, but not by much. If the guardians took her on in waves, they were sure to win. There was only one reason he hadn’t chosen that option.

He didn’t want to watch his precious children fight one another to the death.

If someone defied Ainz Ooal Gown of their own free will, he would readily view it as revolt and use everything in Nazarick’s power to destroy them. If it was that NPC’s intention, he, as the ruler of Nazarick, had to answer it.

If it was just their programming, he would have tried to find a middle ground.

But neither of these was the case with Shalltear. This time it was

mind control, and it was Ainz's mistake to not have considered that possibility. The blame fell on him.

So he wanted to settle things himself.

Ainz took off a ring. It was a cash store item that let him come back to life with barely any penalty. Its removal was a sign of his indomitable resolve. He didn't want the possibility of resurrection to cause any carelessness.

With a solid determination that was different from desperation, Ainz cast his eyes toward the sky. "Still no enemy attack. Nothing currently registering on Nazarick's intelligence magic... There's no surveillance?"

Normally Ainz would be rolling out several magical defenses. The spell he'd cast in Carne as a countermeasure against intelligence-gathering magic was one of those.

Back in the *Yggdrasil* days, friendly fire had been off, so they could cast intelligence magic between allies, no problem. In this world, it was different. If Albedo or one of the others tried to detect him, the spell to resist it would cast immediately. If that happened, he'd clash with Nazarick's defense system, and in an unlucky scenario, he might end up losing a ton of health.

In order to avoid that, he canceled the linked spell and dialed back the response to just finding out who had cast the intelligence spell. What he knew from this was that no one from outside Nazarick had their eye on him.

He couldn't understand it and racked his brain. *Could she really have just happened to be placed here?* "And did Albedo catch on to my huge lie? Sheesh. Still, I can't... Isn't this a gamble, Shalltear?"

Of course, there was no response from Shalltear with her vacant expression.

Ainz looked at her, came up with a plan, and felt a bit like he

wanted to run away.

Before he'd been talking tough to psych himself up, but standing here now was heavy emotionally. Even if he was prepared to die, or perhaps *because* he was prepared to die, the vestige of Satoru Suzuki's mind was frightened. It wasn't a *Yggdrasil* battle that was about to begin but a real fight to the death—he was risking his life.

This wasn't like the fights he'd experienced now and then since coming to this world, the ones with opponents like Nigun or Clementine, where victory was assured because of how overwhelming the gap in combat ability was; this time he didn't know if he would live or die, and he was starting from a disadvantage.

If I weren't an undead, and—

"If I weren't the ruler of Nazarick and I weren't representing our guild, I probably wouldn't even be able to make a fist." Ainz laughed aloud. Even just that made everything better.

Fear of death was nowhere to be found. Neither was he anxious about defeat.

Pride and his shining memories gave him strength.

"I am Ainz Ooal Gown. With that name, I can't be defeated."

He would simply prove that his position as master of the Great Tomb of Nazarick wasn't a sham.

Ainz turned his piercing eyes to defenseless Shalltear.

"...Well then...how about we begin?" Ainz barked and began casting. From all the many spells he possessed, the one he had carefully chosen went into effect—a tier-ten defensive spell. "Body of Effulgent Beryl!" Ainz's body was bathed in a green brilliance.

"Heh-heh-heh!" He laughed derisively as the spell finished, never once taking his eyes off Shalltear. He felt a deep satisfaction at having

been right on the money with his guess—a huge gamble had paid off. "Just as I thought, huh? You won't even prepare to fight unless you consider my actions totally hostile. It's just like a game." It was basically the same behavior mind-controlled monsters had exhibited in *Yggdrasil*. That this world worked according to the game's theory eased the overwhelming disadvantage. "In that case, sorry, Shalltear, but I'm gonna have you wait a little longer till we start."

Ainz cast spell after spell. "Fly! Caster's Blessing! Infinity Wall! Magic Ward: Holy! Life Essence! Greater Full Potential! Freedom! False Data: Life! See-Through! Paranormal Intuition! Greater Resistance! Mantle of Chaos! Indomitability! Sensor Boost! Greater Luck! Magic Boost! Dragonic Power! Greater Hardening! Heavenly Aura! Absorption! Penetrate Up! Greater Magic Shield! Mana Essence! Triplet Maximize Magic: Explode Mine! Triplet Magic: Greater Magic Seal! Triplet Maximize Boosted Magic: Magic Arrow!" There were even more than these. Ainz cocooned himself in magic. "Okay, let's go!" His cry upon completing his preparations was as much for him as it was for Shalltear.

The spell Ainz chose for his first attack was an extreme one. It was a spell that went beyond the ten tiers—a super-tier spell.

Spells that belonged to this tier were magic and yet they were not. First off, they weren't cast with MP. Instead, the number of casts per day was limited. The number of uses per day started with one at the time the player became able to us it but would go up with each ten levels after 70. And the number that could be acquired was one per level. They were closer to skills than spells.

So then the question arose: Couldn't a level-100 player defeat Shalltear if they rapid-fired all four uses of each of their super-tier spells? Certainly super-tier spells were far more destructive than tier-ten spells. If it were possible to rapid-fire them, just calculating the amount of damage alone, only a small amount of opponents could take a level-100 player. Shalltear wouldn't be counted among them, so victory was ensured.

But it didn't work like that.

Super-tier spells couldn't be rapid-fired. First, they each had a set amount of time it took to cast them. It was possible to get rid of that with a cash store item, but there was another penalty that made rapid-firing impossible.

When one of the players on a team cast a super-tier spell, all members of that team were penalized with an inability to cast spells for a time, essentially imposing a freeze. It was set up that way so that rapid-firing supers wasn't what would decide guild wars when they broke out, so there was no way to cancel the freeze by means of a cash store item or skill.

For that reason, there was a tendency to consider whoever cast the first super-tier spell in a PvP battle stupid—because the established theory went that the one who used their trump card without knowing their opponent's hand would lose. And in practice, there were very few examples where someone who was the first to cast a super-tier spell won.

But Ainz cast a super-tier spell as his first move. There was no panic or confusion on his face. A cold gleam radiated inside his vacant orbits.

A huge 3-D magic circle, a dome thirty feet across, radiated outward with Ainz at its center. The construct let off a pale-blue glow as patterns like translucent letters or symbols appeared across it. These latter changed at a dizzying rate, the same pattern never lingering for more than an instant.

Had he employed a cash store item, he could have cast immediately, but he didn't. He took his eyes off Shalltear and scanned the area. "So there was...no ambush? Or do we wait and see? This would be a good chance to attack me, though..."

Casters unleashing a super-tier spell had low defense. And super-tier spells were set up so that if the caster took over a certain amount

of damage during the implementation, the cast would be canceled. That was why it was basic strategy to have any caster using a super-tier spell under the protection of a few teammates. In other words, if someone was going to attack Ainz, otherwise defenseless, this would be the perfect chance.

But there was no change in his surroundings. “Are they just being careful?” Ainz laughed and shrugged.

Somehow or another, he was convinced that Shalltear hadn’t been positioned there as a trap but rather just abandoned. “Man, what is going on, though? Well, I’m not omniscient, so I can’t know everything. And if I were, I wouldn’t be in this mess, anyway.” He mumbled to himself and awkwardly rotated his shoulders.

While casting a super-tier spell, it wasn’t possible to move around much, so in a way, it involved standing around waiting like an idiot for time to pass.

In order to use his time wisely, Ainz took a bent gold plate out of space. It clung tightly to his wrist when he put it on. On the plate were numbers, and they changed as each second went by.

What this was goes without saying—it was a watch. He put a finger to the plate to fiddle with the numbers.

“Momongaaa! I’m gonna set the time!” The sugary voice of a woman, so young sounding it seemed forced, rang out, filling the area. It was the type of voice that made him want to scowl.

“Why can’t you turn off this watch’s voice…?” Ainz grumbled, but it was just an act. If he messed with the creator’s toolkit, he could turn off the sounds; he just hadn’t.

The voice in the watch was one of his guild members’, the creator of Aura and Mare, BubblingTeapot. Taking away her voice would make this watch no different from any other.

She was quite a talented voice actress, and the reason she’d given

the watch the type of voice that was liable to make anyone's eyebrows tilt in a disapproving manner was because she had gone a bit overboard with her teasing. Peroroncino, who created Shalltear Bloodfallen, was her little brother and good friends with Ainz. It had been the result of his categorization as one of her little brother's friends.

Or maybe it wasn't teasing. She often voiced Lolita characters in eroge. That bizarre voice from the watch was one of those. So maybe she had just done it as if it were one of her voices for work.

Ainz smiled, wryly recalling his friend complaining to him that if his sister's voice was in a game he'd wanted to get, his desire to buy it went way down. "Seriously, though. I would always get surprised if I was surfing the Net and her voice suddenly popped up."

After speaking to his guildmate who wasn't there, he reached into space and took out a few flat wooden sticks that were all about six inches long. Each one had something written on them, like "Tsukuyomi," "Houyi's Bow," "Earth Recover," "Iron Fists of a Lady Teacher," and so on.

There were several scroll holders attached to Ainz's belt, and he carefully stuck in the sticks, paying close attention to the order.

By the time he'd finished those preparations, the magic circle's bluish glow had grown stronger. He could cast the super-tier spell now.

"Okay, shall we?" Power flowed into his determined eyes—

"Super-Tier Magic: Fallen Down!"



1

There was a noise—a sizzle, like a burning stick being thrown, dropped into water.

The spell beyond tiers turned everything white as if the sun were manifesting on the earth. The heat created expanded quickly and greedily devoured everything in the area.

The spectacle of total death lasted about five seconds. But it felt tens of times longer.

Eventually the white world disappeared, and inside the huge circle that was the wake of the extreme heat, which had vanished as quickly as it had appeared, the scenery had completely changed.

Nothing was affected outside the area of effect. The trees were just as they had been, and the soil was still teeming with life as a forest's should be. It was the same forest—an utterly normal forest.

What was left inside the area of effect, however, was a surprisingly vast plot of dead, blackened earth. The terrible amount of heat that had raged through had burned up the vegetation; all that remained were bits of the roots of huge trees that had carbonized. There were even parts of the ground that had turned to glass, and some patches were still smoking.

Standing right on the edge of this world that allowed no living things, Ainz was pierced by a horrifying presence coming from inside.

There was only one possible source.

There was no other being that could have survived an amount of heat that would kill all life.

"K-kaahhhhghghg, kahhhhgh." Mixed in with the strange voice that reached Ainz's ears was something like the sound of grinding teeth.

When he turned toward the voice, he saw crimson in the monochrome black world.

Her whole body smoking, Shalltear Bloodfallen sneered. "That wasn't enough to kill *me*!" Her crimson eyes, full of enmity and murder, bore straight at him. "Lord Aiiiiiinz! That kiiiiinda hurt!" She stepped slowly forward. The scorched earth cracked under her feet.

Closing the distance to Ainz one step at a time, she swung her Pipette Lance. It made a *voom* noise as it sliced through the air, announcing that she could still fight.

As an arcane-magic caster, Ainz displayed his true worth in ranged battles, and without a vanguard, being advanced upon was truly disadvantageous. But he didn't panic and shrink away. He spoke to her with the arrogance of a champion awaiting a challenger. "It was a lame present, but did you like it, Shalltear?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Shalltear laughed as if absolutely delighted. "Wonderful! It's a shame I have to kill you when you have so much power, Lord Ainz."

"'Lord,' huh? Why call me Lord? Who's your master now?"

"Well that's a funny thing to say. Isn't calling you Lord Ainz the natural thing to do? You're a Supreme Being. And my current master is..." Her face twisted into a frown of confusion. "...Why am I fighting

you, Lord Ainz? No, wait. It's because you attacked me. But why did you attack me? ...Now that I've been attacked, I have to use all my power to destroy you? Why?" Eventually Shalltear seemed to reach some sort of conclusion, and her previous grin was stuck back on her face. "I don't really get it, but since you attacked me, I have to destroy you!"

"...I see... Got it, your condition, that is."

"Oh, what's this, Lord Ainz? You seem kinda down—can you beat me like that?"

"Hmph. You sure you aren't misunderstanding something? How is someone like you going to win against Ainz Ooal Gown? Ainz Ooal Gown doesn't know defeat. Shalltear, *you'll* be the one on the ground crying before *me*."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How terrrrrifying!"

