

OVERLORD 8 The Two Leaders

Kugane Maruyama

Illustration by so-bin




Pleiades
Πλειάδες

OVERLORD

Volume 8: The Two Leaders

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OVERLORD, VOLUME 8

KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Emily Balistrieri Cover art by so-bin

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Story 1 Enri's Hectic, Eventful Life

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1

Enri Emmott's day began early. She had to start preparing breakfast before the sun was even up. That was partly because she wasn't quite as used to the work as her deceased mother, so she took longer. The other part of it was that she had to make a huge amount of food.

Cooking for Nemu, herself, and the nineteen goblins who had sworn allegiance to Enri—twenty-one people, plus two more for a total of twenty-three—meant she was beyond busy; her situation was more aptly described as a battle. Enri could still hardly believe that the mountain of ingredients towering before her would vanish after a single meal.

"Well, it is six times larger than before, after all."

Taking a deep breath, she rolled up her sleeves, ready to begin.

She quietly chopped the vegetables, then switched knives and sliced the meat. The order of what needed to be handled when was already decided.

Enri had never been a very good cook, so her efficient preparation of so much in such a short time was a perfect illustration of what humans were capable of under pressure.

The sound of Enri's cooking woke up her little sister, who wandered into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"Morning, Enri. I'll help."

"Morning, Nemu. I'm fine here, so please do what I asked for yesterday."

Nemu made a pouty face for a moment but ended up obeying with no complaints, offering a single "okayyy" before shuffling away.

Enri stopped for a moment.

Pain shot through her heart.

Her ten-year-old sister used to be a lively girl who had no qualms about trying to get her way, but ever since the attack, her childlike innocence had faded, and

she did exactly what Enri told her without so much as a peep. She'd become such a good girl it was depressing.

Their parents' warm smiles flickered across Enri's mind. It had been several months since the attack, but the emotional scars hadn't completely healed.

If it had been some sort of illness that claimed their lives, then at least she would have had time to prepare herself. Maybe the pain wouldn't have lingered so long had it been a freak accident or natural disaster that was nobody's fault, but the deaths of her parents were different. There was plenty of blame to lay.

Enri squeezed her eyes shut. In front of the others, she did her best not to let any weakness show, but when there was no one around, her loneliness gouged at the scars in her heart.

"Yeah…"

Behind her eyelids, she saw their kind parents. Even when she opened her eyes, they were still there. Touching memories filled her mind.

Spurred by the dark spiral of emotions inside her—hatred for the people who killed their parents—she swung the carving knife with a mighty heave. Its momentum carved a clean slice through the meat.

She furrowed her brow at the dent she'd inadvertently made in the cutting board. *I should know better. If the knife gets chipped, it'll be hard to fix. Sorry, Mom.*

This was the knife she had mournfully inherited from her mother. She apologized for treating it carelessly and put a lid on the hole in her heart.

As she was running her finger along the edge of the blade to make sure it wasn't chipped, the door next to her opened.

The one who entered wasn't human, as evidenced by his small stature. It was a type of subhuman known as a goblin.

"Good morning, boss lady. It's my turn today… Is something wrong?" The goblin bowed politely and looked at Enri's hands with concern.

The goblin conducted himself as a subordinate, even though she was just a village girl, because she was the one who had summoned him.

After the attack, when the villagers had been discussing how they should probably have lookouts, Enri suddenly remembered the item she had received, and when she used it, those goblins appeared. The villagers were shocked and frightened of the monsters, but when she explained that they were summoned with an item the village's savior, Sir Ainz Ooal Gown, had given her, they seemed to relax a little. It went without saying that the villagers trusted Ainz Ooal Gown. They were incredibly grateful to him, after all. The work the goblins had accomplished since then completely dispelled the villagers' remaining doubts.

"Good morning, Kaijari. I was being a little too aggressive with the knife…"

Kaijari was one of the goblins who had been summoned. His worried face, furrowed brow and all, seemed like it would be more appropriate on a man-eating bear whose hibernation had been interrupted. "That won't do. Please be more careful. There's nobody with blacksmithing skills in this village, ya know. We can't repair our gear, either."

"Oh, that's right…"

Kaijari tried to be more cheerful, saying, "Well, we'll figure something out eventually," and set about helping to cook breakfast.

He took smoldering embers out of a pot he'd brought and lit the oven with a practiced hand. His skill was clear from the way the tiny flame rapidly grew into a roaring fire.

But he can't cook… I wonder why.

The goblins couldn't make even simple dishes themselves. At first, she thought it was because their diet consisted of raw meat and vegetables, but it turned out they preferred cooked food. Of course, they would still eat something whether it was prepared or not, but…

Maybe summoned creatures can't cook? Well, I'm just a village girl, so how am I supposed to know? Having reached that conclusion, she concentrated on her work. Luckily, the knife hadn't chipped.

Before long, the two were done cooking.

There was a lot more food on the table compared to when her mother had

been cooking for the family.

For one thing, there was meat. Of course back then, her family had received a share of meat the rangers sometimes brought back, but it wasn't nearly as much as they had now. The increase was due to the village operating across a larger swathe of territory these days.

The surrounding Tove Woodlands provided them with the bounties of the forest: firewood, edible fruits and vegetables, animal meat and skins, as well as all sorts of herbs.

One could call it a mountain of riches, but monsters lived in the forest as well. Since the villagers didn't want to risk leading them back to their homes, they hadn't really been able to lay a hand on any of the resources up until now. Back in those days, the best they managed had been sending in specialists with experience and confidence in their hunting skills to steal some of the riches outside the Wise King of the Forest's territory. But now, after the appearance of the goblins and the absence of the Wise King of the Forest, the situation had changed quite a lot.

The villagers were now able to enter the forest and freely harvest the bounties of nature. The efforts of their new, powerful friends were magnificent, giving them access to meat that had been so difficult to obtain before. Fresh fruits and vegetables also showed up with more regularity on their tables. The village's diet improved dramatically.

And since the goblins were understood to be serving under Enri, her house had the first pick of any game they hunted.

A ranger who had joined the village recently also contributed to the improvement of their food situation.

She used to be an adventurer in E-Rantel. Ever since she moved to the village, she had been working with the rangers and improving as a hunter. Since she used to be a warrior, she was great with a bow and could take down large prey. That also increased the frequency that meat was available.

The better nutrition naturally affected Enri's body.

She flexed her arm for a moment.

It made quite a respectable bulge.

Ngh, I feel like I'm getting bigger and bigger lately…

The goblins probably meant to praise her by saying things like, "Yer putting on muscle lately," "Let's power up some more," "Yer getting some good definition there," "Aim for that six-pack," "Lookin' sharp," but as a woman it was a bit—or perhaps quite—complicated.

I haven't bulked up as much as the goblins hope I will but…I'd really rather not…

Envisioning the ultimate form of herself that the goblins were hoping for, she quickly chased the image out of her mind as she began plating food on the table. This was another pain.

There wouldn't be a fuss over slightly unequal portions, but whether there was meat in someone's soup or not could turn into a huge problem. She confirmed that every bowl contained the same amount and ratio of ingredients as she went along.

Soon, right about the time the sweat started rolling down her forehead, she was finished preparing breakfast.

"Okay, we have to get the other goblins and Nfi."

"Yeah, that's right."

"I'll go call them!"

When she turned around, Nemu was standing there, eyes sparkling.

"Did you finish everything I asked you to do?" Enri nodded when she saw her sister nod. "You did? Then go get Nfi and—"

"No, I'll go get the goblins!"

Nemu interrupted her older sister with a sudden shout, but Enri didn't have any objections. When Kaijari bobbed his head at her, it must have been in thanks.

"Okay, thanks. Then I guess I'll go get Nfi."

"That's a good idea! I'll go with ya, boss lady."

No one would be left in the house, but that wasn't an issue. Enri had never heard of any burglaries in the village.

Enri took Kaijari with her and set out after Nemu.

A breeze carrying the scents of the meadow blew over her as she walked in the morning sunlight. As she deeply breathed in the fresh air, she saw Kaijari was doing the same. She smiled in spite of herself, and when Kaijari noticed, his face twisted into an evil sneer. There was a time when Enri might have been terrified, but after living together as long as they had, she knew for sure that this was a happy expression.

Enri enjoyed the pleasant weather as she headed for the house next door.

One of the houses that ended up empty after the recent tragedy was currently occupied by the Baleare family, formerly apothecaries in E-Rantel.

There were two in their household: the master apothecary Lizzy Baleare and her grandson, Enri's friend Nfirea Baleare. Both of them were holed up in their home steeping herbs and creating medicines.

Not participating in communal village life was considered poor behavior that meant being kept at an arm's length—or in the worst case, completely ostracized—but the Baleares were different.

The work of an apothecary—making medicines in case someone became sick or injured—was indispensable in a small village like this one. As long as they made medicines, no one would ask any more of them.

The need for an apothecary was felt especially keenly in a village like Carne, where there was no resident priest who could use healing magic.

Incidentally, in slightly larger settlements, priests often served as local apothecaries as well.

When priests used healing magic, they asked for the appropriate fee in return. In fact, they had to. But in the event villagers weren't able to pay, they were compensated with labor. The priests would use herbs to make medicines for people who still couldn't pay. Treatments done with herbal remedies cost less than magic healing.

There was a cleric among the goblins who could close up small cuts in an instant, but the villagers all agreed that they should save his power to deal with serious injuries. Still, there were limits; the few spells the cleric knew didn't include any that could cure sickness or poison.

For that reason, everyone was thankful the Baleare family stayed inside their house and devoted themselves to making medicines.

Despite the fact that they did such important work, almost no one in the village went anywhere near them.

The reason for that became clear upon approaching the house.

Enri scrunched up her nose. Kaijari did the same thing—only in a more menacing fashion. A nasty, pungent smell hung in the air all around the Baleare house. It practically seemed toxic. Herbs sometimes gave off sharp odors when crushed, but there was at least something fresh and natural to them; they didn't produce dangerous smells like this one.

Exhaling through her mouth, Enri knocked on the door.

After knocking a few times, she began to think that they might be out. At that very moment, she sensed someone moving on the other side. An instant later, the lock clicked and the door opened.

Urk!

She wanted to keep a straight face and not say anything, but she couldn't handle the air that wafted out.

It hurt.

The powerful stench assaulted her eyes, nose, and mouth. It smelled so bad it made the air outside feel like a mild side effect.

"Morning, Enri!"

The eyes peeking through a gap in Nfirea's long bangs were open but terribly bloodshot. He must have stayed up all night working on his alchemy again.

She didn't want to open her mouth with that stink in the air, but it would be rude not to return his greeting.

“M-morning, Nfi.”

Her throat felt scratchy for a moment.

“Good morning, boss man.”

“Good morning, uh, Kai…Kaijari. I guess it’s morning, huh? I was concentrating so hard I didn’t notice, but since the sun’s already so… Time sure flies… I was doing experiments all night, so I’m kinda tired…” He yawned audibly.

“Seems like you were really focused on your work—”

Breakfast is ready, so call your grandmother and come with me, she wanted to say, but Nfirea interrupted her. Well, probably not on purpose. He was just so excited.

“It’s amazing, Enri!”

He leaned in. The horrible odor permeated his work clothes, and she wanted to keep some distance, but she was his friend so she suppressed the urge to back away.

“Wh-what is, Nfirea?”

“Listen! We’ve finally succeeded in producing a potion using a new process! This is totally groundbreaking! We’re mixing the solution we were given with herbs, and the potion we get turns out purple!”

All she could do was sigh.

She had no idea what part of that was amazing. *Is it like if you put purple cabbage in some water?*

“And it really does close up wounds! The healing speed is on par with potions made with alchemical items alone!”

Nfirea rolled up his sleeve to show off the lack of cuts on his slim arm. While Enri thought, *His arm might be skinnier than mine*, he continued talking.

“And so—!”

“Okay, okay, please leave it at that.” Kaijari stepped abruptly forward. “Yer on a high from lack of sleep, ya know? Boss lady, you can leave this to me, so why don’t ya head back first?”

“Are you sure?”

“Not a problem! I’ll throw some water in his face and whatnot to calm him down, then we’ll be right over. If yer late getting back, everyone’ll worry, right? What about Grandma, by the way?”

“She’s still focused on her experiments… I have the feeling she won’t eat breakfast. Sorry, I know you worked hard to make it…”

“Oh, that’s fine. I sort of figured Lizzy might not eat.”

This had happened several times before, so it was no surprise.

“All right, boss lady, please head on back.”

If he was going to put it like that, she had no choice but to obey.

“Okay, thanks, then.”

With one eye on Enri’s receding figure, Kaijari gave Nfirea a cold look. “What do ya think yer doing? Don’t ya know women only pay attention to men talking about their hobbies when they like them? If a man talks about his hobbies with a woman who’s not in love with him, it drives her away!”

“…Sorry. It’s just that this amazing thing happened, so… I mean, it’s so amazing! Groundbreaking!”

Nfirea clearly hadn’t learned his lesson, and Kaijari interrupted with a sigh and a wave of his hand. “Are ya sure yer okay there? Yer in love with the boss lady, right?”

Nfirea gulped and nodded an emphatic yes.

“Then prioritize her over yer medicines!”

“…Okay. I’ll try.”

“Trying’s not good enough! Ya have to do it! Ya have to get her to fall for ya. We’re with ya all the way. Not only that, but her little sister promised to cooperate, too. Ya need to get it together!”

“Yeah…”

“If ya wait for her to say she likes ya, she’ll probably be carried off by some other guy first! Ya need the courage to speak up!”

Nfirea felt like a sharp knife had plunged into his chest.

“Well, I’m kinda slammin’ ya, but I know yer doing ya best, boss man. Before, ya could hardly even squeeze out a word, and now ya havin’ conversations on the regular!”

“Back then, I didn’t get to see her very often. It was only when I came here to gather herbs… I’ve definitely spent more time with her since moving here than all the previous times combined.”

“That’s the spirit, that’s the spirit. Just keep forging ahead! First, we need to call attention to yer strength. I asked a lady in the village, and sure enough, women fall for strong guys. She was forty-nine, but…”

“I’m not too confident when it comes to muscles. Should I help out in the fields more?”

“No, ya have one of these.” Kaijari poked his head to drive the point home. “Fight with that. I was thinking magic might be good, too. But look, when me or one of the others thinks ya have a chance to sell yerself, we’ll pose like this. When we do that, say or do something that’ll make her fall for ya.” Kaijari struck a pose that showed off his bulging biceps. “This, got it? Then if we think ya should keep pushing, we’ll pose like this.” Next, he showed off his chest. The goblin was small but had the sturdy body of a warrior.

Why the poses? Nfirea thought, but he could see they meant well, so he couldn’t bring himself to wonder aloud. He did have to ask one thing, though. “So hey, why are you guys doing this for me? I know you’re devoted to Enri, but I can’t figure out your motive for helping me.”

“What a basic question,” Kaijari answered in exasperation and continued in a clear, slow manner that others might use to explain something to a small child. “We want the boss lady to be happy! From that point of view, yer the goal. So ya guys need to get married as soon as possible!”

“We don’t have to rush, though! We could just gradually grow closer…you know?”

“…That’ll be too late. It takes time from when a human gets pregnant till when they have the baby, right?”

When the conversation reached what was arguably the ultimate form of heterosexual relations, Nfirea blinked a few times, and his face reddened slightly. “Yeah. I guess it takes about nine months.”

“So then ya won’t have enough time to have fourteen—I mean, ten.”

“Ten?! I think that’s a bit much!”

The average number of children for a farmer was five. In rough environments where it was expected that some wouldn’t make it to adulthood, the average rose a little, while in places where priests could heal the sick or in the city where contraceptives were available, it decreased slightly.

For one woman to have ten children was a bit much.

“What’re ya talking about? For a goblin, that’s normal!”

“We’re not goblins!”

“Well, there might be some difference between races, but ya want her to have lots of babies and be happy, right?”

“…I can’t say for sure that having lots of babies *wouldn’t* make her happy, but something feels off…”

“Hmm.”

Kaijari had cocked his head, but Nfirea didn’t feel like responding. Overall, he was grateful for their support.

“Okay, let’s go. For now, I’d like ya to make some kind of move, at least. If ya end up too much like family, it’ll be hard to take things to the next level… But, well, that might be the slow route.”

“Where do you guys come up with all this?” Nfirea shook his head. “Hey, Grandma, I’m going to Enri’s for breakfast. Are you coming?”

A declining voice answered his call into the house.

She would probably be experimenting the whole time. Stopping to eat would be a waste.

He understood her feelings to a painful degree.

The various alchemical items and instruments in this house were all highly

advanced—the correct way to use most of them completely eluded the pair. A maid serving the caster Ainz Ooal Gown had delivered the tools, saying he and his grandma should use them to make new potions and alchemical items. She also brought other things, like a legendary herb purported to heal any and all ailments.

When they asked how to use the solutions, other materials, and unfamiliar instruments, the maid only said, “Think for yourselves!” so they were left with no clue how to proceed.

That’s why they had been working without anything that even bore a passing resemblance to a break, conducting every kind of experiment they could think of—they were sure they were making progress, even if each step forward was slow, and even if they sometimes encountered major setbacks.

It had probably been the most intense two months of Nfirea’s life, naturally, but also Lizzy’s.

The final fruit of that labor was a purple potion on the table, which completely absorbed Lizzy’s attention and caused Nfirea to lose himself in the excitement.

“I’ll go get some for you, then, Grandma.” Having said that, Nfirea closed the door and turned to Kaijari. “Shall we go?”

•

Even if they wanted to wait until everyone arrived to start eating, Enri’s house wasn’t big enough to hold them all. For that reason, if the weather was cooperative, they took their meals outdoors. Doing it this way meant that a bit of a ruckus was tolerable, too. If everyone had been inside, Enri’s patience would have dried up sooner. Still, it was too loud.

“So this is what I’m saying—boss lady’s gonna be my wife!”

“Hey, did ya forget our agreement that ya wouldn’t aim for her?!”

“Yeah! If yer gonna make a move, then so am I!”

“What?! I’m first!”

Several goblins kicked aside their chairs and stood up. A few others jumped onto the table.

Enri held her anger back and called out to them kindly. “Please calm down, everyone!”

But the fire in the goblins’ eyes wouldn’t be extinguished.

“Strugglin’ is futile, brothers! This game’s already been decided. Behold this gleaming meat!”

Enshrined on the spoon one of the goblins, Kuuneru, held aloft was a piece of chicken that at first glance resembled a bean. It was so small that Enri couldn’t be blamed for missing it or not recognizing it as meat while she was trying to serve equal portions.

“I ate my meat already, but I found more at the bottom of my bowl! Did you guys have any extra meat in yer bowls? You didn’t, did you? In other words, this is *love*!”

“Gimme a break! She just mistook it for a bit of vegetable!”

“Or maybe you’re just imagining things? What you ate before was actually a potato, and the only meat you got was that puny nub. Careful, you might creep her out. Remember, our god says: *Thou shalt make Enri happy.*”

“Your god is probably an evil one, Konaa!”

Half the goblins got up, and the rest cheered and heckled them on from their seats. Nemu was one of the hecklers. A few people remained outside these groups and focused on the table. Nfirea was a prime example.

“Ruby powder…magic feathers…a pestle made in Tonelico…a mortar…a mo…a mor…?” He was mumbling something vacantly while working his spoon, so as soon as he put soup in his mouth, it returned to his plate. His hair covered his eyes, but his gaze was likely flitting between the real world and a fantasy.

“Nfi, are you okay?”

If she didn’t do something about the goblins, she wasn’t sure how heated their argument would get, but Nfirea was acting strange, so she couldn’t leave him alone, either. He probably hadn’t slept in a long time. The moment he had sat down, his focus fractured even more, scattering in every direction. By the time they started eating, he was missing so much vitality and intelligence it was

like an undead had joined the table.

“Yes…kay… Enri…soup…”

“Whoa, Nfi. Wake up!”

“Weren’t you the one who was saying, ‘Nemu for life’?!”

“Things are different now. Nemu is ten and about as tall as us, so I thought she was a young lady… Then I learned that humans apparently aren’t considered adults until they’re fifteen!”

“Eh?! Are you serious…? So boss lady and the others aren’t hobhumans or something?”

The goblins’ boisterous conversation moved along quickly. Enri was about to ask what a hobhuman was, but they grew tired of teasing and happened upon a new argument.

“Ah! You stole my bread!”

“My wolf is hungry! Don’t be stingy!”

“Everyone!” Enri raised her voice only to be drowned out by the clamor.

Spoons and plates flew even as shouts and jeers raged. They were throwing empty dishes, so no food went to waste, but it still wasn’t behavior that she could let slide.

Enri finally steeled her resolve, furrowed her eyebrows, and inhaled.

“Pretty sure wolves’re carnivorous! Ya might be higher level, but don’t kid yerself about how you’d fare in a real melee battle!”

“Very interesting! How about I remind ya what ya had for dinner last night?!”

The moment Enri leaped to her feet, they all returned to their seats in a single wave of motion and began eating politely.

“Would you *please* quiet down?!”

Her shout reverberated around the silent table.

“Oh…”

She looked about blankly. They all wore faces that said, *We were just quietly*

eating breakfast. Something wrong? and *You're disturbing us with your sudden outburst.* After a moment of stillness, Enri blushed and sat down heavily.

"Pft! Ha-ha-ha!"

The first one to break the silence was Nemu. Then Enri cracked up, holding her stomach, and the goblins practically fell out of their chairs laughing.

Their timing had been amazing. They had probably planned it all out in detail at a meeting beforehand, maybe even rehearsed. It was hilarious that they would put so much earnest effort into something so silly.

"Ahh, it's too funny. Were you all aiming for that from the beginning?" She'd laughed so hard that she was still wiping tears out of the corners of her eyes while she asked, pretending to be annoyed.

"Of course, boss lady. We'd never make such a big fuss about things like that."

"What he said, ma'am!"

"Quite right, quite right!"

They bragged and frustrated her line of questioning with their usual jokey grins, not a hint of guilt on their faces. But Enri narrowed her focus to Kaijari and stared at him. He seemed to grow uncomfortable and averted his eyes before mumbling an evasive answer. "Well, I guess, like, ya seemed kind of down this morning, boss lady."

"You guys…"

"After all, we're yer bodyguards."

"That's right!"

"Yeah, we're yer bodyguards!"

"We even came up with a pose for when we appear on the scene."

"Oh yeah, so we put you and Nemu in the middle like this—"

"What?! Me too?"

"Of course! Then you raise your arms majestically…like this!"

Even describing it in the kindest way possible, he seemed like a frog tipped

over on its back.

“Uh, I’ll pass, I think. I don’t really know what you mean by ‘bodyguards’ in the first place… Nfi, don’t you think it’s a little…?” She turned to her old friend for help, but no one was there.

On a hunch, she lowered her eyes and found him sprawled on the table facedown in his soup.

“Nfi!” Her face went pale as she shouted and picked him up.

Konaa rushed over at once and pried the exhausted Nfirea’s eyes open with his fingers. “He’s only sleeping… If we let him sleep till around noon, meh, he’ll be fine.”

“Nfi… What’ll we do with you?”

She piggybacked him and set off for a bedroom in her house where she would let him sleep. She could hear voices behind her.

“Huh? Isn’t it normally the other way around?”

“Let’s not say anything, Nemu.”

“Boss man…”

Once the village harvested the wheat, the tax collector would come to the village.

Enri wondered how she would explain the goblins.

Should I just say we summoned them? Maybe I can call them my underlings? Or…

Enri thought about how they were always being considerate of her.

They didn’t merely protect her but also understood her feelings. She wondered what she could do for them.

The goblins were pretty noisy, but they were reliable, too. They were her new family—there had to be *something* she could do for them…

•

Enri wiped the sweat dripping down the nape of her neck with the clean back of her hand as she gathered up the weeds she had pulled out. There were quite

a lot, and the crushed grass gave off a green smell.

After hours out in the field, her sweat-soaked clothes clung to her. She felt gross and tired.

She stretched her back to refresh her mood.

Spreading out before her was a field.

The heads of the wheat plants she'd sown were filling out. As the harvesting season drew closer and closer, the wheat would turn gold. It was quite a sight when the entire field turned completely golden, but before that, she had to perform the chore of weeding. If she didn't take care of the weeds before then, the color wouldn't be as fine.

Now was the time for that suffering.

Stretching her back helped relieve some tension and stiffness. Her body was warm from working the field, and the breeze blowing past felt great.

The gust brought something else to her—noise from the village.

She could hear something being hammered, as well as chants to help teams of laborers focus—all things she had never heard in the village before.

They were currently working on a variety of different projects.

The most important was the building of a wall. And a watchtower. It went without saying that this was to further fortify the village.

Carne was near the Tove Woodlands. The forest was a threatening place where monsters dwelled. It was impossible to live safely near an area like that without sturdy fortifications.

But their village, with houses lined up on level ground and a square in the middle, didn't have anything that could be called defenses; anyone could walk right in. Their arrangements had worked fine for a while—because although they were near the woodlands, no monsters came near them.

That was thanks to the Wise King of the Forest's territory in the forest. No monsters would traverse its domain, so the villagers were as safe as if they had been protected by an iron wall.

