

OVERLORD 6

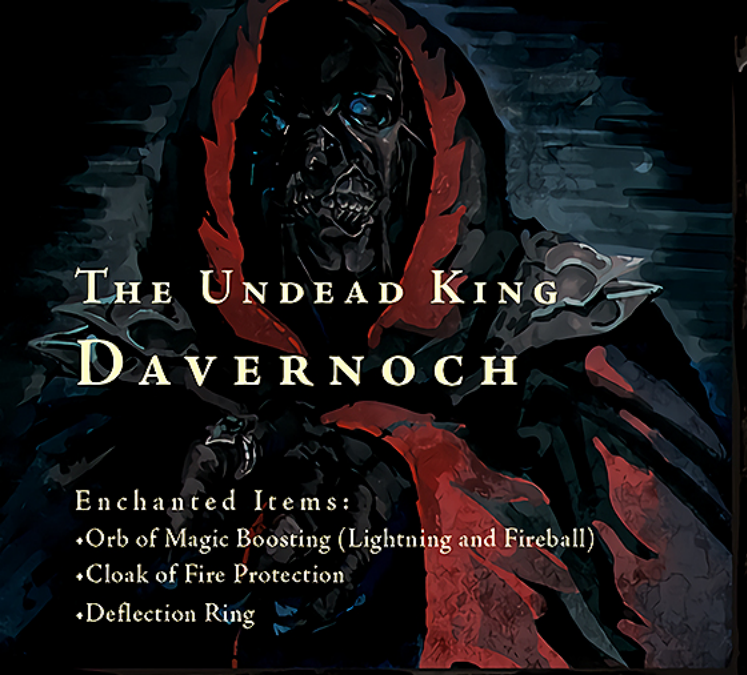
The Men of the Kingdom
Part II

Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin









The Undead King
Davernoch

Enchanted Items:
- Orb of Magic Boosting (Lightning and Fireball)
- Cloak of Fire Protection
- Deflection Ring



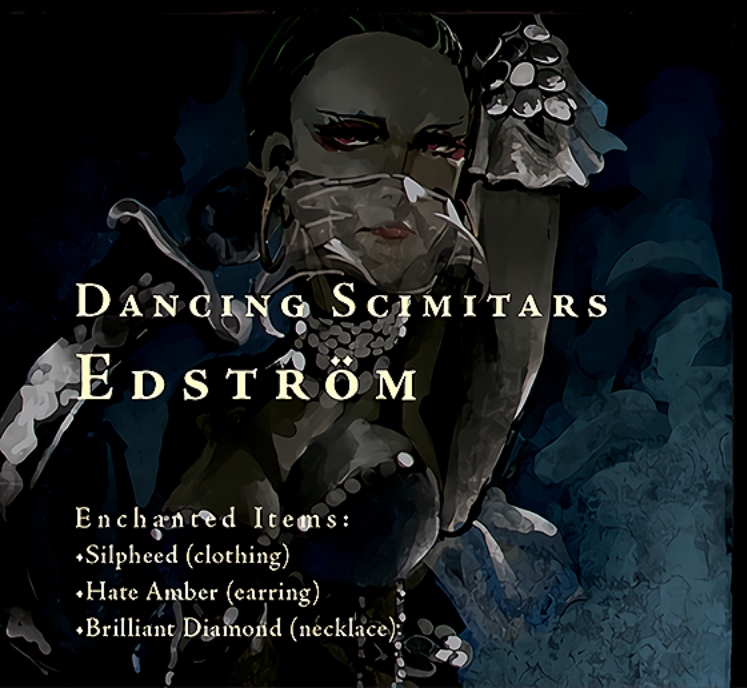
Fighting Ogre
Zero

Enchanted Items:
- Monk's Black Belt
- Beast King's Armband
- Boots of Speed



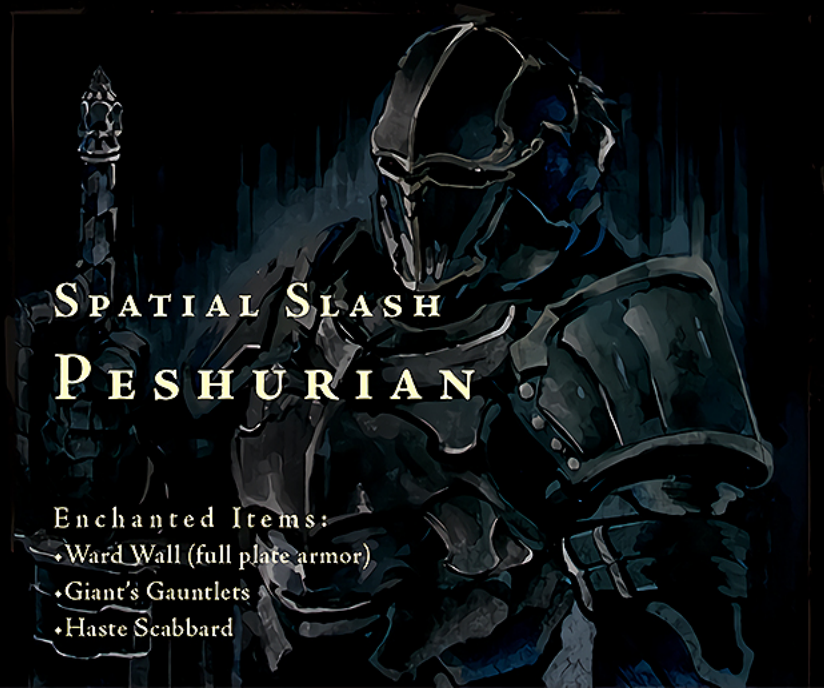
Thousand Kills
Marmvist

Enchanted Items:
- Whetstone of Keenness
- Move Plus (boots)
- Mixed Potion



Dancing Scimitars
Edström

Enchanted Items:
- Silpheed (clothing)
- Hate Amber (earring)
- Brilliant Diamond (necklace)



Spatial Slash
Peshurian

Enchanted Items:
- Ward Wall (full plate armor)
- Giant's Gauntlets
- Haste Scabbard



Illusion Maniac
Succuronte

Enchanted Items:
- Cat's Elegance (mail shirt)
- Hood of Spear Blocking
- Ring of Energy Boosting

OVERLORD

Volume 6: The Men of the Kingdom Part II

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

YEN ON
NEW YORK



Chapter 6 Disturbance in the Royal Capital: Introduction

CHAPTER 6 | DISTURBANCE IN THE ROYAL CAPITAL

Introduction

1

3 Late Fire Moon (September) 5:44 PM

The door to the drawing room slowly opened.

The well-oiled door should have opened smoothly, but now it moved slowly, heavily, as if against a wall of pressure. At that speed, it might well have been reading Sebas's mind.

If the door really knew what he was thinking, he would have rather it didn't open at all, but it did indeed give way to reveal the drawing room.

The parlor was the same as always, but the four grotesques waiting for him inside were not.

One bore the appearance of a light-blue samurai. His chilly aura was deactivated, and he was at attention, silver halberd in hand.

Another was a demon. What inner thoughts did his sarcastic expression hide?

And in the demon's arms was an angel resembling a fetus with wings like withered branches.

Lastly—

"I humbly apologize for my lateness."

Keeping his voice steady by sheer power of will, Sebas directed

an almost religious bow at the sole seated being in the room. As both house steward and butler, Sebas held one of the highest positions among his peers—but the being that both frightened and awed him was none other than one of the Absolutes, the Forty-One Supreme Beings.

Ainz Ooal Gown.

He was the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, with the greatest power at his disposal. The Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown in his hand was giving off a black aura.

Hazy red lights glowed in his vacant orbits. Their gaze slid up and down over Sebas, taking him in—he could feel it despite his lowered head.

The vibrations in the air told him that Ainz, finding this tiresome, had waved his hand dramatically.

"...It's fine. Don't worry about it, Sebas. That's what I get for coming with no notice. More importantly, standing over there bowing doesn't get us anywhere. Get in here."

"My lord!" Sebas raised his head in response to the dignified voice and slowly stepped forward—and a chill went up his spine. With his keen senses, he was detecting skillfully concealed hostility and murderous intent.

He slowly shifted his gaze. The two guardians in his field of vision didn't appear to be paying any special attention to Sebas—or so it might seem to the common observer.

Sebas realized it well enough.

There was nothing amicable about the tension around them. In fact, it was the exact opposite. Their vigilance was not generally found in the presence of allies.

Sebas understood their caution, and the pressure made him wonder if everyone in the room could hear his violently pounding heart.

"I think you should stop right there." Demiurge's cool voice halted Sebas in his tracks.

The spot Demiurge indicated was slightly removed from their master. Of course, it wasn't so far away as to make conversing difficult, and it would serve as an appropriate distance for an audience with a superior, on the whole. But normally, Ainz would have said he was too far away and asked him to approach. His silence created a sense of distance wider than the physical space, and that weighed heavily on Sebas.

It was also the optimum range for Cocytus to attack, which made him only more anxious.

Incidentally, Solution had entered the room along with Sebas, but she remained right next to the door.

"Now, then…" Ainz cracked his knuckles, though it was unclear how he managed with nothing but bones for fingers. "First, I'll ask you if I need to explain why I've come."

There could be only one reason. The circumstances alone said as much.

"…No, that won't be necessary."

"Then I'd like to hear it straight from you, Sebas. I didn't receive a report, but apparently you recently picked up a cute little pet. Is that right?"

I knew it.

Sebas felt like an icicle had impaled him in the back. Immedi-

ately afterward, he realized he hadn't replied to his master and hurried to raise his voice. "Yes, my lord!"

"…Your response was delayed. Sebas, I'll ask you again. Is it true you've picked up and are caring for a cute little pet?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Good. Then I'll ask you this. Why didn't you report it?"

"Right…" Sebas's shoulders trembled slightly, and he stared at the floor. *What do I say to avoid the worst?*

Sebas stood there in silence, and Ainz, watching him, slowly leaned back in his chair. The abnormally loud creak filled the room. "What's wrong, Sebas? Seems like you're sweating bullets. If you need a handkerchief, I'll lend you one…" Ainz theatrically drew from somewhere unknown a snow-white handkerchief between his pointer and middle fingers. He casually tossed it in Sebas's direction. The handkerchief opened as it fluttered over the desk and down to the floor with a motion that could be described as a *fwah*.

"You have my permission to use it."

"Thank you, my lord." Sebas took a single step toward Ainz and retrieved the fallen handkerchief. Then he hesitated.

"…It doesn't have your pet's blood on it or anything. I just can't stand to look at you with all that sweat."

"Oh… Apologies for my unsightly appearance." Sebas unfolded the handkerchief and wiped the greasy moisture off his forehead. The cloth absorbed more than he expected and turned dark.

"Now then, Sebas. When I dispatched you to the royal capital, I ordered you to take note of anything and everything, then send

those observations to Nazarick. I did so because it's hard to discern the valuable information from the garbage without more input. And in the documents you sent, you even wrote up things as minor as street rumors, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Then, Demiurge, just to confirm, let's hear from you as well. I had you read the documents Sebas sent, too, right? Did he mention anything about his little pet?"

"No, Lord Ainz. I read them over several times, but I could not find the slightest hint of such a thing."

"I see. So again, Sebas. I'll ask with that in mind. Why didn't you report it…? I want to know why you ignored my orders. Were the words of Ainz Ooal Gown not worthy enough to bind you?"

The question rocked the room.

Sebas answered in a desperate rush. "Of course they were, my lord. I simply did not think the matter merited a report to you."

Silence fell.

It felt to Sebas like four bloodthirsty gazes were boring into him. They emanated from Cocytus, Demiurge, the angel in Demiurge's arms, and Solution, who would undoubtedly attack him with a single word from their master.

Sebas didn't fear death per se. Sacrificing himself for Nazarick would be his greatest joy. But the idea of dying a traitor's death made even the thick-skinned butler shudder.

As a creation of one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings, he knew there was no greater humiliation than to be executed for treason.

After a pause long enough to leave Sebas's forehead covered in sweat, Ainz spoke. "So you're saying…it was a silly decision on your part?"

"Yes, just as you say, Lord Ainz. Please forgive my foolish error!"

"…I see. Hmm… I understand."

Sebas heard Ainz's voice, devoid of emotion, while his head was still lowered in apology. Since he hadn't been immediately disposed of, the mood had lightened, if only slightly.

But Sebas couldn't relax—because before he could, Ainz said something that made his heart leap into his throat.

"Solution, bring Sebas's pet here."

"Understood."

Solution left, and the door closed quietly. Sebas's sharp faculties sensed her receding on the other side.

He swallowed hard.

There were four grotesques present: Ainz, Cocytus, and Demiurge, plus the strange angel. Demiurge didn't look much like a grotesque, but with the other three, their nature was clear at a glance.

Are they not concealing their forms because it won't be a problem if she sees them?

If a member of the Great Tomb of Nazarick chose to silence someone, it was always with death.

I should have let her go sooner.

Sebas mentally shook his head. It was too late for such thoughts now.

Before long, Sebas detected two presences approaching the room from a distance.

What should I do?

He shifted his focus and stared into space.

If she entered the room, he would have to make a decision—and there was only one option.

He looked to Demiurge, who continued to observe him, and then to Ainz. His gaze dropped helplessly to the floor.

A knock sounded at the door before it opened. Unsurprisingly, two women appeared—Solution and Tsuare.

"This is her."

Though he wasn't facing her, Sebas could hear her breath catch slightly by the entrance. Was she taken aback by Demiurge's appearance as the devil incarnate? Had she shuddered in horror at the giant light-blue insect Cocytus? Was she frightened by the disturbing infantile angel? Or awestruck by Ainz, who embodied death? Perhaps she felt all those things at once?

The guardians' displeasure increased with the human's appearance. Tsuare was the physical symbol of Sebas's crime, in a way. She trembled under the enmity directed toward her.

The animosity of the Absolutes of this world, the Nazarick guardians, terrified all manner of weaker beings. It was a wonder she didn't burst into tears.

Sebas didn't turn around, but he could still sense Tsuare's eyes

on his back. In other words, her courage stemmed from his presence.

"Demiurge, Cocytus, knock it off. Follow Victim's example," Ainz said quietly, and the room's atmosphere changed. Well, the only difference was the disappearance of the rancor directed at Tsuare. After reproving the two guardians, Ainz slowly held out his left hand in her direction. Then he turned his palm to the ceiling and unhurriedly waved her closer. "Come in, Tsuare, Sebas's human pet."

As if his words compelled her, she took one trembling step, then another, into the room.

"You must have courage if you're not running away. Or did Solution tell you—that Sebas's fate depends on you?"

Tsuare, shaking, didn't answer. Sebas felt the gaze on his back intensifying. It conveyed her thoughts louder than words could.

Now that she was in the room, Tsuare unhesitatingly moved next to Sebas. Cocytus slowly went to stand behind her.

She grabbed the hem of Sebas's jacket. He suddenly remembered when she'd grabbed the cuff of his pants in that alley. At the same time, he was filled with regret—if he had only acted more intelligently, none of this would have happened.

Demiurge looked coldly at Tsuare. ***"Knee—"***

A finger snapped.

Demiurge promptly heeded his master's will and snapped his mouth shut.

"—It's fine. It's fine, Demiurge. I'll praise her courage for not fleeing before me and forgive her rudeness."

“My mistake, my lord.”

Ainz nodded benevolently in response to the apology. “Ahh.” The chair creaked as he leaned against the back. “First, I’ll tell you my name. I’m Ainz Ooal Gown—Sebas’s master.”

That was correct.

Ainz Ooal Gown—one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings—held absolute power over Sebas, including whether he lived or died.

To hear such a thing from one’s unconditional ruler was the greatest joy. But for some reason, Sebas didn’t feel the gladness he usually expected; in fact, he experienced so little that he shivered in alarm. It wasn’t due to Tsuare’s presence. For just that moment, he’d practically forgotten she was there. *There’s some other—*

The conversation continued while these things whirled through Sebas’s mind.

“Oh, I—I…”

“Never mind, Tsuare. I know about you to some degree. And I’m not interested in you beyond that. You can just keep quiet and stand there. You’ll know why I called you in a little while.”

“O-okay.”

“Now, then…” The red lights in his vacant eye sockets shifted. “…Sebas. I’d like to ask you something. I told you to operate without drawing attention to yourself, did I not?”

“You did, my lord.”

“But instead you invited trouble for the sake of this worthless woman. Am I wrong?”

Tsuare flinched at the word *worthless*, but Sebas answered without reacting. “You are not, my lord.”

“You didn’t consider that to be ignoring my orders?”

“I deeply regret that my indiscretion has invited your displeasure, Lord Ainz. I’ll take sufficient care that this never happens aga—”

“Very well.”

“Huh?”

“I said, ‘Very well.’” Ainz changed posture and the chair groaned again. “Everyone makes mistakes. Sebas, I forgive your silly error.”

“I humbly thank you, Lord Ainz.”

“However. Mistakes must be paid for. With death. Go on.”

The tension in the room thickened, and the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. No, that wasn’t true. Sebas was the only one affected. The other members of Nazarick were fine.

Sebas gulped.

Who was he supposed to kill? He didn’t have to ask. Still, though he already knew, a longing to be wrong pushed him to pose a question despite his mouth’s unwillingness to move. “Beg your…pardon, my lord…?”

“Mm…I mean that if you eliminate the root of your error, we can say that you never made it in the first place. If the cause of your error remains, it’ll set a difficult precedent for the others, don’t you think? You’re Nazarick’s butler—you’re supposed to be in charge. We can’t very well leave things like this.”

Sebas exhaled. Then he took another gulp of air.

Sebas's breathing was always steady, even before a powerful enemy, but he was now gasping like a small animal in the face of a predator.

"Sebas. Are you a dog who obeys m— The Forty-One Supreme Beings? Or do you abide by your own will?"

"I—"

"You don't need to answer. Show me."

Sebas closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again.

He hesitated for an instant. No, for an eternity that others might call an instant. The pause was long enough for Cocytus, Demiurge, and Solution, fanatic devotees of the Supreme Beings, to show their displeasure.

Then, finally, he made up his mind.

Sebas was Nazarick's butler.

Nothing more.

It was his foolish indecision that had led to this. If he had sought permission sooner, this wouldn't have happened.

Everything had been his fault.

A hard glint appeared in Sebas's eyes—the sparkle of steel. Then he turned to face Tsuare.

The fingers clinging to him retreated. They faltered briefly in the air and then dropped helplessly.

She must have seen his face and understood his decision.

Her eyes closed as she smiled.

Tsuare's expression showed neither despair nor fear. She acknowledged and accepted what was about to happen. It was the face of a martyr.

Sebas's movements were also calm.

His heart was already at ease.

Standing there was a servant with ironclad devotion to Nazarick. There was no reason for a loyal retainer to not follow his master's absolute order.

He had cast aside his hesitation. All that remained was earnest devotion.

Sebas's tightly balled fist flew at Tsuare's head at a speed that ensured a mercifully instant death.

And then—

—something hard stopped it.

"What are you—? What do you mean by interfering?"

"...NGH."

"..."

Sebas's punch, about to obliterate Tsuare's head, had been blocked.

Cocytus had reached out from behind Tsuare, whose eyes were still squeezed shut, to stop the fist.

If he's blocking a strike ordered by a Supreme Being, does that mean he's revolting?

But the question in Sebas's mind was resolved immediately.

"Step back, Sebas."

Though he was irritated and confused, he had been about to throw another punch, right up until he heard Ainz; his fist relaxed completely. It wasn't a rebuke to Cocytus but an order holding Sebas back. That was to say, the plan all along had been for Cocytus to block the attack.

The whole thing had been a setup. In short, they'd done it to test Sebas's will.

Tsuare cracked her eyes open and seemed to realize she'd narrowly avoided the guillotine looming before her. Once the threat to her life had receded, the tension in her snapped like a string, and she trembled with tears in her eyes. Her legs were shuddering so violently she seemed likely to fall, but Sebas didn't move to support her. Or rather, he couldn't.

What could he do now? He had completely forsaken her.

Ignoring Tsuare's fear, Ainz and Cocytus began a discussion.

"Cocytus, would that attack have killed the woman for sure?"

"NO DOUBT. THAT STRIKE MEANT INSTANT DEATH."

"Then I hereby judge Sebas's loyalty to be sound. Good work, Sebas."

"My lord!" With a hard expression on his face, Sebas bowed his head.

“Demiurge, any objections?”

“None, my lord.”

“Cocytus?”

“NONE, MY LORD.”

“…Victim?”

“Peach-clay-scarlet-grape-brown-ash. ”

“Okay, then on to the next item of discussion.” With a snap of his fingers, Ainz stood and spread his arm to the side. His robe billowed. “Thanks to Sebas’s and Solution’s work, I think we’ve gathered enough intelligence. There’s no reason to stay here any longer. Effective immediately, I’ll have you vacate the mansion and return to Nazarick. Sebas, you’re responsible for the woman’s fate. Since we’ve proven your loyalty, I won’t tell you what to do with her—is what I’d like to say, but we need to think things over before releasing her. Don’t you agree there will be trouble if she goes around blabbing about Nazarick, Demiurge?”

“Indeed, I do. As long as we face an unknown enemy, we should avoid information leaks whenever possible.”

“So what should we do?”

“…Perhaps we should check on some things.”

“Right. Sebas, wait a little while on disposing of Tsuare. I don’t think you’ll have to kill her, but I can’t say for sure.”

Sebas couldn’t hide his surprise that even Ainz, Nazarick’s ultimate authority, couldn’t decide immediately and was leaving the issue of what to do with Tsuare unsettled. “Lord Ainz, are we withdrawing from this mansion—from the royal capital—due to

my mistake?"

"...Sort of but not really. As I mentioned before, I think we've gotten nearly all the intel we need out of this place. There's not much benefit to staying entrenched here any longer. I figure it's safer to withdraw. Demiurge, I'll take Victim back. Give them here."

Having taken the baby angel from Demiurge, Ainz cast a spell. "Greater Teleportation!" At the same moment, he flourished his cape dramatically, like a stage actor. Then, in a ball of raven black collapsing in on itself, he vanished.

Sebas was briefly stunned by the strangely theatrical departure, the likes of which he hadn't seen before, but he came back to himself with a start. "Well, she seems a bit tired, so I think I'll let her rest in her room for a little while. There's no issue with my escorting her there, right, Demiurge?"

"...No. It's as you say, Sebas." Demiurge smiled demonically and gestured elegantly toward the door as if to say, *Go ahead*. "Just keep in mind that you could be summoned again. I don't think you need to worry, but I don't want to have to go chasing you around the capital."

"Come with me."

"...Okay," Tsuare replied in a hoarse voice, tottering after Sebas.

They left the room, and the two sets of footsteps tapped down the hall. They walked without speaking, and eventually the door to Tsuare's room came into view. They hadn't gone very far, but it felt like they'd been traveling for a terribly long time.

When they reached the door, Sebas finally seemed to have made up his mind to speak. "I don't intend on apologizing."

He sensed her flinch behind him.

"But it is my fault that I was ordered to dispose of you. If I had handled things differently, this wouldn't have happened."

"…Master Sebas…"

"I'm a loyal slave to Lord Ainz—and the Forty-One Supreme Beings. If the same thing happened again, I'm sure I would act no differently… So I think you should go be happy in the human world. I'll request permission for you. Lord Ainz should be able to manipulate your memories. We'll erase all the bad ones, and then you can go."

"…What about you?"

"…I'll have him erase mine, too. Nothing good can come of remembering this."

"What would be 'good'?"

Sensing the intense will behind her words, Sebas turned around.

He was met with the sight of a woman glaring at him through her tears. Slightly shaken, he considered what he could say to persuade her.

Certainly, Nazarick was an exceptionally wonderful place, truly blessed by the gods. But that held true for only Sebas and the others created by the Forty-One Supreme Beings, along with the lower minions of the Great Tomb.

To an ordinary human with no aptitude or powers, such a place could never be a home. And he didn't think it would accept Tsuare, a weakling with a nearly worthless life. No, it wouldn't be possible without the protection of Nazarick's supreme master.

"...I'm saying you should go be happy in the human world."

"My happiness is where you are, Master Sebas, so please take me with you."

Tsuare stated her wishes clearly, and Sebas pitied her.

"You seem to have experienced some happiness from this minor sequence of events, but it's only because your heart is numb from the hell you endured."

She had seen the worst the world had to offer, so she thought she could live a pleasant life in this problematic place that was only a small step up—that was all. That's what Sebas had decided, but Tsuare laughed.

"I don't think this is hell at all. I get to eat till I'm full, and you give me honest work to do. I was born and grew up in a tiny village. Life there was hard, too." Tsuare's eyes focused on something far away for just a moment. She returned to herself immediately and looked straight at Sebas. "We worked the fields while we were racked with hunger, and then the lord of the domain made off with most of the harvest anyway. There was barely anything left to fill our own stomachs. And on top of that, the lord treated us like toys. He'd rape me and laugh when I screamed. He laughed! I don't—"

"I understand." Tsuare was smiling weakly when he pulled her in close, folded her into his breast, and put his arms around her trembling shoulders. Just like before, she cried like a dam had broken, and he felt her tears soaking into his shirt.

The world she had seen and lived in couldn't possibly be all there was. Still, to her, that was what human society represented.

Sebas deliberated.

What would be best? No matter how much he thought it over, he could come up with only one answer. But there was a good chance it would infuriate his master and end with an order to kill Tsuare.

"You might die, you know."

"If you have to kill me, then at least I'll die by the hand that granted me warmth when I was nothing more than a breathing corpse…"

The expressive face gazing up at Sebas gave him the determination he needed. "Okay, Tsuare. I'll ask Lord Ainz his permission to bring you to Nazarick."

"Thank you."

"It's too soon to thank me. This supplication could result in an order to kill y—"

"I know."

"I…see."

Tension receded from his arms around Tsuare's shoulders, but she didn't move away. She clutched Sebas's jacket and gazed up at him with glistening eyes.

They were filled with anticipation. Sebas instinctively understood that, but he didn't know what she was hoping for. He did remember something he wanted to be sure of, though.

"Just to confirm, you won't have any regrets if you leave the human world? There's nowhere you might want to go home to?" An invitation to Nazarick wouldn't entail that she could never have any contact with the human world ever again—he wasn't whisking her away to imprison her—but there was still a chance

she would never go back.

"…I…would like to see my little sister again. But my wish to forget the past is stronger…"

"I understand. Please head to your room for now. I'll go see Lord Ainz again."

"All right…"

Tsuare released Sebas's jacket and wrapped her arms around his neck. Sebas didn't let it show on his face, but he had no idea what to do now. Ignoring him, she stood on her toes.

Their lips met.

The gentle touch lasted for only a moment. Tsuare pulled back almost immediately. "It's prickly." She moved away, touching her lips with her fingers. "That was my first happy kiss."

Sebas couldn't say a word, but she gazed at him and smiled brightly.

"I'll be waiting here. See you soon, Master Sebas."

"U-uhh…y-yes. Please wait just a little while."

"What happened? Your face looks red…"

It was the first thing he heard when he returned to the drawing room. Upon realizing he was blushing, Sebas began taking long, slow breaths. This display of agitation from before was a failure for a servant about to meet his master. His hand nearly went to his lips, but he refrained and assumed an expression appropriate for an ideal retainer.

"It's nothing, Sir Demiurge."

“You don’t need to use ‘sir,’ Sebas. You can talk just like we were when Lord Ainz—the sole absolute Supreme Being—was here. What do you say, Cocytus?”

“I AGREE.”

Sebas acknowledged that he understood.

Five minutes later…space warped.

When the rippling fabric of reality smoothed out, a figure appeared. Of course, it was Ainz. He was no longer carrying the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown, and he had not brought Victim with him, either.

Sebas, Cocytus, Demiurge, Solution. All four of them fell to one knee with their heads lowered.

“Thanks for meeting me.” Ainz circled around the desk and sat down in the chair. “Rise.”

The four of them stood at once and focused on Ainz, who seemed to be in extremely high spirits.

“Now then, now then, Demiurge. This is proof that you’re a worrywart. I didn’t think for a moment that Sebas would betray us. You guys are paranoid. I even checked in the Throne Room.”

“My apologies. And thank you for entertaining my foolish dissenting opinion.”

“That’s fine. Even I overlook things sometimes. With you checking up on them, I can rest easy. And I’m not so petty that I’d complain about your worries on my help.” Demiurge bowed low, and Ainz shifted his eyes away from him. “Now then, we were going to discuss what to do with that woman, right, Sebas?”

Sebas's body was rigid with nerves. He mustered a "yes, my lord" and paused. After a glance at Ainz's expression, he resolutely asked, "What shall we do with her?"

After a momentary silence, Ainz replied with a question. "Mm, if we release her, Nazarick intelligence will leak, I suppose?"

Demiurge nodded when Ainz looked at him. "Yes, that is correct, but what should we do?"

"Let's just adjust her memories. After that…all we need to do is give her some money and drop her in a suitable place."

"Lord Ainz, I think killing her would be easier and more definite." Demiurge offered his opinion, and Solution nodded her agreement.

Ainz watched them and thought, *If they both feel that way…*

Sebas experienced utter chaos internally.

Once their master made up his mind, it wouldn't be easy to change. Although he'd been pardoned, Demiurge, Cocytus, and Solution were probably thinking less favorably of him now. If he voiced an opposing opinion in the wrong way, he might offend them.

But he had to say it.

Sebas opened his mouth to disagree with Demiurge. But he didn't. That is to say, Ainz spoke first.

"…No, Demiurge. I'm not fond of killing when there is no particular benefit to us. Or rather, if you kill a weakling, you can't use it later. We need to consider how she could be useful to us alive."

Sebas suppressed his sigh of relief. Ainz hadn't decided what

to do with Tsuare yet. There was still a chance.

"Understood. Then…shall we have her work at the farm I'm running?"

"Oh right, you've got khimaira, right? By the way, you don't want to kill some and eat them, do you? We need to improve Nazarick's food situation."

Demiurge averted his eyes from Ainz, who was murmuring, "Khimaira steak—no, burgers…," and stared into the distance.

Then he returned to himself. "The meat is bad quality—it doesn't make the cut for food. I don't think it's worthy of feeding glorious Nazarick…" Demiurge's smile suggested he couldn't recommend it. "Well, we do feed dead livestock to the others. They don't eat it as is, so we grind it up."

"Hmm. They eat their own kind? So they really are just animals."

"Exactly as you say, Lord Ainz. They're so foolish, and that's what makes them adorable playthings. However, they are omnivorous and also eat wheat, so if you have any extra, might I trouble you for some? We're not quite getting by on what we can steal alone…"

"They are the source of our precious parchment supply. I don't mean to starve them. Yes…before you withdraw, Sebas, buy a large amount of wheat and give it to Demiurge."

"Understood. For a great quantity, I think I'll rent a warehouse and store it there temporarily. How should I transport it to Nazarick?"

"Hmm…Call Shalltear and have her use Gate. You don't mind if we leave it up to you for the rest, do you, Demiurge?"

“Of course not. We’ll transport it from there.”

“Good. By the way, Demiurge, your work truly stands out from the rest at Nazarick; I can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz! That sentiment is enormously encouraging for me.”

“…Uh, well, calm down. I want to ask you something, too. Are you sure you don’t have too much on your plate? I summon you whenever I need you, you’re running the farm to stabilize our parchment supply, you’re making demon king plans—I’ve left a lot of important things up to you. I keep wondering if you’re actually okay.”

Demiurge smiled ear to ear. It was a pleasant smile, devoid of malice, that Sebas had never seen on him before.

“Thank you so much. I am utterly unworthy of your concern, but please feel at ease. All my work is extremely rewarding, and none of it is burdensome to me at the moment. If I begin to feel I require assistance, I will be sure to ask.”

“I see, I see.”

Listening to their master’s happy voice, Sebas frowned and ruminated on the true nature of Demiurge’s farm.

As a fellow servant of the Supreme Beings of Nazarick, Sebas knew Demiurge’s personality inside and out. There was no way he would simply manage a farm, even if he was raising monsters like khimaira…

A striking scene flashed through Sebas’s mind—because he’d guessed the identity of Demiurge’s livestock.

Could he really send Tsuare to such a place? Certainly, Demi-

urge would guarantee her bodily safety, but he probably wouldn't go as far as to assure her mental well-being.

The pair's discussion reached a pause. *If I'm going to interrupt, now is the time*, Sebas decided and addressed their master. "Lord Ainz."

"Hmm? What is it, Sebas?"

"If it's all right with you…" He held his breath. This was a gamble. An extremely dangerous gamble. But he had to do it. "I'd like to put Tsuare to work in the Great Tomb of Nazarick."

A silence descended, and as all eyes gathered on Sebas, Ainz quietly said, "I asked Cocytus a similar question once before, but what's in it for us?"

"Indeed. First, Tsuare can prepare meals. Currently the only two members of Nazarick who can cook are the chef and the sous-chef. I'll take the liberty of excluding Yuri and her ilk. Considering the future, I think it would be beneficial to have more people who can cook. Also, I think having a human work in Nazarick as a test case is value enough on its own. I should think if a lower lifeform like her could eke out a living there, it could set a promising precedent. In addition—"

"Okay, okay." Ainz raised a hand to stop the torrent of appeals to Tsuare's usefulness. "I get it, Sebas. I understand very well what you're saying. I was thinking we should take our lack of cooks into consideration."

"But Lord Ainz, will she be able to prepare dishes worthy of Nazarick?"

Sebas shot a quick, sharp glare at Demiurge. The devil smiled back at him.

That jerk. Sebas killed the words on his tongue.

Ainz may have forgiven Sebas, but Demiurge hadn't. Surely that was why he was trying to take Tsuare's case in an undesirable direction.

"That's critical, isn't it? How about it, Sebas?"

"...Tsuare makes home cooking. As for whether it's worthy of Nazarick...it's hard to say."

"Home cooking?" Demiurge scoffed. "I doubt we'll be serving many steamed potatoes or whatnot in Nazarick."

"I have to say, Demiurge is being too hasty. Her knack for classic dishes means that if we ask the chef to teach her, I'm sure she could master other cuisines. We need to consider not only her present skill but her future potential."

"In that case, I'd like her to help with that on my ranch. It's tough work mincing all that meat."

"I—"

The pair's noisy conversation continued. Ainz watched them.

He watched them and the scene appearing behind them—the figures of their creators, a vision of the old days.

•

"So where are we going today?"

"To fight the fire giant."

"To fight the demonic ice dragon."

"Hmm... Ulbert, don't you remember? We said we were going

to go get the rare drops from that fire-giant boss, Surtr."

"Don't *you* remember, Touch? Some people need to go hunt demonic dragons to fulfill the special-class change conditions."

"That may be, but Yamaiko needs those rare drops to get stronger."

"Oh, I'm fine…"

"Original Fire, right? Which means she needs Original Ice, too, right? So let's do the demonic dragon first."

"…I paid real money to get a higher drop rate. Surtr's normal rate is lower than the demonic dragon's, so don't you think we should get that out of the way first?"

"I'll pay next time."

"Bu…but…"

"…Maybe we should go abyss diving and hunt sexy monsters like succubi?"

"Dearest little brother, shut up."

"If we're gonna do demons, I'd rather go take out the Seven Sin Lords, although I think it'll take a lot of prep work."

"Touch, now's not the time to insist on getting your way. If you take a look at who we have here, it's clear we have a better shot at killing the demonic ice dragon."

"Uhh, you're the one insisting on getting your way. Plus, we're not the kind of players who only think about efficiency."

"Come on, no need for our strongest caster and our strongest warrior to be fighting…"

“Those two have always been like that, even back when they first reached out to me.”

“Touch sure is a great guy to reach out to a pink meat stick like you.”

“Teapot and Peroroncino, you need to put away your weapons, okay? Or I’ll use my guild master powers.”

“Didn’t some guild beat the Seven Sin Lords?”

“Apparently Pride got killed. Someone posted about it online.”

“You must get a World Item for beating all seven, right? They’re World Enemies!”

“Speaking of World Items, let’s use the Caloric Stone as the main core and build the strongest golem ever.”

“Noobow, I think it’d be better to embed it in a weapon.”

“Armor wouldn’t be a bad choice, either, but that’s just my opinion.”

“Well, there’re a lot of things to consider with that. We can use it to make a request to the admins, too, so we should think a little more.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Momonga.”

“We figured out how to get the Caloric Stone as many times as we want, but it does take a ton of metal from the Seven Hidden Mines.”

“It’s such a headache. We can’t get it for sure unless we monopolize those mines.”

“Yeah. The mines are controlled by all different guilds, so if we

use it now, we'll probably never get it again. And I doubt we can all be nice and take turns… What if we sold some info to Trinity? We could get a bunch of greedy peeps to bump heads and snatch it out from under their noses."

"You mean sell to the coalition at the same time and have them clash over it? That's Squishy Moe for you. Such a tactician…"

"Speaking of the coalition, I hear they're working on another alliance."

"What? Why?"

"I heard they stole some guild's World Item, so that guild changed their plans."

"Ah, geez. But I think it'll just turn out like last time. It's hard for high-level guilds to maintain alliances…"

"—So why don't we just have Momonga decide?"

"That should be good. What should we do, Guild Master?"

"…Huh? About what? I was doing everything I could to ignore your convo…huh? You're asking me? …Sheesh… Then let's just do what we always do and decide by majority rule so there's no trouble later."

"I've got no objections."

"Me neither."

"Then let's say a new gold piece for Ulbert and an old one for Touch. Okay, everyone, get your coins ready. They're about to begin their arguments!"

"—CONTROL YOURSELVES. YOU'RE IN THE PRESENCE OF LORD AINZ!"

The argument between Sebas and Demiurge had been gradually escalating until Cocytus's voice hit the pair like a bucket of cold water.

They turned and found Ainz staring at them intently, and their faces changed color. They couldn't read his emotions from the flames flickering in his hollow eye sockets, but there was no mistaking the power in his gaze.

Realizing that a violent reprimand wouldn't be unwarranted, they both leaped into action at once.

"Please excuse my poor behavior, Lord Ainz."

"My apologies for such a foolish display."

His response to their bows and apologies was extremely strange. "Ah-ha-ha-ha!" Laughter suddenly echoed through the room—merry, bright laughter.

Neither Cocytus, Demiurge, Sebas, nor Solution had ever seen Ainz cackling in such high spirits before. It was so unbelievable to them all that they just stood there blinking.

"It's fine. I forgive you, I forgive you! Yes! Sometimes you have to fight like that—ah-ha-ha-ha!"

What had touched Ainz's heart was a complete mystery, but Sebas breathed a discreet sigh of relief; it seemed like things would work out somehow.

"Ah-ha-ha… Tch, maybe it was suppressed…"

Their master had calmed down all of a sudden, as if a string

had snapped, but it wasn't just Sebas's imagination that he was still in a rather good mood.

Ainz addressed him cheerfully. "I understand what you're saying, Sebas, but unfortunately, inviting a human into the Great Tomb of Nazarick would be…you know. Still, I'd like to see Tsuare. Bring her here."

"Eh? Uh—yes, my lord! Understood." Though he was inwardly confused by Ainz's strange request, Sebas promptly exited the room and brought Tsuare back.

"Lord Ainz, here she is."

"Yes, bring her over…" Ainz leaned forward in his chair. There was something strange about how closely he was examining her.

Sebas observed her out of the corner of his eye, wondering if she'd done something to displease him, but she was no different from before, and he had no idea what the reason for his master's behavior could be.

"…There's definitely a resemblance." He probably hadn't intended to say it aloud. "…Good of you to come, Tsuare. First, let me say this: I generally don't give warnings twice. I respect other people's choices, even if those choices lead them to unfortunate outcomes. With that in mind, I have a question for you. If you lie, that's the end of the discussion, and if your answer is undesirable to me, it'll be over then, too."

Sebas, standing next to Tsuare, heard her gulp. That was only natural. In the face of a threat like that, she was probably unbearably anxious about what would happen next.

"Now then, the question. Tell me your full name."

Sebas couldn't understand Ainz's intentions. *Why would he*

ask such a thing?

He peeked out of the corner of his eye at Tsuare and saw her gaze darting around the room. The reaction spoke volumes.

Answer honestly, Sebas prayed in his mind.

She hadn't even told Sebas her full name, so chances were good that there was something about it she didn't want people to know. Still, lying to his master would only lead to the worst possible result.

The silence continued until Ainz started getting impatient, and she murmured in a voice as tiny as the buzz of a mosquito, "Tsu-Tsuare…Tsuareninya."

"And your last name?"

"Tsuareninya Veyron."

"I see… I see… Then I ask you, Tsuareninya, is it your wish to come to the Great Tomb of Nazarick—the land I rule—and live there…? The Great Tomb of Nazarick is not home to humans. Not that it could never be, just that there aren't any. For that reason, I'm not sure it's a suitable habitat for you… You also have the option of accepting a vast fortune from me and living somewhere far away in human lands, you know."

The proposal was so grand she wondered why he was making it to her, but she replied without a moment's hesitation, "I—I want to live with Master Sebas."

Ainz slowly nodded.

Curiously, the red light burning in his vacant eyes softened.

"Very well. Listen, my minions."

Everyone straightened up, and Tsuare hurried to copy them.

"Tsuareninya will be under our protection from now on, on my honor as Ainz Ooal Gown. We can welcome you as a guest of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, but what is your wish?"

"Th-that's very kind of you, b-but please let me work with Master Sebas."

"If that is your desire. So we'll tentatively make Tsuareninya a maid who reports directly to Sebas. Sebas, give her appropriate work to do. At the same time, we'll transition the Pleiades to the Pleïades and change the team leader as prescribed. However, we won't have her move from her current location, so Yuri Alpha continues as the acting leader."

Solution bowed her head low.

"And tell all the members of the Great Tomb of Nazarick that Tsuareninya is protected under the name Ainz Ooal Gown and that she will be working alongside them."

Everyone in the room besides Ainz and Tsuare bowed at once.

"Demiurge, do you have any objections to my decision?"

"Not a single one, my lord. Your word is law in the Great Tomb of Nazarick. That said, I imagine many will find it hard to comprehend welcoming a human to our blessed land. How shall I explain it to them?"

"If we step back and think about it, Nazarick welcomed Yamaiko's little sister Akemi, who's an elf. So her being a human alone shouldn't rule her out. If we say that, then—" Ainz looked at Solution as he continued, "—we'd have to expel your littlest sister, too."

“I’m not sure if you can call an immortal being human, but…”

“Hmm, that’s true, Solution. Now then, Demiurge. Tell them those were my words. If anyone has objections, have them come see me, and I’ll explain.”

“Understood. For my part, I have no further questions.”

“Okay, then, to confirm: First, we begin withdrawing from this mansion. We’ll send all the guards stationed here back to Nazarick immediately. Sebas and Solution, your final job in the royal capital will be to buy the wheat Demiurge requested and move it to a storehouse. Once you’ve collected it there, we’ll send Shalltear to transport it to Nazarick using Gate. That’s it, I think?”

They all bowed their heads without a word, and after glancing around, Tsuare hastily followed suit.

“What should we do with Tsuareni—with Tsuare, Sebas? Should I take her back with me? Or should we have her go with you?”

“I should think it would be less troublesome for her to go with me, in more ways than one.”

“Okay, got it. Then Sebas, Solution, bring all the guards here. I’ll send them back with my magic.”

“Understood!”

Watching the three of them leave the room, Demiurge asked Ainz, “Do you know that woman?”

Ainz slowly rose from his chair without answering and turned toward the wall, as if to face someone. After a pause, he spoke. “Demiurge, I believe kindness deserves kindness in turn and

harm should be avenged with harm. In the same way, debts must be repaid."

Ainz pulled a book out of thin air. It had a leather cover and was so shoddily bound with a string it was nearly falling apart.

"I have a version the librarian translated for me, but this is the original. This journal belonged to…a girl who was burning with rage after her elder sister was spirited away by a noble…"

In a certain village, there had once lived a pair of sisters who loved each other. Their parents had died too soon, leaving the girls destitute, but they got by and helped each other out.

Then one day, the elder sister was taken as a mistress by the lord of the domain, about whom no one had anything good to say. If this could have led to a happy life, the younger one might have held back her tears and celebrated, but she guessed from the rumors that her sister would be toyed with and discarded like garbage once the man was done with her.

Her guess turned out to be correct. Furious, she left the village to seek a way to save her sister—because no one would help her.

Eventually, she realized she had an aptitude for magic, so she cultivated her power in order to stage her rescue. But before she could reach her goal, her quest was cut short.

Much was written in the journal, but on the last page was a single, simple line praising two adventurers, Momon and Nabe, with whom she'd gone on a journey to gather herbs.

"I learned a good deal of the ways of this world from this journal, so I'm indebted to you. I'll repay that debt to your elder sister."

Ainz stroked the faded leather cover and put the book away in

space.

“Then Lord Ainz, there’s a favor I’d like to ask of you.”

“What is it, Demiurge?”

“While I was reading the materials Sebas sent, there was one thing that interested me, and I was wondering if I might have some time to investigate.”

“Something caught your attention?”

“Yes, there’s a place I’d like to go visit. I’d like to be back by the time you return, but I need to look for it first, which may delay me… It would be extremely rude of me to keep you waiting, my lord, but if at all possible, I beg you…”

Ainz replied cheerfully to put the grim-faced Demiurge at ease. “No problem, Demiurge. You’re acting for the benefit of Nazarick, right? Waiting for that doesn’t bother me at all. You should go.”

“Thank you!”

2

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:01 PM

In the morning, Sebas and Solution’s busy day began.

They could have left without saying anything, but destroying the reputation they’d built as merchants would be a waste, so they decided to act as though they were returning to the empire.

Solution had met everyone only once, but Sebas took her with him to tell all the merchants and guildsmen he'd interacted with that they were leaving.

The visits couldn't very well end with just that; for friendly human relationships, small talk was unavoidable. No man was averse to chatting with a woman as beautiful as Solution, either, which only exacerbated the situation.

As a result, they were trapped at each stop for half an hour or more, and it had gotten quite late by the time they finished.

"That took a long time, but the temporary storage and transport of the wheat is done. Now we should be free to return to Nazarick, right?"

Solution sounded delighted—which was rare for her. Sebas could tell she was happy to go home to the Great Tomb of Nazarick, as well as satisfied she had carried out their master's orders. Since Sebas had been the one doing the majority of the intelligence gathering around town, she probably hadn't encountered many opportunities to feel she was accomplishing anything with her work.

The farewell visits they'd gone on were work and a place for Solution to shine as the public-facing lady of the house. It must have been very fulfilling for her. She even seemed ready to start humming a song.

In fact, thanks to her good mood while she was talking to all the merchants, negotiations on various fronts had progressed to their advantage. Even discounting their bulk purchase of wheat, the prices for the storehouse rental and so on were exceptionally low.

Being a pretty lady has its perks. Reflecting on how great that must be, Sebas parked the carriage on the grounds of the man-

sion and walked up to the door with Solution.

Sebas took out the key and inserted it into the keyhole.

But when he turned it as he always did, there was no click or response of the lock.

Suspicious, Sebas furrowed his brow and looked at Solution.

The door's unlocked?

When he pushed, it opened slightly.

They'd left Tsuare there alone. She never would have gone out on her own.

"There are a number of new scratches on the keyhole. There's a good chance someone picked the lo—"

Without waiting for Solution to finish, Sebas flung open the door. He didn't even think to consider a trap. If there was one, he would crush it underfoot.

They'd already mostly moved out of the mansion, so it felt vacant and empty. He stepped inside, activated all his detection abilities, and searched for the chi of a living thing—for Tsuare.

But there was no sign of any human.

"Tsuare! Tsuare, are you here?" he shouted and searched the house.

He looked everywhere, but she wasn't there. Not only could he not find her, but also he didn't discover any trace of what might have happened to her, either. It was as if she'd simply vanished.

No, someone definitely broke in. I don't smell blood, so they must have just taken her. So they've kidnapped her, and they'll

demand…

Sebas clenched his fists.

Just as I thought, it was a mistake to leave her alone while we said our good-byes. His error grated on him.

He'd been nervous about leaving Tsuare all by herself in the mansion. Thanks to their run-in with an underground organization, he had doubted danger could be too far away.

The reason he'd left her alone regardless was because she was still frightened of other people and going outside. She hadn't healed from her trauma. Her composure during the audience with his master and the others was probably because she hadn't registered them as people. Her reaction back then hadn't been one of someone with mental scars but of any normal person encountering monsters. Even just having her sit in the carriage could have been an issue, which caused him to opt for leaving her at the mansion.

He'd also figured that since they'd totally destroyed the brothel, it would take time for their enemy to regroup and plan an attack.

All he could say now was that he'd been too optimistic.

Sebas was anxiously hurrying down the hall when a voice called out to stop him. It came from the drawing room.

"Master Sebas, in here."

"Solution! Is she there?"

She couldn't be. He'd glanced in a moment ago. Still, he held out hope despite the slim odds.

When he entered the room, Solution was standing in the middle of it holding a sheet of parchment.

"It seems like something is written he—"

"Please let me see it." Without waiting for her reply, he snatched the parchment out of her hands. He activated a magic item, read the words on the sheet, and crumpled it up with a furious expression. "She was abducted, so I'm going to save her."

The response was quiet and measured. "I think that's fine."

Sebas's eyes widened. He never would have expected that from Solution.

"But Lord Ainz's orders were to withdraw to the Great Tomb of Nazarick," she added. "Shouldn't you prioritize that?"

"We're supposed to bring Tsuare."

"Master Sebas. If you act on your own again, you'll be putting yourself in a very dangerous situation. Where are you even going to go in the first place?"

"They were kind enough to specify a time and place. It seems they're connected to the organization that was running the brothel I destroyed."

"I see. But before you leave, you should report to Lord Ainz. If you hadn't destroyed the brothel in the first place, none of this would have occurred. Didn't this happen because you neglected Lord Ainz's wish that we operate quietly? If you act independently again, you'll be ignoring his orders again… Besides, have you forgotten what our master said?"

The words flashed in his mind—under whose name Tsuare would be protected.

“Report to Lord Ainz. Tell him she’s been kidnapped and ask what to do.”

3

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:15 PM

“La-la-laaaa.”

Cheerfully humming a song she made up, Albedo slid a needle through a loop of yarn. She tugged it tight. Again she inserted the needle, again she pulled it taut. After several repetitions, she’d sewn black fabric onto a sphere made of white yarn. Next, she stuffed some cloth into the white ball to make it especially round.

She took a hard look at her yarn doll, which was nearly a perfect sphere, and then smiled tenderly—a smile brimming with love like that of a goddess.

“Okay, Lord Ainz’s head is done!” Satisfied, she squeezed her hands into little fists and then pet the figure’s skull.

It was an exceedingly adorable item, with appliqué eyes and mouth; it would surely make Ainz blush if he saw it.

“Next, I need to make his body…”

She very gently placed the skull on the corner of the table and got up to get the ball of white yarn.

Albedo was in her room.

Originally, she didn’t have personal quarters, since she was as-

signed to defend the Throne Room.

Ainz felt it was wrong for the captain of the guardians of the Great Tomb of Nazarick not to have her own chambers, so on his orders, she'd been given one of the Forty-One Supreme Beings' spare rooms.

Like Ainz's, Albedo's quarters were spacious. Since she hadn't had many belongings to bring with her, she'd honestly thought it was too empty.

But after living there for two months, that was no longer true.

One of the reasons for that was the dressing room she was about to open.

It was completely full of Ainzes.

Of course, they were artificial. She had innumerable Ainzes, from life-size body pillows featuring him in different poses to adorably deformed Ainz-shaped plushies.

This was a top secret chamber, an unbreachable holy ground where not even the maids who came to clean were allowed. She called it her harem room.

"Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee-heeee!"

With an odd little shout, she took a flying leap, slowed her fall with the wings at her hips, and landed on a body pillow. The movement was reminiscent of a rugby tackle.

Still embracing the pillow, she rolled across the floor with her momentum. There were all kinds of Ainzes strewn around, so it didn't hurt at all.

From underneath three Ainz pillows, she giggled in that

strange manner. “Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee. My newest body pillow, made with Lord Ainz’s sheets… In other words, I’m indirectly sleeping with him. Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee…”

Burying her face in the pillow, she sniffed.

“It doesn’t smell like…anything.” She sounded extremely disappointed—to the point of inspiring pity, had anyone heard her.

Ainz was an undead who didn’t require sleep, so he didn’t use his bedroom to begin with. Plus, since his body was all bones, he didn’t have any particular body odor. He did bathe to rinse off dust and the blood of his opponents, but his own body didn’t secrete anything that would smell.

“Hm…? Is this…? Could it be?! Lord Ainz’s…”

But this virgin in love could detect Ainz’s nonexistent scent—although it might have been an olfactory hallucination.

“Hee! Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-heeeeeeee!”

Resembling a pervert more than a captain of the guardians, she inhaled deeply with her face still buried in the pillow.

“Ahh, I’m so happy.”

As captain, Albedo bore the brunt of an extensive workload. Her job included many painstaking responsibilities, such as various tasks related to positioning Nazarick’s soldiers and building the area’s security network, confirming Nazarick’s internal security, checking the statuses of everyone serving in the Throne Room, and so on.

For that reason, it was very important to her to use this space to rest and recover.

“Ohhh, I wanna see Lord Ainz. I wanna see Lord Ainz. Ahhh, I wanna see him.” She was irritated with Narberal, who was traveling with him, but tightly hugging the pillow helped her decompress. Just then—

“Albedo.”

She jumped.

Cold sweat broke out on her forehead as she glanced around the room, face twitching. Then she realized she’d heard the voice via a spell.

“I-if it isn’t Lord Ainz! Whatever could it be?”

“I just got a Message from Sebas—no, Solution—saying that Tsuare, the woman he picked up, was kidnapped, so I’m asking you to put together a unit to support him.”

When he said “Tsuare,” she remembered who it was right away.

Immediately after Ainz returned, he’d left for E-Rantel to be Momon, but she’d heard the rest from Demiurge, who’d stayed.