Clad in killer intent, Shalltear approached at a speed that made gale-force winds look slow. As she ran, each footfall caused an explosion of burned soil. Clementine's charge had been fast, but Shalltear's was in a different realm altogether.

Ainz was grateful for a body that didn't need to blink. She was so fast that if he had even once, he would have lost her.

Leaving behind her laughter, Shalltear dashed with the tip of her lance pointed at Ainz. Normally this kind of lance charge would be performed by a knight employing the speed and weight of his horse, but with Shalltear's incomparable upper body strength and astounding speed, hers was easily more powerful.

The words *deadly strike* weren't serious enough for the fatal blow that pierced the sky as it stretched toward Ainz's chest.

But even as the lance's tip approached, Ainz was immobile. He just spoke kindly. "That's dangerous, you know?" It was a warning full of affection given out of concern for Shalltear. That was one way to

intercept her attack.

When Shalltear stepped on it, Triplet Maximize Magic: Explode Mine went off. The three resulting shock waves blew her quite a ways back.

Ainz told her even more kindly, “Forgive me for the late warning, Shalltear. I put some mines there. Maximize Magic: Gravity Maelstrom!” He threw a jet-black sphere at her. It was a swirling ball of supergravity that would deal a formidable amount of damage, even to someone of Shalltear’s level.

In response, Shalltear immediately recovered her stance from being blown back and waved her free hand. “Wall of Stone!” A huge stone wall pushed up through the ground to surround Shalltear, and Ainz’s supergravity maelstrom crashed into it. The wall warped, was crushed, and broke easily into pieces, but the gravity maelstrom disappeared at the same time.

“Hmph! Maximize Magic: Rib Hold!” Ainz cast in further pursuit. The giant ribs that jumped out of the earth attacked Shalltear like a bear trap. The tips of the bones were sharp and bit deep into her flesh.

“Gah!” Usually this spell would restrain the enemy after dealing damage, but Shalltear slipped away easily. She was immune to the restraint thanks to her complete resistance to travel obstruction.

“...Shalltear, I forgot to tell you: I took the liberty of laying traps all around here. How about if you flapped your wings and flew over?”

“I’m not about to let you provoke me like that, Lord Ainz! You have traps in the sky, too, I’m sure?”

“It was that obvious?”

“Yes. Completely obvious.”

They chuckled at each other, and Ainz’s red flames lowered a tad.

As if I did all that. The only mine spell he had planted was that one. There wasn't any magic in the sky. This wasn't a battle where he had that kind of MP to spare. He wasn't in a position to allocate any for spells that might not be triggered.

So he smiled when she fell for his bluff that he'd told to reduce her mobility. But he didn't relax. In this battle, Ainz was the challenger. The tightrope he was walking was very fine, and it would be easy to misstep. He knew that, so he wasn't stupid enough to get happy over a small victory like that.

"But I'd expect nothing less from you, Lord Ainz. You won't let me close in with such a simple charge, huh?" Her eyes and voice indicated sincerity, but Ainz could sense her will to fight was just as strong as her praise was genuine.

Now this battle really begins. If Ainz had had a body that could sweat, his back would have been a waterfall. *All I can do is deal as much damage as I can until my MP runs out…*

If he didn't, his defeat would be certain.

Shalltear, wielding her Pipette Lance, glared at the caster standing leisurely before her, her master, Ainz Ooal Gown.

It wasn't clear why she had to oppose the one she should worship, but her heart told her that wasn't a problem. *You can take your time and think it over after you kill him*. Having calmly thought that far, she twisted her lips into a smile at what an overwhelming advantage she had.

Casters, particularly arcane-magic casters, possessed immense power, but it was dependent on MP. If they ran out of MP, their fighting power disappeared, naturally. While Shalltear was a faith-magic caster, she was also proficient in pure physical combat. Even if she ran out of MP, as long as she still had HP she could continue fighting.

So even if she couldn't chip his HP all the way down, his defeat would be inevitable if he ran out of MP. And even if it wasn't, he was an arcane-magic caster, so he had no effective way to recover health. *So be afraid of your HP and MP gradually slipping away! Ah-ha-ha! Imagining Lord Ainz's terrified face makes me so excited!*

So what was the most appropriate tactic? Make it a war of attrition.

She had the battle planned broadly in her head as she tightened her grip on her god item, the Pipette Lance. This weapon's special ability was that when it dealt damage, it would heal the wielder's wounds proportionally. No, it was specialized for that. That was why Ainz didn't summon anyone to be his front line when he should have been in the back—he knew that weaker monsters would just be fodder for the Pipette Lance's healing power.

Oh, poor Lord Ainz. You have to fight me all by your lonesome with no vanguard!

Wearing a sadistic smile, she cast Mana Essence. It allowed her to temporarily see how much magical energy the target, Ainz, had left. *He really has a ton, huh? How did he get that much power?* He had more than one and a half times the amount of MP she had. Look as one might, there was nobody in Nazarick with that much power. *As befitting a Supreme One, he is truly a nonstandard undead... Is he a super undead—no, a godly undead?*

That said, she had no intention of losing. She didn't know how it was for the other guardians, but an opponent specialized in ghost magic wasn't a tough one for her. *Still, I gotta stay on my toes. But why isn't he wearing his god gear?* Ainz's robe was looking somehow shabby. It had none of the dignity of his usual raven-black one. *Is it a countermeasure against me? That could very well be. But we're not gonna get anywhere just staring at each other. First, I should set up some healing for this long fight...* "Regenerate!"

As Shalltear cast a spell that would gradually heal even undead, recovering from the super-tier spell damage, Ainz was already

attacking again. He cast the same supergravity ball as before. “Maximize Magic: Gravity Maelstrom!”

As the black sphere rapidly approached, the option of using the same wall as before flitted across Shalltear’s mind, but doing that wouldn’t put any pressure on her opponent. In order to get him to use a lot of magical energy, she’d have to attack.

She chose—“Greater Teleportation!”—to close the distance via teleportation and aim for a close-quarters fight.

Everything before her eyes warped, and the scene that should have changed instantaneously felt slowed down. *Tch!* She judged it was the effects of the teleportation-obstructing spell Delay Teleportation.

She was right, and although he should have been within her lance’s reach, Ainz was still quite far away. Instead, there were three flashing orbs of light before her eyes—Drifting Master Mine.

The mines had detected her, and right as they were about to burst, she dispersed herself using Mist Form. This skill allowed the user to turn their body into mist—perfect for a vampire. Despite the word *mist*, this was not a transformation into the natural phenomenon but rather into an insubstantial astral body. In this form, she could completely avoid attacks in the real world, including the three explosions.

“Nice try!” Along with his yell he unleashed Maximize Magic: Astral Smite. The spell that dealt a blow to insubstantial forms attacked Shalltear’s whole body—and her defense was slightly lowered when she was mist.

Her dispersal was canceled with the resulting pain. Her lip split, and she felt a trail of something slimy run out. “Brilliant. That’s Lord Ainz!”

There was no response to her sincere praise. Just a suspicious look.

“Don’t you believe me? But I really think it was a move worthy of

one of the Supreme Ones, deserving my complete devotion."

As expected, he was great in a magic battle. But—Shalltear's lips formed a smile—his MP had gone way down. Certainly, Shalltear's health had also gone down, but it was within the levels she'd calculated, whereas Ainz's MP expenditure had exceeded her expectations. She was already getting ahead. In other words, she was one step closer to victory.

Okay, how about this? Shalltear made her next move. "Force Sanctuary." The area around her was wrapped in white light, a barrier of pure magical energy. In exchange for being unable to attack herself, the absolute protection completely shut out her opponent's attacks. Through the magic, she saw Ainz rush to cast a spell. "Yeah! You better hurry and cast something!"

At a glance, Ainz was winning this fight. Shalltear already knew the reason.

Ability—no.

Gear—no.

Preparation—yes.

Yes, his advantage stemmed from preparation done in advance, from countless defensive spells. A caster's strength could change dramatically with preparation. Of course, this went for Shalltear as well. That's why Ainz had to destroy the wall surrounding her as fast as possible and keep her from getting her defenses in order.

Shalltear's aim was to get him to spend MP—she had no real intention of casting defensive magic she wasn't even that good at—and she laughed at him as he scrambled. *Oh, you're dancing in the palm of my hand just like I wanted, Lord Ainz. But is the reason you're not using scrolls, staves, or wands because you want to save them? Or because you're too frazzled? Or maybe because you know they won't do much to me anyway…? Hmm?*

Ainz's magic resistance made him immune to lower-to mid-tier spells. It didn't matter how great a caster his opponent was. Shalltear's resistance, on the other hand, varied depending on the level and ability of her opponent. If the caster was weak, she'd be immune to even tier-ten spells, but against a powerful caster—like Ainz—tier one was probably the limit.

The effect of scrolls also depended on the maker's skills, but they were usually created at the lowest level and fixed there. For that reason, there was a good chance that a scroll's spell wouldn't pierce her defenses. That might have explained why he wasn't using any.

While Shalltear was calmly analyzing the situation, another of Ainz's spells was taking effect. "Maximize Magic: Thousand Bone Lance!"

Erupting from the earth in a wide area around Ainz, innumerable—not just a thousand or two thousand—giant spears made from bone thrust forward with great force. A cluster of the spears pounded into the barrier over and over with loud crashes as they drove home. Then, with the sound of breaking glass, Shalltear's barrier grew brittle and was smashed apart. Shattered fragments scattered into the air, then melted away to leave no trace behind.

"Tch!"

She'd spent a fair amount of MP on that barrier, and it had been broken in one hit. Something like this went beyond all her expectations, but as she stewed over it she was attacked again.

"I'm not done yet! Maximize Magic: Thousand Bone Lance!"

"Greater Teleportation!" She picked a spot in the sky as her destination to stay out of Delay Teleportation's area of effect.

"Don't think you're getting away! Maximize Magic: Gravity Maelstrom!"

He must have been tracking her teleportations somehow. His spells

were always flying at her right after she moved. Shalltear still had enough breathing room to admire his combat skills—that was an amazing move he wouldn't have been able to pull off without all his experience.

"You're awfully calm." Ainz, whom she had to eliminate for some reason, asked her, "How can you be so at ease when you're fighting *me*? We're the same level and I have better gear. My area of expertise is worthless, but that's my only disadvantage. Even so, I'm sensing that you have this absolute confidence that you'll win, that you're a rank above."

Hearing her master ask "Why?" made Shalltear feel superior. "Ah-ha-ha-ha! Then let me show you how calm I am. Did you know I have this skill?"

She flashed a smile reserved for victors and released Impure Shock Shield. She emanated shock waves with the reddish-black color of blood all around her and the jet-black ball of supergravity that had been about to hit her was blown away on impact. This was one of Shalltear's skills that worked as both offense and defense.

"Tch!" She heard Ainz click his tongue. If her previous tongue click had been because things hadn't gone her way, then Ainz's was due to his lack of wiggle room.

"Ah-ha!" she laughed at him and performed another skill.

A huge divine war lance almost ten feet long appeared in her hands. Its head was particularly large, and the pure feeling emanating from it was proof it was no ordinary weapon. The way it sparkled silvery white as it reflected the light of the sun was beautiful.

"Hmm... I've never seen that before. You conjured it with a skill?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! For how long will you be able to keep up that brave front, Lord Ainz? It seems like you don't know what this is, so allow me to explain. Its name is Purifying Lance!" She sneered at his ignorance and shot the lance. Shot, not threw. It automatically

floated into the air and raced across the sky. She'd spent MP to give it a targeting effect, and—

"Guh-hagh!"

—it pierced Ainz's chest.

Shalltear felt like she saw his immobile skeleton face twist severely into an agonized grimace. "Ah-ha-ha-ha! Just what I'd expect from a weapon treated as holy magic! Seems like it was pretty effective, huh?"

Another huge lance appeared in Shalltear's hand. She threw it immediately. This second one approached at speed that could not be dodged and went through one of Ainz's shoulders.

"Guh! Don't underestimate me! Maximize Magic: Reality Slash!"

He cast an immensely powerful spell. It was a weaker version of World Break, the ultimate super-dreadnought skill that the strongest warrior class, world champion, could acquire at its highest level, but it was still a top-class destructive spell among those on the tenth tier. Space was rent, and blood spurted from Shalltear's shoulder like a fountain.

Then the powerful attack spell, which should have canceled almost any magical defense, was negated—the blood flowed back into Shalltear's body as if time were being rewound.