But that safeguard was undone by human hands.

Imperial knights had attacked the settlement, killing their loved ones. No one thought they would be safe any longer as they were.

That was why the goblin leader Jugemu's proposal to fortify the village—he mentioned they might not be able to protect everyone if they came under attack again—was adopted unanimously. They were still tormented by unforgettable nightmares.

First, they broke down houses no one was living in anymore and appropriated the wood for the wall. Obviously, that wasn't enough, so they needed to cut down some trees from the woodlands. If they went deep into the woods, they ran the risk of entering the Wise King of the Forest's territory, so they skirted along the edge.

The goblins, naturally, served as their escorts.

Through all this cooperation, the villagers' wariness of the goblins virtually disappeared. Perhaps the knights being fellow humans who killed the villagers was a contributing factor. Their own kind had robbed them of their lives and loved ones. In contrast, the goblins, despite being a different race, worked under Enri to help the village. In other words, it wasn't right to place trust in others based on whether they were from the same race or not.

Most of all, the goblins were powerful. Goblin warriors posted as lookouts, and even if they got hurt, the goblin cleric Konaa would heal them.

It was hard to dislike them when they were so nice.

Thus, in a few short days, the goblins put down roots in the village and became an irreplaceable presence there. One glance at their house was enough to understand. Despite belonging to a different race, they were living in a big new house built for them right near Enri's.

The villagers and the goblins worked together on the defense plan, but unfortunately they were short on hands, so at first they'd been able to build only a simple fence.

It was at precisely that point that the Wise King of the Forest, who had been acting as a breakwater for the village, abandoned its territory to follow a

masterful warrior in black armor. Everyone had worked so hard to finish the fence and then had to lament that it would never be enough to keep them safe.

But now they were protected by a great wall.

Things had taken a turn for the better when a peerless beauty, who said she was one of the village's savior Ainz Ooal Gown's maids, brought some stone golems to their homes.

Golems were strangers to exhaustion that silently followed orders—and possessed far more power than humans. Since they were a little clumsy, the golems couldn't be trusted with detailed work, but their help shortened building times by an unbelievable degree. With golems working without sleep or rest, the construction of the wall advanced rapidly.

It would have been impossible for the villagers and the goblins to perform such a vast amount of labor on their own, but the golems finished it—felling a huge number of trees, digging the gigantic hole to properly sink the foundation—and the wall that would normally take several years to complete was built in a few days. Moreover, it was longer, taller, and sturdier than originally planned.

They made progress on not only the wall but the lookout towers as well. Thanks to that, the village had towers in both the east and west.

"Boss lady, I'm done over here, too."

Enri's thoughts were interrupted when Paipo, the goblin who was weeding with her, called out.

"Oh! Thank you."

"No, no need."

Paipo waved her off while his hands were still filthy with dirt and plant juices, but she didn't feel like she could ever thank him enough.

It was hard for her to maintain her house's fields after losing her mother and father. Normally someone from the village would help, but with the dearth of workers, everyone had their hands full with their own fields. But when the goblins started helping her, the problem was solved. And Enri wasn't the only one getting assistance.

Enri heard someone calling for her and turned around to find a plump woman standing there. Next to her was a goblin.

“Enri, dear. Ohh, thanks so much. I finished up my field with the help of Mr. Goblin.”

“That’s great. Everyone volunteered to cooperate. Please thank them directly.”

“Ohh, I thanked Mr. Goblin already. He said they’re just underlings and wanted me to thank their boss lady!”

Enri’s face twinged at the mention of “boss lady,” but she turned it into a grin.

The goblins had offered to help out households who’d lost workers in the attack. The woman before her was from one such family.

Who could begrudge such considerate goblins? They were better neighbors than some of the humans in Carne. Naturally, those sorts of stories got around and had resulted in everyone’s current high opinion of the little monsters.

“By the way, where are the other goblins? I thought I’d treat them to a meal as a thank-you.”

“The others are either working security or helping out the new arrivals, but I’ll let them know.”

“Oh. Well then, please pass the message along, Enri, dear. I’ll make something special. I suppose I’ll treat this one now.”

“Really? Then I humbly accept yer offer. Sorry, boss lady, but I’ll be over at Mrs. Molger’s.”

When Enri nodded, the woman and the goblin next to her set off walking back toward the village.

“I just hope all the people who agreed to move here will understand that you’re not evil…”

“They looked pretty spooked when we first laid eyes on one another. It seems like they’d counted us among their enemies,” replied Paipo.

“I guess in other frontier villages, it’s normal to consider subhumans

enemies…”

“That’s why we’re offering to help out so much. It’s tricky, though.”

“B-but they’re coming around, aren’t they? A little while ago I saw someone say hello like normal.”

“Well, the transplants have memories just like the people here do of being attacked and having their families killed. No, maybe their burdens are even heavier.”

Carne’s fate was brutal, but even so, about half the villagers survived. Some villages had almost their entire populations killed by the knights.

The people who had responded to Carne’s call for new settlers were survivors from those villages.

A silence fell upon the pair.

Enri gave her back another good stretch and looked up at the sky. The noon bell hadn’t rung yet, but it was almost time, and she was at a good stopping point in her field work.

“Okay, should we have lunch?”

She was familiar enough with Paipo’s squashed-looking face to see that he’d put on a cheerful smile.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear! Yer cooking is delicious, boss lady.”

“No, it’s not.” She laughed, blushing.

“No, no, really! Competition for the job of helping ya in the field is fierce —’cause we all want to eat yer tasty food.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Then why don’t I just make food for everyone? Like we do at breakfast.”

Cooking for two was the same as cooking for twenty…or not. Cutting up the ingredients for that many portions was a job in and of itself. One or two pots would never be enough. It would take quite a lot of work. But when she considered how much she owed the goblins, it didn’t feel like any trouble at all.

“No, no, that’s okay. Eating yer food is a perk for the one who beats out the

competition.”

Enri smiled at the little grinning subhuman, not sure what to do. She knew the goblins had been playing rock-paper-scissors to decide who got to help her, but she wasn’t sure her cooking was worthy of such a fuss.

“Okay, shall we head back and eat?”

“Sounds good…”

Having said that much, Paipo suddenly shut his mouth and looked into the distance with his keen eyes. Enri gasped at the stark shift from funny little subhuman to seasoned warrior and followed his gaze.

There was a goblin riding a black wolf, seemingly gliding across the meadow toward the village.

“It’s Kyuumei.”

The goblin troop Enri had summoned comprised twelve level-8 goblins, two level-10 goblin archers, one level-10 goblin mage, one level-10 goblin cleric, two level-10 goblin riders, and one level-12 goblin leader for a total of nineteen.

Kaijari, who she had seen that morning, and Paipo, who had been helping her in the field, were level-8 goblins, while a level-10 goblin rider, Kyuumei, was coming toward them now in furry leather armor mounted on a pitch-black wolf.

The goblin riders were tasked with riding around the meadow and acting as an early warning system. It was common to see them return to the village for regular reports.

“…Yeah.”

But Paipo’s voice was tense. Something wasn’t sitting right with him. That was the feeling she got.

“What’s wrong?”

“…It’s a little early. He was supposed to be on watch out toward the woodlands… Did something happen?”

Hearing Paipo’s explanation, Enri felt worry well up inside her—fear that another bloody attack was nearing.

As the pair watched in silence, the large wolf carrying Kyuumei raced toward them.

The wolf's ragged breaths spoke volumes about how hard they must have rushed over.

"What is it?"

In response to Paipo's question, Kyuumei, still on his wolf, bobbed his head to Enri and answered, "Something seems to have happened out near the woodlands."

"…Something?"

"I don't really know. It's not like before when a big bunch of guys were heading north—"

"Do you mean knights?" Enri interrupted without thinking. Even though she knew she couldn't be of any use in this situation, she had to ask. She couldn't shake the fear from the day the village was attacked.

The other group the goblins mentioned had numbered in the thousands, leaving tracks behind as they headed north. The footprints were human size, but since they had apparently been barefoot, the goblins concluded they weren't human.

"I'm not sure, but I don't think it's knights. It seems more like something's happened deep in the woods."

"Oh." She sighed in relief without really meaning to.

"…Well, for now I'll report in to our leader."

"All right. Nice work."

"Thank you."

They waved, and Kyuumei ran off astride his wolf. They watched him go until they saw him slip through the slowly opened village gate.

"Well, shall we go back?"

"Yeah."

After washing up at the well, Enri and Paipo arrived home and a young girl's voice called out to them.

"Welcome back, Enri!"

Along with the greeting, they heard the scraping noise of two rocks grinding together. When they looked, it was Nemu using the stone mill in the shade of the house.

The pungent smell that prickled Enri's nose was wafting from the mill. It resembled the aroma that had been clinging to her hands earlier but was twice as strong—enough to pick up even from a distance.

Nemu was already used to it, so it must not have been a problem for her, but when it hit Enri, tears sprang into the corners of her eyes. Nothing in particular happened to Paipo's expression behind her, although it wasn't clear if a racial trait had spared him or whether he simply thought it would be rude to make a strange face in front of his master's younger sister.

"We're back. How'd it go? Did you get them crushed properly?"

"Yep, perfect. Look!" Nemu eyed her results with a satisfied smile. Of the mound of herbs that had been there when Enri went out, only a tiny few were left. "Amazing, right? I'm practically done!"

Nemu had been turning the herbs into a paste and stuffing them into a jar the way Enri had requested. Most herbs were stored by either drying or grinding them up, depending on the type.

"Wow, you worked hard, Nemu!"

In response to Enri's unreserved praise, Nemu looked a bit proud but also blushed. At some point, she had either been trained by Nfirea, or perhaps she had simply decided she wanted to help her sister out, but her work had improved, becoming both thorough and swift.

Herbs were an important source of revenue for Carne. It took a lot of work to live in a frontier village, and this was arguably their home's only specialty product.

It was an indispensable way of acquiring money, so the villagers knew where

to find abundant clusters of all different sorts of herbs.

Enri thought to herself quietly. This herb boasted one of the best profits out of all the various types that the villagers foraged. But because the plants developed medicinal properties only right before they flowered, they could be relied on for only supplemental income. The villagers had already picked clean all the clusters they knew about, but it was possible that if they pushed a little farther into the forest, there were still untouched clusters.

But of course, monsters stalked the woodlands. Enri couldn't just stroll in as if she was going on a picnic. But now she had the goblins alongside her, plus Nfirea, who had a wealth of experience gathering herbs. If she asked for their help, they would probably be able to earn a nice bit of money.

After hesitating for a moment, Enri broached the topic with Paipo. "I'd like to go gather herbs in a new spot. Would you come with me?"

Really, there was no reason Enri herself needed to go; she could have theoretically sent the more confident goblins of their ranks into the dangerous woodlands on their own, if only the goblins she summoned hadn't come with a peculiar shortcoming.

They were bad at looking for herbs and butchering animals they had hunted.

It was similar to how none of them could cook. Enri could show them an herb, but they couldn't find another of the same variety even if it was right in front of their noses. It puzzled her, but they simply lacked those abilities. Moreover, there was no sign that they had the ability to learn or acquire those skills. It was almost as if they were erased from their memories.

As a result, when it came to gathering herbs, someone had to go with the goblins.

"I don't mind going, but it might be a little tricky to have ya come along."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah, wasn't Kyuumei just talking about how something might have happened deep in the forest? During times like that, the woods get agitated."

Enri looked confused, so Paipo explained in detail. "Cautious monsters will

sometimes shift their territory. When that happens, neighboring territories get jumbled up temporarily, and it causes all sorts of confusion. To put it simply, yer more likely to run into a monster, and the forest becomes more dangerous. If yer unlucky, ya might even come across monsters outside the woods. No matter how daring ya are, there's no need to leap directly into danger, is there?"

"I see…" Enri wondered if she was actually "daring," but she chalked it up as more of the goblins' usual flattery and let it go. "It seemed like there was a big migration before, too. Something must be going on, huh?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I'd like to send some guys into the woods to do a detailed investigation…but if we leave, there won't be as many people to protect the village… Oh! How about sending adventurers?"

"That would be tough." Enri frowned. "Nfi told me it costs a lot of money to hire adventurers. Supposedly, the lord in E-Rantel would cover part of the cost, but it'd be hard for us to cover even just our share."

"Ah…"

"Maybe if we were able to forage and sell a lot of herbs, it would work out, but our only other option would be to sell that item Sir Gown gave us…"

Ainz Ooal Gown had given her two horns. She had used one, but the other she still had hidden in her house.

"Don't do that, boss lady. If it came to that, it'd be better to blow it."

"No, of course I won't sell it."

She didn't want to be the low sort of person who would pawn off a generous gift. Even if it reached the point where they were in trouble if she didn't sell it, she would still be against it. She especially didn't want to do anything so ungrateful when Ainz Ooal Gown continued to be so concerned for the village that he had sent over a maid with golems.

"But what a dilemma. We can only gather these herbs during this time, so even if it's a bit dangerous, I'd really like to go if possible…"

Enri smiled at Nemu, who seemed nervous. She wanted to avoid doing anything that would upset her last remaining family member, but she would

hate missing out on a chance to earn some precious cash. Maybe her priorities were a little out of order, but she needed to pay her debt to the people who put their lives on the line for the village—the ones who considered her their master.

I need to make a pile of money and see what I can do to buy the goblins new gear. Full plate or whatever seemed like it had good defense. That black-armor person…what was her name again?

She had no idea how much weapons and armor cost, but it had to be quite a hefty sum. That was precisely why Paipo held out a steadying hand when she looked so determined to rush ahead.

"Well, it's just my opinion. I'll ask our leader about it, so don't make any hasty decisions. I don't want to get scolded for claiming some half-baked idea, and I bet the boss man would also like to get his hands on all sorts of herbs."

Just as Enri was wondering what to do, she heard a cute little rumbling noise. When she looked up, Nemu was shooting her a dissatisfied look.

"I'm hungry, Enri. Let's eat!"

"Yeah, sorry. Clean this up and wash your hands. I'll make lunch."

"Okay!"

With a cheerful reply, Nemu took apart the mill and used a spatula to transfer the green goop inside to a little pot. Enri headed for the entrance to the house, thinking, *I wonder what I should make…*

2

Enri stood just outside the Tove Woodlands. Of course, she wasn't alone. She was surrounded by all the members of her loyal goblin troop.

The goblins had donned mail shirts and round shields, while thick machetes hung at their hips. On the other side were slung pochettes to carry small items. They also wore brown shorts and sturdy shoes fashioned from furry animal pelts. They weren't missing anything in terms of gear.

The fully outfitted goblins were going over their kit one final time. They checked that their waterskins were full and their machetes sharp.

The reason they were so well equipped but packed lightly was that they planned to finish their business quickly rather than spend hours exploring the forest.

They weren't all there as escorts for Enri. Their main objective was to do a detailed investigation on the news the rider had brought. They wanted to find out what had occurred in the woodlands. Still, all they needed to do was protect the village, so they decided to explore more broadly in the settlement's vicinity rather than plunge into the forest depths.

Only three goblins would go gathering with Enri.

Nfirea was also with her. He was all ready to go, wearing clothes suitable for picking herbs in the forest. With him along, they would certainly be able to collect what they needed.

He must have sensed her gaze. He cocked his head as if to ask, *What?* She waved her hands to show that she had nothing particular in mind, but he still must have been worried, because he walked over accompanied by a large goblin.

The goblin had such a hulking physique that it was hard to believe he was the same race. He wore a heavy-duty, roughly fashioned breastplate and carried a well-used great sword on his back.

This was Jugemu, the goblin leader whom Enri had named after the goblin hero Jugemu Juugemu. Incidentally, all the knights who fought alongside that hero had special names, and she had given those names to the rest of the goblins.

"You don't seem…worried, but is something wrong?"

"No, I'm fine, really! I just happened to look at you."

"That's all right, then, but remember that even a little thing can get you killed in the woods. If anything seems off, let me know."

"He's right, boss lady. Like I said before, we're gonna be checking out the

forest, so we won't be able to come to yer rescue so quick… Will ya be all right?" Jugemu twisted his craggy face into a worried look and peered at Enri.

In response, Enri smiled. "I'll be fine. I'm not going that far in, and these guys will protect me."

"If ya say so…" He eyed each of the goblins she was looking at in turn. Then he raised his voice. "Well, ya guys probably already know this, but don't let the boss lady get so much as a scrape!"

"Aye!" The three goblins going with her—Gokou, Kaijari, and Unrai—gave a lively reply.

"And boss man, I'm counting on ya, too."

Enri noticed Kaijari was doing a front double biceps pose for some reason.

"So now's a good time to do something? Ahem! Of course! I'll protect Enri!"

Enri hallucinated a sparkle in Nfirea's teeth as he laughed, brimming with confidence. It was so unlike his usual personality that it kind of creeped her out. *He must be tense because we're headed into the forest.*

How childish. She thought it was sweet and felt like his big sister. "Thanks, Nfi. Glad I can count on you."

Huh? Now he's doing a side chest pose… What's that about?

"What? But we're not even… Uh, I brought a bunch of alchemical items, so yeah, you can leave it to me!"

Hit with another sparkle, Enri felt his sweetness level drop by about half.

"Uh, sure…thanks."

"Yeah, thanks… Still, I'm not sure we really need to be doing something this dangerous…"

Jugemu turned around to look at Enri with a sober face. She couldn't believe he was rehashing the same conversation they had had multiple times in the village, but she knew he was saying it out of concern for her safety, so she couldn't ignore him.

"But if we don't gather the herbs, we can't make that money…"

“Couldn’t we use animal skins instead? Those we can get well enough on our own.”

“They aren’t bad, but those herbs fetch the best price.”

The values of skins and herbs were completely different—night and day. Of course, an extremely rare animal might be worth a lot, but those were few and far between.

“Maybe you could have the boss man bring them back to you…”

“The Baleare household and mine have separate accounts. We’ll work together and split the profits. I can’t just take advantage of everyone all the time.”

Helping one another out was the village way of life. That was precisely why becoming ostracized left people without options. But relying on everyone else all the time was proof that a household couldn’t make it on their own, and there was no way mooching would be tolerated. Self-sufficiency meant hard work.

Behind them, Nfirea was saying, “Kaijari, can you read the atmosphere a bit and knock off the poses for now…?” and the pair averted their eyes.

“Ah, that’s true… Yeah… But that means if you got together, you’d have a single account… Anyway, you won’t cancel the trip, right?”

Jugemu’s voice was gradually losing energy. He must have realized that she wasn’t going to give up on the plan.

Enri knew Jugemu was worried about her and she didn’t want to cause him trouble, but her resolve was unshakable.

The reason she was heading into the forest despite knowing about the dangers was due to that remark Kaijari had made about being unable to repair their gear.

She might have been able to sharpen a knife, but mending iron gear would require a true blacksmith. In other words, the goblins were having a latent crisis. As their gear degraded, it put them that much more at risk. It was essential to have backup equipment.

If they put their lives on the line and worshipped her as their master, what could Enri do in return? She couldn't just hole up in a safe place enjoying the fruits of their devotion. She concluded that she needed to do everything in her power to let them fight to their full potential at a moment's notice.

The goblins were Enri's bodyguards, but they also protected Carne. Following that logic, she could probably tax the villagers to buy weapons for them, but she rejected that idea the moment it came into her head.

She wanted to pay back her debt to the goblins personally. This foraging trip was, in a way, an expression of her sincerity and pride.

"We would've liked to have scouted the area before ya go…"

The goblin mage Daino chimed in from behind. She wore the skull of some humanlike creature. In her hand, she held a twisted staff that looked shabby but still taller than she was. Her body was heavily accessorized with peculiar tribal ornaments, and her chest had a slight swell to it. Looking at her face, Enri could distinguish a slight softness compared to the men. Enri was used to it but could still only barely make out the difference; an average human wouldn't be able to tell at all.

"But you have no idea what it's like, right?"

"Yeah, unfortunately we don't know if it's safe or not. Even if we did go first, all we would be able to find out is whether the forest had calmed down or not, but that would still take time. If we wanted to know the new layout of territories within the forest, it would take longer."

By then, the herbs they wanted to collect would be out of season. Hearing Daino's comments, Enri's strong will shone in her eyes. "It's all right. I won't go in too deep," she said decisively.

After repeating the same argument several times, Jugemu understood that Enri wasn't going to change her mind. He gave up and turned to the three goblins who would be accompanying her. As expected, he said the same thing as before. "We can't guard her, so ya guys gotta protect her as our representatives. You too, boss man!"

"Aye!"

“Really, it would be safest for everyone to go together. Dividing our force is awfully foolish,” grumbled Daino.

“But that would take too long otherwise, right?”

“Yeah. If we don’t shoo away the monsters heading toward the village and the creatures trying to establish territory nearby, there’ll be trouble. Once they’ve built a nest, they won’t leave, and even if they do leave temporarily, it’s very likely they’d come back.”

With the changes in how the spheres of influence mapped across the woodlands, it was essential that they perform a search, especially in the areas near the village.

They were readying for round one of this reconnaissance. As the first, it was the most dangerous. That’s why they could spare only three goblins to escort Enri.

“Okay, then. Let’s go! We gotta get this search over with and meet up with our boss lady!” Jugemu barked orders, and the goblin troop responded with a ferocious roar.

Inside the woodlands…

About a hundred and fifty yards in, the temperature had dropped more than a couple of degrees simply because the sun’s rays didn’t reach the forest floor. That said, it wasn’t completely dark; even Enri could see their surroundings fine. Wading through the crisp air as they went, the party of five advanced into the forest.

For now, silence reigned over the woodlands. There were almost no sounds besides the swaying of the treetops and the occasional echoing call of a bird or beast. Enri and her companions’ footsteps felt loud in that quiet. The other party, headed by Jugemu, must have gone far ahead, because they couldn’t hear them anymore.

Enri’s group advanced in a wedge formation with Enri and Nfirea in the center.

It was difficult to stay spread out in the forest, so a single-file line would have

been standard, but they insisted on the formation in order to protect the two humans. That slowed down their group, but they decided there was nothing they could do about that.

When they got farther in and began heading north, Nfirea started glancing around.

He was searching for treasures sleeping among the trees—herbs.

Enri was no amateur when it came to herbs, either. She knew quite a lot for a girl her age—which ones could be simply ingested orally, which ones were more suited for topical application, and which ones could be made into potions. But she didn't even come close to Nfirea. He had a profound knowledge of not only medicinal herbs but also the ones that could be used for alchemy.

"Did you find a rare herb?"

When Enri asked, all the goblins started posing as if on cue.

More double biceps poses… It must be the hip thing to do… Enri cocked her head. She didn't notice Nfirea's fed-up expression.

"Why didn't I tell them those signals were a bad idea…? Being a chicken is the worst. Uh, so do you see that brownish moss over there?"

Sure enough, there was moss in the direction he was pointing.

"That's bebeyamoku moss. If you mix a bit of that into a potion, it makes the effects a little stronger."

"Wow, really? Looks like normal moss to me. Even now that you've pointed it out, I probably won't be able to spot it. You're amazing, Nfi!"

"Ya really are something, boss man. Is that a valuable herb?"

"It's worth a fair amount, but… Ah, wait. We don't need to get that one. The herb Enri and I are after is worth a lot more. If we don't find much, we can always pick this one on the way back."

"Aha. Gotcha. Wow, but for someone like you, this mountain is a pile of treasure. It'd be easy for you to make a fortune with it. Anyone who chooses to be with ya would be able to rest easy."

“I dunno about—”

The goblins changed poses.

“Uhh, er, maybe you’re right. I’m pretty confident that I won’t let my partner have a hard time in life.”

“Yeah. You seem capable of that much, Nfi.”

The atmosphere of the quiet forest grew awkward.

“Uh, is that all, boss lady?”

“Huh? What do you mean, Kaijari?”

“Huh? Nah, I mean, nothing… Oh… I meant to ask you earlier: What herb are ya looking for?”

“Oh, we didn’t tell you? It’s called enkaishi. Nemu crushed up the rest of our supply.”

“I see, I see. Gotcha—not that us goblins can help spot it, though. All right, let’s keep moving.”

With each step, they wandered deeper into the woods where the heady scent of the forest tickled their noses.

Once they were fully enveloped in this world devoid of people, a place where the humans realized how small and fragile they were, Nfirea spoke. “Let’s try looking around here. There’s lots of shade, and the air is damp… There might be water nearby as well. This is where that type of herb normally grows. This spot doesn’t seem to have been trampled by monsters, either, so it’s exactly what we’re looking for.”

“Gotcha, boss man.”

Nfirea was an apothecary with lots of herb-gathering experience, so anything he said was probably correct. Both Enri and the goblins agreed.

Everyone put down their packs to lighten their load.

“Oh, boss lady, would ya give boss man a hand?”

“Oh yeah. He’s carrying a lot for one person.”

She went over to Nfirea and capably assisted him as he set down his bags.

“Thanks, Enri.”

“No worries, Nfi. But wow, as a specialist, you sure have a lot of stuff to carry. You need so many things.”

She noticed the goblins nodding in satisfaction out of the corner of her eye. She didn’t know what they were so happy about, but she decided to ignore it for the time being.