“Please forgive me the foolishness of objecting to your decision, but is a lower life-form like a human really worth the trouble of forming a special unit to save? I understand if the people responsible for the Shalltear incident are behind it, but…”

“No, I don’t think it has anything to do with Shalltear. This time it seems to be a crime syndicate lurking in the kingdom’s underground.”

“Then that seems even more…”

“Albedo. I promised to protect Tsuareninya on my honor as

Ainz Ooal Gown. Do you understand?”

The tone of their conversation changed completely.

His searing anger reached her loud and clear. Albedo’s voice stuck in her throat; she couldn’t speak.

“You get it, right? You understand?! I swore on my *name* to protect her! And then somebody kidnaps her. My friends and I came up with that name, and now someone is slighting it. Even if they didn’t mean to, I can’t let that stand!”

After his declaration, his hatred seemed to abruptly subside.

He’d probably quelled his emotions after they passed a certain point.

“…Sorry. Got a little upset with those asshole kidnappers. Forgive me, Albedo.”

Now that her master’s voice was more composed, Albedo finally calmed down enough to be able to speak. The wrath of a Supreme Being stressed her out even when she knew it wasn’t directed at her. “Th-there’s nothing you need to apologize for, Lord Ainz.”

Despite his physical absence, Albedo bowed low.

“So, Albedo, this is an order. Rescue Tsuareninya and keep her safe and sound!”

“Understood! And when we rescue her, we’ll bring an iron hammer down on the human scum who displeased you!”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you. By the way, is Demiurge still there dealing with the wheat? Put him in charge of the operation.”

“I’d like to go directl—”

“No, Albedo, I need you to guard Nazarick. Send Demiurge. And tell him to be careful not to let his true identity be exposed. Okay, so I’m leaving the royal capital stuff up to you and Demiurge. Do it right.”

“Yes, my lord!”

The Message ended, and silence returned. Albedo stood slowly and carefully tidied up the body pillows.

“I don’t get it…” There was a strangely hard glint in her eyes as she murmured those words. She was facing one corner of the room.

One of the reasons she didn’t let any maids in her space was because she didn’t want anyone else touching her legion of Ainz dolls. But there was another reason in that corner—the flag with the crest of Ainz Ooal Gown embroidered on it.

Usually it would be hung so it was visible immediately upon entering the room, but instead it was gathering dust in the corner. It received no respect or esteem there, just contempt, anger, and hostility.

“Ainz Ooal Gown…? How stupid.”

Albedo thought of the giant flag she’d hung instead of the Ainz Ooal Gown flag. It was too big, really—like a great theater curtain.

“The Great Tomb of Nazarick belongs to you and you alone. I devote myself to you and only you, my lord. Ahh, I hope to hear your lovely name once more someday …”



Chapter 7 Attack Preparations

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Attack Preparations

1

3 Late Fire Moon (September) 6:27 PM

Climb had called guards who relieved Brain, and he headed home, finally reaching Gazef's house in the evening. Once free from the stresses of combat, Brain realized his stomach was aching with hunger.

I'm gonna feel bad if Stronoff was also hungry and waited for me all this time…

He pushed open the door to the house. His attitude was completely uninhibited, as if he owned the place, but of course, he had permission from Gazef.

Someone must have heard him come in—as he walked down the hall to the room he'd been given, footsteps were approaching.

His guess that it was Gazef proved correct when the source of the sound came down the stairs.

"You were out a while, Unglaus. Where'd you go?" There was no censure in Gazef's questioning voice. On the contrary, he regarded Brain with bright curiosity in his eyes as the latter tried to think how he could ever answer that question in a concise way.

"If you're up for it, want to tell me over dinner?"

That was just what Brain wanted to hear. He rubbed his stomach and laughed. "That's a great idea. Where do we eat?"

Gazef looked just a little surprised and guided him with a *this way* gesture to the dining room.

"You're going to have a servant cook for us? Don't tell me *you're* going to make it?"

Gazef grinned in response to the casual question. "Definitely not. I'm a horrible cook." Then he frowned and added, "But—maybe because she's getting on in years?—my maid seasons things so mildly. When your job takes such a toll on your body, you want to eat something with a more robust flavor… I can't get her to understand that."

Brain chuckled and teased, "So the captain of the kingdom's Royal Select has to eat bland health foods?"

Not the least bit offended, Gazef replied, "That's right," with his usual frown. "Maybe I should have treated you to my household's vegetarian cuisine, but I bought us something."

"I see. Then I'll have to thank you for being so thoughtful." Brain grinned, which cracked Gazef up a bit.

"Well, can *you* cook, Unglaus?" he countered.

But the blade only sliced through air.

"I can't make anything fancy, but simple things, yeah. When I was traveling around and training, I would've been in trouble out on the road if I couldn't cook for myself."

Gazef gave a curt "aha!" as they entered the dining room. He picked up a basket that had been left in the corner.

It was nearly big enough to fit a baby inside, and the scent rising from it faintly tickled the nose and stomach.

The two men sat down facing each other.

After taking the various foodstuffs out of the basket and making a spread, they filled their glasses to the brim with red wine and clinked them. They didn't make a toast to anything in particular, and instead took a silent gulp.

The refreshing flavor of the young wine blossomed in their mouths.

After a couple of swallows, they set down their glasses with satisfied sighs and chatted quietly.

"...I haven't had a drink in a long time," Brain commented.

"Me neither. And actually, I haven't even been home for a meal recently."

"...Must be hard to work at the royal palace."

"Well, I do have a lot of duties as captain of the Royal Select."

"Do you guard the royal family?"

"Yeah, that's my main job."

Hearing about Gazef's life, Brain could tell what an upstanding guy he was. It would have been okay for him to bend or break now and then, but he hewed to the straight and narrow.

The nobles must hate this kind of peasant.

It seemed to Brain that his hunch was right—nobles featured surprisingly little in Gazef's stories. Despite his fairly high position as captain of the Royal Select, most of his stories were about life as a soldier or serving the royal family. There was absolutely no mention of the luxurious world of ballroom dances and so on.

In the neighboring empire, it was becoming less and less the case, but in the kingdom, the wall dividing nobles and commoners was still high and thick.

Brain suddenly found his situation hilarious.

He'd been honing his fencing skills in order to beat Gazef under the assumption that they'd fight to the death the next time they met. Instead they were drinking like old friends.

Perhaps Gazef realized what Brain had been thinking, because he smiled.

At the same time, Brain took up his glass and tapped it against Gazef's. Perhaps he was drunk? He bumped a bit too hard, and the wine sloshed onto the table.

"Hey, hey, don't get it on the food."

"If we pour wine on it, it'll be wine flavored. Could be good!"

"I don't have a terribly sensitive palate, so I don't mind, but… are you the same way, Unglaus?"

"Brain, call me Brain."

"Oh, then I'm Gazef."

"Got it, Gazef."

They laughed and clinked glasses again.

Gazef's stories covered a wide variety of topics, all from a world Brain knew nothing about, and their conversation was rolling along when the captain nonchalantly asked, "So, Brain. How did a man of your caliber end up like that?" He was cautious, like he would be when touching a blister. His studying gaze

wasn't to sniff out the truth but to express his concern, most likely.

"Ahh, thanks." The sudden gratitude made Gazef blink in confusion, and his reaction was so funny that Brain's cheeks relaxed into a smile. Then he straightened up and replied, "I encountered a monster…"

"A monster? You mean like an ogre or something?"

"I think it might have been a vampire… Her name was Shalltear Bloodfallen. The move I devised—to defeat you—she repelled it with her little finger." Brain noticed Gazef's eyes widen slightly.

"I see…," Gazef replied, and a manly grin spread across his face. Brain understood what was behind that expression very well—the emotions of a warrior who wanted to shatter a powerful enemy.

They were the things Brain had felt about Gazef. He had probably wanted to fight Brain, too—to relive that hair-raising battle once more…

But the brutishness of a die-hard fighter immediately vanished from his expression. What remained was the smile of the captain of the Royal Select.

When Brain described the vampire's appearance, Gazef said, "Hrm, never heard of her," and took a draught of wine. Brain also took a sip to wet his lips and told him about the fight—well, the massacre.

But he didn't mention that he'd been employed by a mercenary band. He had the feeling Gazef would be understanding and say, *Well, that's one way to live*, but he just couldn't bring himself to tell this upstanding man the cruel things he had once done in the name of improving his fencing.

Gazef listened in silence without a trace of doubt in his eyes.

"Do you believe me?"

"...Well, the world's a big place. I wouldn't be surprised if such a monster exists somewhere out there. Historically, there were evil spirits and dragonlords, after all. But a monster like that...I doubt I'd be able to beat her, either."

"Yeah. I don't know how strong you are now, so I won't make any half-ass comments, but I'll still go ahead and say that you wouldn't be able to win. That fiend lives in a world we can't even set foot in. Even if we went at her together, the fight would probably last only about a second or two."

Gazef jokingly grumbled, "Naw, c'mon," but Brain made an earnest appeal.

"Gazef, as the captain of the Royal Select, you need to protect the royal family. Even if you see that thing, don't you dare think about fighting it! Your life is too valuable to be squandered."

"I'm grateful for the warning, but if that Shalltear monster aims for the king, I'll buy time for him if it's the last thing I do."

Buying time isn't possible, even for Gazef. Not if that monster isn't playing around. But for some reason, Brain still had the feeling that Gazef would do it, that he really would delay the vampire, even if only a tiny bit.

"Shalltear. Shalltear Bloodfallen." He described her once more in detail, and Gazef nodded gravely.

"Okay, I got it. But just in case, tell me again once we're sober. I'll try to gather some intelligence."

"You can round up info all you like, but I don't think it'll make

a difference."

"If a storm is coming, you need to prepare, right? I can't just do nothing. And if we get advice from many different people, we might come up with a way to take her down."

"That would be great, but…"

"They're kind of distant acquaintances, but I know some adamantite-rank adventurers. They might have some wisdom to share… So what are you planning on doing now, Brain?"

Brain frowned at the question. *What* should *I do now?* His eyes moved unconsciously to his trusty sword leaning against a chair.

A lingering regret.

It's nothing more than that. No matter how hard I work, I won't be able to surpass that monster. His greatest dream was already lost. It was clear that his life was pointless.

From now on, he would have to live with his feet firmly on the ground.

It was just a childish fantasy…

"Hmm, what should I do? Maybe I'll be a farmer…"

He was from an agricultural village originally. Though fairly fuzzy, the knowledge of how to work the fields still survived in a corner of his brain. The only thing he could do besides that was swing a sword. To put it nicely, Brain had been very focused in life.

"Or…well, I don't think that's a terrible idea, but you could also work with me and serve the kingdom," Gazef suggested.

That didn't sound bad to Brain. Maybe he couldn't defeat Shalltear, but against humans, he was confident that he would fall into the stronger category. Still—

"I'm not sure I can handle working in a team, and I'm not really one for all the bowing and brownnosing…"

"We don't really brownnose so much…"

"Ahh, sorry. I don't mean any offense. That's just the common stereotype of people serving in the palace… Your offer's not a bad one. To fight for someone else's sake… Oh, that reminds me! Gazef, I met a boy called Climb."

"Climb? Not the boy with the hoarse voice?" When Brain nodded, Gazef made a sound of acknowledgment and then said, "Where'd you meet him? He's assigned to the princess, so I was under the impression he was never very far from her…"

"I saw him training in the street."

"Training in the street…? 'Cause he has no talent, I suppose. I don't think he can get any stronger than he already is. About the only thing he can do is develop his muscles to cultivate what ability he does have. Was he doing a drill to that end? If not, I should probably give him a bit of guidance."

"Hmm, certainly when it comes to swordsmanship he…has no gift for it. But in another way, he surpasses me."

Gazef made a *you gotta be kidding me* face.

The gap between Brain's and Climb's strength certainly was vast, and their level of potential wasn't even comparable, but it all felt the same to Brain, who knew that none of it mattered in a confrontation with the truly strong.

More importantly, Brain believed the mental strength to withstand the murderous aura of a man as powerful as Sebas was truly praiseworthy.

I broke and fled. But if the one Climb protects is standing behind him, he'll stand his ground and fight. A man like that… would probably be able to slice off the tip of that monster's pinkie nail.

Brain didn't reply to Gazef's puzzled look. Instead he recounted the gist of what had happened that day when they raided the brothel managed by the Eight Fingers.

"I see. With Climb…huh?"

"If it'll cause trouble for you, you can hang me out to dry. If I step back and think about it, I'm sure having someone who starts fights in the underworld as a guest in your home is problematic."

"No, not at all. On the contrary, you're more than welcome to… Those guys are a blight on the kingdom. I wish I could have led the charge."

"Do they really cause that much trouble for the country?"

"Enough to make me sick. They control most of the realm's underworld, and they use the dirty profits they earn there to strike deals with the nobles and throw their weight around in society. Even if we want to crush them, the nobles interfere, so there's nothing we can do. The only way to deal a blow to their operations is to break into their cleverly hidden facilities, forcibly expose their crimes, and make a ruckus, like you did. Still, they have more influence than most lesser nobles, so a botched operation would entail quite a counterattack."

"So you're stuck, huh?"

“Yeah, that’s why it would be great if we could take this opportunity to chip away at their power a bit, but it seems tricky.”

“You can’t invoke the king’s authority?”

“The opposing aristocrats would get in the way, so it’s impossible. Those guys are in collusion with nobles in both factions, which makes it especially complicated.”

On that gloomy note, the men silently drank their wine and began their meal.

2

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 7:14 AM

The Blue Roses arrived at the castle first thing in the morning, each carrying a large bundle that landed on the floor with a *clank*. The bags contained their gear. It wouldn’t have been appropriate to appear at the castle fully equipped.

Free from their heavy burdens, they all stretched their shoulders. Renner was observing them with a kind expression when their leader, Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra, asked her, “Don’t you have princess work to do?”

Renner had almost no authority, but her position did come with its own set of duties. “It’s all right. There’s nothing that will cause problems if I leave it for later.”

Lakyus responded with an expression of mock chagrin.

Renner answered with a silly face of her own but almost im-

mediately assumed her serious expression from earlier. “Lakyus, I’d actually like you to handle the issue we spoke of as soon as you’re able.”

“How come? Yesterday we said we were going to attack each location one by one under the utmost secrecy, right?” asked Evil-eye, the caster wearing a mask.

She kept her guise on even inside the castle. Her suspicious attire was allowed only because she was an adamantite-ranked adventurer, one of the strongest humans, and because her superior was Lakyus, a noble.

“Something unexpected happened last night, so I think we need to make a change to the plan. So…” She told them about the recent attack on the brothel.

The Blue Roses’ impressed gazes gathered on Climb as he stood at attention behind them, feeling awkward.

He believed it was entirely thanks to the other two men, not himself, that they had been able to raid the brothel and save the tortured people being held there. In his opinion, he honestly hadn’t done a single praiseworthy thing.

On the contrary, he’d escaped without an upbraiding for acting on his own; now he was disappointed in himself for the flood of relief after he learned his actions had caused only a change in the plan instead of ruining it.

“Nice work, virgin!”

“Yeah, just what Gagaran said. Capturing one of the Six Arms earns you a gold star.”

“…Undead King, Davernoch; Spatial Slash, Peshurian; Dancing Scimitars, Edström; Thousand Kills, Marmvist; Illusion Ma-

niac, Succuronte; Fighting Ogre, Zero…" Tia reeled off their names.

"Davernoch is an undead. Supposedly, Peshurian can slash enemies even from a distance. Edström has some kind of special enchanted weapon. Marmvist is a poison user who specializes in stabbing. Succuronte I'll skip because he's been captured. And Zero is a fighter who excels at unarmed combat. They're all thought to be adamantite-rank equivalent."

"Yeah, it's a great advantage for us that you captured one of them."

"It's amazing, Climb! And how unbelievably lucky that you ran into Brain Unglaus and got to work with him!"

Climb agreed with the last sentiment.

"If Unglaus took out Succuronte in one hit, then he's just as strong as you'd expect after he went head-to-head with Gazef Stronoff. If that's the case, then I'm super-interested in that old man even he couldn't beat," Evileye commented.

"I didn't find out where Master Sebas's house is located," Climb answered.

"…Hmm, so Climb. Did he not tell you because he was on guard? Or did you just not think to ask?"

"Both, Miss Evileye. He might have told me if I had requested it. But I didn't want to ask for something that might have caused trouble for him, considering he volunteered to help after simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"…Mmm, you take things too seriously."

"Beyond a doubt."

The two near-identical sisters appraised him.

“I just don’t understand how I haven’t even heard a rumor about someone on that level…”

With Evileye’s remark, Climb sensed the increasing suspicion of Sebas, but right as he took a breath to defend him, Lakyus clapped her hands to change the mood. “Well, let’s save that for later. If it weren’t for his assistance, we wouldn’t have figured out the precise location of the brothel, and it wouldn’t have been possible to capture the head of the slave-trafficking division, Coccodor. We’re all indebted to him.”

“You’re right, Lakyus. But Princess, does changing part of the plan mean that we’re attacking different locations now?”

“Evileye, I think we need to attack all the locations today and take them out simultaneously. The more time passes, the more of an advantage our opponents have.”

Silence fell over the room.

The only ones involved in this operation were the Blue Roses. The idea had been that since they lacked the manpower, they’d attack the target facilities one by one.

“B-but Princess, didn’t we say that we didn’t have enough people? Did another group step forward overnight to help us? You can’t hire adventurers, can you?”

The founding philosophy of the adventurers’ guild was protecting humans from alien threats. For that reason, there was an unwritten law that they would refrain as much as possible from poking their noses into disputes between humans. If they didn’t, it would be impossible for guilds to cooperate across national borders.

For example, even in situations where guild involvement could save people, the assumption was that if they allowed one exception, there would never be an end to it. So the guild pressured members to comply with the unspoken rule. Punishments ranged from a warning to suspension of work and even expulsion from the guild. In this way, some adventurers became "workers" who took on illegal jobs, but for the worst violators, it was rumored that the guild would dispatch a team of assassins.

The Blue Roses were breaking those commandments by mounting resistance against the Eight Fingers, a human organization. But they were adamantite-rank adventurers, practically the guild's poster girls. There was no way their team would be disavowed, so they got what amounted to tacit consent. Still, the only reason for this privilege was their rank.

"Involving the guards because you want to expand the strike force is the height of folly. The enemy already have their people in the guards. It's a bad idea to use them unless it's as a last resort."

"That goes for soldiers the nobles brought from their domains, too. Until we know which nobles are with the Eight Fingers, asking any of them for aid is a bad idea."

"Hmm. I guess the only people we can trust are Gazef Stronoff and the soldiers—the Royal Select—directly under him… Then again, I wonder how far we can trust his men…"

"You're absolutely right. In the end, it's really hard to take measures against these guys when we don't know how far their influence extends. But if we just go around investigating, the whole kingdom will become corrupt. It'll be like playing Whac-a-Mole with no idea who the moles are."

Renner nodded at Lakyus's complaints.

On top of the empire's offensive maneuvers, they had to deal

with internal conflict and the worsening corruption. And the princess was still trying to fight under those conditions—Climb thought he could see rays of glittering sunshine highlighting his master and smiled. He was surer than ever that only she could govern the kingdom and bring happiness to the people, and his devotion to her grew.

He clenched his fists in fury at everyone, mainly the nobles, who treated her as a decorative figurehead in spite of her virtues and decided that all she needed to do was look pretty. But his anger eased at the sound of her beautiful voice in his ears, and he focused on the conversation once more.

"It's exactly as you say. So I'm thinking of asking a trustworthy noble for help."

"You know of someone, Princess?"

"Yes, Evileye. I don't know many, but there is one we can trust."

"Really, Renner? Who's that?" Lakyus asked. "Not that I think you would overlook this, but even if we can trust the person, it won't do us much good unless they're also pretty powerful. And we have no guarantee they've brought enough soldiers from their domain."

"I'm pretty sure this one is acceptable in those respects. And I'll summon the captain of the Royal Select as well."

"That I understand."

"Yeah, we can have faith in the captain of the Royal Select. Or rather, if he is with the Eight Fingers, we don't stand a chance."

"Okay, Climb. Please summon Marquis Raeven. He attended a recent meeting, so he should still be in the city."

“The marquis? I did see him with one of the princes, but…”

Marquis Raeven did fit the bill—except for the standing question of whether they could trust him or not.

He was one of the six great nobles, and when it came to capital, he had more than most. The only problem was the lack of proof he wasn’t under the influence of the Eight Fingers. There was a distinct possibility his affluence was due to taking money from the syndicate.

But Climb immediately rejected such ideas. Renner, his most wise master whom he respected, had vouched for the man. In that case, he had to be trustworthy.

But unlike Climb’s, the faces of the Blue Roses fell.

“Whoa, whoa, Princess! Can you really trust the marquis?”

“I hear he can’t choose a side.”

“He’s like a bat that constantly flits back and forth between the king’s faction and the nobles’ faction. If he’s only loyal to profits, he’d take money from the Eight Fingers.”

“I don’t want to think what would happen if intelligence leaked that way, Princess.”

The negative opinions kept coming when a clap suddenly sounded. It was Lakyus. “Everyone, hold on! Hey, Renner. I haven’t heard many good things about the marquis. Can we really trust him?”

“I can’t say for sure. And I think he is receiving something from the Eight Fingers.”

Huh? Everyone was surprised, their faces clearly indicating

confusion. But one person had an idea.

"You're going to leak false intelligence to manipulate him?"

"Like there will be an assassination. Tell him an elderly hit man is after someone, and then their security will focus on the threat."

Renner shook her head at the former assassins. "No, Tina, Tia, that's not it. There must be some people who get money from them who have no intention of cooperating with them, right? Of course, if his maneuvers are more intricate than I thought, we'll fail, but…Climb, summon Marquis Raeven. If you tell him you took out the Eight Fingers' brothel and captured the head of the slave-trafficking division, he should meet with us."

Climb's eyes shifted to the window to see how light it was outside. The morning sun was blinding, so it was a bit too early to summon him. Still, he didn't expect they'd be able to see a great noble immediately, so perhaps it was a good time to make an appointment.

"Should we really mention the head of the slave-trafficking division?" he asked. "I think it would be better to keep it a secret…"

Renner wanted to play that card to leverage a meeting, but even if Raeven was a great noble, he wouldn't turn down a summons from the princess, so Climb figured it would be better to save that information for later.

Renner shook her head and vetoed his idea. "If we want him on our side, we have to show our hand. That's the most effective way to indicate that we trust him."

"I see." Climb nodded and respectfully bowed his head. "Understood. Then I'll be on my way to call on the marquis."

“Thanks, Climb. Okay, I’m sure that will take a while, so how about some tea in the meantime?”

•

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 9:37 AM

The Blue Roses expected it would take quite a while for Marquis Raeven to arrive, assuming the earliest they could meet him would be about midday.

As a great noble, he would have various plans for his morning such as meetings with other nobles. If it were the king summoning him, it would be different, but this was Renner, who essentially held no authority of her own. She would be low priority for him.

That was why when Climb returned so quickly, they thought that perhaps he had been flatly dismissed. Instead, no one could hide their surprise when two men entered the room behind him.

One of them was, of course, Marquis Raeven.

There was no word to describe his appearance besides *impeccable*. He wore a doublet made from some exotic beast fur—probably a monster’s—sewn with golden thread. The jacket’s front buttons and lapel ornamentation were quite elaborate, and from the way they glittered, the buttons must have been set with tiny jewels. A thin standing collar concealed his neck. These clothes were fit for an audience with the king, and given how well he wore them, he certainly looked the part of one of the six great nobles.

The following visitor was rather plump.

Renner looked at him and exclaimed, “Brother!”

“Hello, my young half sister. You seem to be in good spirits…

and I see the daughter of House Alvein is here, so these must be the Blue Roses, if I'm not mistaken. Amazing. I never thought I would meet adamantite adventurers in a place like this."

The man who had entered without knocking and started chattering away was the second prince, Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself.

When Lakyus bowed to show proper respect for the royal, he responded with a benevolent wave of his hand. "It seemed like an interesting conversation, so I decided to come along."

"You summoned me, Your Royal Highness?"

"Yes, thank you for coming, Marquis Raeven. Please lift your head," Renner answered. She was standing now that the prince—further up the succession chain than her—had entered the room.

When the marquis looked up, a faint smile was painted onto his face.

It was a sly expression, eerie to anyone who saw it. At the same time, they all somehow agreed that this was the only sort of smile that suited him, so no one ever found it off-putting.

"Can we have everyone except for us go into the next room?"

"Very well, brother. Lakyus, Climb, sorry—but please go next door."

"Got it." Lakyus replied concisely and had her companions take their bags. They were probably planning to begin preparations in the next room so as not to waste time.

After watching the six of them—five Blue Roses plus Climb—bow and disappear into the next room, Renner invited the two men to the table.

“Have a seat.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

“Got it, little sister.”

One plopped into his chair, and the other gracefully sat without a sound. Renner poured a cup of tea and set it in front of the marquis.

“Sorry to trouble you, Princess.”

“My apologies that it’s gotten tepid.”

“Hey, hey, hey! None for me?” Zanac scowled at the other two and their cups full of tea.

“Oh? I thought you hated tea, brother.”

“Yeah, it’s just hot water with some color to it—of course I despise it, but I’ll feel left out if I’m the only one with no drink.”

“Then shall I have the maid bring something? Would fruit water be all right?”

“Tea is fine. No need to go out of our way to leak intelligence, is there?”

“If we act today, the maids won’t have time to relay information back to their respective houses.”

“We should still be careful, though, right? Girls tend to blab. Especially when it comes to the palace servants—those women can send reports home at an alarming speed.”

Renner smiled as she poured a cup of tea and offered it to Zanac.

"…Hmph. So you've already tested the maid info network?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Eh, never mind." With that the prince took a gulp of tea and stuck his tongue out. "Ugh, it's bitter."

"But Your Highness, what could you have possibly wanted to discuss so early in the morning? Of course, I would make haste when you summon me no matter the hour, but…"

"Thank you. The situation is urgent, so I'll be frank. I'd like you to lend me your wisdom."

After a light cough to clear her throat, she got right to the point.

Marquis Raeven's almond-shaped eyes widened, containing a shade of surprise, but he immediately regained his composure, and the trace of emotion vanished.

"My wisdom? If it's a question Your Highness cannot answer… I'm not sure I will be able to."

"I believe you have what it takes. No one at court is as skilled as you in these matters."

The marquis exchanged glances with the prince.

Renner was barely involved in any power struggles at all. So what "matters" could she possibly be referring to?

The marquis smiled in a relaxed way. It was evident that if he forced himself to guess now, his thoughts would lead him in a strange direction. He judged there was no harm in waiting until he had more information.

“What sort of advice do you need?”

“I’d like to ask you, since you’re the dominant power in the shadows of the king’s faction—or rather, the one leading the king’s faction from the shadows—if it would be possible for you to mobilize your side’s soldiers.”

“…Huh?!”

The marquis looked like a spell had detonated directly in front of him. Anyone there would have been surprised—Raeven’s expression rarely changed so drastically.

But such a reaction was only to be expected. If any other noble had heard what Renner said, they would have laughed. It was actually true, but the marquis had been keeping it secret.

Raeven only appeared to be flitting between the two factions, when in reality, he was actually the one contributing the most to the king’s faction, leading it behind the scenes and keeping a lid on the internal conflict that threatened to split the kingdom in two. Without Raeven’s efforts, their nation surely would have already fallen.

Zanac gasped softly. He had always had a hunch that Renner was a monster in human clothing, possessed of an unnatural intellect, but how had she arrived at the truth with virtually no one serving as her eyes, hands, or feet? She was practically locked up in the palace. Not a soul in the kingdom besides Zanac knew the truth.

The two of them simultaneously realized she could be bluffing but quickly dismissed that idea. Renner was acting like she was only stating the obvious. They had met enough schemers that she would have to be quite an actress to fool them, but if she wasn’t acting, then what was the foundation for her assertions?

Renner realized she needed to explain further and, ignoring Raeven's surprise, continued talking in an easygoing way. "… Well, really I should have asked one of the other two great nobles in the king's faction, but Blumrush is leaking intelligence to the empire, right? So then…"

"H-how…?"

"Wait one moment!" The marquis's eyes popped open, and he spoke louder than Zanac's hoarse murmur.

"Marquis Blumrush…?"

"You know about him, right? Isn't that why there's a limit on the amount of important information he's allowed to handle?"

Both of them stared at Renner, speechless.

Her earlier serene expression hadn't changed a bit, and she wondered under her breath, "Or maybe I'm wrong?"

"Y…you…" Raeven was so shocked he forgot to address her properly.

Everything she said was true.

It was known only to Raeven and Zanac that one of the six great nobles, one on the king's faction side, Marquis Blumrush, was betraying the kingdom. The reason they tolerated a traitor in their ranks was their greater interest in not disrupting the balance between the two factions.

Raeven had frantically concealed the situation from the nobles' faction and skillfully maneuvered so no sensitive intelligence would leak to the empire. Yes, up until now, he had believed he was pulling it off flawlessly.

Raeven had told Zanac. So how did the caged little bird get all the way to Renner? Thinking about it gave Zanac goose bumps. “How did you figure all that out…?”

“If you just listen a little bit, it’s obvious. And the maids talk sometimes.”

How reliable was maid gossip, though?

Raeven didn’t believe it was possible.

But a memory he had of her convinced him what she was saying—that she’d inferred everything from maid talk—was true. She’d once made a jewel necklace out of a pile of trash by selecting only the prettiest pieces. So—

“Are you a monster?”

—a fitting assessment of such a woman escaped his lips.

Although it had surely been loud enough for her to hear, Renner only smiled and didn’t reprimand him for his rudeness. Raeven cast away the presumptions he had held up until this point.

The woman before him was someone he should treat as an equal. And he was sure his memories were not mistaken.

“Understood. We can speak frankly. You don’t mind, right, Prince?”

Seeing Zanac nod, Raeven straightened up and looked straight at Renner. His attitude resembled Gazef’s in a fighting stance.

“But before we begin…I’d like to talk to the ‘real’ Princess Renner.”

“What do you mean ‘real’?” Renner asked innocently, puzzled.

“I saw a girl a long time ago. Her sophisticated insight was far greater than mine, and the things she said were immeasurably valuable. Of course, it took quite a while for me to realize their value and significance.” The room had fallen silent, and the marquis’s monologue hung in the air. “She was a girl who murmured strange things—or so some people thought—but when I saw her, I felt for a moment like I had seen something dangerous.”

“Something dangerous?” Renner asked quietly.

“Yes. I only caught a glimpse, so I assumed it was perhaps a figment of my imagination. But her hollow eyes suggested she didn’t care about the world one bit, that she despised everything.” Raeven shrugged as if to ward off the sudden chill in the room. “But after a while, I saw her again, and she acted like the child she was, so I thought I must have seen wrong… Your Royal Highness…I wanted to ask if I have indeed been cleverly deceived all this time.”

Their gazes met—the sly battle of two entwined snakes.

Suddenly, the spark left Renner’s eyes.

Raeven smiled faintly, feeling as though he had finally spied something he’d once seen long ago. “Ah, I never thought that it was so…”

Witnessing his innocently smiling little sister turn into a horrifying monster, Zanac broke out in a cold sweat. No, he always had a vague idea—that beneath her beauty she concealed this ugliness. It seemed his only mistake was his guess that she desired authority for herself or that she wanted to destroy the entire kingdom for sticking her in this cage.

She wasn’t like him; she was something else.

“Just as I thought, Your Royal Highness, Princess Renner. Those eyes are exactly the ones I saw back then. So you’ve been acting all this time?”

“No, that’s not it, Marquis Raeven. I wasn’t acting. I was satisfied.”

“…By your soldier…Climb?”

“Yes, it’s thanks to my Climb.”

“Wow. To think that boy was capable of changing Your Highness… I thought he was nothing more than a child. But what is he to you?”

“Climb?” She stared into the air. *How much is he worth to me?* She tried to find the words that could express the answer.

Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself.

To describe her in a word: *golden*. People attributed it to her dazzling beauty. But not many knew that she possessed abilities that far outshined her looks.

Her powers were thought, insight, analysis, innovation, comprehension—every aspect of her mental capacity had developed to an abnormal degree. In short, she was a genius.

Clearly the gods themselves had lavished her with these gifts—it seemed to be the only possible explanation. Her ideas, apparently composed of flashes of inspiration, were the result of considering countless fragments of information with her shocking perception.

There probably wasn’t a single other person who could match Renner on the entire continent.

Or if there was someone who was her equal, they wouldn't be human. Still, even among races that surpassed humans, beings able to rival her were extremely rare.

In Nazarick, the only ones near her level were Albedo, the captain of the guardians, capable of overseeing all the minions on every level, and Demiurge, who possessed a wealth of demonic wisdom with a particular gift for strategy, domestic and foreign—essentially any facet of nation building.

But humans often think of things only from their own point of view. In that sense, maybe it was all regular people could do to label her as an eccentric or an oddball.

But Renner had one flaw. She didn't understand why other people couldn't comprehend what she could. If she had had a peer, maybe she would have been able to realize she was gifted. Then things might have turned out differently.

But that was not what happened.

Instead, a little girl expressed thoughts no one else could comprehend, and they found her frightening. Since she was incredibly cute, she was not terribly disliked and still received love to a degree. But the fact that no one could understand her had a massive impact on her psychological development, and slowly, over time, she began to warp.

Perhaps calling it the isolation of genius would sound nicer.

The stress of an environment where no one could keep up with her was intense, and for a long time, she couldn't keep her food down.

She grew thinner and thinner, and people who knew her back then believed she wouldn't last long.

Without her puppy, that probably would have been true. And even if she had overcome her trials, a monstrous being might have come into existence, one who saw the world only in numbers and who enacted horrific sufferings upon the few for the sake of the many.

It had been a whim. One rainy day she decided to take an escort and go outside for a change of scenery, and she came upon a half-dead puppy.

The animal gazed at its soon-to-be owner.

What serious eyes. That was what she thought at the time.

His eyes naively revered her.

She was used to the stares of those who found her odd. She was used to the looks of people who found her cute. But she couldn't fathom what this puppy's eyes held. To her, these spirit-filled eyes embodied hate, amazement, joy, emotion—and humanity.

Yes, in those eyes she found a fellow human.

The puppy the girl picked up grew into a boy and then a man.

As a pup, as a boy, and as a man, his eyes pierced her with a blindingly innocent gaze.

But this no longer pained her.

Because of those eyes, she became able to converse with others somewhat normally as a person, gaining the ability to pass her time with severely inferior creatures.

And now, thanks to Climb's simple existence, Renner's world was complete.

“Climb…hmm. Yes, if I could be with him…mm-hmm. And if I could keep him chained up so he couldn’t go anywhere, that would be even better.”

The atmosphere in the room froze over. Perhaps it made sense for Zanac to be shocked, since they were at least partially of the same blood, but even Raeven was astonished.

He had thought they would listen to the sweet, childish words of the woman said to be the most beautiful in the kingdom. But considering that the real Renner had planned to reveal herself, the talk most likely wouldn’t have been so syrupy, but this was still beyond anything he could have imagined.

How much simpler things would have been if she were only suffering from love that crossed class boundaries. What she had just said was beyond insane.

“I—I see. So this is your true nature? When we were kids, you didn’t seem any stranger than a shirt buttoned one spot off, but now I understand how abnormal you really are.”

“Really, brother? I don’t think I’ve done anything particularly strange,” Renner replied.

“Why don’t you just keep him, Your Highness?” the marquis asked. “If you… Well, maybe it’s difficult without someone supporting you.”

“Yes, and it would be difficult to manage while keeping up appearances as a princess… And it’s no good if I force him to look at me. I want to keep him like a dog, wrapped in chains, with those eyes just like they are now.”

One would be hard-pressed to find people who enjoyed hearing talk about the fetishes of others. Raeven had encountered Renner’s thoughts as a woman, and he wanted to regain some

distance.

"Keep him like a dog…? So you're not in love with him, then?"

Renner eyed him as if to say, *What in the world are you talking about?* "I adore him! I just really adore those eyes. And I love the way he follows me around like a loyal hound."

"Sorry. I don't get that at all. That's not love, little sister."

"I believe one can argue there is more than one type of love."

"…My apologies, but I can't quite comprehend…"

"And I'm not asking you to. As long as you know that I love him, how much I adore him, that's enough."

She's crazy.

Raeven thought her personality was warped, but he hadn't realized she was distorted in quite this way.

Faced with this woman and her abnormal psychological makeup, the two men exchanged glances—*what do we do now?*

They had already learned that the princess was in love with a soldier, which had the potential to rock the kingdom, but they felt like they had stumbled upon an even wilder discovery.

"Well, fetishes are—"

"It's not a fetish. It's the purest love."

She interrupted the marquis with a rebuke, and he suppressed the urge to argue. "Well, love…yes. But at present, the idea of you and…Sir…Climb being together seems—"

"Impossible. And what's more, if word of it got out, you'd be

married off to a noble right away. Barbro is under the influence of the nobles' faction, so I'm sure he'd choose one of them."

"Hmm. It'd probably be one of the first jobs on his list even if he were to inherit the throne right now. I would bet good coin it's already been decided. There is a man who looks at me like I'm already his."

"The one hoping for your hand in return for joining the nobles' faction."

"But Climb would be impossible, anyway… Even if he obtained peerage, he'd be a baron at most. Even if the court made an exception and granted him something higher, I still don't think he'd be allowed to marry the princess."

"I'm well aware of that. With the current state of the kingdom, it would probably be impossible no matter what method we tried."

Zanac grinned. This was exactly where he wanted her. "Soooo, how about we make a deal? If I become king, I'll get you and Climb together."

"It's a deal."

"That was fast. Are you sure?"

"I have no reason to refuse. Of all the gambles I could make, this one has the best odds. I've been meaning to move the conversation in this direction ever since you entered my room with Marquis Raeven."

"…So you'd planned for this all along?" he responded with a rueful smile, but his expression was far removed from the emotions he felt. He'd always considered his little sister cleverer than him, but he hadn't expected to find himself dancing in the palm

of her hand.

When he thought about it, there was no reason for her to reveal so much, but when he considered the possibility that her intent had been to elicit that response from him, it made sense. In his head he cursed, *You monster!*

"And so, brother, or rather, Marquis Raeven, I have a favor to ask."

"What might that be?"

"You have a child, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes, he's still just five years old. What about him?" The face of his precious son came to mind, and he had to make an effort to keep his cheeks from relaxing into a smile. Since he knew the reason for Zanac's sour expression next to him, he forced himself to hold back the boasting.

"Please give him to me as my fiancé."

"No! I'll never hand him over to a woman like you!" he barked instantly. Then, looking between Zanac's half-closed eyes and Renner's unchanging smile, he realized his mistake and blushed. "I beg your pardon, Your Royal Highnesses! I was a bit startled…" He cleared his throat once and readdressed Renner. "Your Royal Highness, do excuse me, but may I inquire as to the reason?"

"You must know why."

"C'mon, Renner, you're the one who started this, so—"

"You marry my son and have a child with Climb," the marquis interrupted. "My son has a child with the woman he loves—a child who would be my actual grandchild—and it could be my successor. You would pretend to be its mother. Is that it? It's not

a bad idea. You'd get to have a child by the man you love, and my family would marry into royal blood, albeit duplicitously."

"I'm not interested in rank or inheritance, so if my real child could be set up financially to some extent, I wouldn't make your house raise it."

"I'll go ahead and trust you there."

"…So if someone with Marquis Raeven's authority proposes a marriage, Dad won't be able to ignore it," the prince mused. "The marquis gets some royal blood for his family, and you get to be with the man you love. Plus, I'll have gained your support. No losers. If any one of us betrays the others, we all take the fall… A perfect plan. I still kind of can't believe you're suggesting this in front of me."

"Oh, but brother, I want to guarantee that you're an ally. And wouldn't you hate to find out about it after the fact?"

He didn't have a response—because she was right. And a plan in which the parties had a strong grip on one another's weaknesses couldn't be refused. Renner may have had some screws loose, but the kingdom needed someone with her superior intellect.

"Okay, that's enough about us. What's this about a run-in with the Eight Fingers? I heard you captured the head of the slave-trafficking division?"

"Yes, it's as Climb told you. And I want to attack them swiftly before they go to ground. We got ahold of some intelligence telling us where the Eight Fingers are operating inside the capital, so the plan is to conduct the raid sometime today. There's just one problem: We don't have enough soldiers. I summoned you because I want to borrow your strength, Marquis Raeven."

Raeven and Zanac shared a look, and it was the prince who spoke. “So where will the raid take place?”

The pair of them took turns reading the parchment and translation Renner handed them.

“This is confirmed?” asked the marquis.

“Of course. I had Lakyus and her team check them out. The report just came in, and these locations are definitely owned by the Eight Fingers. The problem is that they’re all situated on land owned by different nobles.”

It wasn’t quite an issue of extraterritoriality, but marching in would mean picking fights with the nobles out in the open.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. If we find anything related to the Eight Fingers, we can use that to put pressure on the nobles.”

“And even if we don’t find anything, we’ll still ‘find something’—I see. Guess we know how to get rid of any papers that would cause trouble if they were found in our possession.”

The trio’s eyes met and they laughed—but their laughter was devoid of kindness.

“Oh, Renner, I have one problem—or rather, something we need to address.” Zanac looked around the room. This was the first time he had checked to make sure no one else was there. In other words, the topic was that important and that secret. “Actually, our brother is also receiving money from one of the Eight Fingers’ divisions. I thought we could use that information to get him disinherited, so we’ve been searching for their headquarters in the kingdom. So far we’ve found out it’s in the capital. I’d like to add it into the raid list.”

“That’s fine. This is an opportunity to do a big sweep. If we

miss this chance, who knows when another will come along. Which division is it?"

"The drug one."

"Ah, that's not good. A few days ago, I had Lakyus and her team attack three villages that are cultivating narcotics. If we don't move fast, we might miss out."

"Really…? I see. Marquis Raeven, how soon can you move?"

"It'll be tough. For now, I have an idea of some nobles who the Eight Fingers haven't corrupted yet. But as for houses we can trust for sure, there are probably only two. I'll need some time to persuade them. Besides that, there is one other problem."

"And what might that be, Marquis Raeven?"

"The soldiers we have may not be a match for our enemy."

Some humans, such as powerful adventurers, could take on an army.

There were various theories about why so many adventurers outclassed ordinary humans.

The most likely possibility was that in extreme circumstances, the flesh—or according to another hypothesis, the brain—became abnormally stimulated, triggering a process akin to supercompensation and increasing their abilities. Others thought it was blessings from the gods or some kind of evolution due to magic exposure, but what all the theories had in common was the rapid improvement of physical, mental, magic, and/or other capacities.

The more powerful opponents one faced, the more often this improvement would occur, so it was especially frequent for adventurers, who faced immensely powerful monsters with a di-

verse array of abilities.

And if the Eight Fingers had such members, mere soldiers wouldn't stand a chance.

"But surely your bodyguards would be all right?"

Raeven shook his head in response to Zanac's question. "They *are* retired adventurers—mythril rank and above, at that—but some of our enemies possess unbelievable power. The Six Arms are the strongest the Eight Fingers have to offer, and each is said to be the equivalent to an adamantite-rank adventurer. If they show up, we'll be in trouble. Of course, if we assume we're sending multiple soldiers after only one of them, that's different, but…"

"Adamantite rank…" It was only natural for Zanac to be stunned. Each adamantite-ranked adventurer was said to be a solo powerhouse who could face a thousand men.

"Then let's ask Lakyus to split up the Blue Roses and have them each take command at a different location. As long as there isn't more than one of the Six Arms at each location, that should work."

"There are five Blue Roses if I remember correctly? The enemies' strongest number six. When you take that into consideration, dividing our forces could be a mistake, but…well, there's nothing that says they'll all be in the capital. If the Blue Roses are okay with that plan, we could raid five locations at once."

"So we can't do all of them? If we could, that would be best."

There were seven addresses listed on the piece of parchment Renner had received. The one Zanac and Raeven wanted to add made eight. They didn't have enough manpower.

“Of course, it would be extremely frustrating to pass over three locations, but I don’t think we have a choice.”

“What about heading for the remaining three after the initial raid?”

“That’s probably the best we can do. Your Royal Highness, mobilizing soldiers within the capital itself will be an issue. What should we do about that?”

“I’ll take care of it by talking to Dad. So I have to give up on the idea of doing all of them at once? I guess it was kinda ambitious, but—”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Here we go.”

Normally a maid would answer, but since none was present in the room, Raeven started to get up. Renner gestured that he remain seated, walked over, and unhesitatingly opened the door.

When she saw who it was, she turned around, all smiles, to face the other two. “It’s someone who might help us with a sixth location.”

The one who entered Renner’s room on her invitation, though he was rather puzzled, was the captain of the Royal Select, Gazef Stronoff.

3

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 9:00 PM

Climb held a black lump in his hand. The jiggly mass would have been spherical, but it was malleable enough for gravity to compress it.

Climb took the strange ball, which seemed to contain liquid, and smashed it against his body—and armor.

The sphere splashed across Climb's white armor, creating a black splotch. The item in his hand had been a ball of black dye, so that much was expected. But that wasn't all that happened.

The dark spot staining Climb's armor began to creep along its surface, eventually covering it entirely. In a matter of seconds, the armor was completely painted over. It had changed from sparkling pure white to matte black.

The sphere Climb had smashed was an item called Magic Dye. There were supposedly higher-tier versions that gave resistance to acid, fire, or chill, but the one Climb used affected only colors.

It went without saying that the reason he used it was because his pure-white armor would draw too much attention.

Lakyus called for all the squad leaders to gather, so Climb approached.

At the center of the leaders stood a gorgeously outfitted war maiden.

First, her enchanted sword, the name of which was known to virtually everyone—Demonic Sword Killineiram. It was the size of a bastard sword, but its blade, black like the night sky, was hidden in its sheath. Still, one could tell from the hilt that it was extremely well made. The giant black sapphire embedded in the pommel was especially opulent, containing a sparkle that flickered like a flame.

Then there was her full plate armor, gleaming like only gold and silver could; it was engraved with countless unicorns here and there. This was the armor that only fair maidens could equip, said to be impossible to tarnish: Virgin Snow.

In contrast to her lustrous gear, the cloak protecting her back seemed to be gray cotton. The enchanted item, called a Cloak of Rat Speed, was far more powerful than appearances suggested, boosting the user's speed, agility, and evasion.

It seemed like her famous magic item, Floating Swords, wasn't activated.

The reason Lakyus dressed to stand out, unlike Climb, was because she had the magic skills to handle herself.

The faces around her were all familiar to him—the Blue Roses and Gazef Stronoff.

To Climb, he was so out of place among them it was pathetic.

The operation Lakyus talked about entailed storming eight facilities owned by the Eight Fingers crime syndicate.

But there were only seven squads, so the leaders of each squad, plus Raeven's personal guards—all former adventurers of mythril rank or higher—would head to the last location after the other seven were neutralized. The remaining squad members would hold the initial sites. Eight Fingers members were to be disabled and captured if possible. Otherwise, they would have to be killed.

That was the whole mission.

Lakyus continued with a warning that since their opponents were a large organization with immense power in the underworld, it was possible they would encounter strong enemies and

traps; everyone needed to stay vigilant.

Climb shivered.

It wasn't due to fear but the heavy pressure of the role he was to play in the operation.

The reasons Climb had been selected as a squad leader despite being far inferior to the others were because he was stronger than regular soldiers and because one of the key participants had recommended him.

Additionally, they'd set it up so the sole former orichalcum-rank adventurer team from Raeven's men would be on his squad.

He couldn't very well refuse when everyone had so thoroughly prepared a role for him.

And once he realized the hidden reason he'd been made a squad leader, there was no way he could give up the position.

The Blue Roses, Marquis Raeven, Gazef Stronoff, and Prince Zanac, who would be on hand to put out fires if a situation arose —their presence alone gave no indication that Princess Renner was participating at all. If Climb, Renner's personal attendant soldier, was acting as a squad leader, the intent must have been at least partially to show that Renner was involved in the operation in a major way.

It appears to have been Marquis Raeven and Prince Zanac's idea, but I wonder why they would do that… Their reasons were a puzzle to Climb. Still, he was filled with the courage to masterfully execute this important role in order to spread the word that Renner was working hard for the kingdom.

Lakyus's explanation ended, and the group dispersed. When Climb returned to his squad, the man who'd been behind him for

a while addressed him nonchalantly. “Are you ready?” It was Brain Unglaus, whom Gazef had brought along to help; he was the assistant leader of Climb’s squad. “Squad prep is complete. All that’s left is to move on the commander’s order. And here is the route we’ll be taking. He chose it.”

The map of the capital he’d been given had a red line drawn on it. Climb looked where Brain was pointing toward a person.

It was one of the members of the former orichalcum-rank adventurer team who’d been assigned to Climb’s squad. He noticed the young man’s gaze and gave a small wave in response. Climb gave a quick bow to the fairly experienced man. Ordinarily, it might not have been advisable for the squad leader to bow his head, but for Climb, who was leader only in name and had no power to back it up, this was perfectly natural.

In Climb’s case, rather than leading the charge, he would be needing some hand-holding.

As he mused, a large figure approached and called out to Climb, “Hey, virgin!”

I wish she wouldn’t call me that, Climb thought with all his heart as he sensed a change in the way his squad mates were looking at him.

He was probably lucky no one was laughing. Among the warm gazes and watchful eyes of adults, he also sensed some strong solidarity.

“What is it, Miss Gagaran?”

Unlike when he’d seen her at the inn, she was enveloped head to toe in top-class magic items.

There was a crest like an eye emblazoned on the chest piece of

her spiked, dark-red full plate armor. It was the famous equipment Gaze Bane.

Her gauntlets were a bit unusual due to the carvings of a pair of entwined snakes. They were an ancient rarity that healed whomever they touched—Caduceus Gauntlets.

The huge war pick hanging from her hip was Iron Feller. The splendid red cape fit for royalty or nobility was Crimson Guardian. They weren't visible beneath her armor, but she also carried a Vest of Resistance, a Dragon Tooth Amulet, and a Belt of Greater Power. Besides that, she had Wing Boots and a Twister Circlet equipped, and her rings also contained immense magical power.

This was Gagaran, the pinnacle of the kingdom's warriors, in full gear.

The price of even one of her items would make anyone's eyes pop. Only an adamantite-rank adventurer could possess so many. Evileye, Tia, and Tina were outfitted similarly, with items that could be indentified at a glance as ultra-rare.

"What? I just thought I'd give the virgin a little spanking, since he might be nervous."

That actually meant she had reached out because she was worried about him, but he still wanted her to knock off the whole "virgin" thing. He could have done away with his virginity anytime. There were places for just that. It was simply that he hadn't yet.

Still crying softly in his heart, Climb saw Gagaran look at Brain, next to him, with an unusually sharp gaze.

"Brain Unglaus. The man who fought neck and neck with the captain of the Royal Select. Ah-ha… So they weren't lying or exag-

gerating, huh?"

"Warrior of the Blue Roses, Gagaran. I see… You're strong. Certainly worthy of an adamantite-ranked team. So do I pass?" When Climb looked at Brain, wondering what the "passing" thing was about, he shrugged and told him why Gagaran had really come over. "She came to make sure I'm strong enough to take care of you."

"Really?!"

"Naw, c'mon… It has nothing to do with you. Just seems sad for him to die with his virginity intact, so I thought if we had time, I'd steal it quick like. But anyhow, I see it was no fluke that you beat the Illusion Maniac. You're an awe-inspiring warrior. I can tell even without crossing swords. With you around, we'll have some breathing room."

"I'm glad you feel that way. I've also learned the rumors about you were true. But we can't let our guard down. There are plenty of monsters in this world who can kill even warriors like us in an instant."

"Ohh, so you're the cautious type? I can't say I dislike men like that. You're probably not a virgin, but how about it?"

"I'll pass. I think the pressure would crush me."

Where would she crush him? Climb wondered but didn't ask.

"Ah, that's too bad. Climb, take care." Gagaran waved good-bye and walked away with heavy footsteps.

Watching her go, Brain murmured, "You would never guess from the way she looks, but she's a rather kind person."

"Yeah, Gagaran—well, all the Blue Roses are friendly. Miss

Evileye looks mysterious, but she's surprisingly nice, too."

"The masked arcane caster...? Actually, Gazef was saying that that Ainz Ooal Gown fellow he met wore a mask, too... I wonder if they're the hip thing among casters... Oh, seems like we're on the move."

"Yeah. The squads that are traveling farther have to leave now so the raids happen at the same time."

They were both looking at the departing units up ahead.

Climb looked around, searching for a certain woman.

Of course, he couldn't find her. She would be coordinating with Prince Zanac. He figured it was self-centered of him to feel melancholy just because he couldn't see her before leaving, especially given how hard things were for her.

"Okay, Climb, should we go, too?"

"...Yes! Let's head out."

Climb gave his squad the sortie order.

Climb. Assistant leader Brain Unglaus. Four former orichalcum-rank adventurers. Twenty members of Marquis Raeven's militia. Plus, high-level priests and wizards' guild members with connections to Marquis Raeven were tagging along to support from the rear. A total of thirty-two people quietly set out.

4

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 8:31 PM

"I didn't expect such a strong lineup…I must thank Lord Ainz." Those were the first words Sebas uttered upon meeting the group at the mansion.

With Demiurge at the head of the line, the assembly also contained the guardians Shalltear and Mare, while the Pleiades had provided Solution and Entoma. Moreover, several of Demiurge's high-level evil lord minions were present as well. It was an unbelievably powerful force, perhaps even overkill.

"Especially to have the two strongest guardians with us…"

"Hmm. Lord Ainz has granted me full authority," Demiurge said. "Do you have any objections, Sebas?"

"Of course not."

"Then I would ask that you not misunderstand. Lord Ainz did say to rescue that human Tsuare, but the more important reason we are gathered is to execute the foolish Eight Fingers who spat upon the incomparable visages of the Supreme Beings."

"I understand. Saving Tsuare is a secondary objective, correct?"