"What did you do?" Ainz demanded.

"Don't be so surprised, Lord Ainz. It's a skill." The tone of her reply was steeped in her superiority.

"Tch! So you can use all the skills you want, but none of mine work?"

"Hey, don't say I'm being unfair. This is the power Lord Peroroncino gave me, so perhaps this is just proof he was superior to

you."

"So that's what you're trying to say." Before Shalltear could wonder at the sudden slackness of expression and quiet lack of emotion in his voice, he began to yell again. "Let's do this, Shalltear! No matter what skills you have, my magic can top them!"

"Aha! A shootout? I definitely won't lose!"

Maximize Magic: Reality Slash and Purifying Lance crossed each other, and both parties were grazed.

As they did the same moves again, Shalltear laughed at how foolish it was. At the same time, she wondered why she was fighting.

Shalltear Bloodfallen was guardian of the first, second, and third floors of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, created as a loyal retainer by one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings of Ainz Ooal Gown, Peroroncino. So wasn't it strange for her to be fighting Ainz Ooal Gown, formerly known as Momonga? She'd turned her blade on one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings.

If it had been orders from her Creator, she would have followed them and fought with all her might. She wouldn't have hesitated even if it meant turning all of Nazarick against her. But that wasn't what was going on.

No matter how much she racked her brain, she couldn't find the answer. But she couldn't stop herself. Someone was whispering to her that she had to do everything in her power to slay him.

While watching Ainz's MP go down with Mana Essence, she repressed the laughter welling up within her and turned back time to heal.

Using stronger spells meant using more magical energy. Among them, Reality Slash belonged to the group that had a bad rate of damage to MP expenditure. The fact that he was spamming it must have meant that he thought the battle would be decided by how

much health he could chip off her before she made it a close-quarters fight.

His strategy isn't wrong. He's right to aim for a short fight. If it lasts longer, the advantage is mine... It could also be because debuffs don't have much effect on undead... Shalltear smiled and gazed at the man using immensely powerful magic over and over. *That's fine. I'll play that game with you.*

Some of Shalltear's skills were unlimited use, but some of them did have limits. She could reverse time to heal up to only three times in a day. Purifying Lance had the same restrictions. She could use Impure Shock Shield only once more.

But there was nothing appealing to her about saving them. She'd already decided to finish this at close quarters. Her skills and MP were just tools to chip away at Ainz's MP. *I can still fight if I run out of MP, but for him it's fatal.*

Shalltear was fighting with her total HP and MP, while Ainz was fighting with just MP. This huge gap between them had existed from the beginning.

Shalltear cast a gentle eye on Ainz, who had no choice in this fight but magic—less like the look from mother to child and more like the pity of the strong for the weak.

After loosing her final Purifying Lance and taking the Reality Slash shot that came flying back as if he were saying, *Here's what you get!* Shalltear began the second phase of the battle. "So how about this? Summon Tenth-Tier Monster!"

"Oh, no, you don't! Greater Rejection!"

The summoned monster disappeared in an instant. Ainz's triumphant voice reached Shalltear's ears. "I'm not about to let you buy time, Shalltear!"

I shouldn't laugh at him. If not a skill, I'll just use MP! Struggling

to keep her expression neutral, she cast a spell. “Oh? Then I’ll be more direct! Maximize Magic: Vermilion Nova!”

“Triplet Maximize Magic: Call Greater Thunder!”

Deep red flames that should have been Ainz’s weakness surrounded him. Meanwhile three giant bundles of lightning bolts pierced Shalltear’s body.

As she sensed a big chunk get taken out of her health, a look of displeasure appeared on her face for the first time since the battle began. *Is he protected against fire?*

No matter how strong someone was, they couldn’t possibly protect completely against all attributes. There was a limit, even for grotesques with racial resistance who chose classes that had mastered resistance and were fully equipped with god items that added resistance. On the other hand, if one narrowed down the number of attributes, it wasn’t impossible to raise one’s resistance—even of one’s weakness—up to complete.

In other words, Ainz had probably given up on other attributes in order to get complete fire resistance. *Well, that’s a pain. I don’t know what attributes he left open*. The only way to find out would be to use Life Essence to monitor his health as she tried spells of various attributes. *I don’t wanna do all that. I’ll just go for what I know has to be a weak point…* “Maximize Magic: Brilliant Radiance!”

“Maximize Magic: True Dark!”

Ainz’s body was cleansed by the holy light enveloping him, and the neutral attribute darkness broke down Shalltear’s. It was at that moment—she didn’t miss it: Ainz’s body swayed slightly for an instant. He was already trying to pass it off as changing stances, but she could see through such an obvious move as that. His expression was one of enduring pain.

Shalltear laughed without showing it on her face. *Found your weak spot!*

No, there was nothing he could do about this. Holy was a lethal attribute for undead. It was a pretty hard one to overcome, and impossible if he was putting effort into protecting against fire.

The pair glared at each other and cast their next spells.

Of course, Shalltear chose the same one, Brilliant Radiance.

And then how many times did they go back and forth like that? Shalltear's health was also going down. If she hadn't been sneakily using MP to activate a skill that decreased the effects of magic on her, it might have even reached zero.

I'd expect nothing less. In a battle of magic, Lord Ainz has me overwhelmingly beat in both offense and defense. I pummeled him with holy magic, but compared to me, he hasn't even taken that much damage...although his MP has dropped quite a bit. She could see his MP, and compared to when they had started, it had gone down quite a lot. Still, the flames known as the will to fight still blazed in his eyes. *Ah, it gives me the chills. I can't wait to see that wonderful man's determination get crushed, to see him warp into a beaten dog.*

She fought back the sensations that were building in her lower body. If she were in her room, she would have sent for her vampire brides, but unfortunately they weren't around. And of course, she couldn't take care of herself where she was at the moment.

Then I'll have to get my satisfaction via combat.

She looked at Ainz with eyes gleaming with lust and licked her lips. If she widened the gap between them even farther, how would he react?

"Okay, I'm going to take the liberty of healing. Maximize Magic: Greater Lethal!"

Living things healed with justice energy and took damage from negative energy. Undead were the reverse. For that reason, Greater

Lethal, which poured out a ton of negative energy, was the best healing spell for undead like Shalltear.

"I see. I'm also running low on health—Greater Lethal."

Shalltear blinked a few times. She couldn't believe what was happening before her eyes, but seeing Ainz's wounds heal, she had to accept it.

"Huh? How come you can cast the faith-magic spell Greater Lethal? Was it on one of your classes' spell lists?"

"Nah. Unfortunately this isn't my power, but an external one I got from a magic item—an item that lets me use one spell of my choice. But then I have to use up a whole gear slot for it; I can't piggyback any magic-boosting skills on it, and it's not as powerful as it would be when a real faith-magic caster uses it, so honestly there's not much point."

Grumbling about what a pain it was, Ainz cast it again, while Shalltear murmured, "Well, there goes one of my plans..." But his MP would still go down, so it wasn't that big of an issue.

Having decided that, she cast it again and healed her wounds. At level 100, it wasn't so easy to fully heal.

Then, at the end—

"Maximize Magic: Greater Lethal!"

"Body of Effulgent Beryl!"

—having healed up, Ainz was casting defensive magic on himself.

Shalltear was a faith-type magic caster, and Peroroncino hadn't given her info about that spell, so she had no idea what Body of Effulgent Beryl did. She did notice that the green aura he'd had reappeared, so she assumed it must have been some kind defensive spell. *That's right. I'm about to come at you directly*. Right when she

was about to make her move, brandishing her Pipette Lance to her heart's content, she heard a complaint that seemed like it had just slipped out.

"This fight is so lopsided."

The comment caught her off guard, and her grip on the lance relaxed a bit. Then she thought, *So you finally noticed?* But she made the rational judgment that saying it aloud would be rude to her master, Ainz... *Master? Lord Ainz?* The words kept popping up in her mind, and they puzzled her. Why was she up in arms against her master, Ainz? But that's just how things were. There were many things in the world that were impossible to understand. It had to just be one of those.

Despite deciding that, she felt on a separate note that Ainz's behavior was lacking consistency. She called out to him in a voice that made it hard to feel like they were in the middle of a fight. "If it's so lopsided, why not withdraw?"

"Well, yeah, but..." She had the feeling his supposedly immobile face twisted into a bitter grin. "I...yeah. I'm very selfish, Shalltear. I don't want to run away." Ainz looked to his empty bony hand, and following him as if he'd tugged her, Shalltear looked as well. "It's something nobody would understand, or maybe they'd think it's stupid, but at this moment, I'm feeling really fulfilled as a guild master. I wonder...why that is. I was always the guild master, but the majority of what I did was odd jobs and regulation. It's not like I stood at the head of the line to lead everyone or anything. But now I am fighting on the front lines for the guild... Maybe I'm just self-satisfied."

"Is that what it's like? A man's pride?"

"May...be? Could also just be...despair. Oops, we put the damper on our fight with this boring conversation. How about we start back up?"

2

Ainz calmly looked on as Shalltear moved into a fighting stance with her Pipette Lance. In order to win, he had to get through this close-quarters fight.

The armor on Shalltear's back bulged, and bat wings grew through it. Ainz knew what would happen next.

Several large bats born out of her back flew into the air. They were elder vampire bats created with Summon Kin. A swarm of vampire bats followed.

They weren't very strong, but Ainz couldn't just let them do what they wanted. He immediately cast a spell: "Shark Cyclone!"

A tornado over three hundred feet tall and over one hundred and fifty feet wide suddenly appeared. Black with dirt it had whipped up, it drew in the bats as they tried to get away and trapped them inside.

There were shadows gliding along inside the raging winds of the tornado. They swam as if they were in the ocean—sharks twenty feet long. They flocked to the bats, which were desperately trying to fly against the wind, as if food had been dropped onto the surface of their water. Effective against flying creatures, the spell showed off its true worth; the sharks ripped off the elder vampire bats' wings in the blink of an eye and chomped them to pieces.

While they went to work on chomping on the vampire bats, there was something biting into the raging winds. It was a crimson lump that flew straight through the tornado at high speed. Its tip was stuck out, and it left a fiery afterimage like the trail of a jet.

Ainz was unable to respond well enough and sharp pain ripped through his body. He could feel all the bones making it up getting crushed and scattered.

While he was distracted in that one instant, Shalltear moved right up in front of him and thrust her terrible weapon into his chest. Crushing bones along its way, the tip all but pierced his back.

"Gah!" He gasped in pain. The hit from the weapon with a battering attribute had taken a huge chunk out of his health.

As an undead, Ainz could handle pain. It was suppressed automatically after reaching a certain intensity, like his emotions. That's why even a combat amateur like Satoru Suzuki could function calmly without getting tripped up by it.

But this was severe.

This felt like his life was actually in danger. Starting to feel far removed from everything, similar to the darkening of one's vision after severe blood loss, Ainz's—No, Satoru Suzuki's fragile mental state faltered.

But Ainz's will was stronger than that.

The man fighting this battle right now was not Satoru Suzuki. It was the highest ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Shalltear's attack was unrelenting as he groped for his next tactic. The blade still inside him, she pushed deeper and deeper. As the tip sank in, the thicker point of the lance drove home. The sensation of his body being ripped apart; the pain coursing through him; his health plummeting.

These sensations were what made Ainz activate Body of Effulgent Beryl. The aura of green around him shattered.

The tier-ten spell Body of Effulgent Beryl, in addition to decreasing damage taken from battering weapons for its duration, allowed onetime full immunity from the damage. By having Body of Effulgent Beryl absorb the damage from the lance, its tip moved out of his body as if time had been rewound.

From the position he'd been pushed by the lance, Ainz cast a spell at Shalltear, who wasn't quite sure what had happened. "Wall of Skeleton!"

Countless armed skeletons made up the bone wall that now stood between the pair. Their weapons came down on, stabbed, and swiped at Shalltear—but not a single one reached her.

"Maximize Magic: Force Explosion!"

Invisible shock waves raged around Shalltear. The bone wall took them, then warped dramatically, and finally broke into pieces. The collapsing bones made a sound like rain falling as they scattered. But they had done some good for Ainz even just by securing him a bit of time.

"Release!"

At Ainz's command, Greater Magic Seal launched thirty shots of white light each from three magic circles, for a total of ninety. They were neutral-attribute Magic Arrow spells. As they streaked through the air, they were as beautiful as the beating of an angel's wings, but these were angels of death.