“Okay, let’s start searching!”

With a slightly subdued “Yeah!” the goblins set about guarding the area, and Enri and Nfirea began combing the area for herbs.

Enri hadn’t expected things to go very smoothly, but it was almost disappointingly easy to find enkaishi. The herb grew so densely between the trees that it practically jumped out at them.

“Over there. I can’t believe we found a bunch on our first try. It was definitely the right choice to have you come along.”

“Nah, it had nothing to do with me. We’re just lucky we found a spot that wasn’t all messed up. It can be awful after a monster passes through.”

The large amount of herbs growing there wasn’t exactly worth a fortune, but it would still net them a considerable sum. Enri frantically suppressed the greed flaring up inside her. They were in a dangerous place, so they needed to finish their work quickly without overreaching.

She crouched down and picked the plants carefully at the base.

The parts of the enkaishi herb that had medicinal properties were near the roots, but that didn’t mean Enri could simply pull up the entire plant. This herb had a lot of life energy, so if she left the roots alone, it would grow back over time. It took a little longer to pick the herbs carefully, but it would have been a shame to gather every last bit and ruin the cluster they’d only just located.

The pungent smell that drifted up each time they plucked a plant didn’t bother them once they got used to it. It was heaven compared to Nfirea’s house.

They foraged each herb one at a time and carefully packed them in the bags on their hips in a way that kept them from being crushed. It would have gone faster with the goblins' help, but they were keeping a vigilant watch. Enri wasn't foolish enough to ask them to pick herbs.

Next to her, the motions of Nfirea's hands were superb. He moved so quickly but still picked the plants in a way that perfectly preserved the medicinal components. It was clear he had skills only a specialized professional could have.

Enri watched him from the side in silence as he concentrated. He almost looked like someone else.

He's really grown up…

"Is something wrong?" Nfirea suddenly looked up. He must have sensed something was off because her hands had stopped moving.

Enri looked down bashfully for no particular reason. "Nah, I just was thinking how amazing you are."

"…Oh? I don't think I'm all that. I'm barely an apothecary. Pretty sure this is normal."

"……I wonder."

"I'm pretty sure."

The conversation broke off there, and the herbs in their bags gradually piled up as time slowly passed.

Their bags were a little more than half full when the goblins abruptly crouched down around the two of them as if to hide.

Enri was startled, but Kaijari gestured to her to be quiet. *It's some kind of emergency.* Once she realized the situation, she finally stopped moving and strained her ears. From very far away, she could hear the sound of something moving through the undergrowth.

"What is it?"

"Something's coming this way. It could be aiming for us…but most likely, it just happens to be headed in this direction. First, let's pull back a little from this

place.”

“…Would an item that could make a loud noise work as a decoy?”

“Hmm. No, boss man, I think we’d better not. Seems like it could backfire. Okay, let’s go.”

The five of them moved away from the noise into the shadow of a nearby tree. The reason they didn’t go farther was to avoid making too much noise tramping through the plants. If the incoming creature only happened to be traveling in their direction, they didn’t need to risk being discovered.

It wasn’t a huge tree, so they weren’t completely hidden, but they could at least flatten themselves against its roots so they didn’t stick out too much.

The five of them lay there waiting, holding their breath and praying that the creature would go in a different direction. Unfortunately, their wish didn’t come true, and the creature appeared in the party’s line of sight.

“…Huh?!” Enri let a small yelp of surprise slip.

It was a little beat-up goblin.

There were small, bloody wounds all over its body. It was breathing heavily, covered in sweat and blood.

Goblins were smaller than humans to begin with, but even taking that into account, this one was tiny. Her insights from living with goblins in her daily life told her she was looking at a child.

The goblin child threw a fearful glance over its shoulder back in the direction it had run from. Without even straining her ears, she could hear something else coming through the brush. If the goblin she saw was being hunted, the other had to be the hunter.

The goblin frantically worked its cramping legs to hide in the shade of a different tree from Enri and her companions.

“Wha—?”

“Please be quiet.”

Gokou interrupted her, but his eyes never moved. He was keeping close

watch on the direction the goblin child had fled from.

Less than a minute later, the hunter appeared.

It was a magical beast that resembled a huge black wolf. They could tell it was a magical beast because of the chains wrapped around it. The boa constrictor–like chains didn't inhibit the beast at all; they practically seemed like an illusion. The creature also had two horns jutting out of its head.

Nfirea whispered the beast's name. "It's a barghest…"

There was no way it was answering, but it snorted just like a dog would—and then sneered. The expression was sinister—impossible for a normal animal to make. The beast's eyes slowly scanned the area until they were looking in the direction of the tree where the goblin child had hidden.

If the barghest had a good nose to match its canine appearance, there was no way it would miss the scent of that much blood.

It didn't seem like the goblin child had made it this far because of any ability to fend off the pursuer. The beast was either sadistic or hunting purely for sport.

Suddenly the barghest stopped, scrunched up its face in suspicion, then stared at the place where the herbs were growing thickly.

Ah…

Enri shrank back. The others did the same.

Behind the tree, Enri opened her hands. Her skin was flecked with green. Nfirea was next to her looking at his hands, too.

The sap from when we were picking herbs…

Yes, the same intense odor as when Nemu had been crushing them. They had gotten used to it, so their noses didn't notice it anymore, but the intense smell must have been hanging in the air. Her racing heartbeat felt noisy.

"It's on the move… Looks like it's heading away from here. I guess it didn't notice him because of the stink."

Listening with an ear against the tree, Unrai seemed to have a question mark

over his head. “…I guess it couldn’t pinpoint him because of the smell?”

“What do you mean, boss man? I’m pretty sure magical beasts have good noses…”

“That’s the point…,” said Nfirea, explaining his idea.

Basically, because of the beast’s keen sense of smell, it hadn’t been able to pinpoint where the pungent smell was coming from. The scent on Enri’s and Nfirea’s hands and bags had mixed with the general smell of the location they had been picking in. And as a lucky bonus, their body odors must have also been covered up.

It might have even viewed the crushed herbs as a last-ditch effort by the goblin child to hide.

They had a lot to thank the powerful smell for, but it wasn’t hard to imagine that if they ran, the smell might follow them and lure the barghest.

“If that kid ends up being a sacrifice, then problem solved. As long as we don’t know how strong that thing is, it’s too risky to interfere.”

At those coolheaded words, Enri looked over at Gokou in spite of herself.

But it was a natural thing for him to say. The goblins’ number one priority was Enri’s safety. Of course, they would want to avoid combat with that magical beast—even if they needed to sacrifice someone of their own race.

There was nothing strange about his statement whatsoever, according to his beliefs.

But Enri hated it. *Isn’t it wrong, as a human, to not save someone if you can? Even someone from a different race?*

Maybe it was just the foolish idea of a village girl who had never been attacked by goblins and lacked a sense of crisis.

She looked at all the other goblins. They must have understood her feelings, but they kept their mouths shut. Next, she looked at Nfirea.

“Nfi…”

He sighed. “Let’s save him. He might be a good source of information. If we

don’t find out why he ran all this way, the village might find itself in a tough spot later.”

The goblins furrowed their brows.

“We might not be able to beat it, ya know!”

“That’s true. But barghests come in all different strengths. I heard barghest leaders are pretty powerful. From that one’s chains and horns, though, it doesn’t seem like it’s too strong. I’m sure we could beat a normal barghest.”

“Hold yer horses. The boss lady’s here! We should avoid any danger.”

Enri swallowed. These were foolish words spoken for her own satisfaction that would put not only her own but other lives at risk. Still, she had to speak. “Abandoning someone you might be able to save…is like allying with the attacker. I don’t want to be the kind of person who picks on the weak. Please!”

About the time Kaijari looked at Enri’s serious face and sighed in defeat, the magical beast made a strange noise. It was a bark that was clearly sneering. Next, they heard the goblin child scream.

They no longer had time to hesitate or confer among themselves.

“Guess we got no choice. Let’s go!”

The goblins leaped out first. Nfirea followed.

Watching the warriors go to battle to make her wish come true, Enri felt a tearing pain in her chest.

I can’t do anything but watch from back here.

The least she could do was watch so intently that she didn’t even blink.

The four who had charged out immediately caught sight of the barghest, which had tackled the goblin child. The reason the young goblin had new wounds but wasn’t dead had to be due to the barghest’s wicked desire to play with its prey.

The barghest stopped moving and looked between the new group and the goblin child. It probably thought it had just been led into a trap.

“Hey there, puppy dog!” Unrai jerked a thumb at himself and said, “If ya

wanna play, I'll play with ya! C'mon!"

"Grrrrarr," the barghest growled with open hostility.

Out in front, Kaijari drew his machete from his hip in one smooth, natural motion. The other goblins followed suit.

"Don't hold back! I'll teach ya some tricks—like 'Down.'"

"Agyahhh!" In response to the provocation, the goblin child pinned under the barghest screamed.

The beast didn't talk, but its actions spoke loudly: *If you move, I'll kill him.* But —

"Okay! Let's slay this sucker!"

The three goblins ignored the beast's threat and charged.

The barghest's eyes wavered in confusion at the unexpected turn of events.

The barghest didn't know this, but the goblins hadn't really turned up to save the child. They had simply heard Enri's request and were invested on only the "it'd be great if we could save him" level.

If they didn't kill the barghest now that they'd faced it head-on, it was possible Enri, who was actually most important, could end up hurt as well. That's why they had to slay the beast once and for all. So actually, if it wanted to mess with the goblin child some more, that would mean it was taking pointless actions, which would help them out.

Seeing the gleam of the three machetes, the barghest stopped moving again, realizing the child wouldn't work as a hostage. It wondered whether or not it should finish off the small goblin.

Ending his life would be extremely easy. It could kill the child in one bite. But while doing that, its enemies' weapons would definitely come slashing.

The danger to the barghest's life forced it to do one thing.

Ignoring the child, it leaped to meet the goblins' attack.

The barghest was heavier than the goblin warriors. The plan was to take advantage of that to tackle them before ripping out their throats.

But that immediately went awry.

The goblin the barghest aimed for nimbly dodged, and the other two sliced at it with their machetes from either side.

The chains wrapped around its body blocked one of the attacks, but the other bit into flesh, spraying blood.

At the same time, an open bottle came flying at its snout.

“Rarrrr!” The barghest screamed at the awful stench that pierced its eyes and nose.

The moment the beast stumbled to a halt, more pain assaulted it.

The barghest could tell from the blood flowing freely from open wounds that the fight was going poorly. With tears in its eyes and a wavering field of vision, the magical creature charged. It aimed at the one who’d thrown the bottle—a human.

But the charge lasted only a few steps. The bottoms of its paws adhered to the ground and stayed there.

Below, a bizarre slime was spread across the earth. The strange liquid didn’t soak into the dirt at all.

“This doesn’t have enough adhesive power to hold a strong magical beast! Let’s attack it all at once!”

Following the human’s urging, the goblins shouted a battle cry and leaped to attack. The human launched powerful magic as well.

“Raaaorrrr!” The monster mustered all its strength and ripped its feet away from the ground. They came up with the adhesive and the dirt stuck to them, so the monster was slowed down a little but could still fight.

Seeing the goblins surrounding it again, the barghest, which was far more intelligent than regular animals, acknowledged that these goblins were formidable.

It was convinced they were different from ordinary goblins—the risk of dying was very real.

This barghest had three basic attacks. It could gouge with its horns, it could bite, and it could tackle and then scratch with its forelegs. That was it. Unlike a stronger barghest, its repertoire had no special attacks. But actually, there was one last-resort ability.

It was an attack that completely abandoned defense, so that would be the end if it didn't connect. At the same time, there was no reason to hold back any longer. The barghest was merely waiting for the right time to use it.

After checking the goblins surrounding it, the monster howled madly.

"Reinforce Armor!"

The human's spell made the goblins' armor glow. The barghest panicked, guessing it must have been some kind of strengthening spell, but the goblins seemed calm.

The warriors charged together in what could be considered a reckless attack that relied heavily on their boosted armor. It wasn't a stupid plan, though. Some might even call it a brave step forward to avoid needless injuries in a protracted battle.

That would have been true—if the barghest hadn't been lying in wait for them.

If it had been able to make major changes to its expression like a human, the monster would have showed them a satisfied smile.

The chains wrapped around its body made slithering noises like a snake. They began to move as if they had come alive.

The thick chains swung at a tremendous speed.

Even if the special ability Great Chain Whirlwind didn't kill the goblins, it would still deal serious damage.

The barghest was desperate. This was a major skill that it could use only once per day. And during the approximately ten seconds it took for the chains to wind back up, the monster couldn't protect itself with them. This was a very risky move indeed.



The unexpected attack caught the goblins off guard, and their evasive maneuvers came too late. It was a fatal error. But—

“Duck!”

—a determined order sliced through the air faster than the chains could.

The barghest had bet everything on that one attack. Its eyes widened at the shout from another human.

It should have been too late for the goblins to dodge, but they agilely ducked down as if energized by the voice.

The barghest strained its slightly blurred vision, peering at the commander standing behind the caster.

Machetes cut into both of its forelegs and one of its hind legs. The monster shrieked at the pain. It managed to wind up the chains and bare its teeth in a menacing way, but the goblins didn’t seem the least bit scared.

“Boss man. We won’t need any more support magic. Please just keep an eye on our surroundings.”

Realizing the battle had been decided, the barghest tried to run.

But its normally agile body was unusually heavy. Of course it was. Three of its four legs were now useless. Still, it struggled to escape, but the goblins wouldn’t allow it.

Sticky blood spread across the grass, dyeing it red, and the smell of iron completely overpowered the odor of the herbs. The barghest’s spilled innards were still so warm they were practically steaming. The goblins shifted their gazes from the dead beast to the child.

The little goblin was so heavily wounded he had completely lost the energy to run, but he had enough mental fortitude to sit up and lean against a tree.

“Wh-who are ya? What tribe are ya from?” he asked, half–on guard, half-terrified.

Enri’s goblins looked at one another. They were exchanging glances to decide what sort of attitude would benefit them the most and how much information

they could give away, but Enri felt there was something else that needed attention first.

“More importantly, shouldn’t we do something about those wounds? What can we do, Nfi?”

The goblin child’s injuries seemed deep, and they were still bleeding. Left like this, he would surely die. Enri didn’t have any way to save the child, but her hope that her friend would be able to do something was immediately answered.

“All normal herbs can do is stop the bleeding. They can’t put the lost blood back in, so he’ll still be in danger, but…” Nfirea rummaged in his bag. “I have the potion we made with the new method. I should probably give it to Sir Gown, but…can I see the wounds?”

Nfirea moved swiftly to the front and took out the potion.

“Wh-what’s that freaky-lookin’ juice? It’s not poison, is it?”

When he saw the purple potion, the goblin child became hostile, though he was still scared. To Enri, and maybe to Nfirea as well, it was a perfectly normal reaction. Being wary of something that looked toxic was only natural. But to the goblins, it was apparently unforgivable, and they immediately launched into a tirade.

“Hey, kid! This is our boss lady, who decided to rescue ya, and the boss man. Ya owe yer life to these people, so ya better watch yer mouth. They’re trying to help ya!”

The goblin child’s eyes flitted to the bare machete blades. He may have been a child, but even he could tell the goblins were in a foul mood. He quickly withered.

Enri felt the threats probably weren’t necessary for a child, but she was aware that goblins probably had their own way of doing things. Butting in with human common sense was no good in a variety of ways.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Ah, nah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” Nfirea sprinkled the potion on the

child as he spoke. The cuts all closed right up.

“Whoa! What the heck? It’s a gross color, but it works amazing!” Then he seemed to catch sight of the goblins looking at him and trembled. “Er, I mean, th-thank y-you.”

“That’s right, kid, gratitude is important.”

“Great. Now we can tell Sir Gown that the experiment was a success.”

Enri and the goblins understood why he was going out of his way to seek their agreement, and they nodded.

Nfirea was conducting research in potion making with ingredients he received from Ainz Ooal Gown, the greatest caster of all time and the village’s savior. It wasn’t as if he was being paid, but all the materials were being provided by someone else. It should have been clear who the results belonged to.

There were major issues with Nfirea using a potion without permission, but a clinical trial was a fine excuse.

I bet if we told him what happened, Sir Gown would forgive us, but…maybe there is some kind of rule for apothecaries.

“Y-ya experimented on me?!”

Enri and Nfirea winced as the child interpreted things differently. But, of course, someone who didn’t know the backstory couldn’t help but think that.

For those two, it ended with a wince, but there were others who weren’t so composed. The goblins seemed to be getting pretty riled up—to the point where one of them muttered, “Stupid brat,” while he sucked his teeth.

Enri gestured for them to calm down. “Okay, that’s enough.” For someone who didn’t know the situation, it was a natural reaction, and they were talking to a kid, so it was no wonder he couldn’t grasp the big picture.

“If ya say so, boss lady… Shall we get moving? Something else might smell the blood and come over here.”

“We won this time, but boss lady, give us a break, okay? Our mission is to protect ya.”

“Seriously. I was surprised when ya shouted out, too!”

“I think that saved us, though, so we can’t really— Hey, punk, don’t be running away! We’ve got a mountain of questions for ya. If ya don’t want me to cut yer legs off, come quietly.”

“Unrai…”

“It’s for the sake of the village, boss lady… C’mon, kid.”

The goblin child trudged forward. His wounds were completely healed, so he didn’t have any trouble moving. It was his rebellious spirit slowing him down.

Gokou, holding his bloody machete, spat on the ground.

Enri looked to Nfirea for help, but he silently shook his head. Next, she looked at the other goblins, but she was met with steely gazes that said they supported their comrade’s actions.

“Boss lady, don’t worry, I won’t kill him. I just want to ask him what happened. Besides, do ya think he’ll make it if we leave him alone here?”

The question was clearly aimed more at the child than Enri. He seemed to understand, and the resistance in his eyes vanished.

“I get it… I won’t run away…”

“Okay. Then let’s move quickly. Do ya know for sure if there was only one barghest, kid?”

“No. There should have been a few ogres, too. I don’t know if they came after me or not… And don’t call me ‘kid.’ I’m Arg, fourth son of chief of the Geeg tribe, Ar.”

“Arg, got it.”

“‘Kid’ seems good enough to me, but…”

“We can talk later. And we don’t need to fight. If he wants us to call him Arg, then wouldn’t doing that help us build some mutual trust?”

“Yer so mature, boss man. All right, let’s grab our bags and go.”

The party followed Kaijari’s instructions. Keeping their guard up, they walked in silence.

Enri wanted to lighten the mood with some conversation, but the forest wasn't a world that belonged to humans. She couldn't do something so careless when there might have been other monsters coming after them.

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The group emerged from the dim forest, with its patches of deep darkness here and there. Bathing in full sunlight banished the tension that had been reigning over Enri's body. She felt relaxed, like there was room to breathe again. For a moment, she keenly sensed that she was back in the human world.

Nfirea, walking next to her, seemed to feel the same way and let out a deep breath that could have been taken as a sigh or a yawn.

The goblins' bristling tension had also faded. Arg was the only one whose expression was still strained. He looked confused by all the sunlight and wide-open space, probably because he had been brought up in the forest, where there were plenty of places to hide.

"Uh, the village is that way."

Looking in the direction she pointed, Arg frowned. "What's that wall? It looks like…the Structure of Ruin."

"The Structure of Ruin?"

"Yeah. It's a horrible place that just got built in the woodlands. No one who goes near it comes back alive. I heard there are undead lurking around it."

"You seem to know quite a lot, considering no one ever comes back alive."

"When the Structure of Ruin was still small, a brave warrior from our tribe saw bone monsters building it."

"Have you ever heard of this place?"

"No, sorry, boss man, but I haven't. If we go too far into the woodlands, we might run into a monster even our boss can't beat, so we can't go in very deep."

"…Hey, so what tribe are ya three from? Yer stronger than any goblins I've ever seen. How…?" Arg glanced at Enri. Then he said in a tiny whisper, "I think it's a human, but…" Then he asked, "So ya work for this human?"

"Is that weird? Pretty sure it makes sense to ally with someone strong."

“Sh-she’s strong?! I mean, I know there are supposedly all levels of humans, but… Yer a girl, right? And the one hiding his face with his hair is a boy?”

Enri blinked. *What, do I look like I’m not a girl?* But if the goblin wasn’t sure Nfirea was a boy, maybe he had trouble telling them apart.

Next to her, Nfirea whispered something logical. “Enri, this kid probably hasn’t seen humans before. He probably doesn’t know anything about us besides what other goblins told him. Maybe for goblins it’s just harder to tell human sexes apart?”

“But even our clothes are different…”

“But he doesn’t know about that kind of stuff! Maybe men and women goblins wear the same clothes. I mean, some goblins have advanced culture and built countries, but he’s probably not from a group like that.”

I see, thought Enri, and she realized she hadn’t answered Arg’s question.

“Yes, I’m a girl.”

“So yer a caster?”

“No, why?”

Arg looked very confused.

“I’m the caster. I’m an arcane caster.”

“…Are ya guys married? Is that why?”

“Huh?” They both reacted with yelps.

“Well, I just feel like I heard about some tribes where the wife wields the husband’s authority…but yer not like that?”

“N-no! We’re not!”

The goblins looked like they wanted to say something in response to Enri’s forceful rejection, but she saw them shrug out of the corner of her eye.

“Then…why is a girl in charge?”

“If ya don’t know, that’s why yer a kid. Our boss lady is strong in ways ya can’t see with yer eyes.”

Enri was about to deny that, but she was overpowered by Arg's intent, saucer-eyed stare and couldn't find the words to explain. While she was at a loss, Kaijari asked the child a question.

"Okay, now we'll be asking the questions. Why was that thing chasing ya? What happened?"

"Well—"

"Hey, shouldn't we discuss those things in the safety of the village?"

The one who answered Enri's question was—

"Yeah. That seems like a better plan."

—a woman who hadn't even been there until now.

Everyone gasped in shock and turned in the direction of the voice.

An eye-catchingly beautiful woman was standing there.

She had her hair in braids, and her skin was brown. She wore, according to her, a maid uniform. Some kind of strange weapon-like thing was strapped to her back.

She was an extremely shady character but also a familiar face.

Lupusregina β.

The maid worked for the village's savior Ainz Ooal Gown. She delivered alchemy supplies to the Baleare house and was also the one who had brought the stone golems to the village and gave them their orders. The villagers took a shine to her right away due to her bright personality and cheerful way of talking.

But she was unfathomable in some ways, like how she would suddenly appear out of nowhere. The villagers figured that she must have magic abilities, since she was that great caster's maid, which was how Enri understood it as well. Even so, when the maid suddenly appeared like this, her heart would leap into her throat.

"Lupu, where'd you come from…?"

"Psh! C'mon, En, I've been behind you the whole time! Wait a minute. Don't

tell me you didn’t notice! I thought you were ignorin’ me.”

“What? Huh?”

It sounded like a joke, but her voice was dead serious. Enri looked around at everyone else for help.

“Uh, Lady Lupu, that’s enough joking around.”

“Wow! You think I’m jokin’! I’d really like you to remember… Just kidding! I was playin’ around.”

Everyone became silent, then someone sighed, exasperated.

“Well, enough about that. Anyhow, who’s this goblin kid? He—he can’t be…?”

Enri felt Lupusregina’s eyes flitting between her and the goblins and had a bad feeling.

“Pft—pft! Nfi! Guess the goblins got to her first, ’ey? Pffffft!”

Everyone blinked nonstop as her laughter continued.

“How awful! A purehearted lad’s dream—trampled! How hilarious! Wa-ha! … But seriously, who the heck is this?”

Arg twitched as if he’d seen something alien.

But Enri understood how he felt. Lupusregina was cheerful, but her expressions changed so rapidly she seemed manic. The gap between a smile and a sudden straight face could produce a mysterious fear.

“I won’t snatch you up and eat ya. No worries. I just want a chill explanation about who you are.”

“Lady Lupu, didn’t you agree that we would talk about those things later?”

“Oh! Yeah, I do seem to remember randomly saying something like that.”

“…”

“Oh! Miss Beta, there’s a potion I’d like you to take to Sir Gown. It’s newly developed, and we have proof it works.”

“Oh? You finally got something, ’ey, Nfi?”

“That’s right. Unfortunately, it’s not completely red yet, but we’re getting

close.”

“Splendid. I’m sure Lord Ainz will be pleased.” Not only her words but her entire vibe changed. She seemed like a whole other person, not the silly, cheery woman from before. But that expression lasted only a moment. The next second she was back to her normal self. “Well, that’s something to look forward to! Man, comin’ today was the right idea! And you don’t have to call me Beta! I’ll make a mega-exception and say you can call me Lupusregina.”

She warmly mingled with the party as they walked to the gates.

The villagers didn’t say anything upon seeing the unfamiliar goblin child. It was possible they were overly relaxed, but it also showed how much they trusted Enri and her friends. Or maybe they had assumed he was a relative of the goblins who protected them.

The group cut across the village and passed Enri’s house. They were headed for the goblin residence.

“Sorry, one sec. I’d like Brita to hear this boy’s story, too.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea, boss man. She’s an apprentice ranger, so she goes in the woods as well. We should share the info… What do ya think, boss lady?”

