

OVERLORD 4 The Lizardman Heroes

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Illustration by so-bin





OVERLORD

Volume 4: The Lizardman Heroes

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YEN ON
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Prologue

PROLOGUE

"Welcome home, Lord Ainz." Ainz hadn't been to his room in a couple of weeks, and the next words out of Albedo's mouth completely drained him of the will to do anything. "Would you like something to eat? Or a bath? Or maybe…me? ♥"

Ainz imagined a wild dance of hearts behind her head. "… What's with the act?"

"I'm playing newlyweds, Lord Ainz. When the husband takes his pet and goes to his new job assignment alone, there is no better way for his bride to welcome him home than this, or so I've heard. How is it?"

So this was why she hadn't met him on the ground level. He wanted to respond with a flat *And I care why?* but he'd never even dated a woman, much less married one, so he swallowed the comment. He had to keep up appearances. Masculine pride welled up inside him. *What kind of reply does she expect, anyway?* He wasn't confident, but he gave a benign response as if he were. "It was pretty attractive, Albedo."

She smiled happily and said, "Good. Tee-hee-hee!"

Being on the receiving end of such a charming smile, he lowered his center of gravity slightly, preparing for action. He felt something creeping up his back like a snake. It was probably the animal lust reflected deep within Albedo's eyes. But their golden glimmer was deadly serious. If he even joked that he wanted her, she would take it as a promise and descend on him like a beast of intense carnal desire. Words like *sexual assault* flickered through

his mind.

He'd lost nearly all his physical desires, but the clinging vestiges begged to go along with Albedo's mood to see a taste of what would happen next. And his spirit of curiosity, which he hadn't lost, spurred him on.

Stop it, you fool. It was not with his spirit of self-denial but with some similar power (surely related to being undead) that he managed to ignore her intentions.

Before they'd been transported to this other world, he'd warped her personality by editing her backstory, as a joke, to say she was in love with him, but now he couldn't make a move, even though he was already using her in plenty of other ways. In a corner of his heart, he hated himself. *It's not like I can take a swing if I don't have a bat. I don't think relationships between men and women can go well based on a mental connection alone… Maybe that's why I'm scared?* thought Ainz the virgin.

There was another thing. The NPC his old friend had made was a child, in a way. He wondered briefly if it was right to sully or warp her any more than he already had. *Are you stupid? This isn't what you need to be thinking about right now.*

"Ah!"

The sudden shout from Albedo caused the flames in his empty eye sockets to flare. "Wh-what is it, Albedo? What happened?"

"I have made an error. Supposedly it is proper etiquette for a new wife to meet her husband wearing nothing but an apron…" She checked her dress and blushed before speaking again. "If you order me to change, I will do so immediately." She glanced at him, and her quiet but awfully distinct voice continued, "Right in front of you…"

"Uh…right…ngh. Geez…" He sighed. "Albedo, it's about time

we quit fooling around. Let's start the report meeting and exchange information."

"Yes, my lord."

Regretfully—though for what, he wasn't sure—Ainz did his best to ignore her and thunked down into his chair. He tossed three leather bags onto the table. In moments, Albedo had shifted from horny bride to outstanding secretary, ready to receive Ainz's instructions.

"First, I'm handing over the money I made in E-Rantel, so put it toward experiments."

The bags were different sizes, and the biggest was so full it was nearly overflowing. Inside were the gold, silver, and copper coins Ainz had earned as an adventurer.

"Understood. Then I'll use this for Nazarick's defense systems and testing whether we can summon monsters or not."

"Please do. Also check if you can use it for creating scrolls or crafting items." He looked away from Albedo's deeply bowed head and gazed at the leather bags with an emotion resembling a prayer.

Gold coins earned in the game *Yggdrasil* could be used not only to buy items but also to maintain and manage one's guild, summon monsters over level 30 that didn't spawn automatically, cast some spells, craft items, and resurrect dead NPCs, among other things.

They'd already confirmed that they could use *Yggdrasil* gold coins, but they hadn't determined whether they could use this world's currency—especially silver and copper coins, which didn't exist in *Yggdrasil*.

It wasn't too much to say Nazarick's fate depended on these

experiments. If the coins in this world worked like *Yggdrasil* gold, their plans would change in a big way—the importance of obtaining this world's currency would increase drastically. Depending on the situation, Ainz might have to suddenly make acquiring money the highest priority. On the other hand, if they couldn't use the coins, the resources in the treasury would become their only lifeline, and they'd have to start budgeting.

"Then about Clementine…"

At the name of the corpse that had disappeared, Ainz's immobile face grimaced. He was worried that because of his mistake, she'd been resurrected and was now sharing intelligence on Nazarick with an unspecified multitude of people.

Nazarick had many potential enemies, but they'd been able to get relatively little information. On top of that, he'd gone and leaked Nazarick's info. *With luck, it might reach some guild members. There might be some around… But it'd be a mistake to expect that kind of luck. I have to be careful from now on. What should I do about Momon?*

If someone *were* after them, Momon would be the target. Ainz was in the middle of building a foothold, so it would be a waste to abandon the persona now. And it was still too early to let people know that Momon and Ainz were one and the same. *All I can do is play it by ear…*

Forced into a mental dead end—no matter how much he pondered, there was no easy answer—he set the issue aside for the moment and considered other things. "I think I might tell Pandora's Actor to throw one of Clementine's swords into the shredder."

"Shredder?"

At Albedo's puzzled voice, Ainz remembered its official name. "The exchange box. You can get a higher price if someone with

merchant skills uses it, so I'll have Pandora's Actor take on Nearata's form and use his skills." Watching Albedo bow her head in acknowledgment, Ainz proceeded to unroll a piece of parchment on the table. "One other thing. Here's the world map I finally got my hands on in E-Rantel."

"This is… Hmm…"

He knew why Albedo was frowning slightly. The map wasn't very detailed.

"I understand how you feel. And it only covers this area, just a part of the world. The scaling is probably off, and a lot of geographical features are missing. Plus, it mainly shows human countries; there's only one subhuman nation on here. It's totally sloppy, but it seems like this is the best we can get."

Ainz had learned about many places from the head of the wizards' guild thanks to their budding friendship—for example, the plains where the centaur tribes resided, the papigsag scorpion-people villages in the desert, the mountains where the dwarves had built their country, and more—but the parchment showed none of these. In the end, this map was nothing more than a tool for the convenience of humans by humans.

A map was unusable if it wasn't reliably accurate. But a better one would be hard to get without massive investments of time and money. So Theo Rakheshir had said, and given how friendly the wizard leader was being with Ainz, it must have been the truth. Ainz could tell from his response that just getting this map had been a nearly impossible request.

"Understood. Then let's copy this and pass it out to all the guardians."

"Yeah, but before we do that, let me give you a simple explanation." Ainz pointed to the middle of the map. The drawing was fairly detailed. "This is E-Rantel…and the Great Tomb of

Nazarick is around here." He moved his finger to the northeast, stopping in the vicinity of a huge forest. Perhaps it was only natural, but he could pick out Nazarick's location from just the surrounding topography with a fair amount of confidence. "These are the Azerlisia Mountains that form the border between the Re-Estize Kingdom and the Baharuth Empire. The Tove Woodlands extend from their southern edge and wrap around them. And here lies a big lake." Between the southern tip of the mountains and the woodlands was a lake shaped like an upside-down gourd formed by the rivers running down the mountains, and Ainz's finger stopped at its southern shore. "This is a large marsh, where several lizardman villages are situated."

Ainz noted Albedo's nod and continued. "Now, I'll pass on to you the brief descriptions of our neighboring countries that the head of the wizards' guild gave me. To the northwest of the kingdom is a rugged region divided by several mountain ranges. This area is the Argland Council State, home to multiple subhuman races. We need to watch out for the dragon councilors—there are said to be five or seven.

"Then, to the southwest, is a place called the Sacred Kingdom. It's fairly rough on this map, but apparently a giant rampart surrounds their country. Like the Great Wall of China. They're always on guard against threats from this wasteland, although it isn't marked on the map. The different subhuman races are constantly fighting there."

"That's where Demiurge went, right?"

"Yeah. And then on the other side is the Slane Theocracy. We need to watch out for them."

"Is this the border?" Albedo traced a line with a delicate finger.

"Maybe. Honestly, the boundaries drawn here don't mean much. The map is too rough. Okay, let's look at the empire side. Northeast from the empire there are several allied city-states.

Supposedly there's at least one subhuman city-state as well. Then to the southwest of the empire is an area with giant quartzite pillars, and it seems there's this race of humans…? Apparently they tame wyverns and live in the numerous caves there." From what Ainz had heard, it sounded like a place like Wulingyuan, but the details were unclear.

"Wyvern riders?"

In *Yggdrasil*, wyverns were beasts with levels in the late 30s that players with mounted soldier classes could call upon and ride, but he had no proof that they were the same in this world.

"…Yeah. They're probably pretty strong, but even if they are, I'm not worried about them attacking the Great Tomb. But below that… This map cuts off around the eastern part of this huge lake." Ainz indicated a place on the table instead of the map. "Supposedly there's a country called the Dragon Kingdom here."

"Dragons?"

"Yeah. Legends say the powerful dragons of old created that country and that the royalty there still has dragon blood flowing in their veins… I have no idea if that's true or not, but…anyway, that's it for the map." In the world where Ainz went by the name Satoru Suzuki, this would all sound like lies, but in this world, it could very well be true.

"So the countries we should look out for are the Slane Theocracy and the Argland Council State?"

Ainz crossed his arms and *hmm*ed. This was basically all they knew about the surrounding polities, but that was mainly because they hadn't collected enough information.

Albedo slowly bowed her head. "Excuse my error. At present we should be on guard against every country, shouldn't we?"

"…That's right. Even if a country itself doesn't seem like an issue, you never know what kind of individuals you'll find inside." *Like the one who used a World Item on Shalltear*. It seemed like Albedo understood without him saying it aloud.

Ainz tapped the table at two locations in the east and south. "But in the east there's a city that rises out of the sea, and in the south, the city that the Eight Kings of Avarice built. These are probably the cities we have to watch out for the most—especially the latter, a floating city in the middle of the desert."

"Floating city?"

"If the story I heard is correct, it's beneath a floating castle that pours an infinite amount of water. Apparently the whole city is surrounded by a magic barrier, so you'd never think it was in a desert."

A cold glint appeared in Albedo's eyes, and she made her proposal in a rather restrained tone. "Should we have some minions conduct a reconnaissance-in-force?"

"We don't need to go stepping on a tiger's tail. Even if whoever used the World Item did come from there, we should pretend to be agreeable until we figure out how strong they are… How's Shalltear doing?"

"There's nothing physically wrong with her after the resurrection, but…"

"Don't mince words. Even I get anxious, you know!"

"Ah! My deepest apologies. The truth is, I am a little worried about her, mentally speaking."

"…Are there lingering effects from the mind control? Does the World Item still affect her after we killed and resurrected her?"

“No, it’s not that… It seems like she’s unable to forgive herself for fighting you.”

Ainz was confused for a moment.

Everything had been due to his error; Shalltear had done nothing wrong. He told her that many times.

“If you’ll forgive me the rudeness of speaking against your decision…”

Ainz nodded at her serious expression.

“Perhaps you should have punished her.”

The red sparks in his eye sockets dulled. He opened his mouth —then closed it as she continued.

“Clear rewards and punishment keep all in order. If you punish her, her guilt will disappear. Without penance, she stays unable to come to terms with her crime.”

I see, thought Ainz. It was true that rewards existed as the reverse of punishment. But Ainz had been a normal company employee, so he had a hard time judging when to reprimand and when to forgive. His normal self would avoid the issue entirely by excusing everything.

In that case, he felt a bit bad for Shalltear, but providing retribution might be good practice for him.

“…Got it. I’ll come up with some punishment for her.”

“I think that’s for the best. Do forgive me for my outspoken behavior.”

“What are you talking about? I *want* suggestions like this. I’ve been wishing someone would give me opinions when I’m not sure what to do. Albedo, as the captain of the floor guardians, it’s en-

tirely appropriate."

"Thank you!" The peerless beauty's cheeks reddened, and she bowed with moist eyes.

Ainz was flustered by her expression of genuine happiness and responded with a benevolent wave. "Okay, I'm going to go back for now and get some work done. I'll leave things here up to you."

"Yes, please do! While you're gone, I'll take responsibility for managing everything." He thought he heard something in a low voice about being his wife, but he let it go because Albedo still had more to say. "But Lord Ainz, please be careful. We can't be certain that the one who controlled Shalltear won't launch another attack."

"Hmph!" Ainz looked displeased for the first time since returning to his room. "If they do, I'll kick their ass…well, maybe it wouldn't be that easy. But don't worry, Albedo. Our enemy is unknown. I intend to prioritize retreat if I encounter them. And I've readied some protection." Ainz looked slowly up at the ceiling, his mind on their supposed enemy.

The unknown World Item holder who must be their enemy, the other *Yggdrasil* players who may or may not exist, the shadows of players who must have been here once… Of course, it was too soon to conclude they were all enemies, but operating under that assumption would keep them from getting caught unawares later. *Always expect the worst.*

"Until we know who they are, let's keep a low profile. But we might need to lay out some bait to catch our prey… So, how's the plan going?"

Albedo's reluctance to meet his gaze gave Ainz some idea. "There's no report from Cocytus. According to Entoma, nothing is outside the realm of what we anticipated. I think they'll get into formation soon near the target location and send the forewarn-

ing.”

“I see… Not exactly what I was hoping to hear, but I guess we’ll see what comes of it.”

“It helps us if you can see it that way.”

“Okay. Really, I’d like to take a look at how things are going. Unfortunately, I’ve got a pile of adventurer work to do, so I have to go. But I want to see how the fight goes, so record it for me—the lizardmen versus the army of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.”

Chapter 1 Departure

CHAPTER 1
Departure

1

The Great Tove Woodlands stretched across the southern foothills of the Azerlisia Mountains, which served as a natural border between the Baharuth Empire and the Re-Estize Kingdom. North of the forest was a huge lake. This body of water was shaped like an inverted calabash, split into an upper and a lower lake, with a diameter of about twenty-four miles. The deeper upper lake was home to larger creatures, while in the lower portion dwelled smaller life-forms.

Where the lower lake merged with wetlands to the south, numerous buildings stood in the everglade. Each one had a foundation of about ten stilts set into the marsh. It was the type of structure people often built to live over water.

The door to one of those buildings opened, and the master of the house came out into the sunlight. He was a type of creature known as a lizardman.

Lizardmen resembled a cross between a reptile and a human. More specifically, they were lizards that had hands and feet like humans and walked on two legs, though their heads had almost no human features.

Most classified these creatures as subhumans, similar to goblins and orcs, and their civilization was less advanced than humans'. Though their way of life was often considered barbaric, they still had their own culture, even if an unrefined one.

The average height of an adult male lizardman was about six foot three, and their weight was easily over two hundred and twenty pounds—not from fat but because they boasted fairly ro-

bust physiques with bulging muscles. To help keep them balanced, they had long reptilian tails growing from their lower backs.

Over the course of their evolution geared toward ease of movement in the wetlands, they had developed broad webbed feet. That did give them a little trouble moving around on land, but this was not a problem for their everyday lives. Their scales, which ranged in color from a dark green to gray or even black, were not like lizards' but hornier like alligators'. They were harder than the weakest armors of humans.

Their hands had five fingers like human hands, though their fingers ended in short claws. The weapons they wielded with those hands were extremely primitive. Since they didn't have many opportunities to acquire metal ore in the marsh, most of the weapons they used were spears made with monster fangs or claws, or blunt stone weapons.

The sky was a single clear shade of blue, and the sun shone brilliantly near its zenith. The weather was nice, with only a wisp of white clouds like the brushstrokes of a painter over a clear view of the mountains thrusting up in the distance.

Because lizardmen had such a wide field of vision, he—Zaryusu Shasha—could see the blinding sun without moving his head. Narrowing his eyes to vertical slits, he rhythmically descended the stoop.

He scratched the brand on his black-scaled chest. The mark indicated his position within his tribe.

The lizardmen tribes had created an organized caste society. At the top was the tribal chief. Their leaders were not selected based on bloodline but simply by who was the strongest. The ceremony to choose the chief was held every few years. Then came the council of elders made up of selected seniors. Beneath them, society consisted of the warrior caste, then the normal males, the

females, and the children.

Of course, there were those who did not fit into this hierarchy. First, there were the druid priests. They supported the tribe by predicting the weather, forecasting danger, and using healing magic.

There were also hunting parties made up of rangers. Their primary role was fishing and hunting, but since the regular lizardmen cooperated with them on that, their most important work was in the forest.

Lizardmen were basically omnivorous, but fish made up 80 percent of their diet, and they didn't eat many plants or fruit. The reason they still sent hunting parties into the woods was mainly lumber. Since land wasn't safe for lizardmen, simply venturing into the woods to cut trees was a job for technical experts.

These rangers were allowed a degree of autonomy in the field, but they were still under the chief and expected to follow his orders. In this way, lizardman society was a patriarchy with strict role division. But there were some exceptions, beings completely outside the chief's command.

Travelers.

The word *traveler* might bring to mind outsiders, but visiting foreigners were unheard of. Lizardman society was generally isolationist, so accepting anyone from outside the tribe was rare.

So then, who were these travelers?

They were lizardmen who wished to see the world.

Barring some kind of emergency, such as being unable to obtain food, these creatures would virtually never leave their birthplace. But a few rare exceptions longed to see the outside world.

When travelers decided to leave their tribe, they were branded with a special mark on their chests. It signified that they were no longer under the tribe and its authority.

Most of those who set out into the world never came back. Perhaps they perished wherever they ended up, or they found a new life for themselves. Their fates were never certain. But sure enough, every so often, they concluded their journeys and went home.

Returning travelers were valuable for the knowledge they brought back with them. They were outsiders when it came to the tribal hierarchy but gained respect in a different way.

Truth be told, there were those in the village who disliked Zaryusu, but in general, he was well regarded. Not just because he was a traveler, but because…

He stepped off the last stair into the marsh; the trusty weapon slung at his waist clinked against his scales. The pale blade glowed faintly. It had a strange shape, where the blade and grip united into something like a three-pronged club. But past the handle, the blade tapered to points only about as thick as a piece of parchment.

There was not a lizardman alive who didn't know this weapon. All the members of every tribe recognized the magic items known as the Four Great Treasures, and Zaryusu's sword was the one named Frost Pain.

That famous weapon was the reason for Zaryusu's renown.

He set off at a casual pace.

He had two destinations, and he made sure to take a gift to leave at one of them. His presents were four huge fish—each over three feet long. These were the staple food for his people, and he carried them on his back. The fishy smell didn't bother Zaryusu.

On the contrary, it made him extremely hungry.

I wanna just eat them. He snorted a couple of times to clear his mind and *splish-splash*ed his way into the Green Claw village.

Some children with still-vibrant green scales ran past him, laughing "shaa-shaa," but stopped in their tracks when they noticed his cargo. The growing children peeping out from the shade of their dwellings also focused on him—no, on the fish. Their mouths were slightly open, probably filled with drool. Even after he had moved on, their gazes followed him—the children wanted a snack.

He cracked a smile and walked on, pretending not to notice them. He'd already decided who these fish were for. Unfortunately for those kids, it wasn't them.

Zaryusu was happy that the glint in their eyes wasn't hunger, though. A few years ago, that would have been impossible.

With those yearning eyes on his back, he passed the houses standing here and there, and the hut he was aiming for came into view.

This was the edge of the village, and a little farther ahead was where the marsh began to deepen into more of a lake. The hut on this subtle boundary line was sturdier than it looked and bigger than Zaryusu's house. If there was anything strange about it, it was definitely the structure's slight tilt. Half the house was underwater, but this wasn't due to decay—it had been intentionally built that way.

Zaryusu approached the hut, making loud *sploosh-sploosh* noises in the water. When he'd gotten closer, he heard an affection-seeking cry from inside, perhaps because the smell of the fish had wafted over.

A snakelike head poked out of one of the building's openings.

Once the dark-brown-scaled, amber-eyed head confirmed it was Zaryusu, it stretched its neck out to wrap itself affectionately around him.

"There, there." Zaryusu pet the snake with a practiced hand. The snake smiled at the sensation, narrowing its eyes—it had eyelids besides the protective coating over its eyeballs. The snake's scales felt nice against Zaryusu's hand, too.

This creature was Zaryusu's pet. His name was Rororo.

Since Zaryusu had been taking care of Rororo for most of the pet's life, he felt they could even have conversations. "Rororo, I brought you some food! Eat up, okay?" He tossed through the window the fish he brought. A noise like a *splash*, or maybe a *splat*, sounded from inside. "I'd like to stay and play, but I have to go check on the fish. See you later."

As if he could understand what was being said, the snake rubbed against Zaryusu a couple of times, reluctant to let him go, and then withdrew into the hut. After that came the sound of clutching and chewing. Figuring from Rororo's enthusiasm that he was in good shape, Zaryusu left the hut.

Zaryusu's next objective was also a bit removed from the village, at the lakeshore. He pattered quietly through the forest with quiet *pleck-pleck* sounds. Traveling by water would have been faster, but it had become a habit of his during his walks to see if there were any problems on land. Still, the low visibility thanks to the trees was a strain on even Zaryusu's mind.

Eventually, though, his destination was visible through a gap in the woods. He sighed with relief that nothing had happened. Then, slipping through the trees, he closed the rest of the distance with quick steps.

After ducking under the last of the jutting branches, Zaryusu widened his eyes in surprise—he never imagined he would see

that familiar figure here. It was a lizardman with black scales like his own.

"Brother—"

"Oh, it's you." The black-scaled lizardman turned around and focused his eyes on Zaryusu to greet him.

This was the chief of the Green Claw tribe and Zaryusu's elder brother, Shasuryu Shasha. He had been victorious in two contests to decide who would be chief and maintained rule for the current term without needing to fight. The most distinct feature of this lizardman was his physique. Next to him, Zaryusu, with his average build, looked small. Old scars ran white across Shasuryu's black scales, like lightning bolts tearing through a dark cloud. He carried a huge sword on his back—a thick, rugged thing about six and a half feet long. The steel sword—proof that he was chief—was enchanted with magic that prevented rust and made it sharper.

Zaryusu stood next to his brother on the lakeshore.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

"I could ask you the same thing, brother. The chief doesn't need to bother coming all the way out here."

"Mph." At a loss for words, Shasuryu answered with his characteristic grunt and looked out toward the lake.

Sturdy poles jutted out of the water to surround the area, with extremely fine nets strung between the poles. The setup was immediately recognizable—a fish preserve.

"You didn't come to sneak a bite, did you?"

Shasuryu's tail jumped and slapped the ground a couple of times. "Mph. I wouldn't do that. I just came to see how the breeding is going."

"…"

"Zaryusu, do you really think of me that way?!" he said with force and loomed a step closer. The pressure he gave off was like a wall closing in, making it so even the traveler and veteran fighter Zaryusu felt the need to back up a couple of steps.

But he had the perfect comeback. "So, if you only came to look in on the breeding, then I guess you don't want any, huh? That's too bad, brother. If they were growing well, I was going to give you some."

"Mph." The slapping noise stopped and Shasuryu's tail drooped.

"They're real tasty. Nice and fat because they've been getting proper nutrition. They have more fat on them than the normal fish you can catch."

"Oh?"

"When you bite into them that quality fat just oozes out. And when you tear a piece off, it melts in your mouth."

"Mmmmph." The slapping started up again, but more intensely than before.

Zaryusu eyed his brother's excited appendage and said half-teasingly, "Your wife says your heart's in your tail."

"What? How dare she mock her husband. Besides, what does she mean by that, anyway?" he answered, looking over his shoulder at his now motionless tail.

Zaryusu wasn't sure how to respond, and a dry "ahh" was all he could muster.

"Sheesh. She's so… If you got hitched, you'd know how I feel."

“Oh, I can’t get married.”

“Ha. Nonsense. You mean because of that mark? It doesn’t matter what the elders say—you can just ignore them. Plus, I don’t think there’s a single female in the village who would hate getting propositioned by you… They’ll take anyone with a good tail.”

Lizardmen stored nutrition in their tails, so larger ones were appealing to the opposite sex. In the past, Zaryusu might have preferred thick-tailed females, but as a male who had grown up and seen the world, he’d rather avoid them now if he could.

“I’m not that into the fat-tailed females in the village now. If it came to it, I’d choose a skinnier one. Personally, your wife’s size is fine for me.”

“That may be, given your personality, but stay away from the taken ones. I’m not participating in any pointless bloodshed. Hmm, but you should know the pain of marriage. It’s not fair if I’m the only one.”

“Whoa, whoa. I’m gonna tell your wife.”

“Mph. There you go—this is one of the pains of being married. I’m the chief of the tribe and your elder brother, but you can blackmail me so easily.”

Their happy laughter echoed out over the lake for a few moments.

When it stopped, Shasuryu observed the fish preserve with some emotion. “This is really something, though. Your…”

When he couldn’t find the word, Zaryusu gave him a hand. “Preserve?”

“Yeah, that. No one has ever done something like this in our tribe before. And news of your success has already spread far and

wide. At this rate, all the people watching, envious of your fish, will start to imitate you."

"It's thanks to you, brother. I know you talked to everyone about it."

"Zaryusu, all I did was relay the truth. I just chatted with them. What's significant is that you worked hard and raised these delicious-looking fish here."

At first, the project met failure after failure. Of course it had. He'd just heard explanations on his travels and tried to build it based on those. Even building the fence was a string of failures. After a year of trial and error, the preserve was built, but that wasn't the end.

He had to take care of the fish. He had to feed them. How many times had the fish died on him as he threw in different foods to test what would be best? There were times monsters ripped through the enclosure nets and made all his hard work for nothing.

He was criticized for "playing" with fish caught as food. People had even called him stupid. But now the fruits of his labor were plain to see.

The shadow of a big fish swimming by floated below the surface of the lake. It was fairly big, even for the fish that could be caught in the area. No one would believe he'd raised it from a fry, except for his brother and sister-in-law.

"It's really something, Zaryusu," Shasuryu murmured again as they stood watching the scene together. His words were filled with emotion.

Zaryusu's words were just as heartfelt. "It's part thanks to you, brother."

“Mph. What did I even do?”

Sure, Shasuryu hadn’t *done* anything, but in only the most technical sense.

When the fish weren’t doing well, a priest would suddenly appear. When it was time to gather fence-making materials, there were helping hands. When the catch of the day was distributed, healthy, live fish came his way. There were also hunters who brought fruit as fish food.

It was never revealed who had asked for these people to help him. But even a total fool could tell who was behind it—and that he didn’t feel like being named. It wouldn’t look good for the chief to support a traveler who had deviated from the tribe’s caste system.

“Brother, when they get bigger, I’ll bring some to you first.”

“Heh. I’ll be looking forward to it.” Shasuryu spun on his heel and began walking away. Then he murmured, “Sorry.”

“…What are you talking about, brother? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Did he hear him or not? Zaryusu watched as Shasuryu headed into the distance along the edge of the lake without a word.

After confirming everything was all right at the fish preserve, Zaryusu had returned to the village, but he suddenly felt something strange and looked at the sky. It was just a normal sky, an endless stretch of blue with the mountains breaking through a wisp of cloud to the north.

The usual scenery.

Nothing seemed different. Just as he figured his mind was playing tricks on him, he noticed a strange cloud.

Everyone in the center of the village noticed it at the same time—a solitary dark mass blocking the sun, thick and heavy like a rain cloud.

The priests had said today would be clear all day. Their weather forecasts were magical and, thanks to their knowledge from long years of experience, extremely accurate. Everyone was surprised they'd gotten it wrong.

But the odd thing was that aside from the single dark cloud over the village, there were no other rain clouds. It was as if someone had summoned a cloud to hang directly and over only the village.

Then things got stranger.

Swirling around the center of the village, the mysterious cloud started to spread out. It encroached on the blue sky with tremendous speed.

This was abnormal.

The warrior caste hurriedly went on guard. Children practically dove into their houses. Zaryusu lowered his center of gravity and reached for Frost Pain as he scanned the area.

The darkness blocked out almost the entire sky now. It was possible to see some blue far in the distance, so the cloud was truly hanging over the village. In the midst of this, the center of the settlement was in turmoil. The wind from that direction carried shrill, abrasive cries that made full use of the lizardman vocal cords.

The din was a warning. It meant there was a dangerous threat nearby, perhaps one that warranted evacuation.

When Zaryusu heard it, he raced through the marsh faster than most lizardmen could manage.

He ran, and ran, and ran.

It wasn't easy to move in the marsh, but he kept his balance by twisting his tail. At a speed impossible for a human—although, of course, lizardmen had feet geared for places like this—Zaryusu arrived at the source of the alarm.

There, he found Shasuryu and the warriors in a circle, focused on the center of the village. Zaryusu followed their line of sight and glared at the object of their attention as well.

At the place where their many gazes crossed was a monster like wavering black fog. Inside the fog, a multitude of horrifying faces formed and dissipated a moment later. The variety of creatures and peoples had one thing in common: All their expressions spoke of eternal pain. Anguished sobs, resentful voices, tortured screams, dying gasps, and more formed a chorus that rode on the wind.

A spine-freezing hatred pressed in on them, and the horror of it caused Zaryusu to shiver. *This is bad… Brother and I should let the others go and take care of it ourselves. But…* This was a powerful undead that could frighten even Zaryusu, considered a top-class warrior among the other tribes dotting the area. Zaryusu and his brother were probably the only ones who could put up a fight. What's more, Zaryusu knew the monster's special ability.

He glanced around and noted that although there were only warrior-caste lizardmen present, almost all of them were breathing hard—like frightened children.

The monster didn't budge from its position in the center of the village.

How much time passed that way? The tension was so thick, even the slightest trigger would cause an explosion. It was evident from the way the warriors slowly huddled closer together. In order to even move, they had to desperately struggle against the

mental pressure.

Noticing Shasuryu draw his weapon in his periphery, Zaryusu followed suit and silently assumed a fighting stance. If there was going to be a fight, he meant to charge faster than anyone. *They shouldn't consider it overstepping my bounds if I let everyone know what this thing's special ability is…*

The air, stagnant with accumulated tension, thickened even further— and suddenly the resentful clamor stopped.

The voices from the monster mixed together to form one. Unlike the incomprehensible curses, this voice conveyed a proper meaning. **"Hark, servants of the Great One. I come as a forewarning."**

Everyone stirred and looked at one another. Only Zaryusu and Shasuryu kept their eyes fixed.

"I announce your deaths. The Great One has mobilized an army that shall destroy you. Though that be so, in his generosity, he will grant you time to put up a frantic—futile—resistance. Eight days from today. On that day, you will be the second of the lizardman tribes around this lake to be sacrificed."

Zaryusu's face twitched into a scowl, and he bared his teeth to growl threateningly.

"Put up a desperate resistance—so that the Great One may delight in ridiculing you."

Like smoke and its constantly shifting shape, the monster distorted and warped as it floated up into the air.

"Don't forget—eight days."

And it flew through the sky undisturbed in the direction of the

forest. Among the many lizardmen watching it as it went, Zaryusu and Shasuryu gazed silently at the far horizon.

2

The largest hut in the village served as a meeting place, but usually it wasn't used much. Since the lizardmen had a tribal chief with absolute authority, they didn't hold meetings very often, so there was almost no point in having the hut at all. But that day there was an unusual excitement in the air.

There were so many lizardmen inside that what should have been a spacious room felt small. Of course the warrior caste was there, but so were the priests, hunters, elders, and the traveler Zaryusu. Everyone was seated cross-legged facing Shasuryu.

Shasuryu the chief announced the beginning of the meeting, and the first to speak was the head of the priests, an older female lizardman with strange symbols written on her body with white dye. The designs all had meanings, but Zaryusu didn't know them. "You remember the cloud that covered the sky? That was magic. As far as I know, there are only two spells that can manipulate weather. One is a tier-six spell called Control Weather, so it couldn't be that. Casters who can use tier-six spells are the stuff of legends. The other is the tier-four Control Cloud. Again, only an immensely powerful caster could use this. Only a fool would bare their fangs at such an enemy."

The similarly painted priests lined up behind the head priest nodded in agreement.

Zaryusu knew what a feat tier-four magic was, but the doubtful groans of many who didn't echoed throughout the room.

The look on the head priest's face showed she wasn't sure how to best explain it, but she singled out a lizardman. He looked perplexed in turn and pointed questioningly at himself.

"Yes, you. Could you win in a fight against me?"

The lizardman hurriedly shook his head.

He would probably be confident he could beat her if they were fighting using only weapons, but he had a very slim chance if magic was allowed. A slim chance that, as a warrior, was practically not worth considering.

"But I can only use up to tier two."

"So our enemy's twice as strong?" someone asked.

Sighing at the question, the head priest shook her head in lament. "It's not that simple. Someone using tier-four magic could probably kill even our chief with no trouble at all." Finally, she said, "I can't say for sure. The possibility exists," and closed her mouth.

Once everyone understood the awesome power of tier-four magic, a silence descended on the room until Shasuryu's voice sounded again. "In other words, head priest…"

"I think we should run away. Even if we fight, we can't win."

"What are you saying?!" roared a large lizardman in a deep voice as he leaped up. In terms of sheer brawn, he—the leader of the warriors—was probably on par with Shasuryu. "You mean we should run before we even try to fight? Because of that little threat?"

"Do you have any brains in that head of yours? If we're fighting, it means it's already too late!" The head priest stood to meet the head warrior's stare. Emotions were running high, and they unconsciously made threatening sounds at each other.

As the words *touch-and-go situation* came to everyone's minds, a cold voice rang out. "...That's enough."

The warrior and priest turned to look at Shasuryu as if he'd woken them up with a bucket of cold water. Then they both apologized and sat back down.

"Head hunter, what's your opinion?"

"...I can understand the head warrior's view, as well as the head priest's. They both make sense." A lanky lizardman spoke in answer to Shasuryu's question. Though he was lean, he wasn't lacking muscle—just extremely slim in a pared-down way. "So I think since we have time, we can see how things go. It said there'll be an army. They'll need to pitch camp and whatnot, so isn't it fine to observe them and decide what to do after that?"

Several voices agreed that it didn't make sense to say this or that now, when they lacked information.

"Elder..."

"I can't say anything. Everyone's opinions feel correct. All that's left is for the chief to decide."

"Mph..." Shasuryu shifted his gaze, and Zaryusu felt their eyes meet across a few other lizardmen. The elder brother nodded without moving his head.

With the feeling like he'd gotten a gentle push from behind—although it may have been off a cliff—Zaryusu raised his hand to speak. "Chief, I'd like to give my opinion."

Everyone's eyes fell on Zaryusu. Most of the lizardmen were expectant, but some were frowning.

"You're a traveler! There's nothing for you to say. You should be happy you're even allowed to be here," said a member of the council of elders. "Step do—"

A tail whacked the floor with a *bang*. The sound cut off the elder's comment like a sharp knife. "Quiet!" It was Shasuryu, with unpredictable emotion in his voice. He spoke half in the growls lizardmen made when agitated. No one could interrupt him if he was like that. The tension in the hut grew at once, and the heat of the excitement suddenly cooled.

In that strained atmosphere, one of the elders opened his mouth to speak—without noticing the unspoken urge from many others to let sleeping dogs lie. "But Chief, you can't give him special treatment just because he's your little brother. Travelers are —"

"I told you to be quiet. Didn't you hear me?"

"Gngh…"

"Right now, we're allowing everyone with knowledge to take part. It would be strange not to listen to the opinion of a traveler."

"Travelers—"

"I'm the chief, and I say it's fine. Are you really still objecting?"

The elder silently averted his eyes, and Shasuryu looked at the others.

"Head priest, head warrior, head hunter, do you agree that he's not worth listening to?"

The first to respond was the head warrior. "I think Zaryusu's opinion is worth hearing. There is no warrior who would ignore the opinion of the one who possesses Frost Pain."

"I agree. There's plenty of reason to listen," came the head hunter's jocular reply.

Finally, the head priest shrugged. "Of course I'll listen. Only a fool ignores someone with knowledge."

A few of the elders scowled at the scathing sarcasm. Shasuryu nodded at the three after they gave their opinions and gestured with his chin to Zaryusu that he could proceed.

Zaryusu remained seated and began to speak. “If it’s between running and fighting, I’d choose the latter.”

“Hmm, why is that?”

“It’s the only choice we have.”

If the chief was asking a question, a proper answer was required, but Zaryusu, with an attitude that said, *That’s it*, didn’t seem like he was going to elaborate.

Shasuryu rested his jaw on a fist and sank deep into thought.

What! Did you figure out what I’m thinking? Brother…

Zaryusu was troubled, although he didn’t let his inner thoughts show. Then the head priest asked no one in particular, “…But can we win?”

“Yes, we can!” the head warrior shouted energetically, to dispel their anxiety.

But the head priest just squinted.

“…No, the way we are now we can’t have much of a chance.” It was Zaryusu who verbally disagreed.

“…What do you mean by that?”

“Head warrior, our opponent must have gathered intelligence on us, what kind of fight we can put up. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be able to talk with such an air of superiority. That means that even if we fight well, victory must be impossible with our current strength.”

Then what should we do? It was the question on the tips of everyone's tongues.

Zaryusu, still keeping his true intentions hidden, answered before they asked. "So we need to mess up their plan… Do you all remember the war?"

"Of course," someone replied.

It had been only a few years ago; no one was so far gone that they would forget it so quickly. No, even if they'd gone senile, it would be impossible to forget that war.

Once there had been seven tribes in the great wetlands: Green Claw, Small Fang, Razor Tail, Dragon Tusk, Yellow Specter, Sharp Edge, and Red Eye.

But now there were only five. They had participated in a war where so many lizardmen died that two tribes were wiped out.

It started with a string of poor catches of their staple fish. Green Claw's hunting parties began to extend their reach over a wider area of the lake. Of course, the same could be said of the other tribes.

Eventually, the hunting parties began to clash over fishing spots. Their respective tribes' food was on the line, so they couldn't back down.

It didn't take long for arguments to turn into fights and for the fights to turn deadly. Eventually, warriors began to move in as backup for the hunting parties, and a fierce food war broke out.

Five of the seven tribes joined the conflict, which evolved into a three-on-two struggle: Green Claw, Small Fang, and Razor Tail joined forces to face Yellow Specter and Sharp Edge. Entire tribes participated—not only the warrior caste but also regular adult males and females as well.

After several all-out battles, the three allied tribes that included Green Claw won. The other side had lost so many members they couldn't maintain their two tribes, and they scattered, although they were later absorbed by Dragon Tusk, who hadn't participated in the war.

Ironically, the decrease in lizardmen living on the marsh had solved the food issue. There was enough of the staple fish to go around once again.

"What about it?"

"Remember what it said: We're the *second*, so that must mean it's going around to other villages besides ours."

"Ohhh…" Some voices went up in understanding.

"So you think we should form another alliance, huh?"

"…You gotta be kidding."

"No, I think we should."

"Like during the war…?"

"If we do that, I think we have a chance at winning."

Neighbors whispered to one another, and before long, the voices had transformed into a surging conversation. As everyone in the hut considered Zaryusu's idea, only Shasuryu remained silent and made no move to speak. Unable to bear his deeply penetrating gaze, Zaryusu couldn't meet his eyes.

After it seemed like they'd had enough time to discuss, Zaryusu spoke again. "Don't misunderstand me. I mean with *all* the tribes."

"What?!" The second one in the room to grasp his meaning, the head hunter, gasped.

Zaryusu looked straight at Shasuryu. The lizardmen standing between them involuntarily parted.

“I propose we ally with Dragon Tusk and Red Eye as well, Chief.”

This caused a huge commotion—Zaryusu might as well have thrown a bomb into the room.

Dragon Tusk and Red Eye were the two tribes who hadn’t participated in the war. Green Claw had no contact with them whatsoever, and since Dragon Tusk had taken in the surviving members of Yellow Specter and Sharp Edge, there had to be some deep-rooted resentment remaining in that tribe. Making an alliance with them would mean a five-tribe coalition.

If they could do it, they certainly might have a chance. As everyone imagined this faint hope, Shasuryu spoke suddenly. “Who will be the messenger?”

“I’ll do it.”

Shasuryu didn’t show any surprise at Zaryusu’s immediate reply. He knew his little brother well, so he’d probably expected it.

The surrounding lizardmen made admiring noises. They felt there wasn’t a better choice.

Only one person disapproved. “A traveler?” It was Shasuryu, shooting an icy look through Zaryusu.

“That’s right, Chief. This is an emergency. If they won’t listen to me because I’m a traveler, they’re not worth allying with.” Zaryusu had no trouble shrugging off the icicle glare.

They stared at each other for a few moments, and then Shasuryu cracked a bitter smile. Was it because he’d given up? Or because he knew nothing he said could stop his little brother? Or

maybe he was inwardly smirking at himself for accepting that Zaryusu was the right choice? It was a pained smile. “Bring me the chief’s mark.”

The mark meant the bearer was the representative of the chief. It wasn’t something that could be given to a traveler. The council of elders was about to say something, but before they could, Shasuryu hit them with a fierce glare, and the words died in their throats.

“Thank you.” Zaryusu bowed his head.

Then Shasuryu spoke. “…*I’ll* be the one to choose the messenger to the other tribes. First…”

In the evening, a cool breeze blew. Since the area was a marsh, the rather high humidity combined with the heat to make the air stifling, but in the evening, the wind cooled off enough to be a little chilly. Of course, the change was nothing to the lizardmen with their thick skins.

Zaryusu *splish-splash*ed through the marsh toward Rororo’s hut.

He still had time, but it was possible some unforeseen incident could occur. There was also the chance their enemy wouldn’t keep their promise or that they would disrupt his travels. Considering all those things, it made the most sense to ride Rororo across the marsh.

His waterlogged footsteps slowed and then stopped. His heavy leather pack jerked on his back. He’d stopped because a familiar lizardman had come out of Rororo’s house.

Their eyes met. After cocking his head at puzzled Zaryusu, the black-scaled lizardman moved closer. “I always thought you should have been chief,” Shasuryu began after coming to a stop about two yards away.

“What are you talking about, brother?”

“Remember the war?”

“Of course I do.”

It had been Zaryusu who had brought it up at the meeting; there was no way he didn’t remember it. Then it dawned on him that that wasn’t what Shasuryu was trying to say.

“…After it ended, you became a traveler. I regret branding you so much. I should have stopped you, even if I had to thrash you.”

Zaryusu vigorously shook his head. His brother’s expression back then was still a thorn in his heart. “…Because you let me go, I learned how to farm fish.”

“You could have figured it out here. A wise man like you should have been the one guiding the village.”

“Brother…”

Things that happened in the past couldn’t be undone, and there was no point in saying, *But if only…* It had already happened. So were they thinking that way because they were weak?

No, that wasn’t it.

“…Let me say this not as your chief but as your brother: I’m not going to ask if you’ll be okay on your own. Just come home safe. Don’t try too hard.”

Zaryusu replied with a cocky smile. “Of course. I’ll do a perfect job of it and come back fine. For me, it’ll be a cinch.”

“Mph.” A grin naturally spread across Shasuryu’s face. “Then if you fail, I’m gonna eat whichever of your fish has the most fat on it.”

“Brother, I don’t care about that. That’s not the kind of thing you should be saying now, though.”

“…Mph.”

They quietly laughed together. Eventually, although neither of them in particular made the move, they found themselves facing each other with serious expressions again.

“So is the alliance really your only aim?”

“…What do you mean? What are you trying to say?”

Zaryusu squinted—and thought, *Crap*. Considering how perceptive his brother was, he couldn’t react like that.

“The way you were talking in the hut, manipulating everyone’s opinion, you seemed reluctant.” Zaryusu was at a loss for words, and Shasuryu continued. “…One of the reasons we had that war was simply that the lizardman population had grown too large due to the lack of smaller-scale fights.”

“Brother…we’d better leave it at that.” Zaryusu’s steely tone confirmed Shasuryu’s theory.

“Aha…I see.”

“…It’s the only way…if we don’t want a repeat of that war,” Zaryusu snapped. It was an ulterior motive even he knew was no good. It was underhanded. He hadn’t wanted his older brother to find out, if at all possible.

“…Then what are you planning to do if the other tribes won’t form an alliance? We won’t be able to stand up to them later with just our selected survivors and runaways.”

“Then I guess…we’ll have to crush them first.”

“You’re saying we should destroy one another first?”

“Brother…”

Zaryusu was about to try to convince him, but Shasuryu laughed it off. “I understand, and your way of thinking is correct. I agree with you. As the leader of the tribe, I need to be thinking about its survival and continued existence. So don’t worry about it, Zaryusu.”

“I’m glad. So should I bring everyone to this village?”

“No, if what they said is true, we’re second in line; I envision the first village as the battleground. Normally I’d say we should gather in one of the later villages or one with good defenses, but things will be tough afterward if entire villages get burned down. We should block them at the first village, so can you go straight there when you’re ready? I’m going to ask the priests for magic so we can share information.”

“Sure thing.”

The magic his brother mentioned was hard to use for a large volume of text, and if the distance was too great it wouldn’t reach, but Zaryusu figured it would be okay for this trip.

“And for food, we’re gonna take your fish.”

“Of course. Just leave the fries. It seems like we’ve gotten into a good groove. Even if we have to abandon the village, they’ll come in handy.”

“Okay, I promise. How much food do you think there is?”

“…Counting the dried stuff, probably a thousand meals.”

“Okay, then there’s no immediate issue.”

“Yeah, I know you’ll take care of things. Okay, brother. I’ll be off now… Rororo.” In response to Zaryusu’s voice, a snake head appeared in the window. The pale moonlight reflected off its

scales with a wet gleam. The way each individual scale sparkled when they shifted created a beautiful optical illusion. “Let’s go. Can you come over here?”

Rororo gazed at Zaryusu and Shasuryu for a few moments and then pulled in his head. There came the sound of something heavy splashing through the water and some gurgling.

“So, brother, there’s something I wanted to ask you. I wonder if you have the answer yet. Did you decide what to do about the number of people? Depending on how things go, I may use it to negotiate.”

Shasuryu hesitated slightly before answering. “…Ten from the warrior caste, twenty hunters, three priests, seventy males, a hundred females, and kids…a few.”

“I see… Got it.” Zaryusu fell quiet before Shasuryu’s exhausted smile.

A splash broke the heavy silence. The two of them looked in the direction it had come from and then smiled at each other out of nostalgia.

“Mph… He sure has gotten big. I was surprised when I went in the hut before!”

“Yeah, me too, brother. I had no idea he’d get this huge. He was so little when I found him.”

“I’m not sure I believe that. He was pretty big already when you brought him back to the village.”

As they reminisced about how Rororo used to look, four snake heads poked out of the water a little way from the hut. The four heads moved in the same way, pushing through the water toward Zaryusu and Shasuryu.

Suddenly the heads lifted high, and something huge came out

of the water. The four reptilian heads on long twisty necks were attached to a giant four-legged body—Rororo was a magical beast called a hydra. When Zaryusu gave him fish, the chewing sounds proved he wasn't a usual snake. He moved his sixteen-foot body with surprising obedience and went to Zaryusu.

Zaryusu scrambled up him with the lightness of a monkey climbing a tree.

"Get home safe! It's just like you not to use your head and passionately shout that you won't let a single person die, the way you used to."

"...I guess I'm an adult now."

Shasuryu snorted. "The little scamp is all grown up... Well, that's fine. Take care! If you don't come back, we'll know who to attack first."

"I'll be back. Wait for me, brother."

For just a little while, they gazed at each other, full of emotion; then without a word, their shadows moved apart.

3

The ninth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick had many different rooms. Of course, there were guild member rooms and rooms for the NPCs, but there were also facilities like a large bath, a cafeteria, a beauty parlor, a clothing shop, a general store, a spa, a nail salon, and many other rooms reminiscent of stores.

The reason these kinds of places existed despite being meaningless in-game was either because lots of guild members had

been obsessed with those types of details or perhaps because they were building the tomb in the image of an arcology. It could have even been that because employment conditions in the real world were so horrible, the designers longed for such places.

And in one of those rooms…

The manager of this particular area was the Great Tomb of Nazarick's sous-chef. Usually he displayed his talents in the cafeteria, but depending on the day and time, he might also be here making sure things were ready in case someone came by. The room, designed to be like a short bar with only a handful of regulars, glowed quietly in the subdued lighting.

With shelves full of bottles and eight chairs at the bar, he was confident this was a fine enough room to quietly enjoy a drink. He was as content and fulfilled in this space he had been given as if it were his castle.

But several minutes after welcoming one first-time customer, he realized a lot of that depended on the character of his clientele.

Gulp, gulp, gulp, ahhhhhhh!

Thus his customer downed one drink after another. As the sous-chef absentmindedly polished a glass, he thought, *If you want to drink like that, there are more appropriate places for it.* The ninth level had lounges and bars. There was no need to guzzle here.

She slammed her glass—a rather large one—down on the counter. The sous-chef desperately suppressed the urge to scowl.

"Next!"

In response to the order, he filled her glass—full to the brim with Spirytus and some Blue 1 on top. Then he gently offered it to her. "It's called Tears of a Lady."

The woman looked doubtful, but when he told her the name he'd improvised, her face lit up at finding a drink she'd never seen before. "So the blue spreading out in there is her tears?"

"Yes, that's right," he gracefully lied.

She picked up the glass, put it to her mouth, and chugged it in one go with the smooth motion of someone drinking coffee-flavored milk right after taking a dip at the bathhouse.

Then she slammed the empty glass on the bar just like before. "Phew, I'm a little drunk."

"That's what happens when you drink so fast. Perhaps you should go home and rest for today?"

"...Nah, I don't wanna go home..."

"I see..." He tried to polish a glass and shrank from the woman's obvious disapproval. *If there's something you want to say, then say it. This is why women are such a pain in the ass. This bar is meant for gentlemen dandies, not obnoxious women. I could just bar them from entry...or not. It would be disrespectful to the Supreme Beings. But what a bad idea this was...*

He'd invited her here himself. She'd looked so forlorn walking along the hall of the ninth level that he'd gotten worried and approached her—and this was the result. In retrospect, he certainly regretted it. But now that he'd welcomed her into the bar as a customer, he needed to give her some degree of service as the bartender. *Even if I give her random made-up drinks!*

Bracing himself, he asked, "What's the matter, Mistress Shalltear?"

He doubted it was just his imagination that she seemed to have been waiting for him to ask. "Sorry, I don't wanna talk about it."

Oh, for fuck's sake. He frowned in spite of himself. But since he was a myconid, she didn't understand his facial movements, so she didn't respond. She just toyed with her glass on the bar with a finger.

"I'm a little drunk."