Tier-one spells couldn't get past Shalltear's magical defenses. Something probably felt off about him casting a spell that wouldn't work, so she scrambled to dodge to the side, but the white lights turned at a right angle in pursuit and pummeled her like a sudden rain shower.

The barrage of ninety white spells took a huge chunk out of her health. The shots that had hit her had been upgraded temporarily to the equivalent of tier-ten spells via a skill.

And Ainz's attack wasn't over yet. "Soar, Triplet Obsidian Sword!"

Three shining black swords appeared in the air. They flew immediately toward Shalltear as if by their own wills.

Don't bother me! Shalltear seemed to say as she slashed them away with her Pipette Lance. But even after being flung away, the obsidian swords went after her. It would be incredibly difficult to break these swords of magic with physical attacks.

"Magic Destruction!" Shalltear used up what little remaining MP she had to launch a magic-canceling spell. It erased two of the obsidian swords, but the remaining one continued to attack her.

Magic Destruction's chance of cancellation depended on the skill of the casters. In other words, they now knew for sure who the better caster was.

"Ahhh, how annoying!" Shalltear ignored the sword that kept slashing at her and closed in on Ainz. That small amount of damage wouldn't hurt her at all.

She swung her Pipette Lance and whacked Ainz. He was weak against battering damage. Unable to ignore it, he went flying and cast Fly in midair to regain his balance. But then—

"Shit!"

—he lost composure and yelled for the first time since the battle had begun.

His health wasn't so low that he couldn't recover from the blow. The problem was the phenomenon occurring before his eyes. The health that had been sucked out of him was healing Shalltear. It was healing her faster than the obsidian sword could deal damage. In order to make her lose the health she'd just recovered, Ainz cast a spell. "Triplet Maximize Magic: Reality Slash!"

The three simultaneous tears in space caused blood to spurt out of Shalltear's body, but she ignored it and approached to close the distance, with the obsidian sword following behind her.

All Shalltear can do now that she's out of MP is close in and fight with her Pipette Lance at a range that will work...? That's my least-

preferred way to fight... Ainz fired another attack as he retreated using Fly. “Triplet Maximize Magic: Reality Slash!”

Although he was running away, the distance between them shrank with each eye blink. That was the difference between the speed of Fly and the speed of flight buffed with a skill.

Still spouting blood, Shalltear was now right before his eyes, and she balled up her body—at that moment space distorted and shock waves raged around her.

That’s not Force Explosion! It’s Impure Shock Shield!

The shock waves born of her skill broke the obsidian sword and headed for Ainz, eventually blowing him dramatically back.

“Gugh! Gah!”

She must have piggybacked some other skill on top of Impure Shock Shield. Ainz rolled twice, three times across the dirt until Fly and his items forcibly corrected his stance. Perhaps because he didn’t have semicircular canals, or maybe it was due to his being undead, he could glare at Shalltear without feeling dizzy at all.

The knock-back effect was lucky. Ainz didn’t want a close-quarters fight. If there was distance between them, it meant he had time to use more magic.

He was about to cast a spell when he saw that there was light gathering in front of Shalltear trying to regain human-size form.

Ainz knew what that was.

His immobile face twitched as Shalltear flashed a grin reserved for those who were crushing their opponents.

“So here it is... It’s finally here. I figured it would happen at some point, but that point is now, huh? Einherjar, her greatest ace.”

The white light took on a completely human form. It resembled its user quite a bit besides its white armor and faintly glowing white skin.

Ainz knew that it didn't just resemble her in looks. Some of her magic abilities and skills were lost, and it didn't have any items, but its gear and ability points were exactly the same as Shalltear's. By race, it wasn't an undead but a construct, like a golem, but resistance-wise it was about the same as Shalltear.

In other words, it was another Shalltear, one that could perform only direct combat.

Ainz had been expecting this, of course, but having to fight two level-100 opponents at once was still a huge burden.

Then she summoned countless kin: wolves, bats, a pack of rats, and so on. None of them was as big a threat as Einherjar, but the power of their numbers couldn't be taken lightly.

I can use an area-of-effect spell to finish off all of those at once, but what can I do about Einherjar?

Ainz was watching to see what Shalltear would do when Einherjar charged at him. This he hadn't expected. *Why isn't Shalltear moving? Wasn't she planning on crushing me with the power of numbers?* His question melted as he shifted his gaze and the flames in his vacant orbits grew large.

"That's so low!" he shouted without thinking. *That's allowed?*

What he saw was Shalltear annihilating the kin she'd summoned by running them through with her Pipette Lance. She was healing herself with the Pipette Lance by using it to kill her own kin.

It goes without saying that the amount of healing the Pipette Lance could provide depended on the amount of damage dealt. Ainz was the same level as Shalltear and had high defenses, while her kin were weak. It was obvious which would heal her better. Ainz watched as she recovered more and more health.

She stabbed one after another with her lance, destroying them. It was so cruel and totally unforeseen.

Perhaps it was only natural to have such a tactic, given that friendly fire was on? Ainz recomposed himself and adjusted his strategy to these unexpected circumstances.

Still, he couldn't completely suppress the shock of seeing this scene that would never have been encountered in *Yggdrasil*, the killing of one's own kin to heal oneself. Einherjar had reached him and he took a square hit.

"G-gwah!" Ainz grunted as he went flying and Einherjar charged after him with a blank expression.

Taking hits as he retreated, Ainz decided it was time to unleash an ace of his own. Shalltear didn't have infinite summons, so she must have been almost out. Still, things would take a turn for the worse if she used all the ones around her for healing. He'd been thinking to use this when Einherjar appeared, so everything was going according to plan—except for the fact that she was killing her kin to heal.

Ainz had sixty class levels. One of his classes was a rare one that almost nobody in *Yggdrasil* acquired. The reason he had it was that he had ignored strength and focused on mastering the ghost magic tree as part of his role-playing. It was a coincidence born of a lopsided build that would have never been seen among those trying to make strong characters.

To even get the class, one had to be a level-5 overlord highly specialized in ghost magic who had reached a minimum level of 95.

In most games, it was common for these undiscovered classes, once discovered, to be written about on strategy sites and shared. But in *Yggdrasil*, knowledge was valuable, so there weren't many people who would readily talk to others about, say, World Items, for free. It was especially the case for classes that could be used as trump cards.

The name of the class was *eclipse*. The explanation of it in his status said, “Only overlords who have truly mastered death can acquire this class and eat away at all life like the sun is eaten away at in a solar eclipse.”

And what Ainz was about to unleash was a skill that was acquired at the highest level, 5, of the eclipse class, which could be used only once every hundred hours—eclipse’s ace move.

It was called the Goal of All Life Is Death.

That moment, a clock pointing to twelve appeared behind him. And he cast a spell. “Widen Cry of the Banshee!” A woman’s screams echoed throughout the area like ripples—and they caused instant death.

It was difficult to resist because it had been strengthened with his various other skills. But of course, it didn’t work on Shalltear, who was undead, or Einherjar, who was treated as a construct, because they were immune to instadeath.

What was strange was that some of the kin, who weren’t immune to instadeath, didn’t die.

Ainz thought it odd but wasn’t shaken. *On the contrary, things have to be that way*.

Ker-chk.

Along with the noise, as the magic began to take effect, the clock behind him began to count down.

As Einherjar’s lance attacks chipped away at his health, he looked at Shalltear out of the corner of his eye—and lost hope.

So I won’t be able to just end this? Fuck, Peroroncino, you gave her that to counter me? You didn’t have to give her a revival item! Dammit! he griped in his head to one of his best friends in the guild.

While he scrambled to evade Einherjar's attacks, twelve seconds passed on the clock and the needle came around to point heavenward again.

Then Ainz's ace move activated.

In that instant, the world died.

That was not a metaphor.

It died. All of it.

Einherjar, who'd been brandishing its lance before him, turned to white mist and began to collapse. It died instantly despite being a construct and having no life. In the same way, all Shalltear's kin were enveloped in a power they couldn't resist and died off.

That wasn't all.

It brought death even to the lifeless air and made it impossible to breathe within a diameter of almost 250 yards. If there was anything trying to breathe and live in that area, its lungs would have been polluted by the dead air and it would have died from that.

The soil also died. Everywhere within those 250 yards around Ainz instantly turned into a desert.

In this world consisting of nothing but death, the only things that moved were Ainz and Shalltear.

This was Ainz's ace move. The Goal of All Life Is Death was a move that strengthened spells and skills that had instadeath as an effect. The effect strengthened by this skill would kill even an opponent with an ability that made them immune to instant death, once a certain time elapsed.

The way to avoid it was, as Shalltear had done, to use some kind of resurrection effect on oneself within the twelve-second time limit.

That instadeath skill boost was also why the air and soil had died. In *Yggdrasil*, the effect hadn't gone that far, but in the real world, it was expressed more accurately. Death to everything in equal portions.

This unfamiliar result took Ainz by surprise as well. In *Yggdrasil*, the dirt didn't die. *So this is how much magic changes when you bring it into the real world...* He nearly shook his head in disbelief.

But he swallowed his surprise. The reason he didn't openly express it was pride. Like a ruler, and with an arrogant tone that seemed to say it was all according to his plan, he spoke softly to the sole survivor.

"How does it feel to witness power that can deal death to the dead?"

A fresh breeze blew in, dispersing the dead air. Their voices traveled to each other on the same breeze.

"Marvelous. I'm impressed as always, Lord Ainz. All my kin are dead. But your MP is almost gone, huh? And my health? It's nearly full."

The MP indicator reflected in her eyes showed he was as good as empty. There was a tiny bit left, but only enough for maybe two or three uses. No matter what spells he used, he wouldn't be able to kill her.

He wouldn't be able to kill her even if he used that super-tier spell that could deal so much damage to undead, Fallen Down.

"How much do you have left, about two tier-ten casts? You have such immense magical energy that it's hard to tell."

"Yeah, I guess about two."

He's not lying.

I won.

A satisfied smile appeared at the corners of her mouth.

The winner and loser had been definitively decided. The winner was Shalltear Bloodfallen, and the loser was Ainz Ooal Gown.

With a victor's leisure, she praised the fight of the vanquished. "You were brilliant. Just as your MP is almost gone, I have none left, and I'm also nearly out of skill uses. You fought truly well to this point." She tightened her grip on her Pipette Lance. All she had to do was finish him off in direct combat.

"You're exactly right. I'll accept that praise without a fuss."

Shalltear's forehead twitched.

She didn't like it—that carefreeness. But the snake raising its head—its name, anxiety—she crushed.

No matter how hard she thought, she couldn't come up with any way that Ainz could turn the tables on her in this situation. He'd already used his one-shot ace. So his attitude was that of a condemned man waiting out his last days. It wasn't carefreeness but the resignation of preparing oneself for the worst.

Shalltear walked slowly forward, closing the distance between them. She was confident that even if he tried to cast a spell with a scroll, she could attack faster—she had no need to hurry.

Ainz didn't run. He just stood there stock-still. Sensing that he'd resigned himself, Shalltear asked, "Any last words?"

"Hmm... For thinking I was at a disadvantage, that I'd be a small fry once my MP was gone, and holding nothing back, using your full powers, I offer my deepest thanks, Shalltear. If you had fought cautiously, things never would have gone this well."

"...Huh?" Shalltear doubted her ears. She'd heard something outrageously strange just now.

Ainz continued talking quietly, with little regard for her. “What’s important in PvP is how much false intelligence you can feed your opponent. For example, changing your gear so that holy doesn’t really do much, but making it look like it does, and keeping fire as your weak point as it was all along. But...I did miscalculate a little bit. I figured you would use Life Essence, so I used False Data: Life, but that was pointless. If there’s a next time, make sure you keep an eye on your opponent’s health. It can affect the planning and execution of your strategy quite a bit.”

This was not what she’d been expecting him to say.

She didn’t understand what he was saying. No, she didn’t want to.

He just hasn’t accepted his defeat yet—no, she sensed a tough will. Not only that, he gave off the vibes of one who was about to be victorious.

As she walked, closing the distance, her steps slowed due to something welling up from the core of her heart... *Why aren’t you backing up? You’re an arcane-magic caster! There’s no way you can beat me at this distance! It’s a bluff!*

“When my friend Peroroncino was making you, he told me all sorts of stuff. Well, since coming to this world I got everyone’s data in my head, but apart from that part of my past I want to pretend never happened, the NPC I know best is still probably you.”

“You said...you didn’t know my skills...”