“Huh? Me?” She hadn’t expected to be consulted, so she hurriedly considered her answer. Seeing no reason to disagree, she nodded. “Yeah, I don’t mind. Or rather, I’d like her to listen, too. Thanks, Nfi.”

Nfirea was off and running with a “Got it.”

“I don’t mind waiting here, but maybe we should go on ahead and pour some drinks.”

“Sounds good. Ya guys must be thirsty.”

“Lady Lupu, yer a maid, right? So do ya know how to make some tasty drinks?”

“I’m Lord Ainz’s and the other Supreme Beings’ maid. I don’t wanna work for anybody else! All I wanna do is laze around, so no way am I workin’.”

“I see… That’s too bad.”

The conversation between Unrai and Lupusregina was totally normal—nothing strange about it at all—but Enri felt a chill go up her spine.

Just as she was about to chime in, they reached the goblins' home.

It was a huge place with a yard big enough to let the wolves run freely, spacious enough for about twenty people to live, and with spaces to maintain weapons as well as train.

The goblins who opened the door led Enri, Arg, and Lupusregina inside.

"Wow, so this is what it's like in here!"

"Huh? You've never been inside, Lupu?"

"Nah, I haven't. Can't go in without being invited! Oh, I should mention that it's because of manners—physically, I'd have no trouble! Miss Man Chest is the one with that kind of weird setting."

"Miss Man Chest?"

"Right, En. That's what I call Miss Unfortunate Baby Doll. Well, it's not like she can't actually enter any room she wants, either. It's a myth, folklore. Anyhow, enough of that. That goblin looks like he's got somethin' to say."

"Oh yes. About drinks… Uhh, would you like herbal water or fruit water? We have blackweed tea or water with hyueli in it…"

Arg and Lupusregina didn't seem to understand Unrai's question, so Enri explained. "Hyueli is a citrus fruit. Water with cut-up hyueli in it is refreshing. Blackweed tea is a bitter tea."

"Then I want hyueli."

"I'm good with that, too."

"Got it. How about boss lady?"

"Hmm, then I'll have hyueli as well, please. Also…could we wash our hands? Even though I'm used to the smell, it's sort of…"

"Sure, go ahead. Hey, kid— Arg, this way. We gotta clean ya up a bit. And brother, can ya put away these dirty weapons?"

"Are you sure?"

“Should be fine. We can’t wash them all now anyhow, and we’ll be done with this in a bit.”

“If ya say so.”

Kaijari took the three goblins’ weapons and left the room.

“Arg, would ya come along already?”

“Why do I have to wash? I’m clean!”

Enri could see his hands were filthy. They weren’t clean by any definition of the word.

“We’re not asking for yer opinion. The master of the house just told ya to go wash up. Or are ya such a big shot ya can object to what the master of the house says?”

Arg pouted and walked next to Enri.

She drew some water from a pot and poured it into a bucket. Once she had enough for four people, she plunged her hands into the shockingly cold water and scrubbed. She made sure the green under her fingernails came off. Once they looked clean enough, she lifted them out of the water and brought them to her nose. *Nope, no smell.*

Satisfied, she turned to look at the scene next to her. Unrai and Gokou were washing their hands like she had been, and the water was turning the red of the barghest’s blood.

Next, she checked on Arg and was immediately irritated.

Even a toddler wouldn’t wash up so poorly. He splashed a little water on his hands, squished them together a couple of times, and that was it. He didn’t rub or anything.

Now that she’d gotten the green stink off her own hands, she noticed that Arg still smelled like crushed herbs. Perhaps for goblins who lived in the woods where magical beasts with excellent senses of smell lived, stinking like this was self-protection. Maybe that was why he didn’t have a habit of bathing.

Still…

“This is how you do it.”

Arg made a face when Enri taught him but—perhaps he remembered what the other goblins had said about his position—reluctantly imitated her.

“Nice job.”

“Hey, now wipe yer body with this. Ya gotta get all that blood off.”

With a grumpy look on his face, he took the damp hand towel and used it to wipe down.

“Can we toss the dirty water outside?”

“Oh, right, please go ahead and sit down, boss lady. We’ll handle the rest.”

Taking them up on their kindness, Enri headed for the table. There were a lot of goblins living in the house, which meant there were a lot of chairs. When she chose one and sat down, it finally hit her how exhausted she was. Her arms and legs were stiff as rods, and her head felt heavy.

Gathering herbs was exhausting, but it seemed like the battle with the barghest had especially tired her out. *Even though all I did was watch… Nfirea and the goblins were actually fighting, but they’re going about their tasks like normal… I’ll never get used to battle… Wow, Nfirea was as strong as anyone…* She knew he could use magic, but she didn’t realize how strong he was. *He’s amazing…*

Her old friend seemed like someone else entirely, and a feeling she couldn’t put a finger on welled up inside her. It felt a little like surprise but also completely different and mysterious.

After hearing what turned out to be a ceramic cup being placed in front of her, Enri came back to her senses. The cup was filled to the brim with a clear liquid that gave off a citrus scent. She picked it up and took a sip.

A refreshing sweetness and citrus flavor spread throughout her body; she practically felt filled with vitality. At some point, Arg had sat beside her. He gulped his drink down in one go and asked for seconds.

Lupusregina didn’t touch her drink.

Come to think of it, she never eats or drinks.

“Hmm? What’s up? You’re starin’ awfully hard. Don’t tell me ya got a thing for me! Oh, man! But, En, I can’t believe you’re a lesbian! We gotta tell everybody!”

“What? No! I’m not!”

“Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just kidding. You like guys, right?”

Enri wasn’t sure what to say and pursed her lips.

“Where are they anyway? …Oh, here they come.”

Enri looked toward the door without thinking but didn’t sense anyone coming.

“Really? I can’t hear a thing.” Arg cupped his hands behind his ears. “Hey, are humans a race with really good hearing?”

“Uh, er, I guess I can’t hear anything. But Lupusregina sometimes…fibs like that? To tease people, I guess?”

Arg looked at Lupusregina with a face that seemed to say, *What? You were lyin’?* But then his eyes widened. “No, I hear it! They *are* coming. Wow, yer amazing!”

“Hmm? Oh, nahh. Compared to the boss lady over there, I’m no big deal.”

Arg took her seriously and gaped at Enri.

No, that’s not true. Plus, Lupusregina is grinning like she just told a huge lie. But before Enri could figure out how to clear up the misunderstanding, someone knocked on the door.

It was Nfirea and a woman in leather armor.

The ex-adventurer Brita was the next person to move to the village after Nfirea. Apparently, she had been an adventurer in E-Rantel but retired after some things happened. She still had to eat, though, so she answered Carne’s call and moved in.

She was training as a ranger, and Enri heard she showed promise. She wasn’t as strong as Jugemu, but she was still top class among those in the village, so she was the leader of the self-defense unit (not that it was really grand enough

to deserve the name).

She had been called to the meeting because she was the leader of that group but also because she was an apprentice ranger and as such had occasion to enter the forest.

“Oh, there really is a new goblin… Er, yeah, I can’t help looking at them from an adventurer’s point of view, but I guess I shouldn’t think of them as enemies.” Brita winced.

Enri could understand how she felt. As far as she had heard, goblins were enemies of humans, and it wasn’t considered wrong to kill them on sight. But this village was different. In fact, it almost felt like in this place, humans were the greatest enemies.

“Okay, everyone’s here, so let’s hear what he has to say. Now then, Arg. Please tell us why ya were all beat up and on the run.”

“Simply put, I got attacked, so I ran away.”

“That’s too simple…! What kind of monster attacked ya?”

“One of the Giant of the East’s underlings.”

“The Giant of the East? Who’s that?”

“…What do ya guys call him?”

“No, before we worry about the name—I’ve never heard of him. Do you know anything about him, Brita?”

Nfirea knew the most of any person present, but Brita had the upper hand when it came to knowledge of the surrounding woods. Still, even she shook her head. “Sorry, I haven’t heard of this Giant of the East. And I don’t think Master Racchimon knows, either. We don’t go that deep into the forest, so we don’t know as many details as someone who lives there.”

“Then, Arg, explain from the basics.”

“The basics? What’s basic?”

Enri understood Arg’s confusion very well. Asking specific things one by one made it easier to answer.

“Then will you tell us about the strong monsters living in the woods?”

“From my perspective, ogres and barghests are strong, but…if you mean ones that are equal to the Giant of the East, there used to be these superstrong ones called the Three Big Ones. First was the one that used to be around here, the Great Magical Beast of the South. That one was amazing. People said anyone who went in its territory would die. I dunno what happened to it. Next is the Giant of the East. It’s building up its power out past the deadwood forest. Last is the Magical Serpent of the West. People say it’s a gross snake that can use magic.”

“Wait, what about the north?”

“Supposedly, there’s a lake up north, where lots of different races live, and like, someone is gathering them all together… I don’t really know. But I heard there are twin witches in the marsh. Anyhow, when the Great Magical Beast of the South disappeared, things started getting weird in the forest. I don’t know much about it, but I guess some really horrifying guy showed up, changing the power balance, so we were chased off, and…”

“And then the Structure of Ruin?”

“The ruler of the Structure of Ruin is a little shadow that lurks in the darkness and can command undead. That’s what someone who survived going to the place said.”

Everyone—besides Lupusregina—looked at one another, worried.

First, the Great Magical Beast of the South. Considering that its territory had been in this area, it had to be the magical beast that belonged to the adventurers Nfirea had accompanied, specifically the one clad in raven-black armor. Certainly, with its convincingly powerful appearance, it was worthy of the title Great Magical Beast, and there was no other beast who fit that description.

“The Great Magical Beast…is the Wise King of the Forest, Hamusuke, right?”

“Ah! Well, she is a great magical beast…,” Brita shouted upon hearing Nfirea’s observation, although she shouldn’t have had the chance to see Hamusuke since coming to the village.

When they asked, it seemed she had seen the Wise King from a distance in E-Rantel.

There were two other beings equal to that one. Every single person present felt shock and fear.

“So how did ya end up on the run?”

“Up until now, those three were in a deadlock. The Great Magical Beast of the South never left its territory, but no one could guarantee it would stay that way. There was a chance that if East and West clashed, it might sweep in from the side the moment one of them won, so no one ever fought in the first place.”

“That makes sense. East and West could team up against South… Oh, but South never leaves its territory, so they probably never thought to team up and defeat it. No point in awkward meddling…”

“We don’t know what they were thinking. But up until now they each had personal territories and were building their respective kingdoms. But because of the Structure of—because of the master of that place, the territories have shifted. The two kings decided to fight the King of Ruin. So then the two kings started gathering disposable soldiers,” Arg explained bitterly. “They tried to force us into fighting on their side. But even if we allied with them, they wouldn’t care at all about goblin lives. We would’ve been throwaways—at worst, emergency rations—so we decided to run for it, but…”

“Seems like it was impossible.”

“Yeah. We got attacked by the barghest and the ogres. We had no choice but to scatter. I got this far with a bunch of others. We thought if we could reach the Great Magical Beast of the South’s territory, then the hunters wouldn’t follow us anymore.”

Arg said he had come this far with some companions, but there was no sign of them.

When a sorrowful expression came over Enri’s face, Gokou spoke. “Another team’s conducting an investigation in the forest. If there are any survivors, as long as they don’t resist, they’ll probably be brought back here.”

“I’m sure. The wolves will smell them. So the issue is what else we’re up

against besides the barghest and if there's anything else coming. If we're unlucky, they'll chase you all the way to the village. Arg, what other types of monsters were there?"

"Barghests, ogres, boggarts, bugbears…and wolves, I guess."

"So your run-of-the-mill monsters, then. I guess I'd rather hear more detailed descriptions of the Giant of the East and the Magical Serpent of the West—what they look like, what powers they have… Do you know anything?"

Arg shook his head back and forth. "I dunno details. All I know is that they say the Giant of the East has a big sword and the Magical Serpent of the West has a head like you guys and can use magic."

All eyes gathered on Nfirea, but he shook his head. It was too little to go on.

"The issue is what to do. If a monster equal to that amazing magical beast shows up, honestly, there's nothing we can do. All the self-defense squad is capable of is escorting the womenfolk and making a run for it."

"Hmm. Would fortifying our defenses be enough, or should we be thinking of taking some other action? If the commotion stays confined to the forest, then we're fine."

Everyone became absorbed in thought.

The best thing for people living outside the forest was for these issues to come to a resolution inside the forest. It would be problematic if these events led to a situation where the villagers were completely unable to go into the woods, but in the worst case, they would do what necessity demanded.

"But if the enemy can mow down tribes living in the woods, they must have gathered a crazy amount of combat power."

"No! My tribe used to be stronger, too. But way before this, we started thinking about looking for a new place to live, and we sent some adult goblin troops to the ogres. If it weren't for that, we would have been able to put up more resistance!"

"Those grown-up goblins never came back?"

At Brita's question, Nfirea cocked his head and seemed to be pondering

something.

“So I’m going to totally change the subject, but I just remembered something, so I wanted to ask: Do you talk normally for a goblin?”

“What do ya mean?”

“Ah, sorry, maybe that didn’t make sense. I met some goblins once before, and they sounded—this isn’t a nice way to put it but—not very bright. But since coming here, I see that Jugemu and the others talk normally, and you sound normal—fluent. So I wondered if maybe the goblins I met just happened to be that way, like they were a primitive tribe or something.”

“No, I’m especially smart. Normal goblins don’t use much grammar when they talk… Sometimes I have trouble understanding people in my tribe. It’s gotten to the point where I even worry maybe I was kidnapped from a different tribe. Hey, I’m only asking just in case, but ya don’t think I might have originally been from around this village, do ya? Ya never heard of me before?”

“Nah, I don’t know about that, but…it’s possible yer…well, boss lady, boss man, can I have a word?”

Enri followed Kaijari to the corner of the room with Nfirea.

“That Arg kid, I wonder if he’s a hobgoblin and not a goblin.”

Hobgoblins were a subspecies of goblin and more advanced than goblins in a variety of ways. Goblins were the size of human children even as adults, but hobgoblins eventually grew to be the size of human adults.

They were on par with humans not only physically but mentally as well. Since they could crossbreed with goblins, they often lived in goblin tribes, but there were never as many of them as there were goblins, which often led them to taking up the position of tribal leader or special guardian-type roles.

“But if his mom or dad was a hobgoblin, he would have realized his identity, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe his parents were goblins, and he’s the only one who’s a hobgoblin?”

“Huh? Is this like one of those intense dramas you find in stories?!”

“…I’ve never seen that look on your face before, Enri… Unfortunately, I don’t

think that's the case. It could be that there are changelings among goblins just like there are among humans."

"Something like that could be possible. Not sure that there is anything to do about it, in that case, but…"

When the three of them returned to the table, Lupusregina, who had been silent up until now, spoke. "So do we have a decision? If you want, I can ask Lord Ainz, tell him you'd like the problem solved."

That was just what they wanted to hear.

Surely the hero who saved the village would be able to take on a great magical beast–class monster and win. But—

"We can't depend on him so much."

When Enri made that unexpected remark, the goblins agreed. Only Brita and Arg, who had never met Ainz, looked confused. For some reason, Nfirea's expression seemed to indicate he had mixed feelings.

"This village is our village. We need to do as much as we can ourselves. I'm sure these are nothing more than the thoughts of a girl who's useless in a fight and has never spilled blood, but…"

"No, I agree with ya. This is the boss lady's village—" Kaijari cocked his head with a "Hmm?" before restating. "'Boss lady and our village' doesn't sound quite right, either…"

"You mean the village belongs to everyone who lives here?"

"Yeah, that's it, boss man. Figures that you would understand! Anyhow, that's why asking Sir Caster for help should be our very last resort."

"But what if everyone dies 'cause of that?! Getting chopped up hurts, ya know!"

"Hah! We wouldn't let that happen, Miss Lupusregina. If it comes down to that, we'll be everyone's shield and at least buy them enough time to escape!"

Lupusregina seemed to feel awkward. "Oh, huh. Then do your best."

"So as far as what action the village should take, I think we should contact—or

make a report to—the Adventurers Guild in E-Rantel. When the guild takes a request, they send out a survey team first before doing any follow-up, so there'll be trouble if we wait until an emergency to make a request."

As an ex-adventurer, Brita added her thoughts to Nfirea's proposal. "Yeah. The guild looks out for adventurers, so they don't die fighting an unexpected monster. People who are nuts, like workers, make fun of the practice, saying the guild coddles adventurers, but that's just a garbage accusation made by a greedy bunch. It's only natural for a guild to want to protect its members."

"Brita, I don't mean to imply anything bad about adventurers, but why during emergencies do rates jump or some requests get refused?"

"Adventurers don't want to die any more than other people. Plus, the guild doesn't want to send adventurers to their deaths, either. So for very sudden jobs, even if it might not require an extremely skilled adventurer, the guild offers greater compensation to attract higher-ranking folks for the job."

Enri, the village girl who was neither an adventurer nor anything else, meekly listened to everything the experienced Brita had to say. Certainly, from the point of view of someone in a spot who needed help, it was emotionally hard to swallow her explanation, but from an adventurer's perspective, it made sense.

"Well, even when the guild does investigate, there are still plenty of people who die from an unlucky encounter…" Brita bit her lip. "I start shaking even now when I remember being attacked by that vampire. For a while, I couldn't sleep without medication…"

"A vampire? What are ya talking about?"

Brita smiled bitterly in response to Arg's less-than-tactful question.

"It's a secret. But seriously, don't make me remember it. I'll pee my pants."

"But I told ya my story…"

"That was in exchange for us saving your life…"

"So I guess our plan for the time being will be to report to the guild and maybe make a request depending on how things go? I'm sure the fee is no laughing matter, but we need to get an estimate. We also need to relay this info

to Jugemu and the headman. That sounds good, right, Enri?”

“I’ll let the self-defense squad know. I have the feeling what we discussed here will end up being what we do.”

Enri nodded at Nfirea’s and Brita’s comments.

“Okay, then I’ll hang around the village a little longer before headin’ back. Are ya sure ya don’t need Lord Ainz’s help?”

“Yes. We’d like to do as much as we can on our own. Feel free to let him know what’s going on, though.”

“Gotcha.”

Arg was still having a hard time understanding as he watched Enri and Nfirea stand up and start working on their plan.

“What’s so great about that woman?”

“What’s that?”

Arg trembled at the grown-up goblin’s threatening voice.

This grown-up goblin seemed stronger than any of the ones in his own tribe. Getting a hostile reaction from someone like that gave him goose bumps all over.

Still, he couldn’t suppress the curiosity that children naturally had.

“Are girls always in charge in Carne?”

Enri didn’t look so strong to Arg. She seemed to have a bit of muscle on her arms and legs but not anywhere near enough. He wouldn’t say she needed as much muscle as an ogre, but a leader needed more than she had.

He would have understood if she was a caster. In goblin tribes, too, girls could become leaders if they could use those mysterious powers he didn’t understand. But this one wasn’t a caster anyway.

He honestly couldn’t understand why she was in charge.

“No, that’s not it.”

“…Isn’t that newer ranger lady stronger?”

“Well, Miss Brita is pretty strong, but we’re stronger.”

Arg’s impression of the grown-up goblin before him improved a notch. He sensed there was a reason behind the confidence that allowed him to make such a claim despite the difference in height.

“And the lady who appeared behind us, is she not that strong, either? I mean, I was surprised when she showed up out of nowhere, but…”

The grown-up goblin suddenly went silent and stared at Arg.

Arg sensed something he couldn’t understand and asked nervously, “Wh-what? Is there something wrong with her?’

“The lady who appears suddenly…her name is Lupusregina… She’s dangerous. I imagine you’ll be in the village for a while, but don’t talk to her. Stay away. I’m saying this for yer own good.”

“Uh, oh…okay.”

“And I’ll say another thing. It should be obvious, but if ya do anything to any of the humans here, ya won’t get off with just a beating. Be ready to pay with yer life.”

“G-got it. You’re just telling me to accept being treated like a member of a defeated tribe, right? I promise. I won’t harm anyone from the Carne tribe.”

“All right, then… And don’t go anywhere near Lupusregina!”

Realizing how wary and frightened the grown-up goblin was of her, Arg took the warning to heart. Then he realized he hadn’t gotten an answer to his original question, so he asked again, “So why is *Miss* Enri in charge?” Even Arg could learn. Rather, he was the smartest one in his tribe; he even had trouble meshing with the other members. For him, learning was simple.

The grown-up goblin sighed. “The boss lady…is actually reeeally strong.”

“Huh?!”

“You’re just weak so you don’t understand. When she gets serious, she can wring a barghest’s neck with one hand, pour its blood into a cup, and drink it.”

“Really?!”

“Seriously. It’s true.”

Arg recalled Enri’s appearance. When he took a moment to think about it, he remembered her giving orders with a determination that resonated in the pit of his stomach. *So that was just a glimpse of her true character?*

“Our boss lady’s just pretending to be weak. If ya go around asking weird questions, she’ll get pissed and wring yer neck with one hand! That’s a lot of work to clean up. The blood sprays everywhere.”

“O-oh… Why is she pretending to be weak? I can’t imagine she’d have much to worry about if she’s really that strong…”

“When yer strong, some idiot always wants to test themselves against ya! It’s more troublesome than ya’d expect!”

I thought being strong meant ya could do anything, but maybe that’s not the case? Arg got caught in a maze of thoughts.

He didn’t notice the look on the grown-up goblin’s face that said he was only joking.

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In the middle of the night, Enri suddenly woke up. She scanned the room and made sure nothing was off. The world around her was mostly pitch-black. The only source of light was the moon coming in through the cracks in the shutters. The lighting was poor, but she didn’t detect anything amiss.

She strained her ears.

Horses neighing, the sounds of knights running around in armor, people screaming—she didn’t hear anything like that. It was an ordinary night.

She exhaled quietly and closed her eyes. Perhaps because she’d been sleeping so deeply up until now, she didn’t feel the urge to go right back to bed.

So much had happened that day. After the meeting, they’d gone to talk to the headman and then returned to explain to Jugemu. *I wonder if they’re okay…*

Jugemu and his team had gone back into the woods that evening to confirm the new information they’d received. Walking deep into the forest at night was too dangerous. Unlike humans, goblins could operate fine at night with even a

little light, but many monsters like magical beasts were nocturnal and grew active once the sun set.

The danger jumped dramatically compared to the daytime.

If there hadn't been urgent needs, such as making sure no other monsters were coming after Arg, even Jugemu and his team wouldn't have gone out right away.

The goblins were strong, but that was only in comparison to Enri and the other villagers; there were monsters in the forest—like the great magical beast—more powerful than them.

Enri was so scared at the thought of losing them that she flinched, and perhaps in response, her little sister snuggled up to her, murmuring, "N-ngh…"

Enri opened her eyes slightly to look at Nemu.

It didn't seem like she had woken her up. She could hear her even breathing.

Hee-hee…

She suppressed a laugh just as she heard a soft knock at the door. It wasn't the wind, and she wasn't imagining things.

She furrowed her brow. What could it be this late at night? But precisely because it was so late, it had to be something important.

She dexterously shifted the blanket covering her sister and her, then slowly got out of bed. She moved carefully so as not to wake Nemu. Her heart pounded a little at the thought that the creaking of the floor might wake her at any second.

Ever since the incident, Nemu always slept with Enri. Her emotional wounds were severe.

Enri didn't feel like trying to persuade her to do otherwise—because it comforted her just as much when she slept with her sister.

But she knew that even when they went to bed together, there were times Nemu jerked awake from a nightmare, so when her sister was sleeping soundly, Enri wanted to let her rest.

Quietly and slowly, she moved toward the entryway where the knocking showed no signs of stopping.

When she nervously peered through the peephole, she saw Jugemu illuminated in the moonlight. She sighed with relief.

In a low voice so as not to wake her sister, she called outside, “So you’re back safe, Jugemu.”

“Yes, boss lady. We made it somehow. Sorry to wake ya. I thought I should inform ya right away.”

Enri opened the door slightly and slipped outside through the crack. She was worried the moonlight shining in would wake Nemu.

Perhaps sensing her concern, Jugemu spoke quietly. “I want ya to come with me.”

“Now?” She smiled. “I don’t mind.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Enri told him he didn’t need to apologize and set off walking after him. She wondered if maybe it would have been better to wake her sister after all but decided it was better to let her sleep.

“Allow me to give ya a brief explanation while we walk.”

Normally, Jugemu spoke in a more relaxed tone, but when he felt like something was official—for work—he spoke more formally.

Enri was only a village girl, so she thought he could be more familiar with her, but he hadn’t changed in all the time they’d been together, so she had resigned herself to his just being that way.

“First, we discovered several members of Arg’s tribe.”

“Oh! That’s good!”

“…But they’re mentally exhausted, so they’ll need a few days’ rest. The boss man should be able to help us out with his abilities.”

Enri must have looked confused. He provided additional explanation. “When we found the survivors, they were being held prisoner by some ogres—

underlings of the Giant of the East—and getting eaten. Konaa healed their physical wounds with magic, but their psychological issues remain. The boss man has some medicines that can be used as sedatives, so we're going to treat them with those. Now here's the problem—there's one tricky bit."