"Exactly, although I do approve of your desire to retrieve her while she's alive—I doubt she would be able to withstand resurrection magic."

That was a nasty way to put it.

"Still, what to do in the event she's already dead is certainly an issue. If I were them, I'd chuck the hostage's head at us the moment we foolishly arrived."

“But wouldn’t you rather abuse her to set an example, Demiurge?”

“Yes, as you say, without a doubt. Immobilize the rescuers and then put her abuse on display… What an extremely invigorating scenario.”

“What’s exciting about it?” Sebas asked, concealing his irritation beneath a smile. Of course, with Demiurge’s powers of observation, he probably saw through it, so it was just for show.

“Everything, Sebas. Everything.” Demiurge grinned, and his fissure-like eyes gleamed coldly. “Actually, I’d let the people who came to save the prisoner take her and escape, then turn the tables just when they were starting to feel relieved. The greater the hope, the greater the despair!”

“That seems entertaining as well. If we get the chance, let’s do something like that, shall we?”

“B-but if they really got away, I—I think…wouldn’t that be a p-problem?”

Demiurge and Shalltear laughed.

“Mare, you’re so funny. We’d make that impossible. Well, if they really did manage to escape, I’d send them off with applause.”

“You’re so confident because you’d never let them break through, right? I’d expect nothing less from you, Demiurge.”

Though they didn’t have time to spare, Demiurge chattered on about tormenting humans. That irritated Sebas, so he asked a pointed question for the purpose of ending the conversation. “Demiurge, about executing the Eight Fingers members—do you already have the information we need?”

“Yes, no worries there, Sebas. The intelligence has been acquired.”

“Oooh,” some cooed in admiration. Sebas himself even exclaimed in surprise.

Demiurge hadn’t been in the capital very long at all. Sebas couldn’t imagine what methods he’d used to gather so quickly the data they needed. Considering he was operating under their master’s orders, he couldn’t be relying on rumors—it had to be confirmed reports.

“All we have to do now is raid the locations—yes, plural. Of course, if possible, we should capture multiple people with intelligence at each location so we can punish them for the other foolish acts they—” He cut off there, glanced at Sebas, and continued, “In order to deal them suitable damage in exchange for sullying the promise sworn on Lord Ainz’s supreme, radiant name, we need to get some information out of them. Any objections?”

“N-no!”

“They’ll pay with their lives for offending Lord Ainz.”

“How could I object?”

The two guardians and the butler replied in turn.

The two combat maids and the demon lords said nothing but assumed a humble posture toward Demiurge.

“Very good. Then first, Sebas. Could you tell us the location to which you’ve been summoned? Let’s see if it’s among the ones I have here.”

When Sebas named the place written on the parchment back at his house, Demiurge smiled. “Should we call it good luck? Or

should we lament that we have one fewer location to raid? It seems to overlap with the list I looked into. I'll leave that one up to you."

"That's fine. But Tsuare may be injured. It would be helpful if someone who can use healing magic came along."

"True, it's Lord Ainz's wish to save that human… Solution. I originally wanted to keep you and your superior searching skill on reserve, but will you accompany Sebas as support?"

"Yes, Master Demiurge."

"And as for the people who kidnapped her, who will most likely be in the building…"

"If you spare any of the humans who besmirched Lord Ainz's honor, I really will murder you," Demiurge said.

"Don't worry, Demiurge. I'll be sure to kill them all," Sebas replied.

"I've been watching you guys for a while now… Couldn't you be a bit more friendly with each other?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Sebas saw Demiurge pull a face. At the same time, he was probably making the same face himself.

But when he asked himself why he disliked Demiurge, he couldn't quite pin it down. He didn't get irritated at Shalltear even though she was a sadist, too, but for some reason talking to Demiurge annoyed him.

Still, quarreling with him now would be as good as spitting on the kindness of the Supreme Being. Sebas thanked their master in his head and bowed to Demiurge.

“My humble apologies for taking a rude tone when you’ve come to help me fix my own mistake.”

“…That’s fine, Sebas. Anyway, would you evacuate Tsuare to the Great Tomb of Nazarick as soon as you recover her?”

“Of course. But is everyone ready to accept her?”

“That will be nooo problemmm. I have thaaat coverrrred,” Entoma said in her syrupy voice.

Sebas nodded, convinced.

“So, no other issues at the moment, correct? Excellent. Now we’ll split into seven teams and decide who attacks where. Of course, Sebas and Solution are already set. First, I’d like to make sure we’re being careful—Shalltear.”

Shalltear jumped at Demiurge’s suddenly harsh tone.

“Wh-what is it, Demiurge?”

“I’d like you to stand by as a reserve. You lose yourself when you get too much blood on you. It’ll be a pain if you encounter a mob of easy pickings and go berserk.”

“I—I’m fine! If I suck up all the blood with my Pipette Lance, the chance that happens goes way down!”

“No, that’s not good enough. We need to proceed with extreme caution here and do everything we can to avoid taking risks. And Sebas, I need to apologize in advance. This operation to save Tsuare and bring the iron hammer down on the Eight Fingers is only the first phase of a larger plan. But I cannot disclose the full details—or even what happens in phase two—because after phase one is complete, you’ll return to Nazarick and not be involved. In order to avoid intelligence leaks, it’s better to keep the number of

people who know to a minimum."

"I understand. I'll begin getting my preparations under way."

Once Sebas had left the room, Demiurge addressed the remainder. "Okay. First, I'll give you an outline so we don't miss anything. Entoma, you can create illusions, right? Can you do one to my specifications?"

"Yes, siiir."

Entoma made a virtual image in empty space according to Demiurge's detailed request. He was satisfied with the result.

"Killing this person is prohibited. Some wounds will likely be forgiven, but I want everyone to remember that on principle, harming the target is forbidden—especially Shalltear."

"I understand. You don't need to harp on it." She didn't enjoy the repeated rebuke and puffed her cheeks out in displeasure.

Mare smiled awkwardly. "U-umm, you didn't need to tell S-Sebas?"

"It's okay. Knowing Sebas, he won't harm this person without good reason… Just in case, Solution, can you stop him in an emergency?"

"Understood."

Demiurge nodded in satisfaction.

This operation was tied to a plan that would benefit Nazarick enormously. If they suffered a major defeat here, it was possible their— No, the Supreme One, Ainz Ooal Gown, would be delayed from reaching his unspoken ultimate goal: world conquest.

Their master had left the entire operation up to him, so failure wasn't an option.

Albedo had been stern with him about it as well, but it was clear that because Shalltear, Cocytus, and Sebas had all failed one after the other, any further blunders could cause their master to doubt the guardians' abilities.

True, Lord Ainz had yet to display displeasure at any of those failures, and Cocytus's seemed to have been planned from the beginning, but that didn't make it right to take advantage of his kindness.

With this mission, I must demonstrate to Lord Ainz that we guardians can be of use to him.

Was there any point in subordinates existing if they were foolish and failed to perform satisfactorily?

Wasn't it possible the last remaining Supreme One would be disgusted with their worthless abilities and also leave them?

Even Demiurge was petrified by the thought.

Failure is not an option. Our victory must be utterly complete to outweigh all our past mistakes.

With this resolution in mind, Demiurge scanned the room. "And don't forget that the ones who brainwashed Shalltear might be out there waiting for an opening. Everyone, take care not to stray from your posts without permission. If any of the guardians, myself included, question you, raise both hands or the corresponding body parts and don't do anything suspicious. If you do, we'll kill you to be safe. Any questions?"

"U-um, I asked one before, but d-do you mind another?"

Demiurge smiled kindly at Mare and gestured for him to go ahead.

"So, I don't think Sebas has a World Item like the rest of us. Is that all right?"

"It seems like Lord Ainz wishes for him to act as bait. It would be great if the enemy would bite. Albedo is already standing by in the Throne Room to monitor the situation. Oh, and those who can't use Message should take special care to refrain from acting independently. I'm overseeing the operation, so if any issues arise, come to me with them. And I've briefed Mare on the entire plan, so if I'm unreachable for some reason, he should be able to strategically fill in."

"And whadda…and me?"

"Sorry, Shalltear. As I mentioned before, we're placing you on standby since we can't fully trust you. Yes, we're worried about Blood Frenzy."

"Fine! Understood! Un-der-stood!"

"Once phase one is complete, we'll proceed to phase two. I'll explain it now. This is important, so I want you all to listen carefully—what is it?"

A shadow demon drifted into view from the darkness behind Demiurge and whispered the intelligence it had acquired.

"Really? That's awfully sudden, but I guess there's nothing we can do about it." The new information bothered him, but he couldn't ignore it.

"Sorry, Mare. According to the latest news, we have one more Eight Fingers base to raid. Apologies, but I'd like to change your target. I'm sure you can handle it on your own, but just in case,

I'll have Entoma go with you."

"O-okay. L-leave it to me."

"Excellent. We can go over the finer points later, but while I have everyone here, I will lay out the process of phase two, Gehenna. This will be our most important operation in the capital, so please give me your undivided attention."



CHAPTER 8
The Six Arms

1

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 9:51 PM

In the kingdom, people generally went to bed with the setting sun. Reasonably setting up most sources of light cost money, but as a result, the inhabitants of villages with many poor households ended up having rather healthy lifestyles.

In urban areas, however, elements not present in the countryside came into play. The fancy pleasure quarters cast the difference in especially sharp relief, as many types of establishments and residents suddenly became active after nightfall, as if they were nocturnal beasts.

But Climb's destination was not such an area. Rather than a neighborhood shining brightly at night, it seemed more like an underworld enveloped in darkness.

Climb walked down the quiet alley in silence, carrying no light. He advanced along the dark backstreet without any illumination because his helmet carried the same effects as the Helm of Night Vision. Although it worked for up to only about fifteen yards ahead, his view through the thin visor was clear as midday.

Additionally, his mythril full plate armor didn't make much noise, unlike steel plate. Add the magic it was enchanted with, and it didn't make even the slightest *clink*. It would require extremely sharp ears or skills as a talented thief to hear him, even from nearby.

That's why he was in the preliminary reconnaissance team.

As he exited the alley, his destination came into view.

A high barrier surrounded the area, walling it off. It reminded him of a jail or fortress. It was enough to make one wonder what kind of illegal activities were taking place inside. Even the illumination spells fixed to each side of the gate couldn't erase that image.

Climb couldn't see the target building from where he was, but according to their intelligence, it was on the other side of the wall.

"That's it all right. No doubt about it," Climb murmured as he crouched down, and a voice answered from the empty space right next to him.

"Yeah. From the location and the vibes, it does seem to be the spot. Still, I'll go do some preliminary recon," said the former orichalcum-rank thief adventurer.

Brain responded, "Be careful. Don't forget that even if you're invisible, some warriors can see through that."

"Of course. Our enemy is the Eight Fingers. We need to proceed cautiously, assuming that their side has thieves as capable as me or casters. Okay, you two, pray I don't mess this up."

With that, the nearby presence faded away. Climb and Brain couldn't hear the ex-adventurer even if they tried, but someone who possessed the same level of skill as he did might have been able to pick up the dry click of footsteps heading toward the building.

Only Climb and Brain remained.

They'd left the other squad members behind because they weren't geared for stealth. Full plate armor was noisy and would have announced their position to the enemy. But they couldn't

very well strip off their armor heedlessly just to approach the enemy when they were fully anticipating combat.

That's how the duty fell upon these two.

Of course, they were both warriors, unable to mimic thieves. But because of Climb's enchanted armor and Brain's martial arts, they could operate in the dark, which just barely qualified them to come along. From here on out, it was certainly a job for a professional.

The reason they had run the risk of coming so close to the compound was to judge whether to attack or escape if the thief's infiltration failed and the enemy strengthened their defenses. Simply keeping watch from their position was enough to fulfill their roles.

Still, as time passed while they waited, they grew more and more uneasy precisely because the pair hadn't gone in themselves —their imaginations conjured up all the worst-case scenarios.

"I wonder if he's okay." The words were out of Climb's mouth before he realized.

Brain responded softly. "I don't know, but all we can do is believe in him, right? Trust in the power of a former orichalcum adventurer?"

"I suppose. He is a veteran."

After waiting some time, Brain suddenly reached for the katana on his hip. Climb responded by putting his hand on his own sword when a panicked masculine voice sounded from nearby.

"Wait, wait! It's me. I'm back." It was their companion who'd left on reconnaissance.

“Yeah, I figured, since you got this close without doing anything… So you wanted to check if I could really detect you with my martial arts?”

“Yeah, my bad. You got me. I’m sorry—it was stupid to try to test Brain Unglaus himself.”

“No worries. I might have done the same thing if I were you. More importantly, can you tell us what you found out?”

The air next to Climb shifted, like someone had sat down. It was a strange feeling to know someone was there but not see them.

“First, I think this facility might be used for training. There’s a large yard over the wall that feels like a proving ground. I took only a cursory look at the building, but it has all these private compartments. It must belong to the Eight Fingers’ security division. There was an area I couldn’t get near because it was so well guarded. We’ve got a really bad situation, Climb.”

Then the man became extremely tense.

“I learned two major things inside. One is that there are cells, and a woman is being held there. The other is that there are people who match the descriptions of the Six Arms.”

Setting aside the woman, the Six Arms members being present was not unexpected. *So what’s the problem?* But Climb’s question was answered immediately when Brain asked, “How many were there? Sounds like more than one.”

“Five. When you take into account that the Illusion Maniac has been captured, they’re all here.”

In short, no amount of strategy would help them overcome this. They’d gotten the worst pick of the lot; however…

“That’s…horrible, but it’s also kind of great. If every member of the Six Arms is here, the other locations should fall pretty easily.”

That was the clearest silver lining.

“So what should we do?”

“There’s nothing we can do. It’s impossible for us to take this place down. We’ll withdraw.”

“Is that okay with you, Climb?”

“It’s not good, but we have no choice. If the Six Arms are all here, it means either that this is their base or that there’s something important to them here. It would be a shame to withdraw without figuring that out, but I don’t think we should attempt anything beyond our abilities.”

“You’re right…”

“Then should I go back in to see if I can at least find some documentation or something to take back with us?”

“No, it’s too dangerous. It’s smarter to withdraw now, while they still haven’t realized we’re here. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I agree. Then what should we do now? Help capture the other locations?”

“That would be the most useful thing to do. Could you first report to the men we left behind? We’ll stand by here to make sure no one comes after you.”

“We should be fine, but it never hurts to be cautious. I’m off, then—thanks, guys.”

The thief, whose invisibility still hadn't worn off, marched past Climb and Brain with intentionally audible footsteps before heading toward the rest of the squad.

"...Seems quiet, Climb."

"Yeah. Then should we withdraw to join the others and move to a new location?"

"I guess s— Huh? Climb! Look over there!"

When Climb turned in the direction Brain pointed, he saw the man they'd met yesterday approaching the building they were staking out.

"Is that Sir Sebas? What's he doing here?"

"I can't imagine it's a coincidence... I wonder if something happened. He can't be with them, right?"

"I want to say that's impossible. You don't really think that, either, do you?"

"No, it can't be. Maybe if he were insanely good at acting, but I didn't get that sense from him."

"Why don't we try talking—?"

Right as he was saying that, Sebas's gaze turned right toward them. Climb and Brain were keeping watch on the building, so they were lurking in the dark a short distance away. It should have been difficult to detect them. There was the possibility that Sebas only happened to look their way, but Climb could declare with certainty that was not the case.

Sebas jogged over.

His speed was unnatural. He seemed to be accelerating as he closed the distance, as if he were teleporting forward with each blink of their eyes. He was just running normally, but his agility was so extraordinary that their brains failed to register it.

Then he dove into the alley. To state it more accurately, he entered the alley by leaping over the two of them, who were lying down in the opening.

“If it isn’t you two. What a coincidence to meet you in such a place. What’s going on?”

“Th-that’s our line… We were hiding out here to raid that Eight Fingers building.”

“Just the two of you?”

“No, there are more in the rear.”

Sebas gave a slight nod. “I see.”

Climb asked, “What are you doing here, Sir Sebas? Is there something you need to do in this building?”

“Yes. Actually, the woman I was telling you about yesterday, the one I saved, has been kidnapped. The perpetrators summoned me, so here I am.”

“Really?! We heard from our squad mate who scouted the place that there is a woman being held inside.”

“…And where is he?”

“Mm, he should be back any minute now… Oh, good timing!”

The former adventurer’s invisibility had worn off, and Brain could see him nearing. He suspiciously eyed the old man, who

had suddenly appeared and carried himself with an incongruous elegance.

"This is Sir Sebas, the man who helped us capture the Illusion Maniac. The woman in one of the cells you mentioned is his companion. We just ran into each other here. He's definitely trustworthy, so please rest assured."

The thief indicated his understanding and proceeded to detail his observations, especially concerning the prisoner.

After hearing what he had to say, Sebas answered with deep gratitude. "Aha! Understood. Thank you. Now it will be easier to save her."

"Don't mention it, sir. Incidentally, we're all ready to withdraw…" The thief looked at Sebas awkwardly, feeling guilty that they were retreating even though the man's acquaintance was being held captive.

"Sir Sebas. Five of the Six Arms, the strongest members of the Eight Fingers, are inside. Can you defeat them?"

The thief frowned at Climb's question. Climb understood why quite well. The Six Arms were powerful—on par with adamantite-rank adventurers. He was probably thinking there was no way Sebas could take five of them. But Sebas gave a quick nod.

"It shouldn't be a problem if the five are like that Succuronte fellow."

Blinking in shock, the thief pulled Climb and Brain a short distance away and eyed Sebas with pity as he asked, "Climb, is that man insane, by any chance?"

Anyone who heard what Sebas had just said would have reached the same conclusion—and that was only natural. After re-

alizing how strong adamantite-rank adventurers were, it was no wonder. But Climb, who knew a thing or two about how strong Sebas was, was aware that it wasn't just talk.

"No. That's just how strong he is."

The thief stared at Climb—as if the young warrior was crazy.

"Brain thinks the same thing."

"What?! Brain Unglaus?!"

Brain smiled thinly and nodded. "Yeah, he's so strong that even if Gazef and I both attacked him at the same time, we wouldn't win."

"Th-that's… Well, if it's true, that's amazing…" The thief looked at Sebas with a complicated expression—unwilling to believe, but having heard all that, he had no choice.

"If Sir Sebas worked with us, then maybe… Do you mind telling him about the Six Arms?"

The thief agreed, and Sebas listened quietly with his gentlemanly air, appearing perturbed only once, at the mention of one of the Six Arms' nicknames.

"Undead King, Davernoch…? That's a ridiculous name for such a fool."

The exchange of information ended with little event besides that one murmured remark.

Then Climb asked, "Sir Sebas, do you think you could help us?"

"Of course. I'm here to save Tsuare either way. I'll fight the Six

Arms."

"Then while you attack from the front and draw their attention, we'll sneak in from the back and rescue Tsuare—though we could never stand in for you."

"Hmm. Yes, it would be great if you could bring her out while the enemy is distracted, as it would avoid the dangers of a hostage situation or her being taken away via an alternate escape route."

"Understood. We'll be sure to get Tsuare out safely. So who should go? I realize it'd be foolish to take everyone as we originally planned, but…"

"Mmm, since we're going to be sneaking about the place, ideally it should be the people who make as little noise as possible when moving. They also need to be able to fight, since we have to beat a straight path out of there once we rescue the hostage. That means…" The thief looked at Climb and Brain. "If we had unlimited access to Invisibility, I might have a different idea, but as it is…the three of us will probably be best."

"Me, too?"

"The armor of the other warriors with us is too loud; they can't skulk around."

"Got it. Then the three of us will infiltrate."

"If our casters could use spells silently, then maybe there'd be another way, but…I think we can probably get three people's worth of Invisibility."

"Invisibility?" Climb spoke up in an anxious voice. "My helmet has a power I can activate once a day that can detect the invisible, just like a spell, so I'll be fine, but what about you guys? It would

be a huge problem if we lost one another."

"I'm fine. I have a magic item imbued with a detection spell. I can only use it once, but that should be good enough," said Brain.

"I can't do anything like that, but it'd be hard for me to miss your footsteps."

"Then I think we've come to an understanding regarding the infiltration party. So, Sir Sebas, we'll go in first. Please leave a little time before attacking."

"Thank you very much."

Climb and Brain got flustered as gray-haired Sebas bowed. There was no reason such a powerful man should bow to them. Just as they had during the raid on the brothel, they felt like they were practically taking advantage of him.

"No, please don't mention it. We came here to raid this place, but somehow, you're the one who's going to be taking on the Six Arms. We're the ones who should be grateful to you!"

"Then the feeling is mutual."

They couldn't detect any rancor in Sebas's bright smile. Relieved, Climb stood up. "Then let's pull back for a minute to get that spell cast on us."

2

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:15 PM

After waiting a little while, although he had still left a few minutes earlier than the designated time, Sebas stood before the gate.

He could see through the bars, but there were trees that kept him from getting a good view.

“Hey, right on time, eh?” a gravelly voice commented, and a man appeared from between the trees.

Of course, Sebas had known all along that the man was there. He’d activated an ability that could detect all signs of life in the area. Because it wouldn’t always pick up someone using a concealment skill, it was dangerous to rely on it completely, but it was useful to an extent.

“This way. Follow me.”

The man opened the gate, and Sebas followed him down a garden path.

The Eight Fingers’ garden wasn’t as overgrown as one might expect of an underworld organization. On the contrary, the trees were neatly pruned; they must have been employing a rather skilled gardener.

As they walked down the path, a large area that appeared to be a training ground appeared before them.

Several fires blazed in beacon baskets, and the bright-red flames illuminated the surrounding area.

A group of thirty people, men and a few women, had been waiting for him. They smirked—vulgar smiles that showed they were drunk on violence and that the idea of losing had not once crossed their minds.

Sebas took in the open space. There was not a single person he

could count as a proper adversary, but he did spot the Six Arms who Climb had spoken of.

One wore a robe with a hood. It was dyed black, but the hems were embroidered with crimson thread to suggest flames. The figure's face was obscured beneath the hood, but its presence was not overflowing with life—it was the exact opposite. The "Undead" moniker was clearly not a figure of speech. His alias came from his status as a literal undead.

The sole female member of the Six Arms looked nimble dressed in her light silk. She wore gold bangles on her wrists and ankles, so they jangled whenever she moved. From the belt around her waist hung six scimitars.

The next man was elegant and attractive. He wore a *traje de luces*, and his weapon was a rapier. The blade appeared to be jutting out of a rose—it smelled like roses, too.

The last man had girded himself with rugged full plate armor and had a sword squarely in its sheath.

In total, four. The enemy leader, Zero, was nowhere to be found. *Is he waiting somewhere to make his entrance?*

Those four stepped forward while the others moved to surround Sebas.

"We heard you're pretty strong, old man. Heard you could send us flying with one punch!"

"Our position in the Eight Fingers is based on our strength, so it's a bit of an issue if we lose! That idiot should have known that. Coccodor's division may be down on its luck, but it was still a big mistake to lose in front of him."

"So we have a question for you. Succuronte insists Brain

Unglaus beat him, but is he really just refusing to acknowledge the fact that he lost to you?"

"Hmm. Well, I didn't fight him directly," Sebas replied. "I met him at the mansion once, and the only other time I saw him he was on the floor."

"I see. Then I guess he was defeated, and there's nothing we can do about it. With *the* Brain Unglaus as his opponent, I guess he had no chance."

"If he got stronger since that fight and is still on par with Gazef Stronoff? Yeah, defeat would be unavoidable."

"Still, that doesn't mean you're forgiven. We'll take care of Unglaus and Princess Goldilocks later after killing you first, old man. You're the one who started all this."

"We're going to break and murder you. If we don't, we'll be in a tight spot."

"Look over there."

Sebas pointed to the third floor of the building to indicate he understood.

"A bunch of different VIPs are gathered there. They came to watch us present you a painful death."

"Is Zero or whatever his name is up there, too?" he asked.

"Well, yeah."

One of them smirked at him as if he was an imbecile. Sebas thrust a finger at the man. Then he lowered his hand, ignoring their suspicious looks that seemed to ask, *What is he gonna do?*

“What was that about? Tryin’ to start a fight?”

“Never mind. And where is the woman?”

“‘The woman’? Who do you mean?” Another condescending smirk.

Sebas answered calmly. “Tsuare, the woman you kidnapped from my house.”

“What if I said she was dead?”

“Are you people that kind?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Good one. No, we’re not. She’s a present for Coccodor. We’re holding on to her for him.”

“I see… I see.”

Sebas noticed one of the four glance toward a part of the building. What bothered him was that it wasn’t where he’d heard Tsuare was being held. *Then I will simply have to make sure…*

“Since you’re all assembled, please come at me at once. It will be a pain if Zero gets away, and it would be a waste of time to fight you one at a time.”

“Well, he sure can talk.”

“Feeling smug just because you took out some small fries without any problems? Have you ever met someone with real power?”

“Well said. I’d like to say the same right back to you, but… May I ask a question? Why do you assume I’m weaker than Brain?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Once you get to our level, you can tell about how strong someone is the moment you meet them. And I can tell that you, old man, are far beneath us.”

The others, minus Davernoch, nodded.

"I see…"

Sebas could judge how strong someone was by the size of their chi. Of course, if they concealed it with a spell or skill, it became harder to discern accurately, but that's how it was with anything.

"So! We'll give you a chance. We only fight one at a time. So—"

"—I'm strong." Sebas curled an inviting finger at them. "We've been over this. Don't bore me with your claims to fight 'one at a time.' All of you, come at me! Will you last even ten seconds?"

"Don't underestimate us, human." Davernoch's shoulders trembled.

"Underestimate you? You're the ones underestimating me! My name is Sebas. The one who granted me that name is the strongest warrior. The master I serve is the greatest elite ruler… But there's no point in explaining that to you simpletons. Now, I'm sick of dealing with you. It's time to end this."

Sebas charged. His target was the one with the name that offended him more than anything.

Undead King, Davernoch.

He was a naturally occurring elder lich. Undead born from a mass of deaths generally detested life and had a tendency to do everything in their power to rob the living of it; however, some intelligent specimens suppressed their hatred to forge ties with the beings who still drew breath. Davernoch was one of those.

His purpose in his false life was to further master the power called magic and acquire techniques beyond those he'd been able to use since birth.

But as an enemy of the living, it wasn't as if he could learn techniques from anyone. If he had an undead mentor, that would have been a different story. (In reality, there was a secret society made up of undead casters.) Unfortunately, he was not blessed with the chance to meet one.

So he came up with a plan to accumulate a large sum of money and use that to convince someone to teach him magic.

In the beginning, he killed travelers on the highway and stole their cash, but after being routed by an adventurer who'd come to subdue him, Davernoch became keenly aware of how foolish his method was and struggled to find a new way to earn money. In the end, he concealed his identity and joined a mercenary gang.

But when they learned he could rapidly cast Fireball without rest, they discovered he was an undead, and he was compelled to flee again.

Right when he was left with no avenues to take, Zero reached out to him.

Zero offered to introduce Davernoch to someone who would teach him magic and provide proper conversation to said tutor if Davernoch would put his newfound abilities to use for Zero. The deal came at the perfect time.

Since he wasn't restricted by a life span as an undead, if Davernoch continued mastering various types of magic, there was a distinct possibility that he would end up capable of destroying all life. Perhaps Zero had backed a being who might in the future be able to threaten the human race.

But—

—as Sebas approached in a gale of wind, his right hand curled tight and punched Davernoch. With no time to even move, much

less block or evade, the lich's head came right off.

Davernoch's false life was obliterated, and he was destroyed without ever learning what he did to make Sebas so angry.

Sebas looked down on him and spat out somewhat uncharacteristically, "There is only one person who deserves that title, the one seated on high. How impudent of an inferior undead like you to try and claim it."

He shook the bone fragments off his hand, and as he did, Davernoch's body completely disappeared. The various magic items he'd had on him littered the ground.

The surrounding Eight Fingers members were frozen in shock, and the fact that the Six Arms could move at all clearly indicated they were a cut above the rest; that wasn't something one could do without having overcome a number of life-or-death battles.

It was praiseworthy. It proved that they truly deserved the adamantite adventurer rank.

Next, Sebas faced the woman.

Dancing Scimitars, Edström.

There was an enchantment called Dance. It made weapons move on their own, as if in a dance, just like the name implied. Since the weapons would attack automatically, this spell was perfect for artificially increasing one's allies in a fight.

However, since the weapons could perform only simple movements, the spell wasn't fit to be used as a primary attack method.

Ambushes and keeping enemies in check were about all it was good for. In the fierce battles that took place at Edström's level, Dance could do little more than annoy opponents. Since there

was a limit on how many enchantments one piece of gear could hold, it was only natural to judge that something other than Dance could be more useful. For example, Gagaran of the Blue Roses used a weapon that specialized in enchantments that increased the damage she dealt.

But no enchantment suited Edström better than Dance.

The movements of the dancing weapons were actually based on mental commands from the owner, but in the heat of battle, unless one had a clear advantage, it was difficult to communicate appropriate instructions to a distant, slashing weapon. As a consequence, the movements of Dance became predictable.

But Edström was different.

She could manipulate her swords so naturally, it was as if an invisible warrior with all the same abilities as her had been summoned. This was possible thanks to the abnormal structure of her mind. She'd been born with two powers different from talents.

One was an extremely—extraordinarily—developed spatial sense.

Additionally…there existed some who could do two completely different things with each hand at the same time with no training. Edström possessed an even more advanced version of that, boasting an extremely flexible mind—that was her second power.

She has two brains. It wouldn't have been strange for someone to claim that, given her abilities.

If she had only one of those powers, it would probably have been impossible for her to wield the dancing swords so freely. But to have both at once could be called a miracle.

Surely, in the kingdom of nine million people, there was no

one besides her who had two powers so well matched.

The scimitars drew themselves according to her wishes and floated into the air. All she had to do was concentrate on defense. Her other five swords would do the attacking for her.

She had set her sword zone. Anyone who entered this prison would lose their life without fail.

But—

Sebas flew in close and struck with the edge of his hand at an impossible speed, faster than the scimitars could even begin to attack.

In that instant, Edström's head rolled. Enveloped in chi, the edge of Sebas's hand was far sharper than any lackluster sword.

Her body fell to the ground after a slight delay, blood spouting from the neck, but the five scimitars remained in the air.

Sebas had attacked so quickly, and the edge of his hand was so keen, that she hadn't noticed her own decapitation. She may not have even felt any pain.

The five swords raced through the air toward Sebas, as she'd ordered them to.

But Sebas, standing perfectly straight, ignored them and looked down at the head and kindly voiced genuine praise. "To attack even after losing your head… I respect your drive to fight."

Edström's lips opened and closed. *What are you talking about? What do you mean?*

But she must have sensed something. Her eyes darted around, and she discovered her headless body. The change in her expres-

sion was dramatic. She blinked several times and opened her tearful eyes wide.

I can't believe it. It's a lie. It has to be an illusion. There's no way I lost. He didn't do anything to me. My body won't move because of some kind of spell; that must be it. Somebody say something!

Then, as she acknowledged the truth, her face darkened in despair.

She worked her lips again, and the swords clattered to the ground as if they'd been tossed away. There was no longer any sign she would move again.

"Double-team him! Let's do it together!" the man in the full plate armor shrieked. His sturdy armor couldn't shield him from his fear.

He had fully realized—not with his brain but with his heart—that everything Sebas had said earlier was true, that they never should have made an enemy of him, that they were facing someone who shouldn't exist in this world.

"T-t-t-take my S-spatial Slash!"

He knew he would die, and no matter what happened, he couldn't overcome Sebas.

The reason he didn't run was that he understood instinctively that he would be killed within a few steps. *Advancing means death, fleeing means death, so if that's how it's gonna be…* That sentiment proved that he was, at least, a warrior.

Sebas's eyes narrowed—it was the first time during the current battle where he was facing someone with an ability that warranted caution.

It was the ace move of the world champion who created Sebas, Touch Me, an attack that ripped through space itself. He was certain that this one wouldn't compare to his creator's technique, but even an imitation would probably wound him.

Spatial Slash, Peshurian.

The armored man's title came from his magic art, which could cut an opponent up to almost three yards away when he whipped his sword out of its three-foot sheath. In reality, he wasn't actually tearing through space.

The trick was in his sword.

It was a weapon known as an *urumi*, a long sword made of flexible steel that bent easily and twisted about. The one Peshurian carried was a version of that with the end ground extremely thin—essentially a sword built for cutting. It might be more accurate to call it a fine metal whip.

He'd been given his alias because when he drew that sword and swung it at high speed, he could cut down his opponent with no visible signal but a flash of reflected light.

Compared to the other Six Arms, his move was practically a mere trick, but his mastery of such a difficult weapon indicated his skill as a warrior. If someone handed the same weapon to Gazef, lauded as the strongest fighter in the kingdom, he probably wouldn't have been able to wield it as well.

And even if Peshurian's opponent saw through the trick, it didn't matter—he was still extremely capable.

The terrible thing about his whip was the speed of its tip—it was on another level. Dodging it was difficult—in fact, it was virtually impossible based only on visual cues.

An ultra-quick slash, impossible for humans to handle. Wouldn't such an attack practically be the same as ripping through space?

But—

The tip of his blade, despite its transcendent speed, had been caught between two fingers. The old man had done it so casually, as naturally as if he was plucking something up off the floor.

Sebas took a curious look at the metal between his fingers and raised an eyebrow. "What is this thing? You can't cut space…"

"Hyaa!" With a roar like an avian monster, a rapier came thrusting at him.

Thousand Kills, Marmvist.

His main weapon, Rose Thorn, had two horrifying enchantments. One was Flesh Grinding. This was the terrifying power to twist up the surrounding flesh the moment it thrust into a body and burrow farther in. It destroyed the nearby area and left a horrible scar. The rapier's other enchantment was Assassination Master. This was a magical power that would open up wounds so that even a scratch became a deep gash.

Those two abilities alone were heinous enough, but an additional feature made it especially fiendish—not magic but toxicity.

The tip of Rose Thorn was daubed with a lethal cocktail of many different poisons. Marmvist was not originally a warrior but more of an assassin, which was why he was equipped in such a way. When the goal was to kill an enemy with your weapon, something that would finish them off quickly would be most efficient. That approach led to this combination of abilities that created a sword able to kill with a scratch.

It didn't matter if it was Gazef Stronoff or Brain Unglaus—if they didn't have a specific plan to counter Marmvist's brutality, they would fall.

But he had a weakness.

Since he counted on dispatching his opponents with even the tiniest of wounds, his fencing ability was slightly subpar. Still, his thrusts were the real deal. When Marmvist lunged, it was like a flash of light, and he could declare that he could surpass Gazef in that, at least.

In other words, he had the best stabbing attacks in the kingdom.

And by adding a number of martial arts, he could even approach the league of the former Black Scripture member Clementine.

But—

Sebas didn't dodge. He didn't need to.

"…!"

Marmvist, who had thrust his arm out with all his might, was speechless.

The tip of Rose Thorn, the heinous weapon that could kill with a scratch—was touching Sebas's finger.

Yes, Sebas had stopped the point of the rapier with the pad of his index finger.

"Wh…what?!" Marmvist gasped, having finally realized it was neither a dream nor an illusion as he blinked an extraordinary amount of times. That was all he could manage.

Common sense said it was impossible. His experience screamed that there was no way a steel-piercing strike could be stopped with a fingertip. But the reality was clear before him.

Marmvist's full strength was not enough to push through the gently raised digit of an old man.

Rose Thorn had been bent.

He tried to withdraw to attack a different spot, but before he could, Sebas pinched the blade between his thumb and index finger. That small shift was enough to hold it fast.

Before him was an unyielding mountain. When he looked, his comrade was also frantically trying to retrieve his sword.

In the midst of the struggle, a steely voice rang out. "Well, here I go."

The next moment, Peshurian's head burst.

It was a rare act for Sebas. Up until now all his strikes had been specific techniques, but this time it would be more correct to say he simply lashed out angrily, without thinking.

He looked at his right hand, which had easily thrust through the exploded head.

His white glove was splotched and reeked of iron.

"This is a failing on my part…"

Sebas let the rapier go, then removed the glove and cast it away. The moment it hit the cobblestones, Marmvist snagged it on the tip of his sword and snatched it up.

Marmvist might have believed he was as fast as a star shooting

across the night sky, but to Sebas, he was slow enough to make him yawn. There were any number of methods to take the glove back—like snapping the rapier and charging in to punch the man's head off—but his opponent's intent was so unclear, he decided to pass on that and ask the genuine question puzzling him. "What…are you even trying to do?"

"This is it!!! This must be the magic item that was boosting your power!!!"

It was just a cloth glove.

Marmvist's voice thundered. There was froth at the corners of his mouth. And his eyes were bloodshot. His mind was probably already half-lost to the world of insanity. He'd seen something so unbelievable that he wanted to rationalize it any way he could.

"You could just accept that I'm strong… I'd be fine with that."

Sebas momentarily regarded the man, whose smile seemed to split his face, then threw a punch.

After Marmvist's head had been removed from his shoulders and his body crumpled to the ground, all that was left was silence.

Sebas blew on the pads of his fingers as if they'd gotten a little dusty. Thanks to the defense of Iron Skin, he didn't have so much as a scratch.

"So if I hadn't been cautious when I heard the name Spatial Slash, this would have been over in five seconds. They did an admirable job stretching it out to twenty."

A number of observers higher up in the building had no doubt been watching these gruesome events unfold, and he gave an order to the predator who had been targeting them.

“Solution, they might be in possession of critical intelligence, so don’t kill them. Now, then…”

He turned a cold eye on the stupefied mob surrounding him.

“Ten more seconds.”

3

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:13 PM

Climb jogged down the empty hallway. His helmet’s power let him see the two others running beside him, even though they were all invisible. It made him worry whether the spells were really working. If he looked closer, though, he could tell there was no mistake, because the colors appeared dull.

They had to be careful not to be too loud, but they couldn’t slow down, either.

They had to rescue the kidnapped woman while Sebas was buying them time. Even if he was stronger than Gazef Stronoff and Brain Unglaus put together, these were the Six Arms, no less formidable than adamantite-rank adventurers. If they all rushed him, things could get dicey, so Climb and the others had to get the woman out and save Sebas, too.

They turned a few corners, descended a flight of stairs—and then the man on point suddenly halted.

Climb stumbled a couple of steps, and the voice of the thief apologized to him. “Sorry for stopping so suddenly. Climb, this is it. Around this corner are the cells, and the woman is being held

in the back."

It was definitely a coincidence, but as if on cue, their spells wore off, and the color of the trio returned to normal.

On the thief's signal, Climb peeked around the corner down the dimly lit hallway and saw that there were several large cells.

"...It was like this before, too—no one around."

There weren't even any guards, never mind prisoners. It was imprudent—and too suspicious. It was practically like they'd been invited. But really, who was fearless enough to infiltrate a building garrisoned by every member of the Six Arms, the strongest Eight Fingers? Not even Climb and his team would have gone in if various other factors—Sebas acting as bait, the captive woman—hadn't fallen into place.

The Six Arms were probably thinking the same thing.

The resultant wiggle room worked in Climb and his team's favor; overconfidence really could become an Achilles' heel.

"Okay, let's get in there and save this lady, yeah?" Perhaps because they had leaped into danger together, the thief spoke in a more relaxed tone.

Brain responded with a question. "Before that, can I ask you something? What's the double door at the end of the hall?"

When Climb looked to the far wall, he saw the large door Brain was talking about.

"Well, speaking from experience, I'd say that these aren't jail cells but cages for beasts. I would bet the door in the back is for taking the animals to...some kind of arena."

“I see… There’s a musk coming from the cells. I heard that they make magical beasts fight in arenas in the empire, too, but…”

Climb sniffed the air in the same manner as Brain to pick up the scent. It smelled like a beast, a carnivorous one.

“Taking them out for training is different from publicly executing them, though. I don’t really want to imagine any other uses besides those…but there might have been other kinds of shows? Anyhow, sorry for the weird tangent. Should we move on?”

Climb answered Brain with a nod, and the thief agreed.

The thief took point, and Climb and Brain followed behind him on either side.

They reached the last cell with no issues, and the thief began examining the door at the end of the hall. Climb took a bell out of his pouch. Then he rang it.

A spell activated, and the lock on the cell opened. The thief looked disappointed, but they were short on time. Climb hoped he would tolerate this much.

“Are you Tsuare?” Climb called out to the woman in the cell. She’d been lying on her side, but now she sat up. Her looks matched Sebas’s description, and she was wearing a maid uniform. Assuming she was still wearing the clothes she was kidnapped in, it had to be her.

A faint relief appeared in Climb’s heart. They’d completed their first objective. Next was to escort her to safety.

“Sebas asked us to save you. Come this way,” Climb said, and the woman—Tsuare—nodded.

When she came out of the cell, she looked at Brain and the thief with a tiny bit of surprise. Her eyes seemed to stay on Brain for an especially long time.

"There's no noise coming from behind this door—the one that probably leads to an arena. Still, it's dangerous to go into a place without knowing anything about it. We should follow the plan and head back the way we came."

Climb and Brain agreed. Or to be more precise, they were both soldiers, and they knew that experts exist for a reason, so they replied without a moment's hesitation.

Climb looked down at Tsuare's feet to make sure she was wearing shoes. *Running should be no problem, then.*

"Let's escape quickly before the enemy shows up."

"Okay, got it. I'll take point like before, so follow me. The only thing is that this time we don't have invisibility magic. I'm going to proceed with caution, so watch for my signals."

"Understoo— What is it, Brain?" Climb asked, because Brain was closely examining Tsuare.

"Hmm? Oh, uh, nothing, Climb." Frowning, he said no more.

Climb glanced at her, but he couldn't find anything about her that bothered him; she just seemed like an imprisoned maid.

"So you're okay? Should we go?"

The thief set off running, followed by Climb, Brain, and Tsuare at the rear.

They raced past the cells, but the thief slowed as they approached the corner. He wanted to check it out first.

But with a gait as natural as if he was on a stroll, a man abruptly appeared from around the corner to impede him. They'd been prepared for someone to block off their escape route, but when it actually happened, it was hard to act quickly.

Climb was so startled that he froze, but the thief reacted in a way worthy of a former orichalcum-rank adventurer. He immediately drew a dagger and stepped forward with the intent to kill.

But—with a loud *ker-blam*, the thief went flying to the side like he'd been bodychecked by a bull. By coincidence, Climb caught him. If Climb hadn't been able to fall correctly, he probably would have hit the floor at a bad angle and wound up critically injured from that alone, but luckily they both rolled into a tangle with no loss of momentum.

He was worried by the thief's groan of suppressed pain, but he paid more attention to the newcomer. Climb knew for sure this man was an enemy.

The one in their way was essentially bald. His arms, bulging with muscles, and his craggy face were covered in tattoos depicting various beasts.

His name appeared with a flash in Climb's mind, and he yelped, "Zero!"

He was one of the Six Arms and chief of the Eight Fingers' security division.

"...That's right, boy. You're that whore's slave, right? Hmph! Can't believe we have ants all the way over here. When you leave sweets out, they really show up anywhere. How very unpleasant."

After casting just a glance at Climb and the thief on the floor, he turned a serious eye on Brain, right across from him. He looked him up and down, appraising his worth as a warrior.

Climb was thankful he wasn't worthy of the powerful enemy's attention and checked the thief's condition. "Are you okay? Do you have any medical supplies?" he asked in a low voice to avoid drawing Zero's attention.

There was no reply, just a miserable groan. Shockingly, there was a fist-size dent in the thief's armor. That spoke volumes about the strength of Zero's punch.

After Climb shook him a few times, the thief became more lucid. Climb followed his instructions and searched the pouches at the injured man's hips.

"I know that face. You're Brain Unglaus, right? You fought as equals with Gazef Stronoff. I see, you don't make any wasteful movements. So you must have kept training since that fight, then? I'm convinced. Succuronte didn't lose because he was careless. It was simply the outcome of fighting you head-on. Well, it's too bad he had to go up against you. I guess we'll have to forgive him for his loss. Anyhow, since you've sullied my good name, I really should kill you. But I'm a generous guy. In light of your exceptional ability with the blade, I'll give you a chance. Kneel before me. And then swear to work for me. If you'll do that, I'll spare you."

"The pay must be good, huh?"

"Oh? You're interested…?"

"You're not going to punish me for hearing you out, are you? I did beat Succuronte, after all, so I should expect to be treated pretty well, right?"

"Ha-ha-ha! You greedy bastard, putting money before begging for your life. You can't take your salary with you to the next world, you know!"

“Hey, whoa, what the heck? Are you saying the Eight Fingers can’t make a decent offer? Does that mean you guys are broke? Or are you the type who pockets everything yourself?”

“What?!” Zero’s fist creaked. “So you can talk, huh, Unglaus? There are a lot of guys who can talk better than they can handle a sword—are you one of those? Or did you get cocky ’cause you beat Succuronte? If that’s the case, I owe you an apology. Sorry you were satisfied after beating the weakest member of the Six Arms.”

Brain clownishly shrugged. He must have been dragging out the conversation for the sake of Climb and the injured thief.

But why was Zero going along with it? Probably to boast that he could take all three of them at once. Or did he have some other reason?

…Huh?

When Climb looked over, he saw Tsuare slowly moving behind Brain. If she wanted to find a safe spot, it would have been better to join Climb and the thief. There was no need for her to take the risk of standing behind the man who was having a stare down with Zero.

Brain glanced over his shoulder. It was too quick for Climb to be sure, but Brain had been looking at Tsuare, and the gleam in his eyes was definitely not friendly. In fact, it was hostile.

Huh? Why is she there? Did he look at me? No.

What’s going on? Worried, Climb stood up.

“Hmph. The ant stands! Guess you’ve bought enough time, huh? Pretty soon I’d like to hear your answer. No, words won’t be necessary. Kneel or don’t. Okay, Unglaus, let’s see what you do!”

Brain snorted—and that was all.

"Then you'll die!"

Zero thrust out his left hand and drew back his right into a fist. He dropped his hips straight down, but his core didn't break. His muscles swelled so large that they were almost audibly straining against his skin. To describe Zero as he was now in a few words, it was like he was a huge rock—no, more like an enraged bull.

Brain lowered his hips as well. His stance seemed to resemble Zero's but was totally different.

If Zero was a muddy stream, Brain was a clear river. If Zero was offense, Brain was defense.

"I gave orders to not kill the old man, but the welcome crew is a hot-blooded bunch. They might overdo it and finish him off accidentally. But that would be a problem. I want to mercilessly slaughter him as an example, to teach how foolish it is to cross the Eight Fingers."

His face twisted into a hideous grimace. It showed how ugly hate could make a person.

"Unglaus, I'm going to be hailed as the strongest, and it'll be because of you. I'll set up a gravestone for you to show what happens to fools who challenge the Six Arms! As for the whore's underling, I'll decorate his head real nice and ship it to her."

A murderous aura that would make anyone shudder slammed into Climb's chest. But it was nothing compared to what he had experienced during his time with Sebas. He shot Zero a sharp look in return, and it seemed to take a bit of the wind out of the man's sails.

"I see, got it. Zero, I'll be your opponent. Climb, take care of

the one behind me!”

It took him a second to understand what he’d been told, but that was only Climb; the thief shot a dart at Tsuare without hesitation.

The missile from the former orichalcum-rank adventurer came in sharp and fast.

Tsuare—somehow—managed to dodge it. According to what Climb had heard from Sebas, she was only a maid. She’d handled herself too well for it to be a fluke.

“You figured it out, huh?” She still resembled Tsuare, but the voice belonged to the Illusion Maniac, Succuronte.

“The reason you didn’t ask your rescuers anything was because your voice would have given you away, right? But it was pretty suspicious to maneuver around behind me, don’t you think? Well, I was wondering even before that. You could have been the real one under mind control, or someone else could have been transformed.” Brain exposed the ruse without even turning, keeping his eyes locked with Zero’s. “Eventually, I guessed from the way you were running, but I couldn’t be sure… I’m glad it was you. I couldn’t exactly ask them to make sure you only sustain light injuries.”

The thief froze for a split second. Then a glimpse of gratitude to Succuronte appeared on his face, too.

“So they saw through your little scheme with no trouble? Then the time for relying on magic tricks is over. Now we decide everything by strength! Succuronte. Kill the two small fries in the rear. You can do that much, can’t you?”

“O-of course, boss.”

Tsuare melted away, and Succuronte appeared. He was, however, still wearing the maid uniform.

"Yeah. I went out of my way to arrange for you to be released, so if you can't…" How was Zero's sentence supposed to finish? The man who must have known quite well speedily nodded and stared Climb down.

"We meet again, brat." Succuronte's serious tone belied an unexpected nervousness for the one who had been victorious in their previous encounter.

The Eight Fingers was not an easygoing organization, so there was no way they would forgive two mistakes. Forced into a do-or-die situation, any semblance of calm had vanished from Succuronte's face.

"The Eight Fingers can bail out someone who was imprisoned in the princess's name?" Despite this vivid example of his enemy's influence, Climb raised his sword nonetheless. "…I can't lose this time."

In the previous fight, Brain had taken out Succuronte with a single blow, but against both Zero and Succuronte, victory was much less certain. Climb couldn't count on Brain winning against Zero and defending him. This opponent was stronger than them. But with that unstable frame of mind, he would get clobbered.

I'll win. With indomitable resolution, Climb edged toward Succuronte.

"Don't worry, you're fine. I'll help," Climb heard the thief call from behind him. The casual tone was probably meant to ease Climb's nerves. He was glad to have the support of someone stronger than him, but the thief had taken a hit from Zero, and although he'd used a potion, he undeniably had yet to fully recover. Besides that, Climb wasn't sure if he would be able to coordinate

with someone he was fighting with for the first time.

The thief's grin was evidence that he'd picked up on Climb's emotional distress. "I'm tellin' ya, don't worry! I'm here for backup. A thief's fighting style is different from a warrior's. I'll show you that combat's not all about banging swords together."

"Thank you."

He has more experience than me. It wouldn't be Climb following him but him following Climb. All Climb had to do was throw everything he had at Succuronte.

Having steeled himself, he glared at Succuronte, who was busy creating doubles like he had in their previous fight. Among the multiple Succurontes, it was impossible to tell which one was real. A bitter taste seeped into Climb's mouth.

As the distance between them closed, a bag suddenly came flying from behind Climb.

"This is how a thief fights!"

The bag burst readily when it landed at Succuronte's feet, creating a cloud of powder. Fearing poison, Succuronte covered his mouth. But that wasn't it. The cloud wasn't poison but a magic item.

"Will-o'-the-Wisp Powder!"

The effect was immediate. A pale light glowed around just one of the five Succurontes.

When he realized this, Succuronte's eyes popped wide open.

Will-o'-the-Wisp Powder was for detecting invisible opponents or thieves and the like who excelled at stealth maneuvers. It

didn't work on anything that wasn't alive.

Multiple Vision would reflect the current state of the original body, so, for example, even if the illusionist got dye thrown on them, the copies would instantly reflect the stains on the original. Unless he was completely inept, it would be difficult to tell the real one from the fakes. In the case of a magic item, however, changes to the original body weren't applied to the illusions.

With higher-tier techniques, it was possible to circumvent magic items, but Succuronte had trained as both an illusionist and a fencer, so he couldn't use such advanced techniques.

Climb's sword descended over the real one.

"Shit!" Succuronte jumped out of the way.

It was an admirable evasion, but he looked a little silly in the maid uniform.

They exchanged dozens of blows in a similar fashion.

Climb was ahead. This wasn't part of Succuronte's plan but purely Climb's superior ability.

A human shouldn't have been able to get dramatically stronger in a single day, so the gap shouldn't have been any different from their previous fight, but every rule has its exceptions.

First, unlike the other day, Climb was now equipped with a sword and shield, plus armor and other small items fortified with magic. They raised his physical strength, increased his defense, and most importantly, allowed him to fight in his true style. Succuronte, on the other hand, had been imprisoned, so he'd been stripped of all his original magic items, and the maid uniform he wore for his illusion disguise had poor freedom of movement.

So from the gear perspective, the gulf between them had shrunk, but that wasn't all.

Climb's familiarity with Succuronte's fighting style was another disadvantage to the illusionist. Plus, the thief supporting Climb from the rear was assisting in pertinent ways.

Succuronte created illusions, but the thief used alchemical and magical items to neutralize any edge it might have given him. The former adventurer seemed totally prepared to deal with him. And in actuality, the thief had indeed guessed what the Six Arms' powers were based on the intelligence he'd received and prepared counterstrategies for all of them. The scary thing was that he'd even readied a strategy for the supposedly imprisoned Succuronte—that's how tenaciously cautious he was.

"Damn you!" Even more cornered than he'd been at the beginning of their fight, Succuronte screamed in a cracking voice.

His piercing eyes then focused on the thief. Climb moved to obstruct his line of sight. The young soldier couldn't let his enemy attack his ally.

Under Climb's protection, the former adventurer taunted Succuronte. "Hey, hey, don't look so scared! You're one of the Six Arms! You're supposed to be on par with an adamantite-rank adventurer, right? So you should be fine with this little handicap."

Succuronte's face twisted in loathing. The blood running from the wounds he'd sustained during the brief back-and-forth made him look even more feral.

"You piece of shit!" As he flung the insult, he assumed a casting stance. Really, as a warrior, Climb should have charged at him to interfere, but he didn't. The way he'd learned to work with the thief during the previous exchanges had created a bond of trust.

A bottle flew in a parabola over Climb to break at Succuronte's feet, and a tinted cloud wafted out.

Succuronte was racked by painful-sounding coughs.

It was a cheap disturbance made by an alchemically created item, but it was enormously effective. Succuronte's casting had been halted.

If he had specialized as a caster, this wouldn't have been an issue, but since he'd been training in parallel as a warrior, even the slightest disruption would cause him to lose his concentration, and he'd end up expending his magical energy for nothing.

While Succuronte was distracted, Climb charged at him with all his might. This wasn't like the pounces he'd been doing so far but an indomitable advance. To some, it may have looked like he was jumping the gun, too eager to win, but Climb's warrior instinct was screaming.