He laughed at her. “That was obviously a lie! I just thought you’d get cocky if I said that. If you had saved Impure Shock Shield or something for the end, it would have been impossible to tell who would win.”

Shalltear felt like the blood flowing within her (which was meaningless, since she was undead) had all drained out, and she was steeped in the anxiety that was welling up instead.

It wasn't a lie.

There was no fabrication in anything he'd just said.

Ainz Ooal Gown was standing before her and not running away because he thought he could achieve victory.

"Ahhhhh!" A scream wrenched open Shalltear's lips and gushed out. She did nothing but turn all the emotion surfacing in her chest into sound.

Shalltear was supposed to be the lion, and Ainz was supposed to be the rabbit. *I was supposed to be the hunter*— No, that wasn't right. This was originally a fight between lions. Shalltear had just begun thinking of him as a rabbit on her own.

Driven by panic, she thought she would finish it now, and if he could withstand this hit, she'd just keep hitting him until he died. She thrust her Pipette Lance—

Just a bit faster than that, Ainz's spell went into effect and he simultaneously moved his hand to rip off his robe.

A hard sound rang out.

Shalltear did a double take.

It was impossible.

The Pipette Lance had been repelled by a mass of pure white.

If it had been a spell, she'd have followed up right away. She knew he had only a sliver of MP left, so she'd have considered it a futile struggle. But for a moment, she couldn't understand what had happened and stood there dumbfounded.

The pure white gleam was not magic.

It was armor.

It was pure-white armor. A huge sapphire was set in the chest, and it emitted a purifying, holy light.

Ainz had put on that armor and repelled her Pipette Lance with it.

Their difference in height made it appear as though he was looking down at her.

No…maybe he was actually looking down at her.

She should have been furious, but she didn't have time for that now—because a cold voice reached her ears.

"I was also planning from the beginning on ending this with a close-quarters fight."

•

Bang—the table was struck. The blow made the whole splendid table shake.

They'd been watching the whole fight so far.

The sound of the table being pounded had echoed out several times, but it was the first time this particular spectator hit it.

"OF ALL THE—! THAT'S A SUPREME ONE'S ARMOR!"

"…You mean Lord Touch Me's?" Albedo looked up from the crystal monitor and murmured one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings' names.

"YES! THAT'S LORD TOUCH ME'S ARMOR!" Cocytus yelled again as if he was agitated—no, he was just actually agitated.

The pure-white armor in which Ainz was clad was that of one who had acquired the world champion class; only nine existed in all of

Yggdrasil.

World champion was a special class that was given only to those who triumphed in the official tournament. And the admins awarded world champions a piece of special gear.

Touch Me had chosen that pure-white armor. The deluxe armor, worthy of a world champion, had abilities that surpassed god items—it was more in the realm of a Guild Weapon. Of course, since it was an award for that tournament, only a world champion could equip it, but...

"I'm pretty sure casting the spell Perfect Warrior to turn into a warrior gives no class penalties and lets you use weapons and whatnot." Demiurge's voice contained awe.

Then Albedo murmured, "He thought out all of that..." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

By turning into a warrior using magic, it was possible to equip gear that normally would be restricted to specific classes. This was a measure taken by the devs to allow everyone the ability to enjoy more particular gear like shuriken, vajras, and kasaya. But this turn of events meant that gear only world champions who had won the official tournament should be able to equip was not an exception.

"WOW...TO THINK HE CALCULATED IT OUT SO FAR... I'M IMPRESSED."

The fight wasn't decided yet. Even so, the guardians who were gathered greatly admired the resourceful plan he'd come up with, and that he had the experience necessary to carry it out.

Watching their now even more divine master with a sentiment quivering in their breasts that was neither quite delight nor commendation, they heard the table get struck again.

"THAT'S—!" Sure enough, it was Cocytus shouting.

3

A slicing noise.

“Gyaaaah!” Shalltear screamed; she’d seen something so impossible that she left herself open. The katana that had entered near her shoulder slashed through her sternum to her unmoving heart.

She staggered back, dyeing her crimson armor even redder, and glared at him in shock.

Ainz clenched a single katana in his hand. It was huge and sharp, crackling with electricity. It had sliced through Shalltear’s armor like it was paper.

Her armor was legend tier, but even among god items, there was only a handful that could cut it so easily.

Which meant only one thing.

Yes.

In Ainz’s hand was one of those elusive items.

Along with blood, she spat the words, “Takemikazuchi Style Eight!”

She jumped out of the way as he swung again. She danced well beyond the range of the sword; that distance was proof of her fear.

But that was nothing to laugh at—especially for someone from the Great Tomb of Nazarick. On the contrary, it was clear they understood the feeling. There was no one unafraid of a weapon wielded by a Supreme Being.

This was the weapon of one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, the Warrior Takemikazuchi—if that was really what she was seeing.

“It’s like I said, Shalltear: Ainz Ooal Gown doesn’t know defeat.”

Ainz took a firm step forward, and Shalltear skittered back two. “You should know, Shalltear, that the power of all forty-one members of Ainz Ooal Gown is gathered before you. Understand that you had no chance of winning from the beginning.” Ainz spoke quietly—with absolute conviction and unbreakable confidence. He’d gotten through this battle on thin ice, where one wrong move would have seen him swallowed up by a bottomless lake, and now he had closed in on her.

Both of them had zero MP. Shalltear’s HP was higher. But by using Perfect Warrior to turn into a level-100 warrior, Ainz had ensured his abilities surpassed that of Shalltear, who was not a pure warrior. In terms of gear, Ainz was also ahead. He was no longer fighting at a disadvantage.

The quiet voice of the man who had rid himself of overwhelming disadvantage boomed. “Shalltear Bloodfallen. You call me the highest ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick and the leader of the Supreme Beings. Now witness the power of the man you worship—sear it into your retinas!” That was the signal his attack was coming.

Ainz charged and swung the katana with both hands from over his head.

Shalltear jumped away again and simultaneously got into a charging stance. She meant to leap at the opening when his sword came down. Takemikazuchi Style Eight was actually an *ōdachi*, so like the Pipette Lance, precise movements were difficult.

Takemikazuchi Style Eight cleft the air, trailing lightning; its tip suddenly stopped right before cutting into Shalltear’s chest, and he stabbed with godly speed.

No matter how much muscular strength someone had, if they swung with all their might, the more speed their weapons picked up, the harder it would be to stop partway through. In the case of long, large weapons, it was even harder.

That meant the reason Ainz had been able to do it was that he hadn’t swung with all his might. In other words, he assumed the first

attack would be dodged and this was his follow-up; he'd made her think there would be an opening on purpose.

Thinking ahead to fit together each move was a given for a warrior. All Ainz had done was put the idea into practice. But without the fight in E-Rantel, he wouldn't have been able to do that. He would have just taken huge swings at her and endured her counterattacks.

If he had become a level-100 warrior but was unable to make the most of his abilities, it would have been such a waste. It was the same as driving a car. While both a practiced driver and someone who just had a license could drive, when it came to handling diverse situations, there was a huge difference.

This was experience—the "weapon" Ainz thought would give him the greatest advantage in his fight against Shalltear.

This'll be hard to dodge, Shalltear judged calmly, focusing on the tip of the sword thrust toward her at a godly speed. But a lunge was a dangerous move. If she could use that weakness, it might be possible to get a big chance. *Then…there's nothing I can do but…*

Having resigned to sacrificing her left hand, she maneuvered it into the path of the oncoming thrust. The moment the katana stabbed her, she gently moved her hand in order to skillfully divert the piercing force. The sword that penetrated not her chest but her left hand kept its momentum and ripped through flesh and bone to bore farther into her arm. That and its lightning struck her from the inside.

Even for an undead, the feeling of being bored into like that was horrifying, but she pressed her lips together—into a smile and definitely not a smile that someone taking damage should make. But she wasn't faking, either. This was what she'd wanted to happen.

She tensed the arm with the sword inside it. With Shalltear's flesh clinging to it, the *ōdachi* came to a halt.

Any stab has the potential to miss its mark, get stuck in flesh or

whatnot, and become immobilized. Since in that sense, it wasn't a very user-friendly move, it had a weakness. That's why Shalltear, who knew that, had been able to make a big opening by sacrificing her left hand. Still, it had been quite a feat, requiring her to move in sync with the split-second timing of the katana stabbing and piercing through her.

"You've got a hole there!"

Ainz had no way to block the Pipette Lance with his *ōdachi* lodged in Shalltear's arm.

Right as she was about to unleash a flashing blow with her lance, she saw something shocking. Ainz let go of the *ōdachi*, one of the highest-tier magic items there was, without a hint of regret and whipped out one of the wooden sticks stuck in his belt.

"Ha! You fool! You can't stop my Pipette Lance with that thing! And you abandoned your weapon? You made the wrong move!" It was clever of him to not stubbornly cling to Takemikazuchi Style Eight, but there was no way he could win without it.

With a sneer, she vowed to hit him hard enough to deal more damage than she'd taken to her arm and thrust her Pipette Lance with all her might—only to have it repelled with a clang.

"Huh?" she uttered, dumbfounded.

There was no longer a wooden stick in Ainz's hands. Instead he was wielding the two *kodachi* that had repelled the Pipette Lance. One glittered blindingly like the sun, and the other gleamed softly like the moon. Smoke billowed from his hands, and it seemed as though the weapons were rejecting his undeadness.

"Where's that hole, Shalltear?"

"Wha—?! How?! Wh-what did you—?" She couldn't feel the weight of the sword that should have been piercing her arm. It was as if when Ainz readied a new weapon, that one couldn't exist in the same

world and disappeared. Shalltear had a hunch that it had gone back to where it came from.

"There's no technique. It doesn't do me any good to have a sword in each hand if I can't use them right; it'd be smarter to use just one...?" Ainz murmured as if reminded of something, like someone who wasn't there had been talking to him. "So would you still say that now?"

Without giving Shalltear time to confirm what he'd said, he brandished the moonlight *kodachi* at her, while she was still unbalanced. He made it look like he was aiming for her neck, but he subtly changed the arc of the blade to go for her shoulder. She repelled it with her Pipette Lance at the very last second.

Aiming for that unguarded moment, he moved way into her space. The larger a weapon, the weaker it got when its space was invaded. He knew that well—it was the move of someone with experience.

He swung the solar *kodachi* in his other hand and managed to dart around the Pipette Lance to get in a shallow stab.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" A scream of anguish split her lips apart. The pain of being stabbed with the sword was not a big deal. The searing agony of the holy attribute that flowed into her like a poison, coursing throughout the entirety of her undead body—that was a pain that she could not bear.

With the sword still in her, he moved it back and forth as if to widen the wound.

"Get away!" She had no room to swing her Pipette Lance, so she kicked him. Although he blocked it with a *kodachi*, he couldn't completely kill the force of the blow and was knocked back. Then she saw it. He dropped the *kodachi* and took a small wooden stick into his hands.

The moment he broke the stick, his hands were covered by giant villainous gauntlets with spikes. They were so big it seemed like his

hands might reach the ground even if he was standing.

"Yaaa!" He thrust out his hands along with his roar as he charged.

She blocked with her Pipette Lance without thinking, but the violent shock waves traveled down it and through her body. "Gu-gyah!" With an awkward cry, she was thrown backward by the impact as if she'd been hit by the gauntlets themselves. The damage from the shock waves was not so serious, and the Pipette Lance had protected her from the physical damage, but the magic items she was wearing weren't enough to protect her from the knock-back effect.

Her broken stance was corrected by a magic item immediately, but a burning anger streaked across her mind. "H-how dare you coax such a humiliating noise from me! Before I slice you to pieces, I'll hear the same from you... Huh?" When she looked back at him and found a huge ball of light, all her passionate emotions went out the window.

The radiance of the sun dwelt within the bow Ainz was wielding. The tip of the shining arrow was pointed, of course, at Shalltear.

"I-it can't be. No, no wayyy... Houyi's Bow?"

It was a weapon named after a hero who shot the sun from a country called China that was now divided—as well as the main weapon of Shalltear's Creator.

Nearly all the guardians were protected against projectile weapons, so arrows themselves were not so frightening. But these arrows didn't just deal physical damage—they were packed full of attribute damage. In other words, they were treated as magic and couldn't be blocked.

Shit! I have no MP! I could block them if I had magic! Or even a skill! If I had known this was going to happen, I would have saved a couple of uses... No... The fact that she had no MP left, the fact that she had no skill uses left—both were consequences of the earlier part of their battle. In other words, everything had gone according to Ainz Ooal Gown's plan.