"…I see." *That's impossible but okay.*

Shalltear seemed to think she was truly inebriated, but he could say with confidence that she was not. Drunkenness was a status like being poisoned, so anyone with total resistance to poison would never get drunk. Naturally, as an undead, poison didn't work on Shalltear, so she wouldn't get intoxicated from alcohol. Most of the patrons of his bar either removed their poison immunity item or just enjoyed the atmosphere, knowing they wouldn't get a buzz.

But it must have been the truth that Shalltear thought she was drunk. Drunk on the atmosphere, perhaps.

As he wondered what to do, the glorious sound of what could be called a heavenly intervention rang out. He turned and bowed his head slightly. "Good evening."

"Hey, Peckii." The newcomer who called the bartender by his fungus-inspired nickname was one of his regulars, the assistant butler Éclair. He was accompanied by the male servant who carried him under his arm.

Éclair was quietly deposited on a chair as always. He was only about three foot three, and the bar chairs had high legs, so he had trouble sitting down by himself.

When the sous-chef looked at Shalltear, wondering why she hadn't greeted the pair even though they sat right next to her, he saw she was staring at the counter and mumbling something. The words he could faintly hear seemed to be an apology to the

Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown.

Éclair gave his order in an affected manner. “I’ll have *the usual*.”

“Yes, sir.”

The usual could mean only one thing—the cocktail using ten liquors of ten different colors, the Nazarick. It looked exquisite, but flavor-wise, one glass was plenty. The regulars were fond of it and thought the name fit perfectly, but it wasn’t something that could be recommended to others. He’d experimented with ways to try to make it taste good, but he didn’t have much hope for the possibility.

He mixed the ten-colored cocktail with a practiced hand and set it in front of Éclair.

“You there, miss. This is for you.”

The next thing he heard was the glass tipping and spilling everywhere.

Éclair must have wanted to slide the drink down the bar to her, but that was a move only dexterous people or characters in a manga could do. It was not something a penguin could pull off.

The sous-chef picked up the fallen glass and let out a sigh of relief after examining it and finding no nicks. Next he wiped up the alcohol that had spilled across the counter and said quietly with an angry look, “Could you not smack drinks with your flippers? If you insist, then warn me and I’ll pour into a glass with a wider base.”

“…My sincere apologies.”

Noticing this comedic display, Shalltear seemed to finally realize Éclair was present and raised her head. “Oh, Éclair. Haven’t

seen you in a while."

"It has indeed been a wh… I see you every time you come to the ninth level."

"Really?"

"Yes. But it's rare to see you here. I thought Demiurge was about the only guardian to come here, although he did stop by for a quiet drink with Cocytus the other day."

"Really? Huh." Shalltear's eyes widened upon hearing of her colleagues.

"But what's wrong? You look so distraught."

"It's noth— No, I just failed spectacularly. So I'm drowning my sorrows like the terrible guardian I am."

Éclair looked perturbed and mouthed, *What's with her?* to the sous-chef. But the sous-chef didn't have an answer, so he just shook his head.

He wanted them to enjoy their drinks, though, so he brought up an unexpected topic. "Okay, for a change of mood, how about some apple juice?"

They both gave him blank looks.

"It's made with apples from the sixth level."

Perhaps that single detail piqued their interest; they both indicated they would have some. This genuine response satisfied him very much.

What appeared on the bar was completely normal apple juice, two glasses. He'd glanced at the servant, but the man had wordlessly refused as always. Of course, Éclair had a beak, so he remembered to give him a straw.

“The flavor is refreshing.”

“It’s not bad, but it lacks some oomph…mainly because it’s not very sweet, I guess?”

Those were their impressions after they’d drained their glasses in one go.

“Well, that can’t be helped. I tried eating one, but it just didn’t have as much honey flavor as the ones stored in Nazarick.”

“There are apple trees on the sixth level? I don’t remember any being there.”

But Shalltear remembered something. Before the sous-chef could reply, she supplied the correct answer. “Are those the ones Lord Ainz brought in? I heard from Albedo that he wanted to test whether we could grow outside fruit in Nazarick as part of the plan to replenish our supply of consumables.”

The sous-chef had heard it, too. He’d received orders to see if it was possible to make ability-boosting food with various outside ingredients. “Yes, I heard if it goes well he plans to build an orchard. But you don’t think they’re sweet enough?”

“It’s not undrinkable. It might be good for those times when you want a lighter sweetness.”

“…But who’s growing them? Aura and Mare are outside. Did they leave it up to their magical beasts?”

“No, no. A dryad Lord Ainz brought in is doing it.”

Éclair and Shalltear wore contrasting expressions of *Who?* and *Ah!* respectively.

“I see… Is this what he meant by getting the right man for the job? Had he already come up with this back then?”

“What do you mean? Someone new joined Nazarick?”

Shalltear answered Éclair’s question. The sous-chef had met the dryad, but he hadn’t heard the backstory, so he was all ears.

Apparently Lord Ainz had brought it along to some kind of fight to test the guardians’ teamwork. Then there had been a promise, and it came back to reside in Nazarick. Now it was an apple farmer.

“So Nazarick is changing and growing stronger bit by bit, huh?”

The sous-chef and Shalltear expressed their agreement.

The sous-chef was just the sous-chef, so he didn’t know any details or what the plans for the Great Tomb of Nazarick’s future were, but he understood well enough that Ainz Ooal Gown, the last remaining Supreme Being, was trying to accumulate power in this world.

“Oh. So that means there could be more new members of Nazarick, like the dryad…right?” Shalltear sulked at Éclair. “That sucks… I don’t want grimy outsiders strutting about in this sacred place.”

The sous-chef felt the same way. The thought of anyone not created here entering the Supreme Beings’ realm made him frown. But there was one thing more important than his opinion. “We have to just accept it. It’s what Lord Ainz decided.”

Any judgment of the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown was absolute; if he said something white was black, then it was black.

“I-it’s not like I would go against anything Lord Ainz decided!” Shalltear shouted, flustered.

The other two nodded.

“So from now on, we need to act as good role models—we need to be even more loyal to Lord Ainz. Of course, I don’t think anyone has tried to rebel against him besides you.”

“Yeah, by the way, Shalltear, how about this? I’ll promise you a high position, so—” Éclair started on one of his usual invitations—a scheme that could never succeed—but a strange noise interrupted him.

“Agh-gh-gh-gh-gh-gh.”

Both of them looked at Shalltear, who was holding her head in her hands. Through her groaning, it sounded like she was murmuring, “I’m loyal, I swear I’m loyal…”

“…Really, though, what happened? She’s not talking like she usually does, either.”

In response to Éclair’s bewilderment, the sous-chef shook his head and shrugged. “Who knows?”



Chapter 2 Gathering Lizardmen

CHAPTER 2
Gathering Lizardmen

1

Zaryusu had been riding Rororo through the marsh for half a day. The sun had climbed high into the sky, but the enemy encounter he'd been fearing hadn't occurred, and he reached his destination safely.

There were several dwellings built in the marsh in the same way Green Claw's were, and wooden posts sharpened to a point surrounded the area, facing outward. The posts had large gaps between them, but they would prevent a larger monster like Rororo from invading. This village had fewer houses than Green Claw had, but the buildings themselves were larger. For that reason, it was hard to tell which tribe's population was higher. One of the buildings had a flag waving outside. On it was the Red Eye tribe's emblem.

Yes, this was the first destination Zaryusu had chosen, the Red Eye village.

After taking a quick scan around, he breathed a sigh of relief. It was extremely good luck they were still living in the same area of the marsh as they had a long time ago. Since it was possible that they'd moved due to the war, he'd thought he might have to start by searching around for them.

Zaryusu turned to look back the way he came. He could see his own village. *They must be in a huge hurry to get ready*. Now that he was away, he felt anxious, but he could safely assume there was practically no chance of their being attacked.

That he'd made it here in one piece was proof of that.

Was the Great One or whoever off his guard? Or had he expected Zaryusu's actions? That wasn't clear. At least for now, the enemy didn't seem in the mood to break their promise or obstruct the lizardmen's war prep. Of course, even if this great enemy did move to stop them, Zaryusu's only option was to do what he believed in.

He dismounted Rororo and stretched his back. His muscles were stiff from riding for so long, but stretching made them feel better, even good. Then he told Rororo to wait for him and gave him some dried fish from his bag for combined breakfast and lunch. He would rather have instructed him to procure his own food somewhere in the area, but considering that might involve infringing on the Red Eye tribe's hunting grounds, he decided against it. After petting each of Rororo's snake heads a couple of times, Zaryusu left him and set off walking.

With Rororo nearby, people might be wary of the hydra and not come out to meet him. Zaryusu was a messenger bringing an offer of alliance. He didn't want to seem coercive or threatening.

His feet made a *splish-splash* noise in the water as he walked.

At the edge of his field of vision, he spotted several members of the Red Eye warrior caste walking parallel with him on the opposite side of the post enclosure. Their gear was no different from that of Green Claw's warriors. They wore no armor and carried spears made from sharpened bones attached to sticks. Some had sling-like straps, so the fact that they didn't have any rocks at the ready told him they had no immediate intent to attack.

He took care not to provoke them as he walked around to the main gate. Then he faced the lizardmen watching him from the other side and raised his voice. "I'm Zaryusu Shasha of the Green Claw tribe. I want to have a word with this tribe's chief!"

Eventually—it wasn't a terribly short amount of time, but it certainly wasn't long—an elderly lizardman with a gnarled staff

and white symbols on his body appeared. Five robust lizardmen followed behind.

A priest?

Zaryusu stood proudly. Right now they were equal. He couldn't bow his head. Even when the priest's eyes moved to the brand on his chest, he maintained the same posture.

"I'm Zaryusu Shasha from the Green Claw tribe. I have something to discuss with your chief."

"I won't say it was good of you to come, but it seems *the one who leads our tribe* will see you. Follow me."

The strange turn of phrase confused Zaryusu for a moment. *Why not "chief"?* And they didn't even ask for proof that he was who he said he was. He didn't want to begin the conversation too clumsily and upset them. Despite feeling that something was off, he silently followed.

The hut they led him to was a fine dwelling. In terms of his own tribe, it was even bigger than his brother's house. Patterns in rare dyes decorated the walls, which spoke to the high status of the one who lived there.

One thing that caught his attention was the lack of windows; the only openings were small holes here and there for air. Like all lizardmen, Zaryusu could see fine in the dark, but that didn't mean he preferred living in it. *So why is their leader staying in such a dark room?* Zaryusu wondered, but there didn't seem to be anyone who could answer for him.

He turned around. The priest and warriors who had guided him there were already gone. Initially, he'd thought leaving him alone was incredibly imprudent, to the point where he even indirectly asked them about it. But when they said that they were leaving because the acting chief wished it, his opinion of the per-

son waiting in the room jumped.

Despite what he'd said to his brother, Zaryusu didn't expect to make it back unscathed, but for the Red Eye tribe to surround him with armed warriors and pressure him would have been useless. Probably the first thing he would have felt was disappointment at their caliber as warriors. But if they'd read him so well and were acting generous… *They might be good negotiators, difficult to deal with…*

Ignoring the sensation of distant eyes on him, he approached the door and raised his voice. "I am Zaryusu Shasha of the Green Claw tribe. I've been told the leader of this tribe is here! Allow me to come in!"

He heard a quiet sound, a hoarse female voice giving him permission to enter.

Zaryusu pushed open the door with no hesitation. Inside it was dark, as he expected. The contact with the light outside made him blink even though he could see in the dark. The smell that wafted out was something like an herbal bath, a pungent mix of greens. He figured the one inside would be an elderly female, but what he found completely overturned his expectations.

"Good of you to come," a voice said to him from the darkness. From the other side of the door, she'd sounded old, but now he could hear youthful energy.

Once his eyes adjusted, she came into view.

She's white.

That was his first impression.

Her scales were white like snow without a single impurity. Her deep crimson eyes sparkled like rubies. Her slender body was not masculine but feminine. White-and-red symbols covered her.

They meant she was an adult, that she was proficient in many types of spells—and that she was single.

What does it feel like to be stabbed with a spear? Zaryusu knew. First, a hot, burning sensation shot through the body, and with every heartbeat came a sharp, all-encompassing pain. And that's how Zaryusu was feeling right now.

It didn't hurt. It just…

He simply stood there, not saying anything.

How did she interpret his silence? A cynical smile appeared on her face.

"So I look strange even to the bearer of Frost Pain, one of the Four Great Treasures, hmm?"

Albinos are extremely rare in nature—in part because they stick out, which makes surviving difficult.

In lizardman society, the situation was similar. They weren't quite civilized enough to guarantee the survival of members who had poor eyesight and were weak against sunlight. It was rare that albinos lived into adulthood, and in some cases, they were even culled at birth.

If the other lizardmen viewed albinos as just a nuisance, that would be tolerable, but in some cases they were even seen as monsters. That was the root of her cynicism.

But prejudice wasn't Zaryusu's issue.

"What's the matter?" she asked, perplexed that he was still standing in front of the door, doing nothing.

Then, without replying to her question, he emitted a call with vibrato that ended on a high tone. Hearing that, the female's eyes popped open and her jaw dropped slightly. She was part shocked,

part confused, and part scandalized.

It was a mating call.

Zaryusu came back to himself, and realizing what he'd just done, what call he'd just unconsciously performed, he reacted in a way similar to a human blushing: His tail flailed around—so violently it seemed like he might damage the hut. "Ah no, I didn't mean that. I mean…no, uh—"

Perhaps Zaryusu's surprise and panic had the contrary effect of smoothing her feathers. Her teeth clacked as she smiled and said awkwardly, "Please calm down. It'll just cause trouble for me if you get all rowdy."

"Oh! Sorry." He bobbed his head in apology and entered the house.

By this point, the female lizardman's tail was drooping down and suggesting she had regained her composure, but the twitching tip showed that she hadn't calmed down completely.

"Have a seat." She indicated a cushion, which was woven out of some kind of plant, placed on the floor.

"Thanks."

Zaryusu sat down, and she mirrored him.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm a traveler from the Green Claw tribe, Zaryusu Shasha."

"Thank you for the polite introduction. I'm the acting chief of the Red Eye tribe, Crusch Lulu."

Having finished with the formalities, they visually appraised each other.

Silence reigned in the hut for a little while, but it couldn't stay

like that forever. Zaryusu was a guest. The one to speak first had to be Crusch, the host.

“First of all, messenger, I don’t think there is any need for us to stand on ceremony. I’d like to speak with our mouths wide open, so feel free to relax.”

This meant she wanted to speak honestly, and Zaryusu nodded. “Thanks for that. I’m not used to speaking formally.”

“So, can I ask why you came here?” Crusch asked, although she had a pretty good idea. An undead suddenly appearing in the middle of the village; someone using the tier-four spell Control Cloud; this visiting male from another tribe, one who some called a hero. There was only one thing it could be. Crusch imagined how he would answer—and he demolished her expectations.

“Marry me.”

“…

“?

“?!

“Whaaaat?!” For a moment, she couldn’t believe her ears.

“Of course, that’s not the reason I came here. I fully understand I should get the real reason out of the way before moving on to this, but I can’t lie to myself. Feel free to laugh and call me a foolish man.”

“Uh, er, ah… Haaaa.” These words she’d never heard before, words she thought would never have anything to do with her, sent a storm of confusion ripping through her train of thought and tearing it irreparably apart.

Zaryusu smiled awkwardly at her and continued speaking. “Sorry. Really, my apologies. And during an emergency! You can

let me know your answer later."

"Uh, o-okay…" Somehow managing to put her mind back together, or perhaps reboot it, Crusch regained her composure. But she instantly remembered what he'd just said, and her temperature felt ready to skyrocket.

She looked over the male before her, making sure he didn't notice. His countenance was extremely calm. *How can he be so relaxed after saying something like that to me…? Is he out there courting all the time?! Or does he get propositioned a lot…? I mean, it did sound cool… Ahh, what am I thinking? This was his plan for sure! He wants to get me in the palm of his hand. Wh-why would he want to mate with me, anyway?*

Crusch was so thrown off at being seen as a female for the first time that she didn't have the wherewithal to notice the tip of Zaryusu's tail spasming, too. The male before her was mobilizing every ounce of his mental energy to suppress the frank expression of all the things in his heart.

That was what created this lull. They both needed some quiet time under the veil of silence to cool down their dizzy heads.

Finally, after enough time had elapsed, Crusch thought they should return to their previous topic for starters. She was about to ask him again why he'd come to their village when she remembered what he said last time.

How can I ask now?!

Her tail kerwhapped the floor once, and the male in front of her jerked as if she'd hit him.

Crusch inwardly fretted that her behavior was too rude. Even if he was a traveler, he had still come as the representative of his tribe, and he wasn't just any lizardman—he was the hero who possessed Frost Pain. He was too important to take this attitude

with. *But it's your fault! More importantly, say something!*

Unbeknownst to Crusch, who was busy controlling the volcano erupting inside her, Zaryusu had chosen silence out of shame for his indiscreet behavior.

The wordless void continued, and Crusch resigned herself to the fact that if this kept up there would be nothing she could do, but then finally, she thought to change the subject.

"Should I have expected that you wouldn't be afraid of me?"

Her question, tinged with cynicism, was met with a silent query from Zaryusu: *What are you talking about?*

Crusch thought in turn, *What is this guy thinking?* "I was asking if you're afraid of this white body of mine."

"...It's like the snow that caps the mountains."

"...Huh?"

"It's a pretty color."

Of course, she had never once in her life heard those words before.

Wh-what is th-this guy saying? Unable to withstand her internal pressure, the lid keeping her emotions in check was blown off with enough force to send it flying.

Zaryusu reached out casually and ran a hand over her scales. They were lustrous and pretty as if they'd been polished—and a little cold. His hand glided over them.

"Sha!" Crusch emitted an exhalation that sounded like a short threat.

That restored at least a smidgen of their respective calms.

They both understood—what had happened, what he had done without thinking—and they were both shaken. What instinct had made him do that? Why did that happen to her? They became impatient with the questions, and the impatience bred confusion.

The result was their two tails batting against the hut, *whap, whap*, so hard that it shook.

After a couple of moments, they looked at each other's faces, noticed what they were doing, and both tails froze as if time itself had stopped.

"…"

"…"

Was *heavy* the word for this atmosphere? Or *tense*? Silence fell over them and they glanced at each other.

Crusch had finally gotten her feelings sorted, and with a cold look in her eye that said she wasn't going to tolerate any lies, she asked, "This is all very sudden… What's with you?"

She hadn't been able to express herself very well in words, but Zaryusu seemed to understand and replied honestly with no hesitation. "Love at first sight. And I might die in this fight, so I don't want to have any regrets."

Hearing his simple honesty, his words that seemed to hide nothing, Crusch found herself at a loss for a moment. But part of them she just couldn't buy. "…The bearer of Frost Pain has resigned to die?"

"We don't know how many we're up against. We can't be careless… Did you see the monster who brought the message? The one that came to my village was…"

Zaryusu described it and Crusch nodded. "Yes, it's the same

one."

"Do you know what it is?"

"No, no one in my tribe knows."

"Oh…I met one once." He stopped there to see her reaction. "I ran away."

"Huh?"

"I couldn't have won. Well, at best I would've been half-dead by the end."

Crusch understood what a terrifying undead it was and was relieved that holding back the warriors had been the right decision.

"It can scream in a way that messes with your head. Also, it's incorporeal, so it's basically immune to attacks that aren't made with enchanted weapons. Even with numbers, you can't win."

"With druid magic we can enchant weapons for a limited time."

"Can you block attacks on the mind?"

"We can boost resistance, but we don't have quite enough power to protect everyone."

"I see… Can any priest do that?"

"Almost all of them can boost resistance. I'm the only one in this tribe who can protect someone from confusion, though."

Crusch noticed Zaryusu's breathing grow a little rough. It seemed like he'd realized that her position wasn't just for show.

Yes, Crusch Lulu was quite an accomplished druid and probably possessed more power than any lizardman head priest.

“What number was the Red Eye tribe on the attack list?”

“It told us fourth.”

“Hmm. And what are you going to do about it?”

Time passed.

Crusch wondered what the point of talking about it was. Green Claw had surely chosen to fight. Zaryusu had probably come to form an alliance, was going to say *Fight with us*. Where was the benefit in that for Red Eye?

They weren’t interested in forming an alliance. They were for evacuation. It was the height of stupidity to go up against an opponent who could use tier-four magic. And if the messenger was really so horrible, what other conclusion could there be?

But could she bluntly say all that?

As she swirled in the whirlpool of her thoughts, Zaryusu smiled and said, as if he were talking to himself, “I’ll go ahead and say what I really think.”

What’s he going to say? Crusch fixed her eyes on him.

“What I’m worried about is what happens after the evacuation.” Crusch didn’t seem to grasp his meaning, so he spoke matter-of-factly. “Even if we’re able to move from this place we’re so used to, do you really think we’ll manage to have the same lifestyle somewhere else?”

“No…I mean, it would be difficult.”

Leaving this place and creating a new habitat would require a fight for survival—they would have to win in that ecosystem’s struggle for existence. The lizardmen weren’t champions of the lake or anything, and acquiring the marsh had taken years and years. There was no way their race could build a habitat in an un-

familiar place just like that.

"There's also a real possibility that we won't be able to gather enough food."

Not understanding what he was getting at, she responded in a prickly, confused voice. "Yeah."

"So what would happen if all five tribes in this area tried to evacuate?"

"Then…" She didn't know what to say—because she had finally figured out what Zaryusu meant.

Even though the lake was vast, an evacuation spot that one tribe chose was bound to look good to the others as well. What would they do if a fishing rivalry broke out when they were already fighting a new struggle for existence? That could get ugly. It could end up like the war.

"But you can't mean… Fighting when we're not sure we can win isn't any…"

"No, it's not. I'm counting on reducing the number of mouths across all tribes."

"That's your reason?!"

That was why he wanted to form an army and fight, even if they lost—just to decrease the population of lizardmen. The idea that those besides the warriors, hunters, and priests fighting for their survival could die was extreme, but she could understand it. No, having them die might even be the correct choice in the long run.

If there were fewer mouths to feed, they could get away with less food. Then they might have a chance at cohabitating.

Crusch desperately searched for a way to refute the argument.

“You’re saying that even though we don’t know how dangerous the new spot might be, we should go in with smaller numbers?”

“Listen to me. Even if we take over the area no problem, then what? If the fish supply runs low, the five tribes will just have to kill one another!”

“But we might be able to catch lots of fish!”

“And if we can’t?”

His cold retort left her lost for words.

Zaryusu was basing his actions on the next-to-worst-case scenario. Crusch was making mostly hopeful observations. If they operated based on her ideas and something bad happened, it would be a disaster, but it wouldn’t be if they went with Zaryusu’s plan.

And if the number of adult lizardmen decreased as a result of their defeat, at least they would have died honorable deaths.

“If you refuse, we’ll have to fight you first.”

His dark voice gave Crusch chills.

He’d announced he wasn’t going to let Red Eye be the only tribe to maintain its population and move to a new location. That was a valid decision, and she understood it completely. It was the only way to avoid the danger of weakened tribes being destroyed by Red Eye and the numbers they had preserved. It was only natural that one entrusted with their tribe’s survival would think in that way. She would probably do the same thing if she were in his position.

“I think the chances of killing one another in the new land will be lower if we form an alliance, even if we lose.”

Crusch didn’t understand him and let a genuine expression of

puzzlement appear on her face.

Zaryusu explained in another way. “We’ll have deeper friendship ties. Instead of different tribes, we’ll feel like comrades who fought together.”

“I see.” She rolled the words around in her mouth.

So if tribes spilled blood together, things would be less likely to devolve into a fatal fight, even if the food situation was bad? But she wondered, based on her experience, if that was really true.

As Crusch delved into her own thoughts, facing slightly downward in silence, Zaryusu asked in a voice that troubled her, “By the way, how did your tribe make it through that time?”

It was like she’d been stabbed with a needle. Her head jerked up in spite of herself. When she looked at him, she saw he was surprised. *Oh, so he really doesn’t know.*

They hadn’t been together long, but Crusch had already gotten the hang of Zaryusu’s personality. She instinctively understood that he wasn’t asking as a threat.

She narrowed her eyes and looked at him intently, like she was trying to bore a hole into his head. She knew the baffled Zaryusu had no idea why he was getting such a stare, but she couldn’t stop.

“Do I have to answer?”

Crusch’s voice was full of loathing. The change was so dramatic it nearly felt like he was talking to a different person.

But Zaryusu couldn’t back down. Maybe her answer would save them all.

“I want to know. Was it the power of your priests? Or some

other way? Maybe it can save u—" Having said that much, he faltered.

If there was a way to save them, Crusch wouldn't look so pained.

Perhaps she was able to read what Zaryusu was thinking just then. She snorted and scoffed at the whole thing, herself included. "That's right. There's no way to save anyone at all." She paused and smiled an exhausted smile. "We were cannibals. We ate our own dead."

Zaryusu was shocked speechless. Killing the weak—decreasing the number of mouths to feed—was not taboo, but cannibalism was unclean, the most taboo of taboos.

Why did she tell me that? Why would she tell a secret she should have carried to her grave to a stranger from another tribe—a visitor? Does she not mean to let me go alive? ...No, that can't be right. I don't get that feeling from her.

Crusch wasn't sure why she'd said it, either. She knew plenty well how much lizardmen from other tribes would scorn them. So why...?

Her mouth chattered away as if she no longer had control over it. "Back then— When the other tribes started the war, we didn't have enough food, either, and things were bad. The reason we didn't fight in the war was that our tribe has a lot of priests and not many warriors. Thanks to the priests, we could make lots of food with magic." She went on unceasingly as if possessed. "But the amount of food they could make was still insignificant compared to the number of tribe members. All we could do was face death and slowly tread the path to our extinction. But one day, the chief brought food—bright-red meat."

Maybe I wanted someone to listen...to hear the story of my crime...

She ground her teeth together.

The male before her was quietly listening. If he felt disgust, it didn't show on his face. Crusch was thankful for that.

"What kind of meat was it? Everyone pretty much knew. At the time, we had strict laws, and any family who broke them was kicked out of the village. Our chief brought meat just after some people had been banished. We just shut our eyes and ate it—to survive. But we couldn't go on like that. At one point, all the built-up discontent exploded into a revolt." She closed her eyes and remembered their chief. "We ate it… We knew, and we ate it, so we were just as guilty. Honestly, when I think of it now, it's so strange."

After a moment of silence, she looked squarely at Zaryusu. It surprised her to find a sensation of happiness inside, seeing no disgust in his quiet eyes. *Why would I feel that way?* She had a vague idea of the answer.

"…Please look at me. Every now and then in Red Eye, someone like me is born. They always have something they excel at—for me it was priestly powers. For that reason, our authority is second only to the chief. Then I went and led the revolution and revolted against him. The village split in two and fought, but my side won because we had more people."

"And then because your population decreased, the food was enough to go around?"

"Yes… In the end, we survived. When we revolted, the chief wouldn't surrender—he died having sustained countless wounds. And when I dealt the fatal blow, he smiled at me." Crusch strung her words together painfully. They were like pus that had gradually gathered in her heart since the day she killed their chief.

To Zaryusu, she was finally able to spit out these things she'd never be able to say to the tribe—the ones who'd believed in her

and fought against the chief. That was why she couldn't stop; her words were like water flowing from high to low ground.

"It wasn't the kind of smile you'd flash at someone who was killing you. There was no hatred, or envy, or hostility, or cursing, or anything. It was a truly lovely smile! Maybe the chief was right all along? I keep thinking that! With the death of our chief, the one who was the root of all our evil, the tribe came together again. And not only that, we even reduced our own number enough to solve the food issue!"

That was all she could take.

The dam broke with all the strength she had expended struggling to bear the burden of her crime as acting chief. She gulped back the muddy surge. With her thoughts in tatters, she couldn't get them into words.

Weeping "kuu-kuu"—there weren't many tears due to her biological structure, but the emotions were the same—she broke down.

Her body was so small.

When living in nature, weakness was as good as a crime. Of course, children were protected, but strength was a priority for adult male and female lizardmen equally. From that standpoint, she must have been humiliated. It couldn't be good for the leader of the tribe to show weakness to a member of another tribe, someone she wasn't even close to.

But the sentiments in Zaryusu's heart weren't anything like that. Maybe it was partly because she was a beautiful female. But more than that, she was a warrior, a wounded warrior who gasped, struggled, and still went forward. She'd shown only a glimpse of weakness.

If she was standing up and trying to go forward, she was no

weakling.

Zaryusu approached and gently put his arms around her. “We aren’t all-powerful or all-knowing. All we can do is decide how to act as we go. I might have done the same thing in your position. I’m not trying to cheer you up. Are there any correct answers in this world? We just keep going forward, full of pain and regret, with scars on the bottoms of our feet. All you can do is go forward —that’s what I think.”

They could feel each other’s body heat and hear the beating of their hearts faintly. The two pulses gradually matched rhythms and created the illusion they were one.

It was a strange feeling.

Zaryusu felt a warmth he had never experienced in all his life as a lizardman. It wasn’t because he was holding another lizard-man. *Is it because I’m holding* this *female, Crusch Lulu?*

A little time went by, and then Crusch lifted herself off Zaryusu’s chest.

As her body heat withdrew, Zaryusu felt it was unfortunate. Of course, he was too embarrassed to say so.

“I’ve made an unsightly impression… Do you hate me?”

“What’s unsightly? You struggle down your path, get hurt along the way, but continue on. Do I look like such a fool that I’d think that unsightly? …You’re beautiful.”

“!!!” Her white tail writhed, striking the floor several times. “… Yikes.”

Incapable of asking what she meant by that lone word, Zaryusu asked a different question. “More importantly, does Red Eye farm fish?”

“Farm?”

“Yeah. Raise fish for yourselves to eat.”

“We don’t do anything like that. Fish are a blessing from nature.”

As far as Zaryusu knew, no lizardman tribes had fish-farming technology. The very idea of increasing the amount of food they had with their own hands was foreign to them.

“That seems to be the way priests—druids—think, but could you change your mind? So that you can grow fish to eat? The priests in my tribe accepted it.”

Crusch bobbed her head yes.

“Then I’ll teach you how to farm. It’s important to give them the right food. You can use fruit that druids make with magic. They grow quite well when you give them those.”

“You really don’t mind sharing your technology with us?”

“Of course not. Hiding it won’t help anyone, and it’s more important to save the tribes.”

Crusch bowed low with her tail pointed up and thanked him. “I’m grateful.”

“You don’t really…have to thank me. In exchange, I need to ask you again…”

The emotion drained out of Crusch’s face.

That deeply calmed Zaryusu.

It was a question he couldn’t avoid.

He held his breath, and at the same time, Crusch inhaled.

Then he asked.

“What is Red Eye’s plan for the imminent war?”

“…We decided yesterday to evacuate.”

“Then I’ll ask the acting chief, Crusch Lulu. Do you still think you’ll do that?”

She couldn’t answer.

Her reply would decide the fate of her tribe. It was only natural to hesitate.

But Zaryusu could do nothing besides put on a troubled smile. “…It’s your decision. The reason your chief smiled at you in the end must have been because he was entrusting the tribe’s future to you. Now’s the time to carry out that mission. I’ve said everything I can say. All that’s left is for you to decide.”

Crusch’s eyes rolled, casting her gaze around the room. She wasn’t trying to escape or looking for help. She was just trying to arrive at the correct answer within herself.

No matter what her conclusion, Zaryusu would accept it.

“As the acting chief, let me ask you. How many are you going to allow to evacuate?”

“We’re planning to have each tribe evacuate ten warriors, twenty hunters, three priests, seventy males, a hundred females, and a few children.”

“…And the others?”

“Depending on the circumstances, we may just have them die.”

Crusch said nothing and merely looked up into empty space.

Then she murmured, “I see.”

“So I want to know your decision, Acting Chief Crusch Lulu.”

Crusch considered all kinds of plans.

Killing Zaryusu was one option, of course. Personally, she didn’t want to do that, but as acting chief, she felt differently. *I could kill him, and then the whole village could escape.* She rejected that idea. It was a very dangerous gamble. In the first place, they didn’t even have any proof that he had come alone.

So how about promising him to fight and then running away? This could also be problematic. They ran the risk of his changing plans and opponents to cull the population by fighting with the Red Eye. His real goal was decreasing the number of mouths to feed. In that case, it didn’t matter who they fought.

In the end, if she said she wouldn’t form an alliance, he’d probably take that answer home and come back with an army to destroy the Red Eye.

However, maybe Zaryusu hadn’t noticed, but there was one hole in his plan. Even so, if they didn’t go with him, they wouldn’t be able to avoid the food problem.

Crusch smiled knowingly. There had been no way out of this conversation from the beginning—from the point she’d heard what he’d had to say, from the time the Green Claw tribe started their plan to form an alliance.

There was only one way for the Red Eye to survive: Join the alliance and fight with them. Zaryusu surely knew that, too.

So the reason he was waiting for her answer must have been because he wanted to make sure the commanding lizardman was worth allying with. And that they would commit. But if those words came out of her mouth, many lives would be lost. And—

“Let me say one thing. We’re not fighting to die—we’re fighting to win. I may have said some things that made you anxious, but if we beat the enemy, we’ll be laughing about it later. So please don’t misunderstand that point.”

Crusch nodded that she understood.

He is a really nice male, she thought as she gave her decision. “We of the Red Eye tribe will cooperate with you, so our chief’s smile won’t be meaningless and so as many Red Eye members as possible can survive.” She bowed deeply and stretched her tail straight up.

“I thank you.” He slowly bowed and lifted his tail; his actions said more than words could express.

●

Early in the morning…

Zaryusu stood in front of Rororo and gazed at the gate of the Red Eye village. He yawned a huge “kuwa” in spite of himself. He had participated as an observer in the Red Eye’s meeting until late the previous night, so he was a bit tired, but there wasn’t much time left. He had to get to another tribe today.

Fighting back sleep unsuccessfully, he yawned again, even bigger than before. He had the feeling that he would be able to sleep on Rororo even if his balance wasn’t that great.

He gazed at the rising sun—it seemed almost yellow—and then looked back to the gate and started. Something strange was coming out of it.

It was a clump of grass.

Weeds were growing here and there out of a tunic sewn with many loose strips of fabric and strings. If one laid it sideways in

the marsh, from a distance it would have looked like a patch of grass.

Ah, I've seen a monster like this somewhere before. Zaryusu remembered something he'd seen on his travels. Behind him Rororo let out a low warning call.

Of course, he knew who it was. There was no mistaking her with her white tail peeking out a bit.

He watched the tail sway cheerfully and calmed Rororo down as the clump of grass came over to him.

"Morning!"

"Yeah, good morning... It seems you had no trouble getting the tribe on board?" He looked at the Red Eye dwellings. The village was in a frenzy first thing in the morning, and lizardmen ran busily to and fro.

Crusch stood next to him, facing the same direction, and answered, "Yes, no trouble. We should be ready to leave for the Razor Tail tribe today, and the evacuees should be ready soon, too."

According to information the priests received via magic, Razor Tail had been sentenced to annihilation first. Timing-wise, it was fortunate that it hadn't been Dragon Tusk.

"So why did you come out here, Crusch?"

"It's simple, Zaryusu. But before that, tell me what you're planning to do now."

After the meeting that lasted from evening into the early morning, it seemed natural to call each other by name. They'd gotten closer, so they could speak more at ease.

"I'm going to go to another tribe, Dragon Tusk."

“Strength is everything to them, right? Supposedly they have the most powerful military of all the tribes.”

“Yeah, that’s right. We’ve never had dealings with them before, so I have to go prepared.”

Everything he’d ever heard about them was wrapped in mystery, so going at all was extremely dangerous. And the fact that they had taken in the survivors from the two tribes who lost the war made it even more dangerous.

From the perspective of those survivors, Zaryusu, who had fought in the war, was without a doubt a hateful enemy. Still, for the upcoming fight, Dragon Tusk was the tribe whose cooperation he needed the most.

“I see… Then I should definitely go with you.”

“What?”

“Is that weird?” The clump of grass rustled.

He couldn’t see her face, so he wasn’t sure what she meant. “I dunno if it’s weird…but it’s dangerous.”

“Is there anywhere that isn’t dangerous right now?”

Zaryusu hesitated. If he mulled it over with a clear head, there were lots of pros to taking her along. But as a male, he didn’t like the idea of taking his crush into certain peril. “I’m not thinking clearly…”

The grass hid her from view, but it seemed like she laughed a little bit.

“…I have a different question. What’s with the getup?”

“It doesn’t look good on me?”

Looking good or not isn't the issue. It's bizarre. But would it be better to praise her? Zaryusu wasn't sure how to respond. After careful consideration, he decided to get on her good side, even though he couldn't see her expression. "I guess it looks… good?"

"Yeah, right!" she snapped.

There was probably nothing Zaryusu could have done to not feel disheartened in that moment.

"I just can't take the sunlight, so I usually wear this when I go out."

"I see…"

"Oh, but I didn't get your answer. Will you let me go with you?"

It was pointless to say what he thought, and having her along would probably work to his advantage in forming the alliance. Maybe she had proposed it because she thought so, too. In that case, he didn't have any more objections. "Okay. Lend me your strength, Crusch."

She looked thrilled from the bottom of her heart. "Got it, Zaryusu. You can count on me."

"Are you ready to go?"

"Of course. I packed my bag and everything."

Now that she mentioned it, there was a lump on her back under the grass. It smelled like fresh herbs, a little pungent. As a druid, she probably had techniques that used medicinal herbs, so she must have brought some.

"Zaryusu, you look sleepy."

“Oh, uh, I am…just a little bit. Between this and that, I haven’t really slept much in the past couple of days.”

A white hand suddenly extended from under her grass clothes. “Here. It’s a rikiriko nut. Try chewing it with the shell on.”

Zaryusu took the brown nut out of her hand and unhesitatingly popped it into his mouth. A bitterness radiated out of it and took the edge off his tiredness, but he couldn’t really say he felt awake. As he kept chewing, however, the flavor suddenly exploded across his tongue. It made his breath smell, too. “Mph! How refreshing! It really gets into your sinuses.” He inadvertently reacted in his brother’s trademark way.

“Shuu-shuu,” Crusch laughed at him. “You’re not sleepy anymore, right? But that doesn’t mean you’re not tired, so don’t overdo it! You should take a break when you can!”

Satisfied by the fresh, cool feeling in his mouth and nose, Zaryusu nodded. “Then I’ll take a nap on Rororo at some point.”

Without further ado, he climbed up Rororo’s back. Crusch followed a moment later. Rororo glared at Zaryusu, none too happy with the strange sensation of grass creeping along his body, but Zaryusu managed to soothe him.

“Okay, let’s go! It’s not very stable, so hold on to me.”

“Got it!”

She wrapped her arms around him, and the prickly grass tickled.

“…” This feeling wasn’t quite what he’d expected, and he frowned.

“What’s the matter?”

“Eh, it’s nothing. Let’s go. Okay, Rororo, we’re counting on

you."

"What am I so happy about?" Hearing Crusch's excited voice behind him, Zaryusu smiled in spite of himself as they swayed along.

2

Conquered by its new ruler, the Tove Woodlands were filled with silence—because every living thing held its breath, frightened by the new king.

But this one place was different.

The sounds of trees being felled and then transported filled the area. Heavy iron machines—golems reminiscent of heavy machinery—carried the trees to an area of huge wooden buildings under construction. The structures seemed far from completion. The site was quite big, but there were surprisingly few buildings actually standing.

Working there were golems and undead. Most of the undead were elder liches wearing eye-catching crimson robes. Each of them had a nine-inch demon—a brown-skinned imp with bat wings—perched on one shoulder. They held their pointed poison tails up to keep them out of the elder liches' way.

One of the working elder liches unrolled a piece of paper and gave orders to a golem in transit. The golem stopped as ordered, and the lich looked back and forth between the part it'd been building and the paper, cocking its head. Eventually it spoke to the imp on its shoulder.

After listening to what the elder lich had to say, the imp ex-

pressed its understanding and flapped up into the sky.

Its movements weren't very elegant, but it soared into the air and scanned the site with its goggling eyes. Soon it found the person it was looking for and immediately glided down to meet her.

It was one of the Great Tomb of Nazarick's guardians of the sixth level, Aura Bella Fiora. She was one of the new rulers of this forest.

The dark-elf girl was using a rolled-up piece of paper in lieu of a megaphone to project her voice. The imp flapped down before her and bowed, and she asked in a familiar way, "Uh-huh. Which team are you from?"

"Mistress Aura, I'm C-3."

"A *C*, huh? Okay. Is there some kind of problem again?"

All the workers in this place had letters from *A* to *E*, and each team had their own job and location. Aura recalled that *C*s were working on the warehouses. Their construction was second furthest along among the different buildings.

"There's an issue with the thickness of the wood being used for construction, so if you could spare a momen—" The imp stopped short because a voice started coming from the iron band around Aura's wrist.

"It's time!"

It was the ditzy voice of a cheerful girl, and when Aura heard it, her expression broke. Her ears drooped, and her face flushed with awkward embarrassment. "Okay, understood, Lady BubblingTeapot!" she responded energetically to the band on her wrist.

"It's lunchtime. Let's call it good for this morning."

There were almost no monsters working there that required food. Actually, Aura was wearing a Ring of Sustenance, so she didn't need to eat, drink, or sleep, either. But her master had kindly told her, "Make sure you take a proper break!"

"So sorry, I'm going on break. Could you come back in an hour?"

"Understood. Then please excuse me." The imp bowed and then noisily took off.

After watching the imp fly back toward the warehouses, Aura stretched her shoulders and looked once again at the band on her wrist—and grinned ear to ear. It had been a reward from her master for a job well done. Of course, as a guardian created by the Supreme Beings, it was only natural to work for them, for her master, and it would be wrong to charge for her service. It was a matter of course. But she just couldn't refuse when he offered this.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh. I wanna hear Lady BubblingTeapot talk more." She gently stroked the band. Her caresses may have been even gentler than the ones she gave the magical beasts she controlled.

All the voices the item used came from the Supreme Being who created Aura. Even just hearing it tell her the time sent joy coursing through her entire body. When she heard her little brother, Mare, got a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown, she'd been a little jealous, but now, she honestly thought she had gotten the better gift.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh." Her ears sagged, and she polished the band a bit giddily. She nodded in satisfaction as it sparkled in the sunlight. Then she frowned, puzzled. "I wonder why Lord Ainz limited the ways I can use it." He'd given her several orders, such as *Don't set an alarm at 7:21 and then 19:19*. "Maybe I should ask… Eh, I can't do that!"

Noticing the numbers on the band, she rushed off.

She ran to a maid.

The forty-one maids who worked in the Great Tomb of Nazarick were grotesques—homunculi—but on the outside they looked like beautiful women. This one, however, was different.

Her head was a dog's, and a line like a scar ran down the middle of her face, along with marks that looked like the remains of stitches. It was as if her head had been split right in half and sewn—though it seemed impossible—back together. Her name was Pestonia S. Puppydog. She was the head of Nazarick's maids and a high-level priest.

"As you requested, I've brought you a hamburger. On the side you have pickles and fries with the skins on. And for your beverage, cola…woof."

During the brief pause before the "woof," Aura had a hunch she'd forgotten her signature noise, but she didn't say anything. The drool-worthy aroma was making her too hungry. Even though her ring rendered eating unnecessary, it wasn't like she *couldn't*, and eating made her happy—especially something that tickled her nose with such a tasty aroma.

"The total effects of your meal are—"

"Ah, I'm okay; I don't need to hear that. I didn't order it for the ability boosts."

"Understood, woof."

Pestonia went to the food cart that was emanating delicious smells at her side.

"Lu-unch, lu-unch!"

Listening to Aura's food song, Pestonia lifted the cover of a sil-

ver tray.

"Ooh!" Eyes glued on her meal, Aura mentioned something she remembered. "A-7 ground beef isn't bad, but I like a mix of beef and pork better. I wonder if you can make three-patty burgers of that."

"I'll tell the chef, woof."

"Great, thanks!"

Aura grabbed the tray and walked off with a smile on her face.

3

A clump of plants peeked around Zaryusu's shoulder as he watched the Dragon Tusk village rise in front of them. It went without saying that it was Crusch. Her hands moved, and the grass covering her head parted to reveal the face Zaryusu found so beautiful.

"Are you really planning on riding right in? Are you trying to start a fight?"

"No, the opposite. The Dragon Tusk tribe prioritizes strength. If I get off Rororo now, there might be trouble—I could end up in a fight before I reach the chief. Rororo is a great deterrence against that."

As they proceeded, several warriors on their guard here and there throughout the village, weapons in hand, pierced them with their eyes alone.

Reacting to the hostility, Rororo let out a faint, low cry. De-

spite the warning, Zaryusu had him continue advancing.

If he went any farther, there would be a fight. Once the air crackled with tension, Zaryusu finally stopped Rororo and dismounted. Crusch came down a moment later.

The sharp gazes of several soldiers targeted the pair with palpable pressure. The sentiment wasn't simple hostility but already in the realm of killer intent.

Crusch, seeming a bit overwhelmed, stopped moving. She may have had advanced ability as a druid, but she rarely had to bear the brunt of an encounter as a warrior.

Instead, Zaryusu took a single step forward. He shielded Crusch with half his body and raised his voice. "I am Zaryusu Shasha, and I come on behalf of the Green Claw tribe. I want to speak with your chief!" His strong voice subdued their murderous attitudes, and the Dragon Tusk warriors seemed a bit overawed, and their stances wavered.

Then Crusch raised her voice. "I am Crusch Lulu, acting chief of the Red Eye tribe. I also came to meet with your chief." Hers was a quiet voice, but it contained the confidence and awareness of a tribal leader. She'd been inspired by the proud male's voice, and the little lady lizardman who had been there a moment before had vanished.

"I'll say it again! We came to see your chief! Where is he?"

Just then the atmosphere shifted violently. It was almost as if emotions had taken on physical shape and assaulted Zaryusu and Crusch.

Rororo's four heads immediately started writhing. He opened his jaws wide and let out threatening growls, moving his heads to intimidate. The lizardmen shrank back for a moment as if frightened at the huge hydra's continued high-pitched cries.

"…You don't really need to protect me."

"I don't intend to. You came here of your own free will. But the one who should get this kind of glare, as the one responsible for the breaking up of their tribes, is me."

More warriors gradually gathered by the entrance to the village. They all had magnificent physiques and faint scars in their scales. They had probably made it through some intense battles. But Zaryusu could tell their chief was not among them.

They were all mere warriors. There was no one with the dignity of his elder brother or the extraordinariness of Crusch, no one with the impact of a chief.

The only sound breaking the silence was Rororo's warning growls. Not a single lizardman there relaxed their guard. Then…

"Ah!" Crusch gasped quietly. But Zaryusu didn't lose his composure when the lizardman they were waiting for appeared—he'd sensed the immensely powerful creature walking toward them before he'd seen him.

Still, he couldn't help being a little shocked when he finally came into view.

To describe this lizardman in a word: *monstrous*.

He was huge, over seven and a half feet tall. That alone wasn't enough to make him grotesque, but there were reasons to use that expression. First, his right arm was big and thick. It was the same strange appearance that fiddler crabs, with their one large claw, had. No, his left arm wasn't skinny. His left arm was about the size of Zaryusu's. His right arm was just bizarrely thick, and it wasn't puffed up due to disease or deformity, but muscle. He was missing his ring and pinkie fingers on his left hand. His mouth seemed to have been sliced open with something around to the back of his head. His tail was smashed flat, less like a lizardman's

and more like an alligator's. But more eye-catching than anything else was the brand on his chest. The design was different from Zaryusu's, but its meaning was the same: He was a traveler.

He took a close look at Zaryusu and Crusch—and there came a sound like pieces of dry wood bumping together. The grotesque lizardman's sharp teeth rubbed against one another. Apparently he was laughing.

"So you made it, huh, bearer of Frost Pain?" His deep, heavy voice was a good fit for his odd looks. He was probably just talking normally, but he sounded daunting.

"Pleased to meet you. I've come from the Green Claw tribe an—"

The lizardman waved a hand, as if to say, *Not necessary, not necessary*. "How about just your names?"

"...Zaryusu Shasha. And this is Crusch Lulu."

"Is that a...plant monster? Well, you did bring a hydra, so it's not so strange that you'd have another pet monster."

"...No."

Crusch began taking off her clothes, but the massive lizardman did his *not necessary, not necessary* hand wave again. "Don't take that joke seriously, ya goobs..."

"!"

He gave Crusch a bored look as she rustled her grass and then turned to Zaryusu. "So, I guess I'll ask why you're here."

"Before that, could I ask your name?"

"Yeah, I'm the chief of the Dragon Tusk tribe, Zenbel Gugu. Call me Zenbel!" he said with a toothy grin.

Zaryusu had known this one was chief when he saw him, but the reality of a traveler in charge was still surprising. On the other hand, it made sense. There was no way a male like this could be *just* a traveler. When he appeared, the hostility from the others vanished. He was a male with that much authority, as well as military might and unifying force.

"You can call me Zaryusu, too. So…Zenbel. I imagine that a strange monster showed up here lately?"

"Yeah, the messenger from the Great One."

"If it came, then that makes this eas—"

Zenbel lifted a hand to pause Zaryusu mid-sentence.

"I have an idea what you're going to say, but we only trust the strong. Take up your sword." The split mouth of this huge lizardman, Zenbel Gugu, chief of the Dragon Tusk tribe, bared his sharp teeth good-humoredly.

"What?!" Crusch was the only one to gasp in surprise. The warriors in the area and Zaryusu appeared to approve.

"…How straightforward. Chief of the Dragon Tusk! That's a clear, concise judgment with no time wasting."

"And you're a brilliant messenger. I guess I should have expected that, since you have Frost Pain, though?"

●

The strongest gets selected as chief. For a lizardman, this was utterly natural. *But for issues that impact the continuation of the tribe, is that okay? Shouldn't many people consult one another and discuss things from different angles before deciding?* Crusch thought these things—and then found such logic mysterious.

Everyone looking on, both males and females, agreed with their chief's decision. Until recently she would have said, *That's the way I make decisions, too.*

So why am I doubting it now? Where had that doubt come from?

Am I under some kind of magic attack? That couldn't be. She was fairly confident she wouldn't lose to any lizardman on the marsh with her magic skills. That pride told her that it wasn't any mystical art.

Crusch moved her eyes to look at the two males.

Zaryusu and Zenbel.

Next to each other they looked like a child and an adult.

Of course, as a caster, she knew physique wouldn't decide everything, but seeing this much of a gap between them made her heart shriek, *I hate this!*

I hate this? I hate the idea of them—no, him*—fighting?* She reached out within herself to try and understand this peculiar feeling that had come up in her heart. *Why am I so against it? Why don't I want them to fight?*

There was one answer. She didn't even have to think about it.

She smiled faintly, a little awkwardly, and with a bit of a sneer. *You just have to admit it, Crusch. You don't want Zaryusu to fight because you're scared he could get hurt…or even die.* In other words: that.