This was the tipping point of this fight.

True, Climb and the thief were keeping the pressure on Succuronte, but it wasn't clear how long their advantage would last. The thief didn't have infinite projectiles. They had to launch an offensive that would finish things off while they were ahead.

Climb used the original martial art he'd acquired the previous day.

It didn't have a name yet, but to give it a temporary one: Release Brain Power. Its effect was simply to remove the limiters of the human mind. It caused the functions of everything from his flesh to his senses to drastically improve.

Sustained use would wear him out physically and damage his muscles, so it was a double-edge sword, but if he didn't use it and

try to make this a short fight, he wouldn't be able to beat Succuronte.

When he activated the art, it was like something snapped into place in his head.

The maelstrom of emotions in his heart poured out as a roar.

A look of surprise came over Succuronte's face, as if he'd suddenly remembered something. And along with it—was that fear? It was an inappropriate emotion for a man worthy of an adamantite rank to have toward a lower-ranking opponent.

Climb brought his sword down from overhead—and was blocked. Stopping a magic longsword with an unenchanted dagger was impressive and deserved nothing but praise. But admitting that meant one also had to admit that Climb had forced Succuronte, a fencer skilled in evasion, to choose an option he was less comfortable with—blocking—and that was no mean feat.

But his attack didn't stop there. Climb immediately kicked forward.

Succuronte moved instinctively to shield his abdomen—and his face twisted up. "Rrrrahhhhh!" He went pale, cold sweat oozed out of his pores, and he staggered, having lost the will to advance.

Behind Climb, the thief's face twitched.

Succuronte had received a kick where it counted with a steel boot. He was wearing pads, but still, he felt something under them distend.

Then came the final blow.

With a spurt of blood, Succuronte fell to the floor with a *thud*.

Climb glanced around the area without lowering his guard. He especially wanted to avoid anyone circling around behind the thief, so he concentrated for a while until he felt confident. This was not an illusion.

A gold star. Even if it was two against one, this was a pretty big victory.

Climb looked at Brain. He'd thought maybe he could help him out—but his enthusiasm quickly vanished.

His fight with Zero was on another level.

For starters, it even sounded different. Despite it being sword against fist, the sounds ringing out were metallic. And they just didn't stop. The endless clash of katana and fist made him wonder how they were finding time to breathe.

Zero especially caught his eye.

His punches were carving out pieces of the wall. With smooth movements like shaving off soft clay, he was leaving ruts in it.

"Whoa, whoa…I heard the fists of a first-rate monk were like iron, but his are harder than that. Mythril…no, orichalcum?" The thief standing next to him saw the same thing he did and grumbled in astonishment.

After a minute of fighting, during which Climb would have been easily killed, neither of them had so much as a scratch. It was for precisely that reason that Zero's expression registered respect.

"Unglaus…you're fairly impressive. You might be the first man to withstand this many of my attacks."

Respect appeared on Brain's face as well.

“You, too. You’re only the second monk I’ve ever seen who is this powerful.”

“Oh?” Zero’s face twisted up in curiosity. “That’s the first I’ve heard of a monk on my level. Tell me their name—I can’t ask after I kill you.”

“He should be on his way here right about now—after killing the other Six Arms you had stationed here.”

Zero furrowed his brow, then broke into a smile.

“Hah! You mean that old man? It’s too bad, but four of my closest comrades are out there welcoming him. They may not be as strong as me, but they’re still tough, unlike Succuronte there on the floor. I don’t think he could possibly be coming here.”

“I wonder. I can just picture him strolling around that corner.”

“Oh, I’m sooo scared. Guess I better take this a little more seriously.”

That remark made Climb’s eyes widen—because he realized what Zero’s “serious” must be if he still had energy to spare after that exchange. He was also surprised that Brain seemed to have expected this. *Does that mean neither of them is going all out? This really is a fight at the pinnacle of human strength, definitely worthy of an adamantite rank!*

“That’s probably a good idea. Those two already finished their fight. I don’t have to buy time anymore. Just lose here and end it, Zero!”

Brain lowered his hips as he sheathed his katana. Climb had seen this stance before—it was the same one he’d used to defeat Succuronte the previous day. Faster than Climb could wonder if he would also beat Zero in one hit, the leader of the Six Arms

leaped backward. He gained considerable distance with a movement so light it surpassed the limits of human capability.

"Edström can create a sword zone, but so can you, huh? Of a different sort. If I carelessly charged at you, I'd be cut in half, right?" It wasn't as if he'd seen through Brain's original martial art, but still, he had excellent warrior senses if he had figured out what type of move it was. "But it seems like you can't do that without standing by and bracing yourself…"

Zero unleashed a knuckle punch. It seemed like a pointless move, but the powerful blow created shock waves that shook Brain's body.

"I can win just by attacking you from back here. Or do you have a way to cut an enemy at a distance?"

"No, I don't," Brain answered honestly. "If you're going to fight like that, I just have to get out of this stance."

With a deeply emotional expression that didn't fit his character, placid like the surface of a lake, Zero quietly asked, "Brain Unglaus, is that your ace move?"

"That's right. It is my ace move, and it's only been broken once from the front."

"That's lame. It's already been broken? So this'll just be the second time." Zero prepared himself, slowly pulling his fist back. "I'm going to break straight through. I'll obliterate that move you're so proud of and, on top of that, I'll win. I'll defeat Brain Unglaus, and at some point, I'll get Gazef Stronoff on the floor at my feet. Then I'll be the strongest in the kingdom."

"You're a bit too ambitious if you're going to lose your footing on your first step. Must have a lot of time on your hands."

“You really are all talk… Nah, you’ve made it this far, so you’re not *all* talk. Still, when you get to the next world, realize that I was above you and lament. Lament that you were stupid enough to challenge Zero. Here I come!”

Zero had tattoos of various beasts all over his upper body, and they began glowing faintly. In response, Brain did nothing. He just waited there like a statue, but Climb could sense him anticipating the moment that vast power would be unleashed— *Now? Now?*

No one could intervene in such a clash of cruel and violent power.

Then came an unreserved voice.

“So this is where you were.”

Everyone turned their attention to the newcomer, including Zero and Brain, who should have each been too busy facing their dangerous opponent to look away.

It was a single old man—Sebas. To Zero, this shouldn’t have been possible.

“Huh? What’s going on? The other Six Arms are supposed to be fighting you… Did you sneak in like these guys?”

Sebas shook his head slightly. “No, I defeated all your colleagues on my way here.”

“N-nonsense! Don’t lie. They may not be as strong as me, but they’re still members of the Six Arms. There’s no way you could fight them and show up here unscathed!”

“The truth can be surprising.”

“Sir Sebas! The Tsuare here was a fake! Succuronte just transformed into her using an illusion! We have to hurry and go save her!”

“Yes, thank you for your concern, but it’s all right, Climb. I already rescued her. She was being held at a different location in this facility.” Sebas looked over his shoulder. Following his line of sight, Climb could see a woman wrapped in a blanket standing beside the entrance to the room.

“Ah!” Flustered, Climb looked down at Succuronte. The maid uniform was all bloody and shredded. He couldn’t take that off and give it to her, and she probably wouldn’t have wanted it anyway.

“Never mind that, Climb. The maid uniform was only cloth. It’s not a big loss.” Sebas grinned awkwardly.

Climb was relieved to hear that.

“Hey, hey, hey! You sure are an easygoing bunch, standing around and ignoring me for your chat!” Zero couldn’t make any rash moves while he was in front of Brain, but he’d finally changed position, facing Sebas with a hateful look. “Old man! I’m gonna ask you one more time. What happened to my crew?”

“I killed them all.” His tone was so relaxed he might as well have been talking about snapping the stems of some wildflowers he’d come across, but his words were callousness incarnate.

“D-don’t be ridiculous! I’m not about to believe that!”

Sebas smiled in response to Zero’s shouting—an expression devoid of hostility, suggesting that he’d been telling the truth.

“…Brain Unglaus, I’m putting off our duel for now. I’m going to show this old man the power of the Six Arms!”

“Okay, got it. Try not to get killed instantly. I guess my work here is done.”

“Keep talking! …Old man, you’ll pay with your life for lying to me!”

A slight smirk appeared on Sebas’s face—a smirk that was unbearable for the man who’d bragged he’d be the strongest in the kingdom.

Zero’s tattoos emitted a faint glow.

Chief of the security division, leader of the Six Arms, Fighting Ogre, Zero.

He was a man who could kill Gazef Stronoff or Brain Unglaus instantly if they came at him unarmed, and even if they had weapons, the outcome would be uncertain.

One of the classes he’d acquired had a skill called Shamanic Adept. With it, he could allow animal spirits to possess his flesh and borrow their superior physical abilities. Its uses per day were limited, but if he activated it, his faculties could rival a beast’s despite his being human.

A creature with such physical prowess using the techniques of a human—it wasn’t hard to see what was so terrifying about that.

Zero activated his skills.

Usually, he activated only one to save some for later, but Zero had realized that Sebas was formidable.

Still, he wasn’t convinced the man had annihilated four Six Arms. If he hadn’t snuck in, if he broke in through the front, then it made sense to think someone else was out there.

The Blue Roses were a possibility.

For now, since I don't have more detailed information, I'll pulverize Sebas. Brain Unglaus I'll have to leave for another day. I'll show the spectators my overwhelming power as a threat and withdraw.

He saw that was his best option and began prepping his strongest move.

The panther on his leg, the falcon on his back, the rhinoceros on his arm, the buffalo on his chest, the lion on his head—he called upon them all.

An explosion of power filled his body, to the point where he briefly worried he might swell up and burst.

"Khaaaaaaaaa!" He exhaled the heat burning up in his body—and charged.

Zero, the strongest of the Six Arms, attacked with a single, straight punch. No feints, no gimmicks, just a pure direct strike, but the power it contained was unfathomable. Its destructive potential was boosted by not only Shamanic Adept but a variety of monk skills plus multiple magic items, and his fist flew at an overwhelming speed.

The attack was so fast even Zero had a hard time controlling it. He was somehow able to make a move out of it only because he'd specialized in charging head-on and punching with all his might. He didn't hesitate to show the best card in his hand. This move was simple but unrivaled. He was absolutely confident that it couldn't be beaten by cheap tricks.

Zero had the feeling he'd left everything behind. His senses slowed, and he felt like he was trailing behind himself as he took one step forward, then another.

“Ah!” someone screamed.

It was too late for that.

He arrived in front of Sebas in the blink of an eye and, with a perfect transfer of energy, unleashed his punch, jam-packed with power.

Zero smiled when he saw Sebas, who was standing stock-still, perhaps shocked by his speed. *Yes, regret that you were foolish enough to fight me, the strongest of the Six Arms!*

“—Buh!”

The fist pierced Sebas’s defenseless abdomen. A perfect deciding move.

His power erupted like an explosive blast, and Sebas was launched backward as if he were strangely lightweight, like a plushie with no stuffing. He was thrown against the floor and tumbled across it, unable to control his momentum.

He didn’t so much as twitch. Instant death.

But that was only natural. His internal organs had all burst into a sloppy liquid mess. The only part of him still shaped like something human was his exterior.

This was Zero’s strongest move—a magic art that made a one-hit kill reality.

—Or that was how it was supposed to go.

But Sebas didn’t budge an inch.

He’d stopped the full force of Zero’s punch with just his abdomen, using nothing but his muscles.

No one would have been able to believe their eyes. It was a scene from beyond the boundaries of common sense.

The gap in the pair's physical powers was clear—but the outcome defied all expectations.

Of course, the most astonished one was Zero. He'd used his ultimate attack. It should have been impossible for any living thing to take it unfazed. And no one had, up until this point. Despite that, he was faced with the reality of the current situation, so even when something black streaked before his eyes, he couldn't react.

Sebas's leg stretched toward the heavens. Rising like a swallow in flight, it grazed Zero's nose.

Once the foot had reached its apex, it came swiftly down.

An ax kick.

That was the name of the move. But its speed and power made it no ordinary strike.

"…What are you?" Zero muttered, and the edges of Sebas's lips curled up slightly.

A horrifying sound rang out—something like the crunch of gravel or the snapping of a stick. Zero's head was crushed, as if under hundreds of pounds of weight; his neck and spine gave way easily; and he collapsed to the floor.

The room fell silent.

The move could be simply described as *awe*. Dodging the blood flowing from part of Zero's smashed head, Sebas brushed off the area where he'd been punched.

"Phew, that was a close one. If the warning had come any

later, I'd have died."

That's a complete lie! There was no warning! No one said it, but all three of the men, and maybe even Tsuare, screamed it in their heads.

"You saved me, Climb."

"Wh…uh…um, yeah…" Climb opened his mouth in an attempt to say, *What?* but timidly accepted Sebas's gratitude. He was so shocked, he didn't know what to say.

"It seems I was just a bit stronger than him." Sebas made a tiny space between two fingers. He must have been indicating the gap between himself and Zero, but no one could possibly agree with that assessment.

"A bit"? No. Again, everyone present thought the same thing.

"Anyhow, we saved Tsuare, so we should probably withdraw."

"Oh, but…the other Six Arms… Did you really…?"

"Yes, I killed them all. There were several, and they were all quite powerful, so I regret that I wasn't able to hold back a little."

"I—I see. Well, that can't be helped, so please don't feel bad."

Three of them looked at Zero's corpse on the floor. There was no way they could say Sebas was lying.

"F-for now, let's call some soldiers and search the building."

That was what they'd come here for in the first place. It was incredibly good luck that Sebas's assistance had allowed them to make a clean sweep of the enemy stronghold. If what he said was true—though of course it was—they'd utterly destroyed the

strongest force within the Eight Fingers, a great military achievement.

They'd probably gotten the best results of any squad. The death of Zero, who would have had detailed knowledge about the organization, was a downside, but there was no way they could have taken him alive, so the loss was merely theoretical. Only a fool would quibble about that.

With expressions that said there was nothing else left to do, Brain and the thief nodded at what Climb, in his slightly agitated state, had proposed. Only one of the group wore a dark expression.

"What is it, Sir Sebas?"

"Oh, sorry, something was just bothering me… But first, the air in here is rather bad. Shall we go outside?"

"Yeah, good idea."

Glancing between Tsuare and Zero's corpse, everyone agreed.

Sebas went to where Tsuare was, near the entrance to the room, and picked her up. Her bony white legs, nearly devoid of flesh, kicked into the air with the movement. Climb noticed her delicate hands tightly gripping Sebas's jacket.

They were a butler and a maid. But the atmosphere made their relationship seem like more than that.

Ugh, I'm the worst for taking such an interest in their relationship. Who cares what it is?

"Okay, let's go," Climb declared and walked off ahead of the others without waiting for an answer.

The other three followed. They could investigate after parting with Sebas and Tsuare. Climb was bracing himself to fight for Sebas, who had his arms full, if they happened to be attacked on their way (not that there was much chance of that), but it turned out his worries were for nothing.

They had sensed others in the building when they were sneaking in, but it seemed like there was no longer anyone there.

If you think about it, by the time Sebas took out the Six Arms, no one would be tough enough to stick around and want to fight him. There's a very good chance they all ran away. If so, I hope the squad members we left outside captured them, Climb thought, exiting the building.

The sense of freedom made his shoulders feel lighter.

Then someone tapped him. When he turned to look, it was the thief. He was focused on something in another direction completely. His wide-eyed profile looked the same as it had when Sebas had slaughtered Zero with one hit.

Climb followed his line of sight, and his eyes grew wide, too.

"A wall of fire?"

Climb nodded in response to Brain's whisper.

If a building had been on fire, there would have been a pillar of flames. A fire like that wouldn't have surprised Climb so much. But it wasn't; this was a wall of flame over a hundred feet high surrounding a section of the capital. It was probably a quarter mile long or longer.

"What could that be?"

At the sound of Sebas's puzzled but not particularly tense

voice, the three others returned to themselves.

“What should we do, Climb? I think that’s the storehouse district. Who was assigned to it?”

“The leader of the Blue Roses, Lady Alvein… We’ll treat this as an emergency, scrap all current plans, and retreat to the castle as instructed. Then we’ll see what our superiors say.”

“That’s for the best… Oh, Sir Sebas…”

“I’m going to take Tsuare to a safe place so nothing like this can ever happen again.”

“Understood. Thank you, Sir Sebas, for today and last night.”

“Don’t mention it. I simply worked with you because our objectives happened to match. I owe you for the attempted rescue. Anyhow, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be going.”



CHAPTER 9
Jaldabaoth

1

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 9:10 PM

The woman woke up thirsty.

She stirred in her king-size bed and reached for the pitcher of water on the nightstand, but her hand whooshed through the air.

Then she remembered she hadn't put the pitcher there today and sucked her teeth.

"Fwahhh," she yawned. She both slept and woke up early, like an old lady, but she had gone to bed only an hour ago. It went without saying that she hadn't slept enough yet.

She swallowed and put a hand to her neck.

Her throat felt sticky and parched, so she went to get a drink. She covered up with a heavy robe that was lying nearby, popped her slippers on, and left the room.

She was Hilma, chief of the drug-trafficking division, and this building was her base in the royal capital. Her subordinates numbered in the dozens and should have been busy at work, but it was so quiet it seemed like no one was around.

She walked down the hall feeling uncertain. The facility was always quiet unless nobles were visiting. *But isn't this* too *quiet?*

The reason she invited nobles to the mansion was to forge connections.

In noble families, the heir generally inherited the house rather late. By the time their turn came, many were already over thirty.

Until then, they had no choice but to receive money from the current head of the household to lead their lives—despite being married and having children. That was why she invited those heirs to her property and entertained them.

She supplied alcohol, women, and drugs to them and whispered things in their ears to tickle their pride. She brought them together with peers of similar rank to give them a sense of camaraderie. By entertaining them like that, she was able to build friendly relationships.

And after those nobles took over their houses, it was her turn to reap a bountiful harvest. If they tried to cut her off, she'd give them the stick. If they made efforts to be more useful to her, she'd give them the carrot. And so she wormed her way further into noble society.

She walked down the quiet hallway to get some water.

It wasn't bad that it was quiet. She preferred silence over a noisy commotion. She didn't even attend the nobles' wild parties, but she was fed up with them anyway. Still, this lull was terribly strange. The chilly stillness made her feel like she was the only one in the mansion.

"...What's going on?"

There was no way even her guards would go off somewhere without informing her first. She considered raising her voice to call for someone, but she realized giving away her position would be a bad idea if this was an unusual situation. She considered returning to her room and going back to bed, but that seemed too passive.

Anyone who couldn't act when the moment of truth arrived would be eaten up like kibble. That was her belief, and it was precisely because of it that she had been able to ascend the social ladder from high-class prostitute to where she was now.

She glanced both ways along the hallway. Sure enough, there was no one, so she set off again.

Her sixth sense told her to head for a secret room only she and very few others knew about. The room contained several enchanted items, some jewels, and an escape route. This building was her main base in the royal capital, but she had others. *It might be a good idea to escape to one of them.*

As she walked stealthily down the hall, she noticed something.

"What…is this?" She spoke in spite of herself, though in a low voice.

She'd discovered something bizarre out the window.

The thin glass pane was covered with layer upon layer of ivy. As a result, barely any light was coming through. She tried to open the window, but it wouldn't budge.

Confused, she looked to the other windows in the hallway. They were all blocked with thick vines as well.

"What? Who the heck…?"

It definitely hadn't been like this when she'd gone to bed. The plants couldn't possibly have grown so much in only an hour. It had to be magic.

So who was the perpetrator, and what was their aim?

She had no idea. But she understood that she was in an ex-

tremely bad spot.

"Dammit!" Cursing, she started to run. She didn't have the wherewithal to worry about the hem of her robe. She just had to get to the secret room as fast as possible.

When she reached the staircase, she looked at the first floor. As expected, it was silent.

She made her way carefully down the stairs by the moonlight filtering through gaps in the ivy, grateful that the thick carpet muffled her footsteps.

"!" When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was so startled she gasped.

There was someone standing in the hallway staring at her. The figure melted into the shadows, not because it was lurking there like a thief might but purely because of its dark skin. It was a dark elf, and its two sparkling, differently colored eyes seemed to float in the blackness.

Her visitor let the black cloth around it fall to the ground. The clothes beneath were those of a girl. She had a black staff in her hand and was looking Hilma's way with upturned eyes.

The secret room is right behind this mysterious girl. Recalling the floor plan of the mansion, Hilma inched nervously forward, determined.

How great it would be if one of the nobles just brought her as a joke. But she quickly rejected that naive idea.

When she'd heard Coccodor had been captured, she wasn't sure how the powers that be would react, so she'd been making preparations to evacuate to a safe location. She had no subordinates who, under those circumstances, would bring an outsider

here without reporting it to her.

“Hey, little miss—,” she began, then furrowed her brow.

As a former high-class prostitute, she’d met a large variety of people from every walk of life. Her experience told her that the elf before her was a boy, not a girl.

His outfit was extremely elaborate, definitely not the kind an ordinary person could get their hands on. It seemed to be the sort of luxury good even Hilma didn’t have.

Dark elves used to live in the Tove Woodlands but were rarely seen in the kingdom these days. Now one was standing before her cross-dressing in expensive clothing.

If everything hadn’t felt so odd, she would have assumed he was a slave brought by some nobleman to satisfy his self-indulgent tastes.

“…What am I doing here?” he asked.

She slowly approached him in a way she hoped would cause as little alarm as possible.

“A-auntie, are you in charge of this mansion?”

Being referred to as an older lady didn’t bother her. To such a little dark elf, that was likely how a woman her age appeared to be.

“N—,” she started to say but stopped. She had a bad feeling.

She’d always prized these sparks of intuition. She’d lived her life trusting her hunches far more than common sense. Even when common sense had betrayed her, her hunches never had.

“Yes! Yes, I am in charge here!”

“O-oh, I see. Good.” The boy smiled. It was so pure that even under these circumstances, the desire to defile this clean creature flared up in her breast.

“S-so I guess it wasn’t a bad idea to ask those people.”

As if in response to the boy’s remark, a nearby door opened. A woman slowly appeared from inside. She looked like a girl wearing an odd maid uniform, but instead of the scent of perfume, there was a stench of blood and gore hanging around her.

Hilma put a hand over her mouth and suppressed a shriek.

A man’s arm dangled from the woman’s hand. Torn muscle fibers were visible, as if the whole thing had been ripped out of his shoulder socket.

“Wh-what…?”

“U-umm, er, it seems like some people are coming to attack this mansion, and there’s a lot we have to do before they get here, so I brought her along.”

“Don’t mind meeee. I got to eat my fiiiilll for the first time in a whiiiile, so I’m quite satisfiiiied.” She spoke, although her mouth didn’t move. That was extremely bizarre, but there were several even more pressing questions. Most shudder inducing was the mystery of what exactly she’d eaten her fill of. Hilma had a guess, but she didn’t want to believe it.

It was in that state of mind that she asked, “Hey, hey, a-are you gonna eat me, too?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, no. You’re different, Auntie.”

It provided no relief. She had a hunch—that an even crueler fate awaited her.

"H-heyyy, kid. Wanna have some fun?"

She slid the robe she was wearing off one shoulder.

She took pride in her body. When she had been a high-class prostitute, sleeping with her had cost an extraordinary sum. And even after that, she had maintained her charms and didn't put on any extra fat. She was sure she could still get even the most anti-social guy in the mood, so she was confident she could easily arouse the interest of a child.

But there was no sign of any special feeling in the boy's eyes.

She acknowledged that she wasn't as attractive as the maid next to him. Still, despite having retired, she was a pro. She could get even the most halfhearted guy to burn up with desire.

She approached him slowly, so as not to cause alarm, with the smooth, graceful twists of a snake.

She didn't sense any desire coming from the boy.

So she changed tactics. She slowly reached around his neck—and activated a magic item.

Tattoo of Viper.

The snake tattoos on each of her hands fleshed out, raised their heads, and struck at the boy's body. If they bit him with their potent neurotoxin, he would immediately go convulsing into the next world. Hilma had no way to fight, so this was her trump card.

The snakes lashed out quick as whips, but the boy grabbed

them dexterously and crushed them in his fists without a moment's hesitation.

The Tattoos of Viper slithered back into her arms. The snakes themselves had been killed, so she wouldn't be able to use them until a day had passed for recovery.

Now in the worst possible scenario—having taken hostile action without achieving anything—Hilma staggered backward. The most horrible thing, however, was that the boy's expression hadn't changed at all the entire time. He didn't seem flustered after being attacked, and he didn't look hostile.

"E-er…I'll be…uh…going, then."

Where? The moment the question entered her mind, a sharp pain shot through her knee. It hurt so badly she couldn't stand, and she collapsed on the floor.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" She let out an agonized cry and, in a cold sweat from the pain, looked at her knee—which she regretted. "My, my, my leeeeeeeg!"

Her left leg was bent the wrong way. Not only that, but her bones poked through the bright-red flesh.

Sobbing from the unbelievable pain, she thought to reach out a hand to hold it but hesitated. She was scared to touch it.

It was at that moment that the boy seized her by the hair—and set off walking.

He dragged her away with strength that didn't match his boyish appearance. The young dark elf paid no attention to the sound of more than a few of her hairs tearing free from the scalp in his grasp.

“Ow! Ow! Stop it!”

In response to Hilma’s shrieks, the boy just gave her a quick glance. He didn’t stop walking. “W-we have to hurry!”

2

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:20 PM

After raiding the building, Entoma Vasilissa Zeta went out the door.

She gathered all the papers that had stuck to her feet, balled them up, and tossed them into the building.

Their original plan had been to dispose of any people inside, gather any important documents and items of value, and withdraw. It would have been best to leave no trace, like a bird leaving its nest, but they didn’t have time to go through the papers; since they simply seized everything, the aftermath made it look like a burglar had broken in.

Still, that in and of itself wasn’t a problem. Demiurge, who had sent Entoma and Mare out in the first place, had mentioned it as a possibility. The problem was that they were running far behind schedule.

None of the demons who had accompanied the pair from Nazarick were around anymore. Mare had captured the most important person in the building and gone ahead to their meeting before Entoma. The minions had taken the mountain of stuff responsible for the delay in their schedule and left.

Yes. The reason their calculations had gotten thrown off was that they'd discovered the basement just as it was time to withdraw. And it had been jam-packed with smuggled goods and what appeared to be illegal drugs.

Collecting all that had been slow going.

For one thing, the basement was split into a number of small rooms, and the valuable-looking items had been hidden among a huge mess of other things. A forest really did do a great job hiding trees. It was impossible for Entoma and the demons to carry out every single item, so they had to dive into the veritable jungle of loot and search for the best "wood."

If the woman Mare took had been present at the time, they probably could have figured it out much faster, but they'd already finished with her by then.

Entoma and the demons had decided to inspect the items and cram the garbage into one of the rooms. Even for a crew with far superior musculature than humans, it was still an annoying job. Nevertheless, it was worth doing, and they had most likely succeeded in hauling all the valuable goods out of the basement.

Entoma, who was the last one remaining after acting as overseer, looked up at the night sky and wiped her forehead in that special motion reserved for those who have done their job. Not a single drop of sweat had formed, but the gesture reflected how she felt.

"Okay, thennn. Everyooooone, hurry up and haul that stuuuuuff."

At Entoma's orders, a bunch of heavily laden insects larger than humans flew off into the night sky. They were giant beetles she'd summoned with a bug tamer ability.

With the deep, loud drone of beating wings, they soared straight across the sky toward their destination.

After seeing off the insects and their items, Entoma remembered the object in her hand.

“Oh, I didn’t eat thissss. Oh nooooo, that won’t doooo.” She gave herself a theatrical thump on the head and brought the severed arm of the man up beneath her lower jaw. With a few sloppy scarfing noises, she whittled the arm down, and her throat moved. “Urp.” Her dainty belch was accompanied by the smell of blood and gore.

“The soft fatty meat of womennnnnn and the lean meat of childrennnnn are both tasty, but for a diet, the muscly meat of a man is bessssst.”

After consuming some of the flesh while deftly avoiding the bones, she chucked the arm back into the building.

“Deliciousssss. Thank you for the meal.” She made a little bow at the mansion and then began departing for the next destination detailed in her orders, albeit later than planned. She hadn’t gone more than a few steps, however, when a voice called out to stop her.

“Hey there, nice evening, ain’t it?”

“…I wonder about thaaaaat. Doesn’t seem like a very good evening for you at allllll.”

It was hard to tell if the human who had slowly come into the open was a man or a woman. While the newcomer had the likeness of a woman somewhat, that hulking physique led Entoma to the conclusion that “male” might be the correct guess.

“What’re you doing out here?”

“Taking a wallllllk.”

“…What’re you munchin’ on? Looks like you’re enjoying it.”

“Meeeeeat.”

“…A human’s?”

“Yesssssss. Human meeeeat.”

Something cold had emerged in the man-woman’s tone, but Entoma didn’t worry. She wasn’t about to consider some human’s feelings. If the creatures bothered her, she would stomp them; if they didn’t bother her, she would ignore them; if she got hungry, she would catch and eat them—she thought so little of their kind, it would have been strange to care about the feelings of one of them.

“Uh-huh. So a monster appears? I didn’t know the Eight Fingers were keeping pet monsters. Well, it seems like they screwed up with the keeping part.”

The man-woman slowly held up a war pick. That was when Entoma began to feel troubled.

“Heyyyy, how about weeee just decide we never saw each other?”

A strange expression appeared on the man-woman’s face. It was probably surprise at hearing her proposal.

“I’mmmmm also here for worrrrrk, so fighting youuuuu would be a painnnn. Besiiiiides, I’m full right nowwww.”

“…Sorry. I may not look it, but I’m one of the kingdom’s top adventurers. I can’t just be all ‘Oh, I see’ and let a people-eating monster off the hook. We can’t have you existing in the human

world.”

“Ah, what a bother. But you’re stronnnng. So maybe I’ll eat you laterrrr.”

Entoma fixed her eyes on the man-woman head-on for the first time.

He-she appeared to be a pure warrior.

Hrmm, must be pretty stronnnng.

Entoma wasn’t a warrior by trade, so she couldn’t gauge the strength of her opponents very well. Still, she could tell this one outmatched her.

“Rahhhgh!” The man-woman charged, swinging the war pick.

Entoma gracefully dodged. But the war pick pursuing her abruptly changed direction mid-swing. It wasn’t a fluid motion making use of centrifugal momentum but a brute-force swing that altered the weapon’s trajectory with overpowering muscular strength.

While dodging again, Entoma activated a skill.

“Eh? You’re just gonna keep running away?”

The war pick swung around. The wind it whipped up by passing Entoma’s head ruffled her fake hair.

“Hmmm. You must love whooshing that thing around, huhhh?”

In response to the taunt, she heard a “Tch.” Just as she was activating another skill, the war pick came down, but she dodged it easily. With no target left to strike, its momentum drove the

weapon into the ground.

Entoma scoffed at the repetitive, workman-like attacks. Her face didn't move, but as her opponent, the human could sense her ridicule clearly.

The next second, however, Entoma realized that the man-woman had done something possible only with overpowering strength: aim for that careless moment.

"Break!"

The earth around the war pick in the ground shattered all at once. No, the cobblestones collapsed. It was as if a massive earthquake had occurred in just that one spot. For the first time, Entoma couldn't maintain her stance. Meanwhile her opponent, through the effect of what magic item, she didn't know, remained perfectly stable.

Entoma saw the dirty edge of the war pick rise up.

I underestimated this person, she scolded herself.

Dodging it would be easy enough. Certainly, if she were a human and the ground beneath her had been destroyed, she would have lost her balance and found it difficult to escape between the two shock waves. But Entoma was one of the Pleiades, and all the magic items she had equipped were upper tier, so this situation didn't bother her one bit.

There was just one problem.

To dodge, she had to jump aside, and it would get her maid uniform dirty.

Was that a pardonable offense? It was her best outfit, given to her by the Supreme Beings.

Time…to finish this.

Hostility appeared on her face beneath her mask for the first time.

Time to finish this.

I'm gonna kill you.

Filled with not the mild annoyance of a human brushing away a bug but murderous intent, Entoma raised her left arm to meet the descending war pick. Even a floor guardian wouldn't make it through this attack unscathed, so for her, it would be nearly impossible.

The next second, instead of metal gouging flesh, the clang of hard object against hard object rang out.

Entoma's left hand suddenly had a small shield sticking to it, quite literally. There was a bug with over eight legs clinging to her arm.

"What…is that thing?!"

"I…am a bug tamerrr. So I can summon bugs and put them to work for meee."

She flung her other arm to the side, and a long bug that looked almost like a broadsword flew out of the dark night and affixed itself to the back of her right hand.

"Sword Bug and Shell Bug. I'm gonna kill youuuu. I wasn't going toooo, but I can't let this stannnd."

Entoma charged and launched a single stroke.

She sliced open the man-woman's armor, and blood spurted.

But it was far from a lethal blow. Even if it had been impossible to evade Entoma's all-out attack, the warrior had been able to get away with only a light injury.

So that stuff earlier about being top class in the kingdom was neither exaggeration nor a bluff. But if this is all this person's got, they're no match for me.

Entoma Vasilissa Zeta may not have been built purely for combat like Yuri Alpha, but she was still a member of the Pleiades, which meant that a mere human could never match her strength.

She swung again and bathed her face in the fountain of blood.

Because of the wound from the first attack, this blow cut deeper—not such a light injury this time.

"Your movements have changed! Does that mean you're taking this seriously now?!" The angry shout came at the same time as he-she swung the war pick, and Entoma repelled it with her Shell Bug. The shock that ran through her was surprisingly intense, but she braced her legs and didn't stagger so much as a step. There was no harm in doing so, but this was a manifestation of her pride—being moved by a human was obnoxious.

The man-woman didn't die but instead, maintaining momentum, unleashed a fluid chain attack. It was an attack of Sturm und Drang and was probably buffed by one of those special "martial arts" exclusive to this world. But Entoma made skillful use of her Sword and Shell Bugs and blocked all fifteen attacks to emerge unscathed.

Entoma had no way of knowing, but that had been Gagaran of the Blue Roses' ace move, performed by activating multiple arts simultaneously. It was a super-elite chain attack. Each blow in the barrage was backed by the full strength of Gagaran's powerful arms and could defeat even the martial art Fortress—it was possi-

ble to stay on the receiving end only with a defensive art that no one but a few geniuses were able to acquire, Impenetrable Fortress. Yet Entoma was blocking everything with her innate physical strength alone.

This was a gap born of a difference in level and racial physical ability.

Even when the first glimpse of despair appeared in her opponent's eyes, Entoma showed no emotion. The only thought in her head was to kill.

Pwah!

It was the sound of someone coming up for air. At the same time, the chain of attacks stopped. Entoma took her right hand—the one with the Sword Bug—drew it back like a bow, and thrust it forward like an arrow. Her aim was the chest of the man-woman in front of her.

The war pick rose up, but it moved at the speed of a tortoise. Entoma's stab was faster and pierced the man-woman's chest—

—or that was what was supposed to happen.

Her blade sliced air. The Sword Bug missed its mark and thrust into the darkness of the night.

Entoma's head turned with an uncanny motion—to look at the interfering intruder.

More than several yards away was a woman dressed in black. The man-woman, out of breath, was behind her.

"Thanks, Tia. I thought I was a goner."

"So you have red blood, too, huh, Gagaran?"

“What’s so surprising about that? I’m pretty sure you’ve seen me get injured plenty of times.”

“I thought maybe by now it’d be blue, like you powered up.”

“That’s not a power-up! More like changing races!”

“Then a class change.”

The sound of their cheerful banter irritated Entoma. She was the strong one, and therefore, she was the one allowed to be calm. *They need to think about the position they’re in.*

“Are you almossssst readyyyyyy? Said your good-byyyyes?” Entoma braced herself for the first time. She wasn’t scared of the man-woman—Gagaran. The problem was the new opponent—Tia. If her outfit wasn’t a fashion statement, it meant she was a ninja—a class that required at least sixty levels to acquire.

That meant the teleportation that had saved Gagaran from Entoma’s attack was ninjutsu.

If her opponent was really a ninja, victory wouldn’t be so easy, even for Entoma. She’d wanted to end this with some energy in reserve, but under the circumstances, she no longer had the luxury to hope for that.

“Spider Talisman!” Faster than her opponent could move, Entoma scattered four talismans.

The moment the sheets hit the ground, they changed into large spiders. On par with the results of the spell Summon Third-Tier Monster, the conjured spiders weren’t strong, but for Entoma, gaining even a bit of insight into what her opponent could do would be tremendously helpful and give her time to prepare herself for combat.

Although bug tamers' bug weapons were powerful, they had their drawbacks. One of them was that summoning the bugs took a little time.

"Shadow Double!"

As Tia's ninjutsu activated, her shadow wriggled, and another Tia appeared.

Entoma paid it no attention. The doubles created with Shadow Double had only a quarter of the power of the user. The only exception was its evasion, which was proportional to the amount of MP expended. The double might have been a tough opponent for her spiders, but to Entoma, it wasn't even worth fighting.

The main problem was how much combat ability the original ninja possessed. Entoma readied her ace move, Bullet Bugs, and one other. At the same time, she slapped a talisman on herself to boost her strength.

The Bullet Bugs amassed out of thin air and began to envelop her left arm. About an inch long each, the insects gleamed like steel, and their pointy, conical bodies bore a close resemblance to rifle bullets. The similar shape was only natural, as they were put to the exact same use.

The ninja's double had its hands full dodging an assault from one of the spiders, and the original was fending off two. She couldn't be too terribly high level if she had taken out only one after this much time. In that case, even combining her potential with Gagaran's was most likely not enough to interfere with Entoma's victory.

Heh, it won't be that easyyyyy…

She would settle this quickly, forcefully, and without mercy.

Satisfied with the weight settled on her left arm, she aimed at Tia.

The bugs had gathered on Entoma's arm until it was twice as big around, and they began moving down past her wrist. After reaching the tips of her fingers, they all scrambled to be the first to take off. The continuous noise of their wings was reminiscent of a Gatling gun. Shooting mercilessly through her spider minions in the line of fire, a total of one hundred fifty Bullet Bugs choked the air as they streaked toward Tia.

These living missiles, which could penetrate steel, would scar and fell even the largest of tree trunks. But in the face of these death slugs, Tia relied on ninjutsu.

"Unyielding Diamond Shield!"

A shield, dazzlingly radiant with all the colors of the rainbow, appeared in front of her. The huge hexagon sparkled, ripping through the darkness, and the bugs crashed into it. The barrier lasted less than a few seconds before breaking apart with the clear tinkle of shattering glass, but by then, the barrage had ended, and Tia, safely behind cover, was unharmed.

Entoma clicked her tongue despite not having one. Still, uncovering her opponents' hidden moves one after the other would illuminate the path to victory. Tia could still handle her attacks for now, but the moment they surpassed the ninja's ability, they would be like a muddy stream surging past its banks to swallow everything.

With her bug sword, Entoma batted away the throwing knife flying toward her from the front, and with her bug shield, she blocked Gagaran's attack from above. That blow must have come a long way down. The Shell Bug shrieked as the impressive momentum slammed into it.

If Entoma had been blinded by the dazzling light of the Unyielding Diamond Shield, she probably wouldn't have been able to block Gagaran's charging attacks in the dark, but her sight wasn't about to be affected by something so minor. Moreover, her field of vision was much wider than humans'. *Even with* this mask *on*.

Perhaps judging a follow-up attack too risky, Gagaran glided out of range as if she were skating on the surface of a lake, barely moving her feet. Her agility despite her heavy build showed that her wounds had fully healed. She crushed Bullet Bug carcasses under her feet with dry crunching noises as she stood next to Tia.

"Crap, I have zero confidence we can win this. What's up with her? Her timing's so perfect! She blocked my attack without even looking!"

"Wider field of vision?"

"There's something else. There's a good chance she has a bug tamer ability or whatever. That or a special sense you get from some kind of magic spell… Still, though, why doesn't she attack while we're chatting? The advantage is overwhelmingly on her side."

"A beast first assesses its opponents' strength, then attacks their weak point."

"Gotcha. So she's checking out all the tricks up our sleeves, hmm? People who are actually cautious, unlike our Little Miss Tiny, are a pain in the neck."

"I guess I shouldn't underestimate theeeem too much just because they're humannnn. Wellll, I have some other reasons, toooo, but…there, seeeee? In that case, I don't need this bug."

The bug clinging to Entoma's right arm fell to the ground and

scurried off, vanishing into the darkness.

"Instead…c'meeeeere."

A new creature coiled around her free arm. It was like a centipede—no, it was a real centipede, albeit over thirty feet long and its face, if it could be called that, had abnormally sharp fangs.

This was the strongest insect she could summon, Whip Bug.

Entoma began bracing her legs.

She'd collected most of the data she needed about the humans in front of her—their attack speed, destructive power, defense, evasion, mobility, and so on. The only thing she wasn't sure of was how Tia would address the situation, but that wasn't worth getting anxious about.

"Oops." Entoma felt around below her face. There was a clear, sticky liquid. "I thought I was fullll, but I guess all this exercise made me hungry agaaaaain."

The fluid clinging to her hand was drool—proof of her yearning for the two humans, who were no longer anything besides food to her.

Humans were her favorite, but up until now, she'd had to subsist on green cookies and be satisfied with that. Of course, she didn't hold it against the Supreme Beings. On the contrary, Entoma felt she was being given generous consideration. For example, when villagers were captured and used in healing experiments, she was allowed to eat their severed arms.

Still, on some level, she was just putting up with the situation, so when faced with these excellent specimens, who would make for the highest quality foodstuff, she couldn't throw away the chance without taking even a single bite.

The two humans shivered under Entoma's ravenous gaze. The reaction didn't stem from fear of their powerful enemy's blood-lust but from a physiological instinct born of being targeted by a predator.

"Kiiiiyaaaaaaaaa!" With a shrill battle cry like two pieces of Styrofoam rubbing together, Entoma went on the offensive for the first time in this fight. The motions of this predator hunting down her prey were direct and bizarrely fast.

By the time the shield bug had deflected the six throwing knives hurled her way, there was barely any distance left between them.

When Entoma saw Gagaran out front with her weapon at the ready, she decided whose she would neutralize first and lashed out with the whip in her right hand.

The longer a whip is, the slower its tip will move—that was a given. It was natural even for someone with superhuman strength like Entoma. But that assumed the weapon was like any ordinary whip.

What Entoma wielded was the strongest summoning she could accomplish with her bug tamer abilities…

Normally a whip would approach in a circular motion, but this one moved in an impossible way. It approached Gagaran quick as lightning, like an extension of Entoma's arm, twisting at acute zigzag angles. Even an adventurer who'd experienced all sorts of unknowns wouldn't have had a chance to see or experience inconceivable movements like these—only a cross between a living being and a weapon could perform this way. It was utterly natural to be at a loss during one's first encounter.

But her ability to dodge it nonetheless proved she was an adamantite-rank adventurer—the highest-rank adventurer.

Gagaran just barely avoided the bug whip, and it whizzed past the side of her face.

"Watch out!"

The same moment Tia screamed, Gagaran was sent flying—by Tia's ninjutsu, Ring of Fire Bombs, which she set off knowing it would hit both herself and her teammate. As the flames and explosive blast enveloped the pair, the Whip Bug suddenly made a hairpin turn to pass through the space where Gagaran's head had been.

Without Tia's resolve to take drastic measures, the Whip Bug would have undoubtedly decapitated Gagaran. It was a decent evasive tactic, but Entoma's attacks didn't end there. As if bound by a leash, the Whip Bug abruptly changed direction and headed for sooty, blackened Gagaran.

At the same time, Entoma threw a talisman in Tia's direction.

Thunder Bird Talisman.

In midair, it transformed into a bird discharging pale-blue shocks and flew toward Tia.

When facing two opponents, one of them could be left to a bug. That was one of the good things about being a tamer.

A burst of electricity bathed the area in a pale-blue light, illuminating Gagaran, who was trying to subdue the Whip Bug, and Tia, in her pain.

"Dammit! I hate creepy-crawlies!"

Holding the bug's head down with her war pick, Gagaran tried to pin it against her left flank, but it took advantage of its full thirty feet to wrap around her body.

A dagger Tia threw mid-charge crashed into Entoma's shield bug with a clang.

"Wild Flight of Thunder Bird Talisman!"

Entoma scattered several talismans with her left hand. They changed into birds slightly smaller than the previous one and assaulted Tia all at once. Tia, however, disappeared, and the birds flew off when they failed to detect her.

The ninja loomed in the darkness behind Entoma, outside her field of vision. Tia had used short-distance teleportation. But Entoma had already found her. Some bugs have antennae, and the additional sense Entoma had was possible thanks to an organ very much like those, which detected changes in airflow.

She shot her few remaining Bullet Bugs at Tia, who oozed out of the shadows into the open.

"Kugh!" The grunt of pain was accompanied by the smell of fresh blood, but Entoma judged that her opponent still had the will to fight and made a follow-up attack.

"Bombing Talisman!"

An explosion larger than Tia's broke the night's stillness. The ninja was sent flying, and as she tumbled across the ground, Entoma threw more charms at her: Sharp Slash and Colliding Winds. Without a chance to stand up, Tia was cut and blasted, rolling away in a trail of blood.

"Tia...! You buggy bitch!" Gagaran's insult came from the center of a lumpy sphere—the Whip Bug was completely coiled around her.

The plan had probably been for Gagaran to subdue the Whip Bug with her strength and for Tia to take on Entoma herself.

Entoma sneered beneath her mask.

All she could say was that they'd been too foolish. Humans of this caliber never had any chance of defeating Entoma, a member of the Great Tomb of Nazarick's Pleiades. The smartest thing for them to do would have been to ignore that she was eating humans and withdraw as fast as they could. They were in this situation precisely due to that error of judgment.

"...I went out of orderrrr, but I guess that can't be hellllped. In any caaaase, you've got a lot of muscllllle, so you should be plenty substantial and tastyyyyy." Entoma summoned a bug. This one wasn't fiendishly dangerous in a fight, but its slender, syringe-like body contained a paralyzing poison.

With the bug in hand, Entoma approached Tia with a light step.

She'll make a great souvenir. There were quite a few creatures who preyed on humans in the Great Tomb of Nazarick. Entoma was sure they would be delighted.

"Hmm? What's thiiiis?" Entoma's superior senses detected something long, thin, and cold approaching from overhead, and she leaped aside. That same moment, a spear jammed into the spot where she'd been standing.

It was a lance like a knight might use, made out of crystal, but it was no ordinary make. The fragile crystal had broken the cobblestones without so much as cracking itself.

"Magic...I suppoooose?" Psychic caster Entoma sensed something from the lance that anyone with a magic-using class would understand.

"That's right. A tier-four arcane spell, Crystal Lance." The one who answered was a figure who had gently alighted on the end of

the shaft—a short, robed woman wearing a mask who spoke with a young-sounding voice.

Another one? Entoma was getting sick of this. Just as she thought she'd captured a delicious meal, another intruder had appeared. At this point, it would have been harsh to tell her to restrain herself.

"Could I have you leave it at that?"

"Who are youuuu? If you leave right now, I'll forgive youuu, so can you go off somewherrrrre? I like tender chilllllldren, but there aren't so many parts of them you can eaaaaat. I'll fight you after I eat these twoooooo."

"I see. A monster that feeds on humans, huh? Is that maid getup you're wearing some kind of joke? I can't imagine anyone would be happy to have a monster who reeks of blood serving them."

"SAY THAT AGAIN, YOU LITTLE BITCH!" Entoma let her real voice slip in spite of herself and grabbed her throat.

The newcomer's remarks were so unforgivable, she nearly lost herself in violent emotion. She was seized by the urge to rip this girl limb from limb, not by the principle of survival of the fittest but out of contempt.

What did she just say to me*, one of the Pleiades of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, who serves the Supreme Beings?*

Hellfire crackled and popped in the pit of her stomach. "YOU'RE DEEEAD!" She couldn't help her voice, but she felt her back bulging and frantically tried to keep at least that under control.

"Evileye!"

Entoma learned the masked woman's name—the name of the opponent she had to kill with all her might—when Tia shouted it.

"I wondered what you guys were doing… Good grief, this is some elementary stuff: Think about the difference in ability between you and your opponent. This one is stronger than you guys…but weaker than me." With a flourish of her cape, Evileye shouted, "How dare you bully my comrades, monster! Now I'll give you a taste and see how you like it. Better be grateful!"

Entoma couldn't have cared less about the shouts from beneath her opponent's mask.

Steeped in murder, she charged. Her brain, ruled by hatred, was barely conscious of the other two any longer except as bothersome little pebbles.

You say there's no one who would be happy to have me serve them?!

The words went around and around in her head.

She moved her Whip Bug. Apart from the three feet or so she was holding on to, the rest was in a huge ball. At its core, of course, was Gagaran.

"I'LL CRUSH YOU AND YOUR COMRADES! YOU AWFUL WOMAN!"

Her blow fell like a hammer.

"Hmph! What a pitiful attack." Evileye didn't break her composure. "Reverse Gravity!"

Entoma resisted the spell, but her Whip Bug became weightless and floated into the air.

As a rule, gear resisted when the equipper did, but in the case of a bug weapon, it wasn't the tamer but the bug itself who had to do the resisting.

That led to situations like this one, where Entoma didn't get affected but the Whip Bug did. The bug may have been able to attack on its own, but this was one of its drawbacks.

Naturally, having been hit with that spell, Entoma was forced to discard her original plan.

Sensing Entoma's intentions, the Whip Bug withdrew its entire thirty-plus-foot length from Gagaran all at once, like a tape measure winding up.

Meanwhile, Gagaran fell to the ground, and Evileye gave her instructions. "Gagaran! You're in the way! Heal Tia's wounds or something! If your gauntlets are out of power, use a potion!"

Injured humans would recover. If that was all, there was no issue—neither of those women was capable of fighting Entoma. But adding the caster in front of her into the equation changed things.

Evileye was on an equal footing with Entoma. If she received even a little support, the battle would tilt to Entoma's disadvantage.

So Entoma decided—although she didn't really want to—to use her true ace move. She'd already used it once to annihilate all the enemies in the mansion, but she could still unleash it two more times.

The move was spewing out meat-eating flies—Fly Breath.

This breath released a mass of flies that didn't eat away at meat but instead bored into flesh and left maggots, like botflies.

They dealt damage over time as the maggots burrowed into the victim's body. Even more terrifyingly, that wasn't all: The flies that emerged would form a huge, cloud-like army and attack anyone within range, minus special exceptions.

Entoma opened her throat up wide, baring her true mouth, which was near where a human's jaw would normally be. To an onlooker, it probably looked like her jaw had been split.

With a retching noise, she spit up a glob of insects.

"Hey! Don't tell me that ability has something to do with an evil spirit! If that's the case—" Evileye created a white fog to intercept the flies.

A chill attack was a clever way to intercept, but it would have a hard time providing complete protection. The best would have been a spell or something that caused a blast that could scatter the swarm.

She messed up.

Entoma imagined Evileye being eaten up by maggots, but the counterspell turned out to greatly surpass all her expectations.

The flies bathed in the fog dropped to the ground, and then the haze enveloped Entoma. That moment, she was assailed by unbelievable agony.

"Aghhhhghghgh!!"

The maid's face was steaming, and she was writhing like she'd been doused with acid.

Evileye had meant only to render her opponent's breath attack ineffective, but it appeared that she'd inadvertently discovered her true identity.

“Whoa, whoa, can we make it?” Gagaran, war pick at the ready, was watching for a chance to charge. As an excellent warrior, she must have seen that this was where the battle would be decided. Really, judging from their opponent’s capabilities, they needed to end this fight now and as quickly as possible.

The reason Gagaran didn’t charge was that the flailing thirty-foot Whip Bug wouldn’t let her get close. Still, it seemed like the futile resistance of someone who was already defeated.

“What the heck was that spell?”

Evileye answered Tia’s question. “An insecticide spell, Vermin Bane. One of the evil spirits from two hundred years ago had an aspect of an insect. I developed this to exterminate the bugs it used. It’s one of my original creations.”

“Hey! It won’t hurt us, will it?”

“No. It works specifically against bugs and has no effect on any other living thing.”

“…Her face is melting.”

“Tia, that’s because she’s actually a… Huh? No! That’s not a face!”

As if it had been waiting for Evileye’s shout, the maid’s attractive features sagged and fell to the ground with a splat. It looked like the skin of her face had sloughed off, but that wasn’t it. The underside of the skin that had dropped to the ground was covered in insectoid legs.

“Are you serious? A mask-shaped bug…?”

“Guhaaah!”

With a violent retching noise, the maid exposed her throat. A single fissure ran along her extremely rigid-looking neck, and a rather large glob of liquid spilled out.

It looked like vomit, but it was definitely something else—it started to squirm on the ground.

"What the…?"

Even Evileye gasped at the scene playing out before their eyes. She'd never seen anything like it in all her long life.

"A Lip Bug." That's what Tia called the soaked, leechlike creature writhing on the cobblestones. "It's a bug that consumes human vocal cords and then produces the victim's voice."

The tip of the skin-colored leech resembled human lips, and it was gasping in the adorable voice the maid had been speaking with earlier.

As everyone stared, the hand covering the maid's face slowly moved away. The features she revealed were practically an insect's.

All the Blue Roses recoiled from her strange appearance. They had guessed as soon as the mask bug had fallen to the ground and they saw how effective the insecticide was, but having the reality before their eyes still sent a jolt of terror through them.

They felt dirty knowing that a monster this far removed from humanity had managed to infiltrate their world.

"YOUU…YOUU…!" It was a stiff-sounding voice that was difficult to understand.

"Well, isn't your voice just the cutest thing now! I like this one better," Gagaran spat in disgust, overflowing with hostility. Of all

the Blue Roses, she was perhaps the most human. It could have been that she wanted to offer some small gesture to the poor girl whose voice the bug had originally stolen. She seemed to grip her weapon even more tightly.

"Y-YOU HUMANNNNN!"

Earlier in the fight, their opponent had always appeared composed. But now, she'd lost her calm.

If that was the case, there was no longer any time to conserve power—they needed to start in with fierce attacks.