Shalltear roared as her eyeballs turned red—the sour grapes of someone who knew what would happen in the next moment. “You bastard! How dare you use Lord Peroroncino’s weapon! So this was your plan all along?! How did you get that bow? Where were you hiding it? You have some skill where you snap a stick in half and it appears?!”

What the hell kind of trick did he use? It was like the world was giving him preferential treatment.

“A magician never gives away his tricks.”

“So you’re saying it’s sleight of hand?! You can’t just summon Lord Peroroncino’s weapon with a magic trick!”

“...Actually, you’re right. It might be disrespectful to him. Well, to answer your question then, I used a cash store item. More importantly, have you figured it out? That I’ve been in control the whole time?” The ball of light had finished charging and he shot it at her.

Though she knew it was futile, she put her Pipette Lance in the line of fire—the explosion of light filled the area.

As her body roasted in the holy glare, she made a decision: *I can’t pull back*. If things kept up like this, she would run out of options and get overpowered. Maybe that white armor was tough, but it couldn’t go unscathed against the Pipette Lance. She would abandon defense and focus only on dealing damage, relying on the lance’s health absorption powers.

“Rahhhhhh!” Shalltear screamed a rough war cry unbefitting her delicate throat.

The cold voice of the man who intercepted it reached her ears. “The odds are probably...seven to three? I don’t even have to say which is which, right?”

Ainz slowly moved into a fighting stance with a huge, strange ax

that gave off a purple glow and had a blade of red crystal.

Under that pressure, it was hard not to hesitate to close the distance. But she charged. Putting herself out there was all she had left.

"I like that resolve. This is the final phase, Shalltear!"

•

"LORD AINZ WINS." Cocytus shook his head, murmuring in admiration.

But Demiurge, who didn't have any ability as a warrior, was curious. Of course he believed his master would win. But his feeling was that things needed to be evaluated intellectually, so he asked, "Why is that? From my perspective, it seems like the battle is far from decided."

"SHALLTEAR HAS ABANDONED DEFENSE AND IS ONLY ATTACKING NOW. SHE'S NOT WRONG TO DO SO. I WOULD PROBABLY BE FORCED TO DO THE SAME IF IT WERE ME."

"Yeah. Lord Ainz keeps changing weapons—i.e., it's impossible to know what's coming next. With such a lack of information, backing up could be a bad move. I'm sure she's thinking the same now that she's seen the bow and arrow. So all she can do is fight within her Pipette Lance's range. The fact that she can't use any skills or MP is forcing her hand. I…think that's what he intended?"

"I see. So that's the issue. The Supreme Beings never used their weapons very ostentatiously before us, so the only one who really knows about all of them is probably you, Cocytus, right?"

Cocytus shrugged. "I KNOW ONLY THEIR NAMES AND POWERS. IT ISN'T AS IF I'VE SEEN THEM WITH MY OWN EYES."

"Ah. Okay, I kinda get it. Basically, Shalltear has abandoned

defense and then Lord Ainz brings out this ax—"

"BLOODSUCKING MEAT DEVOURER."

"Thanks, Cocytus. As you can see, with Bloodsucking Meat Devourer, he's off-balance and won't be able to aim very well. But against Shalltear, who's not defending anymore, that should be no problem."

"THE FACT THAT EVERYTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED IS ACCORDING TO LORD AINZ'S PLAN IS... WELL, I SAID IT BEFORE, BUT I'M IMPRESSED."

"He must be able to read everything with the omniscience of a god. It's only natural for him to have such powers of discernment, considering he was the leader of the Supreme Beings... Honestly, I feel like he would be able to run Nazarick just fine without us. It's a bit humiliating."

"I'M IMPRESSED BY HIS EXTRAORDINARY ABILITY AS A CASTER—NO, AS A WARRIOR."

"But...it can't be decided yet, can it? If it's a battle of HP, the odds are against Lord Ainz."

Albedo smiled in response. It was a smile that said she was convinced he would win. "He'll be fine."

"How do you know that?"

"He calls himself Ainz Ooal Gown. He's our—everyone's—leader. The ever-lofty Supreme One. He has declared that he will win and staked it on his name."

•

Their respective HPs went down with each blow.

Shalltear healed with every hit, but Ainz was dealing so much damage that the healing was negligible. Meanwhile the Pipette Lance

was chipping away at Ainz's health. The battle had shifted gears into something like a game of chicken.

She took an armor-crushing ax blow, felt her bones breaking, flesh rending. But in exchange, she'd lunged with her lance and could also feel his bones breaking due to the battering attribute she'd given it via a skill.

This feeling... Maybe with this much HP left I can make it? She was glad there was still a path to victory left. If they kept exchanging blows like this, she could squeak by and win.

Once they left defense behind, the fight devolved into just beating on each other. She didn't even think about who would fall first; since this appalling back-and-forth had begun, she'd been anxious, but now a ray of hope crossed her face.

It was because she was calmly calculating out their HP loss in a corner of her mind. All the panic turned to joy.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Her laughter spilled over as she attacked and took attacks. "Ah-ha-ha-ha! Lord Ainz! It seems like you'll be the first to run out of HP! After all this, the basic gap in our health will end up deciding it!"

He threw a bucket of ice water on her idea—and with just one line. "You think so?"

Hearing the voice of the tactician who'd made this such a hard battle, the one who'd been in control all along, she realized how foolish she was.

There's no way that'll happen.

So how was she going to turn around this situation?

She didn't know. A third party told her the answer.

"The allotted time is up, Momongaaaaa!"

A female voice.

It was a girlish voice Shalltear had never heard before, but it made her think of the voice of a woman she knew. If she did that sort of voice, that's probably what it would have sounded like.

"Hey, what do you think time is up for?"

Unsure what the question was getting at, she let her shapely face look honestly puzzled as they repeatedly struck each other.

"If everything so far has gone according to my plan, then this passage of time is part of that, right? So what significance does the time that the watch just alerted me to have for us?"

The ax in Ainz's hand disappeared and a pure-white shield appeared. It matched his armor, so it was as if he'd become a holy knight. It repelled the Pipette Lance with a hard sound.

Why did he fortify his defenses now? It must have had something to do with the voice, but Shalltear didn't know the answer.

His cold voice reached her mixed with the metallic clangs of the single-minded defense to which he'd switched. "It goes without saying: I'm settling this. It means our duel is over."

Why? Shalltear still had 25 percent of her health remaining. *So how is anything settled?* She wanted to scream, but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth.

"...I couldn't defeat you with a single super-tier spell while you had full health. So then wouldn't I get you to use up enough of your health so I could defeat you in one move? Oh, and your health went down quite a bit when we were beating on each other just now."

"...Ah. Ah-ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Shalltear lost all semblance of composure and attacked, as if she wouldn't have to know the defeat that lay ahead if she could stop him

from talking.

It was such a flurry of attacks that there wasn't even a fraction of a second between clangs. It sounded like a hard rain.

But Ainz repelled them all so magnificently it should have been impossible. He continued with the leisure of someone convinced they wouldn't get wet even standing beneath a huge waterfall. "...My direct combat ability is lower, but...in return my magic defense is higher. So you know what I'm trying to say, right? Let's go, Shalltear. All you can do now is pray that my calculations were off!"

"Kuhhhhhhhh!"

There was Shalltear, attacking again and again with the understanding that defeat was imminent. Although her features had grown warped, he could never find her ugly. Facing her, he prepared to make his final gamble.

Although he'd talked big to Shalltear, things weren't actually so guaranteed. Super-tier spells were more like skills in that they didn't use MP, but since they were treated as magic, he couldn't cast one turned into a warrior like he was. If he canceled the magic that made him a warrior, he'd become unable to equip the shield and armor and they'd fall to the ground. He had no chance of blocking any attack Shalltear might unleash at that time. If she piggybacked skills on it, he might not have enough strength to finish things with super-tier magic afterward. That would mean defeat.

But there was no other path to victory.

Ainz watched for his moment. First, he had to cancel the magic turning him into a warrior. Then he had to use the cash store item in his hand.

He chuckled. He'd never blown this many paid items in *Yggdrasil* PvP. This was the difference between reality and a game, between a battle that had to be won and one that was just for fun.

Here's my chance!

He repelled Shalltear's huge swing with his friend's old shield, and power filled his eyes. He canceled the warrior spell and cast the super magic.

The same magic circles as before activated around him, and he was about to break a small cash store item shaped like a little hourglass when—

—he hesitated for a moment. He felt guilty for killing an NPC his friend had so passionately created.

That was a fatal error.

Shalltear didn't let the chance go by. She spotted the item in Ainz's hand immediately and aimed her powered-up Pipette Lance at his arm as if to say, *Oh, no, you don't.*

There was no way he could escape that blow, since he'd canceled his warrior magic—

—*Chills.*

As she was about to crush the item with her Pipette Lance, they went up her spine. She sensed hostility.

When it had appeared she couldn't say, but next to Shalltear was an unmistakably hostile presence. She definitely couldn't ignore it.

In a panic, she took her eyes off Ainz and turned her head to the side to see who was there.

And...there was no one.

There was the 250-yard diameter desert Ainz had created with his magic. Inside was no one but Ainz and Shalltear. Even the hostility she had sensed a moment ago was gone. It was like she had a waking dream—

“Cra—!” she yelped, coming back to herself, but it was too late.

The broken hourglass made the casting time zero.

“Fallen Down.”

At the sound of his voice, a flash about midway between the two, who were not very far apart, enveloped everything.

In the scorching heat, Shalltear knew her flesh was breaking down. Her right hand carbonized and crumbled; the Pipette Lance slowly fell through the glaring white world to where the ground might have been. Her face, pummeled by heat, dried up, and all she could see anymore was white.

Her throat was bone-dry—it wasn’t clear if it was burned up or not, but making any noise was difficult. Even so, she felt there was something she had to say, so the fading Shalltear Bloodfallen mustered the rest of her life force to string together some words. “L… Long live Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, Supreme Being and Nazarick’s strongest.” She paid her sincere respect to the leader of the Forty-One Supreme Beings. Although she could no longer move, her heart felt extremely light, as if the heat waves had burned through her shackles.

At the same time, as her consciousness faded, she saw someone who shouldn’t have been there—the one who had created the situation that had decided the duel.

Undead were basically immune to psychic effects. However, there were some effects that, though functionally identical, were not treated as such. She had used such an effect.

Shalltear just smiled faintly and said, “…Pip-squeak.” Then, as if satisfied, she completely disappeared into the white world.

•

Aura canceled the skill she’d had active, Sky Eye, and put her

lustrously pink pouting lips back to normal. Then, with a discontented look on her face, she jeered at someone who wasn't there. "Youuuu dummy! Stupid idiot, getting mind controlled even though you're undead!"

"Wh-what's the matter, sis?"

"Hmm? Nothing."

Mare followed Aura's line of sight, but from where they were in the forest, no matter where they looked, all they could see was trees. But from the direction she was looking, he could at least make a guess—she'd probably been observing the fight between their master and Shalltear.

If she used her ranger skills, anything within a little over a mile was inside the range of her observation. That was why they'd been cooperating with the eyeball corpses to guard the area.

"S-so is it over?"

"Ya, Ainz won by a landslide."

"I—I figured."

Even the strongest guardian in Nazarick couldn't beat him. Mare pictured Ainz in his mind and thought, *Makes sense*. The one who kept the Forty-One Supreme Beings together could never lose.

"Well then, sis. Uh, umm, are we going to go pick up the items Shalltear had equipped?"

Aura remembered the view she'd had before she canceled the skill. "It looked like Lord Ainz took care of it. We'll withdraw as ordered."

"O-okay." Realizing she was in a bit of a bad mood, Mare agreed without saying anything.

Aura's *number-one friend* had been mind controlled, and on top of

that, she'd turned her sword on the master they were all supposed to love and loyally obey. It made perfect sense that she'd be killed, but it still stung.

4

As he expected, when he opened the list of names in the Throne Room, the place where Shalltear's had been was blank. Now Shalltear's death was official, and it was clear that step one of the plan was complete.

Pain shot through Ainz's heart. Although there had been no other way, seeing the list like this really made what he'd done sink in; even some guilt welled up. He apologized to Shalltear in his head, swallowed his nonexistent spit hard, and turned back to the guardians who were gathered there.