Participants in these types of fights almost never died. But if they *almost never* died, that meant that rarely, they did. If things got too heated, someone could easily be killed. *I don't want to lose my husband by making him fight like that*, thought the sin-

gle female.

So in her heart, she'd accepted Zaryusu's proposal.

No male has ever treated me like that… Not that that means I should be a pushover… What do they call that? "Easy"? Ahh, I feel kinda…happy but sad… Oh, I don't know!

Having quietly acknowledged her emotions, she went over to Zaryusu, who was warming up, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Do you need anything else to get ready?"

"Nope. I'm good to go."

She tapped his shoulder again.

It was a sturdy shoulder.

Right around the age she began to understand the world around her, she had started down the path to becoming a priest. Along the way, she had touched many males' bodies during prayers, applying medicine, and casting spells. But she had the feeling she'd touched Zaryusu far more than the rest of them put together.

So this is Zaryusu's body…

He was starting to get excited about the fight, and his muscles were bulging. It felt very masculine to her.

"…Is something wrong?" Apparently he thought it odd that Crusch hadn't moved her hand.

"Huh?! Uhh, er…priest's blessing!"

"Aha. The spirits of your ancestors will help me out even though I'm from a different tribe?"

"The spirits of our ancestors aren't so narrow-minded. Good

luck!" She removed her hand from the shoulder of the male she loved, prayed for his victory, and apologized to the spirits of her ancestors for the lie.

Zenbel was similarly prepping, and in his right hand, he gripped a huge spear—a steel halberd of almost ten feet that a normal lizardman wouldn't have been able to use without both hands.

Then he—casually—swung it.

The sweeping motion displaced enough air that Crusch could feel the wind where she was.

"Can you—? No. Will you be okay?"

"Hmm, I'm planning on it one way or another."

She'd been planning to ask if he could win, but she stopped herself. Zaryusu was fighting because he knew he had to win.

In that case, he wouldn't lose. She'd known him only a day, traveled with him for only half of one, but still, she knew: This male was worth falling for.

"Okayyy, are you ready, bearer of Frost Pain… Ahh, Zaryusu."

"Everything's fine. I'm ready anytime." He casually turned from Crusch and advanced into the circle that was to serve as the arena.

"Ahh," Crusch sighed, unable to help but watch him as he walked away.

The warmth in Zaryusu's shoulder where Crusch had touched him for so long—although it probably wasn't really that long—was fading.

The duel he was going into was a simplified version of the type

used to decide a chief. Since it was a solo fight, it was against the rules to have a third party cast spells.

When the warmth made his heart buzz, when she didn't take her hand away, he thought maybe she had cast defensive magic. But there was no way that Crusch, as acting chief of her tribe, didn't know the rules.

So if it wasn't magic, then why did it get him this excited?

Is it because I'm a male? Is it that I want to impress a female? Brother once called me a dead tree…but apparently that's not the case.

Zaryusu entered the circle of lizardmen, took Frost Pain from his hip, and lifted it up. Summoned by his will, a frosty whiteness clung to the blade.

The surrounding lizardmen gasped.

They were survivors of the Sharp Edge tribe who knew Frost Pain's former owner. And others had seen what Frost Pain could do.

When Zenbel saw Zaryusu invoke the power only a true owner of Frost Pain could, his vicious expression cracked into delight—the delight of a growling animal with its teeth bared.

"I don't want anyone to get hurt too badly," Zaryusu declared coldly in response to the fierce aura coming off the lizardman before him.

At this provocation, the emotions of the warriors in the crowd surged in a bad direction, but the sharp slap of something striking water and the extraordinarily huge spray that followed immediately calmed them down.

Zenbel had hit the marsh with the tip of his spear. "Oh…?

Then don't let me admit defeat. Listen up, you guys! If I lose, this guy's your chief! No objections, no arguments, and no whining!"

They couldn't have accepted it, but none of the warriors argued. If Zaryusu did kill Zenbel, they would probably grit their teeth and obey.

"Okay, now we're ready. Come at me like you mean to kill me. I'm probably one of the strongest guys you've ever fought."

"You might be right… Got it. And if I die…" He flicked his eyes behind him to Crusch.

"Sure, I'll get your female home safe."

"…She's not *mine* yet, but okay."

"Heh, but you're majorly going for her, right? That plant monster! Is she that worth it?"

"She really is."

They ignored the lizardman shrinking into a ball and cradling her head behind them.

"I'd like to see. If I win, maybe I'll strip her for a peek before I send her home."

Up until a moment ago, Zaryusu had been pumped just for the fight, but now a new energy flowed through him.

"…Well, now I've got a really good reason not to lose. I'm not showing Crusch to the likes of you!"

"You're crazy about her!"

"Yeah, absolutely nuts."

They ignored the cringing lizardman, shaking her head *no, no*,

as some of the other females tried to talk to her.

"Ha!" Zenbel laughed, tremendously happy. "Then you'd better win! If you lose, it's all over!"

"Oh, I plan on it."

Zaryusu and Zenbel glared at each other as if to say they were done chatting.

"Let's go?"

"Come at me!"

A short exchange, but neither one moved.

When the spectators started to get impatient, Zaryusu was the first one to inch forward. Despite the fact that they were in a wetter part of the marsh, he made no noise.

Zenbel just waited for him, immobile.

The moment Zaryusu got within a certain distance, a roar whooshed by in front of him, and he jumped back. It was Zenbel's spear. There was no technique—he just swung it around. Still, that was what made him so ferocious.

Zaryusu prepared to charge, and Zenbel held his spear at the ready. He was swinging that huge thing around with just his right arm. With a motion like a whirlwind, he was back in his stance immediately after.

Zaryusu wondered something. To test it out, he moved back into range—and the power of a violent gale swiped at him. He met the shaft with Frost Pain, and a tremendous shock went through his arm—and his body left the ground.

Zenbel had sent a grown lizardman flying with the strength of just one arm. That arm was truly beyond the realm of common

sense.

The air buzzed with excitement.

Witnessing the overwhelming muscular strength of their chief, the warriors roared.

Zaryusu retreated, *splish-splash*, using his tail to keep balance. Shaking out his numb hand, he narrowed his eyes slightly. *What…the heck?* He stared, guard up, at the giant in front of him. *Seriously, though, what? He's so…weak.*

He *was* tremendously fast. Zaryusu would get knocked back if he took blows with his sword. But that was it. Zaryusu wasn't scared. Zenbel was just swinging his spear around like a kid with a stick—no real technique. The problem was whether this was really all. With that arm, he seemed like he would have a more precise way to move.

Is he not fighting seriously to get me to be careless?

Zaryusu sensed that was not the case. He was on guard against the unknown, reconsidering his strategy, when Zenbel, who hadn't taken a single step, asked him with a grin, "What's wrong? Can't get Frost Pain to work?"

That jovial expression was probably meant as provocation. Zaryusu wasn't going to respond to that.

"I once lost a fight with the guy who used to own Frost Pain."

Zaryusu remembered. He knew the male Zenbel was talking about: the chief of the now defunct Sharp Edge tribe, someone Zaryusu had killed.

Zaryusu's focus had been pinpointing Zenbel, but now he expanded it to include their surroundings. In the sea of hostility, the loathing of the Sharp Edge survivors was especially intense.

“These wounds on my left hand are from that fight.” Zenbel waved the hand with two missing fingers as evidence. “Maybe if you use the power he beat me with, you can win!”

“You think so?” Zaryusu replied with absolute cool.

The power was definitely strong. It could be used only three times a day, but it brought victory more often than not. The reason Zaryusu had defeated its previous owner was that he had already used it three times. If Zaryusu had faced the attack back then, he probably would have been killed.

But there was no way a guy who knew Frost Pain’s power would want to be on the receiving end. Zaryusu tensed up. *I don’t know… I’m not getting anywhere like this, though. I guess I should charge.* Having decided, he leaped at Zenbel at double his previous speed.

And the halberd intercepted him with tremendous force.

Zaryusu didn’t dodge, but took it with Frost Pain. Everyone watching thought he would get knocked back again.

Raised up, Frost Pain clashed with the halberd—and simply parried.

He didn’t even have to use a martial art technique. Zenbel was handling his spear like a child at play. At that level, it was a cinch for Zaryusu to parry any attack, no matter how heavy.

Zenbel’s eyes opened wide in surprise—no, admiration.

That was the moment Zaryusu closed in like a gale-force wind. Zenbel could try to bring his halberd around, but he’d be too slow. Even if he had the strength to completely stop the spear and bring it back, it would take a couple of moments—and that was plenty of time for Zaryusu to get in close.

Frost Pain slashed Zenbel's flesh…

…And fresh blood flew.

A huge cheer went up, along with the tiny shriek of one female. The one scattering blood and retreating in escape was not Zenbel. The one with two bleeding scrapes on his face was Zaryusu.

Unlike his previous stance, Zenbel came charging after Zaryusu, not about to let him get away. And he attacked with the same thing he'd used to gouge at him a moment before—his claws.

Frost Pain clashed with them, and a hard metallic sound rang out. A beat later, the halberd, no longer in Zenbel's hand, made a noisy splash.

"Grrrrahhhh!" Exhaling at length, Zenbel attacked once again with his huge arm as he charged.

Compared to the childish way he handled his spear, these strikes with his hand were masterful. Now Zaryusu had all the pieces to understand.

Zenbel wasn't a warrior—he was a monk who employed a special energy called chi to transform his body into a weapon.

Zaryusu met the hand with Frost Pain.

Lizardman claws were harder and sharper than human nails, but they weren't so hard that metal would ring when it hit them. Yes, this was a monk ability that hardened teeth and nails: Natural Iron Weapon. It was said that a monk's fist at the limit of its power could dent adamantite, the hardest metal, but from the feel of Zenbel's, he hadn't reached that level—maybe steel at best. Still, Zaryusu couldn't underestimate those claws if they were evenly matched with Frost Pain, one of the lizardmen's Four Great Treasures.

They exchanged a few blows.

Zenbel attacked with his hand, and Zaryusu slashed with Frost Pain. They evaded each other's attacks, then clashed, and a short pause occurred.

"Ha-ha! You're still alive?!" Zenbel licked the blood and scraps of meat sticking to his fingers.

Likewise, Zaryusu's tongue, longer than a human's, came out and licked the red liquid flowing from the scrapes on the part of his face that would be a cheek on a human. He was glad he'd been able to just barely dodge the attack meant to pierce his eyes. He had wounds, but they weren't deep. He still had plenty of fight left in him.

While Zaryusu thanked the spirits of his ancestors—*and I guess Crusch's might have helped, too*—Zenbel complained. "You knowww…if you don't use that move and I beat you, it'll feel like you were going easy on me." He balled up his fists and bumped them together a few times in front of his chest.

"Sorry, but I'm not planning on using it."

"Hrmm. No saying you weren't fighting seriously after you lose!"

"Now that you've sparred with me, do you really think I'm the type to say something like that?"

"…No, I don't. Sorry, I didn't mean that. But if you're not gonna use it, then I'm comin' for ya!"

Voom! With a rush of air, he kicked at Zaryusu with one of his thick legs.

Zaryusu acted without hesitation.

He dodged the foot and immediately slashed with Frost Pain, but the sword was repelled with a metallic sound.

His eyes widened in admiration.

If a barehanded attack was blocked with a sword, the attacker would get injured. That was logic. But when a monk used chi, they altered common sense.

This was Iron Skin, a special power that made flesh hard as steel whenever anything came in contact with it by surrounding the body with chi. Like with Natural Iron Weapon, a trained user could fortify himself.

Zenbel repelled the magical sword. That spoke to how much training he'd done as a monk. But Zaryusu was sure of his victory.

There wasn't such a huge gap in their combat skills—Zenbel had just *been at a disadvantage since the beginning*.

There was an overwhelming amount of attack types: kicking, tail whipping, punching, clawing…

Each of the physical attacks Zenbel unleashed was fast and heavy. Faced with that, it seemed, sure enough, like Zaryusu had quit attacking and reached his limit just defending.

Chain after chain of hits.

If Zaryusu hadn't been able to block all the weighty, destructive blows, he would have been done for. The surrounding lizardman onlookers cheered, confident their chief would win with his continuous attacks.

Now and then, Zenbel's claws grazed Zaryusu's body, and the flesh that should have been protected by his hard scales was easily broken. Blood beaded and flowed. These were definitely not minor wounds—and he had so many they were impossible to

count. Zaryusu's life was like a candle in the wind; it would be no surprise if he surrendered at any moment. The lizardmen had smiles on their faces, delighted at their champion's victory.

But the chief himself felt differently.

Each time one of his strikes was repelled, he felt victory slipping further away, and he couldn't completely suppress his anxiety.

Frost Pain's blade was enchanted so that it could deal additional chill damage when it sliced into an opponent. As a secondary effect, it had the power to send some chill damage over to an opponent when weapons clashed. In other words, just his hand and the sword bumping together caused him to be weakened slightly. His hands and feet were numb, and little by little, his movements were slowing down.

Crap. I lost so quickly last time that…I didn't realize it had this power! It wasn't just that one move! Makes sense for one of the Four Great Treasures!

It was precisely because Zaryusu understood these effects that he had chosen to fight defensively—or to put it another way, he chose to fight in a way he was certain to deal damage. This was also why he wasn't evading Zenbel's attacks.

He had chosen the cautious path to victory. That prudence made him Zenbel's greatest enemy.

When Zaryusu leaped at him, Zenbel unleashed a special move. From the moment the Green Claw tribesman blocked it, Zenbel's chances looked pretty low.

He felt he was attacking an impregnable fortress on his own. *Ahh, shit. I can't get him…but still! I was waiting for this time to come! For so long!* A male Zenbel had once fought flickered through his mind. He hadn't been as strong back then. He'd kept

training in order to beat him someday. When he heard his adversary had been killed, frustration and regret overcame his heart, but he still didn't rest.

It was all for this day.

As chief of his tribe, he couldn't just abandon everything and go off to battle. That was why he hadn't been able to hide his joy when he heard the owner of Frost Pain had showed up in the village.

It wasn't right to end a fight he'd anticipated so much this simply.

He punched, he kicked. He gradually lost feeling in his hands and feet, and his chi couldn't reach. Even then, he didn't stop.

He's strong! Even stronger than the one back then!

He figured this male must have ceaselessly trained just like he had.

So their initial gap just never closed. Of course, he could make the excuse that he had lost due to Frost Pain, but he didn't want to say anything that pathetic. *That's right! That's the owner of Frost Pain for you! The strongest lizardman male!*

He didn't stop attacking, but at the same time, with the clear-headed part of his brain, he praised Zaryusu for blocking his kicks with Frost Pain.

Get wounded, bleed, get wounded again.

Keeping a close eye on the fierce back-and-forth, Crusch had seen with her exceptional druid abilities which direction the battle would lean in. *Amazing… He must have been able to tell right from the start of the battle.*

She was blown away by Zaryusu's exceptional warrior abilities.

A cheer went up.

It was for Zenbel, who seemed to be overwhelming Zaryusu with his repeated attacks. The surrounding lizardmen didn't notice, but the movements of his arms and legs were growing gradually slower.

Zaryusu was strong. Crusch could say that with confidence.

Most lizardmen fought by putting pressure on their opponents with their robust physical abilities, while Zaryusu—well, and Zenbel—fought with technique. And Zaryusu had Frost Pain to back up his skills. For that reason, the current gap between them was, in large part, Frost Pain. But she could also sense, as the obvious truth, that that wasn't everything.

Would an average warrior be able to give Zenbel a run for his money like this with Frost Pain? The answer was no. Zenbel wasn't such a simple opponent as that. The weapon was powerful, but being able to draw out its abilities completely made Zaryusu a first-rate warrior.

His greatest talent was how quickly he could read his opponent. The reason he had been able to dodge the blow when Zenbel had abandoned his spear was that he had been carefully reading him. He had foreseen that Zenbel had a trump card, that the spear was a bluff.

The knowledge of the fish preserves, his combat technique—how much had he gained on that journey that he branded himself to go on?

Before she knew it, Crusch had stopped questioning Zaryusu's victory. She just watched his profile, not with worry but with something else buzzing in her chest. "He's one amazing male..."

The duel was so impressive that time flew by for everyone watching. The combatants themselves, though, felt differently. Their labored breathing was an unmistakable sign that the physical and mental toll went beyond just the time they spent.

That Zaryusu didn't lose his will to fight despite bleeding from wounds all over his body was commendable in its bravery. There had never been someone who lasted so long in a fight against their chief. That's how the surrounding lizardmen felt.

His victory imminent—or so almost everyone thought—Zenbel wordlessly broke his stance. They were sure he would proclaim himself the winner, and as they held their breaths in anticipation, Zenbel raised his voice—and did the exact opposite. "I lose!"

Their chief's victory should have been right there. So why was he proclaiming his loss?

The only one to foresee the result, Crusch, bustled into the circle. "Are you all right?"

Zaryusu sighed heavily, dropping the sword he'd been clutching, and answered in a voice oozing with exhaustion. "Well, none of these wounds will kill me… I don't think they'll be a problem for the upcoming fight, either."

"I'll cast some healing magic on you." Crusch sighed and adjusted her grass clothes with a rustle to reveal her face.

Zaryusu felt a gradual embrace around him—not the hot pain of the wounds carved into his body from a moment ago but a pleasant warmth. Giving in to the feeling of health flowing into him, he turned to face the huge lizardman he'd just challenged in that life-or-death battle.

Zenbel was surrounded by the members of his tribe, explaining what had happened, what Zaryusu's strategy had been.

Crusch announced after two casts that she was done healing him, “I guess that’s it,” and Zaryusu looked down at his body.

There was still coagulated blood sticking to him, but his wounds were completely healed. When he moved, there was a strange lingering, pulling feeling, but it didn’t seem like any cuts would reopen. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Crusch giggled. It exposed her beautiful pearly fangs.

“You’re so pretty…”

“What?!” Her tail jerked and slapped the water.

Then neither of them said anything.

Crusch was silent because she was wondering how this male could say stuff like that with a straight face. She wasn’t used to being complimented, so to her, he said too many things that were bad for her heart.

Meanwhile Zaryusu didn’t understand why Crusch had clammed up. The worry he might have said or done something wrong crossed his mind. Honestly, he’d thought females would never have anything to do with his life, so he didn’t know how to act. It may not have seemed like it, but he was doing the best he could as well.

“Hey, hey, you’re gonna make me jealous, dammit!”

They both turned to look at the owner of the voice, Zenbel. Their perfectly synchronized movements made him falter momentarily.

“Uhhh… White one, you’re not gonna heal me, too?”

He acted normal after seeing her white albino face. But she remembered her impression when she’d seen him for the first time

and understood. *I guess that makes sense?*

"Yes, yes…but are you sure it's okay? Your tribe's priests won't get to do it, then."

"Yeah, it's fine, it's fine. More importantly, it kinda really hurts. It's like I'm frozen solid. Can you hurry it up?"

"Only 'cause you said to. Tell your priests that!"

"Okay, I forced you. Please."

Crusch sighed and started casting healing magic.

And suddenly Zaryusu, although he couldn't be sure, felt like the number of hostile gazes decreased. And, though only a few, some even turned friendly.

"Okay, all done."

She'd cast more times on Zenbel than she had on Zaryusu. His wounds didn't look that bad, but apparently they'd been deep.

"Hmm! So you're more talented than our priests!"

"Thanks. But I don't know if I should… No, thanks."

"Okay, both our wounds are healed up, so I guess this is sudden, but do you mind if we jump right into business?"

"Yeah! Let's hear what you have to say—is what I was going to lead with, but…" Zenbel paused with a grin. "Alcohol."

Both Zaryusu and Crusch were nonplussed, like they didn't understand what he'd just said to them.

"Gotta have tough discussions over drinks. You get me?"

Negotiations went better once the parties knew who was

stronger. Zaryusu could understand risking their lives to figure that out. That was the lizardman way of life. But he couldn't understand a drinking party. The Green Claw tribe didn't have that custom.

What was the point of fighting a life-or-death battle if this was what came next?

"No, I don't!" Zaryusu, tormented by exhaustion, gave a quiet, raw answer with a discouraged look on his face. Immediately afterward, a surge of regret swept over him. *We haven't even formed the alliance yet, and I just reacted to this tribe's chief like a little kid.* Crusch was giving him a strange look, too.

Zaryusu had no relationship experience, so he had no way to know that Crusch's reaction was one of curiosity and tenderness at having discovered another side of the object of her affection.

"If we drink, we won't be able to think straight. That's no good," Zaryusu hurriedly restated, but Zenbel didn't seem to be bothered.

"Hey, hey, hey! You're a traveler, right? Anyone around here looking for knowledge would go to the dwarves, am I right?"

"No, I didn't do that. I visited the people of the forest."

"Oh. Then remember this: Friends become best friends by drinking together. That's a lesson from the dwarves! We don't have much time, but we have to speak frankly, right, Zaryusu Shasha?"

"I see… Understood, Zenbel Gugu."

"Okay, then! We're gonna drink tonight! Bring it out! Let's get this party started!"

●

In a nearly six-and-a-half-foot bonfire stand, set on dry land, crimson flames blazed so high that they seemed to reach for the night sky itself. That giant red light kept the darkness away.

Placed front and center next to the bonfire stand was a pot over three feet high with a mouth over two and a half feet in diameter. The stink of fermentation coming from it drifted on the breeze. Dozens of lizardmen took turns ladling liquid out of the pot, but no matter how many times they scooped, the alcohol showed no signs of running out. This was, like Zaryusu's Frost Pain, one of the lizardmen's Four Great Treasures, the Giant Wine Pot. It produced a limitless amount of alcohol, but the flavor was not so great. To a human who knew even a little bit about alcohol, it would be frown inducing, but for the lizardmen, this was high-grade stuff. That was why the drinkers kept coming.

A little ways removed from the vessel was an extremely quiet area, and it took only a glance to see why. Several drunk lizardmen lay facedown on the ground. They'd collapsed there and not budged an inch. This was the disposal area for totally wasted lizardmen.

Crusch, having taken off her clothes, was walking through the area, keeping her eyes on the ground—watching out for the tails of the lizardmen lying around. Her footsteps were steady, and she didn't seem drunk, but it was impossible to say she wasn't drunk at all—her tail, just her tail, was cheerfully twisting around with a mind of its own. It curled up and stretched, pointed up and drooped. It was hyper like a little kid.

In reality, it felt like a fresh breeze was blowing through Crusch's heart. It may have been partially the alcohol, but that wasn't all. The freedom helped.

It was her first time ever walking among a large group of people with her albino body exposed. Zenbel had a strange appearance, too, so although some were surprised by her at first, soon she was blending right in.

She carried food in both hands as she walked, feeling her heart sing. She walked toward where Zaryusu and Zenbel were sitting cross-legged on the ground drinking together.

They were using shells of a fruit similar to coconuts as cups. The liquid filling them to the brim was clear, but that fermented smell hung thickly in the air. Between them was a large plate of raw fish to snack on.

Zenbel grinned at Crusch as she walked over. “Hey, plant monster!”

“…Are you ever gonna stop calling me that?” She’d already taken off the outfit, but no matter how many times she protested, he would probably tease her forever. Crusch decided not to put up a futile resistance. “So did you finish talking?”

Zaryusu and Zenbel nodded to each other.

“Pretty much.”

They’d wanted to talk alone, so they’d asked Crusch to leave. Their bluntness about it had left her no choice, so she went to get food, but really, she had wanted to participate in the conversation. If it was about the upcoming war, she was involved, too.

She wanted to hear a summary, even if they didn’t tell her anything awkward, but instead—

“Just male stuff.” Zenbel indifferently cut off that possibility.

Her offense showed plainly on her face, but since she had no other choice, she changed the subject. “So what’re you going to do? Are you going to join the alliance and fight with us?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course we’re gonna fight. We were gonna fight even if you guys didn’t show up!” He emitted a sound like pieces of dry wood bumping together.

“Wow. You’re awfully war-crazy, huh?”

“Don’t compliment me—I’ll blush.” Paying no attention to Crusch’s disgust, he nonchalantly asked her for a favor. “Oh, right, plant monster. You gotta convince Zaryusu. I told him a zillion times he should be chief, but he won’t listen.”

Zaryusu twisted his expression into a dead-tired wince. He looked so exhausted she could tell they’d gone over this repeatedly while she was gone.

“He can’t do that! He’s from another tribe, and he’s a tr—” She was going to say “traveler,” but she remembered Zenbel was, too, and changed the subject. “Why did you want to go traveling?”

“Huh? It was just such a shock to lose to the guy who used to own Frost Pain! I wanted to get stronger. And I wanted to find out what else was out there. That’s why I became a traveler.”

Next to him, Zaryusu’s shoulders suddenly drooped. Crusch remembered the stories of his travels that she’d heard on their way over.

What had kept Zaryusu going during his journey were his resolution, determination, and sense of mission for his tribe. He must have thought this male, who was a traveler like him, had felt similarly…but Zenbel didn’t seem to have a shred of those sentiments.

Crusch put a gentle hand on his shoulder to comfort him. *He’s him and you’re you*, she thought.

Then she realized that anyone looking at them would probably think they were lovers, and her tail started twisting around wildly. Zaryusu’s went totally crazy, too.

Without thinking, they looked at each other and grinned, blushing.

Zenbel continued in high spirits without paying them any attention. “I thought there’d be some strong guys up on that mountain. ’Cause it’s just so huge! And the dwarves I met there taught me all kinds of things, ya know? They gave me that spear, too. I didn’t think I needed it, but once they said to take it as a symbol of our meeting, I couldn’t really refuse.”

“…Hmm, good for you.” Crusch’s reply was a little careless, or perhaps cold.

“Thanks.”

The sarcasm didn’t even get through.

Crusch, whose good mood had been ruined, knocked back her drink. Her throat grew hot, and once the liquid settled to her stomach, the heat spread throughout her body. Zaryusu drank in the same way.

Then there came an extremely low voice. The quietness of it was so at odds with the lighthearted conversation thus far that for a moment they weren’t even sure who had spoken. “So. Do you think we can win?”

Zaryusu answered in an equally quiet voice, “…I don’t know.”

“Well, yeah, how would you? There’re no sure wins. Actually, if there were some guy shouting about how we could win when we don’t even know the enemy’s strength, I’d punch his lights out. Like, don’t just say whatever, buddy!”

Crusch said nothing to Zenbel as he softly laughed.

“But our opponent’s being careless. Our chances will probably depend on how that plays out.”

They could practically see the question forming in Zenbel’s head, so Crusch stepped in for Zaryusu to explain. “Do you remember what the monster said?”

“Sorry. I was asleep at the time.”

“…But you must have heard from someone.”

“Nn, it was complicated, so I forgot it. Anyhow, if they come to attack us, we just have to beat them at their own game. That’s the important part, right?”

This guy’s useless, said Crusch’s face as she gave up explaining.

Zaryusu picked up where she left off with an annoyed smile. “…This is what he said: *Put up a frantic resistance.*”

Zenbel’s face twisted into a horrible grimace full of unpredictable emotions. “That pisses me off—that they’re treating us like we’re beneath them from the start.” He let out a dangerous growl. Intense anger and disgust swirled around him.

“Yeah. They’re totally making light of us. That’s how confident they are… They think they have the force to break any resistance of ours, no problem… So we’ll crush that arrogance. We’ll gather the five tribes together and show them the greatest power we can muster. First, we’ll slap ’em upside the head to show them we’re not half-assing it.”

“Ha, sounds good. Now you’re speaking my language.”

As the two males started to get excited about the upcoming battle, Crusch spoke like a bucket of cold water. “I don’t see that many benefits to mutilating their pride. Isn’t it fine to just do enough to prove our worth? If they understand that we’re worth something, maybe they’ll decide not to kill us all.”

“Whoa, whoa, you’d bow your head to these hateful bastards?”

“Hey, Zaryusu… I understand the danger of evacuating, but I’d rather be alive and in chains than dead,” Crusch murmured.

Neither of them could refute her or mock her for having a servile nature.

None of them wanted to get conquered. But there was still more of a future that way than dying in the fight. If they had a future, they still had a chance.

For example, if they shared the fish-farming technology, they could abandon this place and all flee.

Anyone who would order someone to throw away that possibility and die wasn't fit to rule.

"Listen for a second…"

At Zaryusu's quiet suggestion, everyone listened to the sounds of happy laughter on the breeze from the banquet.

"If they conquer us, we might not be able to throw parties like this."

"But maybe we could! Right?"

"I wonder. I doubt it. Those guys seem like they want to enjoy watching us die. I doubt they'll show any mercy. If they had even a tiny bit of kindness, they wouldn't come to kill us off for kicks."

He's right. Crusch nodded. *But still—* "What I'm trying to say is…don't die."

"Oh, I won't die! Not until I hear back from you!"

"!"

Crusch and Zaryusu regarded each other seriously beneath the night sky. And they made a promise—

—With the astonished third wheel Zenbel sitting right there.

INTERMISSION

In the meeting room behind him, they were probably already turning to a new issue. But his role in that room was finished, so he had left.

Of course, he had other roles besides report giver. Now he had to perform the various tasks surrounding the resurrections of his comrades and fill in the temporary membership hole by appointing someone new. In other words, his work as the first seat—that is, captain—of the Black Scripture was waiting for him. He also had training and experiments to do. Since the Six Scriptures were secret organizations, he had an undercover life in the theocracy as well.

In his personal life, he also had marriage arrangements to make—with multiple women. Currently there were only three awakened demigods in the Slane Theocracy, so the higher-ups were euphemistically ordering him to leave behind lots of children.

With all those things piled up, he had precious little free time. “Still, I hope they’ll let me relax for today.”

Feeling liberated after the high priest meeting, the highest meeting in the Slane Theocracy, he rotated his shoulders—and a clicking noise caught his attention.

He knew who was making the sound before he saw her. Even among Slane Theocracy citizens, only a few were allowed in here, and if he recalled who wasn’t in the meeting room, the answer was obvious.

As he expected, there was a girl leaning against the wall. Strangely, her longish hair was a different color on each side. One side was a striking silver and the other was so black it seemed to suck everything in. Her eyes were also each different colors. Next to her, a war scythe that resembled a cross spear rested against the wall. She looked so young—probably still in her early teens—but her true age was quite different. She hadn't changed at all since he'd assumed the first seat of the Black Scripture.

His eyes moved to her ears, hidden by her hair—but then stopped. He knew she hated her ears.

Her glossy lips curled up, like perhaps she had read his thoughts.

She, born a mix of two bloods that was nearly impossible, was the strongest member of the Black Scripture, the additional seat, "No Death–No Life." She served as the guardian of this sacred place where the armaments of the Five Pillar Gods were laid to rest.

The soft noises came from a toy she was playing with, popularized by the Six Gods and called a rubik-q in the Slane Theocracy.

Her voice reached him, mingled with the clicks. "It's easy to get one side, but it's hard to get two, you know?"

It wasn't very hard for him, but he hesitated to say so and just grinned at her in reply.

It seemed like she didn't really want a response anyhow, and she continued, not seeming to think anything of his silence, "What the heck happened here that the high priests would meet?"

"I think you've already received the report…"

"I haven't read it," she replied flatly. "Besides, it's easier to hear the situation from someone who knows. Was Star Reader–

Second Sight's reading wrong? You sortied to dominate the Catastrophe Dragonlord, and then what?"

Their eyes didn't meet even once while they spoke. She was focused on her toy the whole time.

"…We lost two men and had one critically injured in a fight with some unknown type of undead similar to a vampire. So we retreated."

"Who died?"

He didn't detect even a hint of emotion in her question despite the deaths in her squad. It was like she was hearing a story that had happened in a far-off place. But he didn't think anything of it. It was an appropriate attitude for her to take.

"Cedran, who was protecting Lady Kaire, and Beaumarchais, who tried to restrain the vampire when it had stopped moving."

"Giant Shield–Perfect Wall and Godly Realm–Iron Ties, huh? What with the shrine princess of Earth dying in some mysterious explosion and the Black Scripture losing two members…we're having pretty bad luck. Who got injured?"

"Lady Kaire. It seems like the effect of some curse; her wound wouldn't heal with magic, so we retreated."

"So what happened to the vampire?"

"It's still there. If we tried to restrain or even approach it, it prepared to attack, so we figured leaving it there was the best option."

"So the problem's not solved, then."

"…We decided during the meeting just now to hang back."

That was the conclusion they'd reached in that room. Rather

than risk bigger losses by messing it up, they would leave it there until they had built up their strength for combat. There was probably no one in any other country who could beat that undead anyhow, and if there were, they would need to be cautious of such power and prepare their national defenses accordingly. They had decided to leave the bare minimum number of agents and withdraw the rest.

And he agreed, at least in part.

The only ones who could face that vampire head-on and win were probably demigods and dragonlords. So it was smarter to leave it there as an alarm and be on guard against whoever killed it.

"Hmm. It can't be a vampire…"

He agreed. That was why he had called it *some unknown type of undead*.

"It's not a dragonlord? The Vampiric Dragonlord or the Elder Coffin Dragonlord?"

The edges of her lips turned up farther into the clear shape of a smile—if an expression that brutal could be a smile, that is.

"…Both of them are already dead, you know," he said, sensing a chill in the air.

She replied immediately. "They're both undead. We don't know that they're really gone." She raised her head for the first time and met his gaze squarely. The light in her different-colored eyes was curiosity, joy, and the urge to do battle. "Between me and the vampire, who do you think is stronger?"

He had anticipated this question, so he gave the response he'd prepared in advance. "You."

“Oh…” She seemed to lose interest and went back to her toy.

He gave a sigh of relief in his head.

“That’s too bad. I thought I could learn what it’s like to lose…”

Listening to her mutter, he wondered who would really be stronger if they clashed. He’d been hit by both of them, and from his experience, he would guess the vampire would be declared the winner. But actually, the vampire could never win against No Death–No Life.

The reason was their gear. The vampire didn’t seem to be equipped with anything. That was the weakness of powerful monsters—they had so much confidence in their abilities that they didn’t think to equip powerful gear.

In comparison, No Death–No Life’s equipment was made up of pieces left by the Six Gods. That was why he could declare her stronger. But if that advantage disappeared…? *That could never happen*. He rejected the idea as soon as it occurred. It would be impossible to find gear equal to hers—the gods’.

So *if* it were possible? That could be the day the Slane Theocracy’s strongest, the additional seat, lost. It would be the day they faced the despair of the protector of humanity’s defeat.

Wait, why am I assuming she would have to fight alone? I may not be as strong as her, but I’m an awakened demigod, and I have some items we could use. If we took advantage of all that, surely we’d be able to take out one undead, even if it was immensely powerful. There can’t be a bunch of them if they’re that strong. Lost in thought, he heard a giggle. He twisted his face into a quizzical frown and eyed its source.

“Here’s a different topic: When are you gonna get married?”

It was an unresolved topic from the meeting. When would he

find a suitable woman—to put it nicely, a fiancée; to put it less nicely, a tool for reproducing?

"There isn't anybody."

"Well, you're still young, so I guess it can't be helped."

While conducting Black Scripture business, members wore magic masks to give them fake faces. In the Slane Theocracy, adulthood was prescribed in law by the gods as age twenty, but when he took off his mask, he was far younger than that.

"If you get married, she'll end up on the dark side of the theocracy, too…but you don't have to worry about it. She'll still get to raise your kids."

"I know that. There are already some people doing it in the scriptures."

"I see. Oh, but you should make sure to tell her you'll be marrying another woman besides just her. Polygamy isn't a problem legally, but some people hate it even though they've been taught that."

Polygamy was allowed in the Slane Theocracy if one had permission from the state. It was a vestige of the past historical custom born from a need to maintain pure bloodlines of the few powerful citizens available. Still, the majority of marriages were monogamous, and only a handful of polygamous cases were approved per year. And even when it was approved, the limit was two wives.

"Thanks for the kind advice. And what about you? You're not getting married?"

She did look young, but he was asking because he knew she was really older.

"Hmm. If there was a guy who could defeat me, I'd marry him

no matter how ugly he was, no matter how twisted a personality he had…even if he wasn't human. I mean, imagine—a guy who could defeat me! I wonder how strong our kid would be…" With a hand on her lower abdomen, she replied with her first ear-to-ear grin of the day, and he was sure she had no intention to marry.

But what if someone who could defeat that vampire appeared?

A slight uneasiness flickered across his mind.



Chapter 3 The Army of Death

CHAPTER 3
The Army Of Death

1

“Oh, hey. We can see it now!” Seated behind the other two on Rororo, Zenbel grinned at the scene ahead.

A few hundred yards in front of them, the first village that had been targeted—home of the Razor Tail tribe—was coming into view. It was about the same size as the Green Claw village, but it looked bigger—probably because lizardmen from other tribes were gathering there. Since they were in the middle of preparing for the war, anyone working was moving in a hurry.

“I can’t get enough of this atmosphere!” Zenbel inhaled sharply through his nose and sniffed the air. The smell got his blood pumping and invited even more excitement.

Meanwhile, Crusch, who had probably never smelled anything like it before, had a different impression from the males. “Isn’t it dangerous to ride in on Rororo like this?” Currently in plant monster garb, she was anxious about the tension that she could sense from so far away. She was afraid that if they approached on the hydra, the agitated lizardmen might charge at them.

They might know Zaryusu’s face, but not Crusch’s or Zenbel’s, and besides, just because some of the Razor Tail tribe members knew him didn’t mean they all did.

“No, it’s the opposite. We’re safe precisely because we’re on Rororo.”

Crusch looked puzzled—well, he couldn’t see her face, but she certainly seemed puzzled—so he gave a simple explanation.

“My brother should be here already, and if he is, he definitely told them we were coming on Rororo. They probably already told him they saw us. All we have to do is take our time approaching.”

In fact, as Rororo continued across the marsh, a single black lizardman appeared. Zaryusu waved at the familiar figure.

“That’s my brother.”

“Oh?”

“Hmm!”

They reacted in unison—Crusch with pure curiosity, Zenbel like a beast who had discovered another powerful animal.

As Rororo advanced, the distance between the two brothers shrank. Eventually they grew close enough that they could make out each other’s faces. It had been only three days since they’d seen each other, but when they had parted ways, both had braced for the possibility that they would never meet again. Needless to say, it was an emotional reunion.

“Hey, you made it, little brother!”

“Yes, and I bring good news, brother!”

Shasuryu looked at the two behind his brother. Zaryusu felt Crusch’s arms around him stiffen a bit.

Rororo stopped right in front of Shasuryu, recognizing him, and stretched out his four heads for some affection.

“Sorry, but I didn’t bring any food!” Hearing that, Rororo sulkily pulled his heads away. Of course, the hydra couldn’t understand the lizardman language. He must have worked it out through what could be called family understanding. Or maybe he just didn’t smell any food.

“Okay, let’s get down,” Zaryusu said over his shoulder to the other two before hopping nimbly off. Then he reached out and took Crusch’s hand.

Shasuryu’s eyes paused on her as she got down, and he frowned suspiciously. “What’s that plant monster?”

Crusch slumped a bit at receiving the same reaction once again, but she didn’t bother objecting. Her current apathy was probably thanks to Zenbel. But even she wasn’t ready for the bomb Zaryusu dropped.

“She’s the female I’m in love with.”

“Ahh!” Shasuryu emitted a sigh of wonderment and turned his shameless gaze on Crusch, who was petrified and still holding Zaryusu’s hand. “Mph…well, there’s only one thing I want to ask. Is she pretty under there?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking of marr— Ngh!” A sudden pain in his hand made Zaryusu shut his mouth. Crusch had dug her claws into it —*hard*.

Shasuryu observed the pair with a dazed expression. “I see…so you like the pretty ones. What was all that about, ‘Oh, I can’t get married’? Trying to act so cool. You just didn’t have the right person! …Anyhow, I’m chief of the Green Claw tribe, Shasuryu Shasha. I’m grateful to you for becoming our ally.”

His tone brooked no disagreement because of the nature of their coming together, but Crusch and Zenbel had no need to be shaken by him now.

“Likewise. I’m acting chief of the Red Eye tribe, Crusch Lulu.”

Everyone thought Zenbel would reply after Crusch, but contrary to their expectations, his greeting didn’t come. He showed no restraint as he blatantly appraised Shasuryu.

Perhaps satisfied, he nodded and spoke with a feral expression. “Hmm, so you’re the one, huh? The warrior who can fight with the powers of a priest? I’ve heard the rumors!”

“I’m surprised they’ve spread as far as Dragon Tusk,” Shasuryu replied. They were like two wild animals acknowledging each other’s presence.

“I’m the chief of Dragon Tusk until your little brother says he’s ready to step in. Zenbel Gugu.”

“So good of you to come. I welcome you as a worthy chief for a tribe that prizes strength above all.”

“Speaking of which, you wanna have a quick fight? Don’t you think it’ll be easier to talk if we know who’s strongest?”

“…I’m not opposed to it…”

Zaryusu wasn’t about to stop him. He figured it would be useful to know in various situations going forward.

Before they could begin, however, Shasuryu held up a hand to curb Zenbel’s urge to fight. “…But it’s kind of a bad time.”

“Aww, c’moooon!”

Shasuryu grinned at Zenbel’s discontent. “The ones who are out on patrol will be back pretty soon. Then we should know some details about the enemy. You can wait until after that, right?”

One hut had been designated as the meeting room for the chiefs. Inside gathered the leaders of each tribe, plus Zaryusu, for a total of six.

Zaryusu was well known among the other tribes as the male who killed the chief of the Sharp Edge tribe, previous owner of Frost Pain, as well as the hero who convinced them to form the

alliance. None of the chiefs had any objection to having him in the meeting.

The hut wasn't very big, but the six of them managed to sit in a circle. When Crusch had first shown her white skin, three of the chiefs were unable to hide their surprise, but now they were composure incarnate.

After formalities, the first one to speak was the Small Fang chief. He had a small body for a lizardman, but his limbs were strong and smooth like steel. Apparently he'd been a hunter, and he probably had the best projectile weapon skills of any lizardman on the lake. In fact, he had ended his fight to become chief by lobbing a single rock.

"There were a little under five thousand enemies." He had mobilized all the hunting parties to search for the enemy army.

That was considerably larger than all the lizardman forces combined, but it wasn't outside the realm of their expectations. There were even some sighs of relief that their adversaries were so few.

"...And their leader?"

"We couldn't quite figure it out. There was a monster like a big red lump of meat, but as you might expect, it was hard to get close enough to see much."

"What's their order of battle like?"

"It's an undead mob, skeletons and zombies."

"Were they using lizardman corpses?"

"No. I don't know much about land creatures, so I can't say for sure, but...I think they might be human bodies. They didn't have any tails," explained the Small Fang chief.

Hearing that, Zaryusu was certain they were the plains-dwelling human race.

"We can't make the first move and attack them?"

"It'd be tough. They're located in a corner of the forest that they've cleared to create an open area. I wonder how long that took. I'm also curious where all the lumber went, since we didn't see it anywhere. Ah, sorry! Guess I'm off topic. Anyhow, they're in the woods. *We* may have been able to get in there, but I imagine it'd be difficult with the warriors along."

"So what about a hunter-only assault?"

"There's no way, Crusch. How do you expect us to take out five thousand undead with twenty-five hunters? They'd catch us and crush us, and it'd be over," replied the Small Fang chief.

"Hmm… Then how about mobilizing the priests?" Some nodded at Shasuryu's suggestion, and their eyes gathered on Crusch —but Zaryusu replied promptly.

"Let's skip this plan."

"Huh? Why?!"

"They've been keeping their promise so far, but I'm not sure they'll continue to once we go on the offensive."

"You may be right. At the very least, we should wait until everyone is here to attack."

"So are we looking at a siege, then?"

"Hard to defend." The broken speech came from one of the lizardmen— the Razor Tail chief. He was clad head to toe in white armor with a dull luster.

The armor was enchanted—if only ever so slightly—and one of

the lizardmen's Four Great Treasures, White Dragon Bone. It was carved from the bones of frost dragons, creatures with a natural ability to chill things and rumored to inhabit the Azerlisia Mountains. That being said, something carved out of plain bones, even the bones of an immensely powerful dragon, wouldn't be imbued with magic, but at some point, this armor had become magical.

The problem was that its power likely came from a curse.

White Dragon Bone made the wearer only as strong as the amount of intelligence they forfeited. On the body of someone wise, it could be harder than not only steel but also mythril or the legendary adamantite.

The catch was that any cleverness stolen by the armor would not return when the wearer took it off—thus its reputation of being cursed.

When the Razor Tail chief, famous for his wisdom, equipped the armor, he was able to repel all the weapons the lizardmen had. Its fellow Great Treasure Frost Pain was no exception. The armor had probably reached adamantite-level hardness.

While most who attempted to use White Dragon Bone had lost nearly all their intelligence and ended up idiots, the Razor Tail chief alone maintained a much lesser but still working mind, showing how intelligent he'd been from the start. That was why ever since he became chief, his tribe hadn't held a fight to decide a new one.

"H-here marsh. Bad footing. Walls…break easy."

"I see. So we should be more aggressive?" asked Crusch.

"Heh. Sounds good to me! Attacking feels better than defending anyhow. If everybody takes three or four? We just gotta beat 'em, right? It'll be a cinch!"

The other participants all just looked at one another. Eventually, Crusch, overlooking Zenbel's remarks, began to speak. "The problem will be if they have backup… It's also possible they're still assembling their force."

"Nnn, I wonder. It doesn't seem like they can fit any more undead in the clearing they have, at that size… Well, but they could just put them here and there throughout the forest."

Undead didn't need food, drink, or rest, so they didn't require a large open campsite. For that reason, it was difficult to accurately estimate their numbers from the size of their location.

"We should keep the possibility of a siege battle in mind, just in case."

"Then we of the Red Eye tribe will reinforce the walls so they'll be able to withstand such a battle. Thanks in advance for your cooperation."

All the other chiefs nodded in approval, even forlorn-looking Zenbel.

"For the time being, let's prepare for a siege. Also, we need to define a system of command."

"For starters, let's have Crusch lead the priests. We should have her command them during the war, too."

As everyone agreed with the Small Fang chief's proposal, one voice objected. "The chiefs should be a separate group." It had been Zaryusu who spoke, and all eyes gathered on him.

"Aha. I see what you mean, Zaryusu," said Shasuryu.

"Plan to m-make…elite squad?"

"That's right. There are a lot of enemies. If we don't take out their commander, we may lose. And if monsters like those mes-

sengers to each village come out, we won't be able to beat them with numbers—we'll need a small select group."

"But don't we need commanding officers?"

"Can n…nomin…pick from…head warriors."

"We're fine without commanders. All we gotta do is hit the enemies in front of us!"

"…What if we had a separate group to give orders from the rear and only engage if we find their HQ or the battle takes a turn for the worse?"

"Sounds like a plan to me! Okay, so how about this group of six, including Zaryusu?" said Zenbel.

"No, let's break it down further into three and three," said Crusch. Splitting up meant they would be able to fight on two fronts, but it would make them weaker. "One group to go for the enemy commander and another to hang back on defense."

"Then it would be smart to split up into us three chiefs, and then Zaryusu and the two chiefs he brought over. The squad roles we can play by ear," offered the Small Fang chief.

"Mmm, I'm fine with that. Zaryusu?" said Shasuryu.

"Yeah, that'll work. No objections, Crusch, Zenbel?"

"I'm fine with it."

"Me, too, although it's too bad I can't just punch at random. You beat me, though, so I'll follow your lead."

"So we only have four days left until they attack, right?"

"Yup."

“Then what do we need to do?”

“Get some stones for ammunition, reinforce the walls…and set up communication among tribes. We need a system to make sure everything is getting done.”

“The Small Fang tribe is for leaving the assigning of all these tasks up to Shasuryu like last time.”

“Us fine…too. You two…opinions?”

Crusch and Zenbel nodded their agreement.

“Then I’ll go ahead and take command. Let’s figure out a detailed plan for the next three days.”

Having finished his work for the day, Zaryusu walked silently through the busy village. Several lizardmen saw the brand on his chest and Frost Pain at his hip and greeted him respectfully. It was kind of a bother, but he had to reply to keep morale up. He put on a confident expression and responded as was expected of a hero.

Projecting that attitude, he headed to a part of the village’s outer wall. A hurried construction project was under way there, and several lizardmen worked on it single-mindedly.

First, they made a frame by filling the spaces between wooden posts with plants. Next, they coated it with pasty mud. The priests cast some kind of spell, and all the moisture evaporated at once to create a cracked wall. They repeated the same process on the back side.

“Oh, Zaryusu. What’s up?”

“Nothing. I just wondered what you were doing.” Zaryusu sloshed across the marsh to stand next to the overseer, plant monster Crusch. He pointed at the work going on in front of them. “What in the world is that?”

“A mud wall. We have no idea what kind of monsters might show up, so we thought it would be good to build a wall so they can’t get into the village so easily, but…we don’t have much time, and we’re not even halfway done.”

“I see… But isn’t mud really easy to break through?”

“No worries. A thin coat of mud is easy to break but not a thick wall. It’s a rush job, and we weren’t able to collect enough materials, so rain will weaken it a bit, but this wall won’t be destroyed so easily.”

Come to think of it, anything thick is hard to break. Zaryusu was convinced, but despite the dozen or so lizardmen frantically building, the pace was dismally slow. Tortoise slow. Even if they did their best for three more days, the wall wouldn’t get much longer. Still, something was better than nothing.

“Right now, we’re changing the parts we won’t be able to cover to a sturdy fence.” She pointed.

The workers had stood the posts up on triangular bases. Multiple ropes of woven plant material were strung loosely between them. Zaryusu remembered that this was the way the Red Eye tribe built their fences.

“What is that?”

“You weigh down the bases to make the posts impossible to pull or push over. Then the ropes are positioned so no one can slip between the posts. If you stretch them taut, they’re easier to cut with a sword, so you leave them loose on purpose.” Crusch replied to his question a little eagerly.

All during their trip she had been learning things from him, so she was happy to be the teacher for once. And there was another emotion she felt.

“I see… Yeah, that’ll take a lot to knock down.”

Crusch breathed deeply with pride when she heard Zaryusu’s admiration.

Zaryusu nodded emphatically.

The rushed fortifications were developing well. They weren’t much compared to what humans or dwarves could build, but considering they were on uneven marshland, there was probably nothing better.

“By the way, Zaryusu, did you tell the warriors—” Just then, they heard the voices of warriors shouting on the wind. They were excited about something.

“What the heck is going on? That’s a cheer I’ve heard somewhere before… Oh! It’s like when you were fighting. Could it be your brother and Zenbel?”

Zaryusu nodded, noting the uneasiness in Crusch’s eyes.

“Won’t it be trouble if your brother loses? He’s supposed to be the commander in chief.”

“Who knows? But he’s strong, you know. Especially if he has time to use his priest powers, he’ll grow stronger and stronger. My brother can definitely beat me if I’m not careful.”