"The real battle begins now! Don't let your guard down, you two! Know that she'll be attacking even more brutally than before!" Evileye warned the other two. But knowing them, they didn't need to be told. They'd probably been ready to risk their lives since the moment the fight began.

The bug maid's back swelled, and four long appendages—spider legs—surged out from beneath her clothes. It looked like she was carrying them on her back.

Using her new legs, she made an incredible leap, almost as if she'd used Fly. With the height advantage, the monster spewed carnivorous flies down on all of them.

Clicking her tongue, Evileye cast Vermin Bane again.

"YOU'RE THE ONLY ONNNE! YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE I'M SCARED OOOOF! IF I CAN JUST KILL YOUUU, THE REST ARE A ROUTINE JOOOOB!" The bug maid landed. All the flies she'd spit up were dead, and she glared straight at Evileye with her compound eyes. It was probably true that Evileye was the only one who could fight on equal footing with her. If Evileye lost, this phase of the battle would be decided, and Gagaran and Tia would surely be slaughtered, but Entoma's decision to limit her

focus to one opponent was still a mistake.

“Rrragh!” Gagaran struck with her war pick from the side.

No matter how superior Evileye was, this powerful warrior wouldn’t just leave things up to her—she would fight. She might have known there was a good chance she’d be intercepted and seriously wounded, but she would fight alongside her comrade. Evileye smiled at her beneath her mask—the kind of expression she’d be too embarrassed to make without something covering her face.

The monster went to dodge Gagaran’s attack but paused for a mere instant—due to Tia’s ninjutsu, Unyielding Chains. She seemed to have immunity rather than resistance, so the trap skill was unable to stop her completely, but the creation of even the smallest opening was enough for Gagaran.

The monster countered Gagaran’s strike, extra powerful thanks to Strong Blow, by spitting spider silk—enough to turn the warrior’s entire upper body pure white.

The thread was both sticky and rigid; even Gagaran with her strong arms didn’t seem able to rip it apart so easily. She aborted her attack and tottered to the rear. Instead, it was the monster who charged.

“Crystal Lance!” A translucent missile shot toward the beastly girl.

The lance struck its target and sunk in deep, but she didn’t seem to feel any pain. On the contrary, she was calm enough to begin amassing countless bugs out of the dark night, swarming around her left arm.

“Vermin Bane!”

The white fog whooshed toward them, and the bugs on the monster's arm fell to the ground while she let out another pained scream.

Her mouth, where a human's jaw would have been, aimed for Evileye and spewed the same spider silk that had targeted Gagaran.

Blocking it with magic would be a waste of MP. I'm immune to hold-type techniques, so I guess I should just take it and— Wait, no! Evileye panicked and cast a spell.

The substance from the monster's mouth was definitely a form of thread, but it shone as if it was harder than what had hit her companion.

"Crystal Wall!"

The crystal wall before her eyes broke into pieces, as if it'd been slashed up by a sharp blade, and disappeared.

"So it's a spiderweb that can slice?"

"Here's a present for you!" Tia threw a net of black threads that spread out in the air, but it didn't tangle up the monster. It passed through her body like an illusion and fell to the ground.

"So she really does have complete resistance to obstruction."

"Tch! Time to strategize!" Gagaran said, disgusted. She kicked the maid away, which also put some space between them.

Surprisingly, when her foot met the maid's outfit, it made a metallic noise.

The other Blue Roses, on the alert for area-of-effect attacks, joined Gagaran as she retreated to gain some distance from the

bug maid.

“DAMMIIIT, DAMMIIIT! COMING TO ATTACK MEEE… HOW ANNOYIIING!”

Gagaran watched the maid snap her lower jaw and spoke softly to Evileye. “Did you hear that sound just now? That maid outfit can’t be as hard as my weapon, can it?”

“It seems to be woven from some type of tough metallic thread. Judging from how thin it is, that material must be overwhelmingly harder than your boot.”

“Harder than…adamantite?”

“Not only that! All her gear is high-class stuff… My earth magic doesn’t seem to do much. That means something she’s equipped with must decrease any magic damage we deal her. Honestly, I don’t think clever backdoor attacks will have much effect.”

“Which means?”

Evileye grinned under her mask at Tia’s question. “We obliterate her head-on with the strongest cards we have to play all at once.”

“Isn’t that easier said than done? How are we going to pull that off? If we don’t do it quickly, she’ll power up with her talismans!”

“All we have to do is each use our most powerful move. I’ll use my insecticide spell.”

Obliterating her with the big guns all at once wasn’t going to be such an easy task.

Normally, she would support the warriors with Sand Field: Single and Partial Petrification to kill their opponent's mobility, but that wouldn't work on this maid.

Before, Evileye had believed it was a mistake to concentrate on pure attack magic, that she could leave dealing damage up to Gagaran's physical attacks, and that her role was to devise a plan for if those stopped working. But she couldn't say that anymore. *It's my personal belief that casters who rely on pure attack magic are second-rate, but I guess this time I have to bend.*

Evileye assembled the spells she needed to cast. Shard Buckshot at maximum power would be most effective, but her comrades would get caught in the fire. Her high-tier, original spell Vermin Bane burned through a lot of magical energy, so she wanted to save it for when the maid summoned more familiars if possible. In that case, the best choice was not her preferred tactic but acid magic instead.

The three of them traded glances to confirm they were ready, and all attacked at once.

Evileye's Acid Splash formed the main thrust of the attack. Tia didn't have as much firepower, so she mainly supported with items. Using her martial arts, Gagaran struck again and again.

After a short while, the balance had shifted.

Certainly, their opponent was strong. She could attack with multiple types of spider silk, magic talismans, and summon bugs. She also had more powerful magic items than the Blue Roses did.

But although the Blue Roses' healing resources were dwindling, the bug maid was withdrawing more often.

If anyone asked Evileye what had influenced the battle the most, she would have proudly answered, "My comrades."

Certainly, Gagaran and Tia were weak compared to Evileye and the monster before them. Still, they outnumbered the creature, and that couldn't be taken lightly. The ability to recover while attacking was a big deal. It was even better to be able to receive healing from a supporter when one didn't have a way to heal oneself. That made all the difference.

"Careful not to make simple mistakes! Let's keep the pressure on!"

3

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:27 PM

It was a fierce battle.

The bug maid finally sunk to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Evileye had lost a lot of magical energy, and most of her consumables were gone. In terms of sheer profit and loss, she was far in the red.

"We won." Breathing roughly, covered in wounds, Gagaran proclaimed their victory. She didn't have a single healing item left, but she hadn't lost as much health as her visible injuries made it seem.

"Let's deal the final blow."

"Yeah," Evileye agreed with Tia's suggestion. The bug maid was dying, but she wasn't deceased yet. Her shrill cries were proof of that.

The safe thing to do was to unhesitatingly take her life while she was already robbed of her capacity for combat.

Tia charged with her sword but suddenly froze. Faster than Evileye could ask what was wrong, she saw what had happened.

“Could I have you leave it at that?”

She couldn’t believe it, but at some point, a man had arrived and was standing in front of the bug maid.

He wore strange clothes that were not ordinarily seen in the region. From what Evileye knew, it was a type of garment worn in the south called a suit. The newcomer also wore a mask, so she couldn’t see his face.

Only one thing was certain: He couldn’t be human. A tail was visible behind him.

“Hey, Evileye, is he a relative of yours?”

Don’t be stupid, she wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. She felt like she’d been struck by lightning. When she looked at her right hand, it was soaked with sweat.

“Are you all right? I’ll take over from here, so please go back and rest.”

The man completely ignored the Blue Roses, even though they had their weapons at the ready, and spoke gently to the bug maid. It was enough to make him likable despite being an enemy, but not to Evileye.

The horror that had made it all the way to her toes wasn’t going away.

Her survival instincts kicked in. She lowered her voice and

frantically told Gagaran and Tia, "...Run. Idiot, don't look this way. Stay quiet and listen. That guy is...incredibly strong. A monster among monsters. Run away as fast as you can and don't look back."

"...What are you going to do?" Gagaran asked, distraught.

"Don't worry about it. Once I've bought enough time for you two to escape, I'll teleport away immediately."

It wasn't clear how, but the injured maid who shouldn't have been able to move staggered to her feet. It didn't seem like she'd used healing magic nor that she'd quaffed any medicine, either.

A bug flew over from out of sight, attached to her back, and took off into the night sky. The maid howled shrilly as she flew away.

The Blue Roses had let her escape from right under their noses, but it was more important for Evileye to not take her eyes off the man before them. That went for the other two as well. Their foreheads were slick with sweat, and they stood frozen.

After watching the maid go, the man turned to Evileye and the others.

Evileye had been alive for over two hundred and fifty years—she'd seen countless powerful beings. The aura hammering into her now was on a whole different level.

No, this sickeningly hideous malice was incomparable to any other.

In terms of strength, he was probably equal to the platinum dragonlord. He was so powerful, she couldn't tell for sure.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. Now then, I'm a bit pressed

for time, so shall we begin?"

"Hurry up and run!" Evileye's cry was no more than a terrified shriek.

The other two abruptly turned their backs. It was impossible to ask them to feel no guilt at leaving their friend behind. That was precisely why they hadn't retreated immediately upon hearing Evileye's instruction. But they trusted her. They knew she would either find a way—or escape.

But their beliefs were easily overturned.

"First, we've only just met, so it's hard to part, but I'll take the liberty of preventing your teleportation. Dimensional Lock. Parting with a farewell is delightful both with regards to etiquette and emotion, don't you think?"

He prevented the casting of any teleportation magic in the area with a skill that only some super-elite demons and angels could use. With that, Evileye's escape route was cut off.

But that was no problem. She'd known from the beginning that this would happen—that the one who stayed behind, the rearguard, wouldn't return alive.

"If we're gonna die, there's an order to follow. The young ones survive, and the ones who've lived a long time die. That's the most proper way to do it." After bidding farewell to her retreating friends, the woman who'd lived over two hundred and fifty years confronted the impossible opponent before her.

"All right, then, after you. Of course, if you don't do anything, I'll go ahead and attack first."

His murderous aura, entirely contradicting his placid tone of voice, was horrifyingly intense. Evileye mobilized all her

willpower and shook off the evil presence.

I am Evileye. The legends sing my praises. No matter how immensely powerful my enemy is, I will fight!

"I'll take advantage of your kindness and go first, then! Eat this! Maximize Magic: Shard Buckshot!"

For her opening move, she cast one of her favorite spells, scattering crystal buckshot just a bit smaller than her fist.

The keen shards caused more damage when they hammered into the enemy at close range, but she hesitated to approach the demon.

For all my resolve, I'm sure wimping out, she scolded herself, but it was natural to fight cautiously while her opponent's power was an unknown quantity.

The masked demon opened his arms in welcome. He bathed in the rain of crystal bullets—or rather he would have, except right before impact, the spell disappeared. It vanished so suddenly it was like it had never been there in the first place.

Racial magic immunity?! You're that strong?!

As the disparity in ability between opponents widened, it was easier for spells to be neutralized.

Ignoring Evileye, who had chosen incorrectly for her first move, the man gracefully spread his arms, as if he were about to conduct an orchestra.

"Hellfire Wall."

Evileye whirled around in disbelief at the wave of heat from behind.

Black flames that could never have existed in nature roared as if to consume the night.

Gagaran and Tia were enveloped in the fire mid-escape. They danced like puppets and then fell to the ground like sacks of garbage. Even after the flames vanished like an illusion, there was no sign of movement from either of them. Evileye suppressed the urge to run over to her companions. She couldn't believe it, but she had no other choice. She knew—those had been fatal wounds, and in a single attack, two of her friends, who had stood beside her through thick and thin, had been murdered.

She ground her teeth to suppress the scream that wanted to come out.

"My plan was to stop just before crossing that line, but it seems they were weaker than anticipated. For them to die from such a fire… I'm sorry for your loss." The man bowed low as if he was sincerely remorseful. It seemed so artificial to Evileye that she could no longer hold back her emotions.

Why had he ignored Evileye right in front of him, the one attacking him, and gone after the other two behind her? She was sure it was because they'd fled. But there was another even more important reason.

Since she understood how overwhelming his advantage was, she had known full well that he didn't even consider her a threat. But in reality, he hadn't even considered her an opponent.

Before me is someone who is not running away. I'll crush the ones who are running first. That was probably his casual assessment of the situation.

"…It's so tricky to judge how much to hold back to prevent death. And I can't take you as the standard. Why were you in a team with them when there is such a huge discrepancy in your

abilities? If it weren't for that, I think I could have found the right level…"

"Don't! Evennnnn! Taaaaaalk! Waaaaaaagh!" Her voice was not a frightened shriek but a shout of anger. With a hate-filled war cry, Evileye ran. No, perhaps it would be more correct to say she glided by the power of magic. She gathered magical energy in her fist and prepped a contact spell that would be difficult to neutralize or resist.

The demon raised his fists to intercept her. "Demon Aspect: Giant Arms of Great Evil."

His arms swelled to several times their normal size and lengthened until they touched the ground. They weren't inflated with air but brawny tools for killing.

Those deadly limbs would deter anyone's approach. Evileye was momentarily daunted, but she steeled her resolve and decided to weave her way in and attack.

As Evileye rushed forward, the giant arms closed in on her. They were so much faster than she'd thought possible, like a huge wall filling her entire field of vision. She immediately judged them too hard to dodge and cast a defensive spell. "Translocate Damage!"

Her sight went dark right as she felt the impact, and she was sent flying. Her field of vision whirled crazily around and around, and she couldn't track where she was. She hit the cobblestones, and her body bounced like a ball. She landed again and skidded.

But she was unharmed.

She used Fly to perform a motion that shouldn't have been possible—she got up.

She had no wounds.

Of course, if she hadn't used the spell to change the physical damage into magical energy loss, she would have been half-dead.

"Maximize Penetrating Magic: Crystal Dagger!" She created a larger than usual crystal dagger and fired it. The pure physical damage of the spell was difficult to neutralize, and she used a skill to boost its penetration potential.

The demon didn't dodge but simply took it. She'd cranked the power of the spell all the way up, but it didn't appear to have any effect on him.

"You're unscathed even though I boosted the spell with defense-neutralizing power? You're a higher-ranking demon that I thought—no, you might be even stronger than an evil spirit! Are you gonna tell me you're an evil spirit king?!"

It wasn't as if adding "king" to anything entailed that it was strong, but it was true that within races, those with "king" or "lord" in their names were more powerful. Probably the only race that allowed for someone weak to be called "king" was the human one.

"Demon Aspect: Sharp Cutting Claws." The demon's fingernails grew to over two and a half feet long. Evileye could sense they were sharp enough to cut all manner of things.

It's probably impossible for me to recover Gagaran's and Tia's bodies while I escape. If the others came, they'd only be deadweight in this fight. If I could at least move the battlefield somewhere else and make it easier for the other two to find the bodies…

Evileye twisted the corners of her lips upward.

In the worst case, Lakyus, who could use resurrection magic, would face this demon, but she wanted to avoid that at all costs.

“Here I go!”

Just as Evileye was about to attempt her difficult plan, something fell between the two of them with a huge racket.

Unable to withstand the weight, the cobblestones cracked, and dust wafted into the air.

It was a warrior, balled up to protect himself on impact.

His raven-black armor reflected the calm luster of the moon, which imbued it with exquisite beauty. His crimson cape fluttered behind him like leaping flames against the backdrop of the night sky. His impossibly huge swords, one in each hand, radiated the light of judgment.

The dark warrior rose slowly. He was massive. In terms of height, he was probably as tall as the demon. But just as devils shrink away from holy light, this sizable demon seemed fearful of the dark warrior. Apparently, he couldn’t believe his eyes.

Evileye heard someone gulp in the silence. It was the demon. This creature, whose power even Evileye couldn’t fathom, was holding his breath before this great warrior.

A cold voice cut through the night air. “Now then, I wonder which one of you is my enemy.”

Intermission

It was a room that embodied the words *exquisite luxury*.

The crimson carpeting was soft and sank underneath one's feet up to the ankles. The natural wood of the settee was elaborately carved in French rococo style and the seat, upholstered in genuine black leather, gave off that gleam only leather has. On the settee sat a single man leaned back with his legs stretched comfortably out.

Handsome. If a portrait could perfectly capture his appearance, people would evaluate him as such.

His blond hair reflected the magic light illuminating the area and twinkled like the stars. His long, tapered eyes, deep-purple like amethysts, charmed the heart of anyone who saw them.

However, anyone who laid eyes on him in person would probably first think of a word other than *handsome*. He was swathed in an atmosphere that had nothing to do with his looks, an aura exuded solely by those born to stand at the top. No one would have any first impression but this: He was a ruler.

His name was Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

At the young age of twenty-two, he was emperor of Baharuth. Feared by nobles, respected by the people, he was said to be the greatest emperor in their history. He'd also been called the "blood spilt emperor" due to his purging of nobles, and neighboring countries feared him as well.

In addition to Jircniv, there were four male attendants in the room, but they stood so straight and still they could have been mistaken for statues.

Jircniv looked away from the papers he'd been going over and stared into space. It was as if there were a blackboard in the air and he was writing his thoughts on it.

Eventually, he snorted. The sound could have been interpreted as a scoff or a grunt of interest.

It was caused by the intelligence he'd received from one of his men in the kingdom. Just then—

—the door was opened without a knock.

It was so rude that the attendants lowered their hips and turned to the door with hostility. But upon seeing who entered, they returned to their normal guarding stance.

The visitor was an old man with a white beard halfway down to his feet. His hair was also snowy white, but it hadn't thinned.

His many years were evidenced in the wrinkles on his face, and his sharp eyes contained the unmistakable twinkle of wisdom.

He wore a necklace of countless crystal spheres strung together, and there were several chunky rings on his withered fingers. His pure-white robe fit loosely and was made of extremely soft material.

When asked to envision a caster, any layman would imagine him—that's what he looked like.

"Well, this is worrisome." The first thing out of the old man's mouth as he came slowly into the room was a grumble. His voice retained more youthfulness than one would expect from his appearance.

Jircniv shifted his curious gaze with just his eyes. "What is it,

Gramps?”

“I looked, but I couldn’t find him.”

“And what does that mean?”

“…Your Imperial Majesty. Magic is the logic of this world. You must stud—”

“Yeah, I know, I know.” Jircniv waved him on with disinterest. “Your lectures are too long, Gramps. Can you get to the point?”

“…If Ainz Ooal Gown really exists, then he is in possession of some rather powerful magic items. Or if he’s avoiding detection with his own power, I’d wager he has at least as good a command of magic as I, possibly even greater.”

The room grew nervous, excepting the emperor and the old man.

Had they really just heard that? Someone was equal to Fluder Paradyne, the most elite caster in all the empire’s history, principal court wizard, and the great sage known as “Triad Caster”?

“Aha! So that’s why you seem so happy, huh, old man?”

“As I should! I haven’t met an arcane caster equal to or better than me in two hundred years.”

“Did you meet one two hundred years ago?” the emperor asked, propelled by curiosity, and the principal court wizard recalled the distant past.

“Hmm. The fairy-tale Thirteen Heroes… I met one of them, tamer of the dead Ligritte Belzú Kaurau. She was the only one. Well, the other casters of the Thirteen Heroes may have been superior to her, but…”

“So do you think there are any arcane casters more powerful than you now?”

Fluder’s eyes were distant. “Hmm… I’ve probably come further than Kaurau did, so… But I have no proof… Magic isn’t the kind of discipline where superiority is easily decided.” The emotion behind his words as he slowly stroked his long beard suggested he was confident in that. Then he raised an eyebrow. “I do hope this Ainz Ooal Gown can be counted as more powerful than me.”

Jircniv smiled in satisfaction, took one of the papers scattered on the settee, and held it out to him.

Fluder seemed dubious, but he took the document and ran his eyes over it. “Ooh.”

That was his opinion on the matter. But the expression on his wise face had changed considerably. His eyes were blazing—he looked just like a ravenous beast.

“I see. So the caster you had me search for did this? Very interesting. They must have taken on about ten members of one of the theocracy’s special units, just the pair of them… Hmm, hmm. That’s someone I’d really like to meet and discuss magic with.”

The paper was a report of what Gazef Stronoff had told the king, as well as the writer’s personal impressions.

“So did you send someone to this village, Your Imperial Majesty?”

“No, I didn’t go that far. It’d be conspicuous to send someone.”

“…We could send my disciple…no. If this document is true, we’ll want to cultivate friendly relations with him.”

“Exactly, Gramps. If he’s a power that can be controlled, then I

want to welcome him."

"I think that's a perfectly wonderful idea. All sorts of wisdom is necessary if you want to peer into the abyss of magic. If possible, I'd like to meet someone who has blazed the trail…" His voice was full of longing.

Jircniv knew what Fluder's dream was.

Exactly as he said, Fluder wanted to view the depths of magic. To that end, he wished more than anything to study under someone who had glimpsed what he desired most.

The magic users who came later needed only to follow the path that had been blazed—usually by Fluder. Taking the most efficient, suitable route, they could cultivate their ability without any wasted efforts.

But Fluder, pushing the envelope on his own, couldn't do that. He was fumbling in the dark, so his progress came only at the expense of tremendous energy. He would have been an even more powerful caster if he could have developed his talents more efficiently.

It was precisely because Fluder understood this that he sought someone to show him the way. There were limits to natural ability. He didn't want to do more for nothing in return.

The reason Fluder took on disciples, too, was because he hoped one of them would surpass him and buoy his efforts. Unfortunately, so far it didn't seem as if that wish would come true.

This was the one wish Jircniv couldn't do anything about. So he changed topics. "I'd also like to gather intelligence on the new adamantite-rank adventurer who popped up in E-Rantel. Will you help me?"

“Of course, Your Imperial Majesty.”



Chapter 10 The Most Powerful Trump Card

CHAPTER 10
The Most Powerful Trump Card

1

4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:31 PM

Around 1,300 feet above the royal capital… A party was flying across the sky, blending in with the stars. There were two casters who had used Fly, and directly behind them sat two others being pulled for a total of four.

One of the seated ones was a man wearing raven-black armor with large swords on his back. The other was a beautiful woman with a ponytail. It went without saying that it was Ainz and Narberal.

Early that morning, the two of them had been requested by name at the E-Rantel adventurers' guild and taken on a job with the promise of an unprecedented reward. The client was Marquis Raeven. The official job was to guard the man's house for a few days because it seemed like some kind of emergency was going to happen in the kingdom.

Ainz knew there was more to it than the "official" story because he'd heard the rest at the time of the request.

According to that discussion, the marquis was sending some soldiers to capture the facility of an underworld organization called the Eight Fingers, and he wanted Momon to fight as a member of that unit. In particular, he wanted him to handle the strongest enemies, known as the Six Arms.

Ainz couldn't think of any reason to refuse the request.

In order to remain neutral, adventurers didn't normally participate in country-level affairs. That was the unwritten rule. But Ainz appreciated that the man had prepared an official request so as to not cause trouble for the dark hero Momon despite the rule breaking, and more than anything, the compensation was drool-worthy.

Ainz thought maybe he could take advantage of this windfall and relax a bit, so he negotiated up his fee while taking great care not to appear indecent, desperately hiding how attractive he found the job, and made a show of hesitancy but eventually accepted the request.

The only problem was that he had been asked to head for the royal capital with the utmost urgency.

In *Yggdrasil*, there had been teleportation stations here and there that would take players between different cities and countries, but in this world, there was nothing like that. On top of that, teleportation magic started at tier five, so according to the story Ainz had concocted for them, they couldn't use it. They would never have made it within a day traveling by horse.

So how would they go? The ones who provided the answer to that question were casters who worked for Marquis Raeven.

They were able to bring Ainz and Narberal to the capital at high speed by combining a special flight spell that consumed more MP than usual with Floating Board.

How did they use that combination? It's simple. Where the pair of adventurers was sitting tells the whole story.

They were atop the translucent platform created by Floating Board. Since the spell absorbed their weight, the casters could pull them without losing speed. That was how they'd come to the capital in a straight shot. The timing had still been unrealistic,

though, and they arrived far later than planned.

So Ainz was a bit worried. Would they show up and learn their services were no longer necessary? Would they receive their compensation?

He'd been lured by the exceptionally huge reward, so of course the client wouldn't want to pay such a sum to someone who hadn't done any work. Ainz didn't want to count his chickens before they'd hatched.

He sighed discreetly and prayed to something. He felt just like an employee of a company that wasn't performing well would feel about their bonus.

May I please be paid my fee in full? I already know how I'm going to spend it.

Besides that, he was enjoying his first look at the capital, as well as the ride through the night. Unfortunately, it wasn't really possible to enjoy a lit-up night view. Most of the capital was shrouded in darkness; there was not a pocket of cheer to be seen. Still, for Ainz, who could see in the dark, the experience satisfied his curiosity to some extent.

Taking in the scene with bizarre earnestness, he happened to catch sight of an unusual sparkle in a certain area.

He didn't understand what was happening at first, but when the black flames climbed into the air, he recognized it as an emergency.

"Wait! Look at that! There it is again. Something's flashing over there. Seems like magic."

"…That does…seem to be magic…" The caster didn't seem very confident when he looked in the direction Ainz was pointing,

probably due to the distance and the fact that it was nighttime. For a normal human, it was difficult to tell.

"Huh? Is this sort of thing a daily occurrence in the capital? Or are you guys setting off fireworks to welcome us?"

The caster replied to Ainz's joke with a straight face. "That location is one of the Eight Fingers bases we're supposed to be raiding."

"I see… I didn't think we'd make it in time, but it looks like I'll be able to be of some use after all."

"Understood. I'll take you that way."

"Stop. It seems like someone is using some high-tier magic down there. If you guys get caught in the cross fire, you'll be killed."

Ainz looked away from the caster, whose face said, *Then what are we supposed to do?* and turned to Narberal. "Nabe, use Fly and carry me. Once we get close, I'll give you a signal and you can drop me."

"Understood."

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4 Late Fire Moon (September) 10:33 PM

From where Evileye stood, at the limits of her life, the black warrior's question seemed idiotic, but she quickly reevaluated the situation. Considering how they were dressed, both sides should have appeared equally suspicious. It was a confrontation between two people who wore masks to hide their faces.

If she were in his position, it wouldn't have been strange to go against her.

Evileye had an idea who the black warrior was and called out. “Dark Hero! I’m Evileye of the Blue Roses! I ask you as a fellow adamantite-rank adventurer, please help me!”

She realized her mistake as soon as she had shouted—her opponent’s advantage. Even if the adamantite-rank adventurer Momon helped her, what good would that do? Even for Evileye, victory was doubtful against this unfathomably powerful demon. He could join her, but it would only be like two pieces of paper standing to fight instead of one. Surely the gale-force wind would mow them down.

All her request could do was rob the life of this man who’d come to rescue her. What she should have shouted was a warning to flee. If she was going to have the impudence to request something of him, it should have been to gather the bodies of her fallen comrades and run away.

However—

“Got it.”

The man gave Evileye cover and confronted the demon.

Evileye gasped.

The moment he moved to protect her, it felt like an enormous rampart had appeared before her. Her heart filled with relief and calm.

The opposing demon slowly lowered his head. It was the deep, respectful bow a manservant might use toward a noble. There was no way he honestly felt respect, so it must have been feigned politeness, a demon’s sarcasm.

“Well, well, how good of you to come. First, may I ask your name? I am Jaldabaoth.”

Evileye heard the man's voice murmur dubiously, "Jaldabaoth?" from beneath his raven-black helmet. And then, "That's a weird name."

She didn't think it was strange, but she sifted through her knowledge of demons, and she wasn't sure she had ever heard it before.

"Jaldabaoth? Okay. I'm Momon. As she mentioned earlier, I'm an adamantite-rank adventurer."

Though the demon Jaldabaoth's demeanor was unpleasant, the dark warrior Momon carried on the conversation with no change in attitude.

Aha! It was a glimpse of what a first-rate adventurer this man Momon was, how he was broad-minded enough to swallow any open contempt for his opponent in the name of extracting intelligence from him. Evileye was impressed.

At the same time, embarrassed by her rising emotions, she hid behind the edge of Momon's crimson cape so as not to disrupt the pair's conversation.

She intended to help Momon fight, but she had a feeling she might get in his way.

The two of them didn't appear to be paying attention to her at all, and their breathtaking battle of information continued while she changed positions.

"I see. And might I inquire as to what brings you here?"

"A request. I was summoned by a noble on the pretext of guarding his home, but…I noticed your fight here as I was flying over the capital. I realized there was some emergency and came down."

The noble must have been Marquis Raeven. So he's summoned an adamantite-rank adventurer to the capital now? She guessed that he meant to have Momon participate in the struggle against the Eight Fingers as much as he could without breaking the adventurers' guild's unwritten law of nonintervention in human matters.

"What's your objective?"

"It seems a magic item with the power to summon and control our kind has ended up in this city. I've come to collect it."

"So if we offer you the item, the problem will be solved?"

"No, that won't be possible. I'm afraid that, as enemies, we must do battle."

"That's your conclusion, De— Jaldabaoth? There's no path forward but as enemies?"

"No, as you say, we must be adversaries."

Evileye felt like something was off and cocked her head.

Rather than waging an information battle, they seemed to be simply exchanging intelligence, but she decided that couldn't be true.

"I think I've got the general picture. In that case, I'll go ahead and defeat you. You don't have a problem with that, right?" Momon slowly spread his arms. The huge swords, extensions of himself, gleamed.

"Oh, but I do. I'll go ahead and resist."

"Here I come!"

He charged. No, it was more correct to say that she had the feeling he charged. At some point, Momon, who had been standing in front of her, was clashing with Jaldabaoth.

The level of combat was such that Evileye couldn't even describe what was happening.

Momon's blades flashed innumerable times, and Jaldabaoth deflected them with his long nails.

"Amazing…"

There were any number of words she could have chosen for an accolade, but seeing his glittering sword, she chose the one that was simplest and most honest.

His slices surpassed those of any warrior in her memory. He was like a warrior who slashed through evil and the darkness enveloping the world right along with it.

She even fancied that she had become one of the princesses from the songs of the bards. The image of a dashing knight coming to save her overlapped with the dark warrior before her.

Something like an electric shock passed through the muscles between her legs, and she trembled slightly.

She sensed that her heart, static these two hundred and fifty years, had leaped.

She put a hand to her small chest, but just as she thought, like that time before, there was no movement. Still, it couldn't have been her imagination.

"…You can do it, Sir Momon." She folded her hands to make a wish—that her knight would claim victory over the terrible demon.

With a *ker-bang* that sounded nothing like an impact on flesh, Jaldabaoth was knocked way back. He didn't fall but slid over the cobblestones in a way that suggested the soles of his shoes were worn down. After retreating several yards, he brushed the dirt from his clothes.

"Magnificent. It may be that my one mistake was facing a genius warrior like you."

Momon thrust the sword in one of his hands into the cobblestones with a *ker-shing*. He rotated his arm to work out the knots in his neck and replied in an even tone, "Spare me the flattery. You're probably still concealing plenty of power."

Evileye's eyes bulged.

The idea that they hadn't been fighting all out was far beyond common sense.

"Is he a…demigod?"

Now and then, one among those with blood of the beings known as Players awakened to immense power. In the theocracy, they were known as demigods. No, to be more accurate, someone recognized to have blood of one of the six great gods was a demigod, and there was another word for someone who had other Player blood. In any case, there was a chance Momon had Player blood—without it, there was no way a person could possess so much power.

"No, no, I can't win against you, Lo— Mr. Momon, was it?"

"That's right, Jaldabaoth. My name is Momon."

"Understood. Then here I come! Demon Aspect: Tentacle Wings!"

Wings grew out of Jaldabaoth's back. Instead of feathers covering them, however, there were flat, abnormally long tentacles. He spoke kindly to Momon, who was on guard in a fighting stance.

"You are strong. Truly strong. I have no doubt you are stronger than me. So although I'd rather not, I'm going to resort to this. I'm sure you can protect yourself if you switch to defense, but in that case, you had better give up on saving the small fry behind you. I suggest taking care of yourself."

The moment he finished speaking, the flat, thin tentacles stretched forward with the force of projectiles. The tips were extremely sharp and could probably pierce human flesh and bone alike with no trouble.

Although Evileye saw the wings closing in around her at high speed, there was nothing she could do. She didn't even have enough magical energy left to create a barrier with something like Crystal Wall. All she could do was duck and hope for a stroke of luck.

The next moment, however, she learned that she had still underestimated the dark warrior.

After hearing a hard *clang*, she looked up and saw a solid shield.

The feather tentacles, cut to ribbons, fell to the ground. They might have been able to slice up humans, but in this state, they were so beautiful.

"I'm glad you're safe."

The man's unconcerned voice… It sounded so normal, it was hard to believe he had just swung his one-handed sword fast enough to intercept all the approaching feather tentacles. He

wasn't even out of breath.

"A-ah! Ahhh! Your shoulder! Are you okay?!"

One of the ribbons was sticking to Momon's shoulder. It had been severed afterward, so it hung limply, almost like a decoration on his armor.

"I'm fine. This is nothing to worry about. More importantly, I'm relieved that you seem all right." He laughed a bit.

Evileye sensed her heart beat once more in her breast. Her face was awfully hot. It felt like her mask was heating up.

"Magnificent. That you were able to keep her perfectly safe from harm is simply… I, Jaldabaoth, offer you my humble praise. You are truly magnificent."

"Cut out the brownnosing. More importantly, Jaldabaoth… why are you so far away?"

As Momon spoke, he reached out toward Evileye and scooped her up.

"!"

Her unbeating heart practically leaped out of her chest. The bards' stories she'd always ridiculed were playing over and over in her head. She recalled in particular the scenes where the knights fought while carrying a princess in one arm. Common sense said that when facing a powerful enemy, taking along such a burden was idiotic. And yet—

I'm sorry, bards of the world! A real knight does *carry a princess of a tender age while fighting to protect her! Omigosh! What's going on? I'm so embarrassed!*

But Evileye's delight swiftly fizzled. Her dream was to be cradled. But in reality—

"This is…"

—he held her like a piece of luggage, tucked under his left arm. No, surely this was the correct way to do it. Evileye was a bit smaller than the average adult woman. From a balance standpoint, too, the core was the most stable part of the body, so this made the most sense.

She knew she was in no position to complain. In fact, she was still full of hatred that her friends had been killed. She knew full well she didn't have time to think about these silly things. Still, she couldn't completely suppress the discontent that rose in a corner of her mind.

Evileye wondered if it wouldn't be easier on him if she clung to him as well, but she wasn't confident that she could hang on if they got caught up in anther high-speed exchange like what she'd witnessed before, so she didn't say anything.

Another bout seemed ready to begin, and she looked at Jaldabaoth and Momon. There was more space between them than before, but for a warrior at the limits of possibility and a super-high-level demon, it was probably only a step.

"I think it's about time we got started?"

"No, I will take the liberty of withdrawing. As I mentioned before, our objective is not to defeat you. I shall soon wrap part of the royal capital in flames. If you insist on intruding, I guarantee the fires of purgatory will send you to the next world."

With that, Jaldabaoth turned his back and ran away. Although he didn't seem to be sprinting, the distance between them increased rapidly, and he melted into the night almost immediately.

“O-oh no, Sir Momon. Hurry, we have to slay him!” Evileye gasped in a panic before they lost sight of him, but Momon shook his head.

“We can’t. He chose retreat to execute his plan. If we chased him, he’d probably start to fight in earnest. And then…”

Momon went silent, but Evileye knew the rest. *And then you’ll get caught up in the battle and die.* That was probably what he was going to say. Even if he had left her here and gone after him, that nasty demon would have threatened her as well with his attacks.

Momon had protected her earlier, so her value as a hostage was clear.

Unable to be of any use to the man who had saved her life, she berated herself. *I talked so high and mighty to Climb, but this is all I’m capable of? Despicable.*

“Okay, Nabe. What do you think we should do now?”

As if in answer to his question, a woman floated slowly down out of the sky. Evileye knew he had a caster with the nickname Beautiful Princess on his team. In her head, she’d once laughed, *Isn’t that name embarrassing?* Upon seeing her, however, her breath caught.

She was so lovely. Evileye couldn’t help but stare—she must have had foreign blood from a southern country in her.

“Mas— Mr. Momon, how about going to the client’s house like we planned in the first place?”

“…And ignore Jaldabaoth? Don’t you think my role in the capital might be to stop his plan?”

“It might be, but I think it’s important that we confirm with the client first.”

“You’re right.”

“More importantly, I suggest dropping that crane fly onto the cobblestones.”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry. I thought it would be dangerous if you got caught up in that fight.” Momon gently put Evileye down.

“Na— No, please don’t worry about me. I knew what your intentions were.” She bowed deeply. “Thank you very much for saving me. As I mentioned briefly before, I am Evileye of the adamantite-rank adventurer team the Blue Roses.”

“I appreciate your courtesy. I am Momon, also an adamantite-rank adventurer. And that caster is my teammate Nabe. So what are your plans now? Those two are your friends, aren’t they? If so, I don’t mind helping you transport them…” His finger pointed to Gagaran and Tia.

“I thank you for your kindness, but that won’t be necessary. My other comrades should arrive shortly. We might even use resurrection magic right here.”

Momon’s armor clanked loudly.

Evileye sharply perceived a streak of intense interest in the gaze coming from the slit in his helmet.

“Wait, you can— Er, I mean, so you can use resurrection magic, can you?”

“Uh, er, yes. Our leader Lakyus can resurrect the dead.”

“I see! Then I’d like to ask you something: Does resurrection

magic work even if you cast it from very far away?"

"What do you mean?"

"Umm, for example, if you wanted to bring these two back to life and you cast from some far-off place—say, the empire—where would they come back to life? In the empire or at the location of the corpses?"

Why is he so interested in resurrection magic? Is he just curious? Faith casters who could use tier-five spells weren't terribly common, so it wasn't strange for him to be curious.

Or did someone important to him die? In that case, her answer might be harsh. All she could do was hope that wasn't the case.

"I don't know the details, but I heard that for the spell Lakyus casts, it doesn't really work unless the corpses to be revived are in the immediate vicinity. So to answer your question, Sir Momon, it wouldn't be possible to cast it from the empire."

"Hmm, hmm, then I have another question. After reviving those two, would they be able to head straight into combat?"

"That would be impossible," Evileye declared simply.

The resurrection spell Lakyus could cast was the tier-five spell Raise Dead. The magic consumed a vast amount of life force, so iron-rank adventurers or below would definitely turn to ashes. The two adamantite-rank adventurers could be resurrected fine, but due to the loss of vitality, they wouldn't be able to move very well, and it would take a while to recover.

If what Jaldabaoth had said was true, and they still weren't out of danger, then their team had suffered quite a loss. *No, as long as this man is the only one who can compete with that demon,*

nothing will change even if we resurrect them. It'd be smarter to have them recuperate…

"I see… I understand things for the most part. If it's all right, I'd like to meet this woman Lakyus. Do you mind if I wait with you for a while?"

"What! Why do you want to meet her?!"

She realized she'd raised her voice, although she didn't understand why herself. Something had prickled in her chest when Momon said he wanted to meet Lakyus.

Even she was surprised. Momon, on the receiving end of the shout, seemed equally disturbed.

She blushed with intense shame beneath her mask. At least she was wearing a hood so he couldn't see her ears turn red.

"Uh, I might be able to ask her about resurrection magic, and although we're both the same rank, she's been a team leader longer than me, so I thought I'd offer a greeting… Also, there's nothing to say that Jaldabaoth wasn't only pretending to flee and won't come back here. So those were my reasons. Is there a problem?"

"N-no, if that's all, then… I'm sorry I shouted."

When she learned he was also taking precautions against Jaldabaoth, the prickly feeling disappeared. *Anyone could have guessed why from our previous conversation… And if he's taking precautions against Jaldabaoth…does that mean he wants to protect me…? Hee-hee…*

"So until then, do you mind telling me what happened here?"

"Before that, I can't bear to leave my comrades' bodies out

there, so do you mind if we move over that way?"

Momon didn't mind at all, so they walked over.

She had guessed they would have horrible burns, but the corpses were immaculate, as if the demon's fire burned up only people's souls.

After closing their eyes and crossing their hands over their chests, Evileye took Shrouds of Sleep out of her bag and wrapped Tia first.

"What are those?"

"If you wrap a corpse in one of these magic items, it keeps them from turning undead or rotting. Supposedly it has some beneficial effect when you cast a resurrection spell, too."

"I see," said Momon, and he gave her a hand, wrapping Gagaran's large body when he noticed her struggling. He was so strong that lifting Gagaran looked easy.

Standing before the two bodies wrapped in white cloth, Evileye said a brief, silent prayer. The dead deserved respect, even if Lakyus was going to resurrect them later.

"Thanks for your help."

"Don't mention it. I'd rather continue our discussion from before. Can you tell me what happened here?"

Evileye readily consented and began to explain. Still, all she knew was why she had come and how Jaldabaoth had appeared partway through the battle with the bug maid.

Momon and Nabe had been listening quietly, but when she was saying how the Blue Roses had beaten the maid to within

inches of her life, their mood changed dramatically.

"Did you kill her?" His tone was neutral, but she sensed an anger he wasn't able to completely conceal.

That was confusing. She didn't understand why Momon would be mad if they killed Jaldabaoth's maid. For the time being, she decided to just explain the outcome as fast as she could. "No. Jaldabaoth showed up before we could kill her."

"Oh. I see, I see…"

His anger dissipated until there was none left, as if Evileye had only misunderstood. Nabe was listening in silence, and the anger in her hard eyes had not disappeared, but her attitude had been negative from the start. Evileye wasn't even sure the anger was directed at her.

Momon cleared his throat and asked, "Mm, do you think it's possible that Jaldabaoth fought you seriously because you were trying to kill the bug maid?"

Evileye realized why he'd gotten angry. It must have been because he suspected that they'd picked a fight with a neutral maid, which might have sparked the whole situation. They'd stepped on a tiger's tail when there had been no need to do such a thing.

An adventurer was always supposed to avoid unnecessary combat. If a member of the highest rank didn't understand that, they risked making adamantite-rank adventurers, including Momon, look bad. *That must be what he's trying to say*. But from Evileye's perspective, that wasn't how things were.

"Jaldabaoth said he was going to envelop part of the royal capital in flames. There's no way any maid of his could be a decent person. I think my comrades were right to fight her."

She would insist on that. That maid was stronger than Gagaran and Tia, so they wouldn't have fought her without a reason. Their choice to engage had to have been the right one.

There was Evileye, unconsciously revealing her raw feelings in her argument, and silent Momon. Behind a mask, behind a closed helmet. They couldn't see each other's eyes, but Evileye was sure their gazes were clashing.

Momon was first to look away.

"Er, yeah. Hmm. I see what you're saying. Sorry." He bowed his head slightly.

This flustered Evileye. She couldn't back down, so she had nearly started a fight, but it wasn't right to have the man who'd saved her life bowing to her.

"Oh, please raise your head! You're so wonderful, you don't nee— Agh?!" Upon realizing what she was saying, she yelped in confusion.

Certainly, Momon was a wonderful person, but in this context *wonderful* wasn't the right word to use.

Evileye shrieked in her head. *Ahhh! How can I help it? He was so cool! Shouldn't I be allowed to feel like a girl for the first time in a few hundred years? He's so strong—yes, he's a warrior who's stronger and more wonderful than me, so of course!*

Evileye watched him with girlish interest. If it seemed like he was blushing, she might still be able to hold out hope; if not, chances were slim.

Evileye's body had stopped developing around the age of twelve. For that reason, she didn't have most of the things men desired, and it was difficult to both arouse desire in them or get

them to satisfy hers. Of course, a certain rare subset found her extremely appealing, but they really were rather uncommon, and judging by Nabe, the one next to Momon, she guessed he was not one of them.

Evileye mustered the courage to glance at him, but when she looked, Momon and Nabe were standing shoulder to shoulder looking up at the night sky.

At first, she had no idea what they were doing, but then she remembered her strange yelp from a moment ago, and it dawned on her.

Her shout had put them on guard.

That's not what it was abooooout! She felt so pathetic she nearly started to cry.

"...Maybe it was just your imagination? I don't see anything," Momon said, having scanned the night sky.

"Y-yes, it must have been. My apologies."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'd rather have it be your imagination than have the enemy catch me unaware," he answered nonchalantly. With Nabe's help, he had sheathed one of his huge swords; the other he held to stay on guard.

Evileye didn't have words for his kindness. Just then, something lit up at the edge of her vision. It wasn't the white light of magic but the vermillion of a raging fire.

"Mr. Momon, look over there."

Both of them saw the red glow as Nabe spoke. Evileye's eyes widened under her mask—she knew where those flames were coming from.

“What is that?”

The curling crimson flames blazed up to the heavens. They had to have been easily over a hundred feet tall. How far they stretched was impossible to gauge, but it was definitely more than a few hundred yards.

The flames rose like a flickering veil and stretched like a sash to completely enclose one area of the capital.

In shock, Evileye observed this phenomenon for the first time in her life, and a quiet male voice reached her ears.

“…The Fire of Gehenna?”

Drawn by his question, she turned toward Momon. “Wh-what in the world is that? Do you know something about that huge wall of fire, Sir Momon?”

Momon jumped and answered with much less confidence than his murmur would have led one to expect. “Hmm? Oh…n-no, I don’t know for sure, so, er, can I tell you once I have confirmation?”

“Of course, that’s fine, but…”

“I—I need to talk to Nabe for a moment. Please excuse me.”

“Huh? I can’t go with you?”

“Er, no, it’s just a quick consultation between teammates, so I’d rather you didn’t…”

Of course. Embarrassed to have asked a question with such an obvious answer, her eyes roved around until they found the woman called Beautiful Princess.

The grin on her pretty face appeared to be a triumphant one.

Maybe it was just her imagination. But maybe it wasn't. Any woman given special treatment by an ultra-first-class man would feel superior to members of the same sex.

Evileye couldn't suppress the strange emotion that appeared in her heart.

The flame of an uncomfortable anger—jealousy.

Not only is he strong, he possesses knowledge I don't… I'm never going to meet another man like this.

Some say that human women had a tendency to be attracted to power. Because they'd been continuously exposed to powerful external threats, their racial preservation instincts kicked in, and they desired to marry a strong man, bear children, and live under his protection. Of course, that wasn't to say that was how all women chose their men. Personality, appearance—all sorts of things fostered love. Still, there were signs that this tendency was pronounced.

Evileye had always scorned women like that. *You're weak, so you'll get someone to protect you? How incredibly foolish. All you have to do is get strong enough that you don't need protection… At least that's what I thought I believed…*

If she let this man get away, would she ever find one who could fulfill her?

Evileye was immortal, so there was no doubt that Momon would grow old and die before her. And no matter how hard she tried, she probably wouldn't be able to have his children. She couldn't avoid being alone again in a few decades, but she thought for once in her life, she'd like to try living as a woman.

It wouldn't be so bad if someone else had his kids. I wouldn't grumble about a lover or two if he gave me the most affection.

"…Then please wait just a minute. Apologies…Miss Evileye?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. I may have been overthinking it. I'm sure there are some things you need to decide as a team. I'll wait here."

In truth, she didn't want to put the slightest distance between herself and Momon. She didn't want to leave him alone with that beautiful woman, against whom she didn't stand a chance. But there was no way she could say those things.

Nobody liked an overly persistent woman. A man who felt like someone was trying to tie him down would flee.

She recalled conversations she'd heard in bars. At the time, she'd thought they had nothing to do with her and gotten up from her seat with a scoff. *Dang… So I guess any tidbit of knowledge can be put to some use… If only I had been paying proper attention back then… I wonder if I have time to learn a woman's ways*, Evileye thought as she followed the withdrawing pair with her eyes. She knew it wasn't what she should be thinking about under these circumstances, but even if she tried to consider the issue at hand, she didn't have enough information, so she only went in circles. Either way, in a few hours she'd be plunging into a battle where she might die, so she could probably afford to relax a bit and seriously consider this nonsense.

Is this a fait accompli?

She wasn't sure how enticing she could be with a body that couldn't bear children, but it was worth a shot.

She sighed. "Shall we beat Jaldabaoth…and build a future?"

Evileye declared war on Jaldabaoth, who was surely behind that blazing wall of fire, in her head. *Sir Momon is probably the only one who can defeat you. So I'll be beside him. And if that maid shows up again, I'll slay her! I may not look it, but I'm the cursed one they called Nation Breaker! Don't underestimate me, Jaldabaoth!*

"She probably can't hear us here, right?"

"I think it would be nearly impossible to listen in at this distance."

"Still, I guess we should take precautions."

Ainz activated an item he'd bought. It would prevent them from being overheard. He'd been saving it because it was single-use, but now he had no choice.

"So, Nabe. I have a fairly good idea of what his plan is; however, the more precise a machine is, the more danger there is of the whole thing breaking if one gear gets messed up. That goes for plans as well. I want to avoid misinterpreting something and ruining everything by assuming I know what's going on and acting without confirmation. You understand, right?"

"I see. I'd expect nothing less from you, Supreme One."

Ainz returned Narberal's heartfelt praise with a confident nod befitting a ruler, as if to say he had everything in the palm of his hand.

—I wish.

In his head, he was practically drowning in a waterfall of cold sweat.

How was he supposed to know what Demiurge was up to? The

only reason he had appeared earlier was because he noticed combat breaking out in the capital and thought, *It's my first battle in the royal capital, so I'll make a cool entrance.* The shock upon realizing he was fighting Demiurge was so great that he nearly lost his cool—to the point where he had to be automatically evened out by the special psychological affinity the undead naturally possessed.

Then, when he'd figured they were fighting the Eight Fingers as ordered, it was actually some adamantite-rank adventurers. He really couldn't understand and had half given up trying to think about it.

In his position, his comments just now were a bad move. Ainz was well aware that pretending to know things was dangerous. Sometimes it was safer to just reveal one's ignorance. But Ainz was a respected ruler. He needed to display wisdom befitting the Supreme Beings, demonstrating they were worthy of reverence.

If a superior, even at company president level, was too ignorant, it was natural they would lose the trust of subordinates.

And so, after frantically spinning his nonexistent brain's gears until they'd nearly melted, what he'd come up with was that tired excuse.

It was unclear if Narberal was just obedient or his logic was more convincing than he'd thought, but she had respect in her eyes. Ainz pretended to give her an order, though it was really asking her a favor. "Yes. So in order to make Demiurge's plan a success, get in touch with him. The reason I'm not is because people are watching—by which I mean that woman. And also because I can't use magic in this form. Hmm…Evileye is observing us so closely. I don't know for sure, but she must be suspicious of me."

"Really? I think not. I'm pretty sure it's something else she's

feeling."

At this remark, Ainz glanced at her out of the corner of his eye so as not to appear suspicious.

"Do you really think so? I know her thoughts inside out. I knew it was a fatal error to get angry back there… Maybe I should have just killed her?"

There was no answer.

All Ainz had felt when he heard that they'd beaten Entoma to within inches of her life was rage. As always, the intense emotion was immediately suppressed. Even so, for a moment, he was consumed by seething anger—it was a miracle he hadn't smashed the sword he'd been carrying into the top of Evileye's head.

The reason he'd been able to hold back his fury and urge to kill her was that, based on the conversation they'd had, he had judged that the drawbacks of killing her would be just too great. He had a chance to become connected with someone who could use resurrection magic—a very good person to know; it would have been a waste to throw that away.

I've grown a bit, learned some patience, he reflected. If he hadn't had the experience of flying off the handle when Shalltear was brainwashed, he probably would have killed Evileye without even considering the drawbacks. The inhabitants of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the NPCs created by the Supreme Beings, were treasures Ainz had to protect. It would be unforgivable if they were tarnished. His ability to think and prioritize had to have been due to his maturation.

Ainz sensed that he was becoming more capable as he built up experience, and his illusion face grinned between his closed helmet and the rubber mask he was wearing for extra insurance. If he kept improving at this rate, he would definitely become a ruler

worthy of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. At least, that's what he hoped.

Until then, I have to avoid disappointing them or making any big mistakes… This is so intense.

"Oh? I'd expect nothing less from you, Lord Ainz. So you can see through that lady completely? Truly, you have eyes befitting the enthroned."

"Cut the flattery, Narberal. I've only put in the natural amount of thought considering the mistakes I've made." He waved an embarrassed hand and then, in a booming—at least, he hoped it was booming—voice, he gave her orders. "Time for action, Narberal. Find out all the plans without delay and inform me. Also, please tell him that I'm guessing, but there is a good chance I will be the one to handle the incident Jaldabaoth causes."

Narberal bowed and cast a spell.

Ainz did a fist pump in his head. What he'd said to Narberal earlier wasn't a lie. Right now he couldn't use magic due to Perfect Warrior, so it was only natural that she Message Demiurge, but he had one other unstated reason.

Now that he'd pretended he understood Demiurge's entire plan, he needed to avoid contact with the intelligent Demiurge as much as possible so his comprehension couldn't be doubted.

There was a risk that due to turning everything into a game of telephone with Narberal, some of the information he received would be distorted. But that was a small risk to take—compared to Ainz being deemed unfit to rule the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

Ainz slowly approached Evileye.

He figured he needed to distract her while Narberal was talk-

ing to Demiurge.

“Sheesh. How do I explain this…? And…why is this kid so powerful? I wonder what she looks like underneath that mask…”

2

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 12:47 AM

In one corner of the castle, in a room that wasn’t so big, brightly lit despite it being the middle of the night, a large number of men and women had gathered. They were each equipped, but there was no standard gear set.

They’d been urgently assembled here—all the adventurers of the kingdom. Some were high-ranking, with orichalcum and mythril plates, and some were low-ranking, with iron and copper plates—a true sweeping mobilization.

The high-ranking adventurers had already deduced that they’d been convened to handle the ongoing situation in the capital, since they’d been summoned to an inner part of the castle where people of indefinite status were usually not allowed to go.

And from the boy wearing white full plate armor standing at attention in the corner, they could guess who the client was; a tiny minority of them had a vague idea of who the man standing next to him was from his adventurer-like vibes and katana.