Jugemu paused to check her expression before continuing. "When we saved Arg's tribesmen, we also took five ogres prisoner. We did it to get information out of them, but… Ogres as a species have a habit of living with goblins. They build a mutually beneficial relationship where ogres do the fighting and the goblins provide food. The ones we took prisoner are saying they don't mind fighting for our tribe. When I asked Arg, he said it wasn't such a rare thing, but… what should we do?"

"Umm, can we trust them?"

"According to Arg, we can. Ogres have the strange tendency of only fighting for either their own tribe or a goblin tribe, so it could be that they're so ready to betray the Giant of the East because he's not from a goblin tribe."

"Mmm, I'm kind of scared of man-eating ogres…"

"It seems they've accepted the humans of this village as members of the tribe, so as long as we feed them there shouldn't be an issue. And we can provide enough food, no problem. Luckily they're omnivores."

Frankly, it was a difficult decision for a mere village girl to make.

"Should we kill them?" His tone was even. "To be blunt, I don't mind killing them, since we'd be avoiding any future issues. I don't want any trouble. They seem fine with betraying their master, so they might rebel the moment we're at a disadvantage. Arg says they won't, but it's hard to accept what a kid says at face value…"

"What do you think, Jugemu?"

"There's nothing better than having more fighting power. We don't know what kind of monster could be displaced from the forest. You can never have too many shields."

"May I ask you one more thing? They won't eat people?"

“…Enri, I know they have a reputation for eating people, but at the end of the day, they’re just carnivorous monsters. They attack humans because it’s easier to capture them than wild animals.”

It must have been far easier for an ogre to chase down a human than a rabbit. Designating a creature that was easier to hunt as the main source of food was natural providence, so to speak.

“Anyhow, that’s all to say that if we give them food, they won’t go after the villagers. They only attack to eat. We can catch animals better than they can, so we can guarantee they won’t go hungry. Of course, we’ll keep an eye on them for a while. We definitely won’t let them harm anyone from the village.”

“Then I guess it’s better to believe them for now and have them serve us. That’ll help us out in the future.”

“I’m glad ya understand. The only thing is that—and ya might think this contradicts what we were just saying, but—if they fail the next step, we’ll kill them. We’re thinking about convincing them that yer the leader.”

“Huh?!” Enri emitted a high-pitched shriek in spite of herself. The conversation had taken too big of a leap. *Why do I have to lead the group, including the ogres?! I’m just a village girl! Jugemu should be the boss!*

“I’m doing this with an eye toward the future. We don’t want them to realize that yer a normal human. We follow yer orders, but if the ogres won’t listen unless it comes through me or one of the other goblins, things could get extremely dangerous. I’m the commander on the front lines, so there’s no telling what might happen to me. We need to have someone in the rear, where it’s safe, who can give orders to the ogres, too.”

Enri worked her village-girl brain furiously. “So we need two people who can give orders?”

Jugemu nodded.

“Then why not Nfi?”

“Because depending on the situation, he might be helping on the front lines.”

“I see…”

That made sense to Enri. So she agreed. If she was going to stay in a safe place, she should make herself useful however she could. She had been hoping for a way to do that. But—

“Can I really dominate the ogres?”

“We’re going to right now, boss lady. Can ya do some acting for me?”

There were two village gates, one at the front and one at the back. Enri was led to the latter. It was wide open, and five ogres had prostrated themselves on the ground. They were the source of the intensely foul smell that reached Enri and Jugemu on the breeze.

Surrounding them was the goblin troop. No one was missing and no one looked injured.

Usually there would have been someone, human or goblin, up in the watchtower next to the gate, but today there didn’t seem to be anyone—perhaps the goblins wanted to give the couple some space.

Nfirea was there and Arg, too, a little removed from the others.

“Hey, Enri. I wonder if I’m allowed to call this a nice night.”

“Sure, Nfi. The moon is pretty.”

“Yeah, it looks so big.”

“Sorry to interrupt yer conversation. I don’t mean to rush, but I’d like to get started here.” After whispering to Enri, Jugemu raised his voice. “Hey, ya guys! Our boss lady is here! She’s the one who decides if ya live or die!”

The five huge ogres all raised their heads to look at Enri. She felt like an invisible force was pushing on her, but she managed to keep her feet from retreating. If she took one step back, the plan would be a failure, and the goblins would have to exterminate the ogres to nip any issues in the bud.

The goblins surrounding them had their weapons firmly in hand. Nfirea had casually taken out a medicine bottle as well.

Some tense time passed.

Enri took the ogres’ gazes head-on and returned them. She couldn’t waver or

look away.

She imagined the ogres were the knights from that fateful day.

Clenching her fists, she remembered the time she'd punched one of their helmeted faces.

Don't underestimate me! Everyone is protecting this village. I'm protecting this village, too!

After an intense period of time—it might have been just a moment, but to Enri it felt like hours—the ogres' eyes wavered.

They looked at one another and then at Jugemu.

"I told ya, didn't I? Our boss lady is strong!"

"Bow your heads!" Enri accompanied Jugemu's words with a shout from the pit of her stomach.

Even she was surprised how determined her voice sounded, and she saw Arg flinch out of the corner of her eye. That didn't matter, though. What was important to her was that all the ogres lowered their heads.

It seemed, at least for the time being, that they all acknowledged her as their superior.

"All right, if ya got something to say to the chief of the tribe containing this village and us goblins, say it now!"

With their heads still bowed, the ogres strung some words together with their gravelly voices.

"Tiny fright master. We sorry."

"We attack your tribe. Forgive us."

The "your tribe" they meant was Arg's. For the sake of simplicity, they had said that Arg and company were members of the Carne village tribe. If they hadn't, the ogres' brains would have short-circuited.

"We work for you."

"That's fine! Work for my tribe!" she commanded, using up the last of her fight. She'd said only a few words, but she was exhausted. She was as tired as

when they had explored the forest.

Just as she thought she wouldn't be able to maintain her boss attitude any longer, Jugemu stepped in to help.

"Good for ya! The boss lady just said she'll spare yer lives!"

The ogres visibly relaxed. It was entirely possible they would have been killed, so it was only natural.

The group of them turned to focus intently on Enri. "Chief, what we do now?"

She didn't even have to think about it. If she didn't know, she could leave it to someone else. "Jugemu, please look after them. Use them how you like."

"Understood, boss lady." The goblin leader bowed once and then turned to the ogres. "Okay, for now we'll set up a tent for y'all outside the village. Stay there. Hey, you guys, get the tent up."

After hearing their orders, the goblins and ogres set off in one cluster.

"Having them in a tent outside the village could become problematic, so if possible I'd like to make a house for them inside—after they've been trained not to attack the villagers, of course."

"We have to go around and convince everyone to accept them."

"Hmm, I don't think it will be any trouble if you're the one telling them, Enri. Also, about tomorrow…" Nfirea and Enri were supposed to take a couple of goblins as an escort and head to E-Rantel. "Sorry, but I have to treat the survivors from Arg's tribe, so it doesn't seem like I'll be able to go."

Those goblins were going to live in the same village as the ogres who had been eating them. They needed both treatment for their injuries and care for their minds, but knowing Lizzy's personality, she would probably have the opposite effect and terrify them. Nfirea was the only man for the job.

"Really? That's a bit nerve-racking…" Enri had never been to a big city like E-Rantel, and when she thought of what she had to do there, it weighed heavily on her.

"Then what about asking the village headman to go with you?"

“I doubt he can…”

The headman needed to pay attention to village systems and maintenance, as well as help new villagers, so he probably couldn’t go too far.

“…Nnngh, honestly, there aren’t enough people in this village. It was like that before, too, but now it’s even worse…”

Carne had always been barely getting by. After the decrease in population, it was functioning markedly worse. That’s why they had suppressed opposing voices and put out a call for new settlers.

“We need to go to the shrines in E-Rantel and see if there are any people who will move here… Ahh, this is too much for a village girl to do…”

“Do yer best, Chief.”

Enri puffed out her cheeks in frustration. She didn’t want to hear that from Jugemu. One of the reasons she was running around like a chicken with her head cut off was to take care of the goblins serving her.

“I really want to go with you, but…” Nfirea moaned, seeming extremely disappointed. But then he deliberately brightened the mood by saying, “Oh, but you don’t need to worry about a thing. I’ll keep an eye on Nemu, so you can just focus on doing your work and getting back.”

“…Agh, it’s like I’m the only person in the world—getting worshipped all of a sudden and having to pretend I’m all-important, forced to go to someplace I’ve never been and do all sorts of work I’ve never done…”

“Don’t be so down, Enri. If you look, I’m sure there’s at least one more person.”

Jugemu and Nfirea chuckled at Enri as she slumped her shoulders.

Last of all, a little ways removed from the others, Arg whispered in a voice no one else could hear.

“So she really is ruling those goblins by her strength… Boss lady Enri, chief of Carne…”

3

Fortress City E-Rantel, true to its name, was surrounded by three walls. The gates in the outer wall loomed largest and sturdiest, brimming with rugged dignity.

These gates were supposed to be able to repel any attack from the neighboring empire. Anyone passing through the city had seen travelers gaping before their imposing presence at least once. Surely, they had all made that face at one time or another.

Next to the gate was a checkpoint; several soldiers were lounging inside, seeking shelter from the sun.

They may have seemed slack for soldiers in a city that was liable to be the front line in a war, but their duty at the checkpoint was to inspect travelers. It was their job to spot spies from other countries or people transporting illegal contraband, so if no one was entering the city, it was only natural there would be no work.

Though these rank-and-file soldiers with nothing to do had not gone so far as to play cards to kill time, they didn't bother hiding their yawns, either.

They seemed bored at the moment, but when they had work, they always had a lot of it. Especially early in the morning, right when the gates opened for the day, things were hectic beyond description.

When the sun reached the highest point in the sky, they started to see a scattering of travelers on the road. It was normal for people to travel in groups in a world where monsters were liable to appear.

When they come, they always come in clusters. Things are about to get busy. Thinking along those lines, a soldier looked out the frame-only window and set eyes on another wagon coming down the road separate from that group.

There was a single woman in the box seat. There didn't seem to be any people-like figures on the uncovered cargo bed. She was a lone traveler.

The woman didn't appear to be armed. From that, he guessed that—

She must be a girl from some village.

But the thought made him cock his head.

It wasn't so rare for villagers in the region to visit the city. But a single woman unaccompanied? That was a different story.

It was impossible to claim with any certainty that there were no monsters or bandits out there, despite it being the outskirts of E-Rantel. It was true that nearly all the dangerous monsters and outlaws had disappeared thanks to the efforts of the legendary adventurer team Raven Black, but that didn't mean there were none, and normal threats like wolves were still present.

This was common sense not only for the E-Rantel region but also for any city—it was simply reality. *So why would anyone let a girl travel on her own?*

It was possible her party had been attacked by bandits and she had run for her life, but she didn't look troubled. She seemed incredibly composed, like she was traveling with the knowledge that she was perfectly safe.

Who is this person?

With the question still on his mind, the soldier shifted his eyes to her horse—and was thrown into confusion again.

It was a magnificent steed, not at all the sort of animal a village girl would possess. Its physique and coat brought to mind a warhorse.

Warhorses fetched extremely high prices. Even if someone managed to get the cash together, they weren't simply sold to ordinary people. They were the best mounts available outside of monsters like wyverns and griffins.

If a regular person got ahold of a warhorse, they likely had some kind of connections, but there was no way a village girl had friends in those kinds of places.

There was a possibility she robbed its original owner, but when something so valuable got stolen, retaliatory measures were definitely taken—to the point where even career thieves avoided targeting someone riding a warhorse.

He concluded that there was a very good chance she was no mere village girl. *But then who is this woman dressed like a villager?*

The hint was that she was traveling alone. In other words, she was confident in her abilities, and they weren't hindered by her plain appearance—she didn't need gear. Therefore, she had to be someone whose equipment didn't correlate closely with her combat ability, like a caster.

That answer made sense to him. If she was an adventurer like many casters, she would have plenty of cash and connections and thus a far better chance of acquiring a warhorse than the average person.

"Huh, is that a caster or something?"

A fellow soldier came up next to him and voiced the same guess.

"Could be," the first soldier answered, furrowing his brow slightly.

Casters were a pain to inspect.

First of all, their weapon—magic—was inside them, so it was invisible. Put another way, there was no method to gauge how powerful their attacks might be.

Second, it was possible that they were using magic to smuggle something dangerous into the city, and uncovering that was difficult.

Third, they carried a lot of specialist paraphernalia and therefore required annoying processing. Those were some of the main issues.

To be frank, he hated inspecting casters the most. That's why they borrowed personnel from the Wizards Guild—and paid them handsomely for their services, of course…

"Should we call him? Ugh…"

"I guess we have no choice. If we let her through and she causes a problem, we'll be in trouble."

"If only casters would just dress so you knew at a glance that's what they were."

"In a shady-looking robe carrying a shady-looking staff?"

"Yeah. If you saw that, you'd know they were a caster. Also, it would be good if we could force them all to join the Wizards Guild and require them to carry a

sign like the members of the Adventurers Guild do.”

They looked at each other and laughed, and the first soldier, who had been sitting the whole time, stood up. He was going to go meet the potential caster girl.

As the soldiers watched, the wagon approached the gate and stopped in front.

The girl got out of the driver’s seat. The sweat beading on her forehead showed at a glance that she’d been traveling out under the sun. Probably to cover herself from the rays, she wore long sleeves and long pants. Neither garment was very well tailored. She seemed like a normal village girl who could be found anywhere.

But she could have been something else on the inside, possibly hiding something. He’d learned since starting his job that things weren’t always what they seemed.

He cautiously approached her.

“We’ve got a couple of questions for you, so do you mind coming with me to the guardhouse?” He addressed her with a mild expression and a tone that was on the familiar side, as if to say, *We don’t suspect anything of you at all, so go ahead and let your guard down.*

“Sure, that’s fine.”

The soldier brought her over.

On the alert for Charm or other mind-control spells, two soldiers followed at a distance of several yards. The others casually observed as she went by to ensure she didn’t make any suspicious moves.

“…Is something wrong?”

“Oh, uh, no, nothing.”

If she can detect subtle shifts in the atmosphere, she’s no mere village girl, thought the soldier as he led her to the gate’s guardhouse.

“Okay, can you take that seat, there?”

“Sure.” She lightheartedly sat in one of the chairs in the office.

“First, give me your name and please name your point of departure.”

“Okay. My name is Enri Emmott. I come from Carne near the Tove Woodlands.”

The soldiers exchanged glances, and one of them left the room. He went to go check if she was listed in the ledger.

The kingdom kept records on its residents. That said, it was fairly sloppy. Many birth and death updates were late, and some people were missing—to the point where some estimated there were tens of thousands of errors. For that reason, it wasn’t good to rely on the ledgers too much, but they could still be useful.

Despite how unreliable the records were, there was still a massive amount of information stored within. It would take quite a while for the other soldier to finish checking. Knowing that, the soldier decided to proceed with other matters. “Can I see your pass, then?”

Usually, anyone entering a city had to pay a toll, which was also called a “foot tax”. But making people from that city’s domain pay would slow everything down, so it was common to provide a pass to each village. The toll was waived for people who held a pass. Of course, the system varied depending on which noble controlled the land.

“Uh, it should be here somewhere…” Enri started to rummage in her bag, but the soldier stopped her.

“No, let me look. Can you hand it to me as it is?”

She obediently gave him the bag, and he made a careful inspection of its contents and found the parchment.

He unrolled it on the desk and skimmed it from top to bottom. The literacy rate in the kingdom was low, but checkpoint soldiers obviously had to know how to read and write. Actually, it’s more accurate to say they were assigned to their posts *because* they had these abilities.

“I see. There’s no mistake. I confirm that this is the pass given to Carne

Village.” He rolled up the parchment, put it away, and handed the bag back to Enri. “Now tell me why you’ve come to E-Rantel.”

“My first order of business is to sell the herbs I picked.”

The soldier flicked his eyes out the window to her wagon, where an inspection of her pots was under way.

“Can you tell me the names of the herbs and the number of pots?”

“Of course. There are four pots of nyukuri, four pots of ajiina, and six pots of enkaishi.”

“Six of enkaishi?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Enri smiled with pride. The soldier figured that was only natural.

Since the soldier worked at the checkpoint, he had some degree of familiarity with herbs.

Enkaishi was one that could be picked for only a very short time right around the season they were currently in, and it was often used to make healing potions. High demand for enkaishi meant it fetched a good price. It depended on the size of the pots, but six would probably make her some decent money.

“So where are you planning to take them?”

“I used to do business with the Baleare family.”

“Baleare? You mean the apothecary Lizzy Baleare?”

Apparently, she wasn’t around anymore, but up until recently Lizzy Baleare had been the top apothecary in E-Rantel and was quite famous. If this girl had been doing business with her, she was probably exceedingly trustworthy.

The soldier concluded that he didn’t have to dig any deeper.

Their job at the checkpoint was to keep dangerous people or items from entering the city. Once something was inside, it was out of their jurisdiction.

He nodded with a grunt of approval and looked away from Enri.

There was nothing suspicious about her story. Nothing in her face said she

was lying, either.

Once the examination of her cargo was complete, his work would be done for the moment.

Just then, the soldier who had gone out returned and nodded.

That meant a woman named Enri was in the ledger.

Still, all that proved was that a woman named Enri had been born in Carne. It didn't guarantee that the woman sitting before them was actually her, and it said nothing about the sort of life this Enri woman had lived. She could be someone who had traveled, gained great magical power, and returned to her hometown, or Enri could have died on the road, and this person could be a criminal who assumed her name.

That's why there was one more thing to check.

"Got it. Can you please call him?"

The soldier nodded and left the room again.

"Now I'm going to perform a body search. Is that all right?"

"Huh?"

Enri looked at him with suspicion.

The soldier hurried to add, "Oh, it's not like there's an issue. Sorry, but this is standard procedure. We barely do anything, so I hope you'll be at ease."

"…If that's all, then I understand."

The soldier breathed a mental sigh of relief. He didn't want to anger someone who might be a caster.

The soldier who went out came back with another man following him.

This newcomer was a caster.

His pale face had a hooked nose and hollow cheeks. He was sweating profusely, probably due in part to the oppressively warm-looking black robe he wore. In his hands, he grasped a gnarled staff with fingers that looked like chicken bones.

The soldier's personal opinion was that if the caster was so hot he should simply take off the robe, but perhaps because he was attached to the style, he stubbornly insisted on that attire. Maybe that's why it felt like the temperature in the room rose a few degrees when he entered.

"This is the girl?"

The caster's voice always made the soldier feel weird.

Going by appearance alone, the soldier guessed him to be in his late twenties, but his voice was awfully hoarse; from just his speech, it was impossible to tell how old he was. Did he only seem young, or was his voice just throaty?

"Umm…" Surprised, Enri looked between the caster and the soldier.

The soldier figured it was only natural that she be surprised; he was surprised the first time he heard the caster's voice, too.

"This is a caster from the Wizards Guild. He's going to do a simple inspection, so please wait a moment." He gestured that she could remain seated and then bobbed his head to the caster. "Go ahead."

"All right." The caster took a step forward and faced Enri head-on. Then he cast a spell, Detect Magic.

His eyes narrowed like a beast eyeing its prey. The gaze that made even the solider feel threatened seemed to not affect Enri.

I knew it, he thought.

Anyone who could remain unfazed under such an intense scrutiny couldn't be a mere village girl. Without experience confronting a monster or someone trying to take one's life, it was impossible to face those eyes bravely. Given her lack of reaction, the soldier felt his assessment was justified.

"My eyes won't be fooled. You're secretly carrying a magic item. On your hip."

Now Enri seemed surprised and looked down at her waist.

The soldier braced himself slightly. If it was a weapon, like a sword, he could understand, but he didn't know anything about magic items.

“You mean this?” The item Enri produced from under her shirt was a shabby horn small enough to hide in two hands. It was the sort of thing the soldier would have let pass at a glance.

“…That’s a magic item?”

“Indeed. You mustn’t be fooled by its appearance. That thing contains great magical power.”

The soldier was astounded. *That item contains enough power that this caster calls it “great”? How much power could it really have?*

The soldier started to get the feeling this girl had dressed shabbily on purpose. He felt a chill as if a blade were pointed at him.

“Oh, it—”

“No explanations necessary. My spells detect all.” The caster shut Enri up and cast another spell. “Appraise Magic Item—mmgh!!”

For a few seconds, the caster’s face cycled through emotions—first shock, then awe, terror, and finally confusion.

“Wh-what is this? The power contained here is no normal power; it is far beyond ‘great.’ It cannot be! What in the world is thiiis?!” Spittle flew as he shouted and his face grew red. “Who are you?! We won’t be fooled by your clothes!”

Alarmed by the sudden change in the caster, the soldier also widened his eyes at Enri.

“I-I’m a normal person. I’m just a villager. Really!”

“A village girl? Why do you lie, wench?! If that’s true, then how did you get this item? It makes plenty of sense if you’re *not* a mere villager!”

“Huh? Umm, Sir Ainz Ooal Gown gave it to me when he saved my village.”

“Another lie, hmm? You’re saying a priest from the Theocracy gave it to you?”

“Huh? Is he from the Theocracy?”

“Gather your men! This girl is too strange!”

The soldier had no idea how things were going in that direction, but this

caster had never reacted in such a weird way before. He figured he should treat it as an emergency and put his own thoughts to the side.

“All troops assemble! All troops assemble!”

In response to the soldier’s shout, his colleagues checking the cargo raced over, obviously tense.

“You expect me to believe this person simply handed over such a powerful item?! Where did you get it?! There’s no way you’re just a village girl!”

“No, Sir Gown really did give it to me! Please believe me!”

The soldier looked between the two of them. Certainly, since he and the caster were colleagues, and the caster had responded to the checkpoint’s request for help, the soldier was inclined to believe him. But Enri seemed like only a village girl frightened by the dramatic shift in attitude.

“Di-did something happen? Please tell me what made you suspicious of her!”

“Hmph! First of all, that horn has the power to summon a goblin mob. I don’t know how many, but that’s the power it contains.”

The soldier frowned. That could cause quite a bit of trouble if it was used in the city. But was that the only issue? There were plenty of people, like adventurers, who carried magic items. This horn wasn’t so strange among all the other magic items, considering that.

“The way she keeps claiming to be a village girl is also fishy. Would you give a magic item worth several thousand gold to a nobody?”

“Several thousand?!”

“Several thousand?!”

It was such an unbelievable sum that both the soldier and Enri yelped.

A normal person would never see several thousand gold in their lifetime. *This shabby horn is that valuable?*

“Yes. You wouldn’t give something like that away without a reason—especially not to a peasant! Of course, it would make sense for a first-rate adventurer or caster to possess such an item. But this girl keeps saying she’s

just a village girl! Isn't that strange?"

That explanation made sense to the soldier as well. People with superior ability attracted objects with superior powers. The many historical figures with superhuman abilities possessed immensely powerful items, without exception. It was fate as well as necessity.

"No, I really am just a village girl…"

"In the first place, I've never heard of this Ainz Ooal Gown character. At least, he's not a caster from this city. Probably not an adventurer, either."

"The captain of the Royal Select knows Sir Gown!"

"You mean Sir Gazef Stronoff? Your story is outrageous. Why would you know something like that if you're just a village girl?"

"Because he came to my village! It's true! If you ask him, you'll see."

There was no way they were going to contact the captain in the capital. And besides, if she really was just a village girl, she probably hadn't made a very big impression on him, so it would be nearly impossible for him to confirm her identity.

"What should we do?"

"For now, we should probably take her into custody and do a thorough investigation. If she's carrying around an item like this horn when she could have cleverly hidden it—well, I don't necessarily think she's a spy or terrorist, but we don't have enough to make a judgment call here."

Enri darted her eyes around in a panic.

She looked just like a normal village girl. If she was acting, then it was entirely too convincing.

Suddenly the soldiers in the area watching events unfold shouted in surprise, and a new voice sounded. "We'd like to enter the city already… What are you doing?"

When the soldier turned around, he saw a figure in raven-black armor standing there.

“Ahhh!”

Both the soldier and the caster yelped in surprise. There was no one in E-Rantel who didn’t know the man wearing that armor. The adamantite plate around his neck proved there was no mistake. He was a living legend, a man for whom nothing was impossible, the strongest warrior.

It was Momon of Raven Black.

“I-if it isn’t Sir Momon! Do excuse us!”

“What in the world are you—huh? That girl…”

“Yes! There was a suspicious girl here, so it took some time to investigate her. We apologize for inconveniencing y—”

“Enri, that’s right. Enri Emmott, right?”

Everything froze. Why did this legendary adventurer know this village girl’s name?

“Uhh, umm, who might you be? …Oh, wait. Y-you came that one time with Nfirea, right? I don’t remember speaking to you, but…perhaps you heard my name from Nfi?”

Momon put his hand to his mouth and seemed to be pondering something. After that, he waved over the caster, and the two of them left the guardhouse. The soldier wanted to go, too, but he couldn’t leave Enri alone.