Shasuryu’s fighting prowess after casting some protective spells on himself was no joke. Also, though he probably wouldn’t use his attack magic in a sparring match, if he started casting, he’d be so strong that Zaryusu wouldn’t have a chance without Frost Pain. After all, when Zaryusu had defeated the sword’s former owner, it had been Shasuryu who originally forced the owner to use up the entire day’s worth of Frost Pain’s power.

“I guess it’s okay, then…”

Crusch couldn't seem to conceal her fear. As Zaryusu considered whether he should let her see his brother fight, he remembered a worry he hadn't mentioned yet. He wondered whether he should say it or not, but then made up his mind.

It wasn't fair to say something he'd withheld on purpose now that everything was decided, but he couldn't suppress the simple yet intense feeling that he didn't want to hide anything from the female he loved.

"I am worried about one thing…"

He couldn't keep the fear out of his voice, and Crusch smiled—because she'd known there had been something. That smugness was so unlike her, so out of place, that Zaryusu couldn't get any more words out.

The one who spoke instead was Crusch. "The thing you didn't say back there? The scenario where the enemy expects this? The scenario where they're just waiting for us to form an alliance?"

Zaryusu didn't say anything. She was right.

The possibility lingered that the enemy had given the lizardman tribes time, clearly stated the order in which villages would be attacked, and allowed them to make war preparations only because they wanted to crush all the tribes in one fell swoop.

"There are a lot of things to worry about, especially for someone like you who thinks so much. But I believe we should just try to fight first…and then think from there?"

"Even if we win, that doesn't mean they'll just give up. No, honestly, the chance they'll give up after one fight is so low."

"Maybe so. But you were right about what you said that night, and look—" She raised her hand. She wasn't pointing to anything in particular, but Zaryusu understood that she meant the whole

village. “All of us are working together toward a common goal.”

It was true. All the different lizardmen were advancing toward a common objective.

He remembered the feast held the previous night to celebrate the five-tribe alliance. There hadn’t been any distinction among tribes. Of course, it would be a lie to say the survivors of the scattered clans had no hard feelings, but they had the will to swallow them for this alliance.

It’s so ironic, Zaryusu thought without moving his lips. He’d thought their isolation would continue on and on, but now everyone had united for the first time against a common enemy.

“What we have to protect is possibilities, Zaryusu. This alliance among all the tribes should allow us to grow.”

The mud walls were technology Zaryusu had never seen before, but another tribe knew it well. Soon, this type of wall would spread through all the tribes. With protection that sturdy, monsters wouldn’t be able to get into the villages anymore. That would lower the chances of weaker lizardmen and children being attacked, and the population would increase. Zaryusu’s fish preserves could provide food for the growing numbers. There could even be a day in the not-so-distant future when they made one big lizardman tribe on the marsh.

“Hey, let’s win this, Zaryusu. There’s no way to know what will happen next. It could be that if we win this one fight it’ll all be over. Then we can grow. Maybe the world will be a nice place where we don’t kill one another over food.” Crusch smiled.

Zaryusu held back the emotions that welled up inside him. He couldn’t risk letting them go and doing something ridiculous. *But just this one thing…*

“You really are a great female. When this fight is over, you

need to let me know the answer to what I asked when we first met."

Crusch's smile grew even brighter. "Okay, Zaryusu. When it's over, I'll tell you."

●

Demiurge hummed a cheerful tune as he worked.

He held up a polished bone, considering where to best put it. Finding the perfect spot, he filed the tip and fit the piece into one end of what he was building. The bone locked into place as if it had been made to go there.

In the same way that traditional wood joinery techniques allow furniture to be made without metal fastenings, what Demiurge was doing could be called "traditional bone joinery."

"Very good." Beaming, he pet the bone. He had the feeling if things continued this way, his project would turn out wonderfully. "But I could use a femur from a three-foot-eleven man…" He could finish the project without one—it just wouldn't be quite as aesthetically pleasing.

Normally he might have overlooked such shortcomings, but this was a present for his master, whom he loved and revered devoutly. He had to give his all.

"If only someone like that happened to be nearby…"

He cheerfully set to work again.

Actually, Demiurge enjoyed making things like this. Not bone work, but carpentry-like activities. His hobby covered a wide range of projects, from small crafts to furniture, and his skill had surpassed that of any typical hobbyist. In fact, the quality of the piece he was working on now would blow anyone away, if they

were able to ignore the building material.

Really, a person would react with awe upon seeing any of the things in Demiurge's tent: The bronze statue of his master made so they could pour lava into it, various types of chairs, a vise—these were all things Demiurge had created. They were made for practical use, and therefore unadorned, but they had all turned out splendidly.

As he picked up another piece of material from the corner of the tent to carefully consider, he sensed movement at the entrance.

He quietly replaced the bone, gripping the irreplaceable item he'd received from his master, and focused on the newcomer. Under usual circumstances, he would have assumed it was one of his minions or a colleague—it was impossible for anyone to penetrate his triple-defense system without his noticing—but he couldn't afford to leave any openings when they were up against the enemy who had mind controlled Shalltear.

The one to open the flap and enter the tent a few seconds later was wearing a white outfit and a mask with a long nose like a pitch-black bird beak—Pulcinella. He was a clown created by the Supreme Beings and assigned to assist Demiurge on his current job.

After checking to make sure the servant hadn't been mind controlled, Demiurge relaxed his focus, and the hand gripping his item slackened.

"Master Demiurge, I've finished skinning them."

At those words, he felt just a tiny bit of disappointment. Normally that would be the kind of work he'd relish himself, but they were on guard against an unknown enemy, so he couldn't really leave his post. Thus such enjoyable work had fallen to Pulcinella. Without letting those feelings show now, he gave a new order.

“Good work. On to the next step. It would be rude to hand them over to Lord Ainz in their current state.” The clown gave an elegant bow, and Demiurge asked, “And how many died?”

“Thanks to the tortures, none. They just lost consciousness. It seems like we’ll be able to skin them again almost immediately. Some are refusing healing magic, but…the number is around what we expected, so it’s not a problem.”

“That’s wonderful.”

It was taking quite a lot of effort to find materials. If they couldn’t flay each one more than once, the work would never be worth it. That didn’t mean they had any intention of taking away the pain or putting them to sleep, though.

“I want to make everyone happy.”

At this sudden declaration, Demiurge recalled Pulcinella’s personality. Pulcinella was known throughout Nazarick as particularly gentle and compassionate. Since he was created to bring happiness to everyone, his behavior always reflected that.

“The beings in the Great Tomb of Nazarick are all happy because we are able to serve Lord Ainz.”

Demiurge nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. “Indeed. Then let me ask you this, Pulcinella. Are outsiders also happy to serve Nazarick?”

“No, they are most definitely not. Certainly, getting to serve Lord Ainz is cause for gladness. One might choke on tears of joy. But if one is forced to serve, that is not happiness.”

“Oh-ho! Then whatever should we do about that?”

“That’s simple. We choose one and cut off his arm. Then the others compare themselves to him and understand that they are happy. What a wonderful thing. Then to make the one with the

missing arm happy, we just cut off someone else's leg. Ohhh, I am making so many people happy!"

Demiurge gave a satisfied nod as Pulcinella leaned his head back and cackled. "Indeed. You are quite correct."

2

Time spent idly waiting normally drags on and on, but before a deadline for preparations, it always goes by surprisingly fast.

And so, the appointed time had arrived.

That day, the sun climbed agonizingly slowly into a clear blue sky. The wind carried not a single sound, and the world was wrapped in a silence so deep it was painful.

The air was so tense a pinprick would pop it.

Someone swallowed hard; someone else was breathing raggedly.

How much time had passed since the gathered lizardmen had stopped talking?

Suddenly a single black cloud appeared, like a hole in the heavens. Just like last time, it spread out to cover the blue sky.

Once it had encompassed the whole expanse, blocking the light of the sun to cast the area into gloom…

The lizardmen looked on as countless undead slowly appeared at the boundary between the woods and the marsh. They couldn't tell how many because of the trees. But the way they came one

after the other made them seem endless.

The attackers consisted of 2,200 zombies, 2,200 skeletons, 300 undead beasts, 150 skeleton archers, and 100 skeleton riders —4,950 in total, plus the commander and his guards.

Defending against them was the five-tribe lizardman alliance.

From the Green Claw tribe: 103 warriors, 5 priests, 7 hunters, 124 males, and 105 females.

From the Small Fang tribe: 65 warriors, 1 priest, 16 hunters, 111 males, and 94 females.

From the Razor Tail tribe: 89 heavy warriors, 3 priests, 6 hunters, 99 males, and 81 females.

From the Dragon Tusk tribe: 125 warriors, 2 priests, 10 hunters, 98 males, and 32 females.

From the Red Eye tribe: 47 warriors, 15 priests, 6 hunters, 59 males, and 77 females.

In other words, 429 warriors, 26 priests, 45 hunters, 491 males, and 389 females—1,380 in total, plus the chiefs and Zaryusu.

A war where one side outnumbered the other three to one was about to begin.

●

It was a one-room wooden building.

There was no ornamentation. It was built simply, like a log cabin with the wood showing; however, it was easily twenty-one yards on each side and the ceiling rose over sixteen feet.

There were barely any furnishings—just a giant mirror hung

on one wall; a huge, thick, sturdy table; and the chairs around the table.

Several people sat down, and on the table were a number of rolled-up pieces of parchment—magic scrolls.

"And thiiis is the laaaast one. A teleportation scrooooll." Along with the high-pitched voice—high enough to plausibly belong to a young girl—another scroll was placed on the table.

The one who put it there was a human woman wearing a maid uniform. She was a dainty little thing, with her hair done in a chignon style like dumplings on either side of her head. But there was something strange about her, most noticeably in her eyes. They were cute enough, but they had no spark, as if they were made of cheap glass. Not only that, but she never blinked. The collar of the risqué maid outfit covering her slim body was high, covering her entire neck. In fact, the only bare skin showing was her face. She was a member of the Pleiades, Entoma Vasilissa Zeta.

"Now thennn, there's alsooo a Message scroooll, so basically, there are quite a fewww. Maybe I could have them clear the table for nowww?" Entoma addressed the one sitting at the head of the table.

The figure nodded. "LET'S DO THAT."

"Okayyy. Chop-chop, thennn! Please clean it uuup!"

With Cocytus's approval and Entoma's order, everyone around the table began to move at once. They were all grotesques. One looked like a praying mantis, another like a spider, another like a giant brain. Everybody looked very different from one another, but they had two things in common: They were all Cocytus's minions, and they all served Nazarick. That was why they were taking orders from Entoma even though she was weaker than them.

The structure of authority in the Great Tomb of Nazarick was based not on who was strongest but on whether one was created directly by the Supreme Beings or not. In that sense, Entoma was superior.

Confirming that the table had been cleared, she mumbled, "Now thennn, I'll give theeese to youuu, Master Cocytusss," without opening her mouth, and picked up the bag at her feet. She took out a few rolled-up pieces of parchment. "Message scrooolls. Lord Ainz told meee they were made with skins acquired by Master Demiuuurge. He saiiid to report back if you have any trouble using themmm."

"OKAY…UNDERSTOOD. I'LL SEE IF I HAVE ANY ISSUES." He took several of the proffered scrolls with one of his four hands. "DEMIURGE HAS GOTTEN AHEAD OF ME AGAIN," he said, smiling wryly at the minions in the room. Someone answered with a faint, sycophantic laugh.

With the parchments in hand, Cocytus fell deep into thought. He had also heard that Nazarick's store of parchment for enchanting with low-level spells was running low.

Finding sources of materials to make various items was a very important project. Sure, they still had some leeway now, but if they just kept consuming items, they would eventually run out. That was why various people, including their master, were working on it. The apple trees he'd heard about, on the sixth level, were part of that plan.

However, the resource problem was something that Cocytus, who had been appointed to guard Nazarick, could do nothing about. Of course he couldn't. There was no way he could go outside if he was tasked with guarding the base. It was completely natural that Demiurge, who had ventured out to gain them a foothold, should be the one to solve that problem.

Cocytus's associate of equal rank had succeeded in his mis-

sion.

He should have been happy about it. And really, he was. He just couldn't completely extinguish the flames of envy deep in his heart. He was so jealous that his colleague had been of use to a Supreme Being—a Supreme One worthy of their worship—that he couldn't stand it.

His own job was to protect Nazarick.

It was perhaps more important than any other guardian's job. Every minion he asked would tell him it was a critical task. They couldn't allow vulgar rabble to set foot in the hallowed ground made by the Supreme Beings.

But with no raiders, there could be no proof of Cocytus's faithful service. He wanted to do something that could show results. For a guardian, being useful to one's master was a joy. Cocytus wanted to taste that joy, too.

His chance was here, right now.

Cocytus turned his head to gaze at the scene in the mirror as he gripped the scrolls. The reflection was not of the room he was in but a marsh somewhere. Yes. The view from the Mirror of Remote Viewing was the reason he'd spent two days camped in this log cabin, which Aura had built.

This war—no, from the point of view of the overwhelmingly powerful Great Tomb of Nazarick, this was no more than a slaughter—was merely a way to collect corpses. When Cocytus received this mission, which could also be termed a *harvest festival*, he was given a number of orders straight from the top.

First, he, Cocytus, would not face the enemy directly. Of course, that went for his underlings as well. He was to make do with the troops he was provided.

Second, he was to hold back the elder lich commander provided to him for until he absolutely needed to deploy him.

Third, he was to rely on his own judgment as much as possible.

There were a few other small things, but those were the main ones.

He needed to somehow claim victory with just the troops deployed around the lake. If he could succeed, he would be able to prove his devotion to his great master.

"NICE WORK. I'D LIKE YOU TO THANK LORD AINZ FOR ME."

Entoma sluggishly bowed her head.

"SO…ARE YOU GOING BACK?"

"No, I was tooold to watch how the battle goooes from heeere."

SO SHE'S OVERSEEING. Having concluded that, he felt a surge of excitement for the mission. *THEN LET'S GET STARTED.*

Cocytus cast Message and gave orders to the undead commander—to march.

●

Bonfires on either side of a raised platform cast a flickering light throughout the area. There were a few lizardmen on the stage—important figures like the chiefs and heads of each tribe.

In the open area before them were all the many lizardmen who had gathered to fight. A quiet commotion rose from them like sea spray. It was the buzzing of the agitation they couldn't completely hide, even if they desperately tried to conceal their worry, panic,

and fear.

This war was about to start. The close friends standing next to them might turn to corpses in the next moment. Or they themselves could be the ones to fall. That was the kind of battlefield onto which they were headed.

Shasuryu Shasha stepped forward out of the line of chiefs to hush the crowd. “Listen to me, lizardmen!” His imposing voice filled the air. Suddenly it was silent enough to hear a pin drop, and his voice echoed even louder. “I’ll admit, there are a lot of ’em!”

No one made a sound, but it was obvious that the throng was upset by this.

Shasuryu waited a moment before continuing. “But there’s nothing to be afraid of! We five tribes have formed an alliance, the first of its kind in history. Because of this alliance, during this time, we are one tribe. That means the spirits of all the tribes’ ancestors—even the spirits of tribes not our own—will protect us! Head priests!”

Reacting to his voice, Crusch Lulu stepped forward, leading the five head priests. She removed her clothing, revealing her white scales.

“Leader of the head priests, Crusch Lulu!”

Responding to his call, she took another step forward.

“Call the spirits down!”

“Please listen, children of this united tribe!”

What was this newborn tribe? Crusch Lulu spoke firmly and eloquently on the topic in undulating tones, sometimes high, sometimes low, almost like she was singing.

At first almost everyone had been disgusted by the albino. But her bold, confident bearing changed their minds bit by bit as they watched.

As Crusch spoke, she twisted slightly this way and that. Her white scales glittered in the light of the fire, as if the spirits of their ancestors had descended into her body.

Unbeknownst to the audience themselves, their expressions became one of worship.

“Five tribes are now one. The ancestral spirits of every tribe will protect all of you! Look, lizardmen! Watch as the innumerable spirits of all our tribes descend upon you!” Crusch spread her arms wide and pointed to the heavens.

Many gazes followed her gesture, but of course there was nothing but a cloudy sky. It didn’t seem like any spirits were appearing. But someone murmured:

“That little light!”

The voices started small but grew bigger and bigger. Several of the lizardmen announced they could see something: Some saw tiny lights; some shouted they saw lizardmen just like them; some saw a giant fish; some were surprised to see children; others said no, they were eggs. The lizardmen couldn’t believe their eyes.

They thought it was truly the descent of the ancestral spirits. What else could it have been?

“Our ancestors are here to protect us!”

It was only natural that people would start shouting such things.

“Feel it! Feel their power as it flows into you!”

They could hear Crusch’s voice slipping into their hearts from

somewhere far away or perhaps somewhere very close. Guided by that voice, many of the lizardmen felt something resembling power enter them.

"Feel it! Feel the strength of our ancestors coursing through you!"

All the lizardmen gathered there felt it for sure—a power bubbling up within them, an excitement that dispelled all their previous anxiety, a fountain warming their bellies like strong alcohol.

It was real proof that the spirits had descended upon them.

Turning away from the sea of rapt expressions before her, Crusch nodded to Shasuryu.

"Now, lizardmen. The spirits of our ancestors have come to walk among us. Our opponents may outnumber us, but will we be defeated?!"

"No!" Still entranced, the multitude of lizardmen responded to Shasuryu in chorus, and the atmosphere swelled.

"That's right! The ancestral spirits are with us! We will not be defeated! Destroy our enemies and dedicate the victory to our ancestors!"

"Yeah!" Their fighting spirit blazed. There were no longer any anxious lizardmen, only lizardmen facing the coming battle as warriors.

The army hadn't been dazzled by magic. Even with this many druids gathered, there was no way they had the resources to cast spells on this many lizardmen right before the big fight. The vision was the result of each lizardman being served a special drink right before the ritual.

It was a drink said to inspire bravery, a tradition passed down among the lizardmen, but its actual effects were short-term intox-

ication, euphoria, and hallucinations—an elixir made with a special roasted herb.

The drink brought about an altered state of consciousness. Crusch's speech had been a way to buy time while the drink took effect.

Once the trick is revealed, it's not very interesting. But for the ones who experienced those effects—the lizardmen who saw the spirits of their ancestors descend—the ritual really did inspire courage.

"Now we'll pass around the paint. Normally each tribe would have their own color, but the ancestral spirits of the five tribes are in all of you. Decorate yourselves with all the colors!"

Priests carrying earthenware pots strolled through the crowd. The lizardmen took paint from the pots and began to paint their bodies with whatever patterns they liked. Supposedly it was actually the ancestral spirits within them painting, so they all let their fingers run wherever they might go.

Many lizardmen covered nearly their whole bodies, especially since this time the spirits of all five tribes had descended, but among them, the Green Claw tribe members barely painted at all. This was due to the fact the leading members, Shasuryu and Zaryusu, didn't decorate themselves very much. Their tribesmen were like fans imitating their idols.

When Shasuryu scanned the crowd and saw that most of them had finished, he drew his huge sword and pointed toward the gate.

"To war!"

"Raaaaaaagh!" Their roars thundered in the air.

3

Stationed on the marsh, the Great Tomb of Nazarick's army was split broadly into two corps. On the left, facing the lizardmen, were the zombies, and on the right, the skeletons. The skeleton archers and riders were positioned behind the front line on the right. The undead beasts, perhaps meant as the final line, were placed in the rear.

Meanwhile, the lizardmen were also divided into two battalions, despite being a small army. On the zombie side were the females and hunters. On the skeleton side were the warriors and males. The priests were inside the walls.

The lizardmen had come out of the village because they knew fighting a siege battle wouldn't give them any advantage. Reinforcements weren't coming, and their walls were far from sturdy. Meanwhile, the enemy army consisted of undead that needed neither food nor sleep.

At such a disadvantage, fighting under siege would have been the most foolish plan.

But forming ranks on the field gave the lizardmen a harsh awakening as to just how wide the gap in military strength was between the two sides. There were more than three undead for every one of them. More than thirty for every ten. The ratio didn't change, but three thousand to one thousand felt overwhelming. The mere sight of three thousand undead forming ranks was strangely oppressive.

Still, even under those circumstances, the lizardmen were no longer afraid. Numbers were not an issue now that their ancestral spirits had descended.

Eventually, the undead slowly began to move. The first ones to

march were the zombies and skeletons. Perhaps meant to serve as reinforcements, the skeleton archers and riders stood immobile in the marsh.

The lizardmen moved to meet them. “Yaaaaaaagh!” A thunderous battle cry echoed across the marsh. Along with it came the sound of countless splashes. Water sprayed and mud spattered.

With both armies on the march, their clash was imminent—and something unusual happened within Nazarick’s army. Although the zombies and skeletons had begun marching at the same time, a gap gradually opened up between them; zombies moved sluggishly while skeletons were quick. On top of that, the marsh bogged them down. Slow-moving monsters like zombies were sucked into the mud, which slowed them further, but lightweight monsters like skeletons weren’t affected as much.

This led to the first clash happening between the skeletons and the warrior caste.

The lizardmen had no formation. They just charged in recklessly and attacked with wild abandon. At the front of the pack were the five head warriors. These champions rushed out first. In some cases, leading from the front wasn’t a very tactically sound decision, but they were the highest-ranking lizardman warriors—if they didn’t fight out front, morale would suffer. This way, all the lizardman warriors were inspired and overflowing with fighting spirit.

The next to charge were the Razor Tail tribe’s eighty-nine heavy warriors. They had the highest defense out of any tribe’s warriors, clad in leather armor and even equipped with leather shields. They held up their shields, and their lines met the skeleton forces like a contiguous wall.

With a crash, the skeleton vanguard joined battle with the lizardman front lines.

And then—bones scattered as the lizardmen cut deep into the skeleton formation. Angry roars thundered, and the sound of breaking bones rang out again and again. At times, there were groans as the living warriors fell, but the clatter of bones greatly outnumbered them.

At a glance, the battle overwhelmingly favored the lizardmen. If they had been humans, perhaps the situation would have been reversed. Since skeletons had bone bodies, they were practically immune to stabbing weapon damage and had high resistance to cutting weapons. For humans, who primarily used swords, it would have been difficult to deal damage effectively. The reason the lizardmen had such an advantage was due to their unrefined primary weapons like maces made of rocks. Skeletons were vulnerable against crushing weapons.

Every time a lizardman swung, brittle skeleton bones crumbled. Even if they could stand one hit, they'd be completely demolished by the next. Meanwhile, the lizardmen's thick scales often deflected the skeletons' rusty swords. Occasionally one of the warriors was injured, but not so critically that it was life-threatening.

In this first skirmish alone, almost five hundred skeletons sank to their final resting place in the marsh.

●

Cocytus was dumbfounded by what he saw in the mirror.

This was still just the first wave of attack, but the ability of the lizardmen was beyond what he'd expected. Cocytus was a brilliant warrior, and he had been able to anticipate their strength to some degree. Certainly the gap in individual aptitude between skeletons and lizardmen was obvious—a lone skeleton had no chance of beating a lone lizardman—but he thought that such a numerical advantage more than compensated for that.

Then what had happened? It almost seemed like the lizardmen had powered up somehow. The way they were now, probably only the skeleton archers and riders could match them.

Even as he watched, the skeletons rapidly crumbled. *SO THE ONLY PURPOSE THE SKELETONS AND ZOMBIES SERVE IS TO TIRE THEM OUT?* In that case, his only effective units were the three hundred undead beasts, the one hundred and fifty skeleton archers, and the hundred skeleton riders—only five hundred and fifty. It was a reversal in numbers.

Cocytus did some calculations in his head. Undead were strong. Especially in a protracted battle, there weren't so many who could defeat them. Undead didn't feel fear, pain, or anything. Fatigue was also a nonfactor, and they didn't require sleep. It went without saying how much of an advantage that became during a war.

Suppose one were hit in the head with a stone mace. That would mean instant death for a living thing, if it's unlucky, but even with luck, there would be severe pain and a lot of bleeding. It's a self-evident truth that it would very quickly lose the will to fight. Of course, there were soldiers who underwent training to withstand pain and wouldn't give up so quickly, but for most, that would be their breaking point. That was only natural for a living thing.

But what about an undead?

If its head was cracked open? It would attack with its brains spilling out.

Its arms were broken? It would attack with its broken arms.

No legs? It would crawl.

Indeed, an undead would continue to move until it lost every remnant of its false life. As long as the conditions for instant

death weren't met—often decapitation for lower-level undead—they wouldn't succumb to pain like humans did. In that sense, undead were the ideal soldiers.

THE LIZARDMEN HAVE BESTED THEM ON AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL—I'LL ADMIT THAT. BUT HOW LONG CAN THAT LAST? Cocytus raised his opinion of the lizardmen up a notch and concluded that it wouldn't be possible to crush them all at once. What he needed to do was draw out the battle.

"SHOULD WE PULL BACK AND SEE HOW WE'RE DOING?"

"That seems like a good idea."

"I think we should send the archers and riders out there."

"Nah, nah, keep pushing like we are now and wait until they're exhausted."

"And then what? If we don't take the enemy base, they'll just go there to recover and that'll be that."

"That's true. It seems like they've strengthened their defenses, but those walls are flimsy. Why don't we sack that village, then encircle their forces and annihilate them?"

Having gotten input from a number of minions, Cocytus picked up a Message scroll. He glanced at Entoma.

She was looking with disinterest at the mirror. She had brought something like a green cookie up near her jaw. Soon after came light crunching noises. Her attitude suggested she thought none of this was her concern. Perhaps that explained her expressionless face.

NO, THAT'S JUST FOR LOOKS. He recalled her true form and realized how foolish he was for checking her expression. Cocytus's friend and one of the five most-evil beings in Nazarick, the

Prince of Fear, called her a “most horrible” predator of his relatives. That was her true nature.

He gave up on trying to grasp the feelings of their master (who must have been the reason she was there) from her face and used the scroll to Message the commander.

“Are they underestimating us?” Zenbel murmured. His voice was low, but from where he was, getting a view from the top of the mud wall, it was loud enough that everyone could hear him.

“The archers and riders haven’t budged!” complained Zenbel. “All I can think is that they’re mocking us.”

“Yeah. I figured they’d come all at once to crush us…,” said the Small Fang chief.

“Zombie fight…going well.”

There were only forty-five lizardmen facing the zombies, mostly consisting of the few hunters. They repeatedly threw rocks and retreated. And little by little, they were leading them farther away from the skeletons. The females had moved to dig into the skeletons’ flank.

“Their movements are kinda strange.”

“Seriously.”

The zombies were moving less like they were following orders and more like they were just completely distracted. Was there a commander who would approve of their troops moving like that? No, that was out of the question. But that was how they were moving. So was it part of the enemy’s plan? Everyone racked their brains.

“I just don’t get it.”

“Yup, agree…Shasuryu.”

No matter how hard they thought, they couldn't come up with any meaning the zombies' actions could possibly have.

After watching everyone for a while, Zaryusu told them what he thought. "Could it be there's no commander?"

"No commander…? Oh, you mean like they were just given initial orders and are following those only?"

"Yeah, like that."

Lower-tier undead like zombies and skeletons, for all intents and purposes, had no intelligence of their own. It was most effective to give them orders in real time. It seemed like in this instance the zombies had only been given the order to kill nearby lizardmen.

"So they think they can win as long as they outnumber us? Or could this fight just be a test to see how long they can last with no commander?" said Zenbel.

"Maybe."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Those bastards!" The one who had yelled wasn't Zenbel but Shasuryu. Even he couldn't take this sitting down. They were all risking their lives.

"Do you mind calming down, Shasuryu? It's not like that's for sure what's going on," said the Small Fang chief.

"Yeah, sorry… I'm glad things are going well."

"Right, brother. For now, we just have to cut down their numbers as much as we can."

Combat fatigue wasn't something to sniff at. In a melee fight, the mental wear and tear was unimaginable. On a battlefield, where they could be attacked from any direction, just swinging their weapons a few times would cause double the exhaustion.

But the undead didn't feel that. They would just keep attacking without rest.

The more time passed, the more obvious that gap between the living and the dead would become.

In other words, time was the lizardmen's enemy.

"Tch, I should be out there."

"Contain…self, Zenbel."

Certainly if they brought out Zenbel's powerful arm, the skeletons would be gone in no time. But that would mean showing their hand. Zaryusu and the other five had to remain as trump cards. Of course, they would go if they were truly out of options, but otherwise they needed to keep their potential to themselves until a really strong enemy appeared.

"But it's quite convenient for us that they aren't coming this way," said Zaryusu, garnering agreement. Then he asked Crusch, "Are things going okay on your end?"

"…Yes, the ritual is going fine," she answered, looking into the village. The priests were currently conducting a ritual that had the potential to give the lizardmen another trump card. Normally it would take an extremely long time, but with all the priests from each tribe cooperating, they would finish in time to use it during the battle.

"…It's amazing what we can accomplish when we work together."

"Hmm…yeah. After the war we shared just a little bit of information, but…this time, after the fight is over, there are so many more things I want to do."

The other chiefs nodded emphatically at Shasuryu's remark. This was the first time they were exchanging and pooling knowl-

edge, and they could clearly see how much it would help all the tribes to grow. The realization hit hardest for the three chiefs who had allied before yet never exchanged knowledge.

Zaryusu looked at the five chiefs and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” asked Crusch.

“Nah, I mean, I know it’s a bad time, but I’m just happy.”

Crusch instantly understood how he felt. “I get it, Zaryusu.”

Zaryusu crinkled his eyes, as if Crusch’s smile were the sun itself. Both their gazes were full of longing and affection.

Their bodies were separated. Of course they were. At this very moment, there were lizardmen going to their deaths. They couldn’t answer the feelings in their hearts while that was going on. But their tails were moving with minds of their own, poking and drawing back.

“Mph…”

“Whaddaya make of it, big bro?”

“They’re in their own world.”

“Steamy.”

“My conclusion: It’s great to be young. You have a future.”

The four older lizardmen nodded as they watched the cute couple.

Of course, Zaryusu and Crusch could hear them talking. As their tails whipped around, they got their expressions under control.

“Brother, they’re on the move.”

The change of topic was so fast Shasuryu and the others grinned awkwardly as they turned their attention to the enemy army. The skeleton riders had set out on a big curve.

"Whoa, whoa, are they coming this way?"

"With the riders? Are they trying to unsettle us by attacking this position?"

"No, aren't they trying to get around the rear of the warriors and males to surround and wipe them out?"

This is bad.

Without saying it, everyone reached the same conclusion. The skeleton riders were a problem.

If they had moved right away, the lizardmen could have crushed them. But now the warriors and males were in a melee battle, the hunters were drawing the zombies away, and the females had begun hurling rocks at the skeletons' flank. The lizardmen didn't have the force to suppress the skeleton riders now.

"Maybe it's time for us to move."

Shasuryu nodded at the Small Fang chief's idea. "The question is who should go. Yeah, it's time to make our first move."

●

Skeleton riders—or skeletons equipped with lances mounted on similarly bony horses. They didn't have any special powers aside from how easy they were to deploy, but their mobility in the marsh was outstanding. Since their bony bodies didn't sink very far into the mud, they were able to move at a horse's pace.

The hundred units took a long detour to arrive behind the lizardmen for a rear assault.

They detected the figures of three lizardmen coming toward them up ahead on the left, but they ignored them. The newcomers to the battle weren't included in their orders, so until they were attacked, they wouldn't have anything to do with them. That was just how undead with no intelligence operated.

They had nearly reached the back of the lizardman army when the rider out in front found his vision spinning wildly. The skeleton had been thrown high into the air, falling swiftly into the marsh.

A human would've been confused and unable to act right away, but the unintelligent, undead skeleton rider promptly moved to carry out its orders. It stood up immediately but did stumble from the heavy damage.

Another rider went tumbling into the first, and the two units' bones broke apart and scattered into the marsh.

This was happening here and there on the marsh, but why?

The answer was extremely simple: traps. The lizardmen had buried wooden boxes in the water. When the horses stepped into them, their momentum caused them to trip.

Skeleton riders went tumbling one after another. Humans would have slowed down or taken some kind of countermeasure, but these riders did not. They might have had the judgment to detour around a gaping hole but not to guard against hidden traps—such thinking was outside the scope of their orders, and they didn't have the intelligence to adapt to their situation.

Maintaining their speed and charging straight into the traps was like mass suicide. Still, although the traps were effective, all they did was slow them down. They dealt some damage, but it wasn't enough to destroy them. The riders scattered around just picked their muddied selves up.

Then a sharp whistling sound rang out, and one of the fallen skeleton riders' heads exploded.

Detecting a hostile party, the riders scanned the area.

Then another head shattered like glass.

The riders discovered the three lizardmen at a distance of a little over eighty-five yards—and that it was rocks launched with pinpoint accuracy from their slings that were knocking off their heads. The skeleton riders advanced.

At the same time, the battle with the skeletons on the ground was reaching a turning point. After the twang of a great many bows came the sound of arrows raining down. The one hundred and fifty skeleton archers fired the bolts over lizardmen and skeletons alike. It wasn't over with one volley; there was a second, a third…

This attack took the lizardmen by surprise. Several were hit and crumpled to the ground. They couldn't protect themselves against the cascade while in combat with the skeletons.

Of course, the arrows hit the skeletons, too, but they didn't take damage. While the piercing damage-resistant skeletons pushed forward, the skeleton archers loosed their arrows from behind. It was a brilliant maneuver. Considering the time it would take to completely obliterate a 2,200-strong vanguard in order to reach the archers, this should have doomed the lizardmen.

The problem was that it came too late. If they had carried out this plan in the beginning of the battle, it would have proven fatal for the lizardmen. They would have been overwhelmed by the numerical disparity, and the battle would have ended differently. But now the outcome was already decided.

The lizardmen ignored the skeletons, having already whittled

their numbers, and charged directly at the archers. One hundred and fifty arrows rained down, and several lizardmen collapsed into the mud—but not all of them.

Lizardmen had thick skin and tough scales. Even without armor, they had the same defenses as a human in leather armor. Even if an arrow pierced their skin, their thick muscles would save their life.

Part of the reason fewer fell was that the skeleton archers didn't have a great deal of strength for drawing their bows. The force behind their attacks wasn't enough to kill a lizardman.

With battle cries, the lizardmen fearlessly pushed through. When the deadly barrage came a second time, they protected their heads with their arms. They ran for their lives as the hail of missiles pierced skin and tore through bodies.

A third volley…

That was about all the skeleton archers could do. If they'd had any intelligence, they probably would have retreated. If they had fallen back temporarily and fought cohesively with the rest of the remaining undead army, there might have been a way for them to retain their usefulness in the fray.

However, they lacked the brains that allowed for such a complicated directive, and in any case, those orders had never been given. They followed the simple orders they had—and continued shooting arrows at the lizardmen even when they were practically on top of one another.

A war cry went up, and a wave of lizardmen swallowed the skeleton archers just like it had the skeletons. The long-range fighters didn't have any room to use their bows. They fell into the soggy earth under the lizardmen attacks. There were still zombies remaining, but almost all the skeletons had been defeated.

This was when a new enemy was finally unleashed—the undead beasts. They were undead made from the corpses of a variety of animals like wolves, snakes, boars—monsters that combined zombie endurance with animal dexterity.

The undead beasts headed straight for the lizardmen. Some were fast, some were slow—it was a disjointed charge with no sense of rank or formation.

Attacks that came from below were surprisingly hard to dodge. The beasts employed the animal-like method of biting at their enemies' ankles to slow and drag them down before dealing the final blow.

For the lizardmen, who were already tired, this was a problem indeed. A number of them who were slow to react had their throats ripped out. When a comrade fell at a warrior's side, it didn't matter if they'd braced themselves mentally or if they believed the ancestral spirits were with them—they couldn't deny that their morale was shaken.

The head warriors fought at the front of the line, but the pressure was gradually increasing; it was only a matter of time before the lizardman lines broke, and they routed. It was at that moment when the marsh rippled with excitement.

Two cones of mud standing a little over five feet high with no arms, legs, or heads appeared…

…and began to move.

Though they had no feet, they moved nimbly across the marsh, gliding, advancing on the undead beasts. Once they'd gotten closer, they reached out whiplike appendages, longer than the mud creatures were tall, from about where the arms would have been on a person.

These were one of the lizardmen's trump cards, which the

priests had combined their powers to summon: swamp elementals.

The swamp elementals plowed into the pack of undead beasts, struck with their whiplike tentacles, and yanked some of them off the ground. Of course, the undead beasts countered, scratching with their claws and biting with their fangs.

Both sides were fearless in the fray, but gradually it became clear the swamp elementals had the advantage. It was simply a matter of an imbalance in individual potential.

The power of their own priests was winning against the undead. Seeing this restored the courage of the lizardmen warriors, and they took up the charge once more.

Thus began a gruesome brawl. In this battle, unlike the one with the skeletons up till now, numerous lizardmen lost their lives. But the lizardmen held the numerical advantage now, and the balance of battle began to tip in their favor.

●

WE'RE GOING TO LOSE.

Cocytus understood that. None of the undead in the troops he was given had intelligence. That was why they'd lost, and he'd been afraid of that since the beginning. But he hadn't expected them to be so weak.

He was bothered by how shallow his thinking had been. There was a way to turn this around, but it wasn't a good one. Using that method was practically a synonym for defeat.

But could he really report to his master that they had lost? Cocytus grabbed a Message scroll. The one to call in this situation was...

“IS THIS DEMIURGE?”

“Yes, my friend. What in the world happened that you would send me a Message?”

Demiurge’s deep, calm voice echoed in Cocytus’s head. As one of Nazarick’s top minds, Demiurge would surely have a good idea.

It was frustrating to go for help to someone who, in a way, was a rival, but he had to avoid defeat at all costs. The army of the Great Tomb of Nazarick? Lose?! To avoid that fate, he would bow his head as low as it took.

“ACTUALLY…”

Demiurge listened silently to Cocytus’s explanation about his present situation that used up a whole scroll, and he heaved an annoyed sigh. “And what do you want me to do about that?”

“I WANT YOU TO LEND ME YOUR WISDOM. AT THIS RATE, WE’LL BE DEFEATED. IF IT WERE JUST ME LOSING, I WOULD ACCEPT IT, BUT I CAN’T DISGRACE THE GREAT TOMB OF NAZARICK AND THE SUPREME ONES.”

“…Does Lord Ainz even want you to win?”

“HUH? WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?”

“Why did he build an army of such low-tier minions?”

Cocytus had been wondering the same thing. He didn’t see any reason to build an army out of the weakest minions the Great Tomb of Nazarick had to offer.

“HE MUST HAVE HAD SOME IDEA, BUT WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS HE TRYING TO DO?”

“I have a few guesses.”

I KNEW YOU WOULD. Cocytus didn't say it aloud, but he definitely had quite a bit of respect for the demon.

"So…Cocytus. You've been there for some days. Before attacking, you should have gathered some intelligence on the lizardmen, right?"

That should have been a given. However…

"BUT LORD AINZ ORDERED ME TO TAKE THEM OUT WITH THE ARMY HE PROVIDED IN A HEAD-ON FIGHT."

"Yeah, but I want you to think for a minute, Cocytus. Isn't the most important thing the results you'll offer to Lord Ainz? If your main objective was to obliterate the village, shouldn't you have searched for the best way to do that?"

Cocytus had no words to reply with. Demiurge's comments were right on the money.

"He must have had that in mind when giving you those minions."

"…HE GAVE ME A FORCE THAT COULDN'T WIN ON PURPOSE?"

"There's certainly a very good chance. If you had collected intelligence, you might have realized that you didn't have sufficient force to take out the village. Then you would have been able to report back and say, 'Lord Ainz, annihilating them will be difficult with these troops. I need stronger troops.' Perhaps that was his aim?"

In other words, he should have verified his master's true intent—not just followed orders but adjusted the operation at his discretion and then acted. That's what Demiurge was saying.

"It was probably to make you more conscious of these things. I'm sure he had other aims as well, but…"

“OTHER AIMS?” Cocytus asked, flustered. He’d already made one error. He didn’t want to make any more.

“He sent a messenger to the villages, but he never mentioned Nazarick’s name. And he told you not to show yourself. That means—”

Cocytus swallowed hard, hanging on Demiurge’s every word. But the next ones didn’t come.

“Ngh! Sorry, Cocytus. Something urgent’s come up. Sorry, but that’s all. I’m hoping for your victory!” Demiurge cut the conversation short, and the Message spell disappeared.

With some idea of what would make level-headed Demiurge panic, Cocytus shifted his gaze to the other person in the room. Entoma was carelessly removing a beat-up talisman from her forehead.

For a talisman wielder to use one now meant…everything was too late.

It was time to unleash the monster he’d been told to save as a last resort. But was that really what his master wanted him to do?

Cocytus, for perhaps the first time, thought carefully about what intentions might have been hidden in the orders he was given. But in the end, there was only one conclusion to draw.

Cocytus cast Message. “AN ORDER FOR YOU, ELDER LICH COMMANDER: MOVE OUT. SHOW THE LIZARDMEN YOUR POWER.”

His body of skin and bones was wrapped in a splendid but old robe, and in one hand, he clutched a gnarled staff. His rotting face, with just a bit of skin stretched over the bones, spoke of dark wisdom. Negative energy rose off his body and hung around him like a mist. This undead caster was an elder lich.

He received the order from Cocytus and glanced at the marsh. Then he gave an order to the flabby, red-skinned undead immediately behind him—bloodmeat hulks who had been created in the same way he had.

"Slay those three lizardmen."

Following the order, two hulks began walking toward the three lizardmen who had wiped out the riders. They were low-tier undead who could use their muscular strength only to punch, but they had regeneration abilities, so it would take a while for an opponent in the same level range to beat them with simple physical attacks.

The elder lich decided they'd be able to buy him enough time.

Certainly, this was a poor plan. As a caster, the elder lich wasn't terribly strong in a close-quarters fight. Having the bloodmeat hulks attend to him would have been the smart strategy.

But he couldn't do that.

The order he was given was to show his power. That meant he needed to use his overwhelming might to devastate the lizardman base on his own.

As he walked, the elder lich crumpled his horrifying face in a chuckle.

It was so simple.

As an elder lich created by the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown, he was far stronger than Nazarick's auto-spawning elder liches. All he had to do was display that power.

He swore on the name given him by his master that he would be victorious. "I, Iguvua, will bring victory to the Supreme One."

4

The lizardmen, shoulders slumping in fatigue, heaved a sigh of relief after finishing off the undead beasts. Despite hearts pained with sorrow, they wore faint smiles.

It was true that more than a few of them had been injured or killed, but they were lucky that was all. If the swamp elementals hadn't joined the battle—no, if they had even showed up a little bit later—their line would have broken and everything probably would have fallen apart.

"Let's go." It was the voice of one of the head warriors announcing the next round.

Everyone's bodies were heavy with exhaustion. They could barely hold their weapons and swinging them was a chore, but the fight wasn't over yet.

The zombies were a ways away, but the warriors still had to mop them up, and they had to stay on the lookout after that.

"Okay, carry the heavily injured to the village. Everyone else, follow—" His command was interrupted by a blaze of hellfire.

The heat wave pummeled the area, and at the center of the flames, the two elementals reeled. The flames vanished as if they had never existed, and the elementals were in shambles. With just one attack, they were half-destroyed. The second round of flames leaped up before the lizardmen had time to cry out in shock. Unable to withstand it, the bodies of the elementals collapsed and melted away inside the fire.

The lizardmen were unable to wrap their heads around the sudden annihilation of elementals that had been so effective against the undead beasts.

What happened?

Despite acknowledging that the swamp elementals had been wiped out, they desperately refused to understand it. This meant that something even more powerful than two swamp elementals had arrived.

The lizardmen scanned the area with naked confusion and fear. The moment they laid eyes on the lone undead in the distance, it loosed another magical attack from its hand.

The fireball, about as big as a human's head, followed a straight path through the air and crashed into the lizardmen on the front lines.

Usually, throwing water on fire would put it out. But phenomena brought about by the laws of magic, even such everyday phenomena, were different. The moment the fireball hit the water, the area went up in flames as if the swamp were a hard floor.

The expanding conflagration engulfed several lizardmen and disappeared.

An illusion—the flames vanished abruptly enough to make them doubt their sight. But the smell of burned flesh hanging in the air and the crumpled forms of lizardmen on the ground were no illusions.

The undead advanced slowly. His manner was so elegant that it seemed to overflow with arrogance. It was the gait of one who was confident in his power.

Should we make a decisive charge like we did against the skeleton archers? While the lizardmen mulled it over, another fireball went flying.

It exploded, and the lives of the lizardmen in the area were snuffed out instantaneously.

This was truly overwhelming power; it was as if everything up until now had been a game.

"Yaaaagh!" A war cry went up, an attempt to shake off the fear. The moment several lizardmen prepared to charge, an icy voice echoed out impossibly close.

"Fools!"

Just a single word. The fireball burned up its victims before they could even cry out.

The undead swayed, and the several hundred lizardmen took a step back, forced by the wall that was the difference between their own power and the truly powerful.

"Let's get out of here!" someone, one of the head warriors, shouted in a quavering voice. "This enemy's different from the others! We don't stand a chance!"

Obviously. It was coming at them on its own. The lizardmen could feel the pressure, like an overwhelming wind, on their skin.

"You guys go back and report to the chiefs and Zaryusu!"

"We'll buy you time!"

The fireball burst, and a few lizardmen fell.

"Run! And tell them!"

The five head warriors let the others retreat to the village and judged the distance between them and the enemy, figuring in the area of effect of the exploding fireballs. Basically, they wanted at least one of them to reach the enemy. They would face death for this objective.

They exchanged looks from their spaced-out positions and set off sprinting.

The distance was around a hundred yards. A hundred despair-inducing yards, but they still advanced. Even if they were defeated on their way, at least they would leave behind some intelligence for Zaryusu and the chiefs who were surely watching behind them.

The lizardmen who had pressed forward now ran home, scattering like baby spiders.

Zaryusu watched calmly. No, he'd been paying attention ever since the immensely powerful enemy had appeared, the undead that sowed fiery death. Its movements were different from the unintelligent enemies they'd faced so far. This was probably the commander.

When it had reached an estimated hundred yards from the lizardmen, it intercepted them with fireball area-of-effect attacks, and the head warriors who had attempted a five-pronged charge were all burned to death on their way.

"It looks like we're up."

Zaryusu nodded at Zenbel, and Crusch also indicated her agreement. Now they might be the ones to die, but they had to throw themselves into the fray.

"Yeah, no doubt about it, this is where we come in. That kind of power… There's a very good chance this is the Great One's right-hand man, the commander of this army. Even if it's not, it must be their trump card."

"Yeah. There's no way they'd be able to control multiple undead of that strength. But how should we approach it? It's too far away."

Zaryusu racked his brain to answer Crusch's question. They weren't fighting to die, so they needed a plan. Zaryusu and Zenbel couldn't fight at a distance. They had to make it a close-quarters

fight. The problem was that hundred yards.

Certainly they were capable of withstanding a fireball or two. But it would be more than one or two by the time they reached the enemy, and the fight would begin in earnest only once they did. It wasn't hard to see that if they faced that inferno head-on in their advance, they'd be overpowered in the end.

"That distance is a real bummer."

"Yeah…it sure is. I never would have thought a hundred yards could feel so far…"

They discussed how to reach the undead without any injuries, or at least without too many.

"What if we swam under the water?"

"Even with priest powers…it'd be pretty hard. If we could use Invisibility…"

They could close the gap all at once if they could go invisible and use Fly, but druids weren't able to acquire those spells.

"Then how about making shields and holding those in front of us while we get closer?"

"It will take too long to make shields."

"We could just break some houses, no?" Zenbel smiled wryly, knowing even as he suggested it that his idea was no good. These magical attacks resulted in blistering explosions. Even if they blocked one direction, the heat would find its way around. They didn't have time to build shields that would cover their entire bodies.

"Oh, hmm… *That*…we could do…"

"What, Zaryusu?" Crusch asked timidly, recoiling slightly.

Zaryusu wondered if she had seen the ruthlessness of his plan on his face, but he couldn't help it. His idea was one he wished he could reject.

"No, I just…found a shield."

●

Iguvua nodded, content with the present circumstances.

Things were going well. The two bloodmeat hulks were still fighting, but he was advancing on the village with no problems.

The lizardmen had seemed ready to charge a couple of times, but once he showed them his power, they seemed to realize how futile their resistance was. The five-man charge had probably gotten the closest, but even then, fifty yards had been their limit.

Iguvua walked silently forward as if he were crossing a deserted wasteland. He didn't drop his guard against the lizardmen, even as he sneered at how weak they were.

There wasn't much distance left between him and the village that was his objective. Upon reaching it, he intended to burn down the buildings with a rapid barrage of flames as he killed all the lizardmen.

But surely the enemy would rather he didn't arrive. ***Then they need to start counterattacking soon.*** When he looked toward the village, he saw he was correct.

"Ohh? I see."

He could see a single hydra. It began walking toward him.

If that was their trump card, laying it low with his overwhelming abilities would probably rob the lizardmen of their remaining will to fight. Then it would be even easier for him to destroy the

village.

He checked his surroundings once, and up into the sky, to confirm there were no enemies, and then stopped and leisurely waited for the hydra to enter his space.

Right on the verge of being in range, it began to run—yes, at Iguvua.

"Fool. You think you can make it all the way over here with your slow feet? You're nothing but an animal." Sneering, he formed a fireball in his hand and shot it at the hydra.

It flew in a straight line right for its target—a direct hit. Flames of crimson hellfire blazed up, licking the hydra's entire body.

However, though it staggered, its feet didn't stop moving. It kept running, engulfed in flames. No, the flames extinguished after a moment, so that must have been an illusion. The hydra's extraordinary willpower only made Iguvua feel like that was what he saw.

Iguvua frowned in displeasure. The creature had withstood one of his attacks. That deeply hurt his pride.

It did seem like the hydra had a defensive spell cast on its body to reduce energy damage, but it wasn't a high-level spell that could completely nullify his magic. ***Hydras have quick-acting healing abilities, but it shouldn't work against fire... Either way, if it's a magical beast, it must be overflowing with life force, so I guess it makes sense it could withstand one attack?*** Iguvua decided, to comfort himself. Still, that didn't completely extinguish the flames of his rage. Iguvua was specially created by the Supreme One, Ainz Ooal Gown. Taking his hit without dying was tantamount to insulting his master.

Though inside he seethed with rage, Iguvua turned an ice-cold

gaze on the hydra that was earnestly running toward him.

"What a bother. Die." He shot another fireball at the hydra.

Hellfire roasted the hydra's entire body, and even at this distance, Iguvua had the feeling he could smell burning flesh. He should have injured it enough that it would hesitate to keep coming, even if it didn't die, but…

"Why don't you stop? Why are you still coming at me?"