When the door opened and a group of women—with only one man among them—appeared, a murmur went through the crowd.

They were all big names, recognizable by every adventurer in

the kingdom.

At the head of the line stood the leader of the adamantite-rank team the Blue Roses, Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra. Next was the Golden Princess, Renner. Then the head of the capital's adventurers' guild. Then from the Blue Roses, Evileye and one of the twins. Bringing up the rear was the kingdom's strongest warrior, Gazef Stronoff.

The group stood before the crowd. The boy in white armor unrolled a large piece of paper and hung it on the wall behind them. It was a detailed map of the capital.

The first to speak was a woman around forty years old, but she was a former mythril-rank adventurer, and her eyes were filled with vigor. "First, I'd like to thank you all for gathering here to confront this crisis." She scanned the room full of quiet, serious-looking adventurers and then spoke again. "Under normal circumstances, the adventurers' guild does not permit intervening in matters of the state." Her gaze rested momentarily on the members of the Blue Roses, but she didn't say anything—her eyes imparted just as much as her mouth could have. "But this case is an exception. We've decided the adventurers' guild will offer its full support to the kingdom in order to resolve the incident as quickly as possible. The princess will explain the details of the operation. Please listen carefully."

The princess stepped slowly forward, accompanied by the members of the Blue Roses and Gazef Stronoff on either side. "My name is Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself. Thank you for gathering here to confront this crisis." She bobbed her head.

Several adventurers sighed in admiration of her dainty elegance.

"Usually, I would express my gratitude at greater length, but

there's no time, so I'll head straight into the explanation. Today in the early dawn, a fiery barrier enclosed a part of the capital"—she gestured with a finger to circle a large area in the northeast on the map—"in this area. I believe everyone here has already seen the wall of flames, which is over a hundred feet tall."

Most of the adventurers nodded, and a few looked out the windows. The flames weren't visible from inside the castle walls, but a red glow had been cast on part of the sky.

"The fire is similar to an illusion in some ways; for instance, it doesn't seem to harm those who come into contact with it. According to someone who actually touched it, it doesn't feel hot, nor does it prevent intrusions like a barrier. Apparently there aren't any obstacles to operating inside it, either."

At those words, some of the adventurers, mainly low-ranking ones, voiced relief.

"The culprit behind this incident is called Jaldabaoth. We've received reports that he is an immensely powerful, extremely cruel demon. And the leader of the Blue Roses has confirmed that there are low-level demons roaming inside the wall of flames. She reported sensing a discipline to their actions that would indicate orders from a superior."

Lakyus nodded in confirmation.

"Bashing in the heads of our enemies is standard. Do we just have to beat this Jaldabaoth guy?" an adventurer wearing a mythril plate asked, and Renner gave a single nod.

"Ultimately, we're hoping that will resolve the incident, but what we'd like to ask you to do is thwart the demons in their objective. According to the information we've gathered, their goal is to steal a particular item that has been transported into the city."

A murmur went through the adventurers. They mainly did jobs around the city and had realized that the zone within the wall of flames was the main economic district, where all the warehouses and company headquarters were located.

"…How did you acquire that information?"

"Jaldabaoth told us."

"Doesn't that mean there's a good chance it could be false?"

"The chance is certainly nonzero. This entire incident could be a huge feint to draw our attention. But I think we can believe him. He hasn't made a move since creating the wall of fire. And if what he said *is* true, sitting back and doing nothing could result in a worst-case scenario. We need to charge in there."

"So how strong is this demon Jaldabaoth you've been talking about? I don't remember ever reading about a demon by that name, so if you have an idea of his difficulty rating, even just a rough estimate, please tell us."

Lakyus frowned and stepped forward. "My teammate Evileye has witnessed his strength, but we can't decide what to rate him right now, so we'll alert you at a later time."

A difficulty rating was a value given to monsters encountered by adventurers that indicated their strength. The higher the value, the more powerful the monster, but among adventurers it was generally believed that judging solely by rating would land most people in trouble—the reason being that difficulty varied widely among individuals, so the ratings could act only as reference points.

For that reason, the numbers weren't used terribly often, but the adventurer who asked must have figured it would be most helpful in a situation like this one, where the idea was to let

everyone know how strong the monster was in a simple way.

"Instead, I'll explain what happened. Right as my teammates defeated a bug maid, whom we believe was a servant of Jaldabaoth, he appeared, and in the ensuing battle… You've probably already noticed that Gagaran and Tia are not with us…" Lakyus scanned the faces of the adventurers in the room. "He killed them."

"In one hit."

The crowd was thrown into an uproar by this additional comment from Evileye.

Adamantite-rank adventurers… They were the greatest elites, living legends. That they'd been slain with a single blow was too impossible to believe.

However—

"Don't panic!" Evileye's earsplitting yell was enough to dispel the heavy atmosphere. "Yes, Jaldabaoth is strong. Having faced him and been helplessly defeated, I can testify to that. He's the kind of monster people can't beat. Even if everyone gathered here went up against him, you'd probably all meet a miserable end. However! We haven't been truly defeated yet! I'm proof of that, since I faced him and lived. Don't worry, there's someone among us who can fight this demon on equal footing!"

With a murmur, some of the more informed adventurers turned to look toward a certain point in the room, at the adventurers there.

"I think some of you may know that a third adamantite-rank adventurer appeared in E-Rantel. Yes, him—" She gestured to two adventurers, and almost everyone's eyes gathered on them. "—the leader of Raven Black, Sir Momon, the Dark Hero!"

The imposing figure standing at attention in one corner of the room and his peerlessly beautiful partner had already been attracting a lot of attention—he was clad in armor black as a crow and wearing his closed helmet despite being inside the castle. Upon learning that his status was high enough for his rudeness to be overlooked, the room filled with murmurs of admiration.

Momon took the plate that proved he was adamantite rank out from under his crimson cape so that everyone could see it.

“Okay, Sir Momon. Please come forward!”

Evileye seemed delighted to welcome Momon to the front, but he waved her off. Then he leaned over and whispered something in Nabe’s ear.

“Mr. Momon says there is no need to spend time on him. He says we should launch into the operation to stop Jaldabaoth as soon as possible.”

“That’s too bad. But he’s right. Okay, Miss Evileye, may I continue with the explanation?”

“O-oh… Sorry, Princess Renner, please continue.” Her mask may have kept her face hidden, but her gloomy tone spoke volumes about her mood.

“As Miss Evileye pointed out, we have someone on our side who is comparable to the enemy mastermind Jaldabaoth. I hope you’ll remember you’re not heading into an unwinnable fight. Now, I’ll explain the details of our plan.”

Renner drew a line in an arc across the map.

“First off, I’d like you all to take on an offensive role.”

“Offensive?” A doubtful voice spoke up. “Not defensive?”

“We cannot win with defense. First, we’ll have all of you adventurers form a battle line. Behind that, the guards will form a second line. At the back will be a rearguard of support troops from the shrines and wizards’ guild. We’ll have you advance into the enemy’s territory in this formation. If no enemies intercept you at that point, your line will steadily press farther into their territory behind the fire wall. Should you be intercepted, please attempt to break through. If you can, advance. If not, we’ll have the front line retreat to draw in the enemy. Meanwhile, the reserves will have built a barricade as far up as possible. When you retreat, please fall back to these fortifications.”

Those would be the line of support from the wizards’ guild, among others.

“At these strongpoints, the wounded will be healed, and then we may ask you to sortie again.”

“Wait a minute! Doesn’t that mean…that the guards will be fighting in our place?”

The guards had next to no potential in such a battle. It would be virtually impossible for them to fight like adventurers.

Renner was about to answer the question when another adventurer spoke. “There’s a critical flaw in that plan. Isn’t it possible that while the line spreads out and defense weakens during the retreat, demons will seize that chance and surge into the city? A low-level demon is still stronger than your average citizen. There’ll be a ton of casualties! It would be safer to use Fly and try to break into their territory in one go.”

“We considered that method, but lots of monsters classified as demons can fly, yes?”

Many of the adventurers recalled demons they had faced and nodded in agreement with Renner. Even plenty of low-level

demons had flight-capable wings.

"Casting Fly in the usual manner would attract too much attention. So we thought of dropping in from a high altitude or using buildings to obstruct the enemy's view during a low-altitude charge, but there's something else we have to do first. You mentioned that as our line spreads out, defense will weaken, but that goes for the enemy line as well. That's why this is an offensive operation and not a defensive one."

Murmurs of approval could be heard here and there.

"You adventurers will be the bow. It will be like drawing back the string and loosing an arrow into enemy territory."

Just like the adventurers spreading out, the enemy would spread to react. That meant their defense would also be weakened.

Ranks or files… The easiest to break through in a head-on charge would be the ranks.

In a nutshell, the line the adventurers would be forming was all a ploy to weaken the enemy line.

"And our arrowhead will be Sir Momon. Once we've judged that the enemy camp has weakened sufficiently, we'll have him make a decisive charge at low altitude."

"What happened to the Drops of Red? These two may be adamantite-rank adventurers, but I can't imagine they'll be able to break through on their own. To make doubly sure we win, I think we need a protective squad to send after Jaldabaoth with them. Don't you?"

At this question from an adventurer, everyone up front exchanged glances, and the head of the guild answered as represen-

tative. “They’re currently out near the border of the council state on a job. We used Message to relay the situation, but it would take at least half a day for them to arrive. It seems like it would be too dangerous to wait that long, so we cannot count on them for help this time.”

“So what will the Blue Roses be doing? Are they going with Mr. Momon?”

“Having lost two of our members, our combat capability has taken a huge hit. Tia and I will assist in the battle to form the line. Evileye will play a different role an—”

“I’m currently recovering magical energy in order to accompany M— Sir Momon.”

“Then I have a different question—for the captain, there. What are the nobles’ private forces doing? What about the Select? The Blue Roses have lost Gagaran. If you substituted for one of them, couldn’t they clear the way for Mr. Momon?”

“I’ll answer that.” Gazef took a step forward. “The nobles’ private forces are guarding their masters’ houses, and the soldiers are guarding the castle. My direct subordinates are protecting the royal family.”

A murmur went through the crowd, and the same adventurer asked another question.

“Does that mean you’re not going to the front lines, either, Sir Stronoff?!”

“That’s right. My role is to remain at the castle to protect the royals.”

The mood shifted. There was agitation in the air. Even though they understood logically that what he was saying made sense,

emotionally they refused to accept it. Receiving money in exchange for shedding blood—that was the adventuring life, and they were prepared to launch themselves into this deadly battle. But if they were going to risk their lives for money, the nobles and royal family should, too—they collected taxes. The crowd believed the elites should not have been holing up in the castle where it was supposed to be safest but out in the field, spearheading efforts to save the people.

And what's the big idea, using the best forces only to protect themselves?

As discontent with the nobles, and especially the royal family, mounted, Gazef stepped back. No matter what he said now, the adventurers would take it as an excuse. That was why she—Lakyus—spoke instead.

"I understand your dissatisfaction. But please remember this: The money to gather you all here is being paid not by the royal family but out of Renner's private assets. And we were able to bring Sir Momon here thanks to the noble Marquis Raeven. The reason his soldiers aren't joining us is that he wants them as defense in case demons spread into the rest of the city. I feel the same way as all of you toward the nobles and the royal family, but I want you to know that they aren't all like that."

Lakyus's words calmed the crowd a little—because the adventurers had all decided to at least try not to show their resentment in front of Renner.

"Oh, that reminds me… There was something I was going to ask you to do while we're loosing the arrow. Climb!"

"Your Highness!" A spirited shout rang out. Everyone's attention turned to the boy in the white full plate armor.

"I realize it's dangerous, but I'm going to ask you to go on a

mission for us. Enter the enemy's territory and bring out any survivors you find."

From the adventurers came cries of "Don't be stupid!" and "That's insane!" Entering the area under enemy control to save people went beyond dangerous—it was more like an order to die. Escorting helpless civilians out of there was an absurdity among absurdities.

But Climb answered immediately, "Understood! I'll perform this duty if it's the last thing I do!"

It was no wonder people looked at him like he was crazy.

"...Princess. Sending Climb alone is too risky. Could I go with him?"

"Is that all right with you, Sir Brain Unglaus?"

A commotion went through the crowd at the mention of that name. For people who valued strength, "Brain Unglaus" was an unforgettable one.

"Sure, I'm fine with it."

"Then please do. Now, could I ask just the leaders of each team to please come forward?"

As he watched the adventurers assemble at the front, Ainz applied himself to a different task—networking.

People who seemed like subleaders kept coming up to him. They offered their team name, praised his gear, said they'd like to see him again sometime to hear tales of his adventures, and so on. The purpose of this was analogous to the Japanese custom of exchanging business cards, but there was one difference. When exchanging business cards, one was left with documentation of

who was who, but when meeting someone on a verbal basis, the only record that could be relied upon was memory.

I guess you need to have good recall to be a top dog, Ainz thought to himself privately as he frantically drilled the information into his brain.

He figured it was important to remember team names and what rank they were. Of course, he allocated his attention and memory to only higher-ranking adventurers. There were also iron ranks and copper ranks who came up to say hello, but they lived in a different world, so he considered them safe to forget. The CEO of a large company would never treasure the business card of a small- to midsize company's salesman—it was the natural order of things.

Still, Momon paid close attention to each adventurer so no one would know his attitude was changing depending on whom he was talking to. He'd shake their hand, pat them familiarly on the back, respond to their dull flattery with a jolly laugh, and they'd praise each other.

They probably figured the reason he kept his gauntlets on while they all sought a handshake after taking off their gloves was due to their difference in rank. Other than that, he greeted everyone on equal terms.

He stared after a person he'd just greeted who was walking away. *What a crazy color…* He wasn't used to hair being hot pink.

He knew that some adventurers dyed their gear and whatnot gaudy colors, but this was the first time he'd seen someone with such loud hair. *I guess there are just more adventurers in the capital than in E-Rantel.*

There were a lot of adventurers in the capital, so they had to

work harder to stand out. *Well, it doesn't seem anyone avoids you or thinks badly of you for dyeing your hair here…*

With Ainz's Japanese salaryman sensibilities, he wondered if pink hair was really appropriate, but it didn't seem like this world was very strict about those types of things. There were even children with dyed hair.

Ainz cleared his mind of hairstyle thoughts and, as he noticed a Japanese-like queue-forming spirit in the adventurers lined up in front of him, focused a bit of his attention on Narberal behind him.

Though he had never used the team name or nicknames himself, his team, known as Raven Black, had another member besides him. The peerless beauty stood at attention behind him; the reason no one went to greet her had to be due to her prickly, even hostile presence. And from a networking perspective, it was more advantageous to meet Ainz, since he was the leader.

Adventurer culture is just like corporate culture… They were both social constructs built by people, so it was no wonder they resembled each other.

After Ainz had shaken so many hands his own would have been sore if he were human, and once the number of adventurers waiting had dwindled, Evileye came over.

The people waiting their turn to meet him didn't say anything when she cut in. The only ones left were the lowest-ranking adventurers. He'd already finished greeting the highest-, high-, middle-, and lower-ranking ones. These were the little grasshoppers who had just barely begun adventuring, waiting for a chance to meet someone who in comparison was practically divine.

They weren't about to complain about someone at the top.

“It seems like you’re about done with your meetings. Do you mind coming over here?”

Ainz glanced through the thin slit in his closed helmet at Gazef. If he was still over there, there was only one answer.

“Nabe. Please greet those people on my behalf. I’ll come once I’ve finished over here.”

The eyes of everyone who heard him grew wide.

“Sorry. The people here have been waiting their turn, so I need to meet them first,” he told Evileye and went back to greeting the shrinking line of adventurers.

Ainz wouldn’t hesitate to go if the CEO of a large company called even if small- to midsize-company CEOs were waiting to meet him. That wasn’t favoritism or discrimination; it was just the way things generally worked. On the contrary, if he stubbornly continued greeting, people would think he was oblivious. This held true for salesmen as well, but sometimes it was necessary to prioritize profit over one’s personal policies. That was a mandatory skill for a cog in the company wheel.

But this case was different.

I can’t talk to Gazef. We didn’t talk much before, and I doubt he’d remember my voice from two months ago, but…I’d be screwed if he did. Still, I have no doubt he wants to talk with me. I’m a bit nervous about handing him off to Nabe, but I’ll do that and lower my voice a bit. Up until now he was talking to so many people I’m confident he couldn’t hear me, but now I should be careful.

“Okay, Nabe, get going.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shifting his gaze from Nabe as she walked toward the princess and the others, Ainz removed his helmet.

He felt everyone looking at him. He shook his head back and forth and then put the helmet back on. Really, he would have liked to act out wiping sweat from his brow, but although he was wearing a rubber mask, his face was an illusion, so he had to perform flawlessly when he touched it or he risked his hand apparently sinking into it. That was why he had only shaken his head.

His objective had been to show Momon's face to Gazef to satisfy one part of his curiosity. *It would be great if that and Nabe's saying hello will stop him from trying to talk to me…* Ainz prayed and concentrated on greeting the adventurers.

"You seem pretty comfortable doing this."

It was Evileye's voice. She was still there. He took care to hide the fact that he wished she would escort Narberal over to the others and instead replied in a kind voice. She might have still been suspicious of him, so he wanted her to think he was being friendly.

"I don't really think I'm comfortable per se."

Anyone who had ever worked in sales could handle this level of conversation.

"No, you are. Your wonderful attitude is truly worthy of a team leader."

How obnoxious. I'm in the middle of greeting these people! Don't stand there babbling, he thought, but he bottled it up. If he was rude to her now, it would defeat the purpose of holding himself back from killing her earlier. With the detachment of a factory worker throwing himself into his assembly line task, he switched to saying just brief hellos. Since everyone knew

Momon's presence was being requested, they were efficient with their greetings.

After getting through the line, he shifted his gaze to where Gazef had been, but the captain was nowhere to be seen. Ainz put a monumental effort into suppressing his urge to do a little dance and intentionally asked Evileye next to him, "Did I take too long? Seems like the captain of the Royal Select left... I'm sorry about that."

"Hmm? Oh yeah, he's gone. He's a busy guy, so it makes sense that he wouldn't be able to stay here long, but it's rude of him not to express his gratitude to our last resort in protecting the kingdom. I'll call for him."

"Wait! Hold on!" Surprised by how much louder than intended his shout was, he abruptly lowered his voice. "I mean, this is fine. You really don't have to worry about it. After all, I'm here because Marquis Raeven made the request. I'm protecting the kingdom for the reward, so the captain's thanks isn't necessary."

"Are you sure...? It's not the first time I've noticed it, but you're quite a generous person, aren't you?"

Ainz glanced at her, wondering if she was being sarcastic, but since her face was behind her mask, he couldn't guess at her true feelings.

I can't trust people who wear masks...dang it. But I wonder why she wears it, anyway. It must be some sort of magic item, but still.

Then he realized his own mistake and scanned the area.

The atmosphere hadn't changed. He didn't catch sight of anyone who seemed to be frightened of or hostile toward Momon the adamantite-rank adventurer.

Back in my Yggdrasil *days, illusions were so-so spells that changed your external appearance or messed up menu functionality, but in this world, they're true illusions. In that case, it wouldn't be strange if there exists a magic item that lets you see through them… No one in E-Rantel could figure out mine, and the head of the wizards' guild said that the only way to see through them was with experience, so I got complacent. There are orichalcum-rank adventurers here, though… I screwed up.*

Ainz looked around again.

It doesn't seem like anyone is on guard against me, so I think my secret is safe…but from now on I shouldn't take my helmet off in the capital. Nothing is certain. I have to keep that in mind. I wouldn't be surprised if there was one of those talent abilities for deciphering illusions…

"…Miss Evileye."

"Please just call me Evileye. You saved my life, Sir Momon. I can't have someone like that being so formal with me."

To Ainz, it was just ordinary politeness, but if she didn't want it, he didn't have any reason to object to dropping it.

"Okay then, Evileye. Shall we go over there now?"

"Let's!"

Her reply was cheerful. Unsure what had set her heartstrings singing, Ainz allowed himself to be led over to where the princess was.

After the group—Renner, her attendant, and the two adamantite-rank adventurer teams—withdrew into a different room, the remaining adventurers began chatting as if they'd been waiting for the opportunity. Naturally, the topic of conversation was the

elite adventurer Momon.

“I’d heard about him in the news from E-Rantel, but he’s so polite you’d never assume he was adamantite rank.”

“It’s not only him. I know the Drops of Red, and they’re the same way. So generous as people—they remind you that strength isn’t all there is to being at the top.”

An adventurer wearing a platinum plate chimed in on the conversation between two wearing mythril plates. “Hmm, do you really believe that? And who prioritizes greeting rookie adventurers over a summons from the princess?”

“That was a surprise.”

The surrounding adventurers all nodded in agreement.

For missions like this one, where it was necessary to cooperate across teams, it made sense to lay the groundwork for getting help easier by introducing oneself. It was only human nature to be more inclined to save a familiar face than a stranger. But the only people adamantite-rank adventurers would turn to for help would be at least mythril. It could be said with confidence that there was no reason for them to greet and befriend the greenhorns.

But Momon did. In other words, he must have been trying to deepen friendships without the ulterior motive of seeking assistance later.

“Normally you would go talk to the princess and leave your teammate to handle the rookies.”

“Yeah, that’s what most people would do. It’s definitely what I would have done. You, too, right?”

“Yeah… To put it harshly, the guy seems a bit oblivious. He seems like he might be the type to mess up judgment calls.”

It was not a compliment, but there was no malice in the speaker’s expression.

“And if you put it kindly?”

As if he’d been waiting to be asked, the same man spoke twice as fast as before. “He’s the best. Even though he’s an elite adamantite, he respects his fellow adventurers—even the ones just starting out. Look! Just look at the rookies’ faces!”

“Yeah, they’re totally in love with him.”

The low-rank adventurers resembled baseball fanboys who had just shaken hands with a top player from the big leagues.

“I’d fall for him, too. He can take my ass anytime.”

“No way. Plus, he wouldn’t go for your dirty ass anyhow. He’s a duo with that pretty lady!”

“You think they’re an item?”

“They gotta be! Why risk the danger of a two-person team otherwise?”

“I heard differently,” a fourth man cut in. The plate around his neck was orichalcum. “You seem to know, since you have the news from E-Rantel, but supposedly those two are on a whole different level—they’re a two-person team because no one else can keep up with them!”

“…Were you eavesdropping on us this whole time?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Don’t be like that. It’s not like you were trying to

talk in secret anyhow."

"Well, whatever," said the other adventurer who had started the chat.

Right about then the head of the guild, who had remained behind, clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "Okay, we're moving out starting now. We'll meet up one hour from when we leave the castle. We don't have much time, so please tell any teammates who aren't here ASAP. For now, please follow me outside."

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 1:12 AM

The reason they'd gathered in a different room was to confirm final plans for the "arrow." When would they charge? How would they handle it if the enemy's position was heavily guarded? They considered all the potential dangers and their strategies for them. In the end, though, they weren't well enough informed, so the only answer was to play things by ear.

The boy in the white full plate armor, Climb, had been listening intently, but now he spoke up. "Excuse me, Princess."

"What is it?"

"Regarding the arrowhead, I know of someone else who has overwhelming ability in battle. What about finding him and asking for help? Two arrows would surely give us a better chance than one, and if they teamed up, I would think they could slay this demon, even if it is immensely powerful."

"What gives, Climb? You don't think my recommendation, Sir Momon, will be enough?"

Evileye didn't even try to soften her sharp tone, and Climb

flinched. “No, it’s not like that. Please don’t think that was my intention…”

“No warriors are stronger than Sir Momon, not a chance. I guarantee that there’s a risk that whoever you nominate will just get in his way.”

The warrior holding a katana, Brain, wondered about that. “Mm, I don’t think we can say that for sure. I’ve seen the guy Climb is talking about, and he was crazy strong. He killed Zero, the strongest member of the Six Arms, in one blow!”

“You’re Brain Unglaus? You got hired as an aide to the princess on the recommendations of Gazef Stronoff and Climb, right?”

“Hired as one of Gazef’s men, that is. I’m just attached to the princess until I get my official appointment.”

“I know you’re much stronger than Climb, but I don’t get how that makes you capable of speaking for this other guy’s strength. Didn’t you lose to that old hag?”

“…Speaking of which, didn’t you, too, Evileye? Apologies, Mr. Unglaus.”

“Ugh,” Evileye groaned in response to Lakyus’s quip. “Th-that was because it wasn’t just her—you guys were there, too!”

“…Right after you lost you said you’d lost to Ligritte, not to us.”

“You really remember it well, Tina!”

“Heh-heh.” Tina laughed triumphantly. Evileye gave an almost humorous “urrrrgh.” Their comedy duo–esque exchange swept away the souring mood and actually helped everyone relax.

That was when Ainz said, “Very interesting. Who is this fellow?”

Climb gave the man’s name with a face full of confidence. “His name is Sebas.”

“…Huh? *Sebas?*” *I’ve heard that name somewhere before*, thought Ainz. *Is it just the same by coincidence?* “…What’s he like?”

Ainz listened to Climb’s explanation and nodded emphatically. *It’s Sebas! Why—how—does this boy know him? What’s their relationship? Is he one of the connections Sebas made in the capital?* He’d only glanced at Sebas’s reports and didn’t really remember who was mentioned. *Well, I couldn’t help it. I have too much stuff to do…*, he thought in a hurry, making excuses for himself.

All he knew was if this boy was a connection that Sebas made independently, mistakenly eliminating him would undo all of Sebas’s hard work. A superior should avoid nullifying his subordinates’ labors; therefore, it was safer to respect this boy in indirect praise of Sebas’s efforts.

More than anything, he didn’t want Sebas to think, *But I wrote about him in my report!*

“We won’t know who is stronger until this Sebas and I actually fight each other…”

“Mas— Mr. Momon, you’re stronger.”

Evileye nodded at Narberal’s assertion.

Ainz brought a fist down on Narberal’s head without thinking.

“My teammate has her opinion, but you two say differently… I imagine we must be about equal strength.”

“That’s the mature thing to say. Meanwhile our teammate, well…she hasn’t grown physically—or mentally.”

“You keep on—!”

“Okay, that’s enough. Do you mind not shaming our colleague? That’s an order from your leader. I doubt there will be any big changes to our strategy, so why don’t you go visit Tia and Gagaran, Tina?”

“Will do.”

The two dead members had already been brought back to life. Ainz regretted not being able to witness the resurrection, but he was satisfied with the information he learned about the process.

“By the way, can you use dark energy on the demon we’re up against?”

“…Dark energy?”

Confused, Evileye answered Lakyus, who was also perplexed, “Yeah, I heard from Gagaran. That Demonic Sword Killineiram you have radiates enough energy at full power to swallow up a whole kingdom, right?”

Lakyus’s eyes popped wide open. “L-let’s talk about that later! We have more important things to discuss right now!”

Demonic Sword? Wait a minute… I’ve heard that name somewhere before—not in Yggdrasil *but here in this world… Oh yeah! Ninya! She said something about how it gave off dark energy. But could it really…? A whole country?! That might be an exaggeration, but even if it came close…*

Ainz gathered that she was blushing out of anger, and that her panic was probably caution after having had her ace move re-

vealed.

As all eyes were on Lakyus, there came a knock at the door, and two men entered without waiting for an answer.

“Brother! And Marquis Raeven.”

Reacting to Renner’s voice, everyone bowed slightly.

It was Ainz’s second time meeting this pair.

The first time had been just a little while ago, when he’d entered the castle. That was when the request got changed from guarding against the Eight Fingers to subduing Jaldabaoth. He was also asked to cooperate with the adventurers who Renner had gathered for that purpose.

After a brief hello, they said they needed to talk to the princess, so Ainz and the others were going to leave the room. They’d already decided on a rough plan, and the idea to look for Sebas had been shot down, since they had neither the time nor means to find him. Lakyus would take charge of everything else on the ground.

“Well then, everyone. I shall pray to the gods that each and every one of you makes it back… Everything depends on you all… Actually, it’s more correct to say it depends on Sir Momon. I hope for good luck during your fight.” Renner bowed her head, and Ainz and the others acknowledged her on their way out.

Remaining were Marquis Raeven, the second prince Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself, and Renner.

The moment Climb left the room, Renner’s face fell slack, and her blue eyes took on the hue of a frozen lake in winter.

The change, intense enough to be called dramatic, gave Zanac

the chills. He said, “I heard the details from the back…” The room they were in was built with an eavesdropping room adjacent to it. The two of them had been listening from there. “But there was one question that didn’t get answered. Why are you forming a line with the guards? …You’re just sacrificing them?”

Guards were weak. They were most likely no hardier than the lowest-rank adventurers. If they were attacked, they’d be completely crushed, no doubt about it.

“They’re food.”

That was the answer the pair had expected.

“One of the adventurers mentioned this, but it will be dangerous if the lower-level demons under Jaldabaoth’s command spread into the town; we’ll prepare a place for them to eat nearby so they concentrate there.” She laughed, adding that full stomachs should dampen their urge to kill.

Surprisingly few things in the world finish neat and clean. There would always be victims; statesmen had to act in ways that created as few as possible. Renner was a paragon of that viewpoint.

But the creatures called humans always had emotional objections.

“There’s no better way? Something that wouldn’t put the guards in harm’s way?”

“If there is, what do you propose then, brother?”

He clammed up.

He didn’t have any ideas better than Renner’s. He had ideas, but none of them cut it. All he could do was acknowledge that her

plan was the best one they had for the moment.

The marquis averted his eyes from the prince who had fallen silent. Then he asked a question. “May I also ask something? Why did you give Climb such a dangerous mission?”

“The same reason my brother is going to patrol the city with your personal troops.”

Zanac was planning to make rounds in the capital to give people the sense that someone from the royal family cared about the commoners. Then later, they would spread gossip that the elder prince had hidden in the castle to stay safe. The goal was to build up Zanac’s reputation while tearing down his brother’s.

So if her reasoning was the same, perhaps Renner wanted to better her renown by sending her right-hand man on a dangerous mission to rescue people? But considering how she said she felt about Climb, the marquis still didn’t understand.

She must have realized Raeven still had questions. She continued, “Climb might die, but in that case, Lakyus can simply cast a resurrection spell on him for me, don’t you think? It takes more than a little gold to perform a resurrection, but I have that much, so it’s no problem. And then who will look after Climb, all weakened after having his life force sapped by the spell? Who would complain if I nursed the boy who fell in battle after following my orders and was brought back to life?”

“I see. That makes sense. Thank you. But what if—”

“—Lakyus dies, right?”

The marquis bowed his head to communicate, *As you so wisely perceive*, and Renner explained.

“During the more dangerous second sortie, I’ve arranged for

an issue to come up. The head of the adventurers' guild said she doesn't want to lose someone who can use resurrection magic, either, so she readily promised to cooperate."

"You planned everything out, huh, sis?"

"Yes." She beamed, and Zanac shivered. Even Marquis Raeven could barely suppress the chill that went up his spine.



Chapter 11 The Final Battle of the Disturbance

CHAPTER 11
The Final Battle Of The Disturbance

1

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 2:30 AM

The roaring flames didn't give off any heat; they were like illusions. The adventurers at the head of the line exchanged glances with their teammates before mustering the courage to take a step into the towering wall of fire.

The support unit from the shrines had cast a defensive spell on them, which reduced fire damage, so the reason they held their breath must have been because they were worried about their lungs burning.

We told them this fire wouldn't hurt them, though…, Lakyus grumbled in her head as she watched over them from the rear. Then she considered the fire wall.

It doesn't do any harm, so it's fine was too simplistic a way of thinking. If the demon's aim wasn't to cause damage, then they needed to figure out what effects it did have and why it was made.

Times like this when all the thinking in the world doesn't get you an answer, it's better to just give up… Was it Evileye who was saying I should use my head for more important things? Or my uncle?

They passed through the magic fire like a mere mirage. The flames had no heat, nor did they present any resistance.

Lakyus scanned the adventurers walking with tense looks on their faces.

The plan was to form a line, but inside the city it was virtually impossible to make a neat line, so with four orichalcum-rank teams as linchpins, all the adventurers split into four groups. To someone with a bird's-eye view, it would have looked like four amoebas spreading out.

As long as the orichalcum-rank adventurers were acting as anchors, they had to be good models for the others. *But even they're nervous.* Really, she would have liked them to conceal their fear and inspire courage in the other adventurers. *I guess I have to be the one to take the lead?*

If she stood at the head of the line, morale would probably improve, too, but right now, she didn't have friends she could rely on by her side. She may have been adamantite rank, but that didn't mean that a single Rose could equal an entire orichalcum team. That was why she'd asked them to serve as the vanguard.

It would probably bother them if the one who asked them to go was to butt in…but…at some point I should probably get out there and lead, Lakyus concluded and crossed through the wall of flames.

A silent world stretched out before them. Apart from the fact that some buildings had collapsed and there was no sign of any people, the city streets were just the same as before.

"Where did the residents go? It doesn't smell like blood. Are they holed up in their houses?"

"That can't be. Look, the doors are kicked in. They must have been taken somewhere."

"There might be demons lurking in the empty houses. Should we go through each one? It'll take a while."

"We should play it safe and contact Lakyus for orders."

“Then I’ll do that right aw—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

The consulting adventurers turned around, drawn by the voice from behind. They must have been surprised to see Lakyus reach the head of the line with perfect timing, and their eyes widened.

“The iron and copper adventurers will stay behind to search the houses. And please have one mythril team stay to supervise them. Everyone else should keep spreading out and advance. Any objections?”

They shook their heads.

“Then please proceed.”

Lakyus joined the orichalcum adventurers and advanced along the street. It was eerily quiet, to the point where one would never guess people had been living there until a few hours previously.

“…By the way, I wonder if Mr. Momon is all right.”

Considering they were leaving everything up to him, she understood their concern. “I’m sure he’s fine. Evileye said he’s even stronger than her. The only problem is the enemy mastermind, Jaldabaoth, who might be his equal. I wonder how tough that demon really is…”

The expressions of all the adventurers in earshot grew dark.

“Oh, sorry. Don’t worry. We just have to do what we can. That’s good enough.”

“Yes, that’s right. As adventurers, it’s a bit frustrating, but let’s console ourselves knowing that everyone will leverage their strengths. Okay, everybody, let’s do this!”

“Right, let’s go.”

Lakyus walked out front with the orichalcum-rank adventurers.

In one hand, she gripped Demonic Sword Killineiram. Said to have been cut from the night sky, the blade twinkled like the stars.

They hadn’t walked very far when they heard the faint sound of explosions in the distance. The lower-ranking adventurers jumped, and the middle-ranking ones started preparing themselves for action. The high-ranking ones vigilantly scanned the area. The most elite among them stared ahead. As everyone reacted in their various ways, Lakyus also turned a penetrating glare forward.

“I guess that group is seeing some action, huh?”

It didn’t seem like the squad Tina was in.

“As long as we’re advancing at the same pace, we should be expecting an intercepting party soon, too.”

“What about from above?”

“We have communications personnel up there as planned, but we didn’t spare any who could attack.”

“That’s fine. Lots of demons can fly. It’d be bad if they flew into the city, so it’s better for us to advance along the ground to draw their attention.”

“So we’re going ahead with the original plan for now?”

“Yes. Hmm…? Hey, did you hear that?” she asked an arcane caster.

The caster replied, “With no visual confirmation, I’m not sure, but it sounds like a hellhound. Their special ability is Fire Breath. Probably around difficulty fifteen.”

“Difficulty, hmm… By the way, what do you reckon the difficulty ratings are for Jaldabaoth and that bug maid?”

Lakyus wondered what to do. If she replied honestly, it would probably do a heavy number on their morale. But if she gave them misinformation and they mistakenly assumed they could face these enemies head-on, that would be a problem, too. After much indecision, she finally gave a straight answer.

“One hundred and fifty.”

“Huh?”

All the adventurers in hearing range had the same look on their faces.

“That’s my guess for the bug maid’s minimum rating, one hundred fifty. Jaldabaoth would have to be over two hundred.”

“What?!”

Everyone besides Lakyus was left speechless. Of course they were. The difficulty rating of monsters that elite orichalcum adventurers usually fought was already around eighty. People said they could somehow deal with monsters up to fifteen points higher than that, but doubling that was just a joke. Not only that, but—

“Wait a minute! So Mr. Momon is going up against difficulty two hundred?!”

“That’s right. That’s why we’d only be in the way.”

“There’s no point even talking about that realm! Two hundred…you must be kidding! Are all adamantite-rank adventurers that strong?”

“Ha. The best we could do is probably ninety.”

“Then there’s no way we can win this!”

Lakyus averted her eyes from the gasping adventurers.

She wasn’t lying. But it wasn’t the truth, either. *She* could manage only around ninety, but Evileye could handle over one hundred and fifty. That was how Lakyus had estimated the ratings for the bug maid and Jaldabaoth. That power was why Evileye wasn’t a part of the perimeter defense.

She’d gone into a special resting period in order to swiftly recoup her magical energy. Once recovered, she would accompany Momon to Jaldabaoth’s location and support him so he could fight the demon one-on-one. They anticipated the reappearance of the bug maid, so it had been decided that Evileye would fight her.

As Lakyus considered all this, she sensed the atmosphere around her worsening. Their will to fight had bottomed out to the point where she could even hear some saying it would be better to abandon the capital and make a run for it.

It was just as she’d expected. Anyone would feel that way. Even Lakyus had had her doubts when she originally heard the details from Evileye.

“You heard what Evileye said, right? Momon fought Jaldabaoth on equal or better footing. That’s why Momon’s handling the demon and we’re working to turn things even slightly to his advantage.”

“E-even if we leave Jaldabaoth up to Momon, what if the bug maid shows up?”

“The Blue Roses will fight her. Evileye has a special item that will let her switch places with us. She has a way to gain the upper hand against the bug maid, so she can shake off the ability gap and secure victory.”

Everyone oohed and aahed, and their morale rose to its previous level.

Perfect timing.

From up ahead came the sounds of beast howls and running feet.

“Here they come. Now we form the line. When you go down a side street, make sure the ones with the higher-ranking plates go first! I’ll take this one!”

The beasts came galloping down the road. They resembled large dogs, but their eyes were filled with nightmarish evil, and instead of spit, they drooled fire.

Hellhounds—fifteen of them. Lakyus stood in their way, readying Demonic Sword Killineiram in a two-handed hold.

“Don’t underestimate me, demon scum!”

With a prayer to the god of water, Lakyus cut down the hellhounds leaping at her in a single stroke of her sword.

Skillfully wielding Floating Swords, which doubled as her shield, she evaded the hounds springing toward her from the side. The ones snapping at her ankles, she kicked away.

Six of the hellhounds beset Lakyus alone. The others scattered

to other adventurers in the area.

Weaker adventurers faced a single hound each. Their stronger peers took on more, and the number of monsters steadily decreased. By the time Lakyus had finished killing her six, the battles in the area had been settled.

“Anyone hurt?”

“We’re okay, Miss Lakyus!”

It couldn’t be said that they’d all made it through unscathed, but no one had suffered any serious injuries.

They were off on the right foot, considering they needed to conserve magical energy.

“We’re advancing! For right now, we’re pushing up about fifty yards! Pass it on down the line!”

Like an echo in the mountains, she heard the words *advancing fifty yards* repeating on all sides. Lakyus brandished her sword and stepped forward to take point.

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 2:41 AM

Three people jogged down the deserted streets, selecting particularly dark, narrow ones.

It was Climb, Brain, and the former orichalcum-rank thief who had joined them during the raid on Zero’s base.

Marquis Raeven’s house soldiers were all patrolling the city along with Prince Zanac. If any demons appeared outside the siege perimeter, they would subdue them. According to Marquis Raeven, the reason he’d lent them such a powerful man was that

the thief had requested to participate himself. Apparently he'd volunteered in order to return the favor for the treatment of his wounds, as well as when Climb caught him after taking a hit from Zero.

There was most likely one other reason: Marquis Raeven probably wanted Renner to feel indebted to him.

Since the thief had led them on routes where they wouldn't encounter demons, they hadn't met a single enemy.

Would they have even made it this far without him?

They were confident they could handle demons that relied on strength and speed, but the moment magic or special powers came into play, their chances grew slim. For a party makeup that depended on steel for both attacking and defending, handling any nonphysical combat would be nearly impossible.

Only those with a death wish would willingly undertake this mission, but the thief had probably agreed to participate precisely because he knew, although they'd spent only a short time together, that Climb and Brain lacked those critical skills.

Feeling grateful, Brain continued moving in a half crouch with quick steps. The atmosphere of the surrounding buildings gradually began to change, and the number of large nonresidences increased. Their destination was extremely close.

"So why are we headed to the warehouse district?" the thief asked as he glanced around the area.

Climb replied, "Princess Renner said if you wanted to collect a lot of prisoners together, you'd need a place big enough to imprison them all. Rather than gathering them in a square, it would make more sense to lock them in multiple warehouses and split up families."

“I see. By scattering families, the members can be used against one another as hostages. Then I guess we have to hurry. Well, I’ll take a roundabout way and look for the safest route I can find.”

“Thanks.”

They had to worry about what happened after they found the people, too. Considering the return trip, they knew finding a safe route ahead of time was a must. It was especially important to find a good route because there would probably be a whole crowd of people to take with them.

But Brain wondered how long their good luck would hold out.

This mission really was essentially an order for Climb to go die.

If the enemy had rounded up commoners, they had to have a reason for it, so there would definitely be someone keeping watch. From what he’d heard, the enemy mastermind, Jald-abaoth, could slay an adamantite-rank adventurer in one blow. The subordinate of such a monster would by no means be weak.

He glanced at Climb, who was running next to him.

The boy who wore pure-white armor to inform people of his connection to the princess was caressing his gauntlet. *No, he’s caressing the ring on his finger beneath it*, Brain knew.

It was an accessory he’d gotten from Gazef.

Apparently Gazef had received it from an old woman and former Blue Rose, and it was an ultra-rare item said to be created by ancient magic. He’d heard briefly that it allowed warriors to break through the limits of their strength.

Survive and return it to me. Brain remembered Gazef’s face as

he'd told the boy that.

He hadn't been wearing any particular expression. No anger, no sadness, no pity—because he knew that warriors with a master worth serving sometimes had to go to battles that might as well have been death sentences. But he had the feeling that Gazef lending such a valuable ring—giving the most support he could offer—spoke to his state of mind.

Running to join the thief up ahead after being waved on, Brain sensed a presence and looked up. He ran his eyes along the edge of the buildings—and received a shock so great he thought his heart would stop.

There was—he guessed from the figure's height and build—a little girl, blond hair fluttering behind her, on the edge of the roof of one of the warehouses. She wore a very expensive-looking dress of white material embroidered with silver. High heels that sparkled like crystals peeked out from its hem. In addition, she was wearing a necklace and earrings—all sorts of elegant accessories. She looked like the daughter of a great noble or a noblewoman from somewhere.

Even discounting the strangeness of the white mask covering her face, her figure was remarkably mysterious, sparkling ominously in the light of the curtain of fire behind them. Her ostentatious appearance combined with her faint presence made her seem to have slipped out of some spirit world.

Her outfit, the color of her hair, and the way she talked weren't the same at all. If the girl back then was born of darkness, this one had come floating down from the moon. Still, this had to be the same one. The figure burned into Brain's memory overlapped with the one before his eyes.

He was sure of it. He knew the face beneath that girl's mask

was that of the monster Shalltear Bloodfallen.

She didn't seem to have noticed them. But with that monster, distance meant nothing because the moment she detected them, they would be killed instantly. But could they leave without drawing her attention?

It didn't seem remotely possible.

Before he knew it, it felt like walking on thin ice—and it was cracking. When he worried that she might sense even his slightest tremble, a sickly cold sweat oozed from every pore in his body.

Climb and the thief were about to say something, but he stopped them by putting a finger to his lips.

They must have inferred something from how pale his face was. They both froze and concealed their presences.

What should we do? What would be best? We will absolutely die if we fight that thing. We can't run away even if we want to. The only way I managed to back then was because of the secret passageway. It'll be impossible in a place like this. But why is she here? Don't tell me she's been looking for me…

Having thought as much, Brain smiled.

There was only one answer.

"Climb, I'll buy time. You go." He turned to the thief and bobbed his head. "Take care of him."

He didn't wait for them to argue.

He jumped, grabbed ahold of the building, and pulled himself up. He didn't have the climbing skills of a thief, but it was no trouble to clamber up two stories by the strength of his warrior

arms. When he reached the roof, Shalltear was still in the same spot.

Brain's heart lurched.

He was scared—so scared he couldn't handle it. The memories of desperately fleeing last time came back to him. Still, for some weird reason, he had the courage to face her.

"…What can I do for you?" Her icy voice, a little different, since it was coming from behind the mask, reached Brain's ears.

She doesn't recognize me? Why not? Could she be…acting? I guess I should act like I'm dealing with someone else first and see how she reacts? Having made that decision, he said, "I saw a strange woman up on the roof. What are you guys doing in the capital?"

"Why should I have to tell you? Or rather, what is a human even doing here? Are you the only one who made it this far?"

His heart was racing. He wanted to know how far away the others had gotten, but he couldn't look. He raised his voice a bit while evading her question. "Were you looking for someone else? Not me?"

"You? Why would I be looking for you?"

"This is the second time we've met, isn't it? I couldn't forget your beautiful face."

Shalltear's hand moved to touch her mask. "…Perhaps you have the wrong girl?"

For a split second, Brain was stunned. Maybe he was mistaking her? But he immediately discarded that idea.

It definitely wasn't someone else.

He couldn't be sure of the voice, since it was coming from behind the mask, and he didn't have a perfect ear, but there was only one Shalltear Bloodfallen in this world, and there was no way Brain could mistake her.

Is this that thing where it's hard to remember someone so insignificant?

If she wasn't being sarcastic and really didn't remember him, it had to mean that she just hadn't taken very much interest in him. From someone as dominant as Shalltear, that was neither arrogance nor hubris.

"Ahh, sorry. Yeah…you're right. This is our first time meeting."

"Oh? Well, if you've come around, that's fine with me…but maybe I should kill you? Do you want to die or live? If you bow down to the ground and lick my shoes, it might improve my mood."

"Sorry, not interested."

Brain exhaled slowly and lowered his hips, assuming a position from which he could draw his sword. The martial art he activated was, naturally, Domain. Of course, he knew it wouldn't work on her.

Shalltear sighed with annoyance and lightly scratched her head. "What a pain that you can't see the difference between our abilities…"

No, I'm well aware of it. Brain answered Shalltear's grumble to herself in his head as he watched her.

He was so aware of how terrible she was it made him sick. *So*

why aren't I running away? Brain wondered, and the corners of his lips curled up.

Not a single ripple appeared on the lake of his heart. Even before such a horrible being—from whom he'd fled, abandoning everything—it remained surprisingly tranquil.

Shalltear approached him casually. Her movements were exactly the same as last time. In that case, he was sure to meet crushing defeat. Everything he'd spent his life doing would be shattered for kicks.

I guess…that's how it goes.

Brain was terrified.

Maybe it was pathetic; he had been in plenty of life-or-death duels before. But he couldn't lie.

He was scared.

His opponent was an overwhelmingly powerful being who could easily take his life. If his battles up till now had been life or death, this would be leaping off a sheer cliff.

He may have been prepared for death in battle, but he wasn't prepared for suicide.

Strangely, however, the stabbing feeling in his chest, the desire to run away at full speed that he'd had since arriving in the capital, was gone.

Suddenly, he remembered a view of a young man's back.

That boy was much younger than himself. Though trembling, he had stood with all his might against an overwhelming surge of murderous intent.

Brain smiled a melancholy smile.

That old man had said that sometimes humans could unlock unbelievable levels of power. But Brain felt it was probably impossible for himself.

He couldn't muster all his strength in service of the princess like Climb, and he couldn't devote himself to the people and the king like Gazef. People capable of those feats were fundamentally different from Brain. He was a selfish person who'd lived his life thinking only of himself.

But…would buying time for Climb cancel that out…?

One step and then another. Shalltear, with her left pinkie finger raised, closed in at a bizarrely slow pace.

Was his extreme focus making time decelerate for him, or had Shalltear deliberately slowed her steps to tease him? Brain felt that either possibility was equally likely and grinned. *That's what she's like.*

His encounter with her had lasted only a few short minutes, but he had the feeling he understood her personality better than that of any other woman he'd ever known.

Two more steps, I guess? Until the end of my days with a sword…

He had fled. But he hadn't let go of his weapon.

He lived his life alongside his sword, so it was probably right to die alongside it.

He made up his mind.

It was as though Brain had revealed himself to her in order to

reach this decision.

"Wielding this sword is…my life, huh."

With those words, he decided to forget everything. His opponent was a being of distant heights. He couldn't afford to waste his energy on pointless thoughts any longer.

He unleashed Divine Strike, a martial art that was impossible to perceive.

But even using Domain and Divine Strike at the same time, he couldn't reach the monster before his eyes. The attack was still so slow she could catch his sword by the ridge on the flat of the blade with no trouble. So that was why…he used one more martial art.

He saw the face of Gazef Stronoff in his mind.

If he hadn't met him in the capital, even if he had made it to this point, he definitely wouldn't have thought to use it.

But all the people he'd met here changed his mind.

Brain was grateful to the man who was once his greatest enemy, someone to overcome, and was now his rival.

He accepted the reality that he might die here.

It's belated, but…thanks, my friend and rival.

The thought alone lightened Brain's mood. Now he could let everything go, no more hesitating. The humiliation he once felt was gone.

"Ahhhhhhhgh!" Brain's lips parted, and he bellowed with the scream of a werethrush. It was a war cry that contained all his

strength, poured out from the bottom of his soul.

He unleashed an ultra-fast Divine Strike against the opponent he sensed with Domain. But that wasn't all. Divine Strike wasn't speeding up a single swipe of his sword.

The attack was—

—four simultaneous slashes.

During the battle where Brain Unglaus had first learned defeat —Gazef Stronoff had used this very martial art.

Brain had admired him and practiced the move over and over, all the while lying to himself, saying he was doing it to know his enemy. Then, in suffering, he forbid himself to use it.

But now, at this moment, all of Brain's shackles had come off, and he used it without hesitation.

"Fourfold Slash of Light!"

Actually, Fourfold Slash of Light had a major weakness.

Unleashing four strikes at once was a burden too great for the user's body to bear, so the attacks would go all over the place. Due to the move's low chances of hitting its target, even its inventor, Gazef, ended up reserving it for use against multiple enemies —when he was surrounded, for instance.

Fourfold Slash of Light had fewer strokes than Sixfold Slash of Light, so it was somehow manageable to direct them all at one opponent, but landing all of them was still a rare feat.

There was no way such a haphazard attack would hit Shalltear Bloodfallen. Brain was well aware of that.

But there was a move Gazef Stronoff didn't possess that Brain did, and it supported his accuracy within its range to an astonishing degree: Domain.

The four errant slashes were redirected with the help of Domain's superhuman precision targeting, and the blades traveled the arcs Brain saw in his mind.

Four simultaneous, ultra-fast slashes that would absolutely hit their target…

This blow would be difficult for even vaunted heroes—humans who had surpassed human capability—to block. It would be nearly impossible to block all four slashes with the physical abilities of a member of the human race. It was an attack that was truly beyond human.

But Shalltear Bloodfallen stood in the uppermost heights of ability, where no one could surpass her. From the point of view of someone like that, those four divinely fast attacks might as well have been moving at a snail's pace.

"Hmph," she scoffed. And her left hand blurred, moving even faster.

A hard sound like the clang of metal rang through the air—the four attacks and blocks had happened so fast that the sounds became one.

So in other words…

Shalltear blocked all four slashes, and not a single blade reached her.

She shrugged. She laughed under her mask to think that she had wasted time going along with this child's play—not at the warrior in front of her but at herself for being so foolish as to en-

tertain it for even a minute.

But the next moment, her eyes widened slightly.

If someone who could numerically compare the pair's abilities were present, they would have given Brain thunderous applause. They would have applauded him with the shock and respect afforded to one who caused the sun to rise in the west.

Yes, such was Brain's miracle.

"…Huh?"

Shalltear was looking at the nail of her left pinkie finger—it was damaged. Part of it was missing—less than a third of an inch, but still.

Shalltear thought back over their exchange. Her nail had been severed at exactly the part she'd been using to block the slashes.

As she recalled, the four slashes had come two from above and two from below—precisely sandwiching the spot she was using to block.

"…You did that on purpose?"

"Pft! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The man before her suddenly started to laugh.

Shalltear wondered if he'd gone insane but then thought twice and decided it was something else.

He must be laughing at the fact that he cut off my fingernail. But she didn't understand. *So he cut off my fingernail—what's the big deal?*

Shalltear's fingernails and fangs were treated as natural

weapons; as such, they could be broken with weapon-breaking skills. Since they would grow back as life force was recovered with healing magic, they broke more easily than other weapons at the same level. They weren't so great. They couldn't even compare with her magic item, the Pipette Lance.

So she had no idea why this guy had burst out laughing.

You cut my pinkie fingernail a little bit, so what? What does it matter? She looked at the other four nails on her left hand. Even her pinkie finger was still long enough to rip easily into human flesh, despite being shorter.

"It seems you pass as a nail clipper…"

The man opened his eyes wide with ever-increasing jubilance. "Thank you! For complimenting me. My sword…my life…hasn't been in vain. I reached, just barely, that infinitely tall peak."

I'm not complimenting you.

She'd meant it sarcastically.

But his reply seemed to be genuine. Meaning this man was delighted to be called a nail clipper.

Does this guy have a screw loose? When she thought about it, he had been saying weird things ever since they met. *Anyhow, he's creepy, so I'll kill him and get it over with.*

Having decided that, she was about to charge, when—

She received word from Demiurge that he'd started the battle.

She knew what that meant. She looked over without thinking, but she couldn't sense the presence she was looking for.

“Because of his ring…?”

One of the rings their master wore had the power to hide him completely from detection abilities. The guardians had all been given one as well, but this ring was powerful enough to erase even the presence of the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

Frustrated that she couldn’t sense her master, she faced forward again, but the mentally disturbed man who had been standing there was gone.