Eventually the caster, who had regained composure, returned on his own. “Let her go. The adamantite adventurer Momon will vouch for her. I don’t think keeping her here any longer will do us any good.”

“That’s a natural enough conclusion…but are you sure it’s all right?”

“You would doubt the word of that great man?”

“No, not at all! Understood. I’ll let her in immediately. Enri Emmott of Carne, you have permission to enter E-Rantel! You may go!”

“Uh, okay. Thank you.”

Enri bobbed her head and left.

Watching her go, the soldier asked the caster, “And Sir Momon?”

“He went on ahead.”

“So what’s the relationship between the great hero and that villager?”

“How should I know? All he said to me was what I told you, that we should release her and that he would vouch for her.”

“Then I have another question. That Emmott girl, do you really think she’s just a villager?”

“Definitely not. She can’t be. Otherwise, why would a great hero like him step in to help her? And it can’t be a coincidence that she has such a powerful item… Do you think she could be connected to the Theocracy?”

“She said Ainz-something-something, right? If she’s someone with friends in the Theocracy, maybe we should report her to the higher-ups?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Reporting someone Sir Momon vouched for to your superiors as dangerous is…probably following protocol, but might it offend Sir Momon?”

The soldier grimaced.

Anytime soldiers got together, they discussed the feats he performed at the E-Rantel Public Cemetery.

No one could remain unmoved by the heroic tale of how he broke through an undead mob thousands—or perhaps tens of thousands—strong. His awe-inspiring appearance and heroic bearing were clearly visible even from afar. The dominant way he had his immensely powerful magical beast prostrate itself so he could mount it drove the soldiers wild.

Like women who become infatuated with a strong man, many men had fallen for the great hero Momon, and it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that most of the soldiers, fellow warriors, were his fans.

This soldier was one of them.

He deeply admired Momon, to the point where if Momon were to pat him on the back, he’d tell anyone who would listen. He didn’t want to invite the displeasure of one he looked up to so much.

“Yeah. If Momon vouches for her, then she’s probably fine.”

“I agree. We wouldn’t want to cause disadvantage to a personal acquaintance of Sir Momon’s. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em. A big tree is better for shelter. I don’t want any trouble… Anyhow, I’ll be on standby.”

“Okay. I’ll get back to work, too.”

•

As Enri drove her wagon through the gate of E-Rantel, she cocked her head, wondering what in the world had happened. It seemed like her salvation had come in the form of the adventurer in the raven-black armor—if she remembered correctly, he had come to the village once with Nfirea to gather herbs.

Normally, she would want to meet him and express her thanks right away, but unfortunately when she passed through the gate and looked around, he was nowhere to be found.

Hopefully, he’ll understand if I thank him the next time I see him…?

She considered taking a little time and searching the area immediately, but there was a reason she had to veto that idea. It was a worry reigning over her mind, the thing she was gripping through her shirt, the item that if she didn’t directly confirm its continued existence, she couldn’t relax—the goblin-whatever-horn.

This is worth…several thousand…gold? That can’t be true, right? Tell me that’s a lie…

She broke out in a cold sweat. He’d given it to her so casually she didn’t think it was worth much at all. Well, no, Nfirea said it was valuable, but this was far beyond what she had imagined.

Wait, I used an item worth a fortune? Is that okay?

If on the off chance he asked for it back, what would she do?

How many pots of herbs would that take…? I guess I’d just have to pick herbs my entire life…

And she still had one of the items worth several thousand gold in her hand.

Is Sir Gown in a position where he can just freely hand out such expensive

items?! Or did he not know how much it was worth…? No, he would definitely know… But what if on the off chance he didn't…

Her stomach started to hurt.

She glanced at her surroundings. There were only a few people in the area, but it still felt like many times the number of people in Carne. She had the horrible thought that someone might come after her for the horn.

I shouldn't have brought this. There is lots of crime in the city, right? What'll I do if it gets stolen…? Wait, if someone blows it and the goblins that get summoned go on a rampage, would I be the criminal responsible…?

Just as she had doubled the amount of cold sweat she was producing, someone sat on the box seat next to her. They moved as if gravity didn't exist for them—definitely by the power of magic.

Who—?

When she turned to face her company, she was overcome with surprise.

It was a peerlessly beautiful woman with raven-black hair, the one who had been with the adventurer in the raven-black armor before. Her cold obsidian eyes were focused on Enri.

"Horsefly, Mr. Momon has something he'd like to ask y—"

"You're so pretty…"

"That sort of flattery won't—"

"About as pretty as Lupusregina…"

Noticing the confusion in the woman's wavering eyes, Enri realized she had said something stupid and immediately regretted it. How would this lady know who Lupusregina was? But she couldn't think of anyone else as beautiful as the adventurer before her eyes.

What should I do? I can tell she's confused… Of course she is. I have to somehow…

"Uh, so you see, Lupusregina is this really pretty lady who comes to my vill—"

"—Thank you."

“Wuh?!”

Her gaze was still stony, and there was nothing gentle about her tone—her brow was even furrowed—but her gratitude was real. She sighed. “I came because Lo— Mr. Momon has something he wants to ask you. Answer me. What are you doing here?”

It wasn’t as if Enri was obliged to answer, but this was the partner of the person who had just helped her out of a difficult spot. If she wanted to know, Enri figured she should answer.

“Uh, before that, can I say something? Mr. Momon helped me out just a short while ago. Please tell him thank you for me.”

“I’ll tell him. So?”

“R-right. I’m here to— W-well, I have a lot of things to do, but, er, one is to sell herbs.”

The woman gestured with her jaw that Enri should continue.

“Then I’m going to the shrine to see if there are any people who want to move to my village. And I’m also planning to inquire about something at the Adventurers Guild. Besides that, I need to stock up on a bunch of things we can’t get in the village, particularly weapons. That’s about it…”

“I see. I understand what you’ve said and will tell Mr. Momon.”

With an airy movement, as if she had been freed from gravity’s pull, the woman jumped off the wagon. She walked away without giving Enri any further attention.

A cutting, icy wind—that was Enri’s impression of her.

“What an amazing lady… Like Brita’s power times ten…”

She wasn’t the sort of woman one could meet in the village. *Is she an adventurer because she has that personality type? Or did she end up with that personality after becoming an adventurer?* Enri started to feel nervous about going to the guild.

“Oh, shoot!”

She didn't think of it until after the woman was already gone, but she must also be a strong adventurer, too. After all, she was partnered with the guy who tamed the Wise King of the Forest. It was possible she knew something about the situation in the woods.

"I should've asked her if she knew anything about the Giant of the East, the Magical Serpent of the West, or the Structure of Ruin… Ahh, I'm so stupid. Why didn't I think of it?"

Enri trundled along the road on her wagon, chiding herself for not being more on top of things, and passed through the next gate.

E-Rantel was broadly split into three areas. The middle section was for the various people who lived there—the normal city area, so to speak.

The Adventurers Guild was also located there.

Usually it would be safer to do herb business with the Apothecaries Guild, but that required a lot of annoying formalities, so she decided to head for the Adventurers Guild, who would do the negotiations for her. At first, she thought maybe she could rely on her connection with Lizzy, but on second thought, although they were close, she realized using the name of her friend's grandmother was pretty shameless.

The one who had respected her intentions and suggested going to the Adventurers Guild was Nfirea.

If he had come, they could have bought and sold herbs without relying on the guild, no problem, but Enri was only a village girl; she was nervous about dealing with the savvy Apothecaries Guild members. That's why she had decided to have the Adventurers Guild act as the middleman, even if she had to pay a fee.

She proceeded through the city according to the directions Brita and Nfirea had given her.

The goblins had traveled with her up until the outskirts of the village, but now they were waiting outside for her to be done with her errands. She was hit with the realization that she was alone for the first time since leaving the village, and she clenched the horse's reins. The tension made her shoulders stiff and sore.

She was about to stretch her neck when she caught sight of the building her friends had described to her up ahead.

“I made it!” she quietly exclaimed. There was no chance of her getting lost now.

After leaving her wagon with the doorman, she went inside.

There were warriors clad in plate armor, hunters with bows and arrows, priests and wizards, plus a few people who generally looked like casters, all coming and going. They exchanged information about monsters in the area, seriously examined the sheets of parchment stuck on the board, or confirmed the quality of items they’d purchased with an ease that came only with practice.

It was a world full of vigilant eyes, tense heat, and an intense clamor—the world of adventurers.

Enri’s jaw dropped at this scene she would never be able to see in her village, and she hurriedly closed it.

True, she was a country bumpkin, and she wasn’t afraid to be amazed by the atmosphere in the city, but she was embarrassed as a girl of marrying age to be seen with her mouth hanging wide open.

She walked straight ahead, careful not to move unnaturally. She didn’t want to get laughed at. She did wonder if it was all right for a village girl to walk among the brave adventurers. She felt out of place.

When she reached the counter, she was met with a friendly smile.

“Welcome.”

“Yes, here I am.”

Enri met the receptionist lady’s eyes, and they both grinned awkwardly in spite of themselves. Enri felt the tension go out of her shoulders for perhaps the first time since she had entered E-Rantel.

“What can the Adventurers Guild do for you today?”

“Well, uh, first, I was hoping you could sell some herbs for me.”

“Very well. And where are the herbs right now?”

When Enri explained that the herbs were on her wagon outside, the receptionist lady spoke to the woman next to her.

“The appraiser will go there now, so do you mind waiting inside the building for a short while?”

“That’s fine. There’s one more thing I wanted to talk to you about… I don’t have an immediate request, but I might make one in the future…”

She gave an outline of the situation to the smiling receptionist, and her smile gradually morphed into a more serious expression.

“I see… I’m a receptionist, so I don’t determine request difficulty levels, but if it’s about the Magical Serpent of the West or the Wise King of the Forest, the adamantite-rank adventurer Sir Momon is probably the only one who can take the job. In which case, it would cost quite a lot.”

Enri felt the receptionist’s attitude shift. It was like she had lost motivation, thinking, *It’s a pain to explain this, since you can’t afford it anyway.*

Through living with the goblins, Enri had gotten better at reading people’s emotions. This growth could be attributed to her efforts to understand the goblins, which seemed like only hideous creatures with borderline unintelligible expressions to most humans.

She probably thinks we don’t have that kind of money in the village… Well, it seemed like the first thing she looked at was my clothes, so I guess that’s what she would think… And she’s wearing nice things.

Enri mentally compared her clothes with the receptionist’s and acknowledged that she lost by a landslide.

But wearing clothes like that to do village work would be a waste; plus, they’d get in the way.

As a woman, Enri judged this match a draw.

“Uh, I heard the city offered money, a subsidy…”

“It does, but the subsidy is only for a portion of the cost. The rest you must cover. Adamantite-rank adventurers are extremely expensive, so even after deducting the subsidy, you would owe quite a large sum. Of course, you can put

in a request at a lower price, but we don't encourage it. Jobs paying less than the going rate are lower priority, so you would have to be prepared for the possibility that it will be difficult finding someone."

The receptionist probably spoke so fluently, so fluidly, because she was regurgitating rules she had perfectly memorized. It was likely she was already thinking that Enri was just a bother.

I guess that's only natural. A customer who can't pay is no customer at all…

The receptionist lady's words matched exactly what Nfirea had told her. That's why she didn't feel too down. It was simply reality that there weren't many people who would lend a hand to the weak for little to no reward.

That's exactly why Sir Ainz Ooal Gown is our savior. He even gave this treasure to a village girl like it was nothing!

If she said she would pay with the horn, what sort of attitude would the receptionist take? She imagined how gratifying it would be but did nothing of the sort. That great caster had given her this item out of kindness and told her to protect herself. It wasn't something she could sell just because it would be good for the village. She couldn't let his benevolence be in vain.

So Enri nodded.

"I understand. Please at least tell me how much. I'll take the information home and consult with the rest of the village."

"Oh? Then please do that. If you come when the broker's appraisal is done, I'll have the fee all calculated for you."

Enri thanked the receptionist, moved away from the counter, sat on a sofa across the lobby, and thought she would kill time until the broker assessment was done by staring absentmindedly at the ceiling.

I'm tired…

Ever since she had passed through the gates, it had been a parade of new experiences. No, nothing had been this bewildering since she'd lost her parents in the attack.

Everything was always the same. I thought that way of life would go on

forever…

Remembering what she had lost, she sighed quietly.

Remembering what she had gained—the goblins, her old friend—she shook her head back and forth.

I wish they would hurry up…

When she was moving, she didn't have time to get depressed. She could empty her head and work hard.

"Miss Emmott, your assessment is done."

At the call of the person who must have been in charge of sales, Enri stood and walked over.

"Th-thank you!"

"Er, the amount is—"

At that moment, she heard someone's quick steps—no, someone running about as fast as they could—coming toward her. Enri turned her head to find the receptionist lady standing there, panting.

"Miss—no, Lady Enri Emmott of Carne. Might I ask you for a little more detail about what we were discussing earlier?"

It was definitely the same receptionist from before. But she was desperate. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"U-umm, excuse me, I'm about to give her the results of her assessmen—"

"I'm talking right now. All I need is a minute, so you can shut up."

The broker's face twitched.

"If you like, we could talk in the sitting room over a drink."

Her lips were pleasantly curled, but her eyes held no mirth at all. She was bizarrely desperate.

What did she sense from Enri's hesitation? With wet eyes, she entwined her fingers as if to pray. "Please! I want to hear what you have to say! I'm screwed unless you tell me!"

Enri had no idea what this frantic plea was about, but she would have felt bad to reject her. When she glanced back, the broker seemed to understand what she was thinking and nodded.

“I—I see. Then will you take me there?”

That moment, the receptionist’s body visibly relaxed.

“Thank you! Thank you so much! Right this way—follow me!”

Bathed in curious stares, Enri followed. The receptionist had a viselike grip on her right hand. She was definitely not letting her get away.

Maybe I was too hasty…

Though seized by a mild anxiety, she entered the sitting room.

She looked around silently. The empty room had an extremely refined interior furnished so magnificently she hesitated to sit on the sofa.

“Now then, go ahead, take a seat.”

A voice in a corner of her mind said, *I won’t be taken prisoner the moment I sit down?*

But nothing happened even when she sat on the sofa. That is to say, the comfortable sofa merely supported her body.

“What would you like to drink? I can offer you quality alcoholic beverages! Would you like to eat? Perhaps it’s too early? I suppose it is! Then fruit…or perhaps cake?”

“Oh, you don’t have to go to all that trouble.”

The abrupt change in the receptionist scared Enri just a little bit. It wasn’t like she was particularly cold toward Enri when she first arrived at the guildhall. She thought the receptionist’s reaction utterly natural and didn’t feel like she’d endured any malice or derision. At least, the lady had been more normal than she was now.

What caused this transformation? Is it because I’m carrying the horn again?

“Now, now, don’t be shy. You can have anything you like. We have snacks that go great with our drinks.”

“No, really… Uh, I don’t have much time, so shall we start talking?”

“Right! Just as you say. Let’s get talking!”

The receptionist took out a thin piece of white paper. The only paper Enri had ever seen was thick with muddled colors. This paper she was just given had to be a luxury item. *Does this mean she has no issues if I use it?*

Enri started talking. Earlier she’d kept it brief, but this time she went into so much detail she bored herself.

A short time later, about when she was starting to get thirsty, her story reached its end.

“Thank you! I’ll bring you something to drink, so please enjoy the refreshment before you go. You can leave the glass here. Thank you very much for everything today!”

The receptionist popped out of her chair and exited the room as if compelled.

“Really… What the heck is going on?”

There was no one around to answer Enri’s murmur.

•

In the end, Enri returned to Carne without staying over in E-Rantel.

She had to spend the night in the meadow, but she wasn’t worried. On the contrary, she slept quite well—thanks to her friends guarding the wagon now packed with new cargo.

“Ahh, you can finally see it.”

Carne’s wall came into view ahead of them. The sturdy logs lined up in a row were a grand sight, but having just seen E-Rantel’s walls, she couldn’t help but think Carne’s seemed inferior in comparison.

“There’s so much I need to hurry and report to the headman,” Enri answered the goblin in the cargo bed. Five goblins plus Konaa the goblin cleric were the members of the goblin troop who had accompanied her all the way to E-Rantel. Chousuke the goblin rider was also with them, but he was keeping watch at a short distance.

“Ya got done half of what ya needed, but the thing the headman asked for

didn’t go so well—was that it, boss lady?”

“Yes. I asked the priest in the city, but no one said they would move to our village.”

“That’s weird. Some people have already moved to the village! Why aren’t there more? Could the priest or whoever be lying?”

“No.” She winced. “Frontier villages are dangerous, so people tend to avoid them. I was hoping for third sons or whatnot who ran off to the city after not inheriting any land…but I guess there just aren’t many people who want to come out to a place like this if they’re not under orders. Also, the folks who have moved to our village so far are people who already spent time in other frontier villages, so their situations are a little different.”

“So that’s just how it is?”

“That’s just how it is, but personally I’m a bit relieved.”

Building friendly relationships with goblins and living together alongside them in a village was probably difficult for the average person to accept. She knew people from the city would be against it for sure, and she wanted to avoid trouble.

Honestly, if Enri were asked to choose whether to accept new settlers from the city or the goblins, she’d choose the goblins.

Just then the wagon jolted, and there was some clinking and clanking from the cargo bed.

“Ah, sorry. Is everyone all right?” Enri looked over her shoulder.

The goblins were riding in the cargo bed, but in one corner was a bag, and every time the wagon bumped, it made metallic noises.

“Yeah, we’re fine, boss lady. Don’t worry about us. But hey, with this many arrowheads, we’ll be able to hunt up a storm.”

The goblin’s expression as he looked at the bag was cheerful. Seeing that, Enri forgot to answer and simply smiled.

They passed through the wheat fields and entered through the one open side of the gate.

Greeting the villagers along the way, Enri headed first to the meeting hall. She wanted to unload her cargo.

When she pulled up next to it, a goblin came out, perhaps in response to the noise.

“Ohh! Welcome back, boss lady! Glad to see yer all right.”

Enri grinned. The goblins had become family to her, to the point where she didn’t truly feel she had returned home until they greeted her.

“I’m home!”

“And is that yer cargo? We’ll put it in here if so.”

“That’s right, brother. Sorry, but give us a hand.”

“Aye-aye!”

The goblins all sprang into action and began efficiently unloading the wagon. The fact that the goblins were cleaning up perfectly without Enri providing any instruction made it clear that they had completely adapted to life in the village.

“Oh, boss lady, we’ll do the rest, so why don’t ya go see the boss man? He might be busy over with Arg healing the goblins…”

“Thank you, but first I have to go report to the headman.”

“Oh? Ah, sorry, guys. I’ll go with her just in case. There are the ogres and whatnot, after all.”

With that, Gokou hopped into the box seat next to Enri. The goblins who had been with her from E-Rantel eyed him jealously, but no one objected—probably because what he said was right.

“Okay, boss lady, let’s go!”

Enri smiled awkwardly. “Thanks! And I appreciate your help!” She thanked the goblins and pulled the wagon away.

“So did anything happen while I was gone?”

“Not much. We put up a building so the ogres can live inside the village. We had the stone golems carry the lumber. It’s not fancy, but we made a cabin for them. I wonder if we can do anything about how much they smell? Their stench

instantly permeated all the blankets we gave them!”

“Hmm… But wow, you did all that so fast.”

“It was thanks to the stone golems! We’ll have to thank the great caster.”

“And Lupusregina, too.”

“…Somehow, I just don’t want to thank Lupusregina, or rather, I don’t like her…”

Enri thought she misheard. She’d never heard Gokou gossip behind someone’s back before.

“How do I put it…? She’s scary. She’s always watching us, like a magical beast who could attack at any time… It seems like ya don’t feel that way, but…”

“Well, supposedly she’s a maid of Ainz Ooal Gown’s, so I don’t think she could be such a bad person.”

“…Well, that’s not very nice.”

Enri and Gokou both flinched. It was the voice of the woman they had just been talking about.

When they whirled around, there was the maid sitting very matter-of-factly in the cargo bed like she had been the other day.

“What’re we gonna do with this guy, En?”

“Uh, what do you mean?”

“B-before that, I want you to tell me how ya keep appearing like that.”

“Hmm? It’s simple. I come out of the sky, that’s all.”

“I don’t think so. We would notice even if ya were coming from above.”

“But I got lots of tricks I can use like turning invisible… I’m just doing my best to go unnoticed. How thoughtful of me!”

The goblin faced forward again, seemingly exasperated.

“B-but hey, it’s rare that you would visit two days in a row. What happened?”

Lupusregina squinted at Enri. *Even that face is cute when such a pretty lady makes it*, she thought without really meaning to.

“Well, whatever. I was just wonderin’ how things went. Like how’s the mini-goblin?”

“…He’s good. I think he’s probably at the headman’s house at the moment,” said Gokou.

“Why at the headman’s?”

“We saved a bunch of the goblins from his tribe, right? He should be there talking about finding a place for them to live.”

“Oh, right, he’s the chief’s son, huh? He must have some responsibility when it comes to the survivors. Well, I gotta hand it to him—and he’s just a kid!” She guffawed in a goofy way, but the accompanying smile was charming on a woman as beautiful as her. Enri gazed admiringly at her despite the fact that they were both girls.

“Oops, better keep an eye on the road!”

“O-oh, you’re right!”

Enri turned back around, blushing to her ears.

She stopped outside the headman’s house, and she and Gokou got off the wagon.

“Okay, I’ll take the horse back to the stable for ya. Don’t wanna get in your way. Hope you’ll tell me what ya guys talk about later, though!”

“Understood. I’m sorry to burden you, but thanks for taking the horse.”

Lupusregina responded to Enri’s bow with a “’Kay, ’kay” and drove the wagon away.

They knocked, announced their arrival to the voice inside, and opened the door.

Arg and the headman were sitting immediately inside, facing each other at a table.

“Oh, welcome back. Take a seat right there. How was the city?”

Enri sat next to Arg as instructed. He seemed to tense up for a moment, but she must have been imagining things.

“Uh, I’ll be going now. Thanks for all your help, Chief.”

For a moment, they didn’t know who he was talking to. Enri, Gokou, and the headman were in the room, so he should have been talking to the headman.

But Arg was looking straight at Enri. She peered intently into his eyes but couldn’t find any hint of a joke in his sincere look.

“Wait… What?!”

Why did he say that to me?

Arg bowed and left the headman’s house before Enri could figure it out.

“What?!? Wait—!”

“So, Enri, will you tell me what happened?”

“Huh? No, I mean…but…uh, yes. Okay.”

It bothered her, but she could get her question answered later. Her report was more important.

Having decided that, she gave a concise account to the headman of what had transpired in the city. The most critical item was probably that there hadn’t been anyone wanting to move there, but it was almost as if the headman had expected that. He didn’t look disappointed at all.

“I see. Well, that makes sense. Not many people want to move to a frontier settlement where monsters are likely to appear.” He gave voice to exactly what Enri had been thinking. Surely everyone in the village thought the same thing.

“Thanks for going.”

In response to his bow, she said, “It was no problem.” There had been various issues, but on the whole, it was a good experience.

“And then…” He looked at the goblin for a split second. “…There’s something I’d like to ask of you, Enri Emmott.”

“O-okay. What might that be? You’re being so formal, sir…”

“…I want you to take over my job.”

Her expression warped in such a way she seemed to be pulling a face.

“Ehhhhhhh?! What does that even mean? Huh? Is that what Arg meant…? What?!”

“I understand you’re confused…”

“I’m a bit more than confused! Are you going senile, sir? Why would you say that?”

“Senile? Now that’s just cruel. You seem a bit bewildered…and I understand that, but I want you to calm down and listen to me.”

“Calm down? How am I supposed to calm down?! Why would you want a village girl like me to take on such a huge responsibility?! Besides, what’s this ‘chief’ thing about?”

“Would you just relax?!”

He probably meant to sound commanding, but to Enri it only sounded loud. Still, she managed to regain some composure. Perhaps a corner of her mind had whispered to her that she wouldn’t understand what he was saying if she didn’t listen.

“I know you’re not following. But please listen calmly to what I have to say. Who is the central figure in the village right now?”

“That’s you, isn’t it? You’re the headman.”

“No. I think it’s safe to say that you are the center of the village at the moment. The goblins and the new ogres all acknowledge you as their leader as well, right?”

“That’s right. We think of the boss lady as the central figure.”

“And the goblins you saved, including Arg, all think of you as their chief, too.”

Enri curled her mouth into a frown. It’s true that was what the goblins thought. But what about the villagers who had been here since long before that? There was no way they would accept this.

“I pretty much know what you’re thinking. You think the villagers would be against it, right? I already checked with everyone. Last night I held a meeting with just the villagers to hear their opinion. The result was that everyone agrees to recognize you as the new headwoman.”

“But…why?!”

“…That’s what a huge shock the attack was, Enri. Everyone wants a strong leader.”

“What’s so strong about me?! I’m just a village girl!”

She had the feeling she’d put a little muscle on her arms, but she was still nothing but a peasant who couldn’t wield a weapon to save her life. If they wanted someone strong, one of the self-defense squad members like Brita would have been better.