5

Rororo ran. He was gigantic, and the terrain was marshy, but he could sprint almost as fast as the lizardmen. He made huge splashing noises as he went.

His amber eyes were clouded from the heat, and two of his four heads were already limp.

Still, he ran on.

Another fireball came flying and hit him. The fuel inside flared up all at once, and the flames licked his body. He felt throbbing pain like he was being punched over and over, his eyes dried up, and the hot air burned his lungs.

The ache from his full-body burns and the searing pain from earlier that still hadn't abated warned him: He would die if he took another hit.

Still, he ran.

He ran.

And ran.

His feet never stopping, one in front of another. His scales peeled off in the heat, and blood erupted as the skin beneath crinkled and curled up. Even then, he didn't stop.

If he were a witless beast, he would have naturally turned tail and fled. But Rororo didn't flee.

Yes, Rororo was a magical beast, a hydra. Some magical beasts were smarter than humans, while some were no more intelligent than any other animal. Rororo was more like the latter.

It was mysterious—a wonder—that Rororo with his animal brain, on the verge of death, would continue to rush toward Iguvua, who was causing him pain.

In fact, his enemy Iguvua couldn't understand it. He even considered that the beast might have been manipulated by some kind of magic.

But that wasn't it.

No, it was something else.

Something Iguvua couldn't understand.

Rororo, with no more intelligence than an animal, was running for his family.

Rororo didn't know his parents' faces. It wasn't that hydras abandoned their young; babies lived with one parent until a certain age, learning the skills to survive in nature. So why hadn't that been the case for Rororo?

It was because he was deformed. Usually hydras were born with eight heads, and as they aged, they grew more, sometimes as

many as twelve. But Rororo was born with just four, so his parents abandoned him and took only his siblings with them.

As a newborn hydra without parents to care for him—regardless of how big he had the potential to grow up to be—in the unforgiving wild, it would only be a matter of time before his young life was extinguished…

…except a male lizardman happened to pass by and pick him up.

That was when Rororo gained a mother, father, and childhood friend all in one.

Through the pain, with his numb mind, Rororo hazily recalled something he was always wondering. *Why am I so big? Why do I have all these heads?* He thought about this sometimes when he looked at his dad—his family. And he had an idea: *Maybe these extra heads will fall off, and I'll grow arms and legs long like grass, and I'll look like Dad.*

And then what would they do?

Oh. *We'll sleep together for the first time in so long.* He'd gotten so big that they ended up sleeping in different places. That made him just a little lonely.

Flames filled Rororo's field of vision, blowing his thoughts away, and searing pain pummeled him again. He emitted a feeble cry. There was no longer any place he didn't hurt terribly. A sense of peaceful warmth came from behind him, but it felt so weak to his scorched body.

He endured the pain like being bashed with innumerable hammers.

It hurt so much, too much; he couldn't think.

His legs became frantic, unending spasms signaling him, telling him to stop.

But…

But! Did Rororo stop moving his legs?

No, he did not.

He advanced. Yes, his speed had slowed to a crawl. The flames burned his flesh, pulled at his muscles. It was impossible to run at his usual pace.

Even taking a step forward was unbearable.

It hurt to breathe. Just trying to inhale one more gasp of air was difficult. It was possible his lungs were burned.

Still, his feet would not stop.

Now only one of his heads was moving. The others were nothing more than dead weight. In his clouded field of vision, he could make out the undead conjuring another fireball in his hand.

Rororo's instincts screamed at him—*I will die if this attack connects*. But Rororo was not afraid. Forward, forward, he moved single-mindedly forward…

He'd been asked to do this by his mother-father-friend, so there was no way he could stop.

He desperately—staggering slowly, his energy spent—advanced a few more steps, when the undead loosed the crimson flames through the sky toward him.

They would burn up the rest of Rororo's life. It was undeniable.

In other words, death.

The end of everything…

Except…

Yes, except that male was here…

Would he let this happen?

This absurdity?

Not in a million years.

"Icy Burst!" Zaryusu jumped out from behind Rororo and, running parallel to him, swung Frost Pain at the same time he shouted. A wall of white frost appeared in front of Rororo, as if the air itself had frozen starting from the tip of Zaryusu's sword. It was frigid, a wintry torrent brought forth by Frost Pain.

This was one of the magical sword's abilities, a special move that could be used only three times per day, Icy Burst. It could chill everything in the area and cause massive damage.

The wall that Zaryusu whipped up blocked the fireball as if it had physical strength. A jewel of fire and a wall of cold air—magical logic made it appropriate that these two should clash.

Impact.

The fierce battle between flame and frost began. The two devoured each other like cannibal snakes of red and white. After an instant of equilibrium, they both faded.

The undead was shocked and visibly panicked. That was the most apt attitude to have after his magic vanished.

There was still some distance between Zaryusu and Iguvua, but they could make out each other's facial expressions and movements now. Rororo's desperate march had brought the three lizardmen this far across the seemingly impossible distance un-

scathed.

"Rororo..." Zaryusu got choked up for a moment. Of all the countless things that came to mind to say, he chose one that was extremely concise and pure.

"Thank you!"

With that shout, Zaryusu ran forward without turning to look back at Rororo. Crusch and Zenbel followed immediately after. Behind them, a nearly fainting voice replied—a cheer for his family.

●

Iguvua's eyes widened. His fireball had been negated. He expressed his disbelief in words: "**This can't be!**"

He cast another spell. Of course, it was Fireball. He didn't want to admit that the one who had erased his spell was the lizardman currently charging his way.

The fireball raced toward the three lizardmen.

The one out in front swung his sword and created an icy wall to repel it, and both spells disappeared. Yes, it was the same thing that had happened before.

"Shoot as many as you want! I'll erase them all!" he heard the lizardman shout.

Iguvua clicked his tongue in annoyance. ***I was created by the Supreme One, Lord Ainz! How can this reptile scum block my magic?!*** He frantically calmed his mind, seething with rage.

There was an extremely good chance that Fireball wouldn't work against them anymore, but the fact that they had ap-

proached by hiding behind the hydra meant there had to be some kind of limit on how many times that spell could be used. Maybe he could use it ten times. Maybe each use consumed some of his health, so as long as he healed he could use it an infinite amount of times.

How should I deal with this? If possible, I want to find out if what he said is true…

Iguvua could still shoot plenty of fireballs, but he couldn't tell if the lizardman was bluffing or not.

They were only forty yards apart. Also, as far as he could tell, the lizardmen approaching him were warriors. As a caster, he didn't want a close-quarters fight.

That was why he couldn't use Fireball. He wasn't foolish enough to try and see how many more they could block under these circumstances. If they hadn't been behind the hydra, if they weren't so close, he might have tried experimenting. But his chances for that had been ruined by that pesky hydra.

"You…damned hydra…" Iguvua spat and decided to make his next move. **"How about this?"**

Luckily for him, everyone just happened to be in a straight line. He pointed a finger at the three rapidly approaching lizardmen. Shocks sparked around it. **"Take this—and taste my thundering wrath! Lightning!"** White lightning streaked across space. And then—

Even at a distance, he could see it—the white light coming from Iguvua's hand, Lightning. Frost Pain's Icy Burst could block chill and fire attacks, but Zaryusu had never tried using it against Lightning, so he wasn't sure if the sword could block it or not. Should they take the risk? Or was it better to disperse, make themselves less of a target, and limit the number of injuries?

Zaryusu tensed the hand that held Frost Pain. The air felt like it was buzzing with electricity—proof that the shock was on its way.

"Leave this to meee!"

Before Zaryusu could make a decision, Zenbel rushed out in front with a shout. At almost the same time, the spell was cast.

"Lightning!"

"Yaaaargh! Massive Resistance!"

Right at the moment the lightning flowed into Zenbel's body, he flexed his muscles. As a result, the bolt that normally would have passed through to the others scattered.

Massive Resistance—it was a monk ability. By radiating chi from their entire body for a moment, the user could reduce incoming magic damage.

This was something Zenbel had learned on the journey he took after being defeated by Frost Pain's special attack, Icy Burst. Whether it was an area-of-effect spell or any other kind, as long as it did damage, this ability would take effect on it.

Cries of surprise went up on both sides, but Crusch and Zaryusu, who believed in their friend, were only mildly surprised. They took advantage of the undead's shock to invade his space.

I see, thought Zaryusu as he ran. If he had used Icy Burst back when they'd been fighting one-on-one, Zenbel probably would have blocked it using this move and defeated him in the opening created. That was why he'd invited him to use it.

"Ha-ha! This is a cinch!"

Zaryusu's expression softened when he heard Zenbel sounding

so confident, but an instant later he was tensed up again—he realized there was a hint of pain mixed into his voice.

If a male as strong as Zenbel wasn't able to bite back the pain, the damage must have been pretty significant. And Zenbel wasn't the type who would agree to the plan of having Rororo run out in front if his move defended him perfectly.

Zaryusu stared ahead. They were only twenty yards away. It had been such a long way, but this was all that was left.

As the party pressed in on him, Iguvua concluded that they were powerful opponents. He had to hand it to any ability that could block his magic. Of course, he still had other methods of attack, but he had to think about defense, too.

"A nice sacrifice, most suitable for showing them how mighty I am." Iguvua grinned and cast a spell. **"Summon Fourth-Tier Undead."**

The marsh belched, and four skeletons armed with round shields and scimitars stood up to protect him. They were skeleton warriors—undead so strong they couldn't even be compared to regular skeletons.

There were other undead he could have summoned, but the reason he chose skeletal warriors was to elude the chill attacks. Iguvua and all bony skeletons had perfect resistance to chill.

Protected by his bodyguards, Iguvua watched the party's approach with contempt. It was the attitude of a champion awaiting contenders. Eventually the distance between them closed.

Just ten yards. That was all that was left. Yes, that was all. Zaryusu made sure the undead wasn't going to attack and looked over his shoulder…

…at the distance they'd traveled. Just to run it, a hundred

yards was nothing, but this was a no-man's-land with nowhere to hide. Rororo, Frost Pain, Zenbel, Crusch. If any one of those elements had been missing, it would have been impossible. An absolutely uncrossable distance. Now it was gone. The remaining gap could be closed if he reached out his hand. They'd been able to overcome it.

He felt just a little relieved seeing Rororo being carried back to the lizardman village, then scolded his buoyant heart and glared at the undead.

It was a horrible being. Zaryusu frankly acknowledged that. If he hadn't encountered it in this situation and instead caught sight of it at a distance, he probably would have chosen to run away as fast as he could. Just confronting the thing made his tail stand on end, and his instincts told him to flee.

He could see out of the corners of his eyes that Crusch's and Zenbel's tails were also stiff. They must have felt the same as Zaryusu. Yes, they were suppressing their desire to flee in order to stand before the undead.

Zaryusu whapped their backs with his tail.

Startled, they both turned to him.

"We can do it," Zaryusu whispered simply.

"You're right, Zaryusu. We can do it," Crusch answered, rubbing the spot where he'd whacked her with his tail.

"Hmph. It'll be fun!" Zenbel laughed with a cocky look on his face.

Then the three of them advanced across the final stretch.

At a distance of eight yards…

Zaryusu and his friends, panting after their sprint, faced off

against the undead, who didn't breathe at all. The first to speak was their enemy.

"I am Iguvua, an elder lich in service of the Great One. If you bow your heads, I'll grant you painless deaths."

Zaryusu laughed in spite of himself—he saw that this undead, Iguvua, didn't understand a thing.

There was only one way to reply.

Iguvua waited for their response without showing any displeasure at Zaryusu's smile. He had the elite arrogance of one who knew he was strong, one who was confident he could kill them.

That arrogance had allowed them to close the final stretch, so Zaryusu was thankful for it.

"Let's hear your response."

"Heh-heh. You need a response?" Zaryusu held up Frost Pain and tightened his grip. Zenbel put up his fists and got into a peculiar fighting stance. Crusch didn't move in a specific way, but she reached toward the reservoir of magic deep within herself so she would be able to cast at a moment's notice. "Then here's our response: We refuse!"

Judging that reply sufficiently hostile, the skeleton warriors raised their round shields and brandished their scimitars.

"Then pain-filled deaths it is. Know that you have rejected my final offer of mercy."

"The dead should go back to the world of the dead, Iguvua!"

The decisive battle began.

“Go, Zaryusu!” Zenbel, who had charged faster than anyone, drove his huge arm into a skeleton warrior. Despite the fact that the skeleton warrior used its shield to block, he kept forcing his fist in. A huge dent formed in the shield, and the skeleton warrior backpedaled into another one and lost its balance. Then Zenbel used his tail to attack a different skeleton warrior but missed.

The skeleton warrior line broke, and Zaryusu slipped in through the opening.

“Stop him!”

At Iguvua’s order, two skeleton warriors swung their scimitars at Zaryusu.

He could have dodged if he wanted to. He could have also blocked with Frost Pain. But he didn’t do either of those things. Evading was, in a way, simply delaying his own actions. He couldn’t waste a move with Iguvua right in front of him.

And more than anything—

“Earth Bind!”

Mud whipped and wrapped around the two skeleton warriors. The mud whips stopped them like chains, giving Zaryusu just enough time to get through the gap.

—yes, Crusch was with him.

Zaryusu wasn’t fighting alone, so all he had to do was trust in his friends.

Crusch was a good caster, but her magic couldn’t stop their movements entirely. Their scimitars did barely graze Zaryusu’s body. But what did that matter? He was so exhilarated his brain didn’t sense the pain as pain.

He ran.

And he pointed at his target—Iguvua. Even if he were hit with attack magic, he would power through and reach him. That was how tough his will was.

“Know fear, you fools! Scare!”

Zaryusu’s field of vision wavered, and unable to comprehend where he was standing, he was assaulted by a vague anxiety, like something in the area was about to attack.

His feet slowed; the psychic spell Scare had shaken him so much that they wouldn’t move. His brain was screaming at his feet to go forward, but his heart wouldn’t move them.

“Zaryusu! Lion’s Heart!” At the sound of Crusch’s voice, his fear dissipated and his fighting spirit blazed at twice the intensity of before. The courage spell had canceled out his fear.

Iguvua glared at Crusch in displeasure and jabbed a finger at her. **“How obnoxious! Lightning!”**

White lightning flashed—

“Gyaagh!”

—and Crusch’s scream echoed.

As Zaryusu set off running again, hatred nearly overtook his heart, but he held it back. Certainly hate was a good weapon, but against someone strong, it could be a burden instead. Against a tough opponent, one needed emotions like fire and a mind like ice.

Zaryusu didn’t look back.

Iguvua had attacked Crusch, the rear guard. That meant that Zaryusu could close the gap between them during this time. The

understanding that he'd made a mistake appeared on the undead's face. That brought a sneer to Zaryusu's, despite the fact that the female he loved had been injured.

"Tch! Ligh—"

"Too slow!" Zaryusu swung Frost Pain from the side with all his might and hit the hand Iguvua had been extending.

"Guh!"

"You let a warrior get up close, caster! Let me show you that you can't use spells anymore!"

Perhaps it was different for the mages of legend, but in general, if an enemy closed in on a caster, there was a chance their spells would be prevented with an attack.

An immensely powerful monster like Iguvua was no exception.

Zaryusu narrowed his eyes a bit at the feeling traveling down his arm. A strange sensation had lingered when he cut. It meant Iguvua had some kind of weapon resistance.

Still, he wasn't unharmed. *Right*. If he had some damage resistance, all Zaryusu had to do was deal more damage.

He just had to slice, and slice, and slice like crazy, that was all.

Of course, that was easier said than done. The saying was nothing new to Zaryusu. As a warrior, he could do only what he was capable of.

"Don't underestimate me, lizardman!"

Three shots of light flew from before Iguvua's face. Zaryusu was startled by the lack of casting motion and instinctively held his sword up as a shield, but the bolts of magic went by it and sent a heavy, dull pain through his body.

This was Silent Magic: Magic Arrow. Silent Magic didn't have any preparation that could be hindered, and Magic Arrow was ordinarily impossible to evade. Even Zaryusu couldn't dodge it.

Gritting his teeth, Zaryusu lashed out with Frost Pain.

"Guh! Damn you, lizardman!"

Magic Arrow may have been impossible to evade, but it didn't do a terrible amount of damage, either. It wasn't about to take someone like Zaryusu, who had punished his body to its limits, out of commission.

Another round hammered into him. The pain reverberated at his core. Zaryusu suppressed it and swung his sword.

This back-and-forth repeated a few times. Zaryusu gradually slowed. The ache was leeching the agility from his movements. The difference between him and the undead who knew no pain became obvious.

Both Zaryusu and Iguvua saw it, wearing contrasting expressions.

The strong would win and the weak would lose. That was the natural order of things. If Iguvua and Zaryusu fought, the results would be clear. However, it was also true that if the weak combined their powers, they could equal the strong.

"Middle Cure Wounds!" At the sound of the voice, Zaryusu's pain disappeared and his energy returned to him.

Iguvua had been feeling confident, but the spell from the rear enraged him, and he shouted, "**You damned lizardmen!**"

Zaryusu was fighting with comrades he trusted. Crusch, Zenbel. And…

"Rororo…I won't lose!"

“Nonsense! I was created by the Great One! There cannot be any defeat for me, you fools!” Iguvua’s eyes blazed with loathing for the three of them.

The reason he hadn’t used any summoning magic was that the undead from his last spell were still around. Until they were destroyed, he couldn’t summon any more. That was why they played out the same monotonous exchange—Iguvua shooting Silent Magic: Magic Arrow and Zaryusu slicing into Iguvua’s flesh. It seemed like the fight would go on forever.

Then the only thing to do was to leave the breakthrough to the ones fighting in the rear. The battle would be decided by whose reinforcements arrived first.

They both knew it.

Crusch pushed through the pain shooting through her body from the lightning and cast Summon Third-Tier Beast. A huge—almost five-foot—crab with a giant right pincer appeared with a loud splash. It showed up as if it had just been sleeping in the swamp, but of course, it had been summoned with the spell.

It advanced, stood next to Zenbel, and clobbered a skeleton warrior with its giant pincer.

Zenbel grinned at the unlikely backup. He was happy to have the help, since he was protecting Crusch while under attack from every direction.

“All right! Weird thing, take those two!”

The crab—a snap grasp—waved its smaller pincer as if to say, *Understood!* and turned to the skeleton warriors.

Hmm… We’re in this awful situation, but I can’t help but notice how similar they are. Although it felt out of place, Crusch smiled, but she wiped the expression off her face a moment later.

Watching the battle, she struggled to keep her breathing even.

Between the defensive and healing spells on Rororo during their approach and the support spells for Zenbel, she had cast too much magic. She was even using summoning magic now, so she was completely exhausted and could barely even stand.

She didn't have enough energy to heal her own wounds. She couldn't fight anymore, so she'd made the levelheaded judgment that it would be a waste to heal herself.

But if she collapsed now, she'd be anxious for Zenbel and Zaryusu fighting up in front. Blood dribbled out of her mouth. Her oral cavity was injured, and she tried to stay conscious.

"Middle Cure Wounds!" She cast a healing spell on Zaryusu, who was fighting at close quarters with Iguvua.

Her legs gave out and her field of vision blurred. Her whole body could sense water around her. Why that was, she couldn't comprehend at first. She didn't notice, but at some point, she had fallen and sunk into the mud.

She realized soon enough and confirmed the lack of new injuries, so she must have just lost consciousness for a second and collapsed.

She felt relieved—not that she was still alive but that she could still fight. She didn't even try to stand up. No, she didn't have the energy to stand—it would have been a waste.

The backs of Zaryusu and Zenbel floated in her hazy field of vision. They were her comrades with whom she'd traveled and fought so far, although it was just a short time they'd spent together. Both of them—Zenbel, matched evenly against the four skeleton warriors with a little help, and Zaryusu, withstanding Iguvua's magic attacks—were covered in wounds.

Crusch desperately steadied her breath and shot spells. “Middle Cure Wounds!” She healed Zenbel. “Middle Cure Wounds!” She healed Zaryusu. “Gah-hack…” She choked in and out.

Something was wrong with her breathing. She inhaled frantically, but it felt like the air wasn’t entering her lungs. It was probably due to using too much magical energy. Her head was pounding, but still, she forced her eyes to stay open.

How much had they sacrificed so far? After all that, they couldn’t be the first to withdraw. Crusch’s eyelids seemed about to fall, but she held them open. And she cast. “Middle Cure Wounds!”

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Zenbel drove his clenched fist into a skeleton warrior’s skull. The sensation of creaking resistance turned into one of crushing, and the skeleton warrior was destroyed.

“Twoooo. Gah-haaaagh.” He heaved a breath like he was exhaling his exhaustion and scowled at the remaining skeleton warriors. The crab Crusch had summoned was already gone, but because it had occupied two of the skeleton warriors, Zenbel had been able to defeat the two others. He’d gotten this far with Crusch’s support.

Now there were two left, the ones the crab had been holding off. When he was done with them, he could move on to Iguvua.

He flexed his huge arm; it could still move.

His left arm was covered in injuries, and he couldn’t really tense it. He’d used it to shield himself from sword strikes too many times. He gazed absentmindedly at it as it hung limply at his side.

“Well, it’s a fine handicap.” He glared at the skeleton warriors

and moved his left arm a bit. A pain that he would never have thought could come just from moving his fingers coursed through his entire body.

But what did it matter? His friend had continued charging even though some of his heads had become deadweight. Could Zenbel Gugu do something so laughable as give up now?

How strong was a skeleton warrior? Zenbel had fought them, so now he knew. Two of them against him would be an even match. That's how strong they were. If he had had to fight four at once, he might not have been able to win. *Thanks to that crab. Maybe I shouldn't eat mud crabs for a while.* After giving thanks to his favorite food, he turned his attention back to the two approaching skeleton warriors.

He balled up his fist.

He could still fight. He could still stand.

Honestly, he wondered how it was possible.

"Hah! This is no time to think crap like that!"

There was only one reason.

He scoffed at his doubting self of a moment ago.

He saw Zaryusu's back beyond the skeleton warriors. His comrade didn't retreat even one step despite Iguvua's overwhelmingly powerful presence.

"That's the biggest reason…"

Yes…

Zaryusu and Crusch. Rororo. They had all fought together. That was why he could still fight.

“Whoa, Zaryusu! You’re really beat up! That’s worse than the time you fought me, isn’t it?”

He swung his powerful arm at the attacking skeleton warriors and sent one flying. The other answered with its scimitar, and he didn’t manage to block it completely with his left arm, and another cut opened on his flank around where Crusch had healed him before.

“Crusch is doing awesome even though her situation sucks, too.”

She’d shot over another spell that began to heal him. He didn’t turn around, but he heard her voice right at water level. He could imagine from what position she was casting. How could she still even use magic?

“…What a great female.” If he was going to marry, he wanted a female like her. Zenbel felt just a little jealous of Zaryusu. “I don’t want her to see me collapse first! That’d be pathetic!”

He feinted with his huge arm and whipped with his tail. Then he grinned. *Plus I’m older than them!*

The two skeleton warriors, concealing themselves with their shields, steadily closed in on him. The shields hid Zaryusu from his view, which triggered an intense emotional reaction in Zenbel. “You’re in my way, dammit! I can’t see that cool male!” He let out a war cry and charged.

●

Iguvua and Zaryusu’s back-and-forth continued. It was a fight where their eyes remained glued on each other, so Zaryusu felt it when Iguvua glanced away for a moment. His undead face warped in a horrifying grimace. And what happened next turned Zaryusu’s body and soul to ice.

There came a splash from the rear—the sound of someone falling.

"Look! Your friend collapsed!"

He couldn't turn around. What Iguvua said might be true, but it might not be. A feeling like his scales were being pulled welled up inside him. But his enemy was overwhelmingly powerful. He didn't have time to turn and look. It was clear that the battle would be decided the moment he turned. Zaryusu hadn't come all this way to lose in such an idiotic way.

He had come here to claim victory.

Still, if what Iguvua said was true, he'd be in trouble if he didn't find a way to deal with the enemy reinforcements that would be coming up from behind him.

I guess I'll take one magic hit. As Zaryusu steeled himself, there was some heavy splashing as if someone was trying to stand up, followed by the sound of multiple bones breaking.

"Zaryusu! I'm done for! The rest is…up to youuu!"

"…Middle Cure Wounds."

With Zenbel's pained words, a huge splash echoed.

With Crusch's voice, which was barely a whisper, Zaryusu's wounds began to heal.

"Nrrgh!" At Iguvua's displeased face, Zaryusu didn't even have to turn around—the two of them must have done exactly what they'd needed to do. *Then next up is—*

"My turn!"

He swung Frost Pain, but Iguvua repelled it with the staff in

his hand. **“Heh-heh-heh. I am Iguvua, elder lich. Just because I’m inferior in close-quarters combat doesn’t mean you should discount me!”**

Despite his boast, Iguvua felt with a chill that his chances of winning were low. If it were one-on-one, he probably could have claimed victory, considering the gap in their abilities. But with the white lizardman healing wounds from the rear, their positions in terms of remaining health had reversed.

Then came three attacks, of which Iguvua was able to block only one. The other two cut into his body. He had resistance against cutting weapons, like a skeleton, and the additional chill damage had no effect, but this was still an extremely bad situation for him to be in.

His blood boiled.

He had been created by the Great One, his master Ainz Ooal Gown, as the commander of this army. Loss was unacceptable.

He at least wanted to summon some undead soldiers to guard him, but with his ability, summoning magic took time to use. It would be pretty tricky to use it with an enemy right in front of him.

At this rate he’d be overcome.

So he decided to use his last resort. It wasn’t a very good move—depending on the situation it could be considered a bad one—but it was the only move he had left.

Zaryusu hesitated before attacking as Iguvua suddenly turned his back and dashed away. Iguvua took the blow in his back and staggered but didn’t fall. Zaryusu clicked his tongue at Iguvua’s seemingly infinite health and ran after him to close the new gap.

Iguvua turned around. His face was twisted up in a rage that

didn't seem very undead, but there was a hint of glee showing through as well.

A red light glowed in his hand. Fireball.

Zaryusu, who had closed in, had doubts. *An area-of-effect spell at this distance? Does he plan to self-destruct? No!*

Fear welled up in Zaryusu's breast as he realized Iguvua's gaze wasn't directed at him. He was looking behind him—at Crusch and Zenbel, who were probably already down.

What should I do? Zaryusu stopped to think.

This was a big chance. If he abandoned them, he could finish off Iguvua. If he didn't, though, he wasn't sure how the battle would go. Neither of them had much health left. There was an extremely high probability that one wrong move could mean the end of his life.

To win against Iguvua—wasn't that why they were here? And they'd sacrificed so many of their comrades. He had to leave Crusch and Zenbel. Surely they would smile and forgive him; he would if their positions were reversed.

But…

He didn't choose to abandon his comrades.

He would save them *and* defeat Iguvua.

Once he'd made his decision, the rest was easy.

"Icy Burst!" Zaryusu created a wall of chill at his feet.

"Gwahhhh!" His body froze in the cold swirling up. The word *ultra-painful* failed to describe the agony that assaulted him.

Desperately clinging to consciousness, Zaryusu focused his

piercing gaze on Iguvua and endured the pain.

As a scream broke through his gritted teeth, the chilling mist enveloped the pair of them and dominated the area.

Enveloped in the white frost, Iguvua grinned as Zaryusu expected. It was like he was saying, *He could have claimed victory if only he had abandoned his comrades.*

Iguvua was immune to chill and electric attacks. That was why he could just stand there in this torrent. He clamped his hand around the fireball to put it out. If he let it go and it hit the white mist swirling around him, he'd essentially be blowing himself up.

He could follow up with another attack on those two lizardmen after the mist disappeared. The first one he had to crush was still standing. Iguvua scanned the area and frowned. He had miscalculated one thing.

"Now…where is he?"

All the mist was obscuring his view. Iguvua could see in the dark, but he didn't have an ability that allowed him to see in conditions with bad visibility. As a result, he'd lost his enemy.

But he didn't need to worry too much. Judging by the distress in the lizardman's voice, he must have suffered fairly serious wounds. After all, he'd radiated enough chill to cancel Fireball. The damage should have been equal to the fire spell.

One wrong move with wounds that heavy could be fatal, so Iguvua could take his time stomping him out.

I guess I should get through this mist first? Iguvua thought, but he immediately discarded the idea. ***If I move now, I'll give away my position.*** The first thing he needed to do was summon more undead. If he had some guards, his victory was certain even if the lizardman was still alive.

As he was about to cast, Iguvua suddenly heard a splash.

One of the Four Great Treasures handed down through generations of lizardmen—Frost Pain. Legend said that it was carved out of the ice that formed the only time the "lake that never froze" froze. It had three powers.

The first was the ability to deal additional chill damage when cutting an opponent because its blade was enchanted.

The second was the special move Icy Burst, which could be used three times per day.

And the third…

The air sounded like it was ripping.

The tip of a sharp blade appeared in Iguvua's field of vision faster than he could even detect what it was.

Something made impact in his head.

The blade that had entered his left eye disturbed his brain. Finally understanding what had happened, Iguvua screamed in shock. **"Gahhhhh! Why aren't you deeead?!"**

Frost Pain was sticking deep in his left eye socket, and he felt a chunk of his life disappear…

Zaryusu's hazy figure appeared before Iguvua in the mist, covered in frost, as the elder lich reeled with the blade still in his head.

Iguvua couldn't understand. How was Zaryusu still standing after taking so much chill damage?

Frost Pain's third power was the ability to protect the one who equips it from virtually all chill damage.

Of course, even though Frost Pain's defense against the cold was strong, it wasn't enough to completely nullify Icy Burst. Zaryusu was weakened by the chill damage, and it was all he could do to stand. He was panting, and his movements were slow. His tail was even drooping into the water. Even breathing was too much work. It would be near impossible to fight anymore. He hadn't even aimed that attack. He'd just mustered the last remnants of his strength and left it up to instinct.

It was only luck that he'd even hit him.

Zaryusu's eyelids threatened to close, but he desperately fought to keep them open.

The blow he'd driven into Iguvua using the last of his strength had been fatal. He watched with a faint sense of anticipation.

Iguvua groped and staggered. As if he could no longer maintain his body, the skin on his face peeled off and cracks appeared in the bone. Even his clothes began to disintegrate into tatters. His destruction was only a matter of time now. The moment Zaryusu confirmed his miraculous victory—

—a hand of skin and bones reached out and grabbed his neck. **"I—I was created by my master as his minion...! Do you really think you can destroy me...so easily?!"**

The grip seemed like it would be easy to break away from if he tried, but—"Gwaaaaagh!"—a scream escaped Zaryusu's lips as intense pain shot through his entire body.

Negative energy was flowing in, robbing Zaryusu of his life. Even Zaryusu, who had been trained in ways to withstand pain, had no way to manage a pain like the chill that was being directly injected into his veins.

"Diiiiiiie, lizardman!" Part of Iguvua's face chipped off and floated up, crumbling into the sky. His life was almost at its end,

but his devotion to his master made him cling to it.

Zaryusu desperately resisted, but he was frightened that his body wouldn't move quite right. Zaryusu himself didn't have much life force left, and the injection of negative energy from Iguvua's touch was completely sapping him. His gaze wavered, and his vision started to go dim. A white fog seemed to be covering the world.

Iguvua was also mobilizing all the fading consciousness he could muster and smiled in victory at Zaryusu and his rapidly weakening resistance.

He would kill this lizardman, and then he would kill the other two who had come at him. *These are probably top-class lizardmen.* So if he killed them, they would be fitting sacrifices to the Great One, his creator.

His expression spoke louder than words, so Zaryusu could tell what he was thinking.

"Diiiie!"

Zaryusu's body wouldn't move right. He could feel his temperature dropping, like poison was coursing through his body. It was even hard to breathe. Only his mental faculties were sharp in that world.

He couldn't die yet.

Rororo had run so hard.

Zenbel had been his shield.

Crusch had used up all her magic.

And that wasn't all. He could feel on his shoulders the weight of all the lizardmen who had fallen in this battle.

Faint noises came to Zaryusu's ears as he frantically groped for a way to fight.

...Crusch's kind voice.

...Zenbel's cheery voice.

...Rororo's cry for attention.

He shouldn't have been able to hear them. Crusch was unconscious and Zenbel was in a coma. And Rororo was far away. Was his brain just imagining the voices because his consciousness was muddled? Imagining words from his friends he'd met only a week ago, the cries of his family?

No.

No, he wasn't imagining them.

They were all there with him.

"Yaa, yaaaaaaaargh!"

"?! You still have that much power?"

Half-conscious Zaryusu raised a war cry at the same time Iguvua shouted in surprise. Zaryusu's eyes rolled to stare down Iguvua.

Iguvua's face was twitching with rage to see the energy in Zaryusu's gaze, where before the lizardman hadn't even been able to make eye contact.

"Crusch! Zenbel! Rororo!"

"What are you planning to do?! Diiiiie!"

Where did that life force even come from? With every passing moment, the vast negative energy sapped and devoured it. Really,

Zaryusu's limbs were heavy, and his body felt as cold as ice.

Still, as he shouted each name, he felt warmth. The power welling up in him wasn't life force—deep in his chest, it was heart.

Something made a squeaking noise. It was Zaryusu's right hand. He'd balled it into a tight fist. In it, he'd gathered all his remaining energy.

"Of all the ridiculous—! Why can you move?! You monsterrrrr!" Iguvua couldn't believe his eyes that the lizardman could still move. A creeping horror rushed through his mind, but he frantically suppressed it.

He was Iguvua, the one deployed from the Great Tomb of Nazarick to command the army. And most importantly, he had been created by the Great One, Ainz Ooal Gown. He couldn't allow himself to be defeated.

"D—!"

"This is the end, monster!"

One moment faster.

Yes, the full-force punch came one moment before Iguvua could flood him with more negative energy.

Zaryusu took his tightly balled fist and slammed it into Frost Pain's hilt.

The blow, hard enough to draw blood from Zaryusu's hand, caused the tip of the sword in Iguvua's left orbit to go completely through his head.

"Arrrrrgh!" Iguvua was undead, so he felt almost no pain, but he could comprehend that he was losing all his false life. **"Ahhh…argh…how…st…pid… Lord…A…nz…"**

Iguvua's eyes showed complete understanding that he'd been defeated.

Zaryusu's body collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut, and as he splashed into the marsh—

"...forgi...ve...me..."—Iguvua crumpled, apologizing to his master.

●

A silence fell over the room. Unable to believe what they'd seen in the mirror, no one spoke—besides the maid, Entoma.

"Master Cocytussss, it appears Lord Ainz is calling youuuu."

"UNDERSTOOD." With his head hanging down, Cocytus slowly turned to face Entoma. Feeling the anxious gazes of his minions, he bit back the humiliation.

On the other hand, however, he admired the lizardmen.

It had been a magnificent fight.

Against what should have been overwhelming odds, they'd achieved victory. Certainly the elder lich wasn't perfect, but he still should have been able to win.

"MAGNIFICENT. JUST MAGNIFICENT." The repeated word revealed Cocytus's genuine feelings. They had cleared an impossible hurdle. "...IT'S TOO BAD," he murmured at the scene in the mirror of the lizardmen cheering with joy at their victory.

The warriors reflected in the mirror looked so small and weak, but they'd set his heart on fire. "AHH, WHAT A WASTE..." Cocytus wasn't sure what to do. Of his countless thoughts, he grasped one—the most horrible one. He thought hard on it and gave his conclusion. "I GUESS I SHOULD GO."

6

Zaryusu felt his body being lifted out of a pitch-black world. It was a pleasant sensation. His eyes opened. The world looked hazy through his freshly woken eyes.

Where am I? Why am I sleeping in a place like this? A number of questions came to mind, and at the same time, he realized he felt a weight on top of him.

White… When he looked, that was the first word that came to his still-groggy mind. Then as he woke up, he understood what it was.

Crusch. She was sleeping on top of him.

"Uh…"

She was alive.

The relief was so strong he nearly vocalized it, but he managed to hold it back at the last second. He didn't want to wake her up. He frantically suppressed the urge to touch her. Just because a female's scales were pretty didn't make it okay to stroke her while she was sleeping.

Zaryusu chased her out of his mind and tried to think about something else. He had a lot to consider. First, the reason he was here. He searched his memory to try to remember what had happened. His last memory was destroying Iguvua. His recollection cut off abruptly after that, but his lying here instead of being captured meant that the tribes must have won.

Careful not to wake Crusch, he breathed a sigh of relief. The weight of the past few days seemed to lighten a little. Certainly, thinking with a level head, the burden was still heavy. They didn't

know the true identity of their enemy yet or what they were after. There was more than a good chance that they would attack again. No, if his hunch was right, they *would* come again.

But just for right now, he wanted to be allowed to relax. He sighed lightly again, feeling Crusch's body heat.

Then he gently flexed his muscles from head to tail. He had no problems moving. He thought he might have lost something, but everything seemed to have gone all right.

Then he remembered the comrades he'd fought with. There were no other lizardmen in the room besides Crusch. *Then where's Zenbel?* A flicker of anxiety crossed his mind, but at the same time, the certainty that *a male as strong as Zenbel couldn't possibly have…* welled up inside him.

Perhaps responding to Zaryusu's slight movement, Crusch stretched slightly. It felt like a core had formed in her soft body. *She must be about to wake up.*

"Nngh…" Crusch made a cute noise. Then she flicked her hazy eyes around, taking in the area. Then finding Zaryusu underneath her, she broke into a smile. "Mmmm…" Crusch groggily wrapped her arms around Zaryusu and rubbed her body against him, just like an animal leaving its scent.

Zaryusu froze and let her do as she pleased. In a corner of his mind, he also had some less noble thoughts, such as *Well, she started it.*

Her glossy white scales were cool and pleasant to the touch. The fragrant herbal scent that hung in the area was entrancing.

Maybe I can put my arms around her, too?

As he was anguishing over the question, Crusch's eyes gradually began to focus. Then she turned them to Zaryusu beneath

her.

She froze.

She'd stopped moving with her arms still around him. Zaryusu considered what he should say first and ended up choosing the most benign thing he could come up with. "Can I put my arms around you, too?"

Benign? In his excited state of mind, he'd thought it was.

Crusch made a threatening noise and thrashed her tail around. Then she rolled away from Zaryusu's body, not stopping until she crashed into the wall.

Facedown, she groaned softly. He also heard her say, "Stupid, stupid, I'm so stupid."

"Well, I'm just glad you're safe."

At those words, she must have finally regained composure; her tail was still wriggling around, but she looked up and smiled at him. "I'm glad you're safe, too."

Seeing her kind face, Zaryusu had something else on his mind, but he held it back with all his willpower and asked a serious question. "Do you have any idea what happened after all that?"

"Yeah, an idea. It seems like the enemy retreated thanks to your victory over Iguvua. And your brother managed to beat the monsters, too. Then the three of us got saved… This was all yesterday."

"So Zenbel isn't here, but he's…?"

"Yeah, he's safe. He must have more regenerative power than you. I heard he regained consciousness right after the healing magic was cast, and now he's probably working on post-fight cleanup. I was so unbelievably tired I guess I passed out again

after hearing that much…" Crusch stood up and went back to Zaryusu.

When she sat down right next to him, Zaryusu moved to sit up, too, but she gently stopped him. "Don't overdo it. You were the one with the worst injuries out of all of us." Perhaps because she remembered him as he was then, her voice became frail. "I'm glad you're safe. I'm so glad…"

She lowered her eyes, and Zaryusu rubbed her back to comfort her. "I won't die until I hear your answer. I was worried maybe you were dead!"

Answer. The word made them both pause.

Neither of them said anything, and the room got so quiet they could practically hear each other's hearts beating.

Crusch's tail slowly curled around Zaryusu's. The tangled black-and-white extremities brought to mind mating snakes.

Zaryusu gazed silently at Crusch. She looked back at him. They could see themselves reflected in the other's eyes.

Zaryusu quietly spoke. No, it wasn't speech. It was a call, the same one he'd made the first time they'd met—a mating call.

After he called, he did nothing. No, he couldn't do anything. His heart just beat earnestly, violently.

Eventually the same speech, the same call, flowed from Crusch's mouth. The same high pitch, the same vibrato at the end. She was accepting the mating call.

On her face was an indescribably seductive expression. Zaryusu could no longer take his eyes off her. Crusch got on top of him, in virtually the same position as when she'd been sleeping on him.

There was almost no distance between their two faces. Their hot breaths mixed, and the beating of their hearts synchronized through their touching chests. Then the two of them became one —

"Yo, are you guys doin' it?!" The door banged open and Zenbel barged in.

Crusch and Zaryusu both halted as if they'd turned into ice sculptures.

Perplexed, Zenbel observed the two of them, Crusch still on top of Zaryusu, and cocked his head. "What? You're just getting started?"

Understanding what he meant, the pair moved apart without a word. Then they slowly stood up and approached Zenbel.

He'd been looking down at them with curiosity, but now he bent over double. "Guh-hngh!" The pair's fists in his abdomen knocked the wind out of him, and his large body sank to the floor. "Urrgh… Nice equipment there…especially Crusch… Agh… That seriously hurt…"

Zaryusu aside, apparently even the female's punch of rage had the potential to take Zenbel out. Of course, a single blow wouldn't be enough to satisfy their frustration, but even if they pummeled him, the ruined atmosphere wouldn't go back to the way it had been.

Although it couldn't replace what they'd been about to do, grasping each other's hands, they questioned Zenbel in order to ease the worries pricking at their minds like pins. "More importantly, we have a ton of questions. I asked Crusch, too, but please fill me in on our current status."

Zenbel answered without paying attention to the fact that the pair was holding hands. "Hmm? The whole tribe's celebrating our

win!"

"So my brother is in charge of that?"

"Basically. We sent the hunters out to search for the enemy, but they couldn't find 'em. No sign of any hidden follow-up wave. That big of a force would stick out if they were on the move. That was why, even though we're still on guard, your brother declared victory for the time being. Actually, I'm here because of something your brother said to me."

"My brother?"

"Yeah, he said, 'Ga-ha-ha-ha-ha! We should let the two of them rest. Maybe they're doing it, ga-ha-ha-ha! I don't want to bother them, but I am curious. Ga-ha-ha-ha-ha!'"

"Don't lie to me! What's with the 'ga-ha-ha-ha'?"

"Y-yeah. I guess he wasn't saying 'ga-ha-ha-ha.'"

"My brother would never laugh like that. Geez…"

"But no, it was that kind of undertone—"

"You're the worst." Crusch spoke with a voice chilly enough for another Icy Burst. It was so creepy that it sent shivers up even Zaryusu's spine. Zenbel, at whom it had been directed, shuddered and froze for a moment.

"So, why are you here?"

"Right, I just—"

"If you say you came here just to bother us, I'm going to blast you with every spell I can think of." Crusch was dead serious. Both Zenbel and Zaryusu could tell.

"Ahhh. C'mon, what? I came to invite you guys. We're VIPs,

you know. We can't not go. And when you think about what might happen in the future…"

"I see…" Catching the implied meaning in Zenbel's vague words, Zaryusu smiled bitterly. *It's a good chance to talk up our strength in case there's another battle?* "Got it. You're okay, too, right, Crusch?"

Her cheeks puffed up with just a bit of dissatisfaction, making her look like the dermes frogs who inhabited the marsh. *Of course, they're totally different on the cuteness scale*, Zaryusu thought.

"Then shall we?" Zenbel asked the two, who were looking at each other, in a carefree voice.

"Y-yeah. I guess. Let's go."

Both of them agreed, so they joined Zenbel and went outside. The moment they stepped off the stairs of the house and into the marsh, Crusch and Zenbel lost sight of Zaryusu. Something huge had pounced and sent him flying.

Bam, flup-flup-flup-flup, ker-splash!

Those were the sounds of what happened next.

Rororo had taken Zaryusu's place. His four heads squirmed healthily, and he happily turned his noses to Zaryusu, who had fallen into the marsh.

"Rororo! You're okay, too!" Zaryusu stood up, covered in mud, and went back to Rororo. He gave the hydra a thorough once-over as he pet him. He must have been healed with magic; it was like the burns had never been there.

Rororo called out and wrapped his heads around Zaryusu for attention. They were so tenaciously curled around him that he

was completely hidden.

"C'mon, Rororo, knock it off!" Zaryusu laughed and told Rororo to stop, but Rororo happily cooed at him without letting up.

Splash, ker-splash, ker-splash!

Suddenly Zaryusu heard a series of rhythmic splashes. When he looked for the source, he was puzzled.

It was Crusch. Her face practically glowed with emotion as she gazed at Zaryusu and Rororo. But her tail was beating out a regular rhythm on the marsh.

Zenbel had been standing next to her, but he had begun inching away, his face twitching.

Rororo stopped moving. He must have sensed something strange as well.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing…"

Zaryusu was confused when *she* asked *him*. She was definitely smiling. It couldn't be anything but gladness that Rororo and Zaryusu were reunited. So why were this many chills going up his spine?

"Goof." Crusch smiled again.

Rororo's heads moved away from Zaryusu, freeing him. Zenbel twitched. Perhaps he opened his mouth to hide his inability to bear the awkwardness. "Okay, Rororo. Let's you and me go on ahead of them."

Of course, Rororo couldn't understand lizardman language. But maybe he'd sensed the mood anyway, because once Zenbel was on top of him, they *splish-splash*ed off at a pretty quick clip.

A bizarre silence fell between Zaryusu and Crusch as the other two fled.

Crusch held her head in her hands and shook it side to side. “Argh, gosh. What am I doing? It’s like my heart doesn’t belong to me anymore. Why can’t I stop it when I know it’s not smart? This is basically the same as a curse!”

Zaryusu understood how she felt—because that’s how he’d been when he first met her.

“Crusch. Honestly, I’m happy.”

“What?!” A splash, bigger than the others up till now, sounded.

Then Zaryusu went next to her. “Listen, can you hear that?”

“Huh?”

“It’s what we protected. And what we have to protect from now on, too.”

They could hear high-spirited voices partying on the wind. Everyone must have been drinking. It was a party to return the ancestral spirits and celebrate their victory but also to mourn the dead.

Normally, alcohol was a valuable item. The reason they could drink so much these past few days was that Zenbel had brought the Great Treasure that gave them an infinite supply, and since all the tribes were gathered, the resulting din was unbelievable.

Listening to the huge racket, Zaryusu smiled at Crusch next to him. “Maybe nothing is over yet. Maybe the Great One or whoever will attack us again. But just for today, how about we relax?” He put his hands around her hips.

Crusch let herself be drawn in close and rested her head on his

shoulder.

“Wanna go?”

“Yes…” She hesitated a moment and then added, “…dear.”

The two lizardmen huddled together and disappeared into the party.



Chapter 4 The Opening Act of Despair

CHAPTER 4
The Opening Act Of Despair

1

Cocytus's footsteps fell heavily on his way to the Throne Room. As if his mood had infected the minions following him, their steps were also dark and weighty.

Their mood was appropriate after suffering defeat at the hands of the lizardmen. Cocytus had commanded the shining army of Nazarick, but all he had reaped was loss and ignominy.

Certainly Cocytus thought highly of the lizardmen. Created to be a samurai—no, to be a warrior—he was inclined to respect skilled fighters.

But those were two different things.

There was no way a Nazarick defeat would be forgiven. And this was no happenstance defensive skirmish—it was their first military expedition. Anyone would be displeased if that glorious first battle was met with failure.

Of course, it was true he'd been given a corps of weaklings, and he remembered what Demiurge had said. But that was nothing more than an excuse. Even if his master had considered the possibility of defeat, surely victory was best.

Soon enough the Throne Room was in front of him, and the room leading to it, Lemegeton, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, came into view. As he neared it, his feet grew even more leaden, to the point where he wanted to believe it was some kind of magic trap.

He hoped his master would reprimand him. It would be his pleasure to wipe away the shame, whether his life was taken or he

was ordered to commit suicide.

What Cocytus feared most was that his lord would give up on him entirely. If he were to be discarded by the last remaining Supreme Being, what would he do? Cocytus considered himself a sword, a weapon in his master's hand that cut down everything it was told to, so there could not be a fate more horrible than being deemed unnecessary and useless.

Not only that, but if the other guardians were forsaken due to his actions, how could he possibly atone? *THERE WOULD BE NO WAY TO APOLOGIZE. IF IT CAME TO THAT, MY DEATH ALONE WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH.*

What's more...

IF OUR MASTER BECAME DISAPPOINTED AND LEFT THIS LAND LIKE THE OTHER SUPREME BEINGS, WHAT WOULD WE DO...? Cocytus shuddered. He had perfect resistance against chill, so naturally his shivers were not from the cold. He was tormented by a mental pressure severe enough to make a human vomit. *TH-THAT WOULD NEVER HAPPEN. LORD AINZ WOULDN'T...WOULDN'T ABANDON US.*

The last Supreme One to remain, after all the others had left the tomb... He was their highest ruler and absolute leader. Their lord, so deeply compassionate, would never forsake them. But no matter how much Cocytus comforted himself, persistent voices in the back of his head countered that there was no proof he wouldn't.

Cocytus arrived at Lemegeton. Normally there wasn't anyone in this room besides the golems and crystal monsters, but today there were many: four guardians—Demiurge, Aura, Mare, Shalltear—and several elite minions they had selected to accompany them. Their gazes gathered on Cocytus, and for a moment, out of guilt, his expression registered distress.

He felt like they were blaming him for the loss. *NO*, thought Cocytus, *MAYBE THEY'RE RIGHT*. His thoughts from before crossed his mind again. *THEY MIGHT ALL THINK THAT WAY*.

When he looked at them, he could feel the wordless reproach in their eyes. "SORRY I'M LATE. EVEN DEMIURGE MANAGED TO GET HERE ON TIME, AND HE WAS OUTSIDE..."

"No, no, don't worry about it," Demiurge answered as the group's representative. It was his usual voice, and Cocytus couldn't sense any negativity in it. But Demiurge was an ingenious guardian with excellent control over his emotions and a talent for hiding his true feelings. Cocytus couldn't tell if he was displeased or not.

In that sense, one could say the Demiurge who had been watching over the previous battle between Ainz and Shalltear was a rare form for him. Of course, his distress was also a sign of his loyalty.

"Anyhow, I told the others, but I'll be standing in for Albedo as guardian representative today. Any objections?"

"NO. I HAVE NO PROBLEMS WITH YOU REPRESENTING US."

Albedo was standing in for Sebas as their master's assistant, so she wasn't present.

"Good. We're waiting for one more, and then we'll enter the Throne Room. But first, considering Albedo's absence, we'll have a meeting regarding how to line up for our audience. Really, we should rehearse, but there's no time, so we'll omit that and proceed with only spoken explanation. Listen closely."

Each guardian and minion acknowledged Demiurge, including Cocytus. He did wonder whom they were waiting for, though, since everyone seemed to already be there.