"Now I will perform Shalltear's resurrection. Albedo, keep an eye on her name. If she appears the same as before, under mind control..."

"Lord Ainz, I realize it's presumptuous, but in that event, please allow us to handle it."

Cocytus and Aura were quick to express agreement with Demiurge, while Mare gave a passive affirmation. Albedo was the only one to look on silently.

"Demiurge—" Ainz's reply was cut off by what were very passionate words, coming from Demiurge.

"As a Supreme One, your word is sacred, Lord Ainz, and I am aware that we must protect you even if it means perishing ourselves. But as your servant, I've judged that allowing any more obvious dangers to approach you would be utterly inappropriate." Demiurge's eyes flicked from Ainz to Albedo. "If Shalltear is still in revolt, we the guardians will take care of it. We would humbly ask that you

withdraw."

Ainz understood the guardians' feelings and couldn't make his usual willful comments. "Got it. Guardians, I leave it up to you."

They all bowed their heads at once.

At the sight, Ainz was assailed by a sense of shame.

I'm a pathetic master.

He'd done so much to avoid it but was now leaving the possibility open that the "children" would end up fighting one another—*even though it was my own indiscretion that caused this. Everything is my fault.*

He began to sigh and then swallowed it after noticing the tender love-like expression on Albedo's face as she stood silently by him.

"Lord Ainz, we're happy just being graced by your presence. To whom would we devote ourselves if all the Supreme Beings were gone? Also, even if we knew we were not abandoned, it's still lonely with no one around."

"...I see. It's lonely with no one around, isn't it?" His eyes glided around the Throne Room in spite of himself. The forty-one flags. He looked at the crests on each one. "...Yeah. It really is... In the treasury, too. How stupid..." Ainz's powerful emotions slipped out in quiet remarks, and he gazed at the guardians. "Guardians, protect me! And begin operations!"

As they all gave a spirited reply, he grabbed the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown from where it was floating next to him and pointed it at one corner of the Throne Room.

In the corner was a mountain of gold coins—five hundred million of them. That was how much they needed to resurrect Shalltear. Originally he would have needed to do some stuff with a keyboard, but he knew there would be no problem doing it without one.

The mountain of coins began to lose its shape and slowly changed from solid to liquid. The guardians braced themselves, vigilant, as the melted gold flowed like a river and began to gather in one spot. The ten thousand tons of gold coins shrank as if they were being compressed and formed the shape of a person. Eventually a golden person was made, and the glimmer began to fade.

Soon the golden sparkle was gone, and what remained was waxy white skin and long silver hair. Without a doubt, it was Shalltear Bloodfallen.

"Albedo!" Ainz raised his voice to call her without taking his eyes off Shalltear.

"Please be at ease. It seems the mind control has been broken."

"Oh..." He sighed with relief and felt his mind balance. Then he reached into space, took out a black mantle, and walked over to where Shalltear was lying.

Her eyes were closed, and her chest wasn't moving. Out cold on the floor, she looked exactly like a corpse, but undead were living corpses, after all, so there was nothing strange about that.

Strange...

He'd already noticed her chest was so flat it could easily be mistaken for a boy's. From there his eyes began to wander, trying to find a place his gaze could land. Perhaps it was a given, but since she had just been resurrected, she wasn't wearing any clothes, so he didn't know where to look. He was so flustered it didn't even occur to him to just look somewhere else. Since his vision had improved greatly since his human days, he could see every little detail perfectly. She was just lying there, so her legs were ever so slightly parted—

Ainz hurriedly threw the mantle over her. It spread out in the air and covered her whole body as intended. *Don't be thinking,* What a shame! *I'm undead. I don't have any sex drive! Almost none, anyhow. I was just looking because I was a little curious about the*

unspecified parts beneath her clothes. In Yggdrasil, *clothes would never come off like this, right? That's why I looked! Yeah, it wasn't like I wanted to see if she had pubes or not!* He didn't know who he was making excuses to, but his mind was a flurry of activity as he approached her. The reason his steps were a little slow was probably to let his head cool off a bit on the way.

He purposely ignored the woman behind him who said, "If you're interested, please let me know. I'm available any time..."

Shalltear's crimson eyes opened just as he stood before her, as if she'd registered his presence. She looked around like a groggy human might and then stopped her gaze on Ainz. "Lord Ainz?"

Her tone was absentminded, like she was still sleepy, but it contained a distinct sense of loyalty. Despite having the guarantee from Albedo and Nazarick's internal administration system, it was a relief to feel it for himself. Joyful, he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her to help her sit up.

"Uwahh?!"

Her body was impossibly delicate, considering her physical abilities.

Ignoring her funny-sounding, incredulous gasp, he hugged her tighter. "I'm so glad... No, I'm sorry. This was all my fault."

"Huh? No, I don't know what happened, but you didn't do anything wrong, Lord Ainz!" Shalltear's cold hand reached around to embrace him back. That it was groping him creeped him out a bit, but she had just died after all, so maybe she was testing her sense of touch, and Ainz let her do as she pleased. "Ah, so my first time with Lord Ainz will be here...?" she was saying, but he ignored her.

Albedo, however, raised objections in a flat tone. "...Lord Ainz. Shalltear might be tired. Perhaps that's enough for now."

"Right." It was possible that there were penalties for NPC resurrection like there were for players. This was their first

resurrection since coming to this world, so he wasn't sure. "We'll talk in detail later, but there are a couple of things I'd like you to tell me right away."

When Ainz let her go, Shalltear seemed disappointed and glared daggers at Albedo. In response, Albedo smiled her usual gentle smile. It seemed like they might stare each other down forever, but it ended when Shalltear looked away.

"Yes, as you wish... By the way, Lord Ainz, why am I in the Throne Room? And judging from my state and your reaction, it seems I've caused you some trouble...?"

"That's actually what I wanted to ask you—so you don't remember what happened?"

"N-no."

"...Sorry, Shalltear, but can you tell me the last thing you remember?"

Her memory cut off partway through the events of five days ago. Everything since then had been lost.

Ainz could, like he did in Carne, use the tier-ten spell Control Amnesia to erase and manipulate memories. But even just manipulating memories over a short time period used a huge amount of MP. For five days of memories, it would cost a fortune of MP—more than most casters even had—and be impossible even for Ainz, who boasted a speedy recovery rate.

Of course, it was possible that NPCs were just programmed to have a few days of missing memories when they were resurrected. Or he didn't know if it was doable or not, but it could have been that multiple casters worked together to erase them.

Right now they had too little information to solve the mystery.

The only thing he knew for sure was that the identity of the one

who'd used the World Item on Shalltear remained unknown.

Not knowing who did it is tricky. There's a very good chance they're just waiting for the right time to sneak up on us... Although, I guess we should be glad that's the worst case. Well...we'll take plenty of revenge on the guy who did this.

Ainz forcibly calmed the anger that even his undead mind couldn't suppress and asked Shalltear gently, "Does anything else feel abnormal?"

If it was the same as *Yggdrasil*, she should be fine. NPCs didn't lose levels. Still, he didn't know if it worked the same way in this world. It could even be possible that she had lost levels like player characters did.

Shalltear patted herself down all over and answered, "There doesn't seem to be anything wrong."

"Okay." Right after he answered, he saw Shalltear's face turn to shock and was assailed by the worry that something was wrong.

"Lord Ainz!"

"What?! What happened?!"

"My chest is gone."

At her reply, all the guardians grimaced as if to say, *Geez, we were actually worried!* Even Demiurge had curled his lips into a horrible expression.

"You wouldn't be able to say that if you knew what's been going on!" Albedo represented everyone with her accusation, and Shalltear's shoulders jumped.

Ainz felt so drained he nearly wanted to rest both hands on the floor, but he thought about resurrection while absentmindedly watching the guardians go at one another.

One thing he thought in particular was how great it would be if Clementine, Khajit, and the other people who died in that graveyard had damaged memories when they resurrected.

But that was probably too optimistic.

The cause of Shalltear's memory loss was unclear, and if those people came back to life—via resurrection magic—there was no guarantee that the effects would be the same as bringing back an NPC using gold coins.

While Ainz was thinking all this, Albedo had nearly driven Shalltear to tears with her one-sided accusations. Looking at them, Ainz was sure there was admiration reflected in his eyes.

BubblingTeapot reproaching her little brother Peroroncino. And all the guildmates watching them, laughing. He felt he could see them in the NPCs.

Ainz reached a hand gently into space and stopped, as if there were a pane of glass there. What he felt was loneliness, like the warm place the guardians were at was somewhere different, projected on a screen.

If he entered that place, they would no doubt demonstrate their loyalty, but that was cowering from fear; it didn't give him the same warmth as being with his old friends.

That was too bad.

When he let his hand drop weakly, Albedo must have sensed something because she suddenly turned around and looked at him quietly. Bathed in her gaze, the emotions of which he couldn't read, Ainz nearly asked, *What?* and the glimmers in his eyes grew bigger.

Albedo kindly held out her hand. Ainz hesitated but took it. Then she pulled him into the circle of guardians. Albedo spoke first, and then the other guardians chimed in.

“Go ahead, Lord Ainz, be stern with her.”

“You really should! Let her have it, the idiot!”

“TRULY, I BELIEVE A HARSH WORD IS IN ORDER.”

“She needs to get the message loud and clear.”

“B-but maybe not too h-harsh, uh…umm…er…”

“Hah! Ha-ha-ha!” Even with the guardians looking at him in surprise, Ainz couldn’t stop the laughter from spilling out of his mouth—no, not from his mouth but from his heart.

After laughing enough, Ainz turned quietly to Shalltear. “I told Albedo before, but this isn’t your mistake, Shalltear. I had all kinds of information, but I didn’t think far enough, so I’m the one who’s most to blame. You did nothing wrong—remember that.”

“Th-thank you.”

“I’ll leave the explanation of what happened to you, Demiurge. No objections?”

Demiurge bowed in acceptance.

“By the way, Sebas—”

“Is bait.”

In response to the cool reaction of a man who would use one of his friends as a decoy, the guardians simply nodded and took a subordinate position: *The will of the Great Tomb of Nazarick’s master was higher priority than the safety of our colleague.*

“I don’t want to do it, but I have to… We still don’t know why Shalltear was targeted, but there is a good chance the next target will be Sebas, who was with her. That’s why I didn’t call him back to give him a World Item… Albedo, select some personnel to conduct surveillance around him in utmost secret… Sebas may be bait, but I

don't intend to let him get bitten. Tell the surveillance team members that it's also their role to get in the way if the enemy starts approaching him." Ainz squinted—the red flames shrank a bit—after giving the orders. *We're going to run into the guy who used the World Item on Shalltear at some point. Then it'll be payback time!*

"Understood. I'll keep strength in mind and gather them right away."

"I'm counting on you. We know now, thanks to Shalltear, that resurrection is possible, but my friends created you—I don't want to be put in the position of having to kill one of you again."

The guardians were moved and bowed their heads. They must have keenly felt how much he valued them. Words could do much more when they were said aloud.

Shalltear seemed to have started to realize what had happened to her, and after a flash of shock, her expression was one of unbearable shame. Ainz gestured at her not to worry about it and then someone started talking to him.

"U-umm, Lord Ainz?"

"What is it, Mare?"

"U-umm, er, uh, do we need to restore the site of the battle?"

"Nah, we don't need to. Did you know that when you break a magic-sealing crystal, an immense power rampages through the area and destroys everything?"

"H-huh? It does?"

"...Sorry, that was a lie. But that's how it goes. A lie will become the truth. Magic-sealing crystals are rare, so there's probably no one who can test it to check. Albedo, rough up the one Nigun used. Also, have the blacksmith put some burn marks on the broken armor we ordered so it'll show what a brutal fight I went through."

"Understood."

"Oh, and I might have been a little under-cautious. There are definitely enemies out there waiting for us on the outskirts of Nazarick who can harm us. I want to get started as soon as we can on a fortification plan. As part of that I'm thinking of using my skills to create an undead army. As I said before, I… Hmm? Or maybe I said it only to Albedo? Anyway, I want to make that our highest priority. I want to get a plan in place to collect the necessary corpses from the graveyard in E-Rantel."

"About that, Lord Ainz…"

"Yes, Albedo?"

"With human carriers, you'll be able to create undead up to only the weaker side of middle tier, right?"

"That's right. What about it?"

The highest-level undead he'd been able to create using the Sunlit Scripture corpses was 40. Any higher than that and the bodies broke down over time and eventually disappeared.