“*Strong* doesn’t necessarily mean that individual is courageous. Being able to command goblins—isn’t that another kind of strength? The Baleare family also thinks you’re fit for the job.”

“Nfi!” Enri squawked like a chicken getting its neck wrung.

“Besides, I’m getting on in years. It wouldn’t be so strange for me to hand over the reins sometime soon.”

“What do you mean ‘getting on in years’? You’re not that old! I thought you were acting bizarrely grandfatherly—is this what that was about?”

It seemed a bit too early to declare someone in their midforties a senior citizen. Some would even call it the prime of their lives.

“Setting aside whether I seem grandfatherly or not, the village is changing. Now that the Wise King of the Forest is gone, there’s a higher likelihood that monsters will come out of the woods. At times like that, my making decisions based on our experience when times were safer won’t cut it.”

“Sir, I realize this is a rude thing to ask, but aren’t you just running away?”

“…I’ll be honest. I can’t deny that.”

The eyes that met Enri’s gaze were those of a man baring his heart.

“I still think about that horrific day, when villagers who were like family to me were killed… I knew your parents well. If we hadn’t been living idly but had built a sturdy wall like we have now, if we had been more on guard, maybe things wouldn’t have ended so badly… Maybe we could have bought the time until Sir Gown arrived to save us.”

Enri felt it would have still been difficult. Survivors who moved to Carne originally came from other villages that the knights had razed. It was possible the walls surrounding their homes hadn't been as solid as the one protecting Carne now, but regardless, they had still been attacked and slaughtered. Even so, she did agree that if they could have bought even a little bit of time, they could have saved more lives.

"The old way of thinking is no good. We need to create a new system and keep this village safe with our own hands. The only ones who can do that are… the open-minded young people. And of them, it has to be someone with power."

The headman finished saying his piece. He gazed at Enri with a gentle expression.

Enri mulled over his words and gave it serious thought. The reason she refused at first was because the responsibility was so great. She couldn't be responsible for the villagers' lives if they were attacked again. *But isn't that just running away, like what I accused him of doing earlier?*

"I don't know if I can do such a big job."

"That's only natural. You'll have me to assist with administrative duties and the goblins supporting you for security issues, but it's still terrifying to be the one making the final decision."

"What about a system of representation where all the villagers participate?"

"I did consider that, but opinions tend to diverge more sharply the more important an issue is. We'd end up getting nowhere. I really do think that if we don't have someone leading the way, we won't even be able to come to a consensus on things we already agree on."

"What if we had one system for peaceful times and one system for emergencies?"

"That won't work. We can't cultivate leaders that way. It's precisely because you show leadership during times of peace that you can put people to work efficiently during emergencies—they acknowledge your authority." The headman's conviction was strong, and his argument was sound.

With a distressed look on her face, Enri asked the only question she had left. "…When should I let you know by?"

"I won't say you have to tell me now. Take your time and think it over."

"Yes, sir."

With that, Enri stood from her seat.

•

As they left the headman's house, Enri turned around to look at Gokou. "Hey, I want to think things over for a bit, so do you mind giving me some time to myself?"

"Ya got it, boss lady. Take yer time. We're on yer side, ya know. Please tell us if ya ever need anything."

"Yes, I will. Thanks."

After watching Gokou go, she headed for her own house.

Can I do the headman's job?

Personally, she felt it was out of the question.

It was possible a time would come when she would have to give unimaginable orders, like sacrificing a minority to save the majority.

I wouldn't be able to do that…

The villagers all think too highly of me. For starters, everyone valued her for the goblins, but it wasn't as if she had negotiated to get them on the village's side. They just came out of the horn given to her by the great caster Ainz Ooal Gown.

And the item came only after the good fortune of being saved…

Wait. I did get saved first, right? Sir Gown was wearing a mask and he…hmm? He was wearing a mask, right?

She suddenly felt like her memory of those events was fuzzy, but it was probably because the whole situation was so extreme and chaotic.

She shook her head and cleared her mind of those doubts.

Anyhow…

If someone else had received the horn, the proposal of being the next head of the village would have gone to that person, not her. In other words, it had nothing to do with Enri's ability; the wheel of fortune simply spun in her favor.

I should talk to someone…

The first person she thought of was Nfirea. She had the feeling that since he used to live in the big city and had met lots of different kinds of people, he would be able to tell if she was right for the position or not. Plus, he knew a lot of things. She could probably get a precise answer from him.

But the headman had told her that the Baleare family—which included Nfirea—was in favor. So there was a good chance that if she asked him, he would simply tell her she should be headwoman.

This is no good… I can't ask anyone from the village. That would mean Arg or the ogres, but Arg was calling me chief so he's out, and the ogres don't seem too smart…

As Enri was furrowing her brow, a bright voice called out to her. "Yo. Looks like you're done talkin'. Hmm? What a serious face. Something botherin' ya?"

The voice hit her like a bolt of lightning. *Right. Someone from outside the village.* Here was a neutral third party who could calmly assess the situation.

Enri ran over to Lupusregina at full speed. "Lupusregina!" She clutched the surprised woman's shoulders.

"What? What? What's wrong?! I got butterflies in my stomach, but spare me the confession. I'm not into girls! Ahh, stop! Don't rape me!"

"Wh-whoa, hold on!" Enri released her shoulders and tried to cover her mouth.

Lupusregina nimbly dodged her and grinned. "Nah, sorry. Anyhow, it seems you're a little riled up, so maybe just calm down a bit. I was only jokin'."

"That's a horrible joke…"

Enri's shoulders slumped. But she recovered immediately. Lupusregina usually disappeared as suddenly as she appeared, so if Enri didn't ask her now, the maid might be gone before another chance came. "Please listen and tell me

what I should do!”

“I dunno what this is about, but it’d be great if you could tell me while we walk. I don’t want the villagers givin’ us weird looks.”

Enri blushed. Lupusregina had a point. But… “Then don’t scream about rape…”

“Tee-hee!” Lupusregina made a cute face with her tongue sticking out.

“Arrrgh, Lupusregina!”

“Okay, okay, let’s go. Let’s go!”

Without waiting for a reply, Lupusregina set off, and Enri followed her.

“Now, now, tell big sister Lupusregina what’s on your mind. I can teach ya everything from sex tips to how to trick boys!”

“Really? You’re so mature…”

To Enri, who had no experience in such matters, Lupusregina seemed extremely experienced. Although nothing had changed, the maid suddenly appeared more grown-up.

“Eh-heh! I may not look it, but I’ve been around, ya know.”

“Huh?”

Been around? As she wondered what that could mean, Lupusregina gestured at her to bring on the questions. For the time being, she set aside the ones that didn’t matter and told her about what happened at the headman’s house.

“So what should I do?”

“Huh? Like I know!”

That was all she said.

“What? But, Lupusregina, you said I could talk to you.”

“Sure, but that didn’t mean I would give ya a proper reply… Well, listen. First, if you only take the job because someone is pushin’ ya, you’ll regret it, so definitely don’t do that. You should keep thinking till ya have an answer that makes sense.”

Lupusregina's usual innocence had faded, giving way to alluring beauty. Normally her eyes were round, but now they tapered thin. Her faint smile gave Enri shivers.

"That's just my opinion—I won't tell ya what to do. Break it down in your own head. One thing we can say is that no matter who becomes headman, they'll make a lot of mistakes. As far as I know, there's only about forty-one people who can do everything perfectly. So it's stupid to worry about failure. And if ya take a step back and really think about it, no one in this village is more fit for the job than you."

"Why do you think that?"

"Go ask the goblins what they'll do if a monster they deem unbeatable attacks the village—both if you're the headwoman and if you're not."

Lupusregina quietly changed back to her normal cheerful expression.

"Well, that was no fun! Agh, I'm not into this scenario. Mannn. It'd be more fun if instead of you bein' headwoman, the village got hit by a big, fat tragedy!"

"What?"

"Heh-heh." Lupusregina patted Enri on the shoulder. "I think you should be headwoman. As for everything else…you should ask the boy over there…" As she took her hand off Enri's shoulder, she twirled around once. It was a light movement, as if friction didn't affect her. "Later, then!"

Lupusregina walked away while waving. Nfirea and Nemu were standing in that direction holding hands. She patted Nfirea on the shoulder. As if that had poured energy into them, the pair started to move.

"Welcome back, Enri!" Nemu must have been incredibly anxious, because she raced toward her at full speed.

For a moment, Enri worried she would be bowled over, but she managed to avoid it by bringing out all the strength in her leg muscles.

"You're back sooner than I expected, Enri. You didn't stay the night?"

"Hi to both of you. No, I didn't. I camped on the way back."

"Hmm… I'm glad you didn't get attacked by monsters. I can't really support

that choice, though. The goblins may be strong, but there are stronger monsters out there. We live on the plains, so you don't get too many out here, but still."

"Enri, don't do anything dangerous!" Nemu grabbed her shirt as if to say she would never let her go again.

Enri was the only living family her little sister had left. *My life doesn't belong to only me.* It seemed like she had briefly forgotten that.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry."

Enri gently petted Nemu's head.

"Okay! I forgive you!" Nemu looked up at her and smiled.

"Thanks. Were you a good girl while I was gone? You didn't make too much trouble for Nfi, did you?"

"Aw, c'mon, sis! I'm not a baby anymore! Right, Nfi?"

"Ah-ha-ha. I had to take care of the members of Arg's tribe, so I couldn't watch her the whole time, but I think she was good!"

"Agh, you're treating me like a kid, too, Nfi? Anyway, more importantly, Enri, Nfi stinks!"

"Nemu! It's the smell of herbs, isn't it? Didn't you say your hands smelled after you crushed them?"

"Is the smell that makes your eyes sting from the herbs?"

"…Well, there are other things, too, like alchemical items I use as an apothecary. But, Nemu, don't make it sound like I smell bad…"

"But you do!"

His face froze.

"Well, it's just that the odor clings to your clothes. I think you'd be fine if you changed out of your work clothes…" Enri hurried to explain what Nemu meant, and Nfirea's face softened a bit.

"I don't really have other clothes… In E-Rantel, I pretty much just wore this."

“Then should I make you some?”

“Huh? You can make clothes?”

“What do you take me for, Nfi? Of course I can make simple clothes.”

“Oh. I’ve always bought mine so it seems amazing that you can just make your own.”

“Well, thanks, but anyone in the village… Nemu, we should start practicing.”

“Okayyy!”

“All right. Will you go on home ahead of me? I want to talk to Nfi about something.”

Nemu put a hand to her mouth, and her eyes sparkled. “Okay! Got it! I’ll go home now! Good luck, Nfi!” She dashed excitedly toward the house with a wave.

“She sure listened well. I wonder if she’s hiding something,” Enri murmured as she watched Nemu go.

“Nah, I doubt it… More importantly! What did you want to talk about? Of course, I have an idea, since I participated in the village meeting yesterday…”

“Then this will be quick.” Enri skipped needless explanation and told him what had happened at the headman’s house.

But not only that. She told him about her worries and what Lupusregina had said—everything.

After listening to the end, Nfirea looked her square in the eye and said, “You should do what you think is best; I’ll support you either way…is the kind of canned reply I don’t want to give. I want you to do it.”

“Why? I’m—”

“You’re *not* just a village girl. You’re Enri Emmott, leader of the goblins. You’re thinking that the goblins aren’t your power. But in the end, they are. I’ll answer the question Lupusregina told you to ask the goblins. In an emergency, if you’re not the headwoman, they’ll carry you off and escape before their fighting power is too depleted.”

“They wouldn’t do that!”

“…They’ll say that while you’re safe, but if the time came, they would. They told me so.”

“No way…”

Enri stared at Nfirea in disbelief. She thought he had to be lying, but she couldn’t detect so much as a hint of exaggeration.

“The most important thing to them isn’t the village but you. But if you’re the headwoman, then the village belongs to you, so they’ll stay here and fight as long as they can. That’s the only thing that changes, but it does make a difference. By the way, they told me to take your sister and follow them in case that did happen. Enri…you can confirm with them if you want, but don’t tell them you heard anything from me.”

“I’m not going to ask them,” she declared.

Nfirea parted his bangs and looked at her with wide eyes. “Are you sure? There’s always the possibility that I’m ly—”

“No, there isn’t. You wouldn’t lie to me. I believe you. But I guess that’s just how important a summoner is, huh?”

“I think it must be partly because it’s you. You buy weapons for them and stuff, right? Seems only natural that they would place the highest importance on such a kind master. This isn’t the nicest way to put it, but the villagers never gave the goblins anything—they think of them as monsters you summoned. It’s only natural to pick the person who sees them as individuals over the people who don’t, right?”

Of course, the villagers didn’t necessarily think of them that way, but when she thought back, she had never seen any of them showing their gratitude in a concrete way.

“…But sometimes the villagers treat them to lunch.”

“That’s a thank-you to you. They’re just saying, ‘We’ll handle the lunch cost and prep time.’ Have you ever seen any of the villagers call a goblin by their name?”

She hadn't. She thought it was because they just couldn't tell them apart, but maybe they never even felt like trying.

When she thought that, an indescribable loneliness came over her.

"Oh…"

But the forlorn feeling wasn't the only thing in her voice. There was a determined gleam in her eyes, like she had made up her mind.

"Yeah… Personally, I think you'd be a great headwoman. And if you become headwoman, the goblins' situation will change pretty quickly."

"…You'll all help me, right?"

"Of course. It's more like there's no one who wouldn't help you!"

"Okay. Then I'm going to pay the headman a visit. When you've made up your mind, it's better to act right away!"

Nfirea laughed at her declaration. It was a soft, bubbly laugh that showed he understood that she wanted encouragement.

"Okay! Get going, Enri!"

She turned on her heel with an "Mm-hmm" and took a step down the path to being the new head of Carne.

•

Watching the village intently from the sky, Lupusregina saw people clustering in the square. Enri went out in front of everyone and said something, but it was nearly impossible at this distance to pick up her voice.

Perhaps she had finished talking—the villagers began to clap.

"Ha-haaa. So that's how it turned out. She did it. This is *great*. Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

"—What are you having so much fun with?"

Lupusregina turned just her head to face the voice behind her. "Oh, if it isn't Yuri. Are you flying with a magic item?"

"Yes, by the power of a magic item Lord Ainz lent me. What's so…? This is Carne. You got scolded over it, right?"

“That’s right. But things just got really interestin’.”

“What things?”

“There’s a new leader in the village now… For the humans here, that means new history, a potential for new beginnings. But imagine the looks on their faces if, just at their grandest moment, the village got attacked and everything burned up!”

A crack appeared in her beauty, and anyone who saw it would have said that something evil or horrible was flowing from it.

“I thought you were getting along with the villagers…”

“Yeah, we get along. I just get so excited when I think about all my human pals getting crushed like bugs.”

“So you’re a total sadist, hmm? Right up there with Solution. Why are you all like that? Shizu is the only saving grace—honestly. Although Entoma isn’t so bad, either…”

Lupusregina laughed at her leader’s complaints and said, “Oh, village, won’t you fall for me?”

4

“Urrrgh, I’m so tired.”

Enri tossed the little chalkboard she was holding onto the table and flopped over. Hearing some quiet laughter, she turned just her head to see her teacher, Nfirea, smiling at her as she had guessed.

“Nice work, Enri.”

“I did work—so hard! I’m not good at using my head…”

“But you have to be able to do simple reading, writing, and arithmetic.”

Enri groaned.

She’d been told there were minimum education requirements for becoming

headwoman, so she was getting private lessons from Nfirea, but her head felt like it was going to burst.

“Why are there so many letters? Someone came up with this system just to torture meeee…”

“Don’t say that. You can write your name now, right? And Nemu’s?”

“Yeah, I’m a little happy about that… I don’t suppose that much is good enough, is it?”

“Sorry! Unfortunately, you’re still at the most basic of basics. I mean, it’s only been five days since you started studying, so we haven’t gotten to any of the important stuff yet.”

Enri looked like someone who couldn’t believe what she had just heard.

“Ohh, don’t make that face. Once you get the simple stuff down, it’s just application. So this actually is pretty important, yeah.”

“…Wahh.”

“You do seem tired, though. Shall we call it quits for today?”

Enri stood as if she’d been waiting for the word. “Yes! Got an early day tomorrow! Good thinking, Nfi!”

With a wry grin, Nfirea erased the squiggly worm letters off the chalkboard. “Okay, have a nice rest. We’ll start studying at the same time tomorrow.”

“I’m really happy that you’re willing to take time away from experimenting to help me, but I can’t do anything to thank you…”

“Yes, yes. That’s how it goes. Someone once told me that the teachers hated by their students are better than the ones who get thanked.”

“That’s a lie! That’s definitely a lie!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Okay, I need to get going. Good night, Enri.”

“Okay, good night, Nfi. You should go home and sleep, not experiment.”

Acknowledging her remark with a smile, he left through the front door. After watching his magic light recede for a little while, she went back inside, and the dark house suddenly felt terribly lonely.

“Ahh, I’m tired.”

She sluggishly took off her clothes and got into bed. They had been pretty noisy, but next to her, her sister was making adorable snoozing noises. Enri closed her eyes in peace.

She was sure she would fall asleep right away because she had worked her brain so hard, and she was right. Perhaps only a few seconds after she closed her eyes, she was out.

How long had it been since she had fallen asleep? Some far-off noise awakened her from her light sleep.

Three knocks. Then a little while later, another three knocks.

When she realized what that pattern meant, her eyes popped open in the darkness. Her extraordinarily lucid brain recognized that she was in her own house, and she jumped up. Her sister jumped up at the same time.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

She sounded scared but not to the point where she couldn’t function.

“Get ready now!”

“Okay!”

Turning on the light would be a waste of time, so they simply started preparing to run.

As the ringing of the bell came to them on the wind, they got their things together in an extremely short amount of time—the result of practicing over and over, as well as a product of the fear that had stuck with them from the previous attack. Probably Arg’s story planted the possibility in their minds, too.

“Nemu! You run straight to the meeting hall! I’ll be there as soon as I finish my duties!”

Without waiting for a reply, she grabbed her sister’s hand and flew out the door of their house.

The bell still making a racket signaled an emergency. It meant that attackers

had been spotted.

She couldn't completely abandon the hope that this was just another drill, but the agitation in the air denied it. It was the same atmosphere as when the knights had attacked.

When they neared the meeting hall, Enri gave Nemu a push. "Now go!"

Nemu made a small reply without turning around and ran as fast as she could.

Enri felt the urge to go after her, to at least see that she made it into the hall safely.

But at the meeting several days ago, she had become headwoman, so she had to act with the entire village in mind now.

She wished this would have happened before she'd assumed the position or long after…

"It's almost like some evil god is watching us." Her inner thoughts spilled out. This really was the worst timing.

"Boss lady!" A goblin ran toward her.

"What is it? What happened?"

"We spotted some monsters on the edge of the forest. They might attack the village."

"Understood. I'll follow you!"

Led by the goblin, Enri raced toward the main gate. Just behind it was the fence they set up only at night, and Enri saw that the goblins were all present. Equipped with the new weapons and gear she'd bought for them, they looked stalwart—like true veteran warriors.

As they approached, Enri could tell by the stench on the wind that the ogres were there, too. They had their brand-new, brutal-looking clubs firmly in hand.

At about the same time Enri arrived, the self-defense squad members, along with Brita and Nfirea, all gathered from around the village. Arg and two of the goblins from his village who had managed to make a psychological recovery came, too.

“Is this everyone? How about Lizzy? Is she coming later?”

Nfirea’s grandmother Lizzy was a fairly powerful caster. It wouldn’t have been at all strange to have her help defend the main gate.

“No, she’s not coming. I had her go to the meeting hall. That place is important, too.”

The villagers nodded with conviction. Their families were gathered in the meeting hall. They needed to fortify those defenses, as well.

“I had members who aren’t great with bows go there. If you have any available hands, I’d like some of you to go as well, just to be safe, but what do you think?”

“That’s not happening.” Jugemu shot down Brita’s request with zero hesitation.

The villagers who lived with the goblins knew there was no malice in his reply. Enri swallowed tensely and the goblin leader continued.

“There are a lot of monsters. Not only ogres, but lots of different kinds. It’s too dangerous to split up the force.”

“We don’t have an accurate count?”

“Brita, they’re in the woods, so we don’t have an accurate count. Keeping that in mind…our current count is at seven ogres, a few giant snakes, a couple wargs, creatures that resemble barghests, and something huge at the rear…”

“Wargs, snakes, and ogres working together? Is there a druid behind them?”

A warg was a magical beast that for all appearances looked like an upsize wolf. They were smarter than wolves, and encountering one in the woods meant a bad time.

“There’s a good chance. If they have a caster, this’ll get tricky—they’ll have a ranged attack method, too. Should we commit our full force? If so, I’ll go call Grandma.”

“I’m…not sure that’s a good idea, boss man. The meeting hall is the sturdiest building in the village. It was made that way so people could hole up in there if it came to it—it’s the village’s citadel, so to speak. It’s far better if we have

someone there to protect it.”

“…So we might have to retreat? Where should I position myself?”

“Lead the self-defense squad, Brita. I want ya to explain my orders to them in an easy-to-understand way and take other actions as appropriate.”

“So we’ll be the second line of defense against the invaders? First will be the archers, and then we’ll be behind the barricade not really aiming but just thrusting our spears?”

“Yeah, do that. But wargs and barghests are quick. If we leave them be, they’ll cause a lot of damage, so aim for them first. And if there’s a druid, can ya all pull back?”

“I have no objections, but will you have enough manpower if the self-defense squad withdraws?”

“…If we’re lucky, it’ll work out somehow.”

“I see… I’ll make sure everyone is ready. Can you prioritize taking out the druids or whatever has a ranged attack so we don’t get hit in the rear? Man, I used to be an adventurer, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen villagers this brave… Well, I’ve been thinking that ever since I came here and saw them doing archery drills…”

“It’s because they were attacked once… They hated how powerless they were.” Enri had been listening in silence, but now she chimed in to speak for all the members of the self-defense squad.

And in reality, no one ran away, even if they were pale in the face. They had to make a stand. They had to defend their village. Most importantly, their loved ones were behind them.

“By the way, do we think that, since there are so many of them, it might be some creature who can muster a force, like the Giant of the East or the Magical Serpent of the West?”

“We can’t say for sure that it’s not.” Jugemu answered Brita’s question in a low voice.

If that was the case, then it was possible that it was Arg and his tribe who

drew in the monsters. Maybe that's why he had answered so quietly—so the self-defense squad didn't get upset at Arg and his tribe.

They had already told the villagers that the Giant of the East and the Magical Serpent of the West existed and that those two were each as strong as the Wise King of the Forest.

They only saw it once the Dark Warrior had captured it, but the immensely powerful magical beast made quite an impression on the villagers. If they thought they might have to confront a monster equally strong, against which they had no chance of winning, they might get frightened.

"The Magical Serpent of the West uses some kind of magic, right? That could be hairy," Brita grumbled and Nfirea agreed with her.

"Monsters have less than ten kinds of magic they can use racially, but it can get tricky when you're dealing with the type that can acquire spells, because of how diverse their repertoire gets. There might be something they can use to get over the wall…"

"I'm glad you and the goblins can use magic, but when the enemy can, it feels like they're cheating," Enri whined and the villagers winced.

"…Don't tell Sir Gown I said that."

At that, many of the villagers cracked a smile.

Maybe they're a little calmer now, thought Enri. Too relaxed was no good, but being too nervous would prevent them from fighting with their usual strength. The current atmosphere seemed just right.

"Don't worry, guys. All ya have to do is shoot yer bows from the rear. We'll be the front line."

The goblins had trained the self-defense squad with that purpose in mind, so that was the most appropriate position for them.

It was extremely difficult for such a small village to procure enough swords and shields for everyone, so they didn't have enough gear to properly equip the self-defense squad for fighting on the front line. In the first place, they may have been called the self-defense squad, but they were still just volunteers from

the village. Their members had some degree of muscle from their habitual use of hoes and spades, but that didn't make them skilled with a weapon. Only people with ludicrous potential could become strong enough to defeat monsters while training only during their spare time between farming tasks.

Having concluded for the above reasons that they couldn't train the villagers up to the level necessary to fight on the front line, the goblins taught them how to use bows and arrows so they could act as the rear guard.

Although their skills had improved and they could hit a target with decent accuracy, they didn't have the strength to draw powerful bows that conveyed superior penetrating ability, so they probably wouldn't be able to deal damage to monsters with thick hides. Still, if they were lucky, an arrow from a volley might strike a weak point.

"All right, line up so that ya can aim for the area right on the other side of the gate, just like we practiced. Arg, yer guys' job starts after the gate gets broken down. We'll have ya line up with the self-defense squad members and use spears. Consider anything Brita says an order from the boss lady herself and obey!"

"Okay! Leave it to me!"

"That's the spirit. No running away, ya hear me? Fight for yer life!"

"Of course! I owe her my life! I don't even mind taking the farthest position out front with the ogres!"

"Stupid kid! If we left it all to ya, the enemy would break through right away! Save the heroics for when yer stronger!"

Getting snapped at by Jugemu seemed to frustrate Arg, but the self-defense squad comforted him.