Ah! I forgot about the weirdo!

When she glanced around, she saw him watching her as he jumped down to street level. He’d run to the edge of the roof while she was distracted.

Surely there’s no way a weak human like you can escape me!

If I use a spell to slow down time, I can catch up before he hits the ground. She made a prompt judgment and cast a spell. “Time Accelerator!”

As the world turned viscous, Shalltear moved to the spot the man had jumped from. When she looked down, she saw a slowly descending human. While this spell was active, it wasn’t possible to harm anyone, but one could, for example, get down to the street first and ambush them.

That’ll be good. Since I’ll be down there anyway, I’ll open my arms and catch him. Being embraced by a voluptuous beauty like me should make that human happy.

Smiling as she imagined his expression, she moved to descend before her spell ran out. That was when she realized there was more than one human.

Who are they?

It was someone in white full plate armor and a man who seemed like a thief.

Brain landed on the street and looked up. Shalltear wasn't there.

She's not chasing me?! Or is she giving herself a handicap like she did last time?

He hadn't run because he believed he could get away. He just thought that he could buy more time for Climb and the thief as they escaped if he was down low rather than up high.

Everything he was doing was so those two could escape. That was why he'd begun this chase.

But just as he was about to start running, he saw something he couldn't believe. Climb and the thief were there waving him over.

What the—?!

He felt like his head was going to start steaming, mostly from anger—and panic.

With a desperate expression, Brain went to them as fast as he could and, grabbing them by the scruff of their necks, set off running. It would have been much faster to run normally, but Brain was too out of sorts to realize that.

He ran as best he could, turning around again and again to make sure Shalltear wasn't chasing them, and then slammed Climb up against a wall. He hadn't controlled his strength well, so Climb bounced off and sunk to the ground.

"Why?! Why didn't you go?!" His emotion was violent, but he

mobilized what little reason he had in order to not yell.

"W-well, because…"

He grabbed Climb as he was staggering to his feet. "Because what, huh?! Are you gonna tell me you were worried or something?! I told you to go!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. I don't know what happened back there, but you didn't explain yourself well enough. This isn't only Climb's fault!"

Hearing the thief's remarks, Brain began to regain his composure. The thief was right—he hadn't said enough. He breathed deeply in and out. "…Sorry, Climb. I guess I went a little nuts there."

"Oh no, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I shouldn't have disregarded what you said."

"No, this was my fault. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"Hey, Mr. Unglaus. What the hell happened? We haven't known each other long, but that wasn't you just now. You were acting like…I'm not sure how to put this, but like a rookie who had just picked up a sword."

"It's too dangerous to stop here. Let's talk on the move. For now, I'll just say that I found a monster as strong as Sebas."

The three of them walked with caution. It was only luck that Brain hadn't run into one of Jaldabaoth's subordinates when he'd fled haphazardly. If they expected to continue to have that kind of luck, they'd be in for trouble.

"But…you're unharmed, so…did you win by a landslide…or did

you settle things by negotiating?"

"No. I used my katana and…yes, I cut her fingernail."

The moment he put it into words, he was filled with an impossible amount of joy. *Yes, I cut the fingernail of that absolute monster Shalltear Bloodfallen.*

"I cut her fingernail," Brain repeated. He nearly lost himself in the glee welling up from the bottom of his heart and had to hold it back. Still, he couldn't keep his voice from shaking with emotion.

"I—I see… You cut her fingernail… W-well, you did do it with a katana, so that is pretty awesome…" The shaken thief's voice also trembled.

"…You cut the fingernail of someone as strong as Sir Sebas, huh? So yeah, that is pretty awesome…I think?"

"Y—? Yeah, wouldn't expect less from Brain Unglaus!"

Brain desperately held back a goofy grin as he bathed in their praise. Then he shook his head to clear away the emotions. "Climb, I won't treat you like a kid anymore. You get it because you've seen Sir Sebas, right? There are plenty of guys stronger than me. Momon from Raven Black is probably in the same realm as Sir Sebas. That's why I want you to remember this. When I say run, you run. If you stay, you'll only be in the way. Promise you'll follow my orders without question."

"U-understood."

"Okay, then. You work for the princess, right? That's why you were able to withstand Sebas's murderous aura. So don't mix up your priorities!" Brain patted Climb on the shoulder and cast his eyes back in the direction he ran from.

Why isn't she coming after me? There must be some reason. I don't even know why she was here… Don't tell me she's here for something in the warehouse district… Then he remembered what Renner had said. *Could she be looking for the same item as Jald-abaoth? That would mean…he's working for her?!*

If a monster as ultra-powerful as Shalltear was here, the correct course of action was to give up on their objective and run away. But could he convince Climb of that? Climb had just agreed to follow his orders, so if he said to retreat, Climb would probably comply.

Is that a good thing?

It wasn't wrong to run, if he wanted to keep Climb alive. But there are times a person has to choose to stand for something more important than their life. Climb was already under orders from Renner to basically die, so maybe this was one of those times?

He didn't know exactly how the boy Climb—just Climb—had lived or why he'd devoted himself to the Golden Princess. Still, he didn't feel it would be right for an outsider to change his will to follow Princess Renner's orders.

Brain grabbed the thief and asked, taking care that Climb couldn't hear, "Hey, is it okay to take Climb with us any farther? I wonder if it wouldn't be better for him to return safely, even if he can't fulfill his mission?"

"…You're a nice guy."

"Cut the pointless brownnosing. And I think you're the nice guy, volunteering for this super-dangerous job."

The thief grinned, blushing, and glanced at the boy who seemed curious as to what they were talking about.

“I guess, how do I put this…? This kid giving his all reminds me of my lost past… In other words, I’ve grown fond of him during the short time we’ve been together. Anyhow, I think I have a general understanding of what you’re thinking. You’re not wrong, but…” The thief’s eyes gleamed with a piercing strength. “This is how he’s chosen to live. Someone else shouldn’t distort that.”

Brain’s breath caught.

“I like that kid. Maybe it’s because we survived a deadly battle together, but when I look into his eyes, I can pretty much read his feelings for the princess. He’s unbelievable. He’s got a reckless, ridiculous wish. That’s exactly why, as a thief…I want to let him aim for the most valuable treasure in the kingdom.”

“…Yeah. He might die, but he decided it himself.” Brain’s resolve solidified. “Then let’s hurry on. There’s no telling when Shalltear will come after us.”

2

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:38 AM

The last of the adventurers slipped by the barricade and withdrew to the rear. This group of guards had orders to defend this position with their lives until the adventurers had recovered from their wounds.

The gap in the barricade—the space that had been opened to let the adventurers through—was immediately barred with lumber.

There was no one any farther ahead of them. In other words,

this was the front line.

Looking behind them, they saw the ragged figures of the retreating adventurers. Their armor was covered with fresh gashes and burns. It had also been dyed with splotches of blood.

Beyond them, the wall of flames blazed. They'd come a little over 160 yards into enemy territory. Though they were in their familiar capital, things felt off. It was like they'd entered some alternate, surreal world.

The buildings in the area had all collapsed. The guards were manning the barricade they'd built with the time the adventurers bought for them, but although it had seemed like the ultimate obstruction a little while ago, it was starting to look incredibly flimsy. Like it would fall with hardly any effort at all.

"It's okay. The monsters didn't chase after the adventurers. The enemy isn't planning on attacking. They want to fortify their defenses, just like us. We're fine. We won't get attacked."

Someone else said the same thing again. In order to distract themselves from the extreme anxiety, they repeated it over and over like a prayer out of a desire to return home alive.

There were forty-five guards defending this barricade. They carried long spears and wore leather armor. One of the men had a helmet on. This was Bona Ingre, one of several captains.

He may have been called a "captain of the guard," but he was no different from an ordinary guard. He didn't have a particularly superior physique nor was he a terribly quick thinker. The younger guards were probably stronger. The truth is, he'd acquired the rank only because he was forty and had been a guard for so long that when a position opened up and no one else was suitable, he slipped into it.

His face was pale, and he was gripping his spear so hard his knuckles had turned white. His legs were shaking. The reason he didn't shift his gaze was probably because looking around was scarier. He seemed so unreliable that the anxiety of the other guards grew.

But this was the first time he'd ever risked his life in battle, so it probably couldn't be helped.

Yes, the kingdom went to the Katze Plain each year for the war with the empire, but the role of the guards was to defend the city, so they weren't dispatched to the front. For that reason, the job was the most desired one for citizens who didn't want to go to war. But now…

Up until now, he might have gotten into some verbal scuffles with drunkards, but he only rarely had to jump in to stop a knife fight, so he had never experienced a more frightening situation than that very moment. The only reason he could resist the urge to run away was that he was sure he wouldn't be forgiven for deserting.

Even if they were lenient, the whole reason he was exempt from fighting in the war with the empire was his duty to protect the city; if he couldn't do that, they would definitely force him to go to the front next time.

"If I get out of this alive, I'm going to quit being a guard," Bona grumbled.

Several guards near him agreed.

"Do you remember what the adventurers were saying?"

"You mean that they encountered hellhounds, greater hellhounds, gazer devils, and demon swarms?"

“Yeah. Does anyone have an idea what kind of monsters those are? Like, maybe if they have any weak points or if there are things that work well against them?”

There was no response. Everyone just looked at one another.

Noticing their discontent and their undisguised looks that said, *This guy’s useless*, he turned his anger elsewhere. “Shit! The adventurers should have given us more details!”

The adventurers who had given the guards the monster information had been heavily injured and in the middle of a desperate retreat. For that reason, it had been all they could do to just give the names; they didn’t have the time or energy to describe appearances or attack methods.

It was harsh to blame them for that. It was a failure of the commanders that, due to the lack of coordination between the guards and adventurers, information had not been shared efficiently, and the guards had to man the defensive line completely uninformed. And actually, not all the guard groups were operating without any idea of what was coming. Some units in the same conditions had gotten information.

Those groups sent a handful of members to help transport the adventurers to the rear, during which they could ask the details of the situation.

The reason this company hadn’t done that was probably because Bona, the leader, hadn’t come up with such a plan and also because he thought it would be outrageous to reduce the number of guards defending the barricade.

“They’re probably getting paid more than us, so they should try harder and actually risk their lives!”

A few people agreed as Bona jeered.

“We’ll risk our lives, too! So they should keep fighting, not retreat, right?” Bona asked the guards in the area. Oblivious to the cold stares from the guards standing farther away, he and the people around him shouted their complaints about the adventurers.

“Here they come!” called one guard who had remained on watch without shifting his gaze an inch.

Bona looked nauseated.

Everyone saw the demons walking toward them down the street.

The one at the head of the line was like a cross between a frog and a human. Its skin was a jaundiced color and gleamed with something mucus-like. Here and there on its hugely swollen body were faces, like the impressions of human heads forced against the skin from the inside.

Its straight mouth seemed big enough to eat a person whole, and when it opened, an unusually long tongue licked the air.

Hellhounds accompanied the froggy monster as if waiting for a meal.

And in the back were humanoids who appeared as though all their skin had been ripped off and were instead coated in a slimy black liquid.

Fifteen hounds, one fat demon, and six skinless demons that had been flayed.

“There’re too many of them!” Bona boomed. “We can’t do this! Run!”

“Shut the hell up!” someone screamed at him. “Can you be

quiet for one damn second?!”

Bona gave a little shriek, but the guard who had yelled at him ignored it and turned to face the others with a tense expression. “Listen up! All you have to do is thrust with your spears! It’s not our job to kill them! We just have to buy time! It’s okay! We can live through this!”

At the words *live through this* a few guards gathered, and then a few more.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

Faces frozen in fear, they fanned out and held up their spears.

“You, too!”

Someone dragged Bona over to his appointed position. They couldn’t afford to let him stand around uselessly.

The hounds howled and tore into the barricade, trying to snap it apart. They crunched through the lumber with shocking speed. The guards thrust their spears into the gaps.

Here and there they heard a hound’s short yelp. Even the ones who hadn’t been stabbed moved away from the barricade in confusion. Then they paced around, growling deep in their throats as they took in the situation.

Having calmed down a bit, the guards jabbed with their spears any time a hound approached. When they did, it would immediately go away.

The guards’ faces brightened.

The way the demons in the back just grinned creepily and didn’t make a move was worrying, but if time kept passing like

this, that was fine. It wasn't as if they were there to defeat the demons.

"Wh-what?!" one of the guards cried out in terror at the scene taking place before him.

The hounds all formed ranks, lining up abreast just past the reach of the spears.

This behavior, different from the reckless charge from before, made the guards nervous. If they could've had some detailed knowledge about the monsters, they might have had a different way to cope, but as it was, all they could do was thrust their spears between the gaps in the barricade beams. They didn't have any specific ways to respond to their opponents' actions.

As they stood with their spears, ready to thrust, the hounds opened their mouths—so wide their jaws appeared to detach. The red in the back of their throats wasn't just the color of their oral cavities.

All at once, the crimson flames licked the barricade. The guards' entire field of vision turned red as if the whole barricade had burst into flames.

It was an intense degree of firepower but too short to completely burn up the barricade. The same could not be said of the guards who'd been standing by behind it.

Screams. Some had charred their eyes while others had inhaled the flames, burning both their esophagus and lungs. They fell to the ground. The only ones who survived were the ones who'd been on the edges; all the guards in center positions had taken direct hits and breathed their last.

"I—I can't take this anymore!"

It was on the tips of everyone's tongues, and the first one to say it was Bona. His subsequent actions were speedy. He cast away his spear and threw off his helmet. Having made himself a little lighter, he bolted.

The remaining guards were stunned. It wasn't as if they hadn't considered the possibility of him fleeing, but to be so magnificently abandoned left them speechless.

Bona ran at a speed that suggested that humans grew faster the more trapped they felt. They watched him go, mouths gaping.

However, his escape came to an end when a demon fell down on him.

The demon with the bloated body flew despite its lack of wings and dropped heavily onto Bona. It sounded like dry twigs snapping.

They heard a voice sniffling in pain. Although the demon could have killed him easily, it chose not to. From the demon's next move, they knew it was not out of mercy.

It lifted Bona into the air.

Then it opened its mouth and gobbled him up. Its already swollen stomach didn't expand to accommodate him, but there was one significant change. Among the faces pressed into its body, a new one appeared.

It was hard to tell, but it appeared to be Bona's.

The guards couldn't move behind the barricade as they listened to it breaking down.

Barricade, ha. They had never had a wall.

The demons came over the broken obstacle and began surrounding the guards.

Quiet sobs could be heard—the crying of people who knew they would die.

Next came the chuckles of the demons—laughing at the foolish humans.

One guard, looking up at the night sky as if making an appeal to the gods, saw something unexpected.

It was a strange party, approaching at high speed. Two people were carrying a warrior in raven-black armor. The warrior's crimson cape fluttered out behind him, and in either hand, he carried a huge sword.

"Toss me!"

Despite the distance, the guard had the feeling he heard a shout.

It turned out to be true, since the two flying people let go. The warrior accelerated, as if an unseen power had given him a shove from behind, and descended to the ground in a gentle arc. He glided smoothly along the road as if friction didn't slow his movement, cutting down a hellhound in his path before finally coming to a stop.

It was such a dramatic entrance that allies and enemies alike stopped what they were doing. His voice carried much better in the silence.

"I'm Momon, an adventurer. I'll take your place. You guys can fall back."

At first, they couldn't understand what the dark warrior was

saying, but the barking of several hellhounds brought them back to their senses. He was their long-awaited backup.

“Hellhounds… Just these? Even double this wouldn’t have been very many.”

The hellhounds attacked from every direction to brutally slaughter the dark warrior Momon. They encircled him completely, not leaving a single gap.

If he used his swords to block, some would get around, bite into him, and rip him apart. If he sliced through them, the remaining ones would leap at him. He’d get bodychecked by the hellhounds, his stance would crumple, and he wouldn’t be able to evade their next assault.

This assault was practically the definition of attacking with sheer numbers.

It was no wonder the guards’ expressions were all so pained. But they had no idea what the truly strong were capable of.

A giant sword arced through the air, causing a massive gust of wind.

Everyone with eyes fell speechless.

It was a single slicing attack. An ordinary person would have been able to cut through one enemy at most. But because of who was holding the sword, this slice could surpass the ordinary.

Four of the hellhounds that had seemed invincible to the guards fell onto the road in pieces.

But perhaps because he’d swung as hard as he could, Momon’s body was leaning off-balance. There were still unharmed hellhounds remaining. If he wasn’t centered, he wouldn’t be able to

evade their follow-up attacks.

He may have been wearing tough armor, but the hellhounds' fangs were sharp, and they had claws that could rip up iron. There was no way he would get away unscathed if so many attacked him at once.

The guards imagined the adventurer who had come to save them covered in wounds.

But that was too hasty a conclusion.

Momon didn't even try to force his listing body back but instead leaned into the flow to whirl around. His crimson cape fluttered behind him, creating a blazing swirl. With the nimble movements of a dancer, he planted his feet again, and his great swords howled as he swept them from left to right.

He sent the remaining hellhounds tumbling down the street. None of them could move properly anymore.

"In just…two slashes?"

The guard's murmur spoke for everyone. Having witnessed such a feat, what other words could possibly come to mind?

"So what's left? An overeater and some gazer devils? How boring!"

Leaving the guards with that murmured remark, Momon strode toward the demons. He might as well have been taking a stroll in a park, he was so unguarded. Normally, someone would have called out to stop him, but after what they'd just seen, no one felt it was necessary.

The role of ordinary people was to watch the powerful warriors go.

Perhaps unable to withstand the pressure of Momon's casual approach, the gazer devils emitted strange screams and attacked.

A single blow.

Sliced-up bodies flew every which way.

Momon's feet kept moving all the while. He continued his casual stroll as if he was walking through an empty meadow, as if the devils had never existed.

"Whoa…"

It most likely wasn't in reaction to the guard's voice, but the overeater opened its mouth—wide like a snake about to swallow its prey whole. Something like a flame flickered deep inside. The agony on the human faces in its body intensified. It was about to belch a scream of souls.

The wailings of the expiring souls it had eaten caused the living to writhe in agony as their spirits withered.

But before the overeater could finish—*bam*—it went flying.

Momon had hurled his huge sword to cut through the demon's head, and the monster fell to the ground.

"They're no problem as long as you kill them before they scream," Momon said simply and pulled his sword out of the corpse.

It took less than a minute. The apparently unbeatable demons were annihilated.

The guards cheered. Their voices rose in the soulful roar of those who had escaped death.

Bathing in their surge of joy, Momon spoke to them quietly. “The adventurers should be mounting a counterattack operation soon. Hold this location just a little longer… Well, the demons were routed, so I doubt they’ll attack again here for a while. Nabe, Evileye, if you please.” The two casters landed and then lifted him up. Momon left the guards with a final call from the air. “I’m going to hurry on to subdue the enemy mastermind. Until then, protect the citizens behind you. I’m counting on you!”

They sighed as they watched the party fly away.

With such an amazing hero telling them to do so, it would be shameful if they didn’t defend this line with their lives.

“Hey, rebuild the barricade! We need to keep holding them back. Don’t even think about what will happen if they break through!”

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:44 AM

The second charging squad, comprised of adventurers who were mythril rank or higher, began advancing with Lakyus at the front and Tina at her side.

At Lakyus’s departure, she had been asked more than once to reconsider. People said that someone who could use resurrection magic shouldn’t be on the front line. But whether she went or not made a huge difference in the force’s strength. Momon’s confrontation with Jaldabaoth was what they really needed to be prioritizing, so she couldn’t very well hang back.

The group avoided following Momon by entering via a different street and headed for their primary objective, the place where the guards were supposed to have erected a barricade, but what they saw when they arrived was a road dyed red, the scene of a

brutal slaughter, strewn with scraps of flesh. Of course, the barricade had also been completely destroyed; there was no sign of it.

The adventurers noisily bunched up and proceeded farther in, but they didn't even make it thirty yards before entering combat with a group of demons that came out of a side street.

As soon as the battle started, the adventurers, who were individually stronger than the demons, were ahead.

But the tables gradually turned. The cause was the numbers that outweighed the adventurers' individual strengths. There were so many demons, it felt like every single one in the region was there.

"Don't fall back! Keep pushing!" Lakyus shouted after casting support magic on everyone. Of course, none of the adventurers was falling back. They knew how important this operation was—they weren't about to retreat.

Evileye's role was to stay close to Momon and intercept anything getting in his way, and their mission was to keep the demons at bay by keeping the pressure on.

In that sense, clashing with this many head-on was the greatest support they could give to Momon. The longer this battle raged, the better the chance of success for him and Evileye.

Shouts and swords rang out. Spells went flying, skills were activated, Fire Breath burned people up. All the sounds overlapped.

Lakyus checked the status of the battle and grimaced. The murmur of one adventurer had lodged itself in the back of her mind: *The demons are gradually getting stronger*.

Could it be that a gate to whatever world the demons live in has opened, and stronger and stronger demons are being sum-

moned through it? Could this wall of fire be a border? What will happen if time keeps passing like this? Even if we defeat Jaldabaoth, will the capital go back to normal? Could this all be for nothing?

"Nonsense!" she scoffed and banished the countless worries from her mind.

You don't know anything until you try. That was why Lakyus swung her sword.

"Fire!"

One of the Floating Swords hanging in the air near her shoulder moved straight up and launched according to her order. The sword ripped through the sky and pierced the open mouth of a hellhound leaping to attack. The hound's corpse vanished without a trace.

Lakyus glanced around and saw that they were completely surrounded. They'd ceased advancing some time ago, and the multilayered ring of enemies around them showed no sign of thinning. All she could do now was slash her sword and fight.

The vanguard put away their chipped and broken weapons and readied their spares. Casters who had run out of magical energy began casting with scrolls and wands. They were running out of resources.

Orichalcum-rank adventurers formed a protective circle around the wounded mythril-rank adventurers who were completely out of magical energy, but still…

This is bad… At this rate, we're going to be worn down to nothing. It's still not over? Haven't you beaten Jaldabaoth yet?

Hearing a scream, she whipped her head around and saw an

adventurer crumple under the fierce blow of a demon.

"Tch!"

Faster than Lakyus could charge, Tina leaped at the enemy to plug up the hole that had formed.

The adventurers behind the injured warrior dragged him in. He wasn't dead, but his terrible condition was obvious. The fact that no one cast a healing spell illustrated how much magical energy the priests and other faith casters had already used up.

All we can do is pull out…

If the balance shifted, they would be swallowed up in an instant. Lakyus couldn't let them die. She needed to take action with an eye on what they would do in the event Momon was defeated.

It was nearly impossible to retreat with a completely exhausted body. They needed to fall back while they still had a bit of energy remaining.

"Wi—!" She was about to shout *Withdraw!* when she gasped at the sight of a grotesque demon dropping softly out of the sky.

It was nearly ten feet tall. It had a muscular body, but it was covered in reptilian scales. Its snakelike tail writhed.

Its head was the skull of a goat. Pale-blue flames blazed wildly in its gaping black orbits.

Its arms were thick, and in its hands, it gripped a gigantic maul.

It spread the bat wings that had been folded up on its back. When it beat them, a cold wind blew, and soul-crushing fear as-

sailed Lakyus. Since she was protected by fear-resisting magic, she didn't panic, but this demonstration was enough for her to see that this demon was far stronger than the ones they'd fought so far.

Sweat oozed out of her pores.

"Oh no..."

If she hadn't been short on magical energy and team members, she probably could have won somehow. If she had been able to look up information about their opponent before the battle, she would have no doubt been victorious. But under the current circumstances, she had virtually no chance. First off, Evileye, who possessed a vast amount of knowledge and could use powerful magic, was gone. Gagaran, who would block the enemy's weapon and counter, wasn't there, either. Tia, who could deftly evade the enemy's attacks and make an aggressive strike with her ninjutsu, was also missing. There were only two of them present, and they were exhausted.

When she looked at Tina, the response was a ready nod.

Just as Lakyus, gripping Demonic Sword Killineiram tightly, was about to stride toward the demon, a nearby orichalcum-rank adventurer grabbed her shoulders and shouted, "We'll hold it here! You should run!"

Lakyus was caught off guard.

He rapidly continued, "If you survive, you can use resurrection magic on us, so you have to make it back even if the rest of us don't—for yourself and the people you could bring back to life!"

The man's honest face and his chivalrous grin were overflowing with the charisma expected of an orichalcum-rank adventurer. All the sympathetic adventurers nodded.

Objectively, what they said was correct. She could do more by staying alive and reviving those who fell here instead of risking her life to buy time.

"I heard resurrection spells take tremendous resources, but please do it on the house for us!"

"Isn't the princess paying?!"

"Let's make the nobles pay! They should at least put up some cash!"

With the relaxed bearing of people on their way to a picnic, a handful of adventurers left the circle. There'd been no gesture or wink. As if they had come to a collective decision, they moved in perfect harmony with one another to stand before the demon.

Seeing the cheerful attitudes of the ones who had resolved to face this life-or-death battle, Lakyus bit her lip and turned her back.

"Break through! Summon all your strength! After this, all you need is the energy to run!"

No sooner had she yelled than she herself was charging into the demon mob with Killineiram. For defense, she could depend on only magic and her armor now. She would abandon herself to the most extreme extent possible and carve a trail of blood.

She gritted her teeth against all sorts of pains—her flesh being gouged, hard objects stabbing at her—and endured it. She considered her health calmly and waited till the last second before casting a silent healing spell. Lakyus had to make it back alive, but if she didn't throw herself into battle here, they wouldn't break through.

"Hrrrraaaagh!" She poured the majority of her remaining

magic into Killineiram. The sword sparkled bright, like the twinkling of stars, and the blade grew.

"Super Art: Dark Blade Mega Impaaact!"

A pitch-black explosion raged to the side as she swung. The low-level demons were swallowed up by the burst of neutral energy and disappeared one after another.

It hadn't actually been necessary for her to shout the move's name. It was super-effective, and yet…

"Not even…close?"

The scene before her tired eyes was a thick wall of demons, albeit low-level ones. She'd blown away so many, but the hole was already filled.

Is it even possible to break through? The creeping anxiety annoyed her, and she swung Killineiram, whose blade had gone back to normal size.

Just then, behind the demons, she saw a metallic flash and heard a man roar.

"Sixfold Slash of Light!"

The six cuts sliced into the demons.

"Sixfold Slash of Light! Flow Acceleration! Hrgh!"

Seven demons fell in pieces like butter under a hot knife. The other monsters stopped what they were doing and shrank from the sharpness—it seemed like there was nothing Razor Edge couldn't cut.

"Crush them!"

At Gazef's shout, spears behind him came forward in a synchronized thrust.

There was no mistaking those steely gleams. Behind him were more than a few dozen—countless—spears, thrusting forward to pierce the demons. The knights and soldiers who had been defending the castle, an army of several hundred, flooded the street.

The demons recoiled from the military force double their size, loosening their circle around the adventurers. A jubilant cheer went up, and the battered adventurers began retreating under the protection of the soldiers.

"What is Captain Stronoff doing here?!"

I thought he stayed behind to defend the castle and the royal family! He must have heard her question, because he turned to face a specific direction.

When Lakyus followed his gaze, her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

An old man was standing there under the protection of four priests and four arcane casters. On his head was the crown that, of all the people in the kingdom, only he was allowed to wear. And he was clad in armor.

The king, Ramposa III.

This is way too dangerous.

Yes, he was wearing armor, but some of the demons could pierce steel like it was nothing. And he may have had guards, but there was still the possibility that area-of-effect spells could break through their defenses and hurt him. An ordinary human like the king would probably die instantly if he was caught in an area-of-effect spell. Lakyus had resurrection magic, but there was no way

he would be able to withstand the loss of life force that accompanied the resurrection process.

“This is what His Majesty said: ‘Are you fellows supposed to protect this castle, this hunk of stone, or me?’ There could only be one answer. Our duty is to protect the king! So our battle takes place here! Charge!”

An earthshaking battle cry went up, and the army made a daring offensive.

It was the numbers against numbers in a violent clash. The moment it looked like they would stage a comeback, an orichalcum-rank adventurer went flying into a wall, painting a bright-red flower.

“Ooooooonnngh!” A giant demon howled as if to say, *Come at me*, and the soldiers froze.

There were some monsters that couldn’t be beaten with numbers.

“Captain Stronoff! Lend us your strength!”

“You got it.”

Lakyus’s eyes widened when she heard the voices that joined the fray next.

“Hup, hold on! Think you might need help from a previously outstanding warrior?”

“There’s also a ninja who plans on being outstanding in the future.”

She would never mistake those voices, but she couldn’t believe it. Shocked, she shouted, “Gagaran! Tia!”

The two familiar faces slowly came into view. They had their usual gear equipped and looked ready to fight at any moment.

“Hey there. If we had just kept sleeping, we would’ve lost our edge, so we asked Captain Stronoff to bring us along!”

“We can fight.”

That can’t be true. Combat immediately following resurrection was in no way advisable. It was normal to rest until one became accustomed to the gap between one’s current and former ability, and in the first place, they should have been totally drained. Despite all that, they stood to join the fray because they knew how important this battle was.

They were here to back up everyone who had fought so far.

Lakyus prayed with all her heart—that Momon would defeat Jaldabaoth and that he would drive the demon mob out of the city.

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:46 AM

“There he is.”

Ahead of them was a square, and the masked demon was standing imposingly in the center of it, making no attempt to hide. They didn’t see any other demons in the area, but Evileye wasn’t stupid enough to believe they weren’t there.

Their opponent registered their rapidly approaching presences and gave an elegant bow. There was only one thing that could explain that confidence.

“Is this a trap…? What should we do, Sir Momon?”

“No matter what’s waiting for us, our only option is to fight our way through.”

“You’re exactly right.”

Evileye figured that Momon’s more relaxed way of speaking to her was a product of their relationship deepening as they worked side by side, and she began to speak more like her normal self, too. If she concealed her true self for too long, it would lead straight to a breakup if their relationship got serious. It was still too early to reveal her actual identity, but she judged that talking in her normal manner was fine.

“Seems like they started on schedule.”

They could hear the beating of drums and courageous battle cries from the rear. Momon figured the offensive had begun diminishing the enemy’s defensive force so he could fight Jaldabaoth one-on-one. They had one shot at this operation. There would be no second chances. The only way to save the kingdom was to defeat Jaldabaoth now.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ve entered the final phase of the operation. Sir Momon…Nabe and I will handle any supporting enemies. You can concentrate on Jaldabaoth and not worry about anything else.”

“Got it. You’ve been with me every step of the way. I hope that after we beat Jaldabaoth, we make the triumphant return together! Nabe, fight alongside her. Know that my wish is for all three of us to make it home.”

“Understood, Mr. Momon.”

The three landed before Jaldabaoth. Evileye scanned the area and noticed a maid coming out of a building adjacent to the square.

She was wearing the same bug mask as before, with its fixed expression, but Evileye could feel the loathing coming her way from beneath it.

She can't be the only one.

Between the bug maid and me, Jaldabaoth should know who is stronger. And since this time, Nabe, who is probably as strong as me, is here, too, there's no way he would have the maid fight alone. He's either going to put the pressure on with numbers, or he has another subordinate of similar rank standing by. Just as she had assessed the situation, something cold crept up her spine.

Behind the bug maid were others, all wearing the same mask as Jaldabaoth.

They were each dressed in a different maid uniform.

There were—

"Four of them?!"

—a total of five enemies with combat ability comparable to hers. In a two-on-five battle, the difference between their abilities would be huge. It was a gap that meant their chance of winning was as good as nonexistent.

"Shit! We underestimated Jaldabaoth's force!"

At this rate, they would be outnumbered, and the enemy would interfere with Momon and Jaldabaoth's battle, which should have happened on even terms.

If even a little backup arrived during an evenly matched fight, it was very likely to decide the outcome—just as the tables had turned in Evileye's earlier fight with the bug maid.

“Okay, I’ll leave those five to you,” said Momon, and he walked toward Jaldabaoth at a natural pace with a sword in each hand.

Watching his sturdy figure move away, her lack of confidence tormented her. How much less anxious she would feel hidden beneath that flowing red cape!

Nearly reaching out after him, Evileye chided her weak heart.

She had come here prepared to die. Just because there were more enemies than she expected didn’t mean she could resort to pathetically crying for help. Plus, he had to have said that because he believed in her. *Otherwise he would never have turned away so bluntly. He’s a decent man.*

Thinking about it again, she became convinced that was what his receding back was saying to them: *You and Nabe will be able to hold them off until I win.*

Passionate flames blazed deep inside her.

“Okay, here I come, De—demon!” Momon raised his voice and sliced at Jaldabaoth. The fierce battle had begun. Perhaps in order to not involve the other two, Momon kept pushing Jaldabaoth, moving their battle away.

“Okay, if I take three and you take two, is that all right with you?”

“Are you sure? I’m fine taking three!”

She had the feeling Nabe suppressed a laugh. “You’ll take two and I’ll take three.”

Evileye grinned. She felt like she’d grasped a part of this woman’s personality.

Frankly, she'd taken a liking to her rival for Momon's affections.

Sheesh. With Momon and Nabe, I feel like it might be okay to take off my ring and show them my true form... Well, if we make it back alive.

"You're a stubborn one, huh? Okay. Then I'll polish mine off quick and back you up! Just hold them off as best you can without dy... What?"

She realized that everyone—the five maids and Nabe—was looking at her. It was so creepily synchronized it could have been prearranged.

"Nothing," Nabe replied coldly and slowly walked off to the side. "Okay, I want three of you to be my opponents. I'll leave it up to you who comes with me."

In response, the bug maid, a maid with braids, and a maid with rolled curls walked after her. The two who remained to face Evileye were one with her hair done up and one with long hair.

"My name is Alpha, and this is Delta. We'll be your opponents."

"I see. How polite you are! My name is Evileye. I'm the one who will defeat you!"

She didn't feel like chatting to buy time. Thinking like that only got one overwhelmed and killed. All she could do was keep pushing.

"Oh...? How frightening."

Evileye used her ace move as her first—a skill that sent all the negative energy flowing through her body into a rage, imbuing

her magical energy with it to strengthen her attacks.

“Here I go!” she barked and cast a spell.

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:59 AM

“Don’t underestimate me!”

The crystal pellet of negative energy shot into the maid—Alpha—running toward Evileye. The physical attack, a combination of battering and stabbing, plus the negative energy, ate into her life force…

Or rather, it should have. But she didn’t seem to feel anything and just kept running.

“Kgh!” Evileye flew into the air. Having an enemy close was an extreme disadvantage for an arcane caster. She had a better chance of winning if she kept some distance.

The moment she floated up, something burst before her eyes. It seemed her Crystal Shield had deflected an enemy attack, and the sparkle of the fine particles surrounding her abruptly dimmed.

The shield must have neutralized a fairly powerful attack, but she felt lucky to have blocked anything at all. Crystal Shield could defend against attacks of only a certain level or lower; any higher and they would pass right through.

“Again?”

The maid in the rear, Delta, was using firearms. Every time Evileye tried to fly up high, she got shot at.

“Ha!” Pumping herself up, Alpha launched a fist at her.

Evileye clicked her tongue loudly.

She had never recognized anyone who fought with their fists as a real opponent. After fighting Alpha for a little while, however, she learned that she'd just been arrogant—she had only ever encountered those weaker than herself. Alpha was a formidable opponent. Whenever Evileye put distance between them, her opponent closed in several times faster, and she broke the caster's slapdash barriers with single strikes.

The two of them felt slightly weaker than her, but she couldn't lower her guard for so much as an instant. She was always walking a tightrope.

What made them especially tricky was their perfectly harmonized movements. When adventurers cooperated, their fighting power got a huge boost, so she figured these two had surely increased theirs quite a bit.

Shit! Monsters teaming up and cooperating…? That doesn't make sense!

But she realized she was in no position to talk. The other members of her team were human, but she was undead. She was in the same position as the maids.

A bang rang out, and the Crystal Shield around her weakened. It was as good as gone.

Cursing, she frantically took some distance from Alpha, who was in front of her throwing a punch. Evileye was a vampire and possessed physical strength that defied common sense, but Alpha's surpassed it. The only reason she couldn't catch up was Fly.

Concentrating on casting magic always made it harder to move around and keep a good distance. It threw off one's depth percep-

tion, and it was also hard to focus while running. That was why casters always stopped to launch spells. Evileye was making the mobile battle work by simply taking care to Fly and put distance between her opponents and her. That didn't make her special—pretty much any caster had trained with this strategy, although how well they could execute it depended on their individual ability. In that sense, her ability was first-rate. She had the flight powers of a vampire and two hundred and fifty years of practice.

Even Evileye, with all her know-how, had to focus to escape from Alpha. She was moving laterally in a huge circle around the entire square, but she had two opponents.

With a hard *bang*, her barrier completely disappeared.

She had the feeling she wasn't getting her money's worth out of Crystal Shield if it disappeared after a grand total of three hits, but considering the level of her opponents, it couldn't be helped.

"Sand Field: All!"

Sand spread throughout the area, trapping Alpha, but it didn't reach Delta. She couldn't use this wide-ranging area-of-effect spell when fighting with her team for fear of affecting them, but it obstructed enemy movements with the sand clinging to them. It also had the secondary effects of blindness, silence, and distraction. Not only that, but thanks to her ace move imbuing the sand particles with negative energy, it ate away at the maid's life energy.

It was a tier-five spell of her creation, one of the strongest cards in her deck.

But Alpha's movements didn't slow, and she didn't even seem to be taking any damage.

"What the heck?!"

She appeared to have perfect resistance to both travel obstruction and negative energy.

"I applaud you! You certainly have your resistances all set!"

Instead of returning the compliment, Alpha blurred. Her kick flew at Evileye's face as if she'd performed a short-distance teleport to appear right in front of her.

As her mask crumpled with a screech, Evileye was knocked far back.

After bouncing along the ground—*thud, thud*—and finally coming to a stop, she shook her spinning head and stood up. By then, Alpha was already practically on top of her.

"Crystal Wall!"

Alpha's fist collided with the barrier of crystal in front of Evileye with a thunderous *bang*. Lines radiated out from the impact as if her protection had been struck with a wrecking ball.

With a grunt and the thud of a foot striking the ground, a shock went through the radiating cracks, and the wall shattered toward Evileye.

"Fa Jin?!"

Just then, only briefly, she sensed the tremor going through the ground as she was using Fly to get some distance. She couldn't tell where the earthy rumbling was coming from, but she knew one thing straightaway: It was because of the other two battling it out.

"They're still fighting…? But maybe they're headed for the climax. Don't mind if I buy some more time, then!" Evileye screamed and charged at Alpha, who was heading her way to at-

tack.

She would devote her body and soul to buying just a little more time. Her special attack was born of that determination.

Alpha's hands traced circles on their way into a fighting stance to intercept.

Evileye felt like an impregnable fortress was towering before her, but she didn't stop…

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5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:53 AM

Ainz dove into a house in a tangle with Jaldabaoth.

He slammed Jaldabaoth against the door, and it shattered in a spray of splinters.

The room was dim and cramped, with no lights—not an easy place for Ainz to swing his swords, which put him at a disadvantage.

He ignored Jaldabaoth and walked farther in. Jaldabaoth followed him an instant later. They entered a different room and found a small table. And two chairs. And Mare.

Mare pulled out a chair and Ainz sat. Jaldabaoth—Demiurge—asked permission to sit across from him and removed his mask. Then Ainz asked him, "First, is this room safe?"

"Yes, it is all in order. There is no one who can eavesdrop on us here."

"I see. And then… Oh, before that, I'd like to ask you a favor. Don't let any more harm come to the soldiers on the route I arrived by. In E-Rantel, it just happened by coincidence, but it

seems that saving people in a tight spot is really good advertising."

"Understood... I sent a mental order, so they should be all right now."

"Great. Now tell me your entire plan."

When Narberal had Messaged him, he'd said he would explain everything when they met up, so Ainz hadn't heard anything yet. Because of that, Ainz was a little worried that he'd messed up the plan and was in for some complaining.

"There are four benefits to my multistage plan."

"Oh? I had thought three...but there are four, huh?"

Demiurge smiled—displaying an expression of great satisfaction.

"I feel as though this is the first time I have won in a battle of intellect with you."

Ainz waved him off. Of course, he had no idea what the three benefits would have been, so Demiurge's remark made him very uncomfortable.

"You've always been ahead of me. Up till now has been nothing more than a fluke."

"What are you saying? No need to be so modest."

"No, really...ngh. So tell me about your four merits."

"Sir. The first is that we gain wealth by attacking the warehouse district and taking everything to the Great Tomb of Nazarick. To that end, all the resources in the warehouses have

been transported via Gates that Shalltear created and are being managed by Pandora's Actor."

That is an extremely good benefit. Ainz gave Demiurge the highest praise in his head.

The royal capital, having lost all their resources at once, would be in dire straits, but what did Ainz care about that? He was just relieved that he could take a break from worrying about money.

"The second is to make it look like we were not involved in the raids on the Eight Fingers. As I'm sure you have realized, if we had only attacked Eight Fingers bases, people might have begun to wonder. If we weren't careful, someone might have found their way to Sebas, so I extended the range of the damage to make it look like we had a different objective."

So the best place to hide a broken twig is in a forest?

"Is it that easy, though? What are we supposedly after?"

"Take a look at this."

Demiurge made a signal and Mare, who'd been standing by, brought out a bag and opened it.

Inside was a statue of a demon. Its six hands were each clutching a jewel, and they were pulsing with a strange brilliance from within.

"The spell contained within these jewels is Armageddon: Evil."

Armageddon: Evil was a tier-ten spell that summoned a demon army. It could summon a large number, but individually they were not so strong. Also, unlike angels, demons would sometimes go on a rampage, so the spell was problematic. Its practical uses were rather limited. Often, casters took advantage of the fact

that the demons weren't allies and used them as sacrifices for ritual spells or special skills.

This use of the spell was similar to the way Shalltear had killed her kin with the Pipette Lance.

"This is an item Lord Ulbert made. Should we make use of it here?"

Considering the level this world's tiered magic was at, it certainly wouldn't be strange for the demon Jaldabaoth to attack with this item as his target.

Then Ainz remembered what his teammate Ulbert had been like during their guild's heyday.

One of the World Items allowed its user to summon an unlimited number of demons, enough to bury the world in them. It caused a huge mess, and when Ulbert heard about it, he merrily created this item in imitation of it. Of course, all it could do was cast six spells at once, and he lost interest in it upon completing it.

There was a clear sense of regret hanging around Demiurge. He must have been reluctant to expend something his creator had devised.

Ainz reached into space and took out the item he had in mind.

"Demiurge, you can put that away. Use this instead."

The item Ainz took out was similar to Demiurge's demon statue but had three fewer jewels, and the overall quality of the statue was inferior.

"Ulbert made this item, too. It was just a test, so he was going to throw it away, but I thought that was a waste, so I had him give

it to me. You can use this, right?"

"I could never use one of your items, Lord Ainz!"

"Really? Then I'll give it to you. You can use it however you want. But Ulbert might be embarrassed if his failed project stays lying around forever."

"My word! For you to bestow such a wonderful item unto me—I humbly thank you!"

Demiurge got out of his chair and kneeled down on the floor. Mare scrambled to follow suit.

"Cut it out, Demiurge. Don't you have more important things to do right now? Think of it as a token of my appreciation for your loyalty."

"We guardians were created by you, the Supreme Ones, so it's only natural that we should devote ourselves to you completely until the moment we expire. Then to be spoken to so mercifully time and time again and receive such fabulous rewards… From the beginning, you had my absolute dedication, but now I will redouble my efforts to become even more loyal!"

"Uh…indeed. I'll have great expectations for your increased loyalty. And you should stand up, Demiurge. As I said, I think you have things to do."

"Yes, my lord! My apologies."

Demiurge sat back down, and Mare stood by behind him.

"So, yes, the story is that Jaldabaoth attacked the Eight Fingers bases looking for this and then occupied the royal capital's warehouse district. The theft of all the things in the warehouses is part of that. And of course, it will be my plan to discover this item

Lord Ulbert made in one of the Eight Fingers base's storehouses."

"I see. And what is the plan's third benefit?"

"Right. We have taken most of the humans who were inside the wall of fire I created and carried them off to Nazarick. I believe we will have many uses for them, and Jaldabaoth will be the one who gets the bad reputation for it."

Ainz murmured that he understood, but he did have one question. *Is it really so advantageous to us to have Jaldabaoth getting a bad reputation? Couldn't we just make it the fault of some random monster? Oh, so…*

"The point is to earn this reputation?"

"That is correct. I'm thinking to make Jaldabaoth king of the demons."

"Ah, I get it. You're going to use him for one of the plans I ordered you to carry out?"

Demiurge bowed, saying, "That is correct," and Ainz recalled the orders he had given him. He'd tasked Demiurge with a number of things; this must have been for the one about creating a demon king.

"And that connects to the fourth merit of this plan, which is that it serves as a test for the incident we will cause in the sacred kingdom."

Aha! thought Ainz. Then he remembered something he'd been wondering about and asked, "By the way, did you bring all those demons from Nazarick?"

"Heavens, no! I would never do such a thing without your permission, my lord."

“Hmm? I cleared Albedo to let you have full privileges for this operation, so I thought you had mobilized Nazarick forces…”

“No, I had the evil lords I brought with me summon them. After a day, the usage limits will reset, so the cost to Nazarick is zero.”

“I see. So that’s why there are some demons I didn’t recognize from Nazarick… Got it. Then I have a different question. You said you abducted all the humans within the wall of fire and took them to Nazarick, but is that true regardless of age and sex?”

Demiurge seemed confused as to what difference it made, but he said yes, which left an unfavorable impression on Ainz.

What happened to humans was no particular concern of his. He’d been a human at one time, but since inhabiting his new body, he didn’t feel close to them at all and practically thought of them as a different species. If it would benefit the Great Tomb of Nazarick, he would kill any number of humans with no hesitation. But he still had qualms about killing infants. *Is this also a vestige of Satoru Suzuki?*

Ainz exhaled a deep breath—although he didn’t have lungs.

“Demiurge. Please give anyone who has not wronged me or the Great Tomb of Nazarick a painless death.”

Demiurge said nothing but bowed deeply.

What Ainz Ooal Gown prioritized was the peace of the organization and the calm of his loyal subordinates.

Having already abducted the infants, they couldn’t just let them go safely, because that could lead to intelligence leaks. He wasn’t against a plan to cultivate humans inside Nazarick who would work with a blind loyalty, but there wasn’t any advantage

to doing it at present. So the plan he proposed was the most mercy he could show them.

"Okay, so is that about it?"

"I have two more things. First, thanks to Mare, another wonderful potential benefit has appeared."

When Ainz glanced at Mare, the boy was fidgeting awkwardly.

"Which is?"

"We're currently working on training, so we're not sure if the plan will work out or not. I'll explain it when we get back to Nazarick. Then the other thing is that since they haven't appeared so far, I would imagine there is a good chance that the people who brainwashed Shalltear don't have anything to do with the kingdom."

"Ah, I see. So is there something you need my help with?"

"Not aside from repelling me in this battle right now. I'll do my very best to make you look good, my lord."

"Got it. Then before I drive you off, do you mind beating up my armor? If it makes it through this without a scratch, it will be hard to convince people I fought someone as strong as you."

"Then would you please take it off? I couldn't possibly attack it while you're wearing it, Lord Ainz…"

"If I take it off, it'll get all dented and I won't be able to put it back on. For the battle with Shalltear I had the blacksmith make me pre-broken armor—that was how I was able to wear it. If you pummel this suit while I'm not in it, I won't be able to get in."

Ainz chuckled to himself. The guardians weren't sure if they

should laugh or not and had vague looks on their faces.

"U-uh, Lord Ainz? W-wasn't that armor made with magic?"

"Nope, this suit wasn't. You might have thought so, since I'm wearing it as a caster, but the reason I can equip this is because I used a spell that turns me into a warrior. After Messaging with Albedo on a break on the way to the capital, I changed just in case something came up. It seems like that was a good move."

Sustaining the spell to turn into a warrior on top of his other continuous spells meant that the constant consumption of MP negated his natural MP recovery, which meant the amount wouldn't increase. If he canceled the warrior spell in an emergency, he would start off with fairly depleted MP, but he felt it was the right choice to operate as a warrior this time. If he hadn't, there would have been a lot of issues starting right around the time his first fight with Demiurge had occurred.

When he heard Ainz's remarks, Demiurge's narrow eyes crinkled into slits. "As I would expect, you have everything in the palm of your hand, Lord Ainz. I can't believe I thought I could match intellects with someone so sharp. It seems you are out of my league," he murmured softly as he smiled.

Ainz's back began to sweat, although that shouldn't have been possible. "Oh, should we get back to it soon? Demiurge, I'm counting on you to rough up my armor."

"Understood. Mare, I want you to send a signal to everyone. Can you cause an earthquake as you promised?"

•

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:56 AM

"Eat this—my electric shock!"

Lightning flashed and hit one of the maids.

“Gwaaa, oh dear!” With an extremely contrived scream, she was launched a bizarrely long way back, as if she had jumped herself. And just like that, she disappeared down one of the streets.

With a dainty grunt, the maid with rolled curls threw a dagger. The knife seemed to lack motivation and described a leisurely arc before hitting Narberal.

“Kyaaagh!” With a scream—uttered with a totally normal facial expression—Narberal pursued the maid who had gotten knocked back.

Entoma went silently after her.

They all ran one after the other down a street. In front of Narberal was the maid with braids. Behind her were Entoma and the one with rolled curls. It was like a pincer attack, only with absolutely no tension. Of course there was none. Why would there be? What little will to fight there had been had completely melted away, and the atmosphere had shifted to one resembling schoolgirls chatting at a café.

“Okeydoke. Nigredo has taken measures against surveillance in this area, so we should be safe.”

“Really? In that case…long time no see, Lupu.”

The maid with the braids, Lupusregina Beta, laughed through her mask. “Long time no see, Na. Haven’t seen you since Lord Ainz hauled you off.”

“I’ve been back to Nazarick a few times, but you were always at the village.”

“Yah. Guess we’re always just missin’ each other. Actually,

haven't seen you in a while, either, So."

"I haven't, either. But shouldn't you talk a little more…?"

"Oh? It bugs you just like Yuri, huh, So? S'okay. I know there's a proper time 'n' place. Just like En."

"Okay, then… By the way, why isn't Entoma talking?"

"Ah, I guess she doesn't wanna."

"THAT LITTLE BITCH STOLE MY VOOOICE."

"Ah." Narberal nodded. Entoma hated her real voice. That must have been why she wanted to avoid talking as much as possible.

"I WANT TO STEEEAL HER VOOOICE."

As usual, she was wearing a bug, so they couldn't see her face, but the intensity of her anger and urge to kill was expressed well enough.

"You can't. Lord Ainz left with her, so if she doesn't make it back alive, it will hurt Sir Momon's reputation."

Entoma pouted at Narberal's response, but she didn't argue back. Their master's reputation or her own desires? There wasn't a combat maid among them who didn't know which to prioritize.

"She's pretty strong, eh? What's her name?"

"I don't care about that crane fly's name, so I don't know. I think it was Evil-something?"

"You're awful, ha. Haven't you guys been fighting together so far?"

Solution responded instead of Narberal, who had scowled at the word *together*.

“Pretty sure she’s Evileye—from the Blue Roses. She was in the reports from Master Sebas.”

“Oh yes, that was her name,” Narberal affirmed. Once someone had said it, she had a feeling that was correct.

“You okay, Na? Not goin’ senile, are you?”

“Can you remember the names of humans?”

“I can! It might be important for work, so I pay attention to proper nouns.”

“Me, too. Or more like, me ’n’ the humans get along pretty well.”

“IT’S NO TROUBLE FOR MEEEE.”

Narberal was just a little shaken by the realization that she was the only one. Just as she was thinking that maybe she should pay more attention and learn their names, they heard an explosion. The buildings on either side of the back alley blocked their view, but they could guess who had caused it.

“Huh, seems like they’re fightin’ for real over there.”

“It’s Yuri and Shizu, after all. Those two would take it seriously. But if the battle hasn’t been decided yet, that means they aren’t going all out.”

“IF IT WERE MEEE, I’D FIGHT ALL OUT UNTIL I WAS PRACTICALLY DEEEAD.”

“Evileye is pretty strong. If it all came down to level, Yuri and

Shizu probably couldn't beat her."

The faces of the combat maids darkened for the first time during this fight.

Except Narberal. She was confident.

"They'll be fine." All eyes were on her as she continued, "I think Evileye is an elementalist like me—an arcane caster who specializes in a specific type of energy and then specializes even further. It makes her attack power really high, but neutralizing her specialization will weaken her."

"The earth tree has…acid, poison, and gravity, right? So how does she use crystals?"

"There's an earth type that specializes in gems! Limiting herself to crystals probably made her even stronger."

"Specialized in pure physical damage magic that deals both crushing and stabbing damage? …That's a bit tricky."

How would I kill Evileye if it were me? All four of them were thinking about it when the ground shook.

It felt a little different from the shaking caused by shock waves.

"AN EARTHQUAAAKE. SEEMS LIKE ONE OF MASTER MAAARE'S. SO IS IT TIME FOR THE NEXT PHASE, THENNN?"

"Is it a signal?"

"Yes, Narberal. Could you get injured soon? We have to corner you."

“I’ll try not to make it hurt too much, but I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Oh, well. It’s for work.”

•

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 3:57 AM

“Calm down! Please calm down!” Climb called out, trying not to raise his voice too much, but all the people in the warehouse were making a racket, so he wasn’t loud enough to quiet them down.

“My boy got—”

“My wife got taken away—”

“Mom and Dad—”

Voices of every age and gender combined into a single wave breaking over Climb. It was so clamorous he couldn’t tell what anyone was saying.

These three hundred citizens were the ones Climb and the others had risked their lives to look for and the only ones they’d found. The people in this smallish warehouse didn’t know anything about the situation outside and were just shouting about how worried they were for their family members who had been taken elsewhere.

It was a very natural scene, a natural reaction, but extremely inopportune.