His uncertainty vanished in a moment as he detected a single presence headed in their direction. When he turned toward it, he saw a grotesque being floating toward Lemegeton. It looked like a fetus. No, perhaps embryo was more accurate. It had a wriggly little tail, and its body was an awfully bright pink. Over its head was an angel's halo, and from its back grew shriveled, featherless wings. Its whole body measured about three feet across, making its way over.

"What's that?"

Demiurge answered Aura's question. "It's the guardian of the eighth level, Victim."

"It is?" Shalltear chimed in.

Victim arrived at Lemegeton and spun around. Cocytus understood that it was taking in the area.

Victim didn't have a neck, so if it wanted to look around, it needed to move its entire body.

"Aster-lime-clay-ash, teal-orange-violet-grape-orange-eggshell. Gray-jonquil-orange ivory. Cinnabar-scarlet-flesh-eggshell-scarlet-purple-eggshell-crimson. "

Unfazed by the strange language, Demiurge replied as representative of the group. "Good of you to come, Victim. My name is Demiurge, and I will be standing in for Albedo as representative."

"Fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape ebony-cream chestnut-silk-silk orange-eggshell chestnut-cream-grape-crimson. " *Then it turned its body around to look at everyone. "Aster-lime-clay-grape evergreen chestnut-lime-grape-madder thistle chestnut-silk-silk orange-eggshell chestnut-cream-grape-crimson evergreen eggshell, orange-ebony-cinnabar-ivory-scarlet teal madder-ash-cream-ebony clay-brown-eggshell scarlet-jonquil-jonquil-silk-grape-crimson. "*

"I see. Well, we're all here now, so first I'll tell you how to line up."

Everyone listened to Demiurge's explanation in earnest. They were about to have an audience with the leader of the Supreme Beings inside the heart of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. If there were any mistakes, the only way to apologize was probably with one's life.

After Demiurge had said what he needed to, he waited just enough time for everyone to digest it and then led the guardians and minions into the Throne Room.

Entering this space, which he had visited only a handful of times, caused joy to well up in Cocytus's heart.

Its magnificent construction, the flags representing each of the Supreme Beings, the World Item all the way in the back—it was a room worthy of being the heart of Nazarick. He was so enthralled he forgot, if for only a moment, the flames slowly roasting his heart.

The guardians left the minions behind partway and lined up at the foot of the stairs leading to the throne. After that, they saluted the Ainz Ooal Gown guild crest against the wall to express their adoration and loyalty. Then they dropped to one knee, bowed their heads, and waited until their master arrived.

Before long, along with the solemn sound of the opening door, came a pair of footsteps. They knew without even turning around that it was decidedly not their master. It was unthinkable that the master of the Great Tomb of Nazarick would appear unaccompanied.

"The highest ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, and captain of the floor guardians, Mistress Albedo." The voice belonged to one of the Pleiades, Yuri Alpha.

The door sounded again, along with the frigid clack of boots on the floor and the tapping of a staff, followed a little later by the sound of high heels.

It was normal to show respect when one's master entered the room, but no one gathered here did anything. Why? Because they were already showing all the respect that was possible.

Only Cocytus did something different. A certain thought occupying his mind ended up expressed as movement. It was a truly tiny motion, but it disrupted the atmosphere in a huge way.

He detected, with a skill, the other guardians focusing on him. Walking behind their master, Albedo radiated a rage she failed to suppress despite her best efforts. But, as could be expected in this situation, no one uttered a word.

The footsteps moved slowly past the line of guardians and up the stairs. There came the sound of someone sitting on the throne, and Albedo's voice rang out. "Raise your heads and bask in the authority of Lord Ainz Ooal Gown."

Then came the shuffling of everyone moving at once to attend to their master seated on the throne.

Cocytus also raised his head immediately.

Gripping the staff that proved he was ruler of the land, enveloped in a horrifying aura, with a black halo behind his head —this was the highest ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Standing in front of him, Albedo observed each of the guardians below, including Cocytus, nodded in satisfaction, and turned to Ainz. "The floor guardians of the Great Tomb of Nazarick bow before you, O Supreme One. Your wish is our command."

He uttered a dignified "Mm" and struck the floor hard with his staff. As all eyes gathered on him, he slowly opened his mouth to speak. "How good of you to gather before me, floor guardians. First, a word of thanks. Demiurge!"

"My lord!"

"Allow me to thank you for your unceasing efforts. I'm grateful for your loyalty."

"Oh, what are you saying, Lord Ainz? I am your servant. It is only natural that I should come when you call. Your thanks are too precious to bestow upon me." Demiurge bowed his head low, his face trembling with delight.

"I see. And do you have any evidence of suspicious scum showing up around here?"

"None, my lord. We are taking ample precautions and should be able to discover them easily should they approach."

"...I guess that's all we can do. But don't neglect the watch! They may employ methods we haven't considered. And about the skins you brought...the head librarian has concluded that they can withstand being made into low-level scrolls. Is it possible to secure a reliable supply of them?"

"Yes! That will be no problem. We have captured a sufficient number."

"Aha. And what was the name of the beast you're using?"

"Beast? Ohh, they're the ones you mentioned, Lord Ainz..." Demiurge was vague for a moment and then answered, "The bipedal sheep of the Sacred Kingdom. How about we call them Abellion sheep?"

Cocytus wondered at Demiurge's tone—he seemed to be having an awful lot of fun. In general, Demiurge was good-natured

and nice to everyone. But that kindness extended only to those created by the Supreme Beings. To anyone else, he was extremely cruel.

Glimpses of brutality were visible beneath his high spirits. The dark malice was surely directed at the beasts he was talking about, but would Demiurge really hold such an attitude toward beings of lesser intelligence? Considering his personality, Cocytus found it a bit strange, but this wasn't the time or place to ask about it.

"I see… Sheep."

Their master smiled faintly, and drawn by his words, Albedo and Demiurge followed suit.

"Goats might be better, but…that's fine. Then please skin those sheep… Is there any possibility of ecosystem issues due to overhunting?"

"I don't believe so. Since we use healing magic, we can skin them right away, and unless we're mass-producing them, there's no need to gather a large number. This is thanks to those exceedingly brilliant monsters, the tortures."

"Hmm? Don't the severed parts disappear if you cast healing magic?"

"About that… We learned something during our healing experiments. If the severed part changes dramatically from its original state before the healing magic is cast—say, it gets minced—then it will remain unaffected by magic. In other words, if we remove the skin and begin processing, it seems to count as a separate entity and will not disappear even if we cast healing magic. Apparently this is also the reason the sheep don't die if we feed them their own harvested meat. As an aside, it seems that if the healer or healee refuses the healing, the magic doesn't work as well and the wound remains. It also depends on

the tier of the spell used and the amount of time that passes before casting."

"I see... Goes to show how great the power of magic is... Good. Then continue as you were."

"Yes, sir. From now on, we'll separate the skins by sex and age when we send them, so please let me know what age produces the best quality."

"Hmm, I think I'll leave that up to the librarian. Next, Victim."

"Teal-scarlet, fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape. "

"I've called you for the reason you're thinking. Something unimaginable has happened, and we need to use your skill to protect the guardians and me as well... Sorry. I'll resurrect you right away, so I hope you'll forgive me."

"Eggshell-aster-cinnabar-porcelain-peach-crimson thistle scarlet-ocher-eggshell chestnut-cream-grape-orange-jonquil ivory, chestnut-silk grass clay-opal-crimson grass, fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape. Gray-jonquil-orange thistle fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape evergreen orange-thistle-indigo. Umber-opal grass orange-seaweed jonquil-violet grass cinnabar-aster-jonquil-clay-opal-jonquil evergreen eggshell-crimson. Umber-evergreen yellow-ivory-white eggshell orange-peach-cinnabar evergreen chestnut-ash-ivory-jonquil evergreen chestnut-black-flesh grass jonquil-eggshell-porcelain evergreen eggshell fuchsia-opal-teal peach-opal scarlet-orange-ebony-cinnabar evergreen ebony-snow-peach-green teal fuchsia-cream-grape-brown-ash. "

"I see... Forgive me."

When their master bowed in apology, Victim gasped in surprise and wriggled this way and that. "Thistle-ocher-jonquil-scarlet-lime-scarlet! "

"There may come a time we need to kill you in order to prevent our enemy's escape. Please accept it. We do not take this action out of hatred. I don't want to hurt you, one of our precious children, but if we leave these unknown enemies alone for too long, things might end up far worse. That was why..."

"Lime-grass thistle chestnut-ocher-orange-black-white-lime-scarlet eggshell flesh-jonquil-clay-scarlet, fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape. Chestnut-silk-thistle-yellow teal orange-licorice-cinnabar-blue-ash grass cream-ivory-scarlet orange-eggshell chestnut-cream-grape-crimson. "

"One of the gimmicks in Nazarick uses these words from the Gospel: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' They are truly fitting words for you. I thank you for your love." Ainz's attention moved from Victim, who had assumed a posture of deep devotion, to another guardian. "Next, Shalltear."

She must not have been expecting to get called. Her shoulders jerked, and her voice was terribly shrill when she answered. "My lord! Sir!"

"Come to me."

He hadn't said anything like this to the other guardians. Startled, she hurriedly got to her feet. Her anxiety was clear from the tension in her back—like a condemned criminal being led to the guillotine—but her spine was straight, reflecting the honor she sought.

Upon ascending the stairs, she immediately dropped to one knee a short distance from the throne.

"Shalltear, regarding the thorn pricking your heart..."

Understanding what he meant immediately, she oozed remorse. "Ahh, Lord Ainz! I beg you, please discipline me for that

shameful affair! Give me punishment befitting the foolish guilty one who, despite holding the position of guardian, committed such a loathsome act!" Shalltear's pained voice echoed throughout the Throne Room.

Cocytus could understand how she felt— No, any guardian, anyone created by the Supreme Beings could.

Even if she had been manipulated, she couldn't forgive herself for acting hostile toward a Supreme Being.

"I see... Then come here, Shalltear."

Obeying his wave, Shalltear inched toward the throne. A bony hand stretched out to her hung head and gently pet it. She ever so timidly looked up, and everyone heard her quiet, astonished voice. "L-Lord Ainz..."

"...The mistake was mine. And we were far too disadvantaged by our opponent having a World Item. Shalltear, I love all who serve Nazarick, all whom we created from nothing. That includes you, naturally. Are you—precious, blameless Shalltear—going to force me to punish you?"

His eyes said he didn't know what to do. Cocytus didn't know what he was looking at, though. His mouth moved slightly. His master's face was all bone with no lips, so Cocytus couldn't guess what he'd said, but it was probably someone's name.

"Ahh, Lord Ainz! You speak of love?" Shalltear's swooning voice rang out.

Cocytus couldn't see her face because he was behind her, but her behavior told him all he needed to know. She sounded like she was crying, and her shoulders trembled.

He saw their master stroke her face with his other hand. In it he held a white handkerchief.

“There, there, Shalltear. Don’t cry. All your beauty will go to waste, you know?”

Without a word, she pressed the back of Ainz’s hand that had been running through her hair to her face—probably to her lips.

Mare sobbed. And then Aura.

Demiurge was also dabbing at his eyes.

Jealous of those who could shed even a few tears, Cocytus watched as his comrade pledged her loyalty once more.

What Shalltear had feared most was that because she wasn’t useful, because she had caused trouble, because she’d abandoned her oaths, that the kind, last remaining Supreme Being in the land would disown her.

But he had obliterated her worries…

…with the word love.

How great was her joy? Cocytus, in the same position as her —no, worse—stood silently behind her, watching in envy.

“Okay, Shalltear. You’re dismiss—”

“Lord Ainz!” A cold voice cut their master short.

Cocytus glared at Albedo, offended by her rude conduct. Something was off. An unidentifiable uneasiness flitted across his mind.

“Clear rewards and punishment keep all in order. Perhaps it would be best if you punished her.”

“…Albedo. You have some issue with—” He closed his mouth.

Ainz must have paused due to something Cocytus didn’t un-

derstand. But what settled things was another word from Shalltear.

"Lord Ainz. I agree with Albedo. I beg you, please punish me. It will be a joy to be able to prove my devotion."

"Okay. I'll decide later what to do and punish you. You're dismissed."

"Yes, Lord Ainz." Her eyes were always red, but now they were bloodshot as well. She descended the stairs, and back in her previous position, she assumed the most humble posture possible.

And then…

"Cocytus, Lord Ainz has something to say to you. Please listen."

The air was tense.

The moment had finally arrived.

Cocytus bowed his head deeply. His posture, from which he could see nothing but the floor, was appropriate for an audience, but he remained in it because he lacked the courage to gaze upon his master's face.

"I saw the battle with the lizardmen, Cocytus!"

"MY LORD!"

"It ended in defeat, didn't it?"

"SIR! MY HUMBLE APOLOGIES FOR THIS ERROR. I—"

A sharp strike of a staff on the floor cut off Cocytus's apology.

Albedo's icy voice vibrated in his ears. "Isn't that rude, Cocy-

tus? If you're going to apologize, raise your head!"

"DO PARDON ME!" He lifted his head to see his master seated on the throne at the top of the stairs.

"...Cocytus. Let's hear from the general of the defeated army. How did it feel to be in command this time instead of fighting on the front lines?"

"MY LORD! MY HUMBLE APOLOGIES FOR LOSING THE SOLDIERS YOU GAVE ME, AS WELL AS THE ELDER LICH COMMANDER YOU CREATED!"

"Hmm? Oh, I can make any number of those, so it's fine to lose them. Don't worry about that. What I'm asking you, Cocytus, is what it was like to lead an army. I'll say this first: I have no intention of blaming you terribly much for this defeat."

The atmosphere among the guardians and the minions behind them was one of bewilderment, excepting Demiurge and Albedo.

SO THE THINGS DEMIURGE WAS SAYING WERE... HRM! Sensing his master was about to continue speaking, he hurriedly shifted his attention.

"Everyone fails sometimes. Even me."

Disbelief hung faintly in the air. There was no way the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown could fail, and in fact, he never had. In short, such a claim was only to comfort Cocytus.

"All that matters is what you gained from the experience. Cocytus, let me rephrase the question. How could you have won?"

Cocytus fell into silent thought. He knew now what he could have done to win. He voiced one of his faults. "I UNDERESTIMATED THE LIZARDMEN. I SHOULD HAVE PROCEEDED

MORE CAUTIOUSLY."

"Hmm! You are correct. No matter how weak an opponent may seem, you should never make light of them... I should have had Narberal watch this fight. What else?"

"I THINK PERHAPS WE LACKED INFORMATION. WE DIDN'T KNOW THEIR STRENGTHS OR THE LAY OF THE LAND WITHIN THEIR TERRITORY. I LEARNED THAT WHEN THINGS LIKE THAT ARE UNCLEAR, THE CHANCES OF WINNING WILL INEVITABLY BE LOW."

"Hmm, hmm. What else?"

"WE ALSO DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH COMMANDERS. WE WERE USING LOW-TIER UNDEAD, SO WE SHOULD HAVE ATTACHED A COMMANDER WHO COULD GIVE THEM ORDERS ACCORDING TO THE SITUATION. ALSO, CONSIDERING THE LIZARDMEN'S WEAPONS, WE SHOULD HAVE MAINLY USED ZOMBIES TO TIRE THEM OUT OR USED ALL OUR TROOPS TOGETHER INSTEAD OF SEPARATELY."

"And besides that?"

"...MY APOLOGIES. THAT'S ALL I CAN COME UP WITH AT THE MOMENT."

"No, that makes sense. Well done. Of course, I can think of some other things, but you have learned well enough, Cocytus. Really, I wanted you to discover these things on your own without being asked, but...I suppose this is acceptable. Now then, why didn't you choose these courses of action from the start?"

"...I HADN'T THOUGHT OF THEM. I BELIEVED WE COULD SIMPLY KEEP PUSHING."

"I see. So when the undead all died, you realized some things? Good! If you strive to not fail again, then this will have been a

meaningful defeat."

Cocytus had the feeling his master smiled a bit.

"There are many types of failures, but yours is not a critical one. Besides the elder lich, all those undead were auto-spawning monsters. Losing them doesn't affect Nazarick at all. And the fact that the guardians have learned not to repeat these mistakes is a bonus."

"THANK YOU, LORD AINZ."

"That said, it's true that you were defeated, so I will have you accept punishment like Shalltear—"

There his words cut off, and Cocytus waited to see what his punishment would be. The brief silence did make him a little anxious, but a weight had been lifted from Cocytus, knowing in his heart that his master hadn't lost hope in him; however, the next thing he said made Cocytus stiffen.

"Honestly, I thought I'd take you off this operation, but this is a better idea. Cocytus! Wipe away the filth of this defeat with your own hands… Exterminate the lizardmen—this time, without anyone's help." If they killed all the lizardmen so that no word of the battle got out, it would be as if Nazarick had never been defeated in the first place.

Someone who scorned those who lived outside Nazarick as lower life-forms would be delighted to set about perpetrating this atrocity. Up until now, Cocytus would have taken the order without hesitation, too, but…

Cocytus trembled—because he knew what it meant to do what he was about to do.

He breathed in and out a few times.

As everyone wondered why he hadn't accepted the order, he spoke.

"LORD AINZ, THERE IS SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE TO ASK OF YOU!"

The world stopped. He felt the attention of a few stabbing into him. Cocytus—a guardian at the peak of power and strength within Nazarick, who could count on one hand those as strong or stronger than him—was assaulted by chills so violent he shivered.

Regret crashed down upon him like an avalanche, but it was too late.

Now that he'd said something, he couldn't take it back.

With his multiple compound eyes, Cocytus had an extremely wide field of vision; his only saving grace now was that because he was facing the ground, he couldn't see his master's face. If he had looked enraged or displeased, Cocytus wouldn't have been able to do anything.

"I BEG YOU, LORD AINZ—"

It was not their master but someone else who interrupted.

"You fool!" Albedo rebuked him with an earsplitting scream, a voice appropriate for the captain of the floor guardians. Cocytus was petrified, trembling like a child scolded by his mother.

"You dare petition Lord Ainz despite being the one who brought defeat to Nazarick? Know your place!"

Cocytus didn't speak but kept his head bowed, hoping for consent from their master, even as Albedo battered him harder with her rage.

"Back dow—" But Albedo's shout vanished partway, giving

way to the quiet voice of one man.

"That's enough, Albedo."

She gasped, and their master repeated the words again to soothe her.

"Raise your head, Cocytus. Why don't you let me hear what it is you want to ask?" It was a quiet voice containing no apparent anger. That was precisely why it was terrifying.

The fear resembled the feeling of being swallowed up while peering into an impossibly clear lake.

Cocytus had gear to protect him from the psychic effects of fear from external sources. The emotions assaulting him now came from inside.

Swallowing hard—not spit, but venom to be exact—Cocytus raised his head and looked his master in the face.

The flames in his vacant orbits were a slightly vivid red.

"Once again. Will you let me hear what it is you want to ask?"

Cocytus's voice wouldn't come out. He tried over and over, but his throat was tight and he couldn't utter a single word.

"What's wrong, Cocytus?"

A heavy silence weighed him down.

"...I'm not mad or anything, you know! I just want to know what you're thinking, what you want to say."

His tone held the kindness one used when asking a clammed-up child. Responding to that push, Cocytus said, "I'M AGAINST KILLING ALL THE LIZARDMEN. I BEG YOU, PLEASE HAVE MERCY."

When he'd finished speaking, he thought he felt the air in the room shift. No, it had shifted.

The biggest reaction was from straight ahead—Albedo's murderous glare. The other guardians were shaken, although Demiurge and their master were tranquil—he sensed nothing from them.

"Cocytus, do you know what you're saying?" Albedo's icy voice, transformed by killing intent, was enough to make even chill-resistant Cocytus shiver. "Lord Ainz ordered you to exterminate the lizardmen as punishment. That you would raise an objection to it… Guardian of the fifth level, Cocytus, could it be that you're frightened of the lizardmen?!"

Her voice was mocking, but Cocytus had no response.

Albedo's attitude was correct. If their positions had been reversed, Cocytus would probably have been similarly irritated.

"How about you say someth—?" What cut off her words wasn't a voice but a sound—the sharp strike of a staff on the floor.

"Quiet, Albedo. I'm asking Cocytus. Don't interfere."

"Excuse me, my lord! P-please forgive me!" Albedo bowed and returned to her previous position.

Their master's gaze returned to Cocytus, serious and practically boring a hole through him. It was impossible to read his master's emotions. He could have been completely furious or just curious.

"Now then, Cocytus. You must have a reason for saying what you just said. Some kind of benefit to the Great Tomb of Nazarick? Tell me."

"MY LORD! THERE IS POTENTIAL THAT IN THE FUTURE

THESE LIZARDMEN WILL PRODUCE ROBUST WARRIORS. I THINK THAT PERHAPS KILLING THEM ALL NOW WOULD BE A WASTE. WHEN POWERFUL LIZARDMEN ARE BORN, IT WOULD BE A BENEFIT TO INSTILL IN THEM A LOYALTY TOWARD NAZARICK AND MAKE THEM OUR FOLLOWERS."

"…Your proposal does make sense. In the end, undead from lizardman corpses weren't any stronger than the ones made using human corpses. If we can make arrangements to collect corpses buried in E-Rantel's graveyard, there's no reason to insist on using lizardmen."

Cocytus was about to say, "Then…," but he realized their master wasn't finished speaking. He had a bad feeling, and then his fear was confirmed.

"However! It's more cost-effective to use the undead I create with corpses than live lizardmen. Loyalty requires trust. Undead don't rack up food and drink costs. The only pro I can think of for using lizardmen is that their numbers will increase. And even then, we'd have to think about the long-term implications… Let me know if you think I'm missing something, anything you think would make sense to me."

Their merciful master would grant his wish as long as he was convinced, but Cocytus couldn't come up with anything.

He'd always seen himself as a weapon for his master to wield. Because of that, because he'd never thought for himself, he couldn't explain his own thoughts well. He hadn't considered how they, as an organization, could benefit.

And what he was being asked really boiled down to one thing: What was in it for the Great Tomb of Nazarick? The reason Cocytus didn't want to kill the lizardmen was because one had attracted his interest. As a warrior, he was drawn to the group that lizardman was trying to protect—it was a personal emotion, definitely not a utilitarian motive based on seeing the

bigger picture.

Cocytus panicked.

If their master, quietly watching him, became impatient or bothered, this miraculous question would lose all meaning. All that would be left was the standing order to exterminate the lizardmen.

He desperately racked his brain. Still, he had no answer.

"What's the matter, Cocytus? You don't have anything? If not, you should be fine with exterminating them, yes?"

The question was repeated.

Nothing came to mind. Cocytus had nothing to say, and his mind was just spinning its wheels.

A murmur echoed loudly in the silent Throne Room. "...I see. That's too bad."

Just as the weight of the words too bad threatened to crush Cocytus, a quiet voice handed him a lifeline.

"Lord Ainz, please forgive the intrusion..."

"What is it, Demiurge? You have something to say?"

"Yes. Regarding your earlier decision, I wonder if you would consider entertaining a humble plan of mine."

"...Let's hear it."

"My lord! Lord Ainz, you're well aware of our need to conduct experiments. What if we experimented on the lizardmen?"

"Oh-ho, that's an interesting idea." Their master leaned forward out of the throne, and for just a split second, Cocytus felt

his crimson eyes on him.

"Indeed. We don't know what Nazarick's future will be, but there may come a time when we need to combine and lead forces. We may need to conquer a country someday. At that point in time, whether we've performed experiments in governance or not may have a huge impact on how successful we are." Demiurge further straightened his posture and gave his conclusion, looking squarely at their master on the throne. "I humbly suggest that we conquer the lizardman villages and experiment with governing in a way that does not employ fear."

The staff struck the floor, and the sharp clack echoed throughout the room. "...A magnificent proposal, Demiurge."

"Thank you."

"Very well, I will take Demiurge's advice and change the lizardman group's fate from extermination to occupation. Anyone with an objection, raise your hand and speak." He cast his flickering crimson gaze across the guardians. "...It seems there are no objections. Then it's decided."

Everyone bowed in acknowledgment.

"But Demiurge, what a great idea. I'm impressed."

Demiurge smiled. "What are you saying, Lord Ainz? Surely you had already come up with it. You were waiting for Cocytus, weren't you?"

He replied with an awkward smile rather than words. But that said it all.

Cocytus felt all the strength leave his body.

He had commanded Nazarick's glorious army, lost, and then objected to his master's opinion without a counterproposal.

What did that make him? It made him… INCOMPETENT. I AM UTTERLY INCOMPETENT.

"No, that's not true, Demiurge. You're thinking too highly of me. What I wanted was an original idea, no matter what it was."

His eyes moved again and stopped the longest on Cocytus. Realizing what it meant, he felt deeply ashamed, but he couldn't look down.

"You need to prioritize intention. Determine the intent and take the most appropriate course of action. Listen, guardians. This won't work if you just blindly follow orders. You need to think a little first. Think about what will benefit Nazarick the most. If you believe an order is mistaken or that there's a more efficient way to do things, then present that to me or whoever made the proposal. Now then, Cocytus. Let's return to our previous topic. I said I would punish you, right?"

"YES. YOU SAID TO KILL ALL THE LIZARDMEN."

"I did, but now instead of killing them, we're going to govern them; therefore, your punishment has also changed. Govern the lizardmen and instill in them a loyalty toward Nazarick. Rule by fear is strictly prohibited. We want this to be a case study."

This was a huge role that Cocytus— No, probably none of the guardians besides Demiurge had ever filled before.

For just a split second, the words It's too hard for me appeared in Cocytus's mind, but there was no way he could say something so pathetic—neither to their generous absolute ruler to whom he owed his loyalty nor to his comrade who had rescued him from a difficult situation. "UNDERSTOOD. I'M NERVOUS ABOUT MANY THINGS, SO I ASK FOR YOUR SUPPORT."

"Of course. Materials, food, personnel—I'm sure you'll need many things. Nazarick will provide them."

"THANK YOU. I PROMISE TO PERFORM IN A WAY THAT LIVES UP TO THE MERCY YOU HAVE SHOWN ME!" Cocytus shouted from the bottom of his heart.

"Good. Then I order all guardians to arrange a sortie. We need a feint and to show them that what they've seen so far is not the true power of Nazarick. Of course, if it will cause obstacles in governing the lizardmen after the fact, we don't have to do it, Cocytus."

Cocytus thought it over before replying, "I DON'T BELIEVE THERE WILL BE ANY ISSUES."

"I see. Guardians, prepare for departure."

All the guardians present called out their acknowledgment in unison.

"Albedo, I'm going as well. Prepare the soldiers."

"Understood. Should I assume there are those who enjoy spying among our enemy and choose personnel who will cause a misunderstanding?"

"Exactly. But don't forget we also have to awe them into submission."

"Then perhaps an army with Nazarick old guarders as the linchpin would be attractive."

Cocytus agreed silently with her reply.

There was a type of undead guard called an old guarder. Nazarick old guarders were an elite undead found only in Nazarick. They were brilliant, proficient in a number of combat skills, and had weapons enchanted with all sorts of effects as

well as magic armor and shields.

"That's fine. How many do you need?"

"Three thousand."

"That's not very many. That might not overwhelm them enough. These guys beat us and probably underestimate us now —we have to terrify them! It's no fun if we send fewer than last time. I want double that. Anything else you need?"

"Then how about also mobilizing the Nazarick elder guarders and Nazarick master guarders? Then we'll have six thousand."

In response to Albedo's smooth answer befitting her position as captain, Ainz was clear and concise. "Great! And is there any issue with activating Gargantua?"

"No, Lord Ainz. He's fully mobile."

"Then Shalltear, use Gate to transport our troops all at once."

"I may not have enough magical energy on my own."

"Get support from Pestonia; have her transfer some energy. If that's still not enough, get some from Lupusregina."

"Understood."

"Next, have Nigredo's and Pandora's Actor's security net focused on us. That will loosen up the coverage on Sebas's crew, but...we'll just have to up the physical surveillance. Good. Move out, everybody! Tomorrow we'll show the lizardmen the power of the Great Tomb of Nazarick!"

“THANKS, DEMIURGE.” The first thing Cocytus did after their master had left the Throne Room was bow low and thank his comrade.

Demiurge flashed his usual smile. “That’s not necessary.”

“I INSIST. WE WOULD HAVE HAD TO KILL ALL THE LIZARDMEN IF IT WEREN’T FOR YOU.”

“I said you don’t have to worry about it, Cocytus. I think this is what Lord Ainz wanted from the start.”

Someone answered “Huh?” to Demiurge and his single raised finger. Cocytus had the feeling it could have been him or one of the other guardians.

“In other words, I think he made you general in the attack on the lizardman village because he anticipated the remarks you made earlier. He appeared extremely happy when you said you were against destroying the villages, and he seemed disappointed when you couldn’t make a counterproposal.”

“You mean he was disappointed because things didn’t go according to plan?”

“That’s right, Shalltear. In other words, there is a very high probability that all the things that were said here were according to his plan.”

“He was able to foresee everything? I’d expect nothing less from Lord Ainz!”

“B-but, you know, uh, er…”

“…Spit it out!” Aura sharply urged on her fidgeting little brother.

“I—I am! Uh, I was wondering why we used such weak undead. Uh, um, like, well, just maybe, but uh…maybe he assumed

we would lose?"

"Or rather than losing, perhaps he thought Cocytus would investigate how strong they were and advise on whether or not we could win."

Cocytus remembered his talk with Demiurge, and the same shame welled up inside him. So he'd been doing it all wrong.

"That plan would be impossible to make without knowing Cocytus's personality inside out. Magnificent, Lord Ainz..."

"I learned during the duel with Shalltear that Lord Ainz's skill as a fighter is exceptional, but he's also a brilliant strategist. I really admire him. He says all those nice things, but we're just his pawns." Demiurge gave his remarks as the most brilliant mind among the Nazarick guardians.

"He is simply too amazing. Perhaps he just arrived to lead the Supreme Beings on a whim?" Shalltear shivered with joy as she spoke of their master, and the other guardians nodded in agreement.

●

Ainz returned to his room and dove into bed. After being airborne for an unusually long time, his body clumsily sank into the mattress. Then...he rolled around for a bit.

To the right, to the left.

It was something he could do only because the bed was so gigantic. Ainz rolled back and forth, giggling a little, paying not the slightest attention to the fact that his luxurious robe was getting all wrinkled. Of course, he was acting like a little kid only because no one else was in the room.

Eventually, after returning sufficiently to childlike innocence

and enjoying the softness of the bed to the fullest degree, he lay there and stared at the ceiling.

"Man, I'm beat... I wanna throw back some drinks and get totally wasted...but I can't do either," he grumbled and heaved a sigh—albeit an imitation sigh, since he didn't actually breathe.

Because he was undead, neither physical nor mental exhaustion affected him, but every day of the past month or so had taken a toll on his human mental state. If he weren't undead, he would've had stomach trouble for sure.

There was a lot of pressure on Ainz in his position.

Momon the warrior defeated a silver-haired vampire—Shalltear. For someone who knew nothing, it was simply an amazing feat, but for the ones who had used the World Item on Shalltear, it held a different meaning. There was a high probability they would come after him or try to contact him.

For that reason, Ainz was always on alert and carried cash store items so he could make a quick getaway at any time. In his free time, still on guard, he role-played (or image trained) in his head how to figure out how to run away while gathering intelligence in the event they tried to make contact.

Those tense days had no effect on Ainz Ooal Gown, but the vestiges of the human Satoru Suzuki were a wreck. The moment he was alone in a free and open space, away from the pressure of having to act like the ruler of Nazarick, he had probably regressed to a childlike state not out of Ainz's wishes but because Satoru Suzuki had been stretched thin and wanted to act out.

"I don't think I've ever worked this long without a day off... I wonder how much overtime I get this month?" This flavor of mumbled griping, too, was perhaps Satoru Suzuki strongly manifesting. "The Great Tomb of Nazarick...no, Ainz Ooal Gown... It's not really a corporation. We are a limited partner-

ship and a fair company that guarantees its workers overtime pay…" After grumbling a little, he furrowed his nonexistent brow. "Hmm? There are managerial bonuses, so I don't get overtime? Ahhhhh!" He began rolling back and forth again. After five laps, he stopped on a dime. "Now then…enough with this nonsense… But wow, I can't belive Cocytus said all that stuff!"

He hadn't imagined that such a thing was possible. Cocytus wanted to show the lizardmen mercy?

That was a real problem for Ainz.

Satoru Suzuki's personality was such that he went into presentations with plenty of documents prepared. He wasn't very good at dealing with unexpected questions, but if the answer was written down in his documents, he could just read it. In other words, to Satoru Suzuki, the key to a good presentation was doing enough research that he could answer any question thrown at him. With such an outlook, he wasn't very good at adapting on the fly—no, he'd gone past that. He hated it.

Of course, he couldn't march into the Throne Room with documents and say, Now, please take a look at the next page. That was why he'd gone over what would happen in the Throne Room in his head more than ten times, hoping all the while that no one would do anything that would take him by surprise.

Cocytus had shattered that tiny hope.

He'd been really nervous about what Cocytus was going to say, but he was glad he'd said it. He felt a kind of familial happiness, like when a quiet child says something selfish for the first time. Above all, Cocytus had grown far more than he'd expected him to.

One time when Ainz returned to Nazarick, he had had a maid cook for him. He had requested a steak. Taking into considera-

tion things like how well-done it should be would have required some practice, but he didn't ask for anything terribly complicated. And he wasn't asking for any stat bonuses like one would get from cooked food in Yggdrasil. As long as he could eat it, there wouldn't have been any problem.

But the result of her cooking was just a black lump.

No matter how many times that maid cooked, the only outcome was carbonized meat.

While accepting her sincere apologies, Ainz had been satisfied with the expected result. It was the same as when he had tried to equip a great sword in his dressing room.

In Yggdrasil, a specific skill was needed in order to cook. Perhaps that was only natural, since eating and drinking gave temporary ability boosts. That maid didn't have the skill.

In short, without the skill, try as one might, cooking would end in failure.

With the Cocytus exercise, Ainz had tried partially as an experiment to see if beings who had already been created, like Ainz and the others, could still gain new skills. If Cocytus could gain tactical and strategic knowledge, that would be evidence for the possibility that Ainz and the others could still grow. The reason he'd made Cocytus command such weak undead was simply because he figured there was more to learn from defeat.

And he was satisfied with the results. Cocytus had shown that growth was feasible.

Of course, mastering techniques and gaining knowledge were two very different things.

Ainz's aim for the future, if he had one, was to become proficient in this world's unique system of magic. Was magic tech-

niques or knowledge? Ainz still wasn't sure. But now he had tested for the knowledge case, at least.

Cocytus had taught him that growth was possible. He'd done a fine job.

Lack of growth is stagnation, plain and simple. Even if I'm counted among the strong now, someday I'll get overtaken , Ainz thought.

Even if he had military technology from a hundred years in the future, if he stopped progressing there, he would someday fall from the position of the strongest. He might be considered strong within the neighboring countries now, but operating from the assumption that such strength would last forever would make him a fool.

"That said, though I'm happy at our child's progress, I do worry whether his behavior is appropriate for someone who is supposed to be completely loyal to me…," Ainz grumbled and looked up at the ceiling. "Ahh, this is so scary…"

The vestiges of the human Satoru Suzuki were shrieking in response to this newest anxiety.

Progress is change. So who could say that the guardians' current absolute loyalty would remain the same? Even if it did, he was terrified of being judged unworthy to be the ruler of glorious Nazarick, of being branded unfit to be guild master.

"…I have to be a leader worthy of their loyalty… Will anyone give me a crash course in emperor-hood?" There was no one who'd created such a convenient school within the walls of Nazarick, that was for sure.

Ainz mulled over the issue, and two figures came to mind. They were two of the Five Worst—the Prince of Fear and the King of Hungry Prolyferum, royalty both. He seriously consid-

ered getting an education from them but in the end dismissed the idea with one word: nope. He didn't want to be taught by either of them, not unless he was in some dire straits. "Well, I guess it's fine… As long as I don't make too many mistakes, I don't imagine anyone'll be telling me to retire anytime soon. Other than that… Oh. Bipedal sheep…?"

Ainz had already realized what their true identity must be, which was why he hadn't asked Demiurge for a description of their appearance. He'd seen a similar monster in Yggdrasil. "Heads of a goat and a lion, tail of a snake. And then arms of a lion, feet of a goat. No doubt about it. Gotta be a khimaira."

The khimaira in Yggdrasil stood upright on two goat legs and attacked with lion paw arms. It had two heads, a lion's and a goat's. It was essentially a baphomet clone, since the developers had used the same graphical data as a base.

Still, that did leave the question of why, if they were khimairas, Demiurge didn't just say so, but Ainz already knew the answer. "In short, it might be a subspecies of khimaira. That's it, right, Demiurge?" Ainz giggled. Then he changed his opinion of Demiurge to surprising lack of knack for naming things. "In Yggdrasil, those khimairalords and other different types were kinda… Well, but those fish khimaira looked so bizarre they were sickening. A new type of khimaira…Abellion khimaira… Maybe I should have him bring one here. Then there was…Victim."

It looked exactly as he'd remembered it, but just one thing was bothering him. "Is that really Enochian, the language the angels are said to speak? It sounds like something else…" Since it was translated, Ainz didn't know what language it was speaking, but he vaguely sensed something. Of course, it didn't help that he didn't know Enochian, either. "Well, whatever… Okay, I guess I have to get ready to head to the front."

He rolled around one last time, reluctant to leave. And then

while he was facedown, he checked something he'd noticed before. He buried his face in the bed and inhaled. Granted, he didn't have lungs, so it was only an imitation, but for some reason he could still smell.

"There's a floral scent… Are they perfuming my bed? Is this just what rich people's beds are like? If so, that's pretty awesome… I wonder if I should nitpick about stuff like this when I pretend to be a rich person… Hmm…"

3

The power to detect danger. For thieves and others with detection abilities, this was one of the most important skills, and it did exactly what it sounded like.

There were two ways to detect danger. One was sensing a threat immediately without deduction or examination, and the other was accomplished by using deduction based on experience and examination. If a "bad feeling" was an example of the former, then reading slight changes in the environment—a faint smell or noise—was an example of the latter.

The latter was sometimes strengthened without even trying by going to battle or traveling solo. It was experience that came of placing oneself near danger.

And in most cases, creatures like lizardmen were better at it than humans. It was a biological ability that stemmed from their keen sense organs and cruel environment. Humans got to sleep in a safe place away from monsters, but in the lizardmen's habitat, the monsters were right next door.

It was especially easy for the lone wanderer Zaryusu to catch

shifts in the atmosphere outdoors.

Sensing something like tension in the air, Zaryusu popped his eyes open. The familiar scenery of his room (although he'd been sleeping there for only a handful of nights) filled his field of vision. A human wouldn't have been able to see even if they squinted in this room with no light, but it wasn't so hard for a lizardman.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Having scanned the room to confirm that, he breathed a faint sigh of relief and shifted.

Because he was such a brilliant warrior, even though he had just been asleep, he was as awake as ever. Not only was he not groggy, but his body was ready to jump into battle at a moment's notice. This was partly due to how lightly lizardmen slept. But Crusch, lying next to him, showed no signs of waking. She just emitted a disgruntled cry in her sleep at the loss of Zaryusu's warmth.

Normally Crusch would have felt the change in the atmosphere and woken up as well, but it seemed like this time she couldn't.

Zaryusu felt just a bit bad, that maybe he'd put too big a burden on her. He recalled the previous night and concluded that maybe her load had been bigger. From defeating the elder lich and everything afterward, it must have been harder on her as a female.

Personally, he wanted to let her sleep. But if he listened carefully, he could hear the sounds of lizardmen rushing around outside. Letting her sleep during an emergency might end up being more dangerous.

"Crusch, Crusch." He shook her rather forcefully a couple of

times.

"Nn, ngh…" Her tail twisted up, and right away her red eyes showed themselves. "Nn, hmnn?"

"Something's happened."

With that, her eyes opened fully even though she still wanted to sleep. Zaryusu grabbed Frost Pain from its position nearby and stood up. Crusch followed a moment later.

When they went outside, they saw immediately what had caused the disturbance: a black cloud spread thickly over the village. It was clear immediately from a glance into the distance that this was no normal cloud. The rest of the sky was fair and blue.

In short, it was…

"They're here…again?"

…a sign that their enemy had returned.

"Seems that way," Crusch agreed.

The lizardmen of the five tribes who had fought together had also all noticed the cloud and were making a racket, but there was no sign of fear. The victory against overwhelming odds in the battle the previous day had strengthened their hearts.

Zaryusu and Crusch splashed toward the main gate at a sprint. They passed by a few lizardmen preparing for combat and reached the gate fairly quickly. Many warriors had already gathered, keeping a close watch on the outside. Zenbel was also there. Next to him was the Small Fang chief.

Zenbel raised a hand in greeting to the two loudly sloshing over and jerked his chin at the scene outside the gate. Zaryusu and Crusch stood next to him and peered beyond the gate.

On the opposite shore, on the boundary between the marsh and the forest, were ranks of skeletons.

"They're back."

"Yeah…," Zaryusu replied to Zenbel and clicked his tongue.

He'd expected this, but it was too soon. Their calculation that it would take some time to recover from such a heavy loss had been completely off. He was surprised they had the power to mobilize an army this big again.

"…At least they're probably weaker than the skeletons that elder lich summoned." Reading between the lines, that meant that Zenbel thought these skeletons were stronger than the army from before.

Zaryusu took a close look at the skeletons, too—to see how strong they were, to see how careful the lizardmen needed to be against them. The enemies were certainly all skeletons, but they were definitely different from last time.

What had changed the most visually was their gear. The previous skeletons had had only rusty swords. These skeletons were very well outfitted. Also, maybe it was just in his head, but they even appeared to have better physiques. It seemed like there were three types, each with different gear.

The most numerous wore splendid breastplates, carried shields shaped like a stretched-out inverted triangle—kite shields—in one hand, and held various weapons in the other. On their backs were quivers and composite longbows. They were well prepared for close- or long-range fighting.

The next type had ratty crimson capes flapping behind them over the same breastplate, held round shields and bastard swords, and wore helmets.

Finally, the least numerous type had the most complete gear sets. They wore full plate armor with a magnificent golden gleam and clutched shining lances. Their eye-poppingly crimson capes seemed free of the slightest speck of dirt.

After his initial observations, Zaryusu realized something, and unable to believe his eyes, he rubbed them a few times with his hands. But it was still there—the truth.

"What…? No way…"

"Th-that's ridiculous…" Zaryusu released a pained murmur at the same time as Crusch's surprised gasp—they'd realized the same thing.

Then Zenbel reacted. "Yep, you noticed it, too, huh?" His voice was pained like the others'.

"Yeah…" Zaryusu closed his mouth. He didn't want to say it—because that would just make it worse. But he had to. "Those look like magic weapons, don't they?"

Crusch, next to him, nodded.

All the weapons the skeletons had were enchanted. One had a sword imbued with fire, another a hammer with blue lightning. There was one holding a spear with a glowing green tip, and even one with a sickle that seemed to be coated in purple goop.

"That's not all. Take a closer look at their armor and shields… They're all magic."

Zaryusu squinted.

Then he groaned in spite of himself. Their glowing wasn't reflected light but something inside the objects themselves.

How much power do you need to equip that many skeleton soldiers with magic gear? Certainly if the magic was just to

make blades sharper, the larger countries Zaryusu had heard of could probably do it if they planned ahead of time. But to imbue each of the weapons with its own attribute—all different kinds of effects—was a different story.

Zaryusu remembered the stories of the dwarves he'd heard from Zenbel the other day.

Dwarves were a mountain race with exceptional metalworking abilities. When they sat down to drink, the sagas they told contained stories of the king who built the Great Dwarven Empire, a hero shrouded in adamantite armor, who killed a dragon at the end of a one-on-one fight, one of the Thirteen Heroes, Magic Mechanic. Even in those tales, there were no armies—certainly not one of more than five thousand—outfitted with that much magic gear.

So what was Zaryusu seeing?

"A mythical army…" If it wasn't in the stories of the people, it had to be from the stories of the gods.

Zaryusu shook with a single intense shudder. This was completely beyond his expectations. They'd made an enemy out of someone they shouldn't have.

Still, he had gathered everyone here, fully aware that they might be wiped out. Could the one who'd come up with such a cruel plan be afraid now? Their enemy was unimaginably strong. He knew that. The question was what to do about it.

"That can't be real. It has to be an illusion."

For a split second, everyone there asked the same wordless question: What are you talking about? The skeletons were maintaining a completely motionless stance, but they seemed distinctly substantial, and their presence was powerful enough to give one the chills. They couldn't be anything so flimsy as an illu-

sion.

The confusing thing was that the one who'd said it was the Small Fang chief. He definitely hadn't gone crazy.

"What basis do you have for saying that?"

He confidently responded to Zaryusu's question. "We've been sending scouts out on rotation. None of them saw any undead like that, and it's not like they could have just overlooked that many. All the scouts have come back safe, too."

"I see... But it sure doesn't seem like an illusion to me."

"But...well, maybe not. But if it's not, then they must have tunneled their way here. That would explain why we didn't see them."

"...I don't care if they tunneled or flew—what are we gonna do? They don't seem to want to start a fight right away, but I don't get the feeling they came here to negotiate!"

"Yeah... If it's like last time, they'll make some kind of move..."

Zaryusu stared at the skeletons. He was trying to make out who the commander was when a shivery wind blew past him. It wasn't just one gust—the wind kept blowing.

He was positive the strange, abrupt chill was no natural phenomenon but brought about by magic.

"The wind is—? Huh? ...No way! It's a different spell...? But it can't be..." Crusch shivered, hugging her body.

Her reaction wasn't just from the cold, which was why Zaryusu asked, "Crusch, where did this freezing wind come from?"

"...You might not believe me, but listen, Zaryusu. Up until

now, I thought the change in the weather was caused by the tier-four spell Control Cloud. But it's not. Control Cloud can manipulate clouds, but it can't create a cold wind like this. That means… the power isn't manipulating clouds but changing the weather and climate. In other words, someone cast the tier-six spell Control Weather…at least, that's what I think." She added in a voice so small no one could hear, "I don't know for sure, since it's a realm of magic I can't use myself."

Zaryusu knew how awesome the power of the sixth tier was. Even Iguvua, the most powerful enemy he'd faced since taking up a sword, couldn't use it. It was the supreme tier, said to be the highest in the world.

"Is this…the power of the Great One or whoever? That…definitely makes sense…" Calling someone who can use tier-six magic "great" was not an exaggeration.

"Whoa, everybody and their brother is bummin' out." Zenbel's complaint was an apt description of the atmosphere.

This weather was unseasonably cold—that is, their environment had changed in an impossible way. The lizardmen's morale was dropping sharply.

Last time it had just been the appearance of a cloud. They could deal with this degree of cold by building a bonfire and having the priests perform a ritual, but the autumn wind had taught the lizardmen that their opponents had the power to warp nature, the uncontrollable.

They didn't need to hear Crusch's explanation to understand the immense power of their enemy—the wind nipping at them said it all.

"Tch! Those bastards—they're on the move." Zaryusu ground his teeth. His tail was trying to flail, but he willed it not to. Are you really gonna do that now?

When the orderly rows of skeletons began marching forward with precisely measured steps, the warrior lizardmen grew agitated, and some made warning growls. But Zaryusu, observing their movements, made a different judgment: Those aren't combat movements.

Just when Zaryusu and Zenbel raised their voices to calm down the shaken lizardmen—

"Calm down!"

—a jarring shout ripped through the air.

Everyone turned to see Shasuryu.

"I'll say it again. Calm down." A silence fell, and the only sound was his confident, dignified voice. "And don't be afraid, warriors. Don't do anything that would disappoint the many ancestral spirits behind you." He wove his way through the quiet lizardmen and stood next to Zaryusu. "What are they up to, Zaryusu?"

"Brother, they're on the move, but it doesn't look like combat prep."

"Mph."

The marching skeletons formed ten rows of five hundred.

"What are they planning to do?"

As if they'd been waiting for the question, the skeletons began to advance again. With perfect control, the rows parted to the left and right from the middle, not a single skeleton out of place. Between the two sides, they left about a twenty-skeleton gap. In that space, there was a lone figure.

The shape wasn't all that big. Even at a distance of two hundred and fifty yards, Zaryusu could tell it was smaller than him.

It wore a raven-black robe and gave off an ominous, evil aura. Its resemblance to the elder lich they had fought the previous day suggested it was a caster. There was, however, one very different thing about this one, and that was its strength.

When he saw it, ice crept up Zaryusu's spine. He knew instinctively that the difference in power between the elder lich of yesterday and this thing was like the difference between a toddler and a warrior.

It gushed a frigid evil from its entire being. He could feel it even at this distance. And that wasn't all. Its gear was also on another level.

An absolute ruler had appeared in the form of inescapable death.

"The…ruler of death?" Zaryusu surprised even himself as he uttered the most fitting words for the monster. And he'd hit the nail on the head.

It truly was the lord who ruled over death.

"…Ooh!"

What was the ruler of death going to do?

The lizardmen, watching with bated breath, all simultaneously shouted in surprise. A magic circle about ten yards across had suddenly spread out around the caster as a huge dome. It gave off a pale-blue glow, and patterns like translucent letters or symbols appeared on it. These characters changed at a dizzying rate; the same pattern didn't linger for even an instant. The way the pale light kept shifting as it illuminated the area was fantastic, and if it hadn't been the work of their enemy, they probably would have been captivated. Now, though, they weren't at all.

What is that? Not comprehending what he was seeing, Zaryusu was confused. He'd never seen a huge dome projected into the air like that when a caster used magic. The action his opponent was taking was entirely outside the realm of his knowledge. So he asked the female who probably knew the most about magic out of anyone there. "What in the world is that?"

"I—I don't know. I have no idea what it is!" she replied, sounding scared. Apparently she was especially frightened precisely because she knew about magic and still couldn't recognize the spell.

The moment after he was about to calm her—perhaps the spell was cast—the dome burst, and countless sparks of light whirled up into the air. All at once they spread across the sky as if they were exploding and—

—the lake…froze.

Not a single lizardman present understood what had happened—not the uncommonly able tribal chief Shasuryu, not the brilliant priest Crusch, not the experienced traveler Zaryusu. Even these lizardmen with faculties matchless throughout all lizardman history couldn't immediately comprehend what had taken place, it was so outrageous.

They couldn't comprehend how their feet were below the ice.

Moments later, after their brains had processed what had just happened before their eyes, the screams went up.

Every lizardman—yes, all of them—shrieked.

Even Zaryusu. Crusch and Shasuryu, and even the one who probably had the most courage, Zenbel. They lost themselves in a fear that welled from the bottom of their hearts and climbed straight out of their souls to manifest in a scream.

It was a reality too horrible. The lake that had never iced over, the lake that had never changed ever since they were born, had warped and frozen.