"Well, actually I've been thinking about ways to get fresh corpses, as you ordered, and I was wondering what you thought about using nonhumans?"

"…I hope you don't mean the bodies of Nazarick minions."

"No, nothing like that. Subhumans." Albedo smiled a cruel—but beautiful—smile. "Aura has discovered a lizardman village. What if we raided and destroyed it?"

Epilogue

Epilogue

Bellote, the leader of the mythril adventurer team the Celestial Wolves, opened the door to the Adventurers Guild. He was met immediately with looks of reverence and admiration. Bellote was used to that. Compared to a month ago, however, there was a little less heat in their gazes. *Well, there's no helping that...*

He looked over the requests up on the board. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any mythril jobs available. Of course, there weren't that many jobs that only mythril plates could take. But this situation wasn't due to that. There was someone cleaning up all the jobs mythril level and higher.

"...Mr. Momon, huh?" Bellote uttered the name in a tone tinged with complaint. It was the name of a man who slaughtered a supposedly powerful vampire about a month ago.

He hadn't actually watched the fight, but anyone who'd seen the aftermath could grasp what a fierce, bitter, life-or-death struggle it had been; he wasn't surprised Igvarge and the other members of Kralgra had gotten wiped out in it. Anyone who participated in that fight would have died as a matter of course.

When the magic sealed in the crystal was unleashed, the earth in a wide area had been blackened. Part of it had even turned to a desert. The surprising thing was that if they hadn't done that, they couldn't have beaten the vampire. And—"They came back alive..." The ones who had returned victorious were paradoxically, to Bellote who was no match for them, bigger monsters than the vampire had been.

He was so strong he had to respect him by saying “Mister.”

As he was thinking about the overwhelmingly powerful adventurer, the door opened, and a buzz went through the guild like a gust of wind. Though he had an idea what the commotion was for, he turned in the direction the others were looking. He saw exactly who he thought he would—the one everyone in town was talking about, the Dark Hero Momon. He had two giant swords on his back and an uncommon beauty behind him.

“Armor where every piece is made with adamantite... I wonder how much that costs.” The ultra-top-class full plate armor, from which his nickname was derived, had been badly damaged when he’d returned from the fight. It had had burns and claw gashes, but now the raven-black armor was fine. It reflected the light and gleamed with no tarnish—the wizards’ guild had mobilized all its members to repair it.

The plate hanging against his chest indicated a living legend, the admiration of adventurers, the weak humans’ last resort who would protect them from the stronger races—adamantite. His achievements couldn’t be contained under orichalcum—a rank so high there had never been an orichalcum adventurer in E-Rantel.

With the appearance of the kind of hero told about in stories, enthusiasm at the Adventurers Guild skyrocketed.

“The third adamantite adventurer team in the kingdom...”

“So that’s the ‘Dark Hero’ Momon, huh? And behind him is the ‘Beautiful Princess’ Nabe. She’s just as gorgeous as the rumors say...”

“So that forest, supposedly he’s the one who burned it up... Word on the street is he did it with martial arts.”

“Nah, no way... If he could do that with martial arts, he...wouldn’t be human!”

“You don’t think he’s just one of the few who can? Adamantites are

the cream of the adventurer crop. I wouldn't be surprised if he was an adamantite among adamantites."

With countless admiring eyes on him, Momon walked majestically up to the counter. The adventurers who had been consulting with the receptionist made way for the highest-ranked adventurer. The expressions contained respect—and fear.

Momon spoke normally to the lady at the desk. "I finished the work I took on. Ready for the next job, so please pick something for me."

The lady's eyes widened for a split second. Bellote knew why. The job Momon had taken on would have been tricky even for a mythril-rank team and probably would have taken a while. He'd done it in no time.

Yes. Depending on him meant mythril-rank jobs could be cleaned up with no trouble. It was only natural. That was just the definition of the highest-ranked adventurer.

"Business is bad," Bellote moaned. Of course, he wasn't serious. Someone who reached mythril status, barring something crazy, would have saved up enough money to retire and live the rest of their life in leisure. Most of the adventurers in this region who reached that level were in it for reasons other than money.

"Ah, my apologies, Sir Momon. We currently don't have any requests that would be worth your time. I'm sorry, but I hope you understand." She stood and bowed.

"I see—" He'd been about to say something but paused abruptly. After a few seconds, he opened his mouth again. "Okay. That's actually perfect. I remembered something I need to do, so I'll return to my inn. If there are any urgent requests for me, please send them there. You know the place, right?"

"Yes. It's the Golden Glimmer, correct?"

Ainz nodded, put on his crimson cape with a flourish, and set off.

As he passed, Bellote heard his voice faintly. It was so quiet he could hear it only in patches, and he had no idea what it meant.

The words Ainz had spoken that Bellote hadn't been able to pick up were orders to display overwhelming military might in a land far away. "Order Gargantua to activate. Call Victim. As soon as Cocytus gets back, I want the floor guardians out in full force."

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



Character 9



Yuri Alpha (α)

GROTESQUE

The combat maids' "big sister"

Position — Combat maid of the Ninth Floor in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — One of the servants' rooms on the ninth floor

Alignment — Good (Karma Points: 150)

Race Levels — Zombie 10 lv

Dullahan 1 lv

Class Levels — Striker 10 lv

Single Blow 5 lv

Cook 1 lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 51 levels

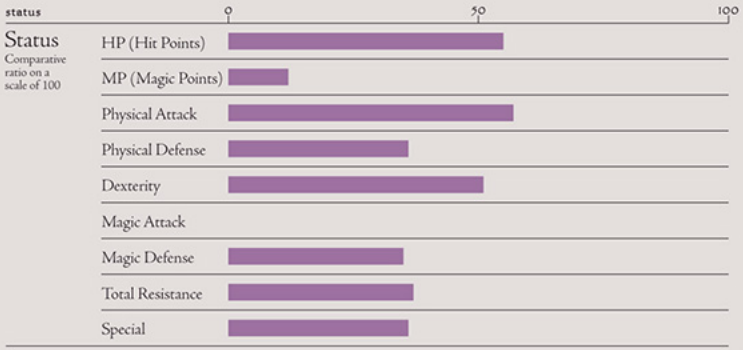
● Race levels ● Class levels

11 acquired total — 40 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



CZ2128 Delta (Δ)

GROTESQUE

Shock troop assault maid



Position — Combat maid of the Ninth Floor in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — One of the servants' rooms on the ninth floor

Alignment — Neutral-Good (Karma Points: 100)

Race Levels — Automaton — 5 lv

Class Levels — Gunner — 10 lv

Sniper — 3 lv

Assassin — 3 lv

Stalker — 3 lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 46 levels

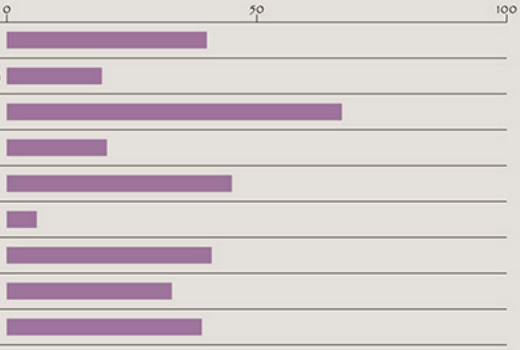
● Race levels ● Class levels

5 acquired total — 41 acquired total

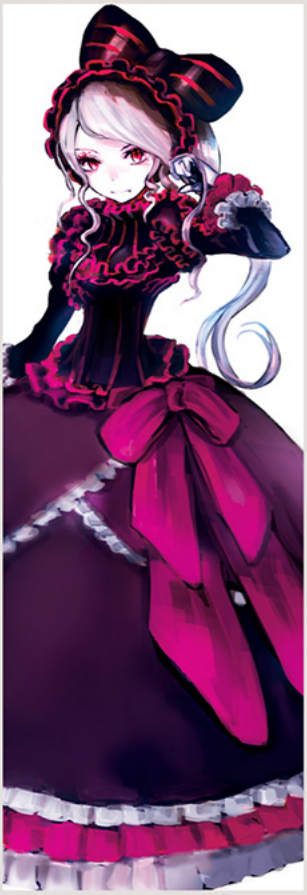
status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 11



Shalltear Bloodfallen

GROTESQUE

The bloody valkyrie

Position — Guardian of the First, Second, and Third Floors in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — The Adipocere Burial Chamber on the second floor

Alignment — Evil-Extreme Evil (Karma Points: -450)

Race Levels — Vampire — 10 lv

True Vampire — 10 lv

Class Levels — Walküre: Lance — 5 lv

Cursed Knight — 5 lv

Cleric — 10 lv

Etc.

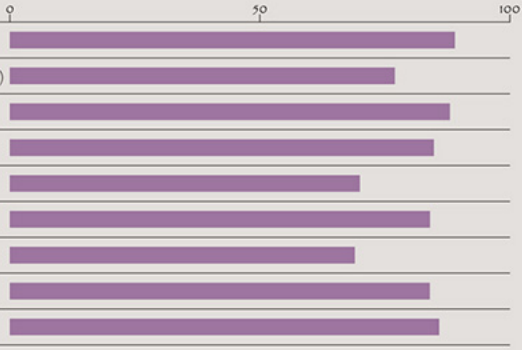
[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 100 levels

Race levels — Class levels

20 acquired total — 80 acquired total

status

Status
Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 12

Pandora's Actor

GROTESQUE

A no-face of infinite variety



Position — Domain guardian of the treasury in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — Treasury Manager's Office

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: -50)

Race Levels
- Doppelgänger — 15 lv
- Greater Doppelgänger — 10 lv
- Etc.

Class Levels
- Expert — 10 lv
- Craftsman — 10 lv
- Castle Lord — 15 lv
- Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 100 levels

● Race levels ● Class levels

45 acquired total | 55 acquired total

status

0 50 100

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

HP (Hit Points)	
MP (Magic Points)	
Physical Attack	(variable)
Physical Defense	(variable)
Dexterity	(variable)
Magic Attack	(variable)
Magic Defense	(variable)
Total Resistance	(variable)
Special	

Afterword

It's been about four months since the last volume—I'm happy to see you again! This is the author, Kugane Maruyama.

So how was *Overlord, Vol. 3: The Bloody Valkyrie*? I hope you liked it.

What am I supposed to write in the afterword, anyway? I wonder this every time. All I do is go back and forth between the office and home, so I'm not confident I have anything interesting to say. I'll just go ahead and reveal (drum roll, please) my four-month schedule.

First, I write for about a month. Then the editor checks it, and in this case, the final story was done in about mid-January. Then after the proofreader's pass, I get the galley. Then I fiddle with it. I guess, including my pass, it takes about another one and a half months from there? This is how the book gets completed.

So all that various stuff happens, and the total time spent on it is… three months, by simple calculation?

That leaves me open for a month before it's published. During that time I write the web updates and portion them off into once-a-month updates.

My job is pretty easy, and I can get home pretty early, so it all works out. If you had to work late every day, it would cut into your sleep, and you probably wouldn't have that free month, either. It'd be

tough.

...But how do people manage to put out a book in three months? I wish someone would tell me.

Okay, from here on out, I'd like to give some thank-yous.

To so-bin, to Code Design Studio, Osako, F-ta: I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks again.

Honey, thanks for all your penetrating insights. I rushed to fix everything.

And to everyone who bought the book, thank you so much. If you have anything you'd like to say...please use the postcard included with the book[*] (sorry, you'll have to pay for the stamp), or if you can see the Web version, I'd be happy if you left comments there.

Okay, next time is...a whole arc of lizardmen! I hope you'll continue reading!

Well then, see you.

KUGANE MARUYAMA
March 2013



Afterword by so-bin

I really liked Ainz at the end.
And irritated Demiurge was
something new (lol).

2013. so-bin

AN ARMY OF DEATH APPROACHES A PEACEFUL LIZARDMAN VILLAGE—AN ARMY OF UNDEAD DEPLOYED BY NAZARICK. ITS COMMANDER IS THE SOVEREIGN OF THE FROZEN RIVER, COCYTUS.



Lizardmen vs Great Tomb of Nazarick.

The lizardman coalition vs. the Great Tomb of Nazarick. The weak are meat the strong shall eat in the merciless world that awaits in Volume 4.

OVERLORD

Volume 4: The Lizardman Heroes

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from YEN ON!



* Please note the postcard was included only in the original Japanese release.