Just because they hadn’t run into any demons so far didn’t mean there weren’t any. They had spotted groups of demons a few times on the other side of the street and elsewhere. It was only a matter of time before some of them heard the screams fill-

ing the warehouse and came over.

"You're the only ones we've found—"

"Where is my wife?! Can you go find her right away?"

"Uh…"

It probably would have been possible to quiet them if he shouted a little louder. Although there was always someone better, Climb was quite powerful; the guards couldn't even compare. The roar of a man that strong would no doubt squeeze ordinary people's hearts like an eagle's talons. He had to actually do it, though.

As Princess Renner's attendant, he'd come bearing her reputation as well as his own. Frightening the people or causing them to feel antagonistic toward him could tarnish the princess's reputation, so he couldn't quite muster the courage to get aggressive with them.

"Could you just give a straight answer—?"

"My baby is still so young—"

"Papaaa! Mamaaa!"

"Shut up for a minute!"

A shout so powerful it practically sent an electric shock through the warehouse blew everything else away. Brain's fed-up roar—the rage of an ultra-first-class warrior—terrified the weak in an instant.

"Wah, wah, wah. If you would just shut up and listen! First of all, this location is in enemy territory, and it's not as if your safety is assured. If we don't move quietly, the demons will come and

kill you all. If you understand, then first shut your mouths."

Brain scanned the silenced warehouse and then glared straight at Climb. The eyes on him were so angry that the citizens gathered around him slowly backed away.

"Next…Climb, you should probably just come out and say it."

He had a general idea of what he needed to come out and say, but he wasn't confident that was really the smart thing to do.

"Too hard? Then I'll say it for you. First, you people need to keep this in mind: Anyone who raises their voice in response to what I'm about to say will be cut down with zero hesitation. We don't even have any guarantee that you're actually humans." Brain slipped his katana out of its sheath, and it sparkled strangely in the small light they'd brought with them. "You're probably wondering what I'm talking about, but take a quiet look at the person next to you. Are you all human?"

The captives looked at one another suspiciously.

"We saw quite a few demons on our way over here, you know—demons with wings and long tails, demons like humans with their skin ripped off, and plenty of others. Those are the kind of guys strutting around outside this warehouse… You probably saw them when you were brought here, right?"

All the people Brain looked at nodded, pale faced.

"So who can guarantee there aren't any demons in here, ones who can peel the skin off humans and wear it?"

No one spoke, but there was a wave of movement—the people were looking around with doubt in their eyes and trying to shift positions.

The warehouse was certainly small, but it wasn't cramped. There was plenty of space to secure a spot apart from everyone else, if desired.

"Relax. If there are any demons in here, we'll cut them down for you. If you take a moment to think about how we got here, you understand that, right?" After waiting for some relief to appear in the atmosphere, Brain continued, "But if the demons from outside rush into this building, I can't make any promises. Hey, don't you think if there was a demon in here, it would call out to its companions to let them know about the invaders? Now you know why I'm going to kill anyone who raises their voice. You might think, 'I'm human, killing me would be absurd,' but how would we know you're human? So, in order to protect the others, we're going to kill anyone who attracts the demons by shouting." He looked around again, focusing on individual faces with a murderous glare.

"Seems like you understand… First of all, before coming to this warehouse, we went through a lot of other ones, but we didn't find any people, and in fact, they were practically empty. When you think about the area the fire wall surrounded, this is the warehouse district, yes, but there also should have been over ten thousand residents. If there are three hundred people here, then that's another thirty-three warehouses full of captives, right?" Brain took a breath. "So here's a question: Why didn't we find any other people? It's entirely possible that we had bad luck. We did avoid places that seemed heavily guarded by demons. But what if they were already taken from the warehouse district to some other location—doesn't that make more sense? Uh-oh! And we have no way of knowing where that new location is. But these are demons doing the abducting, so they can't be very nice."

Climb could hear the sniffling of some people who'd figured out what he was getting at.

“And if you stay here, you’ll probably be carried off by the demons, too. That’s why we’re evacuating now. Just remember this: We’re still in demon territory. If you don’t try to move both quickly and quietly, you’ll be killed during the escape. Hey you, looks like you have a question. I’ll allow you to ask something, but only you.”

The frightened man he pointed at with his katana asked in a quiet voice, “What if we stay here?”

“You’d probably get carried off—to the awful kind of place a demon would want to take you.”

“Wah—!”

Brain shot a fierce look at the lady who wailed, and she lowered her voice immediately.

“I’ll allow a question.”

“My son is only three… So maybe it would be better to stay here and get taken to the same place—”

“I see. Well I’m not gonna put any effort into rescuing people who don’t want to escape. This kid might want to but not me. I’d like you to remember that it’s entirely possible that your child is in another warehouse being saved by another squad right as we speak. If you still want to stay in spite of that, I won’t stop you, but then you’d be creating an orphan, and I sure can’t handle looking after it.” Brain spoke coldly to the gloomy commoners. “I’ll say it again: It’s nearly certain that you’ll be carried off by the demons if you stay here. If you’re okay with that, then I won’t stop you. After all, it’s totally possible that we’ll leave this warehouse and get killed by demons as we try to escape.”

That was where Climb chimed in. He needed to say something. “That said, we’ll do our utmost to protect anyone who makes up

their mind to escape."

"I hate to be burdened, but I'll listen to Princess Renner's soldier. I'll protect you. Okay then, we move in a few minutes. You're free to stay. You're also free to discuss among yourselves in lowered voices. Do what you like."

Nothing that could be called discussion occurred. They might have still been anxious that their neighbors were demons, and many people preferred running, hoping that they would be able to reunite with their family members saved by other groups.

There aren't any other squads. We went around to a lot of other warehouses. At most there are two or three more that are safe.

Brain knew that, but he glared around fiercely, gripping his katana tightly, to make sure no one raised their voices. Climb approached him. Bowing slightly, he addressed him in a lowered voice. "Thanks, Brain. You did what I should have done."

"Don't worry about it. That's not the kind of thing you can say, attached to the princess. I'm practically a mercenary, so it shouldn't cause any trouble for me. I only acted as the whip."

"Still, thank you."

Brain smiled awkwardly. "Well, it's a pain to repeat myself a zillion times, so fine, I get it. I accept your gratitude. Hmm? He's back, huh?"

Walking toward them at the other end of Brain's gaze was the thief. He'd been on alert watching the situation outside. It wasn't as if he was rushing back, so they figured he wasn't there to tell them of approaching danger.

"What's up?"

“Oh, it’s nothing, Mr. Unglaus. No sign of approaching demons. But as you all but said, it’s a matter of time.”

“Yeah. This could just be their last stop. You were watching the outside, right? What was that earthquake a bit ago?”

“No idea. Maybe a fissure opened up, and demons surged in from the demon world?”

“Please don’t dream up worst-case scenarios…”

“Sorry, Climb, sorry.”

“Anyhow, should we get this show on the road?”

Just as Brain was about to raise his voice to address the people, they heard something landing outside the warehouse.

In the hush that immediately followed, the thief crept closer to the door and took a peek outside. Then he waved his hands. It was the sign they’d decided for *Demon!* Then he signed, *A strong one!*

Brain and Climb looked at each other. Then they quietly went over to the thief. As they watched in silence, they saw the creature.

Unlike all others they’d seen so far, they sensed an immense strength from this one.

Almost ten feet high, its physique was bulky with muscle, and it had bat wings on its back. Its head was the skull of a goat or something similar, and it was gripping a gigantic maul.

It was looking toward the warehouse, and Climb and the others peering out felt it meet their gaze.

Perhaps it had sensed them with some kind of magic. Now it was undoubtedly waiting for them to come out.

"That thing's strong…," Brain murmured.

"Without a doubt…," the thief answered.

Climb nodded in agreement.

He quietly looked at Brain. He'd gotten scolded back then with that Shalltear monster, so this time he intended to obediently accept it if he got told to run.

"…Climb. Fight with me."

"Yes, sir!" Climb answered in a voice that was quiet but loud enough.

"You're okay with that?"

"Yeah, look at that thing. He must have just escaped a fight—he's all beat up. I don't know how it would go if he weren't wounded at all, but if we rush him now, I think we have a good enough chance at winning."

Brain slapped Climb on the shoulder and said he expected a lot out of him.

Climb nodded emphatically and activated the power of the ring Gazef gave him. The ring, made by a dragonlord with ancient magic, had the power of temporarily boosting a warrior's powers. With it, Gazef Stronoff, the strongest man in the kingdom, could enter the hero realm, but Climb couldn't get that far. Even if he used his martial art Release Brain Power along with it, he still wouldn't be half as strong as Brain. He could, however, achieve the power of a mythril-rank warrior.

“Shall we?” Brain took point and was about to walk outside when the thief called out to stop him.

“Mr. Unglaus!”

“Maybe it’s about time you started calling me Brain? You’re older than me, and I just feel weird being called ‘mister.’”

“…Okay, Brain, then. What should I do?”

“You stay here, Lockmeier. That thing could be pulling a feint.”

“If it gets close, I’ll help.”

“If it comes to that, we’ll be counting on you. Let’s go, Climb! I probably don’t need to tell you, but…stay on your guard!”

“Yes, sir!”

•

5 Late Fire Moon (September) 4:03 AM

“Kgh!”

Evileye grunted as she took an attack to the stomach. Her body barely felt any pain, but she hadn’t completely lost her human senses. Whenever she took an attack, she couldn’t help re-acting.

Alpha spotted the moment of distraction and used the opening to attack her head-on.

The explosion-like impact knocked the wind out of her and sent her flying. She felt the negative energy flowing through her body decrease sharply.

She couldn't use the strategy of converting physical damage to magical energy loss. Her objective was to buy time. If she ran out of magical energy, she would lose the ability to fight, so she had to consume equal parts life energy and magical energy.

Covered in dirt, she used Fly to force herself upright.

Then she saw Nabe get knocked out from a side street.

She was a mess. Evileye headed her way. The reason they weren't coming after her was probably to wait until they were in the same place to kill them both at once.

When Evileye tried to help her up, she sprang to her feet. "Oh, it's you," she said, cold and rough.

She's beat up enough that her life should be in danger, but something isn't letting her feel it. Either she's not scared to die, or she believes Momon will slay Jaldabaoth before that happens. Evileye figured it had to be one or the other.

"Can you still fight?"

"Of course. No problem."

It was a stupid question.

Still…this woman surpasses your average human. Is she a demigod, too?

She had a number of injuries and was messy with blood and dirt, but it didn't seem like she was fatally wounded. In fact, Evileye's injuries might have been worse.

Considering Evileye had taken two opponents, the fact that Nabe had taken three and gotten away with so little damage had to mean—frustrating as it was—that she was more capable.

“You look awful yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

Evileye smirked in spite of herself at how Nabe-like the response was.

Nabe shouldn’t have been able to see her face, since she was wearing her mask, but she must have picked up some vibes, because a dubious look appeared on her face.

“Nah, I just thought that response was very you.”

“I see. What should we do now?”

“What should we do? You mean how should we buy time?”

Evileye turned a penetrating glare on their five opponents. The bug maid’s desire to end her life pierced her like a spear. From the others, perhaps because they thought she would be easy to kill, there was surprisingly little hostility.

“That, too.”

“There’s nothing we *can* do. If there were two of them like there are of us, we’d be plenty able to win, but when they’re as strong as us and there are more of them, that’s as ‘losing battle’ as it gets.”

“What if we ran away? If we turn our backs and run, they might not follow us.”

“If you want to do that, I’ll protect your rear.” Nabe’s regular features twisted up in disgust.

When you’re that beautiful, even making an ugly face like that doesn’t ruin it, Evileye thought, although it was an out-of-

place observation.

Suddenly, someone went flying accompanied by the sound of a collapsing building.

The figure bounced off the ground and continued rolling.

Evileye gasped—though she wasn't breathing.

She'd thought for a second it was Momon, but it wasn't. The one who'd been launched away was Jaldabaoth.

The sight of his reeling figure all beat up excited her—she didn't even have to wonder who had dealt him such severe wounds, who had knocked him all the way over here.

She looked in the direction he'd come from and could make out a warrior standing there.

His raven-black armor had taken heavy damage, making it clear in one glance what an intense fight the two of them had been having. Still, comparing him and his solid stance to Jaldabaoth, who was practically flat on the ground, was more than enough to tell who was in the lead.

Evileye allowed herself to feel the surge of joy and squeezed both her hands into fists.

Momon slowly lowered his swords and called out to Jaldabaoth. "This is kinda fun. How to say…'real,' I guess? I feel like I'm actually fighting. So this is how the vanguard felt… I was so cornered in our close-quarters exchange earlier that I couldn't feel it. Seems I've caught combat mania. Anyhow, you can come at me as hard as you can in that form!"

There's no taunt more bitter than telling your opponent to use all their strength on you, thought Evileye, but then she shook her

head. Maybe it was what he wanted.

Since he was so strong, Momon probably didn't have many opportunities to go all out. He probably defeated his enemies before he could get serious. To a man like that, facing an opponent against whom he could use his full strength must have been a joy.

"Very well." The demon must have taken it as derision—he replied with a deep, bitingly sarcastic bow.

Seeing that response, a sense of superiority—that she knew Momon better than Jaldabaoth did—swelled in her chest.

"Then I'll attack in earnest."

"Bring it on, Jaldabaoth!"

With those words as the trigger, the pair clashed at the point exactly between them. Their exchange was like a repeat of the time Evileye first met Momon. Long fingernails repelled ultra-fast chain attacks. They were blocking Momon's huge great swords, so they had to be far harder than ordinary nails.

Momon took a giant leap back. The jump's power was so weirdly great that it seemed almost like he'd used Fly. Then he threw a sword up into the air. As her eyes focused on the whirling blade, her peripheral vision caught Momon pointing a spear out of nowhere.

The spear had a crimson head, like a swirl of fire. He launched it at Jaldabaoth. It zoomed toward the demon at ultra-high speed, leaving a vivid red trail that nearly branded her retinas.

"Demon Aspect: Purgatory Clothes!"

On impact, fire leaped into the sky, and a shock wave raged through the area.

“Kgh!” Evileye hunkered down so the burst of air wouldn’t blow her away. She was lucky she had the mask on so she could keep her eyes open in the blast.

As she watched, Momon neatly caught the sword that dropped straight down back to him as if it were slicing through the wind. Then he charged at Jaldabaoth again.

Jaldabaoth, poised to meet him, was enveloped in flames, and the spear Momon had thrown was sticking out of the ground at his feet.

Momon swung the sword down, and Jaldabaoth caught the blade with his hand. That second, the demon’s hand started smoking, and the sword slowly sunk into his fingers.

“If you can melt a weapon of this level…you must have strengthened that power, huh?”

As an adventurer of the highest rank, Momon’s weapon had to be made of fairly high-quality metal.

Still, Jaldabaoth was able to produce flames that could melt it. And Momon had the guts to hold a conversation, unfazed, despite being so close to the extreme heat.

“These two are insane.” Evileye was stricken with fear. She’d known, of course, they were both powerful, but she still couldn’t stop trembling.

“As you so wisely perceive. I’ve increased my fire damage with a skill.”

Suddenly, something black began to mix into the leaping flames.

“Hellfire?”

“Yes. I can’t have you escaping unscathed just because you have perfect resistance to fire!”

Momon backed up in a retreat for the first time, but Jaldabaoth wasn’t about to allow that.

Now Jaldabaoth was the one closing the distance and repeatedly attacking Momon.

Momon used his great swords to continuously block attacks that would have slaughtered a human in the blink of an eye.

In the midst of a close-quarters battle so fierce his metal armor was starting to glow red with heat, Momon took a bizarre weapon out from somewhere and swung it.

“Frost Pain Rebuilt! Icy Burst!”

A torrent of freezing chill burst from the weapon, causing a sudden drop in temperature throughout the area. It was powerful enough to freeze fire, but Jaldabaoth’s hellfire was hotter. Still, it did give some temporary relief from the heat.

Evileye could hear Jaldabaoth’s surprised shout from where she was.

“What in the world is that? Same goes for the spear…”

“While I can’t use magic, I’m using weapons with attributes. I built this imitation Frost Pain as an experiment—and as a bonus, I made it stronger than the real one. It’s also a way to cast the high-tier spell it contains three times per day…but I guess it doesn’t work very well on someone of your caliber, since I can’t boost it with skills.”

The conversation they were having was unreal.

Even though they were engaged in a battle to the death, they were chatting casually to confirm each other's abilities.

Something Gagaran once said popped into Evileye's head. *As a warrior, sometimes when you're trading blows, you start to understand how your enemy feels, almost like you're old friends*. At the time, she'd wondered what the heck she was talking about, but now—

"I guess she was right."

Evileye had grown to understand a ton of things over the course of this one day. She resolved not to doubt Gagaran so much anymore.

Seeing the closeness the pair had developed, Evileye felt a little jealous.

A man clad in raven-black armor, the surface of which had lost its luster—perhaps due to being melted—and a masked demon wearing a suit that was somewhat torn after being slashed up…

They were two beings fighting a life-or-death battle in a realm that transcended human capability, but to Evileye, they almost looked like pals.

"You truly are powerful."

"You, too, Jaldabaoth."

"So how about this? I have a suggestion…"

Momon said nothing but gestured with his chin that he should continue.

"I'll take my leave about now, so shall we call this a good duel and both withdraw? No, to propose more precisely: I will with-

draw for now, so I'd like you to not follow in pursuit…"

"You can't play games with us!" Evileye screamed with rage. After sowing this much confusion and death throughout the city, forgiveness was way too much to ask.

But in a quiet voice, Momon acquiesced to Jaldabaoth's suggestions. "Sure."

Evileye's eyes widened under her mask, and she looked at him. She couldn't comprehend why he would cave to Jaldabaoth's proposal while he was ahead.

Perhaps sensing her confusion, Jaldabaoth shrugged with a "Sheesh." As much as the fact pained her, he looked good doing it, so tall and slender.

"I have no idea why Mr. Momon brought such a stupid woman with him. If you think a little bit, don't you understand why he took my offer?"

Evileye was mute as he continued.

"Your friends have been fighting desperately in order to send in Mr. Momon and keep his battle from being interrupted, have they not? Aha. So that's why no demons intervened in our battle… Do you really believe that?"

Evileye felt like she'd been stabbed in the back with an icicle.

"I have a demon mob standing by to attack the entire city at any time."

Oh no.

Marquis Raeven's men were patrolling the city, but she didn't think they would be able to handle all the demons Jaldabaoth had

ready. He'd essentially taken the entire city hostage.

So if we beat him here…

"Killing me won't make those demons disappear, you know. One word, one mental command from me, and they'll spread all over the city. Of course, there aren't *that* many, so you can probably handle them—but who knows how many casualties will result!"

"But we don't have any guarantee that you'll keep your word!"

No, even Jaldabaoth couldn't guarantee that he would win if he kept fighting the super-elite warrior Momon. So *I'll completely withdraw, so please forgive me, at least don't chase after me. If not, I'll take you all with me?*

How convenient.

But if the capital was taken hostage, they weren't on equal terms.

I see. Evileye respected Momon from the bottom of her heart. *He read between the lines, and that's why he took the proposal—no, taking it was probably the only option he had.*

"Now then, it seems like the gallery has gone quiet, so I'll take the liberty of withdrawing. It's too bad we won't get to complete our objective of recovering that item. I pray you and I never meet again!"

"Yeah. I hope the same, Jaldabaoth."

It seemed like Jaldabaoth smiled beneath his mask.

As soon as the maids had gathered around him, they all disappeared at once in a high-tier teleportation.

“They’re gone…”

Evileye floated up into the air to see what had become of the wall of fire. There was nothing left of it. All she saw was the night view of the city, albeit more troubled than normal.

Maybe the curtain has fallen on this disturbance for now. But what will the outcome of so many casualties and expenses be?

A being called Jaldabaoth whose powers surpassed those of an evil spirit… The elite warrior Momon who is equally powerful… When the world finds out about these things, how will it change? Where are we headed?

Evileye shook her head to clear away the jumble of thoughts. They could take their time later to think about what would happen next.

For now, she had more important things to do. She landed on the ground and spread her arms wide. “Wahhhhhhhh!”

She ran at full speed with a scream of joy that could also have been taken as a battle cry. Her Fly spell was still in effect, but at times like these, running seemed more apt.

She was heading toward Momon. Perhaps she startled him? He practically got into a fighting stance. Ignoring that, she leaped at him. It was like sprinting directly into a wall, but with Evileye’s physical damage resistance as a vampire, she was unharmed.

She hugged him.

“You did it! You won! You won! I wouldn’t have expected any less!”

“Uh, sorry…could you get off me?” He made the request in an even tone. She was clinging to him like a koala. He must have

been feeling bashful.

He could totally just hug me back…

Evileye was after something she'd heard about once. Someone had told her that some men worked off the post-battle buzz with the opposite sex. She was hoping she could get him to do it with her.

Evileye glanced at Nabe, who was frowning sharply. *Don't mind if I do beat you to the punch!*

She tried rubbing up on him a little, but it didn't seem like it was working through the armor, and when she hit a dent, it hurt.

Momon sighed. "Nabe, do you mind helping me put away my swords?"

Realizing her efforts had been wasted, Evileye let go and detached from the tree that was Momon.

Yeahhh…I should time my advances better. Now that Jaldabaoth has seen how strong Momon is, the chance he doesn't keep his word is probably low, but there are still other people fighting, and we need to hold funerals for the dead… We can't just give in to our desires in this situation.

The demon battle was certainly over.

But Evileye's battle as a woman had only just begun.

Running over the options for her next move, she looked up at the sound of metal clanging.

There was a group running toward them. Adventurers, soldiers, and…

“The captain of the Royal Select? And everyone else…?”

Gazef Stronoff was there, as well as Lakyus and Tina. Not only that, but Gagaran and Tia were there, too. They all looked a bit grungy, and she sensed the struggles they’d gone through to get there. They gazed upon the aftermath of the fierce battle. Then they gasped and stared at Momon.

Inferring what they were thinking, she whispered to Momon, “Sir Momon, proclaim your victory.”

But he didn’t move. As she was wondering what the issue was, she heard him say in a low voice, “This is so embarrassing…”

That wasn’t the response of an elite warrior. He sounded so ordinary that Evileye broke into a smile. “You have to do it! You’re the one who achieved the most! Please just resign yourself.”

He sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. I should do it.”

Momon gripped a sword and thrust it up into the air. “Rrrrraaaaaaaaagh!”

A moment later everyone in the square raised their fists in the same way and exploded into a roar of victory. They praised the name of Momon, the hero who had saved their country.

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

6 Late Fire Moon (September) 8:45 AM

The maids were lined up before Sebas, a total of forty-one homunculi. In front stood the dog-headed head maid, Pestonia S. Puppydog. All the maids performing general duties inside Nazarick were present.

"Everyone, this is a new maid who will be working for Nazarick."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Tsuareninya."

She bowed deeply, and the head maid greeted her on behalf of herself and her staff.

They exchanged a few words, and Tsuare didn't seem particularly frightened.

In the first place, besides the sewn-up scar down the middle of her head, her face was that of a gentle-eyed dog. And the maids behind looked like humans. They didn't have scary appearances like grotesques did.

Still, it wasn't as if her fear of others, due to her previous situation, had disappeared. The reason she was able to handle things had to have been that she understood the circumstances she was in and knew she had to work as hard as she could.

If I don't keep an eye on her, she might have a breakdown.

While Sebas was thinking of her, the formalities ended, and Tsuare walked off with one of the maids. She turned back to look at him. When he nodded, she nodded back and walked on without turning around again.

“Master Sebas, how much should we train her to do? Woof!”

“Please aim to have her pass as a Nazarick maid. Do, however, train her appropriately given that she is only human.”

“Understood. Woof!” Her dog face warped to bare her teeth. It was the face of a predator about to tackle its prey, but her eyes were gentle. “I thought her being a maid was just a stopgap.”

“What do you mean?” Sebas responded, puzzled because he honestly couldn’t see what she was getting at.

“…Woof! No, I mean I thought she would retire when you got married. Woof!”

“What?!”

Sebas’s face twitched, and Pestonia’s soft laughter echoed across the ninth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

•

7 Late Fire Moon (September) 4:51 PM

Climb checked the time and whether Renner had a guest or not. Once he was satisfied there was no conflict, he opened the door to her room.

Inside, where everything was tinted red by the evening sun, his elegantly beautiful master was sitting in her usual seat. The light spilling through the window set her off from her surroundings like a spotlight.

“Welcome, Climb.”

He sensed peace rapidly return to his tattered heart as it began healing in the presence of her sweet beauty. He hardened his expression before it could relax too much and walked over to her.

“Okay, sit down, Climb.”

“No, that’s all right, Princess Renner. There is somewhere I need to go following the demon attack on the capital.”

A light went on in Renner’s eyes. They were orders from her, so she probably had an idea what he was talking about.

He was supposed to go guard the wizards’ guild—because of a certain item.

They didn’t yet have a complete picture of the demon raid, but in one of the warehouses, they had discovered a weird item. The wizards’ guild was investigating it now, and the magic it contained was no ordinary spell. That, combined with what Jaldabaoth had said, had everyone convinced this was the item they’d been looking for.

For that reason, until the guild could assemble powerful veterans and decide what to do with it, they were stationing guards in the area. She’d sent Climb as one of them.

It’s awful that we can’t get the Eight Fingers to take responsibility for this, since they’re the ones who brought that item into the city! He couldn’t completely suppress his disgust even though he was with Renner.

The item that had brought tragedy to the capital was found in a warehouse that undoubtedly belonged to the Eight Fingers’ smuggling division. They should have been moving to crush the smugglers as soon as possible, but there was one reason they

couldn't, and only a handful of people knew what it was.

Intelligence leaked by Jaldabaoth played a role in the discovery of the item. That was why Renner had asserted that perhaps he'd let the information slip on purpose—to use humans to find the item his subordinates hadn't been able to.

Since everyone found that argument compelling, everything was being covered up, so they couldn't use its discovery in an Eight Fingers warehouse as ammo.

"You're going with the captain, right? Got it. Then standing is fine. So how are the citizens you saved? They were under the castle's protection up until a little while ago, but they've left now, right?"

The bomb she'd thrown made Climb's heart leap into his throat. "O-oh, they all said to tell you how grateful they are."

"I see. So if I hurry, I can still see them?"

"No, you can't!" He raised his voice and then thought, *Crud*. He hung his head and quickly tried to recover from his earlier exclamation. "They're all very busy. If you visited, I think it would take up too much of their precious time. I apologize for making your kindness come to nothing, but I would ask that you refrain."

As he was bringing his head back up, he thought the expression on his master's gorgeous face would be one of discontent or perhaps a childish pout unsuitable for someone her age. But the one that met him was neither of those.

She was laughing.

Not just smiling but laughing.

He'd seen her laugh now and then. If he thought back to his

most nostalgic memories, he could remember the twitchy way she had laughed not too long after picking him up, but there was definitely something different about this.

Before he could figure out what it was, her normal smile returned to her face.

"…Well, then I guess I can't go, huh?"

Seeing that she understood, Climb suppressed a relieved sigh.

Actually, almost everything he'd just told her was a lie. He had heard hardly anyone thanking her. On the contrary, they blamed her, saying things like, *Why are we the only ones who got saved?*

All they did was grumble to Climb in their anger about their misfortune—the families they'd lost, the assets they'd forfeited.

He took it, tolerated what was obviously simple venting, because he pitied them for having no one else to blame and because he wanted to punish himself for not being able to perfectly realize his master's wishes.

Still, he'd fought demons to save these people despite the danger, and it hurt for them to say such things.

The demon that had appeared outside the warehouse was on another level. It was too powerful for even Brain Unglaus to handle, but it had been heavily wounded. If it had shown up uninjured, the three of them would have surely lost. Hearing later from Lakyus how strong it was, he was thankful they had been as lucky as they were to win.

After getting through that life-or-death battle, this abuse… He was used to being alone, but this was a different kind of pain.

Still, he was fine while the hate was directed at him. He was

the princess's direct report, but nobody liked him, so they probably would overlook him getting harassed. If he let them meet Renner, though, things could get hairy. If they turned their hate on the princess and insulted *her*, Climb would be forced to draw his sword.

"Okay, Climb. Now I'm going to be the bearer of bad news. Brace yourself." She silently closed her eyes for a few moments and then opened them. "The captives you saved from the brothel with Sir Sebas and the others…they've been killed."

For a split second, Climb didn't understand what she'd said. Then he asked hoarsely, "Why…did that have to…?"

From what he'd heard, they were going to shelter at the guardhouse for a little while and then be transported to Renner's domain.

"It was my fault. At first, I thought I would have some adventurers escort them, but then the disturbance happened, so I couldn't hire any. With no other recourse, I hired some mercenaries and sent them instead, but…"

She shook her head. *No one made it.*

"I-it's not your fault! Not even a little bit! It's the ones who attacked them who were wrong!"

"No, I should have been more careful… If only I hadn't let them go! I thought it would be dangerous in the capital with less protection during the disturbance… If I had sent you with them, maybe things would have been different. And what can I say to apologize to the adventurer who introduced those mercenaries to me?" Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

Climb's chest felt tight. Maybe it was an error on her part, but in that situation, it was the best move, so who could blame her?

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Princess Renner!” he declared, and she was so moved she stood and hugged him.

He was about to put his arms around the small torso against his chest—but stopped himself. It would be entirely unacceptable to do that.

“But how in the world did the information get…?”

“I have no idea. There was a period during the disturbance where the castle guard was looser than usual. Could it have leaked then? I had them leave right away, though…”

He couldn’t say there was no chance of that. Or rather, he was certain it had something to do with the guardhouse, given the fact that the rescued captives had been under its protection.

“Where were the corpses found?”

“In the slums inside the capital apparently. I don’t know the details.”

“And where are they now?”

“Buried. Why?”

“If we take a look at the wounds, we might learn something.”

“Climb, please don’t. We can’t disgrace these girls any further. At least let them be at peace in death.”

“…Understood.”

Climb was struck by her tenderness. She did have a point. He was ashamed of his lack of consideration. He’d tried to go too far in the pursuit of truth.

“But don’t worry about it. You didn’t do any— Well, what you

said before." She smiled. Her eyes were red, but the tears were done falling.

"Yes." Climb broke into a smile.

"Sorry to hold you up, Climb. Do your best out there, okay?"

Regretting that her warmth was moving away from him, he banished his desires.

•

10 Late Fire Moon (September) 9:08 AM

That day, the sky was truly blue—its color seemed to go on forever, as if it was celebrating their departure.

"You're going home?" Evileye asked the man in the raven-black armor with the crimson cape fluttering behind him. "Going home" was a strange way to put it, but that was how it felt to her, and the Blue Roses were no different. While adventurers were often thought of as wanderers who didn't put down roots, there were some who chose a city as their home base. For Momon, that must have been E-Rantel. "I'd sure like to go with you…" She couldn't believe how pathetic she sounded. It was just like a girl reaching out after her departing lover, and at the word *lover*, she nearly writhed in agony.

"…It's not a big deal."

That was all he said in response.

He's so cold, she thought to herself.

She couldn't think of anything else to say, and a breeze blew between them.

A man had been waiting for that pause and opened his mouth

to speak.

Evileye thought it was rather insensitive, given a man and woman were in the middle of a bitter farewell, but it wasn't as if they were the only two there. Nabe was behind Momon, and the rest of the Blue Roses were behind Evileye. The casters who would take Momon and Nabe back to E-Rantel were also present.

"We're extremely grateful for all you've done."

Momon acknowledged Marquis Raeven's thanks with a slight bow.

"His Majesty the king also wanted to thank you directly, but…"

The name of the adventurer who had fought one-on-one with the enemy mastermind Jaldabaoth and repelled him had spread far and wide among adventurers, ordinary people, and nobles alike. It was no wonder the king would want to meet him. This sort of thing could even warrant the granting of a noble title. But Momon declined and didn't even make an effort to have an audience.

It probably wasn't a very appropriate attitude.

To the nobles, who prioritized their honor over everything, this behavior by an unknown toward the king—someone above them—was arrogant.

There were those who said he'd slighted the king.

Among the adventurers, some said he was being incredibly rude.

A few nobles even went so far as to say that letting Jaldabaoth go was a mistake and that the reason he hadn't been able to finish him off was because the two of them were in cahoots. Marquis

Raeven had been able to silence those, threatening them by telling them, “Since I made the request to Momon, I’ll consider those remarks a personal challenge, so what would you care to do?”

To their denunciations, Momon had replied, “I’m an adventurer who took on a job and performed it, that’s all. It doesn’t warrant a reward from the king, and if he was going to reward me, I’d like to ask him to thank *all* the adventurers who participated in the operation,” which quieted them down.

But that didn’t mean the smoldering fire was extinguished. They just realized that insulting Momon any further would only injure their own reputations.

Evileye remembered the explanation Lakyus had given her.

It wasn’t hard to imagine that without Momon, the disturbance wouldn’t have been resolved, and more damage would have resulted. The reason only the Blue Roses and Marquis Raeven were seeing off such a hero was because of the difficult position he was in.

After this operation, people’s opinions of adventurers, the king, the second prince, and Marquis Raeven had improved, and their opinions of the nobles worsened.

Of course, the nobles had an argument. The royal capital was the king’s territory, so from their point of view, as leaders of their own domains, they had no obligation to use their soldiers to protect the city, even if they felt like they should. In light of the possibility that the demons might attack their mansions, it was only natural to prioritize their own defense.

After the disturbance, the nobles’ faction started taking the firm stance that any man who didn’t protect his own domain couldn’t be called king. In the king’s faction, they pushed the fact

that rather than go into hiding, their monarch had dared to lead the army. And so the power struggle between the two sides intensified.

The ordinary residents of the city, who had nothing to do with the power struggle, harbored seeds of discontent for a different reason. *Why did these self-important nobles protect only their own houses and not ours?*

Thus the ones who had desperately fought were so lauded. And that bothered the nobles. This vicious cycle eventually led them to turn their discontent on the adventurers—*they only fought so hard because they were getting paid.*

According to them, Momon, the adventurer now considered strongest in the kingdom, surpassing even the other adamantites, was the epitome of this. There was no way any of them would come to see him off. Even the handful of nobles who liked him were in a difficult spot that made it hard to say so after the faction war heated up.

The reason Marquis Raeven had been able to attend was because of his position flitting between the factions.

"A letter of thanks jointly signed by the king, the second prince, and the princess has arrived. There is also a plaque that exempts you from all tolls within domains under direct royal jurisdiction and a dagger from the king."

Evileye could clearly hear Lakyus's sigh of admiration as a noble. A dagger given by the king was like a medal for a noble or knight who distinguished themselves in battle. If the nobles found out about this amid the intensifying power struggle, there would be trouble. The king's decision to award Momon's efforts with one despite that risk could only be called magnificent.

I thought he was just an old guy who did nothing but breed

conflict, but I guess I have to reevaluate him.

Momon casually took the dagger and other items and handed them behind him to Nabe.

"Well, the nobles *might* just consider this a decent enough reward and not say anything…," Evileye said abruptly.

The nobles would probably not be terribly amused, in any sense of the word, if someone with both popularity and power was promoted to a noble rank. And it would be problematic for them if a warrior even stronger than Gazef were to join the king's faction. So if the idea of the king bestowing a rank on Momon came up, they would erupt in opposition, and their basis for the argument would be the dagger. He'd already given him a reward, so wasn't that enough?

Maybe they'll just tolerate this with no problem, thought Evileye, but the people next to her disagreed.

"…That's naive, Evileye."

"Sweetie, the king is a step ahead."

"Huh?"

"That dagger is given to knights and nobles."

"That means that later, when the king appoints Mr. Momon and the nobles complain, he can bring up the dagger. He doesn't give those to ordinary citizens! You guys knew, right? Supposedly he's already been given a rank along with the dagger. He's managed to bulldoze through some tricky logic."

"I see… I can't believe you figured all that out."

"Eh-heh. And proud of it."

“Don’t underestimate a former assas—a ninja.”

“Well, I’m going to get going soon. Marquis Raeven, thank you for everything.”

“Not at all. I hope we can continue our good relationship going forward.”

“I hope the same. And Blue Roses, as fellow adamantite-rank adventurers, I think we’ll be speaking often. See you again sometime.”

“Yes, Mr. Momon. Now that we’ve seen your power, we feel a bit sheepish to hold the same rank as you, but we’ll work hard to approach your greatness. Looking forward to teaming up with you again.”

Lakyus and Momon exchanged slight bows.

Then Evileye felt Momon’s gaze turn to her. It was definitely not her imagination. The proof was that he seemed about to say something.

Evileye felt her unbeating heart give a thump.

If he had asked her to join his team, she wouldn’t have been able to refuse. That would essentially mean betraying the friends she’d been through thick and thin with so far, but she couldn’t lie to herself about her feelings.

After a few hesitant stops and starts, he sighed and turned away. As he did, his crimson cape waved dramatically.

He walked away, and Gagaran said teasingly, “Got rejected, huh?”

“No, that’s just the kind of man he is.”

Evileye didn't once take her eyes off him as the Floating Board from Marquis Raeven's casters slowly floated into the air with him and Nabe on top.

"I'm sure we'll meet him again."

"I hope it won't be a huge incident like this but something a little easier to handle."

"Might be tricky."

"No kidding."

The Blue Roses chatted.

Probably the only time adamantite-rank adventurers would meet under work circumstances was during a huge incident.

"Then we'll just have to go visit sometime. Evileye can teleport. It wouldn't be bad to have somewhere we can pop over to inside E-Rantel. In fact, if you went together now, you'd hit two birds with one stone. No safer way to travel than under Momon's protection!"

Evileye stared at Gagaran, speechless. Of course, she was wearing a mask, but her shock came through loud and clear in her posture.

"Whoa, whoa, you didn't know we knew? Anyhow, don't you guys know that long-distance relationships never work? Well, I guess you're not technically goin' out yet…"

Gagaran looked up at the sky, and Evileye couldn't help but follow her gaze.

Momon was getting smaller and smaller.

“Waaaaaaaaaagh!”

A scream went up, one that sounded like Evileye when she was mad, and the Blue Roses laughed.

•

10 Late Fire Moon (September) 6:45 PM

The Eight Fingers’ emergency meeting was off to a rough start. Not all the members were present. One of those missing was Coccodor, but since everyone knew he was being held at the guardhouse, he wasn’t the acute problem this time. The issue was the other missing member—Zero.

They knew he wouldn’t betray them. That was what made it an even bigger problem.

According to the intelligence they’d gathered, Zero’s death was a confirmed fact. Acting on Zero’s proposal to torture to death the one who’d insulted them, they’d sent some of their own men, and it seemed they’d all been killed.

It was a huge blow. The underlings weren’t irreplaceable, but the death of the strongest man in the Eight Fingers, the chief of the security division, was an unimaginable loss.

The division chiefs gathered here were rivals, but they were also part of the same organization. This loss would affect them all without a doubt.

The debate raged.

What to do about the hole left by Zero? What to do about Coccodor?

Normally they would have wanted to install their own men, but there was one reason they couldn’t at the moment—the

demon attack on the royal capital.

The losses the Eight Fingers had suffered in that attack were no joke. Their bases had been raided on the same day, but the damage done couldn't even be compared. The chief of the smuggling division was in particular trouble.

Almost all their warehouses had been emptied, their contents stolen, and the ones that hadn't been looted had undergone inspection. As a result, they'd lost nearly half the goods they'd been smuggling into the capital.

"All we can do is cooperate with one another until we get back on our feet."

"Pretty sure we always cooperate…"

"Don't be snarky. We need to cooperate for real this time. I think it might be better to operate away from the capital for a while, but what do you all think?"

"Nah, on the contrary, now's probably the time to be in the capital. We gotta grease the palm of the new captain of the guards. If we fled the capital now, we'd be giving up on all the profits to be had here."

"Hrm, that is a possibility, but don't you think it's dangerous to operate in the capital when our security division—our military force—is crippled?"

Five of the chiefs racked their brains. Then they asked the one who hadn't spoken yet, "Hilma, what do you think?"

She jumped.

Her reaction was completely different from their last meeting.

She looked almost like a corpse, with dark circles under her eyes that even her makeup couldn't conceal.

"What's the matter? I heard your house got raided, too. You were the only one who was able to escape, right? Through the secret passageway? Was it that traumatizing?"

The other chiefs had their usual escorts standing by behind them, but there was no one behind Hilma.

"…"

"What's wrong?"

The moment she opened her mouth, the door to the meeting room opened.

"Okayyyy, stop right there!" The one who entered the room with a cheerful shout was a single dark elf boy. A girl of the same race meekly followed behind him.

Everyone present was so stunned they couldn't react.

Perhaps their handling of the situation would have changed in the case of adult dark elves, but these were children—a total mismatch for the current atmosphere. Before assuming they were enemies, everyone wondered if someone had brought them here intentionally.

"So, uh, starting now, you're all going to be minions of our master!" It was silent enough to hear a pin drop. He must have assumed they didn't understand what he'd said, because he rephrased it. "The ever sacred Supreme One has judged that he would gain more influence by conquering you than the leaders of this country. So all your crimes will be pardoned, and you'll become our minions…slaves? Puppets? Well, whatever. Anyhow, congratulations!"

When the dark elf boy clapped his hands, the timid girl followed suit, holding her staff under her arm. “C-congra—”

“The fuck is this?!”

The division chiefs had hesitated precisely because they didn’t know who these elves were, whether they were friend or foe. Once they’d judged them to be enemies, the rest happened very quickly. Their underworld lifestyles meant they had already switched gears, and the first order of business was to find a way to keep themselves safe and survive. Killing their opponent would be put off till later.

It wasn’t clear if the dark elves were the main force or not, but if they could barge right through the door into this Eight Fingers’ executive meeting, they had to have control over quite a bit of this place. That meant that even with the elite escorts the chief of each division had brought, they probably couldn’t win a fight. Unless their opponents were total idiots, they would have eliminated any chance of their losing in advance. That was precisely why everyone’s top priority was escaping.

No one hesitated to use their escorts as shields. Everyone thought of the same thing at the same time and leaped into action.

But it was far too late.

One of the chiefs tried to stand up, and he was the first to realize he couldn’t move.

“Ah. Ahhh, ahhh?! Ahhhhh!” He couldn’t move. His tongue was paralyzed and couldn’t form words. Drool just dribbled out of his mouth.

“Phoo,” the dark elf boy exhaled. Then he smiled broadly. “So, for starters, you’re all invited to a fun place! See?”

“O-oh. H-here’s the invitation.”

Hilma jumped with a start.

“W-wait a minute! I’m good, right? I cooperated, didn’t I?”

Realizing who had betrayed them, the men moved only their eyes to glare at the woman who was still mobile.

“P-please! I can’t take any more! I don’t want to go back there!”

“Hmm. What did you do to her?” the boy asked.

“I took her to the Prince of Fear’s room and had them eat her from the inside out.”

The boy grimaced with a “Yikes!”

Hilma must have remembered. Hugging herself, nails dug into her arms, she trembled violently. She had one hand over her mouth. Her face was sickly pale, and tears poured out of her eyes.

“A-and—”

“That’s enough. So you healed her up with magic, huh? That’s enough to make anyone obey you. But it’s so rare for us not to kill someone.”

“Y-yeah. I guess ’cause we have plenty of corpses and ’cause we could use her to manage this organization…”

“I seeeee. Well, lady, do your best. If you betray us, we’ll put you back in that room for even longer.”

“Eek!”

Hilma nodded over and over. Any urge to rebel had completely

disappeared; she would definitely be loyal to them and carry out her orders as given.

“First, I want you to buy us some time until these people learn to obey. Can you do that?”

“O-of course! Leave it to me! I’m sure I’ll be useful to you!”

Seeing how frantically eager she was to please, the men realized they were about to get a taste of whatever had made her so fearful, and their faces went pale.

“Well, we’re going to leave you with a few subordinates we brought along, so make good use of them! And there are a few people you absolutely cannot kill or oppose; I’ll explain about them later.”

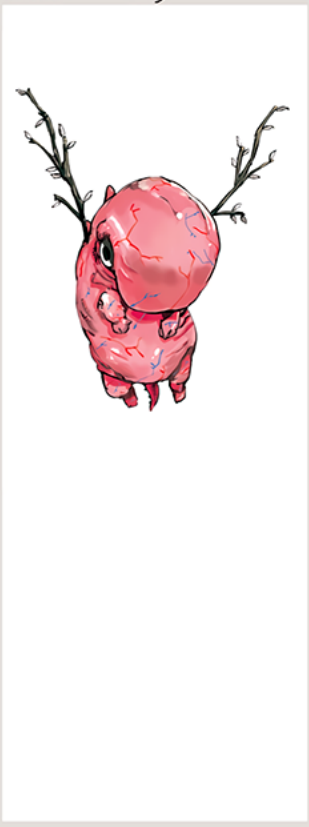
The dark elf boy flashed a grin.

“Okay! Half this country is conquered! Demiurge was saying something about sowing the seeds of a nation… Hmm. Ah well, it’s probably fine. I guess we’ll go to a different country next?”

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



Character 23



Victim

Grotesque

Sacrificial babe

Position — Guardian of the eighth level in the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — The Sephirothic Tree on the eighth level

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: 1)

Race Levels — Angel — 10 lv

Archangel — 10 lv

Etc.

Class Levels — Patriot — 1 lv

Saint — 4 lv

Martyr — 1 lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 35 levels

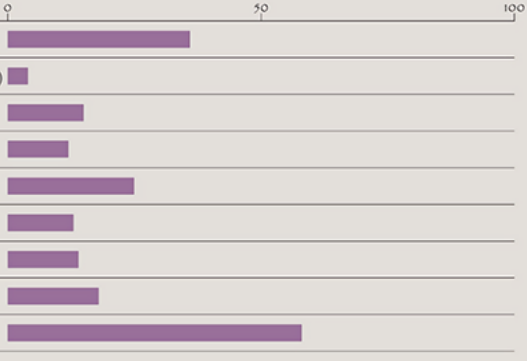
Race levels — Class levels

29 acquired total — 6 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

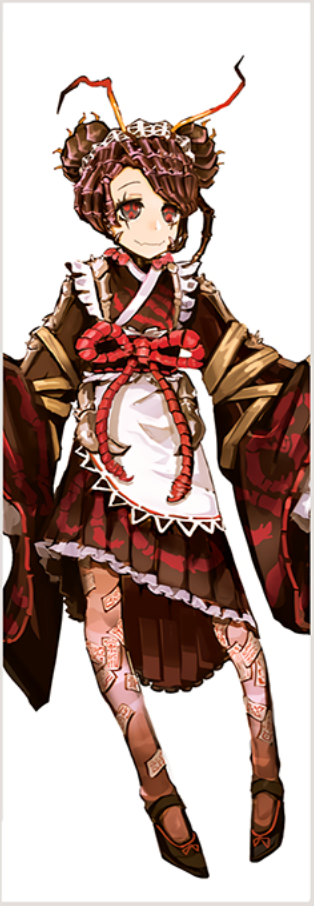


Character 24

Entoma Vasilissa Zeta

Grotesque

Bug-loving maid



Position — Combat maid of the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — One of the servants' rooms on the ninth level

Alignment — Neutral-Evil (Karma Points: -100)

Race Levels — Arachnoid — 10 lv

Etc.

Class Levels — Talisman Wielder — 10 lv

Medium — 7 lv

Bug Tamer — 7 lv

Weapon Master — 3 lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 51 levels

● Race levels ● Class levels

12 acquired total 39 acquired total

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

status	0	50	100
HP (Hit Points)			
MP (Magic Points)			
Physical Attack			
Physical Defense			
Dexterity			
Magic Attack			
Magic Defense			
Total Resistance			
Special			

Character 25



Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra

Human

Blue Rose

Position —— Kingdom soldier

Residence —— The royal capital

Class Levels —— Cleric —— ? lv
Templar —— ? lv
Priestess —— ? lv
Etc.

Birthday —— 1 Late Earth Moon

Hobby —— Writing

personal character

A battle maiden garbed in resplendent gear. Possesses Demonic Sword Killineiram. A priest-warrior with one foot in the heroic realm and plenty of room to grow, there is a very good chance bards will sing her praises in legends. The daughter of a noble family, she ran away after hearing tales of the Drops of Red adventurers (and her parents eventually understood). She's the type to press on and drag her friends along, and the Blue Roses' team is formed around her.

Character 26

Evileye

Grotesque

Apex league caster
"Our Little Miss Tiny" —Gagaran



Position — Member of the Blue Roses

Residence — The royal capital

Class Levels — Vampire Princess ——— ? lv
Sorcerer ——— ? lv
Elementalist (Earth) ——— ? lv
Etc.

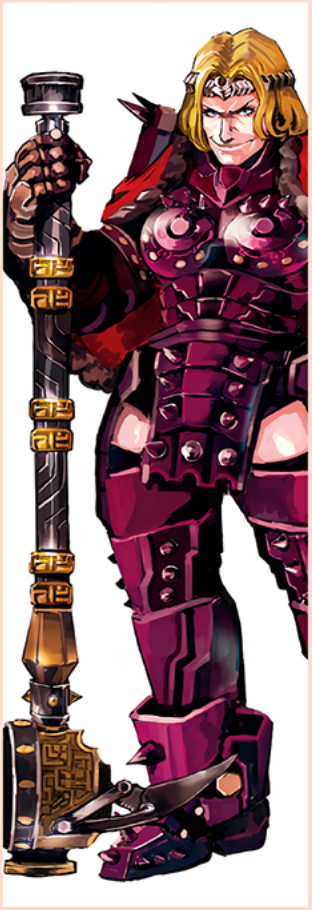
Birthday — Unknown

Hobby — Performing magic experiments and developing new spells

personal character

A once-feared vampire previously known as Nation Breaker. Fought the evil spirits alongside the Thirteen Heroes. Originally human, her appearance is as she was the moment she became a vampire. She refuses to discuss why she became a vampire or why she shattered nations, but it seems to have something to do with the talent she was born with. Incidentally, she was the last member to join the Blue Roses but has the biggest attitude.

Character 27



Gagaran

Human

"Dainty warrior of many mysteries" —herself
"Muscle Monster" —Evileye

Position —— Member of the Blue Roses

Residence —— It's a mystery. (The royal capital)

Class Levels —— Knight —— ? lv
Air Rider —— ? lv
Mercenary —— ? lv
Etc.

Birthday —— It's a mystery. (2 Late Earth Moon)

Hobby —— It's a mystery. (Weight training)

personal character

A woman who is so large and muscular a question mark often gets added to "woman" when describing her. A warrior who saved Lakyus after she ran away to become an adventurer and an early member of the Blue Roses (—there is one other early member). There are many mysteries about her. She goes by an assumed name, and her past is completely unknown; she hasn't even talked about it to her friends. Still, she is the most trusted person on her team and not for her strength but for the broad-mindedness she radiates. She's like a reliable big brother.

Character 28

Tia and Tina

Human

Twin killers lurking in the shadows



Position — Members of the Blue Roses

Residence — The royal capital

Class Levels — Rogue ? lv
Assassin ? lv
Ninja ? lv
Etc.

Birthday — Unknown

Hobby — Stalking

personal character

Two of the three daughters of the boss of a famous band of assassins known mainly in the empire. They had a reputation for killing anyone they targeted, but when they went to kill Lakyus, she turned the tables. Then both of them gave in to her persuasion and agreed to join the Blue Roses. Originally they'd been waiting for her to show her weakness, plotting to assassinate her—but the two sisters had a change of heart, seeing that her lifestyle wasn't too disagreeable, and got out of the assassination business. Now they've changed to the point where they wouldn't regret giving up their lives for their teammates.

AFTERWORD

Okay, so this was volume six, a story that got more and more horrible, in many senses of the word, the more you read. How did you like it?

As the author, Maruyama, I think it was very *Overlord*. I'd be happy if you all agreed. Plus, it's a parade of things a normal light novel protagonist would never do.

Since I set up foreshadowing a few volumes back, now I can get a smug look on my face and say, "I was thinking about this way back then!" It makes me want to brag. It's hard, though… If you make it too conspicuous, people will see through it right away. I think the hardest to figure out is the journal. I believe there's a scene in Volume 2 where there was a discussion of her things being disturbed. Considering the motive of the attacker, there was no real reason to go through her stuff. But that attacker always did things in a showy way, so it wouldn't have been strange if everything was really ripped apart. But the things weren't so out of place—almost as if someone who knew where things were did the searching… So sneaky…

So there are other things like that where if you go back and read all the other volumes after reading this one, you might make some discoveries.

As for the characters, the MVP of both Volumes 5 and 6 is clearly Evileye, but my personal fave is the thief whose name you finally learn at the very end. If you're the kind of person who finds yourself murmuring things like, "It's good to be young," then you probably understand.

With that, thank you, everyone, for reading this two-part story. I'm extremely interested in hearing your impressions. Unfortunately, you'll have to pay for the stamp, but I'd be happy if you sent in a reader postcard.

From here on out, I'd like to give some thanks. To so-bin, F——ta, Osako, Code Design Studio, and everyone who helps create *Overlord*, thank you. And Honey, thanks for so many things.

Finally, to the people who bought the book, I truly thank you!

KUGANE MARUYAMA

January 2014

Afterword by so-bin



MARUYAMA SAID, "HOW ABOUT DOING ENTOMA IN KIMONO FOR THE LAST PAGE?" AND I THOUGHT OH! AND THIS IS HOW IT TURNED OUT. I QUITE LIKE IT. HER FACE DOESN'T APPEAR IN THE BOOK LIKE THIS, BUT IT'S SO GROSS.

so-bin

AINZ OOAL GOWN'S NEXT MOVE IS TO GO TO THE EMPIRE.

AND

"SACRIFICES" ARE GATHERED AT NAZARICK, TANGLED UP, AND TRAPPED.

Nazarick is impossible to escape, so will they still be able to somehow find a way to return home safely…? The Great Tomb removes its veil in Volume 7

Volume Seven

OVERLORD

Volume 7: The Invaders of the Great Tomb

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from YEN ON!