The lizardmen panicked and pulled their legs up. Luckily, since the ice wasn't too thick, it broke right away, but it immediately refroze. The chill coming from below—the biting cold—proved they weren't seeing things.

Flustered, Zaryusu hopped up on a mud wall and surveyed the scene—and the view left him speechless.

Everything in his field of vision was frozen.

Certainly the entire lake couldn't be frozen, but it was a fact that as far as his eyes could see, everything was covered in ice.

In a corner of his mind, worries about his fish preserve popped up, but now wasn't the time.

Crusch had hopped next to Zaryusu, and when she surveyed the area, her jaw fell open just like his. The voice from her agape mouth sounded like her soul had left her. "No way…"

Zaryusu didn't want to believe it, either.

"You monster!" he barked, hoping it would ease the fear.

"Get up now!" Shasuryu's roar echoed.

Several lizardmen had collapsed. The members of the warrior caste who were all right worked together to pull them out of the frozen marsh.

All the lizardmen being pulled were pale in the face and trembling. The rising chill was probably sapping their life force.

"Brother, I'm going to go check around the village!" Zaryusu had Frost Pain, so this level of chill wouldn't affect him.

“No…don’t go!”

“Why not?!”

“They’re probably going to make their move. I won’t let you leave us now! Keep an eye on the enemy. I forbid you to miss a single thing! You’ve traveled the world and have all sorts of knowledge—you’re the lizardman for this job.” Shifting his gaze from Zaryusu, Shasuryu called out to the warriors in the area. “I’m going to cast the chill defense spell Ice Energy Protection. Go around the village and tell everyone to stay away from the ice!”

“I’ll cast, too!”

“Great! Then you and I will split up the work. If you see anyone in trouble, cast a healing spell on them.” Crusch and Shasuryu managed to safely begin casting the protective magic on the lizardmen.

Zaryusu stayed up on the mud wall with his keen gaze aimed at the enemy line so as not to miss a single move. He had to do exactly what his brother told him.

“Hup!” Zenbel hopped up on the wall next to him and checked the enemy lines in an easygoing way. “Take it a little easier. Your brother, he’s just like that, right? Has high expectations of your know-how? Even if you miss something, he’s not gonna get mad. More importantly, if you focus too hard, your field of vision’ll shrink!” Zenbel’s unconcerned voice was soothing.

It was just like in the fight with the elder lich; everyone needed to do what they could, and they would add all their efforts together.

Zaryusu looked around and saw that warriors had also jumped up on the wall to observe the enemy. No, he wasn’t fighting alone. He was fighting with a great many friends.

It seemed like he'd been shaken up in the face of such overwhelming power by that display of magic.

Zaryusu exhaled, like he was breathing out something that had festered in his heart.

"Sorry."

"It's fine."

"...But yeah. You're here, too."

"Hmph. Don't expect much in the brains department!"

They laughed a bit together as they watched the enemy's movements.

"But yeesh, those are some serious monsters."

"Yeah. They're on another level..."

The King of Death, arrogant yet impressive like a true king, was eyeing the lizardman village. His body should have been small, but it seemed to have swelled dozens of times larger.

"...That's gotta be the guy they call the Great One."

"Probably. I don't want to believe that they have more than one monster who can use magic powerful enough to freeze the lake."

"Seriously. Ahh, I get it. To monsters who can do this kind of stuff, we lizardmen must be like little specks of dirt. Ahh, shit. Ahh, shit! We're no better than worms! Oh, he's moving."

The caster who had frozen the river raised his free hand and waved toward the village. It must be a signal. Zaryusu's hunch came true in horrifying fashion directly after that.

“Ahhh!” Voices cried out from here and there throughout the village.

“What…is that? What the heck is that?!”

Nothing could surprise him anymore. Or so Zaryusu had thought, but what he saw made him practically shriek involuntarily.

What stood before them was a giant statue with two arms and legs that appeared to be made out of stone. A red light, pulsing almost like a heartbeat, shone through from the bedrock of its thick chest. Solid arms, solid legs. Its squat body might have even been rather cute—if the thing hadn’t stood almost a hundred feet tall.

That gigantic statue had suddenly appeared out of the forest. At this point, believing it was an illusion made more sense.

The giant statue moved slowly, raising up a huge boulder from who knew where.

Then the hulking creature threw it.

Zaryusu instinctively covered his face. All those in the gigantic stone’s path would surely die.

In the darkness their world had become, Zaryusu was struck at once by a tremendous rumbling and a sound like an explosion. The wall beneath him swayed intensely, creaking.

Along with a roar like heavy rain—the kicked-up dirt falling back to the ground—from the village came the cries of not only children but adults as well.

Despite having braced themselves, they were unable to withstand this fear that was beyond anything they could have imagined. Even though they’d made it through the previous battle, this was enough to regress them to small children.

Relieved he had his life, Zaryusu timidly opened his eyes to see the undead army beginning to move. The giant statue was gone.

They approached the newly fallen huge stone, lying in the marsh about midway between the two groups; held their flat shields over their heads; and crouched down. More skeletons, nimbly keeping their balance, got up on the shields of the first ones and then held their own shields up in the same way.

Zaryusu shook like he'd been struck by lightning when he understood what they were doing. "Are they building…stairs? Who uses troops that would inspire songs of praise in legends to build stairs?!"

They worked toward the top of the rock at an uncanny speed, and the staircase built out of the undead army took shape.

Then some other undead soldiers began to move—about a hundred even more magnificent undead. In their hands they clutched spears like lancers might hold, decorated with fabric: crimson cloth with the same crest stitched into each pennon.

They stepped now into the marsh in perfect alignment, crimson capes fluttering behind them. They proceeded without speaking, crunching the ice under their feet. They really were in perfect order, maintaining their intervals as they advanced across the marsh, then crossing their lances with the warriors opposite them.

The alternating lances formed a corridor leading up the rock.

"A path for the king…?" Zenbel was exactly right.

The caster of death stepped into the corridor of undead. No one knew when the figures following him had appeared.

In front stood the caster, whose power was now impossible to

fathom. He was clad in a robe so black it appeared to be cut from darkness. The staff in his hand radiated a dark-red aura. Inside it, anguished human faces would form, warp, and dissipate. The face beneath the hood was skeletal. A crimson color flickered in his vacant orbits. He was equipped with an abundance of magic accessories impossible for Zaryusu to comprehend and walked forward with the majestic gait of a king.

Attending slightly behind the King of Death was a woman in white. Her appearance was humanlike, but a few things suggested otherwise. Like the wings at her hips.

"Could that be…a demon?"

Demons.

A moniker that encompassed beings from the netherworld, such as fiends, which caused destruction with violence, and devils, which caused depravity with their wits. They were the height of wickedness; the purpose of their existence was to ruin every intelligent, good person. In other words, these monsters were synonyms for evil.

Zaryusu had heard of their kind on his travels: how horrible they were, how about two hundred years ago a monster worthy of being called the King of Demons—an evil spirit—came with its underlings and nearly destroyed the world.

In the end, the Thirteen Heroes defeated them, and even now scars from that battle remained in some places.

If undead were beings that hated the living, then demons existed to torment them.

Behind the demon walked a pair of dark-elf twins, followed by a silver-haired girl. Then came a strange monster that glided through the air, and finally a man like a human with a tail.

The strange monster was the only one who didn't seem immensely powerful—all the others were enough to make the entire length of Zaryusu's tail quiver. His wild instincts were urging him: Run away as fast as you can!

The party walked silently up the stairs beneath the pennons. They stepped on the undead soldiers with zero hesitation and ascended to the top of the giant rock like champions.

The King of the Dead at the front of the line moved his hands.

Upon the sudden appearance of a tall throne that sparkled raven black, he sat down.

The ones behind him, who appeared to be aides, lined up and turned their gazes to the village as if they were watching for something. But they didn't do anything else.

What in the world is this?

A few lizardmen glanced at one another anxiously. They decided to leave the decision-making to the cleverest one present.

"Uh, er, what should we do, Mr. Zaryusu? Should we get ready to run?" The voice contained not the slightest will to fight. The lizardman's tail was drooping helplessly, speaking volumes for his internal state.

"No, no need for that. Think back to the time with the elder lich. This caster seems way more powerful than that, right? He should have no problem ignoring this distance and unleashing an attack right now. He probably…has something he wants to say."

The lizardman seemed to understand. Without taking his eyes off the advancing attendants, Zaryusu continued observing the immensely powerful monster on top of the rock as if he were one of the masses looking up at his king.

He was determined to not miss a thing.

At this distance he was able to observe quite a lot of detail, and their eyes even met.

Was the King of Death observing him, too? The lack of hostility from the dark elves was surprising. The silver-haired girl had a smug grin. The demon was horrifying in how kind she seemed. He wasn't sure about the strange monster. He couldn't sense any emotion from the eyes of the man with the tail.

After enough time had passed for them to observe each other, the King of Death once again brought his free hand up near his chest.

Several lizardmen reacted by flailing their tails in distress.

"Don't be afraid. Don't show the enemy that shameful display!" Zaryusu's reprimand cut like a knife, and the lizardmen in the area all straightened.

Multiple black hazes appeared before the King of Death—twenty, to be exact. The swirling mists swelled to about five feet high. Before long, myriad faces had formed within them.

"Those are…" Zaryusu recalled the monster that had come to the villages and the undead he'd encountered on his travels.

He'd given a rough explanation back in Crusch's village—how it was really only possible to damage this type of insubstantial monster by using enchanted weapons, weapons made of certain metals, magic, or certain martial arts.

Even with all the lizard tribes put together, they had only a handful of magic weapons. In other words, it would be hard to take out even one of this particular type of undead. And their opponent could spawn twenty of them like it was nothing.

"I guess that's what it means to be the ruler of death…" I can see why that elder lich, who was plenty powerful in his own right, would devote himself completely to this being, Zaryusu thought, losing heart.

The caster on the rock murmured something and waved his hand in a way that said, Go!

The undead flew to surround the village and said in unison, ***"We relay the words of the Great One. The Great One would like to speak with you. The one who shall represent you will step forward immediately. Know that taking too long will only displease the Great One."***

Upon making their declaration, the incorporeal monsters flew back to their creator and master.

"Huh? —The heck? That's all?" Zaryusu's mouth gaped idiotically. So he used those powerful undead just to tell us that?

But what he really couldn't believe was what happened at a signal from the ruler of death, when the silver-haired girl brought her hands swiftly together.

The moment her hands connected…the hazy undead ceased to exist.

"Whaaat?!" Zaryusu was so surprised he shouted in spite of himself.

They hadn't returned the summoned monsters but just wiped them out.

Eliminating undead like that was something the priest class could do. Usually they had enough trouble just exorcizing them, but with a big enough disparity in power, it was possible to annihilate them. But doing so to a large number would be much harder.

In other words, the silver-haired girl was equal to the King of Death despite being his follower. The other followers lined up with her were probably just as powerful.

"Heh-heh-heh…" Zaryusu couldn't stop laughing. Of course he couldn't. What else was there to do but laugh? This stark power imbalance was just—

"Zaryusu!"

"Oh, brother!" Hearing the voice from below the wall, Zaryusu looked down to find Shasuryu and Crusch.

They climbed up and examined the caster's party.

Crusch crammed herself between Zaryusu and Zenbel. She nearly caused Zenbel to fall, but he decided to let it slide.

"So that's the enemy boss? Just looking at him makes me start to expect a knife in the back. He looks like the elder lich you guys beat, but…he's probably way stronger, huh?"

"…Did you finish on your end?"

"Mph, pretty much. Crusch and I are both out of magical energy. And from what those messengers said…we have to take care of that first. About that…will you come with me?"

For a few moments, Zaryusu just regarded Shasuryu in silence. Then he nodded emphatically.

For a split second, Shasuryu made a pained expression, but before anyone else could notice, his usual face returned. "Sorry."

"No worries, brother."

With that, Shasuryu hopped off the wall. The thin ice over the marsh broke, and a splash rang out. "Okay, we're off."

“Be careful.”

Zaryusu gave Crusch a tight hug and then hopped down into the marsh after his brother.

Zaryusu and Shasuryu walked over, crunching through the ice. As they exited the village gate, Zaryusu felt the King of Death’s gaze on them as if it exerted physical pressure. And from behind, he sensed concerned looks—the strongest one must have belonged to Crusch. He desperately suppressed the intense emotions that made him ache with longing.

Abruptly breaking their silence, Shasuryu spoke. “…Sorry.”

“Why, brother?”

“…Because if this talk goes badly, we’re sure to be killed as an example.”

Zaryusu knew that. That was why he’d squeezed Crusch so tightly.

“…Considering how many there are of them, I couldn’t let you go alone. Besides, they’d probably think we were making light of them if we only sent one.”

Zaryusu was a lizardman people knew and an appropriate second for the dialogue, but caste-wise he was a traveler. If he were killed, it wouldn’t greatly affect lizardman solidarity.

Even if a hero died, as long as the chiefs were still around, the lizardmen could fight. It would be a shame if they lost Frost Pain, but he couldn’t have left it behind—he needed it to withstand the chill coming off the frozen lake.

The pair walked in silence—one step, then another closer to death.

When they reached the bottom of the undead stairs leading to

the throne, they called out. If the throne had been set back from the edge, they might have gone up, but since there was no room for them, it probably wasn't the King of Death's intention to have them climb the stairs.

The king would stand on higher ground.

Lizardmen didn't have the custom that many other races had, that superiors should be elevated. Of course, considering they'd come for a discussion, one could say this treatment was rude.

In other words, it could mean only that their enemy had called them there under the guise of a dialogue but had absolutely zero interest in talking to them.

But really it was presumptuous of them to expect equal treatment. Certainly Zaryusu and the others had won the previous battle, but one look at the enemies lined up on that rock and they had to admit, even if they didn't like it, that their win was meaningless. It'd been nothing more than child's play.

"Here we are! I am the representative of the lizardmen, Shasuryu Shasha. And this is the strongest lizardman!"

"Zaryusu Shasha!"

Still, there was no sense from their voices that they were trying to curry favor. They knew it was foolish. It was their last bit of pride. That battle may have been child's play to their enemy, but they couldn't let the pride of the warriors who had died be for nothing.

There was no reply. The king on his throne only gave them an openly appraising once-over; there was no sign of movement.

The one who answered was the demon with black wings sprouting from her hips. "Our master doesn't believe you're in the appropriate posture to hear him speak!"

"...What?"

In response to their confusion, the woman called to the one like a man with a tail, who was standing next to her. "Demiurge!"

"You will bow down."

Suddenly Zaryusu and Shasuryu got down on their knees and plunged their heads into the muddy marsh. They couldn't help but think it was the right thing to do.

Frigid, muddy water clung to their bodies, and the broken ice refroze.

They essentially couldn't get back up. No matter how much strength they put into moving, they didn't budge. Their bodies were robbed of all freedom, as if a giant invisible hand were pressing down on them from above.

"Don't struggle."

The moment this second command reached their ears, somewhere in both Zaryusu and Shasuryu a new brain grew—one that would listen to someone else's orders—and they sensed themselves moving according to it.

Seeing the two weakened lizardmen bowing humiliatingly into the mud, the demon lady seemed satisfied and spoke to her master. "Lord Ainz, it appears they've assumed the listening posture."

"Thanks... Raise your heads."

"You are permitted to raise your heads."

Moving the only part of their bodies that they could freely, Zaryusu and Shasuryu looked up as if in awe of his supreme-

ness.

"I…am the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown. I offer you my thanks for assisting with that experiment earlier."

Experiment? We lost that many of our friends and he calls it an experiment?! Violent emotion at the horror of it blazed up as a flame in Zaryusu's heart, but he held it back. It was still too soon.

"Now then, what I'd like to discuss is…you entering under our rule."

Shasuryu was about to say something, but the caster Ainz stopped him by raising a hand slightly. Realizing nothing good would come of ignoring him and speaking, Shasuryu obediently kept quiet.

"But I'm sure you don't want to be ruled by the army you just defeated in battle. So we're going to attack you again in four hours. If you can claim victory yet again, I promise to withdraw entirely. I'll even pay an adequate amount of reparations."

"…May I ask a question?"

"That's fine. Ask away."

"Will the one attacking be you…Sir Gown?"

The silver-haired girl behind him moved her eyebrows slightly, and the lady demon's smile intensified. Perhaps they didn't feel the address was up to their master's level. The reason they didn't do anything about it must have been because he didn't respond.

Paying no attention to them, Ainz continued, "Ha, no. The one attacking is a trusted aide of mine…just one man. His name is

Cocytus."

Hearing that, Zaryusu was assaulted by despair, as if the world were crumbling. If the enemy were going to attack in numbers, the lizardmen might have had a chance—that is, maybe it would have been more of the same unpleasant army from the day before. In that case, they would have had a slim chance of winning.

But that chance was gone.

It would be a solo attacker.

An army that had lost once already, after displaying this much force, would send a single man to attack? Unless it was some kind of punishment for the attacker in question, they had complete faith in him.

Someone a being with unfathomable power trusted… There was only one thing that person could be: another with unfathomable power—such that the lizardmen stood no chance of winning.

"We'll surren—"

"Don't be boring and say you'll surrender before you've even fought. C'mon, let's fight a bit. We'd like to taste a proper victory."

As if robbing Shasuryu of his words, Ainz crushed the end of his sentence.

In short, you mean to make an example of us? You scum, Zaryusu snapped in his head.

As the stronger power, they would expunge the reality of their loss with a massacre. In other words, what was about to occur was ritual sacrifice, nothing less than a trampling of the

lizardmen in order to rob them completely of their will to rebel.

"That's all I wanted to discuss. I'll be watching in four hours, so make it entertaining!"

"Please wait! Will this ice melt?"

Win or lose, it would be brutal for the lizardmen to live on the frozen lake.

"Ohhh…right." He'd forgotten. His tone was that flippant. "I just didn't want to get all muddy walking in the marsh. Once we get back to the other side, I'll cancel the spell's effects."

"Wha—?!" Both Zaryusu and Shasuryu gasped in shock, unable to believe their ears.

He froze it because he didn't want to get muddy?!

The expression This can't be! wasn't nearly strong enough. The power imbalance was too great. This was a being who could bend the powers of nature like it was nothing—and for any stupid whim he wished.

This is who we've been up against? Both Zaryusu and Shasuryu were assailed by the fear of lost children.

"All right, farewell, lizardmen. Gate." Having said everything he'd come to say, Ainz waved his hand slightly. A hemisphere of darkness appeared before the throne, and he disappeared into it.

"Good-bye, lizardmen."

"Later, lizardmans."

"Fare ye well, lizardmen."

The two women and single boy who had been in attendance addressed them disinterestedly and followed their master into

the darkness.

"U-umm, er, well, take care."

"Eggshell teal, clay-ebony-cinnabar-lime-white. "

The dark-elf girl and the strange monster were swallowed up by the darkness.

*"**You may go free.** Well, give us some fun, lizardmen."*

The man with the tail was the last to disappear, and when his gentle voice echoed out, the weights holding down the pair of lizardmen melted away.

Left suddenly alone, still prostrate in the mud, Zaryusu and Shasuryu no longer had the energy to rise.

The freezing chill of the marsh didn't even bother them anymore. The shock to their minds was far more intense.

"Dammit..." An uncharacteristic utterance coming from Shasuryu. It contained a mixture of emotions.

When Zaryusu and Shasuryu returned, the chiefs of each tribe, who had climbed up on the mud walls to evade the ice, were there to meet them. There were no other lizardmen in the area.

They'd probably figured they would need to discuss in secret. So Shasuryu probably thought he didn't need to hide anything. He spoke frankly, relaying every last detail of the so-called "discussion."

There was no big reaction to his heavy tale; everyone's breath just caught slightly. They had probably guessed what sort of "negotiations" would take place.

"Got it. 'N what about the ice? We can't fight if it doesn't

melt."

"That won't be a problem. He said he would cancel the spell."

"That's what you got out of the negotiations, huh?"

Shasuryu just smiled faintly in response to the Small Fang tribe chief's question.

Comprehending his meaning, the chief cheerlessly shook his head. "While you were out, we did some investigating, you see, and…there are enemies inside the lake. They look like skeleton soldiers. It seems like they're standing by in positions surrounding the village."

"No…let…escape."

"So they're really serious about this…"

"I guess so."

The four who hadn't met the ruler sighed. Perhaps they had also arrived at the conclusion that it would be a ritual sacrifice.

"Well, what'll we do?"

"Mobilize all warriors. As well as…everyone he—"

"Brother…could we do it with just five?" Keeping a slightly confused Crusch in his field of vision, Zaryusu continued his petition to not only Shasuryu but also all the males. "Their intention is to put on a show of their overwhelming power, so I doubt they'll kill us all. If that's the case, then we'll need a leader to unite the survivors. If you think about the future of lizardmankind, it would be a waste for all of us here to die."

Two chiefs looked between Zaryusu and Crusch and voiced their agreement.

"...He's right, don't you think, Shasuryu?"

"Yes. Zaryusu, true."

Then, having gotten Zenbel's approval—"Sounds good! Fine by me!"—Shasuryu no longer had any reason to veto his brother's wishes. "Okay, let's do that. Someone needs to survive and lead the tribe. I was thinking that as well. Crusch is the right person for the job. Being an albino might be a minus, but her priest skills will be indispensible."

"Wait just a minute! I'm going to fight with you!" Crusch shouted, wondering why they were leaving her behind so late in the game. "Besides, if someone's going to stay behind, wouldn't Shasuryu be better? He's the chief everyone trusts the most!"

"That's why he's no good. Their intention is to show us their overwhelming power. They're probably aiming to make us lose heart so they can conquer us easier. So if there was a lizardman left alive who gave everyone hope..."

"And...out of all us chiefs and so on here, you actually have the worst reputation."

Crusch didn't know what to say. It was the undeniable truth that she, the albino, was least popular.

Convincing them with words will be impossible, she thought and turned to Zaryusu. "I'm going with you. Didn't you have me resign myself when you called me to follow you here? And now you're gonna tell me this?"

"...Back then, depending on the situation, everyone might have died, but now it seems like one of us will be able to make it."

"Don't give me that!" The air seemed to crackle with Crusch's anger. Several strikes sounded against the mud wall. The intense emotion was making her tail go out of control.

“Zaryusu, you convince her. See you in four hours.” With that, Shasuryu walked off. Following a moment later were the crack of breaking ice and some splashes. The other three chiefs had hopped off the wall and gone with him. Zenbel raised a hand in a slight wave without turning around.

After watching them go, Zaryusu turned back to Crusch. “Crusch, please understand.”

“How can I?! Plus, there’s nothing that says for sure that we’ll lose! With my priest powers, we might be able to win!”

How empty those words sounded. Not even Crusch herself believed them.

“I don’t want to send the female I love to her death. Please just grant this foolish male’s wish.”

Crusch embraced him, visibly heartbroken.

“That was a dirty move!”

“Sorry…”

“You’re probably going to die!”

“Yeah…”

That was true. The chance of his survival was low. No, probably just nonexistent.

“In only a week’s time, you stole my heart, and now you’re telling me to just see you off?”

“Yeah…”

“I’m so glad I met you, but it was also horrible luck.”

Crusch’s arms tightened around Zaryusu’s back as if to say

she didn't want them to ever part.

Zaryusu had no words.

What should I say?

What can I say to make it okay?

These thoughts tormented him.

After a little while, Crusch looked up. Her face was full of determination.

He was worried she would say she was going with them no matter what.

Instead she made a clear declaration: "I'm gonna get pregnant!"

"What?!"

"Let's go!"



Chapter 5 The Freezing War God

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The Freezing War God

1

Ainz and the others' base was where Cocytus had been the previous day, the fortress Aura was in the process of building. If they listened closely, they could hear the sound of construction in the distance.

When Ainz entered one of the rooms, Victim, who had been silently following, spoke to him. "Eggshell teal fuchsia-scarlet-ash-crimson-clay-grape, gray-jonquil-orange teal peach-peach eggshell chestnut-gray-ivory-opal khaki clay-brown-eggshell scarlet-jonquil-jonquil-silk-grape-crimson. "

"Nice work today. Then until we get back, please watch over level one."

"Ivory-orange-peach-grape-cream-grape-orange-jonquil. "

"Gate."

Victim disappeared into the gate of darkness (leading to the first level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick) that Ainz made.

After seeing off the guardian that had a powerful death-activated detainment skill, Ainz turned his attention to the room. At the same time, he sensed Aura in the back, staring at the floor.

She had probably been trying to get the interior decoration together for Ainz's arrival. There was evidence of her painful efforts here and there around the room, but it still didn't look as good as Nazarick. She seemed ashamed.

It's really not so bad, though…

Ainz was once a normal person, so it didn't bother him so much. His quarters in Nazarick weren't bad, either, but they were too luxurious; sometimes he didn't know what to do with himself there. Here, he could actually relax, so it was nice.

I want an eight-tatami-mat studio. Maybe I should just secretly make one somewhere. Oh! I have to make sure to praise my underling's work. I have to tell Aura how satisfied I am with what she's done here.

Watch over your workers with gratitude. Without trust, they will not flourish. Ainz remembered the words he'd seen framed and hung in the president's office at a client company. He didn't know who'd said it, but he thought it was a great quote. That was how an ideal boss should act. *You have to express gratitude in words. If you don't praise people, they won't work… Something like that?*

"Sorry I insisted on staying here, Aura. You don't have to worry about anything. I think highly of your work, and since you prepared this place for me, I consider it equal to Nazarick."

"…Yes, sir." Her eyes widened a little.

Did that make her feel better? Ainz wondered, but he couldn't think of anything else good to say, so he examined the room again to divert the conversation.

It still smelled strongly of wood. Returning to Nazarick would definitely be safer than staying somewhere so vulnerable. This place had no defensive spells cast on it—in a way, it was like a house made of paper. But one could also say it was the perfect place to set himself up as bait to catch a big fish.

Since its location was fairly removed from the lake, the only ones who could come after him here would be *Yggdrasil* players, if there were any, or those with equivalent power. In other words, he'd planned it so that any raid on this place would reveal a pow-

erful enemy.

Of course it was dangerous. But Ainz felt that nothing ventured meant nothing gained.

Nobody's coming? Or…did this operation also fail? …What's that? "Aura, let me ask you something. What is that?" Ainz's gaze fell on a white chair in the back of the room. It had a tall back and an imposing appearance. It was so magnificently crafted that it would have done well as a work of art—as long as one issue was ignored.

"Though it be plain, I prepared you a throne." It was Demiurge, following behind him, who answered.

I figured, thought Ainz and asked another question. "…What kind of bones are those?"

"Various different animals. I collected the good bits from things like griffins and wyverns."

"I…I see…"

It was a throne made of numerous bones. Nothing like it existed in Nazarick, so Demiurge must have made it while he was out. It seemed to contain more than a few things that couldn't be anything but skulls—human, or perhaps subhuman. Although the throne was made from bleach-white bones with no blood or meat clinging to them, it still seemed to radiate an unpleasant gory smell.

Should I sit in this creepy thing? Ainz hesitated for a moment. But his subordinate had prepared it for him, so it would be rude to not sit in it. It would be different if he had a legitimate reason to refuse…

After considering several options, Ainz thumped his hand. "… Shalltear, I believe I said I would punish you. I'll do it right now.

Yes…I'll humiliate you."

"My lord!" She seemed a bit surprised at the sudden address.

"Down on your knees and hang your head. Get on all fours."

"Yes, sir." Looking slightly confused, she proceeded to the place he'd indicated in the center of the room and got into the position he'd described.

Ainz moved next to her and sat down on her slender back.

"L-Lord Ainz!" Shalltear emitted an airy cry of surprise. The reason she didn't move a muscle despite being so shaken was because Ainz was on top of her.

"Be my chair here. Got it?"

"Yes, sir!"

Ainz shifted his gaze away from Shalltear, who seemed awfully happy, to Demiurge. "Sorry, Demiurge. Perhaps another time."

"Aha! Brilliant! That you would sit on a guardian! Certainly no one else could have such a chair; in other words, how perfectly suited to a Supreme Being! I'm impressed as always, Lord Ainz. I would never have thought of it!"

"I—I see…" Ainz looked away from Demiurge's fairly sparkling face and wondered what the big smile was for when a beautiful woman addressed him, beaming.

"Excuse me, Lord Ainz. May I exit the room for just a moment? I'll return straightaway."

"What's the matter, Albedo? Well, it's fine. Go ahead."

She thanked him and left the room. Immediately afterward they heard a woman's voice shout, "Raaaaaagh!" and the noise of

something smashing into the wall. The whole building shook.

A minute later, Albedo returned to the silent room wearing her usual gentle smile. “I’ve returned, Lord Ainz. Oh, Aura, when I left the room, I accidentally bumped into the wall. It seems to have broken, so do you think you could fix it later? Sorry about that.”

“Oh, uh, okay… Sure, I’ll fix it.”

Ainz sighed and swallowed all the things he wanted to say. He arrested his gaze, which threatened to ascend into the air, and tethered it to his staff and its ominous aura.

He couldn’t very well bring the real thing to such a dangerous location, so this was an imitation Guild Weapon, a prototype that he’d crafted. Since he had included an item that had been lying around in the treasury since their experiments with effects, visually, it was practically perfect—a polished fake.

If the Guild Weapon was destroyed, the guild would collapse, so he couldn’t just carry it around casually. That was why he had left it in the care of the domain guardian of the Cherry Blossom Sanctuary on level eight.

I’ve thought of defensive actions we can take if a ring gets stolen, but I’d really like to… Well, I guess we can’t really test for that… As Ainz pondered, Shalltear began to fidget. She was making slight adjustments so the position of Ainz’s butt would make it easier for him to sit. Feeling a bizarre tickle, he looked down at the back of her head.

She was breathing hard.

He was probably heavy. The slender back beneath him was that of a fourteen-year-old girl. A large adult was seated on a little girl’s back. It hit him what a perverted, shameful, cruel thing he was doing, and he thought maybe he’d gone a bit too far.

Shalltear was an NPC created by an old friend. Peroroncino probably never thought she would be used this way. Ainz felt like he was dishonoring his old guildmate, so he thought it could count as punishment for himself as well, but he knew that was foolish. *I shouldn't be causing Shalltear this much pain… I'm hopelessly awful.*

"Shalltear, does it hurt?"

He would stop. He was about to stand when she turned her head around to look up at him. Her face was flushed red, and her eyes glittered with lust. "It doesn't hurt at all! It's more like a reward!"

She panted, exhaling the abnormal heat building up in her body with every breath, and Ainz was reflected in her gooey eyes. Her glistening beet-red tongue licked her lips, leaving behind a bewitching sparkle of light. The slight wriggling of her body reminded him of a snake.

No matter how he looked at it, she was burning up with desire.

"…Yikes."

It creeped him right out.

He instinctively began to stand up.

No, I can't do that.

This was Shalltear's punishment. And Shalltear's failure was born of his own mistake. Resisting his desire to get away from her would be his punishment.

Ainz quashed his uncomfortable emotions.

He endured his squirming, practically snorting chair and couldn't help but wonder, *Peroroncino, how much of a perv did*

you make her?

"Now then…let's get down to business. It seems like we frightened them pretty well."

"I think it went perfectly, Lord Ainz."

"Indeed—the looks on those lizardmen's faces!"

Ainz smiled with relief at the guardians' feedback. He hadn't actually been able to read the changes in the lizardmen's faces. They resembled humans more than reptiles, but their expressions were still completely different. "I see. Then I guess the demonstration of our power that Cocytus wanted as phase one was a success." He breathed a relaxed sigh.

Of course, he would expect nothing less from a super-tier spell that could be used only four times a day. He'd gone all out and cast the Creation; if they hadn't freaked out, it would have been depressing.

"Now then, Demiurge. How long will it take to compile the data about how much of the lake froze?"

"We're currently working on it, but due to the ice covering a larger area than expected, progress is slow. If it's all right with you, we'll take a little more time."

Ainz held out a hand to stop Demiurge from kneeling and then placed it near his mouth. *It covered a wider area than expected, but I guess we can call it a successful experiment…?*

The Creation was a super-tier spell that made it possible to change environmental effects. Players used it in *Yggdrasil* to stop the heat in a volcanic region or the chill in an icy region.

Sure, they could have exhibited their power without a super-tier spell. But he had cast it also as a test of scale—to see how far

its effects would spread. In *Yggdrasil*, the Creation covered quite a large area. When he'd tried it inside Nazarick, it had covered the entire eighth level, but he didn't know what kind of effect it would have on the outside world.

In *Yggdrasil*, it affected an area, but he wanted to know how big an "area" was in this world. If he cast it on a plain and it covered the entire thing, that would be overkill.

If he'd frozen the entire lake, that was too wide a range. Apparently he needed to exercise some caution with super-tier spells.

"Okay, Aura. How's the security net going?"

"I took the undead you lent me and put them on watch for a mile radius, but so far we haven't caught much of anything. I've also sent out some of my magical beasts with detection skills in a two-mile radius, but I haven't received reports of anyone suspicious."

"I see… There's a possibility someone would use the skill Perfect Unknowable on approach. What about that case?"

"No worries. I teamed up with Shalltear, and we're using some undead with good detection skills as well."

"Fantastic."

Aura grinned in response to Ainz's praise. Gone was the depressed look of before.

"We're giving them a big enough opening—why hasn't the enemy who used the World Item on Shalltear made a move?" With all eyes on him, he repeated the question again to no one in particular. "Why hasn't there been any attempt to observe Nazarick or this place?"

“Could there be some sort of surveillance that the current security net can’t pick up? Perhaps using a World Item?”

Ainz cocked his head in response to Demiurge’s question. “… Momon considered that hypothesis, but…even if there were some sort of World Item surveillance, it wouldn’t work on him, since he possesses a World Item as well. It’d have to be naked-eye observations or another physical method… I guess there’s always magic, but I thought they’d switch…” The questions on the guardians’ faces made him realize he hadn’t said enough. “Hmm… How can I explain this? …There was one time we secretly held a precious-metal mine, and because we had monopolized it, market prices soared. Someone mounted a plot to take it from us using Ouroboros, one of the twenty.”

Ainz smiled. He’d been annoyed at the time, but thinking back on it now, it was a good memory—even though he’d gotten killed and dropped some pretty rare items.

“What?! How dare they rob the Supreme Beings of their land! I won’t allow it! Please give us orders immediately for its recapture!”

At Albedo’s shout, Ainz hurriedly looked over at her. All the guardians were hostile and murderous. Demiurge was usually calm and composed, but even his face was twisted into a frown. Glimpses of determination showed through Mare’s timid mien—screaming, *I’ll kill you!* Shalltear was his chair, so he couldn’t see her, but he sensed her body tensing through his seat.

“Calm down! This story ended a long time ago!” Ainz raised a hand and ordered them to relax. They regained some of their composure, but the tranquil surface hid roiling hot lava underneath. Ainz hurried along with his story, partly just to change the subject. “When they used Ouroboros, it made it so we couldn’t get into the world where the mine was. During that time they probably made a search and discovered it. By the time the seal broke and we were able to get back in, the mine had already been

stolen."

Most of the guild members had died in the reckless take-back operation that followed, but Ainz tactfully left that out.

"Okay, what I wanted to say was this: The world had been sealed, but if you were in possession of a World Item, you could still get in. Likewise, even if our enemy is observing us with a World Item, they shouldn't be able to find us."

While several voices claimed to understand, Ainz wondered whether that was really the case.

There was a very good chance, but there was nothing that made it absolute.

When another one of the twenty, Wu Xing Controlling Cycle, had been used, players in possession of World Items had received messages from the devs and items in apology. The apology read: "The changes to the world made with a World Item shouldn't really apply to those of you holding one, but we realized it would put too heavy a burden on the system to keep only your data the way it is. Therefore, we are taking the liberty of making an exception and modifying it."

So there was no guarantee they could avoid a World Item's effects, although that time *was* an exception.

The World Item protecting Nazarick was a specific countermeasure for intelligence magic and the like. If it couldn't prevent World Item surveillance, it was meaningless.

"That's why I thought they'd try to get in touch with Momon, but…the only ones who approach him are mothers with newborn babies and adventurers."

It was all people saying things like, "Please touch my baby so he'll grow up strong," "Please hit me so I can grow stronger as an

adventurer," or, "Please shake my hand." Nobody requested a private conversation.

That was why Ainz was awaiting the enemy's move with various apparent vulnerabilities in different places.

That was one of the reasons he hadn't given Cocytus a World Item—to make him a decoy to lure out the enemy. They were terrifying because they were unknown. If he could get them to show themselves even just once, he'd be able to take appropriate measures against them.

"Regarding that…will you forgive me for saying something foolish?"

"What is it, Albedo?"

"As you said, your plan is to reveal the unknown, but could it be that perhaps the reason the enemy stays away is that you are an unknown?"

Ack… "Th-that's fine, Albedo. I've taken that into consideration."

No, he most definitely had not. He'd been convinced that because he was a certain way, his enemy must have been, too. … *What a stupid mistake. Has this been a giant failure from the very beginning, then?*

"Then please excuse me. Also…"

He couldn't sob, *Miss Albedo, please just stop*. Ainz felt like he'd taken an important test and realized after time was called that he'd missed a bubble and filled all the answers in off by one.

"You told them that you defeated Shalltear with an item…"

"Yes, that's what I reported to the guild. I wanted to avoid

Momon seeming so strong that people would be afraid of him. Apparently magic-sealing crystals are extremely rare, so I doubt someone would break one just to test it. That means the story that I unleashed a crystal—that I beat her with an item—is plausible, and people probably won't be so on guard against me."

"What you say is true. Against someone who believes crystals are very rare items, it's an effective plan."

The vagueness of her words nagged at him like a piece of food stuck between his molars, and he grew even more anxious.

"But would it work against someone who has multiple crystals like you, Lord Ainz?"

"...Huh? Ohhh, I see what you mean." He pretended he understood, but really he wasn't getting it.

What if there were *someone who had a bunch of crystals? It's still true that in this world they are extremely valuable items. Is Albedo worried that someone* would *break one to experiment?* He didn't think so.

His brain took the bad feeling he had and ran with it. He hated himself because he wanted to ask her to explain better, but he'd already gone and acted like he knew everything. *More importantly, is it even okay for me to be the one deciding Nazarick's plan of action? It's like I thought I was navigating a ship, but we're actually climbing a mountain...*

He wanted to run away. As fast as he could.

He'd experienced now and then the weight of being a ruler—it was especially heavy when he failed—and he just couldn't handle it. He let out a sob in his mind.

Of course he couldn't run away. Now that he'd taken on the name Ainz Ooal Gown, he couldn't leave behind the Great Tomb

and the NPCs his guildmates had created—they were treasures. More than anything, he didn't want to be a parent who abandoned his children.

I'm also worried you'll betray, abandon, or give up on me. That's why it's so important for me to be the Ainz Ooal Gown you hope for and believe in.

That was why he made such a grand impression. He practiced in front of the mirror to master a pose he was confident projected "ruler."

"It's not an issue, but I understand your worry very well." Then he looked around. "Albedo…please explain it to the other guardians."

"Oh yes, my lord. If there were someone with multiple crystals like Lord Ainz…who was familiar with what powers crystals had, they would see through the lie. In other words, they would know that it wasn't a crystal he used. I don't know how seriously Shalltear fought, but the ones who used the World Item would regard Momon and her as equally strong. So perhaps they've decided that approaching Momon, the mysterious warrior who showed up suddenly in E-Rantel, is dangerous. I believe that might…have something to do with it."

"…Albedo and the rest of you guardians, if that is the case, what do you think their next move will be?"

"If I may be so presumptuous… It's possible that if they mean to oppose you, they'll spread a rumor that you're in league with the vampire, even if they have no way to back it up, in order to take you down. They probably aren't happy that Momon is making a name for himself and growing more powerful."

Urrgh, Ainz groaned in his mind.

One reason he'd gone to E-Rantel was to acquire information,

but his other purpose was to make a name for his persona, Momon—and also, just a bit, to run away. Once he'd birthed a great hero, his plan was to reveal his true identity, take all the accumulated praise for Ainz Ooal Gown, and spread the name far and wide.

It would also hopefully have the effect of showing that the former infamous PK guild had turned over a new leaf; Ainz was helping people under the name Momon. But now all that might go up in smoke.

"Nnn, but Demiurge, wouldn't it cause more damage to spread the rumor after Momon became famous?"

"Maybe, but it depends, Aura. If Lord Ainz has enough renown, the rumor might just be regarded as a lie to make him look bad. They need to get him before he becomes too big and experienced."

"Magnificent, Demiurge." Ainz gave a magnanimous nod to Demiurge as he bowed and acted as though he'd been thinking the same thing.

"Then let me ask you something else. Why hasn't the enemy done that yet?"

Demiurge raised a finger. "First, they haven't finished gathering information about Momon yet. If he really clashed with Shalltear head-on and won, they wouldn't want to get on his bad side. They might even want to have him as a friend. Second—" He raised another finger. "What if their meeting with Shalltear was just random happenstance? They might have been on their way to do something else—a totally uninvolved third party."

"There's no way they just *happened* to meet her, Demiurge. That'd be a ridiculous coincidence…" But Ainz realized as he spoke that the possibility did exist.

He had concluded that the incident was an enemy attack aimed at Shalltear, or perhaps even at Nazarick, but she had been attacked not long after they had arrived. It seemed way too precise to single her out under those circumstances.

Am I jumping at shadows? Ainz narrowed his eyes—the red flames in his empty orbits.

In the end, his problem was inadequate information. He needed more help. He wanted greater power. *The biggest issue is that we haven't established an intelligence network.* That was what he'd ordered Sebas and his crew to do, but there was only so much intelligence a few agents could gather on their own. At first he had been thinking it would be enough to just acquire a basic understanding of the world, but things had progressed to the point where that wouldn't cut it anymore.

They couldn't gather the information they needed as simple adventurers and the butler of a merchant. This was because the facts known to ordinary citizens were completely different from that of government executives and other influential people.

He also didn't have anyone who could do the analysis to tell what was important and what wasn't.

"Sheesh. One way or another, our biggest issue right now is lack of information. We have to be on guard against an enemy we can't see, so we're not moving fast enough…"

In response to Ainz's grumbling, a glint heralding a brilliant plan appeared in Demiurge's eye. "Then what about joining a country, Lord Ainz?"

After a silent moment, Albedo said, "Ohhh," as if she understood.

Ainz followed her a beat later. "Oh, I see what you're getting at, Demiurge."

But the other three guardians cocked their heads like they didn't get it. Then Aura meekly posed the question. "Lord Ainz, why would that be a good idea?"

Ainz was glad his face didn't show emotion. "Sheesh… Mare, Shalltear, do either of you understand what Demiurge said?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"I see. Then there's no helping it. Demiurge, tell them."

"My lord, understood. Everyone, Lord Ainz has been concerned about the possible existence of a powerful, unknown enemy. If we were to encounter that powerful enemy, we'd need a way to settle things via negotiation."

Teacher, I don't understand. It was written on the faces of the three students, plus one.

Professor Demiurge, sensing his explanation was too difficult, began again after adjusting it to their level. "What if Lord Ainz were controlled by a World Item?"

"I'd kill the jerk controlling him!"

"…No, that's not what I mean, Aura. Basically, if he were controlled, that could be an excuse, right? We know with absolute certainty that someone is out there controlling people with World Items, so that makes it fairly persuasive."

"In other words," Assistant Professor Albedo took over from Professor Demiurge, "we pretend to be under someone's umbrella to create a justification for Nazarick's actions going forward. If we say we had no choice because our country ordered us to do something, we can shift the blame to some extent, even if we have an enemy on the same level as us. If they wanted to avoid a head-on battle, they'd probably put up with it, right?"

“I see… Even if our enemy took offense at something we did, if we had a reason, we could pull in a third-party ally… Is that what you mean? I’d expect nothing less from Lord Ainz…”

Ainz reached out a hand to pet his chair’s head like an evil villain petting the Siamese cat in his lap. “The one who came up with this plan wasn’t me—it was Demiurge. If you want to praise someone, you should probably praise him.”

“No, that’s not true. It seemed you had already reached the same conclusion.”

“Oh, uh, hrm. Well, I don’t mean to take credit for your idea. Hmm. Besides, joining a country would make gathering information easier as well.” A nation would probably already have the intelligence network Ainz was frantically trying to build, so inserting someone from Nazarick into that network would get them much further than they were now. Ainz’s remark had been an indirect request for feedback from his two wise advisers as to whether such a plan would alleviate his earlier concerns as well, and it caused Demiurge to smile warmly.

“It’s just as you say.”

Ainz could tell that behind his words lurked the sentiment, *As expected, you already knew?*

“Ohh, aha. Brilliant as always, Lord Ainz, thinking so far ahead… I see… So the lower life-forms can be of some use to us after all.” Following Albedo’s comment, all the guardians, including his chair Shalltear, radiated pure sparkling admiration at him.

Ainz felt extremely awkward, but at least he’d gotten the pair’s approval. He was relieved he wasn’t wrong.

“Then…let’s infiltrate. Which country?”

“The countries in the area are the kingdom, the empire, and the theocracy, correct?”

“Wh-what about a country farther away? The council state or the Sacred Kingdom?”

“I’d like to avoid the more distant countries. And for the time being, while we’re still underinformed, I’d like to steer clear of the theocracy. So the kingdom or the empire… From Sebas’s reports, the kingdom doesn’t seem too appealing, but…I guess we have to think about it. Now then—” He prepared to change the topic and gestured at the mirror. “We’ve given the lizardmen some time. Allow me to make sure they aren’t doing anything that might surprise us.”

A bird’s-eye view of the lizardman village gradually appeared in the Mirror of Remote Viewing. Little specks were running around inside.

Ainz moved his hand, changing the scenery visible in the mirror.

First, naturally, he zoomed in.

That made it clear that the lizardmen were frantically preparing for war.

“Wasted effort…,” Demiurge murmured at them gently.

Okay, where are you? They all look the same… Ainz frowned at the image, trying to find the six from before. *Oh! Here’s one in armor. Is this the guy who threw the rock? And here’s the one with the great sword. It really is hard to tell the difference between them. It’s easy if they’re different colors or equipped in different ways…but ah, that one with the arm…found him.*

After observing, he restlessly moved the viewpoint around as if he didn’t know what else to do. “…The white one and the one with

the magic weapon aren't here!"

"Errr, what was his name? Zaryusu?"

"Oh yeah. That was it."

When Aura chimed in, he remembered the lizardman who had come to the negotiations.

"He's probably in his house."

"Maybe."

The Mirror of Remote Viewing couldn't see inside a house—not normally.

"Demiurge, the Infinity Haversack."

"Understood." Demiurge bowed once, took the shoulder bag on the table that had been moved into the corner of the room, and politely handed it to Ainz. Ainz took out a scroll.

Then he cast a spell with it.

The spell created a sense organ that could see the invisible and insubstantial. It couldn't penetrate a magic barrier if there was one, but it could get through any regular wall, no matter how thick. If for some reason it couldn't, that would prove that they were up against an opponent who didn't let their guard down.

By linking it with the Mirror of Remote Viewing, he allowed the guardians to see what he was seeing and then moved the eyeball-like organ floating in the air.

"Let's try this house first." He haphazardly chose a shabby-looking house, the nearest one, and sent the sense organ inside. Even though the interior of the house was dark, it looked like broad daylight.

Inside, the white one was pinned down with her tail up, and the black one was mounted on top of her.

The onlookers were bewildered.

At first, he didn't know what they were doing. Then, he didn't understand *why* they were doing it.

Ainz moved the sense organ back outside without a word.

"…"

Full of misery, Ainz put his hands to his head.

The guardians standing by exchanged glances, not knowing what to say.

"…An absolutely disgusting bunch, they are. Cocytus is about to attack them and that's what they're doing?"

"You're right, exactly right."

"Uh, er, u-umm…"

"It's just as you say, Demiurge. We should punish them!"

"I'm jealous…"

Ainz raised a hand, and the guardians' comments stopped. "… Well, they're about to die. I saw in a movie that at times like this, species' preservation instincts kick in or something." He nodded as if to approve of his own opinion.

"Just as you say, my lord."

"That much should be permitted, indeed."

"Quite right, quite right!"

“Uh, er, u-umm…”

“I wish you would do that to me…”

“…Shut up, you guys.”

The guardians all closed their mouths, and Ainz sighed.

“…Man, I feel kinda demotivated. Well, there’s probably no one in the village we need to watch out for anymore. But don’t drop your guard! They could be coming this way! Aura…” Ainz froze and looked at the two children.

Shit! What have I done? They aren’t old enough to have had sex education— no, it’s still too early! He had the feeling this was how a father felt when the family was watching TV together and a hot love scene came on. *What do the mothers and fathers of the world say when their children ask how babies are made? This is bad! How could I do this to BubblingTeapot’s two… Phew, well, it’s no problem. Albedo’s no good. Demiurge could…explain the medical science of it… I’ll make him a candidate. Shall-tear…*might *actually not be so bad? Anyhow, we can figure it out another day.*

Shelving the issue for the time being, Ainz cleared his throat. “Ahem. If the security net catches anyone, all the guardians and I will move out.”

In the event a *Yggdrasil* player showed up, he wasn’t planning on keeping his promise of staying out of the lizardman village. If the tribes couldn’t be made allies, he would crush them with all his might to prevent an intelligence leak—even if he had to bring out the big guns from level eight.

He shook off the guilt of breaking his promise with Cocytus. For the most important things, a fib was sometimes expedient.

“Okay, when it’s time for the show, let’s kick back and enjoy

Cocytus's battle."

2

Four hours went by in the blink of an eye.

The ice on the marsh had melted, and the warriors were gathered by the main gate. Not many had lived through the fierce battle of the previous day to participate in this one.

In total, they were 316.

The reason only warriors were participating was because Shasuryu had said, "There aren't a lot of enemies, so if we go out there with too many men, we'll just get in one another's way."

At a glance it seemed like a legitimate reason, but of course, the truth was something else.

Zaryusu gazed at the gathered lizardman warriors from a slightly removed position. Their bodies were painted with the crests that proved the ancestral spirits had descended among them, and the willpower on their faces could cut like a knife. It didn't seem like anyone had defeat on their minds.

Lizardmen nearby cheered for the warriors. Among them, there were many who couldn't hide their fears.

Zaryusu struggled to fake confidence so his internal hesitation wouldn't show, so the others wouldn't realize this battle was an offering to the King of Death.

This fight was for the King of Death to show off his strength to the lizardmen, to obliterate their will to resist. They had no

chance of victory from the start, and behind Shasuryu's earlier statement was the desire to keep the victims to a minimum.

Zaryusu looked away from the lizardmen and shot a penetrating glare at the enemy side. The skeletons hadn't taken a single step from their previous positions. He couldn't see the monster Cocytus among them. *He can't just be one of these skeletons, can he? This is the King of Death's aide. He won't be any ordinary monster*. He was sure he would feel it all the way to the tip of his tail when he laid eyes on him.

From behind Zaryusu, as he sank into his gloom, came the signature splashing sound of someone heavy wading through the marsh. "Yo, Zaryusu!" Zenbel called out to him in his usual carefree voice. Not a thing was different about him, even though they were about to go to their deaths.

"Morale is awesome, huh?"

"Yeah. It'll be great if they can maintain it when they face that Cocytus monster…"

"Right? Oh! Is it already time?"

Shasuryu was at the gate. All the lizardmen turned their attention to him and the two swamp elementals next to him.

Crusch wasn't there—she was pouring magical energy into the swamp elemental summoning. Between that and the long term–effect defensive spells she'd cast on Zaryusu, she probably wouldn't be able to move when she was done, she'd used so much magical energy. In fact, she'd told him that when the two of them had left the house—that she probably wouldn't see him again because she'd be passed out from using so much energy.

Feeling lonely with no one next to him, Zaryusu looked in the direction where he thought Crusch would be. Her expression when they had parted was tearing up his heart.

“Warriors! We march!” Shasuryu’s call to boost their fighting spirit sent the morale of the lizardmen in the area soaring. They were full of excitement.

I have to get back to the warriors. Zaryusu put a lid on the thoughts in his mind.

The lizardmen walked slowly forth with Shasuryu and the two swamp elementals out in front. They were leaving the village so that it wouldn’t get caught up in the fight. Zaryusu and Zenbel walked at the rear.

Zaryusu suddenly turned to look back. Those shabby mud walls, the worried lizardmen watching, and—

He breathed a faint sigh, cleared everything from his mind, and walked on—without murmuring the name of the female on the tip of his tongue.

The lizardmen walked through the marsh and took up a position midway between the village and the enemy skeletons.

They weren’t thinking about ranks. They were just scattered around, waiting for the fight to begin. At most, they’d have each tribe’s chief, Zaryusu, and the two elementals out front.

The enemy had probably been waiting for Zaryusu and company to arrive. The skeletons banged on their shields and stomped the ground. If the timing had been off, it would have just been noise, but the undead transformed the racket into a harmonious sound. It was so magnificent that anywhere but here it would have been worthy of applause.

While the sound attracted all the lizardmen’s attention, trees behind the skeletons in the forest started falling over.

There was only one reason huge trees with thick trunks like that would fall: Someone was cutting them down. A commotion

went through the lizardmen.

Since they couldn't see anyone, it was possible to imagine that multiple people were working together to cut them down. But the trees were crashing at intervals too precise for that to be true. It might have been possible, considering the perfectly ordered command of the undead they'd witnessed before, but none of the lizardmen thought so.

A strange feeling passed through their minds—that it was the work of a single actor.

What was strangest of all was that they couldn't hear a blade hitting the tree trunks until right before the trees collapsed. In other words, impossible as it might seem, someone incredibly strong must have been felling the thick trees with a single swing.

Cutting a huge tree in two… How much arm strength and what kind of blade would one need to do such a thing?

The sound of the falling trees combined with the rhythm of the skeletons banging their shields and slowly approached the lizardmen.

The defenders were shaken. Of course they were. There wasn't anyone who wouldn't be shaken under those circumstances. Even Zenbel, Zaryusu, and Shasuryu, who had braced themselves, were shaken—they were just skillfully hiding it.

Eventually the figure cutting through the forest came into view. At the same time, the skeletons' banging stopped.

In the unnatural silence was a mass of polished light blue. It sparkled so intensely it made one wonder how much light it would reflect if the sky weren't covered by that thick cloud. The being looked like an eight-foot-tall bipedal insect. If the face of an ant and a praying mantis were combined and then demonically warped, it would probably look like this. The hard exoskeleton

encasing his body was wrapped in a chill that sparkled like diamond dust. From his sturdy tail that was more than double his height sprouted countless spikes. His powerful lower jaws could surely sever a human arm with no trouble. His four arms featured sharp claws and were equipped with dazzling vambraces. From his neck hung a golden disk, and he wore silver anklets.

The appearance of an absolute power on par with the King of Death.

So that's Cocytus? Zaryusu's heart pounded, and at some point his breath had turned ragged.

None of the lizardmen had anything to say. Their eyes were drawn to the being who had shown himself, and they couldn't tear them away—not even if they were scared.

Without realizing it, they began to retreat. These lizardmen who had boosted their morale before coming, and Zaryusu and company, who had braced themselves for this moment—they all quailed before the appearance of this overwhelmingly powerful opponent.

I get that the King of Death and his entourage weren't going to fight us. But I had no idea how terrifying a powerful opponent who is ready to fight could be…

The monster they were up against was enough to make even Zaryusu want to run away, and he had a spell on him that should have canceled out fear. It was a miracle that the lizardmen who hadn't received spells weren't scrambling to flee.

Cocytus advanced toward them with slow steps.

His imposing figure entered the marsh and passed among the skeletons…

When he'd approached to about thirty yards from the lizard-

men, he stopped. Then he moved the insect head on top of his long, thin neck. As if he was looking for someone.

Zaryusu felt the gaze stop for a moment on him.

"NOW THEN, LORD AINZ IS WATCHING. PLEASE SHOW ME YOUR SPIRIT. BUT FIRST, ICE PILLAR."

He repeated the spell, and about twenty yards away, between him and the lizardmen, two pillars of ice thrust up out of the water.

"IT MAY BE RUDE TO YOU WARRIORS WHO CAME HERE PREPARED, BUT ALLOW ME TO TELL YOU SOMETHING: ACROSS THAT LINE IS DEATH. IF YOU INSIST ON ADVANCING PAST IT, KNOW THAT DEATH AWAITS YOU." Cocytus crossed two of his arms; it was a posture that said he made the rules.

"Hey, he's actually a pretty nice guy!"

Zaryusu nodded as if agreeing with Zenbel's outburst. Then he took a step forward. Following him, Zenbel, Shasuryu, and the other two chiefs took a step.

Shasuryu turned around and called out to the warriors who were about to follow them. "You guys can stay there… No, go back to the village. Otherwise you'll probably get mixed up in this and be killed."

"Hey, let us fight with you! We *are* scared…but still!"

"It's not cowardly to pull out. It's important to live!"

"Then why—?"

"Some lizardmen can't withdraw. That's just the way it is. How could a chief let his tribe get conquered without putting up a fight?"

“But, Chief, we’ll fight, too!”

“Hold up! Young fellows, go home. Leave the rest to us old fogies!” The lizardmen who had pushed their way to the front were plenty old but still far too young to be called elderly. There were about fifty-seven of them. When the others saw their expressions, they didn’t know what to say.

If there had been emotions like determination or resignation on their faces, the younger ones might have offered to accompany them, but their expressions contained a wish—the wish that those younger than them would survive and enjoy life.

The warriors, who had no words, moved off to the rear, frustrated.

Shasuryu turned back to Cocytus. “Didn’t mean to keep you waiting, Cocytus.”

Cocytus reached out an arm and curled one of his awfully long, thin fingers. *Come at me!*

In response, Shasuryu roared, “Chaaaaarge!”

“Rrrraaaaaaagh!” With a roar from the bottom of their hearts, the determined lizardmen raced across the marsh toward Cocytus.

Cocytus eyed the charging lizardmen coldly. “IT’S A SHAME, WARRIORS, BUT FIRST ALLOW ME TO THIN YOU OUT A BIT.” It was inconceivable that he would lose, even if they all reached him. Cocytus just judged that he should be selective.

Cocytus, as a warrior, would have rather shown respect and waited until they were in attack range to fight them. But under the circumstances (he was receiving more favor than he deserved), allowing the rabble to cross swords with a guardian of the Great Tomb of Nazarick would be disrespectful to the one

watching.

Cocytus unleashed his sealed aura.

It was an ability from his knight of Niflheim class: Frost Aura. The skill slightly inhibited the user's opponents' movement while dealing extreme chill damage. If he had put it on full blast, the lizardmen watching the battle would have been in range, but he didn't want to do that.

He held back the power.

Shorter range, less damage.

"THIS SEEMS ABOUT RIGHT." An arctic frost spread out from Cocytus to cover an area with a radius of about twenty-five yards. The dramatic change in temperature caused the atmosphere to rumble.

"...OKAY. THAT'S PROBABLY ENOUGH."

He suppressed his aura.

It lasted almost no time; the raging cold vanished as if it had never been there. But it definitely hadn't been a dream or an illusion. The proof was the fifty-seven lizardman bodies littering the marsh.

Only five could still move—the strongest five. With neither fear nor hesitation at the death of their comrades or Cocytus's power, they leaped into action at once.

A rock flew through the air. The first one to rush forward was the lizardman in armor. Two others followed him. The two swamp elementals (their bodies cracked from the chill) weren't as nimble and moved slowly behind them. The last lizardman cast a spell.

That stone, the first attack, had been aimed at Cocytus's neck,

but it was pointless because—"ALL GUARDIANS HAVE RESISTANCE TO PROJECTILE WEAPONS VIA AN ITEM OR WHATNOT." The rock was deflected as if it had hit an invisible shield.

The next challenger, the one running out in front, was the Razor Tail chief wearing one of the Four Great Treasures: White Dragon Bone. It was hard enough to repel Zaryusu's Frost Pain and the strongest armor available to the lizardmen.

Facing him, Cocytus drew a sword out of the air, as if he'd been holding it secretly in space. It was an *ōdachi*, a sword with a blade easily six feet long called Imperial Sword Zanshin. It was the keenest weapon of the twenty-one in his possession.

And now he swung it at the oncoming lizardman.

His swordsmanship was so sharp it practically cut the air itself, and the atmosphere's scream—a musical tone—echoed throughout the area. If it weren't for the situation, it would have been a pleasantly serene sound.

The moment after, the chief, armor and all, was sliced vertically in two, and the two halves separated and collapsed into the marsh.

Cocytus had cut through the lizardmen's strongest armor without putting even a nick in Imperial Sword Zanshin.

Without letting the death before their eyes faze them, the next two lizardmen split, one left, one right, and raised their weapons.

"Yaaaagh!" From the right, Zenbel's spear hand stabbed toward Cocytus's face with the power of Natural Iron Weapon and Iron Skin.

"Waaaagh!" From the left, Frost Pain stabbed toward his abdomen.

The attacks were based on the logic that in close combat it was difficult to use long weapons.

Of course, that went for only ordinary combatants.

Cocytus made a subtle dodge and took Zenbel's arm from the side with the middle of his blade. He moved with the long sword exactly as if it were part of his body.

Iron Skin made Zenbel's skin hard as steel, but Imperial Sword Zanshin's sharpness had already been proven on White Dragon Bone. The blade bit smoothly into his arm and continued in a graceful motion to the water's surface, easily severing the limb.

"Gahhhh!"

As blood spurted from Zenbel's stump of a right arm, Cocytus caught Frost Pain in his other hand.

"HMM, AHA. IT'S NOT A BAD SWORD, BUT..."

"Tch!" Giving up on pulling Frost Pain free (it wouldn't budge), Zaryusu unleashed a kick at Cocytus's knee. Cocytus didn't even attempt to avoid it, and a sharp pain ran through Zaryusu's foot. It was as if he'd kicked a wall harder than steel with all his might.

"Overspell: Mass Slight Cure Wounds!" In exchange for a vast amount of magical energy, Shasuryu was able to force a spell from an elite tier he would never normally be able to use and heal everyone.

"HRM..." Cocytus had never seen this magical boost before, and he observed Shasuryu with great interest.

The two swamp elementals came running in to block his view. They stood between him and Zenbel, whose severed arm was on the mend thanks to the healing spell, and tried to attack with

their tentacle-like arms. Before their attacks could connect, however, Cocytus slashed through the both of them, annoyed.

As the swamp elementals disintegrated into lumps of mud, Zaryusu punched Cocytus's compound eyes and stomach and chest equivalents. Of course, the one who got hurt was him. He was already bleeding from the broken skin on his hand.

"PESKY ONE, AREN'T YOU?" Cocytus swung his spiked tail around and struck Zaryusu hard in the chest.

"Guh-hagh!" With a cracking sound, Zaryusu's body soared like a ball hit with a bat and crashed into the marsh. After rolling several times through the mud, he finally stopped, but the intense pain in his chest and the blood he was coughing up made it hard to breathe.

Had the broken bones in his chest punctured his lungs? He tried to inhale, but the air wouldn't come. It was like being underwater. The warm fluid running down his throat made him nauseous. When he looked at his chest, he saw multiple wounds like knife gouges and a gush of blood flowing from them. *I'm this bad after just one hit…?*

Desperately struggling to breathe, Zaryusu glared at Cocytus with eyes that still had fight in them to see if a follow-up attack was coming.

"YOU STILL HAVE THE WILL TO FIGHT? THEN I'LL GIVE THIS BACK." He tossed Frost Pain carelessly near Zaryusu, who was still in the mud, and then ignored him to face the others.

Although his arm had grown back, Zenbel had taken a battering, and Shasuryu cast a healing spell on him.

Another rock hurtled toward Cocytus as if to say, *I won't let you near them!* But it ricocheted uselessly.

“HOW ANNOYING,” Cocytus mumbled and casually thrust his hand toward the Small Fang chief. “PIERCING ICICLE.” He launched dozens of sharp icicles the size of human arms from across a wide area.

The icicles had no trouble skewering the sole lizardman being targeted. One in the chest, two in his abdomen, one in his right thigh. They all went clear through him.

The Small Fang chief, the most talented lizardman ranger, swayed, then collapsed into the marsh, like a marionette whose strings had been cut, and died.

“Waaaagh!”

“Overspell: Mass Slight Cure Wounds!”

Zenbel charged, and Shasuryu used the healing spell again. Zenbel was trying to buy time for Zaryusu’s wounds to heal.

He knew it was reckless—all his abilities were powerless in the face of Cocytus’s—but he advanced with zero hesitation.

When Zenbel came in range, Cocytus casually swung Imperial Sword Zanshin at him.

The blow came faster than Zenbel could see.

Far faster than he was nimble and—

—the sword had no trouble cutting through his flesh.

Zenbel’s headless body gushed a fountain of blood and crumpled into the marsh with a splash. His head followed a split second later.

“...NOW THEN, TWO LEFT? I HEARD ABOUT YOU FROM LORD AINZ, AND HERE YOU ARE, THE LAST SURVIVORS.” Cocytus, who hadn’t moved one step from his position when the

battle started, gazed at the two remaining lizardmen and brandished his katana. Neither blood nor fat clung to the smoky-white blade. It was beautiful, as if everything had come off in that one stroke.

Zaryusu had recovered enough energy to stand, and Shasuryu had drawn his great sword. They faced Cocytus between them. Zaryusu scooped some of the still-pouring blood from his chest and smeared it on his face. It looked like one of the patterns to call down ancestral spirits.

"Zaryusu, how are your wounds?"

"Bad. There's still a dull pain, but I can swing my sword a few times."

"I see… Well, that's enough. Honestly, I'm pretty much out of magic. If I'm not careful, I might pass out," Shasuryu said with a *kachi-kachi* noise of his teeth that could have passed for laughter.

In response, Zaryusu changed his expression slightly. "Oh… So you're killing yourself, too." Smiling faintly, he exhaled and relaxed his shoulders. He let his sword hand droop.

A sharp pain streaked outward from his chest, but he did his best to ignore it.

He wasn't about to give up before this was truly over—he was going to keep swinging his sword.

He knew full well they couldn't win.

There wasn't anything he could do about the defeat they'd been dealt. Still, he couldn't just accept it.

Why? Because he'd lied to a lot of souls, told them that winning was possible. There were lizardmen who believed that big, fat lie, so there was no way he could accept this defeat.

To the very last second, with all my might—

"I will keep wielding this sword!" Zaryusu's roar echoed throughout the area.

The fangs in Cocytus's jaw closed with a click. "THAT'S A GOOD ROAR…" He must have smiled. And it wasn't the sneering smirk of the strong at the weak but a smile at an equal, a warrior.

"Good, Zaryusu. Just like that. Let's fight this till the very end!" Shasuryu smiled. "Now then, sorry to have kept you waiting, Sir Cocytus."

Cocytus shrugged in response. "I DON'T MIND AT ALL. I'M NOT SO BOORISH THAT I'D INTERRUPT A FAREWELL BETWEEN BROTHERS. ARE YOU READ— NO, EXCUSE ME. YOU'VE BEEN READY FROM THE BEGINNING, HAVEN'T YOU?"

As Zaryusu and Shasuryu took a solid step forward, Cocytus brandished Imperial Sword Zanshin and spoke. "LET'S HAVE YOUR NAMES."

"Shasuryu Shasha!"

"Zaryusu Shasha!"

"…I'LL MAKE A NOTE OF YOU AS WARRIORS. AND ALLOW ME TO APOLOGIZE. NORMALLY I HOLD A WEAPON IN EACH OF MY ARMS, BUT…AND I DON'T SAY THIS WITH DISDAIN, BUT…YOU JUST AREN'T STRONG ENOUGH FOR ME TO DRAW THEM ALL."

"Isn't that just too bad!"

"Indeed. Let's do this!"

The two lizardmen dashed at Cocytus. The splashing echoed across the marsh.

Cocytus cocked his head slightly at their staggered timing. They wouldn't both enter the range of his sword at the same time; Shasuryu would arrive first. *They must have a plan*, he thought and waited for them with a vague sense of excitement.

The first one to enter his range would be Shasuryu. Cocytus watched to see what he would do.

Right at the very edge of where Cocytus's blade would reach, Shasuryu stopped and—"Earth Bind!"—cast a spell.

Countless chains of mud reached out toward Cocytus. At the same time, Zaryusu ran for all he was worth. He hid Frost Pain behind his back so his range couldn't be guessed.

Shasuryu's comment about being "out of magic" had been nothing more than a bluff to trick Cocytus. If he fell for it, he might get caught in the chains and stabbed by the one running up from behind.

No matter how hard his exoskeleton is, the tip of my sword should penetrate if I put all my strength into it. With that sentiment fueling his charge, the attack of a man who had abandoned defense would be quite powerful.

YOU MUST HAVE A LOT OF CONFIDENCE IN THAT SWORD. Cocytus understood that sentiment well. He, too, felt strongly about all his weapons. Among them, he had particularly strong feelings for the sword he'd drawn this time, a weapon used by his creator. He was showing them the utmost respect by facing them with Imperial Sword Zanshin, even if it resulted in an even more overwhelming power disparity.

But they had misunderstood one thing. They were fighting Cocytus, guardian of the fifth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

"...YOUR LEVEL IS TOO INFERIOR FOR YOUR SPELLS TO GET PAST MY DEFENSES."

Just before the mud chains touched Cocytus, they were repelled and fell back into the marsh as plain mud. At that low level, they couldn't penetrate Cocytus's magic defenses.

"Icy Burst!"

Along with the shout from the rear, white frost swirled around Cocytus, enveloping the area.

A POINTLESS EFFORT.

Cocytus, with his perfect resistance to chill, took the freezing assault as a gentle breeze and waited for Zaryusu or Shasuryu to spring into his range.

About a breath later, the chance he'd been waiting for appeared. But he hesitated for just a moment. *WILL CUTTING OFF HIS HEAD BE ENOUGH TO STOP HIM?*

Zaryusu had abandoned all defense, so Cocytus didn't think so. The sight of the headless body charging on appeared in his mind. *SO SLICE OFF HIS ARM FIRST, AND THEN CUT OFF HIS HEAD? NO, THAT'S UNCIVILIZED. I'LL JUST SLAY HIM WITH ONE BLOW.*

Zaryusu's full-speed sprint, with no thought for defense, was hopelessly slow from Cocytus's point of view.

In the white haze, the black figure of Zaryusu came dimly into view. Cocytus reached out and deftly grabbed Frost Pain's blade, just like before.

Was the reason he didn't feel any chill in his fingers because Zaryusu had belatedly realized it didn't work on him?

Doubt ran through his mind at how easy it had been to stop the charge, despite the speed—but only for a second. He didn't need to think too hard, because one swing of Imperial Sword

Zanshin would end this.

Then there would be only one left.

SO IT WAS A CHARGE WITH NO PLAN… Cocytus went to cut Zaryusu down, a bit disappointed, when he changed his mind. *AHA…!*

"Rrrrrraaaaaagh!" Through the cold hovering in the area, along with the roar, a great sword came down. Shasuryu's strike had enough momentum to whip up a wind to blow away the chill.

Earth Bind, Zaryusu's charge, and Icy Burst had all been feints.

Stabs from Frost Pain were worth being on guard against, but Shasuryu's overhead swing would probably deal more damage. Cocytus had no doubt that that was their main attack. However—

"IF YOU WANT TO SNEAK ATTACK, YOU HAVE TO DO IT QUIETLY."

With the splash of their footfalls plainly audible, it couldn't possibly be a sneak attack. *WAS THERE EVEN ANY POINT IN TAKING CHILL DAMAGE TO ATTEMPT THAT?* Cocytus wondered. *OR ARE THEY JUST FLAILING?*

But it was true that they'd entered his range.

AS LONG AS I'M HOLDING HIS ONLY WEAPON, ZARYUSU IS NO ENEMY. ALL THAT CHANGES IS THE ORDER IN WHICH I'LL KILL THEM, thought Cocytus, and he swung his sword.

One blow.

He sliced Shasuryu, great sword and all, right in half. Before his corpse even hit the marsh, he'd brought his katana back

around to cut down Zaryusu and—

—just then, Cocytus's fingers slipped on Zaryusu's blade. Taken aback, he checked them. *WHY IS THE SWORD PUSHING TOWARD ME?* In the midst of the white frost, he saw something red on both his fingers and the blade. He instantaneously figured out what had caused the slip.

BLOOD?

That was confusing.

He wondered when it had gotten there—and understood when he saw Zaryusu's face through the frost.

He hadn't been painting a pattern when he'd smeared the blood on his face. He'd gathered the blood to slather it on the blade of his sword.

Icy Burst hadn't been to deal damage to Cocytus or to conceal Shasuryu but to hide the fact that the blade had blood on it. That was why Zaryusu had held the sword behind his back as well.

When Cocytus had stopped Zaryusu's attack before, he'd grabbed the blade of his sword. Zaryusu had remembered that and made this move on the off chance Cocytus would do the same thing again.

Then an electric shock zapped through Cocytus's brain. *THAT TIME! WHEN I THOUGHT HE WAS RUSHING AT ME AWFULLY SLOWLY! AHA! TO THINK HE BLOODIED THE BLADE FOR AN INGENIOUS PLAN TO MAKE IT SLIP AND RUN ME THROUGH, WHICH WOULDN'T WORK MORE THAN ONCE. IN ORDER TO CREATE A DEFINITE CHANCE, HE HELD BACK TO MAKE ME THINK IT WOULD BE EASY TO GRAB THE SWORD.*

The blade slipped closer and closer to his light-blue body. Not

even Cocytus could withstand Zaryusu pushing for all he was worth with his full body weight—not when he was using only two fingers now, slipping on the blood.

If he'd grabbed it at more of a distance, he might have had more options, but at this close range, he did not.

Cocytus was so moved he shivered.

Even leaving everything to chance, this attack had won all its various bets. More than anything, though, if Shasuryu hadn't been around, this situation couldn't have occurred.

Shasuryu probably hadn't understood what Zaryusu was trying to do, but he had believed in him as his older brother and sacrificed his life. He'd made that pointless sneak attack and war cry to draw attention from his little brother for even just a moment.

Just one moment.

Literally the time it took to blink… As Frost Pain approached with Zaryusu's all behind it, Cocytus clacked his lower jaws together. "WONDERFUL."

Then the sword stabbed at Cocytus—and glanced off without leaving so much as a scratch on his sparkling cerulean body.

It was the inevitable outcome born of the unbridgeable gap in ability between the lizardman and an elite NPC of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

"SORRY, I HAVE A SKILL THAT MAKES ME TEMPORARILY IMMUNE TO ALL WEAK MAGIC WEAPONS. AS LONG AS IT'S ACTIVATED, YOUR ATTACKS ARE MEANINGLESS."

Personally, Cocytus would have gladly sustained an injury out of respect for the warrior who made such a splendid attack, but as a guardian, there was no way he could do that with a Supreme Being watching.

Cocytus intentionally took a single step back. It caused mud to spatter and soil his beautiful blue body.

A one-step retreat.

It didn't mean anything. Nothing happened because of it. Zaryusu was definitely going to die, and Cocytus's victory was absolute.

But it was a token of praise from the absolutely strong, Cocytus, to the helplessly weak, Zaryusu.

Zaryusu smiled a pure smile reserved for those who knew their fate and had done everything they could to avoid it as Cocytus swung Imperial Sword Zanshin.

3

"That was some magnificent fighting." Ainz praised Cocytus, who was bowed before him on one knee.

"THANK YOU."

"That said, I think you know already, but this time you gave them the stick. From now on, you need to give them carrots. We mustn't rule through fear."

"UNDERSTOOD."

Ainz nodded and turned to the other guardians in the room. "Good. Listen to me, guardians. As I said in the Throne Room, I'm leaving the governing of the lizardmen completely up to Cocytus. If he requests support from you, give him whatever he requires. Cocytus, I'd like for you to instill in the lizardmen a loyalty

to Nazarick…to give them a special education… But I'll leave the details up to you. Let me know if you need Wings of Ascension or any other specific item. I could lend you a Power Suit or something for a time as well."

In *Yggdrasil*, it was possible for players to change their race mid-game, but not whenever they wanted. There were various requirements that had to be met first, and it was impossible to change back afterward.

One of the requirements was an item. For example, to change into an elder lich, one needed a Book of the Dead. To change into an imp, one needed a Seed of Corruption. The Wings of Ascension Ainz mentioned were for becoming an angel.

Ainz thought that perhaps it was possible to be reborn as a grotesque in this world as well and couldn't help voicing that unintentionally.

"THANK YOU, I WILL LET YOU KNOW. ALSO, LORD AINZ. HOW WILL THOSE LIZARDMEN BE DISPOSED OF?"

"Which?"

"OH, THE ONES CALLED ZARYUSU AND SHASURYU."

The ones who lasted till the end, huh? Their corpses should still be in the marsh, but what about it? "Oh. Should we recover the bodies and try using them as fodder for undead creation that doesn't use my skills?"

"I FEEL THAT WOULD BE REGRETTABLE…"

"Hmm, what do you mean? Are they that valuable?"

From what Ainz was able to tell watching on the Mirror of Remote Viewing, there hadn't been anything noteworthy about them—Cocytus had won a crushing victory.

"...IT'S TRUE THEY WERE WEAK. BUT I SAW THE SPARK OF A WARRIOR IN THEM, IN HOW THEY DIDN'T FEAR MY POWER. I THINK IT WOULD BE A WASTE TO USE THEM AS FODDER. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THEY MIGHT BECOME STRONGER THAN WE COULD IMAGINE. AND I DON'T THINK YOU'VE PERFORMED RESURRECTION EXPERIMENTS YET. HOW ABOUT USING THEM FOR THAT?"

Could it be that he's taken a liking to those reptiles?

Honestly, Ainz didn't get what "spark of a warrior" meant. There was that word *bloodlust* that came up a lot in manga and books, but like when he warned Narberal, he didn't really understand. In the same way, empathy between warriors made no sense to him.

That was because although his current self was quite different, he was originally just a normal member of society. It was probably dangerous for the average citizen of Japan to feel an affinity for concepts like a thirst for battle and the "spark of a warrior." He would have understood the spark of a brilliant salesman better, albeit still vaguely.

"I see... A waste, huh?"

Cocytus answered in the affirmative, but Ainz still wondered, *Even if it's a waste...who cares?* But if he really thought about it, Cocytus sounded absolutely right.

He did want to do resurrection experiments at some point. There was plenty for Nazarick to gain from it, from Ainz's point of view. And unlike the incoherent Cocytus in the Throne Room, now he was making a proposal with the pros accurately presented. If this was proof of progress, he'd passed this exercise with flying colors.

Ainz thought for a moment and remembered that he had excellent subordinates. There they were, lined up in postures befit-

ting their status—silent, straight, and stock-still.

"Albedo, let's hear your opinion."

"Things should be as you wish, Lord Ainz."

"...Demiurge, what do you think?"

"I believe what you say is most correct, Lord Ainz."

"……Shalltear, how about you?"

"The same as Demiurge. I defer to your judgment."

"……Aura."

"My lord. I agree with everyone else."

"……Mare."

"U-u-uh, yes, sir. Me, too."

These aren't answers. Ainz racked his brain.

After thinking over various things, he arrived at the conclusion that this matter must just not be a very big issue for the guardians. In other words, they must have decided that there weren't any huge pros or cons either way.

Of course, that opinion could be a problem depending on where they were coming from. It was the issue of how far you could trust someone saying, *It's not a lot of money*, if they thought of a hundred million yen as peanuts—basically, a gap in values.

There was no point in asking… So does that mean it's fine if I resurrect them? I keep thinking I've thought things through before acting, but I've been making a lot of mistakes lately… Since he had no choice, he considered the pros and cons himself.

"...So we've conquered the lizardman village. Is there someone representing them? Any way of organizing themselves?"

"YES, THERE IS A REPRESENTATIVE."

"Oh? What's he like?"

"A WHITE LIZARDMAN WHO DIDN'T PARTICIPATE IN THE BATTLE. IT SEEMS SHE HAS DRUID POWERS."

"Oh, that one! I see, I see..."

So we can use her, thought Ainz. *She'll make a good spy.*

But if they implemented the idea in his mind right now, it might cause trouble for Cocytus when he had to govern them. *So what should we do?* Then he realized something with a start. ... *It'd be faster to just ask, even though asking before was pointless...*

Ainz explained his plan to Cocytus. Cocytus's response was affirmative. Ainz couldn't be completely sure Cocytus wasn't holding back out of respect, but when he glanced at Albedo and Demiurge and saw no change in their expressions, he figured there was probably nothing wrong with his idea.

"Okay. How long will it take you to bring her here?"

"PLEASE FORGIVE ME, BUT I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT ASK, SO I ALREADY HAVE HER IN A NEARBY ROOM."

Ainz instinctively looked at Demiurge and saw him shaking his head slightly.

Crazy! He did something without being asked! It doesn't seem like anyone gave him the idea, either... This must be how a boss feels seeing one of their subordinates grow, he thought, and his face warped in satisfaction, not that the bony exterior moved at

all.

"No, no, that's good, Cocytus. It's foolish to waste time. Your judgment was correct. Okay, bring her here."

"Um, please wait a minute!"

"What is it, Aura?"

"I don't think this distasteful place is suitable for you to meet someone, Lord Ainz, even a subordinate. It would be better to meet her in the Throne Room at Nazarick."

All the other guardians besides Mare made slight nods of agreement.

"...MY HUMBLE APOLOGIES, I DIDN'T CONSIDER THAT. DO FORGIVE ME!"

"Ahh..." *I wasn't even thinking about that!* Ainz wondered what to do next. Then he remembered what he'd said earlier. *In that case...* "Aura."

"My lord!"

"This place you made, into which you put so much thought—I told you I think it's equal to Nazarick, right? I wasn't lying. Cocytus, bring her in. We'll meet her here."

"L-Lord Ainz!"

"Aura, step down."

"Albedo!" Aura responded fiercely, blushing. "Why are you stopping me?"

Albedo just shot one glance at her and then fixed her attention on the door.

The one who answered angry Aura was Demiurge. "…Lord Ainz's words are correct in every instance. Thus, if he says he considers this place equal to Nazarick, then—"

"—that is correct." Shalltear finished his sentence.

I don't think my words are always correct, nor do I really want them thinking so…but in this case I guess it's convenient if they do.

"Aura. I'll tell you one more time. I think this place that you, one of my most trusted servants, a guardian, are working hard to build is equivalent to Nazarick—even if it's still under construction… Do you understand?"

"…Lord Ainz. Thank you!" Aura bowed deeply. The other guardians followed suit.

You don't have to be so…emotional. You're gonna make me blush! "Then Cocytus, bring her here."

"YES, SIR!"

Cocytus immediately brought the snow-white lizardman into the room. She kneeled and bowed her head before Ainz.

"Let's hear your name."

"Most supreme of the great, King of Death, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, I am the representative of the lizardmen, Crusch Lulu."

What an exaggerated title. Who came up with that? Ainz wondered, acting the composed king.

"…Hmm. Good of you to come."

"My lord. Please accept the lizardmen's absolute loyalty."

"Hmm." Ainz took a good look at Crusch.

Her scales were extremely beautiful. They sparkled stunningly in the magic light. Ainz was seized by a bit of intellectual curiosity regarding how they would feel if he touched them.

As he gazed at her, he noticed her shoulders were trembling slightly. He didn't think Cocytus's chill skill was activated, so there had to be some other reason. After mulling it over, he arrived at the obvious answer.

If Ainz said he didn't care for them, all the lizardmen would be killed, so she had to pay careful attention to her each and every word. Under that mental stress, his silence must have been terrifying for her.

Ainz wasn't the sort to derive pleasure from tormenting the weak. He could be incredibly brutal if it profited Nazarick, but his mind wasn't so twisted that he would act that way all the time.

"From now on, you lizardmen will be under my rule. That said, Cocytus will govern you as my proxy. Any objections?"

"No."

"Very well, then, that will be all. You may go home."

"What? Are you sure?" Crusch exclaimed with her head still bowed. It was an appropriately stunned response considering what unreasonable, impossible demands she had expected him to make.

"For now. Crusch Lulu, you lizardmen are heading into a period of prosperity. Future lizardmen will surely be grateful—to be under my rule."

"No, you've shown us such mercy despite our hostility toward your greatness, Lord Gown. We are already grateful."

Ainz slowly stood up from his throne. Then he went next to Crusch, bent down, and put an arm around her shoulder.

Crusch flinched, and her trembling passed into Ainz's arm.

"There's also something I want to ask especially of you."

"What might that be? I, your devoted servant, will do anything in my power for you, Lord Gown..."

"I want to ask you a *personal* favor. In exchange, I'll resurrect Zaryusu."

At the mention of the name he'd heard from Cocytus, her head shot up. Her expression was twisted in shock.

Feeling triumphant, Ainz continued to observe her. She was probably trying to hide the flurry of changes whirling through her expression. He couldn't tell exactly what emotions they were, since the movements were so different from humans', but they probably ran the gamut.

"You can do that...?"

"Yes, I can manipulate even life and death. Death is just another status for me," he responded to her faint query. "Like poison or sickness. Of course, I can't do anything about life span, but..." He had a feeling if he used Wish Upon a Star it would work, but he didn't go as far as to say so.

"...Then what do you wish of me as your faithful slave? ...Perhaps my body?"

Ainz was speechless. "No, I...don't think that's..." He nearly broke character and blurted, *I mean, c'mon, a lizard?* but he desperately clung to his persona. He decided to overlook the noise of grinding teeth coming from somewhere nearby. "Ahem. No, that's not it. It's simple: I want you to keep an eye out for any lizardmen who might betray me."

"No lizardman would do such a thing," she declared, but Ainz

sneered at her.

"I'm not foolish enough to actually believe that. I'm no expert in lizardman thought, but for example, in the race of humans, betrayal wouldn't be a rare occurrence. That's why I want someone secretly watching from the inside."

From her now blank expression, Ainz fretted internally that he'd gone about proposing it in the wrong way. He was already planning on bringing Zaryusu back to life, but his plot was to create a debt of gratitude on her side by manipulating her into asking him for it. *What will I do if she refuses here? Maybe I shouldn't have been so greedy… Well, no use crying over spilled milk.*

"…Right now, there is a miracle right in front of you, but it won't be there forever. If you don't seize this moment, it'll all be over."

Crusch's face twitched.

"We're not going to do some creepy ritual. You probably have it in this world, too, right? Resurrection magic—that's what I'll be using."

"Isn't that a legen…?"

She swallowed her words, and Ainz spoke gently to her, acting his arrogant part. "Crusch. What is most important to you? I want you to think about that."

Her gaze started to waver, and he flashed back to his days as a salesman, envisioning a client who was about to bite.

Next he had to get her to understand that this miracle wasn't free. People were wary of free things, but they would often consent if a reasonable price was charged.

“You’re going to secretly observe your lizardman friends from the inside. You may have to make some difficult choices at times. And I’m going to cast a spell on Zaryusu when I resurrect him so you don’t betray me. If I ever suspect that you have, he’ll drop dead instantly. I’m sure this will all be agonizing for you, but won’t having Zaryusu back be worth that?” *No spell like that exists, but she doesn’t need to know that.*

He stood up slowly with the attitude that he’d said everything he had to say. Then he spread his arms.

Crusch watched him with eyes full of anguish.

“Oh yes, and after I revive Zaryusu, I’ll tell him that I brought him back to life because I had a use for him. I promise not to bring your name into it. Okay, Crusch Lulu, make your choice now. This is your last chance to bring back your beloved Zaryusu. What will you do? Will you shake my hand? Or not? Choose.” He slowly extended his hand to her. At the same time, he gave a strong warning to the guardians. “Don’t do anything even if she refuses! So, what’ll it be, Crusch Lulu?”

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

His entire body felt like it was being gently stroked. Someone's hands were pulling him up from deep underwater. But Zaryusu shook them off. He sensed something horrifying beyond those hands that he didn't like.

After what could have been an eternity or an instant, he had the feeling a hand was reaching out to him again. He went to brush it away once more but hesitated. He could hear a voice right next to him. The voice of the female he loved…

He hesitated.

And hesitated.

And hesitated.

After faltering and wavering in that world of uncertain time, Zaryusu finally, albeit reluctantly, took the hand.

And all at once he was pulled up, leaping into a white world.

The overall weakness was awful.

His body felt full of sludge.

He was abnormally exhausted. No matter how hard he'd trained, he'd never felt as awful as this.

He fought to open his heavy eyelids.

Brilliant light poured into his eyes. Lizardman eyes automatically compensated for the amount of light, but they were still daz-

zled by sudden brightness. He blinked—

"Zaryusu!"

Someone hugged him tightly.

"C-Crusch?"

He should have never heard her voice again, but there it was.

He looked at her hugging him with eyes that had finally adjusted.

It really was the female he loved, Crusch Lulu.

Why? How in the world…? Zaryusu was assaulted by endless doubts and worries. The last thing he remembered was…the moment his own head fell into the marsh. Cocytus had definitely killed him.

So why am I alive? Could it be that…? "Crusch, did he kill you, too?" he asked, with a numb mouth that didn't move quite right.

In response came Crusch's puzzled face. "Huh?"

He was slightly relieved to see that expression. She wasn't dead, then. *So why am I alive?*

A hint at the answer came in the form of a voice from somewhere to the side. "Hmm. So he's revived, but he's confused. And it seems like he lost some levels… I guess it's not much different from *Yggdrasil*?"

Realizing whose voice it was, Zaryusu looked over in surprise.

Standing there was the King of Death, Ainz Ooal Gown, the impossibly powerful caster. He was holding a foot-long wand that looked so sacred as to be out of place in his hand. It was an extremely beautiful object, made of what appeared to be a tusk with

runes carved in the handle, its tip dipped in gold.

Zaryusu had no idea, but it was a Wand of Resurrection, the item that had brought him back to life. Usually only someone who could use priest magic was able to wield priest-magic items, but this one was an exception.

Zaryusu examined his surroundings and confirmed that they were in the same lizardman village from before. The group was in the square, with lots of prostrate lizardmen surrounding them. None of them moved a muscle, their worshipfulness was so strangely intense.

"What in the world...?"

It was logical to prostrate oneself after being shown that much power, but that wasn't all he felt from the lizardmen here—there was something else, something stronger. Lizardmen had no deities—the targets of their faith were their ancestral spirits—but what he sensed from them now was the worship of a god.

"Hmm. Be gone, lizardmen. Don't enter the village until someone tells you to."

No one objected to the order. On the contrary, they consented without a word. The shuffling and splashing in the marsh as they walked away were all they left as they cleared the square.

The display of power must have completely broken their spirit. Of course, it was lizardman custom to bow to the strong. In other words, things had gone according to their opponent's wishes.

"Aura, are they gone?"

"Yes, they all left."

The one who answered was a dark-elf girl. It might have been partially because she was standing behind Ainz and Zaryusu couldn't see her, but he hadn't even been able to sense her—her

presence was surprisingly slight.

"Okay. Then allow me to congratulate you on your resurrection, Zaryusu Shasha."

Resurrection.

It took Zaryusu a little while to understand what that word meant. When it dawned on him, he was hit with a shiver. *Resurrection…so I came back to life?* He couldn't speak, only gasp.

"What's the matter? It's not like lizardmen harbor some hatred for resurrection, right? Or did you forget how to talk?"

"R-resurrection… You can bring the dead…back to life…?"

"That's what I'm saying. Really? You thought I couldn't do something so simple as that?"

"Did you…hold a big ritual…?"

"A big ritual? Why would I need that? I can do it fine by myself."

Zaryusu had nothing else to say. Resurrection magic was a miracle performed by the legendary lizardman with dragonlord blood in him.

But here was a being who said he could do it by himself.

A monster? No.

A caster with immense power? No.

Zaryusu had figured it out completely.

Leading a mythical army, attended by devils…

In other words, the being before him was on par with a god.

Zaryusu sat up, wobbling, and prostrated himself before Ainz. Crusch hurriedly bowed in the same way.

"Great One." The being looking down at him seemed confused for a moment, but Zaryusu judged that to be just his imagination. "I devote myself to you."

"Good. I'll make you a promise on my honor as Ainz Ooal Gown."

"Allow the lizardmen to flourish."

"That's what you want? I promise anyone under my rule will flourish."

"I thank you."

"Well, your mouth still isn't working quite right, is it? If you rest a bit, you'll get back up to speed. Rest for now. Later there are a lot of things we have to decide. First, we need to make sure this village, now under my rule, has proper security... Well, please discuss it with Cocytus." Saying that, Ainz readied himself to leave, but Zaryusu had something he needed to ask first. It had to be now.

"Please wait. What about Zenbel and my brother?"

"Their corpses should be over there somewhere." Ainz had begun walking away with Aura, but he stopped and gestured casually with his jaw toward the edge of the village.

"You won't bring them back to life?"

"...Hmm...I don't sense anything in it for me..."

"Then why resurrect only me? Zenbel and my brother are strong. They would definitely be useful to you."

Ainz took a good look at Zaryusu and shrugged. "I'll think

about it… Keep the bodies of those two safe. I'll consider it."

Ainz walked off, robe flapping, as if to say the conversation was over. As the pair retreated, Zaryusu heard Aura's fading voice say, "That hydra's pretty cute, huh?"

He finally broke his submissive posture and relaxed.

"I survived… Or I guess I came back to life?"

He didn't know what kind of rule they were in for, but if they could prove themselves useful, he figured it couldn't be that bad.

"Crusch, my brother…"

"It's okay. Let's worry about it later. Right now you need to rest and get back on your feet. Don't worry, I can carry you."

"Okay…thanks."

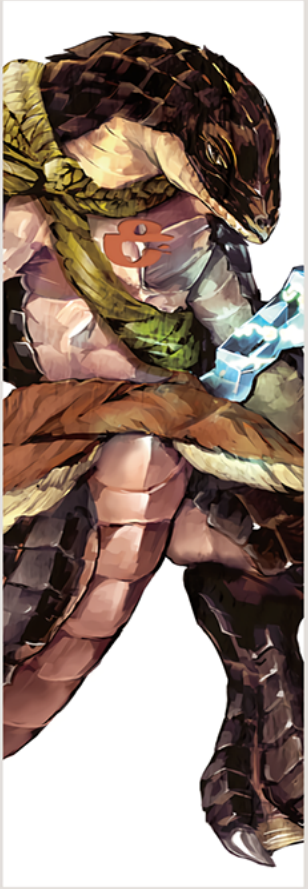
Zaryusu crumpled to one side and closed his eyes. The moment his lids fell, he was hit by a wave of sleep, like the deep sleep that awaited him after a day of straining his body beyond its limit.

Sensing the gentle arms around him, Zaryusu sank back into darkness.

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



Character 13



Zaryusu Shasha

SUBHUMAN

The strongest lizardman warrior

Position — Traveler

Residence — A house in the Green Claw tribe village

Alignment — Good-Neutral (Karma Points: 100)

Race Levels — Lizardman — 1lv

Class Levels — Fighter — 10lv

Sword Master — 6lv

Ranger — 1lv

Sage — 2lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 20 levels

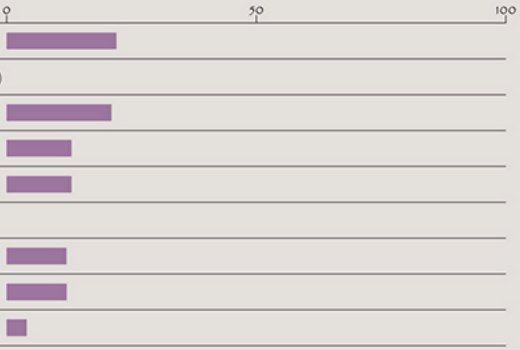
Race levels — Class levels

1 acquired total — 19 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 14

Crusch Lulu

SUBHUMAN

A beautiful albino



Position — Acting chief of the Red Eye tribe

Residence — A house in the Red Eye tribe village

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: 50)

Race Levels — Elderblood-Awakened Lizardman — 1 lv

Class Levels — Druid — 8 lv

Spirit Shaman — 5 lv

Summoner — 2 lv

Dragonic Adept — 1 lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 17 levels

Race levels — Class levels

1 acquired total — 16 acquired total

status

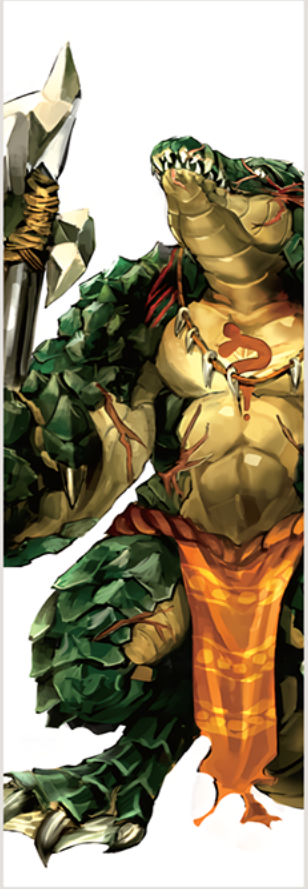
0 — 50 — 100

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

- HP (Hit Points)
- MP (Magic Points)
- Physical Attack
- Physical Defense
- Dexterity
- Magic Attack
- Magic Defense
- Total Resistance
- Special

Character 15



Zenbel Gugu

SUBHUMAN

A rowdy guy with a huge arm

Position — Chief of the Dragon Tusk tribe and traveler

Residence — The Dragon Tusk tribe's chief's house

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: 50)

Race Levels — Lizardman — 5 lv

Class Levels — Fighter — 1 lv
Monk — 10 lv
Single Blow — 1 lv
Chi Master — 1 lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 18 levels
Race levels — Class levels
5 acquired total — 13 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

	0 — 50 — 100
HP (Hit Points)	
MP (Magic Points)	
Physical Attack	
Physical Defense	
Dexterity	
Magic Attack	
Magic Defense	
Total Resistance	
Special	

Iguvua 41

SUBHUMAN

Test subject 41



Position —— Guinea pig

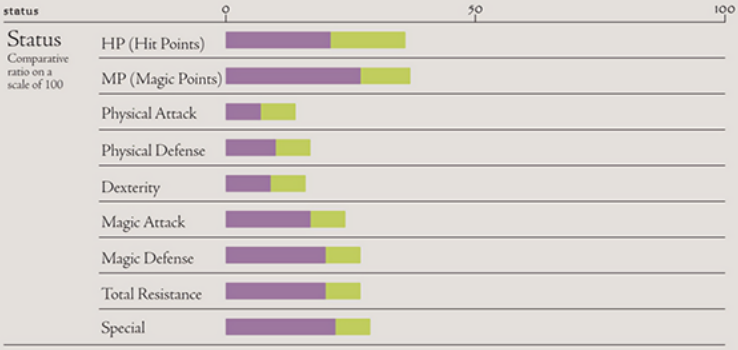
Residence —— None

Alignment —— Extreme Evil (Karma Points: -500)

Race Levels —— None

*But his level as a monster is 22
(his base level before being powered
up with a skill)

Class Levels —— None



AFTERWORD

I doubt there are many people starting from this volume, so allow me to say, “Long time no see.” This is Kugane Maruyama.

So, as I announced in the afterword of the previous volume, this turned out to be a strange book all about lizardmen. The story was fairly rare for a light novel, don’t you think? Maybe I just don’t know where to look, but I have the feeling there aren’t that many where the protagonist one-sidedly invades a peaceful village.

How was it?

You may have mixed feelings, but in this series there’s a fairly good chance that the strong will trample the weak now and then.

The *Overlord* protagonist isn’t the type to just deal with what’s right in front of him, putting out fires as they start, but the type that acts assertively to carry out his aims and pursue profit. Instead of acting when he hears a princess is in trouble, he’s the aggressive one who goes out searching for a princess who’s in trouble. Well, maybe not exactly like that…

And those of you who play strategy sim games understand, but in order to meet his goal of expanded military power, Ainz tends to subjugate weaklings rather than go after stronger opponents.

So rather than the usual invaded side, I’d like to make this a series about the invader side. That said, just beating on each other isn’t an invasion…

From here on out I’d like to give some thank-yous. So-bin, Cr-

usch was so cute!!! She got me all flustered. Thanks also to Code Design for the great cover, obi wrap, and poster designs. To Osako, thanks for always doing such detailed proofreading. And thanks for everything to my editor, F[redacted]ta.

To Honey, who looked over the manuscript, thanks as always for your "penetrating insights." I really use my head to figure out how to respond.

And to everyone who bought the book, my deepest thanks. Thank you so much.

Okay, it will be great if I can see you again for the next book.

Well then, see you.

This is just a side comment, but in every book so far I've used the word *death* in at least one of the chapter titles, but it's getting tougher to do, so there might not be one in the next book. It was just for kicks, so it's not like there's an issue if I don't, but... Anyhow, if you don't have the knack for that sort of thing, it's just kind of hard to pull off! Bummer.

KUGANE MARUYAMA

July 2013


RUSTLE
RUSTLE
Afterword by so-bin
CRUSCH
Let's make figurines of her. so-bin

SEBAS AND COMPANY HEAD FOR THE KINGDOM ON ORDERS FROM AINZ TO GATHER INTELLIGENCE ABOUT NEARBY COUNTRIES. A MEETING WITH A CERTAIN WOMAN ENDS WITH THEM CONFRONTING A POWERFUL, SHADY ORGANIZATION.

What's the full story of this incident told from both the Great Tomb of Nazarick side and the kingdom side? A mystery, a butler, and a maid in Volume 5.

OVERLORD

Volume 5: The Men of the Kingdom (Part I)

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