Enri was relieved—first, that the villagers didn't think Arg drew the monsters, and second, that they seemed to be accepting him and the others in his tribe.

They were the most recent outsiders to come to the village. They weren't treated cruelly or avoided, but neither had the wall between them completely disappeared. But seeing them like this, it seemed like in the near future—perhaps once they got through this battle together—there would be no chasm

between them. Ironically, combat was the best way to strengthen their bonds.

It was precisely because Arg felt that wall directly that his passion to fight was so strong. He was aiming to improve his group's standing by contributing to the village. Even in human society, the ones who took initiative and shed blood were respected. Considering that the position in that society of all their tribe mates hinged on their performance in this battle, the determination of Arg and his comrades was understandable.

"Nfi, I have a favor to ask you." Enri moved next to him and whispered in his ear.

"Ooh—er, could you back up a bit for a second? Mm-hmm, okay. Got it. In that case… There's something I want your group to do, Arg. I'm going to give you these alchemical items, so I want you to put them to good use."

Nfirea opened his bag and showed them a bunch of bottles and paper packages.

"Throw them at the enemy. You won't be able to hit them from too far away, so it'll only be useful in medium-range combat, but… Can you do that?"

"Leave it to us! We got this!"

As if he had been waiting for Arg to take the bag, the voice of a goblin in the watchtower sounded. "Those guys out there are on the move! No doubt about it. They're headed for the village!"

If they strained their ears, they could hear the savage growls of various monsters on the wind.

"Okay, self-defense squad, get ready! Be careful, boss lady! You, too, boss man!"

"Yep! Got it. Please don't let anyone die!"

"You can count on me! Let's go, Enri."

Enri ran off with Nfirea as an escort. They were going to make a round of all the houses to make sure there were no villagers who hadn't been warned about the situation.

After seeing off Enri, the goblins transitioned into battle mode.

“First, self-defense squad members, ple— Get into position. Make sure the enemy is in range!”

Naturally, they couldn’t aim directly through the wall at the monsters on the other side. To hit a target they couldn’t see would require an indirect shot, but these novices couldn’t manage something so complicated. It would have taken too long to train them to that level, so the goblin instructors decided to have them specialize in one thing—mastering a sense for how to land arrows right on the other side of the gate. In other words, the goblins had the volunteers practice figuring out how much strength to use at a specific angle to draw their bows in a way that would drop arrows in the correct spot. It was an exercise that wouldn’t be useful anywhere but that one location, but it was probably fairly efficient training, since it allowed them to conduct one-sided attacks if they could expect enemies to come to break down the gate.

The cries of the monsters drew nearer, and a booming shock echoed through the gate. The adjacent walls vibrated.

“Okay! Targets are in range! Suppress them!”

“Loose!”

In response to Jugemu’s shout, two goblin archers up in the watchtower—Shuuringan and Guurindai—began loosing their shots. As long as they had a clear shot, the goblins with “archer” in their name wouldn’t miss. Screams of pain went up from the other side of the gate.

The self-defense squad, engulfed in the virtually rumbling combat atmosphere, trembled in fear and anxiety.

Then Jugemu shouted, “Self-defense squad members shouldn’t be loosing their arrows yet! Bows down till I give the order!”

The reason they weren’t attacking even though enemies were in the range they had practiced for could be understood by anyone who saw the watchtower in the next instant.

Someone was lobbing rocks at it from over the wall. Each one was larger than a human head.

Most of them missed, but bad luck had it that one did hit, and the whole

tower swayed.

“We’ve got stone lobbers! They seem to have more shots!”

“Each one has about three stones, so we can expect around twenty-one—Whoa!”

Another stone connected and broke a plank in the upper part of the watchtower.

If the self-defense squad attacked, the stones would probably go flying at them, too. Granted, the chance of receiving a direct hit was extremely slim, since they were in a position that shielded them from the enemy’s line of sight. But if they were unlucky, one impact would definitely be enough to kill any one of them. Even a stone retaining its momentum and rolling through their lines could cause serious injuries.

The battle looked like it would be a long one. Choosing not to have the self-defense squad fight was the safe, conservative strategy, but it was also a sign of Jugemu’s determination to not let anyone die.

“You thought if you threw stones we’d get scared and stop shooting? You thought wrong!” Guurindai shouted and bravely aimed his bow again amid the flying stones. All the self-defense squad members’ eyes were pinned on him as he fearlessly retaliated despite the serious risk of injury he faced.

But Jugemu wasn’t watching that. He scanned the battlefield and spotted a new enemy. “Kyuumei! Get the snake that’s climbin’ up the left-hand wall! You can take him on yer own, right?”

“No problem, Leader. Leave it to me!”

Kyuumei, who had been on standby in the rear, raced on his wolf over to where the snake was now visible coming over the wall.

“Fifteen! Sixteen! Hang in there a little longer, you two!” shouted Jugemu.

They didn’t even need to be told. The prowess of the pair of archers standing in the now-leaning watchtower remained as sharp as ever. If they had abandoned the tower, the position would have crumbled sooner, but their hard work drew the lobbed stones in its direction, rendering them pointless. When

Jugemu looked left, Kyuumei was prevailing in his fight with the snake.

Once the half-destroyed watchtower began leaning so badly that Shuuringan and Guurindai couldn't hold out any longer, they jumped down. The pair didn't stop on impact but rolled across the ground.

"Self-defense squad, prepare to loose!"

The squad raised their bows.

"Deep breaths! In! Out! In! Draw!"

The same shouts as usual gave the self-defense squad the illusion, for just a moment, that this was a drill. They could forget the screaming creaks of the wood and move almost identically to the way they did during practice.

"Loose!"

Fourteen arrows flew neatly through the air, curving in identical arcs. They disappeared over the wall, and the screams of monsters could be heard.

Arg whispered an impressed "Amazing," but Jugemu didn't have time to pay attention to him.

"Prepare yer second shot! Don't rush! Deep breaths! In! Out! In! Draw!"

Shuuringan and Guurindai, who had received healing magic, lined up alongside the self-defense squad.

"Loose!"

Another fourteen arrows flew. And two more a beat later. A howl of rage went up again, and the shrieking of the gate grew even louder. It seemed the enemies' anger and pain were being converted into power.

"Fall back! Change gear!"

All at once the self-defense squad moved behind the fence located inside the main gate. The sturdy barrier would block the path of anyone who penetrated the first defense. It was set up in an L shape, and it funneled the enemies straight toward the waiting ogres and the goblins under Jugemu. For the invaders, it was after they broke through the gate that things would become truly deadly.

“Any casters should get out of the direct line of fire!”

“Leader!”

“What is it, Arg?”

“In the items from boss man, there’s an adhesive. Where should I spread it?”

“Won’t it get sucked up by the dirt?!”

“He said it will but that ya can just assume it’ll last for a short amount of time!”

“I see. Then find an opening to throw it at the base of the blocked gate!”

Arg took his tribe mates and moved out with a curt “Understood.” As they prepared, the rider returned from defeating the snake. The cleric rushed over and healed his wounds.

With a *ker-blam*, one side of the gate burst open. The first to surge in were the enemy ogres.

“Heh-heh, ya brainless morons.” Jugemu sneered. *Ya made a big mistake.*

The way that only one door broke was actually part of the village’s plan. If one side broke, the enemy would probably just charge in rather than try to break the other side, especially if they were being shot at. But the opening was narrow, so they couldn’t all enter at once, leaving quite a few stuck with nowhere to go. Meanwhile the village had soldiers stationed along the L fence and could attack all at once.

“Stay hi to our deadly battle formation!”

The ally ogres had an advantage in their fistfights with the enemy ogres due to their slightly better gear, and the self-defense squad supported them with spears. Volleys from the archers and the mage, as well as alchemical items from Arg, flew toward the ogres who were trying to break down the inner fence. Other beasts were looking for gaps to jump into the fray, but the goblins held them at bay.

The villagers had a definite advantage. The riders were on reserve in the rear. If the enemy didn’t have any casters, victory was certain. But then—

“What’s that?!” There was dread in Jugemu’s stifled shout. “Is that a troll?”

A giant, clearly different from an ogre but just as big, was approaching with peculiar, awkward movements. In its hands it clutched a huge sword with a strange aura about it.

Did the slimy liquid running from the groove down the center of the blade to its edge have magical power?

“Is this their boss…? Could it be…the Giant of the East?”

Once it crossed his mind, it made sense. Its tough flesh was trained like steel, and while it resembled trolls Jugemu had seen, it also looked like something completely different. He could understand how it would be on par with the magical beast he’d once seen.

Even one troll was formidable enough that they would have to throw everyone they had at it. How hard of a fight would they have against a monster that seemed even stronger?

“Then…”

Jugemu wondered what to do.

They had no chance of winning. The best move would be to protect Enri and run. She would be completely opposed to it, but they would have to use force if it came down to that.

“…No, that’s not our best move. It’s our worst move and our last resort,” he spat. “…Men, we’re going to die. Abandon any comfy ideas like falling back. We’re going to sear our bravery into the eyes of everyone here!”

A battle cry full of the goblins’ fighting spirit went up, and for a moment, the enemies in the area seemed overwhelmed and froze.

“Let’s go! Show them yer power as one of boss lady Enri’s followers!”

•

Enri breathed a sigh of relief; she and Nfirea had been around the village once but found no one. Just then she could make out the sound of something breaking from the direction of the main gate. Then she heard a chorus of screams and a heavy bass sound that made her guts vibrate.

The monsters must have broken down the gate. The battle must have started. Enri swallowed the bile that threatened to come up. A bitter taste spread from her throat through her mouth, but she ignored it and looked at Nfirea.

“Nfi. We should be at the gate, too.”

“I understand, but don’t you think it would be better for you to go reassure the people in the meeting hall?” His words contained the nuance *so you won’t be in the way*.

Enri had trained with a bow, but at the point the gate was broken down, they should have already transitioned to fighting with spears. Even if she went now, there honestly wasn’t much she could do.

“I can’t do that. I was chosen as headwoman because I can command the goblins, because I’m powerful. It’s probably the right move to withdraw, but at least this time, I just can’t.”

She had to show them, at least once, that she could fight out in front.

Perhaps acknowledging the strength in her eyes, Nfirea parted his bangs to reveal a serious expression and agreed. “Yeah, you’re right. Got it. I’ll protect you.”

At the sight of the brave, earnest look on his face, not at all characteristic of her longtime friend, Enri felt her heart do something unfamiliar.

“Hmm? What is it, Enri? I may not be as magnificent as Sir Gown, but I won’t die before you.”

“…Don’t say ‘die.’”

“Oh, sorry… Umm…umm…”

Recognizing his usual inability to come up with something to say, Enri smiled.

“Let’s go, Nfi!”

“Oh, uh, yeah! Let’s. We don’t have time to stand around talking.”

The two of them took off running for the main gate. They had come all the way to the back gate, so even if they sprinted at full speed, it would still take some time to get there. If they arrived out of breath, they wouldn’t be able to

fight right away and would only be in the way in a clash, so they moved at a pace that saved a bit of energy.

But they ended up running for only a few seconds.

An awful noise froze them in their tracks.

When they turned around, something was partially visible at the top of the back gate.

The shapes were huge, and strange, and so unlike what a human's looked like that, for a moment, Enri and Nfirea couldn't figure out what they were staring at, but they were fingers. A hand had grabbed the top of the thirteen-foot gate.

Shocked like they'd been punched in the head, the pair scrambled into the shadow of a house.

"What is that thing? A giant?"

"I don't know! B—" Without finishing, Nfirea gasped, mouth agape.

Enri quickly looked to the back gate and made exactly the same expression.

Something was slowly climbing over, and there was no way it was human.

"That's not a troll, is it?"

At Nfirea's breathless question, Enri took a hard look at the monster.

"That?"

"It's the first time I'm seeing one, but it looks just like the stories I've heard. If it's really a troll, we're in trouble… Adventurers have to be at least gold rank to fight them. Honestly, it might be tough for Jugemu and the goblins."

So it was stronger than the strongest person in the village. Enri felt all the blood drain out of her face.

The troll began looking around the area, snorting.

Enri was pulled farther into the shadows. Then a hand went over her mouth, and she heard a low voice whispering in her ear.

"Enri, trolls have good noses. Right now, we're downwind, so I think we're fine, but it's too soon to relax. We should try to get away from here…and meet

up with the goblins.”

Enri replied into Nfirea’s ear. “No, Nfi! If this thing goes to the front gate now, they’ll be pincered and everyone will die!”

“Ah, you might be right. But what can we—?”

“We’re the only ones here, so we have to stop it.”

From a gap in Nfirea’s bangs, his eyes said he thought she was crazy. And Enri knew what she was saying sounded outrageous, but there was no other way.

“We don’t have to defeat or kill it. We just have to buy some time. Nfi, help me out.”

“How are we going to buy time? You mean we try to keep it here? I could fight it, but…I doubt I would survive even a single hit.” There was a quiet resolve in his voice.

In response, Enri told him her plan to trick the troll. “I have an idea. First, let’s make an ogre.”

The troll looked at the wooden houses for a little while and then began to move.

Every dwelling had the mellow scent of humans, but he knew it was only lingering traces. Confirming there were no other nearby smells, he started walking in the direction of the fighting clamor. The sounds of his brother’s battle made saliva pool in his mouth—because they made him think about the humans who were surely there.

Nice, tender humans were a rare feast.

Even among trolls, he was a bit of a gourmand, and he loved the meaty arms and legs while preferring to pass on the bitter bellies. As a result, it was hard for him to eat his fill without enough prey, but it seemed like there was plenty here.

His stride lengthened as he began to drool.

But then he stopped and looked around—more precisely, he eyed the shadows of the houses.

Ogres.

He smelled ogres.

The troll frowned. There were ogres among his brethren, but these smelled a little bit different; he didn't recognize them. The scent surrounded him from the shadows of the houses.

Of course, the reason he could distinguish the odor to that degree was not that he had the keen nose of a dog but that since he had ogre comrades, he had learned the scent of their race. So he wasn't able to figure out how many there were.

And something puzzled him. There was a mysterious scent in the air as well. It was like the green smell of trampled herbs but much stronger.

Are the ogres slathered in mashed-up herbs? With the question still on his mind, he wondered what to do. The smell was so pungent it seemed like his eyes were going to tear up. *The ogres must have stuffy noses if they can stand this.*

He could take them head-on. Trolls were stronger than ogres. But that didn't mean he would get through it unscathed, and it didn't mean it would be a short fight.

Since the troll possessed a racial regeneration ability, his wounds would gradually heal, but it was bad to lose time. His ogre friends would eat up all the humans.

Surely his opponents were spread out so they could all jump him at once if he went straight for a fight.

Satisfied that he had seen through their scheme, the troll started going around them.

His goal was to annihilate them as quickly as possible. So perhaps now, while they were scattered, was his chance. He could just start with one on the edge and pick them off individually.

As he was moving slowly so as not to make any noise, a tiny shadow suddenly darted out from one of the houses.

It wasn't a goblin or some other creature like that but his favorite food—a human.

As he was frozen in shock, the caped human came and splashed him with something.

"Oograhhhhh!" The sharp stench made him scream. The green liquid he'd been hit with gave off such a violent stink he all but wanted to rip off his nose. It was several times stronger than the herb smell hanging around the ogres.

He may have had regenerative powers, but this wasn't an injury. With tears in his eyes from the intolerable smell, he tried to kick the human, but it had already raced into a house.

The reason that he, with his keen sense of smell, had let it sneak up on him was that the stench of the herbs had overpowered the human scent.

Though angered, the troll returned to his original target. First, he'd kill the ogres, then he'd have the human for dessert.

The furious troll searched around the houses but couldn't find any ogres. There was no one; it was as if they had all disappeared.

"Grrrr, where are they?"

Ogres were smaller than him, but they were still huge, yet he scanned the area and saw nothing. If anything that large moved, he should have caught it in his peripheral vision. *Are the ogres invisible like my master?* Confused by this incomprehensible turn of events, the troll snorted.

Still, the intense herb smell on his body got in his way, so he had no idea where the ogre smell was coming from.

"Grrrrr." With a groan, the troll used a hand to wipe at the liquid, but that only made his hand smell.

Just then he discovered a piece of cloth on the ground. Figuring he could clean up with that, he grabbed it and brought it to his nose out of curiosity. His nose wasn't working so well, but up close he could somewhat detect the smell.

It smelled like an ogre. At that point, even the troll could figure out what was going on. *I must have thought there was an ogre here because of this fabric*

covered in ogre scent.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

"Human!" the troll roared and scanned the area. No humans to be found. So it had to be in the house still.

Clenching his fist with rage, he smashed it into the building. After pounding a few times, the roof caved in.

I'm going to tear it to pieces, thought the troll as he chased the human that flew out of the house in a panic.

The troll chasing her meant the plan was working, so she could only be thankful, but she still wanted to cry. *This can't be good for my heart.* What village girl wouldn't be on the verge of tears if she had to play tag with a huge man-eating monster, where being caught meant ending up in its stomach?

The other thing that made her want to cry was that she didn't know when this game of tag would end. When she thought about how long she would have to keep at it, the will to continue running to the very end welled up inside her, but every time she worried about when the battle at the front gate would be over and whether everyone knew they were being chased around, her spirit flagged.

Enri regretted taking so long to prep that neither she nor Nfirea had been able to report to the front gate.

She dove desperately into the house where Nfirea was waiting. Then her friend, wearing a matching hooded cape, ran out the back door. As she waited with bated breath to see if their opponent would get caught in her trap, the troll chased after Nfirea without seeming to realize he was a different person.

Panting, Enri happily clasped her hands together.

There was a clear gap between trolls' and humans' stamina, stride, and strength, meaning a single person being chased would definitely get caught; her idea was to even up the battle of attrition by trading places and taking turns resting without their opponent realizing. One objective was to buy time, but they also didn't want to let the troll reach the meeting hall where all the villagers were gathered.

The issue was how to make it seem like there was only one person. How did trolls tell humans apart? If a troll spent a lot of time observing humans, surely they would learn to discern some differences, but what if that wasn't the case? What she relied on was disguising their appearances, focusing especially on their clothes. That's why they both wore the same rain cape.

Then they employed herb juice to neutralize the troll's sensitive nose.

Enri had set two traps for the monster's sense of smell—stopping the troll in its tracks with the lingering odor of the ogres and then covering up their human scent with the herbs.

Having finally caught her breath, she began moving stealthily toward the next house.

Once she entered the dark interior, she quietly checked on the situation outside. As the heavy thudding approached, Nfirea, looking frantic, dove into the house. At the right timing, Enri leaped out the back door she had just come in.

She set off running but quickly realized the troll wasn't coming after her.

It was looking between her and the house, snorting. Its ugly face warped further. She could sort of tell it seemed full of suspicion.

Icy sweat ran down her neck. She absentmindedly wiped it away with the back of her hand, but at the wet sensation, it hit her. "…Its nose adapted?"

The troll seemed to have gotten used to the herbs, noticed something off about the sweat it was smelling, and came to the conclusion that there were actually two humans.

It raised its fist and smashed the roof of the house. Nfirea came tumbling out, but he stopped and didn't seem like he was going to run. "Enri! You escape! I'll buy you time!"

"You idiot! We should go together!"

"It'll definitely catch up to us! Using a house as a shield won't matter!"

Enri's eyes widened and Nfirea laughed.

"I'm the stronger one, so if I act as the bait, we have a better chance of

surviving!” He cast a spell, and a glow enveloped his body.

What he said made sense, so Enri was at a loss for words. Nfirea seemed to laugh.

“Let me protect the lady I love!”

Nfirea turned to the savagely grimacing monster and pointed at himself with a thumb. “If you wanna play, then play with me! C’mon! Acid Arrow!” A green arrow flew at the troll after he shouted some uncharacteristic taunts. The moment it connected, steam rose as the sound of sizzling filled the air. Of course, the troll’s roar of pain was multiple times louder.

The troll fixed its wild eyes on Nfirea. It didn’t seem to be paying any attention to Enri anymore.

“Hurry up and go! Get help!”

It was even more foolish to stand around doing nothing.

“Stay safe!” With those parting words, Enri set off running.

The troll didn’t seem to be coming after her.

Honestly, there was no chance of him surviving. There was an insurmountable gap in their stats. Nfirea didn’t stand a chance against a monster only gold-rank adventurers could fight.

Lasting even a minute would be praiseworthy—that’s how hopeless the battle was.

“Yeah, I’m definitely gonna die.”

Nfirea smiled wryly at the troll, which was cautiously on the move.

Regeneration didn’t work on wounds from acid or fire. Nfirea had trumped the troll’s greatest ability, so that’s probably why it was on guard, but its worry was misplaced. If the troll just leaped at him like normal, it would surely win, so all Nfirea could do was laugh.

“Well, it works in my favor. Hypnotism!”

There was no change in the troll’s hostile attitude. It seemed to be resistant to the spell.

When it realized its opponent was casting magic, it charged.

The sight of the hulking figure drawing nearer as Nfirea watched was nightmarish.

“I would have been able to last a little longer if it had worked… Am I that unlucky? Too bad…”

Nfirea felt discouraged. He had no chance of winning; he knew he’d gone beyond brave to reckless, but still—

I have to buy more time for Enri.

—that thought moved him.

When he saw the troll before him raise its left arm, he dashed forward and to the left. Inspired to escape his impossible situation, he dove for the safety at the end of the most dangerous path. He felt the *whoosh* of the fist striking down behind him blow through his hair and a wall-like leg coming at him.

His field of vision spun. From inside his body, he heard noises like snapping branches.

He crashed into the ground and tumbled across it like a piece of trash.

Pain coursed through his body. Rather than an acute pain, it was more pain than he had ever felt in his entire life.

“B-but it’s amazing that I’m alive. I’m so awesome…” It was thanks to the defensive magic he had cast, plus the fact that the troll had kicked at him from an unstable posture. Stabbing pains assailed him when he coughed, but he stood and cast a spell. “Acid Arrow.”

The troll was about to follow up with another attack but stopped in its tracks. It was wary of the acid scorch on the ground at its feet.

Yes, exactly what I wanted.

His objective was to buy time. If his opponent hesitated to attack out of wariness, he would be happy for it to stay wary forever.

Besides, the next attack would surely kill him.

“…It hurts. I don’t wanna die…” He whimpered in spite of himself.

That's life.

No one wanted to admit it, but there came a time for everyone when they had no other choice. For Nfirea, that time was now.

I'm going to die here. I am, without a doubt, going to die right now.

He wanted to run away. If he ran with all his might, maybe he could get away. But if he did that, how horrible of a tragedy would ensue?

He thought of Enri.

It was because he had her that he could fight like this.

"Well, I told her, so I guess it's… No. I don't want to die without hearing her answer…"

He figured he couldn't get the troll closing in to understand the heart of a boy in love.

Buying time was now impossible.

For some reason, he was able to read exactly what the troll was thinking from its hideous expression. The monster was prepared to sustain damage in order to kill him. In that case—

"Acid Arrow!"

The most he could do was leave it a little worse for wear for whoever came to fight it after him.

The troll's face twisted up with the burning pain, and it raised a fist. Already in so much pain he could barely stand, Nfirea had no idea how to block it.

"Please hurry!"

Three goblins led by Enri rushed to Nfirea's aid.

The reason they'd met up wasn't that Enri had reached the front gate. Since Nfirea and Enri hadn't come back, and mysterious screaming could be heard from the rear, their leader had split his already meager force and dispatched three troops.

If I had sat tight a little longer, they would have arrived regardless. The thought filled her to bursting with guilt.

They had just a little bad luck.

If it weren't for that—

"Over there!" Enri was pointing at Nfirea. Before him, the troll was raising its fist.

They wouldn't reach him. The distance was too great.

He would get hit with the troll's pounding fist, a blow strong enough to break a house. His death was certain.

In the darkness of her closed eyes, Enri heard the goblins gasp. It was an indication of their shock.

The reaction struck her as out of place, so she cautiously opened her eyes and —

"Yeesh, your health bar's in the red there. Are you okay?"

—saw a beautiful woman holding a huge weapon.

Lupusregina had thrust her huge sigil-shaped weapon out from the side and blocked the troll's fist. Considering how thick and huge the arm was, it seemed impossible, but it was neither a dream nor an illusion.



“Hokay, I’ll take this guy. You’re hurt pretty badly, huh, Nfi? Heal!”

The troll took a step back as if it couldn’t comprehend what it was seeing. Well, it was only natural, since a mysterious person had appeared out of nowhere and blocked its full-powered blow. Maybe it thought she was some sort of magic being.

With a dazed expression, Nfirea turned his back to the troll and began walking. He was utterly unguarded, but the troll didn’t attack. No, it couldn’t, because that would entail ignoring the one standing in its way.

“Nfi!” Enri squeezed him.

“Ohh, it’s you.”

His hazy response, spoken as if from a dream, alerted her to how critical his condition was. They had managed to snatch him from the jaws of death, but his psychological shock was surely critical.

“I’m glad you’re okay!”

“You too.”

Enri felt something warm returning to her heart, replacing the cold she’d felt when she thought Nfirea would die.

“I’m really glad you’re okay!” She hugged him hard.

“You too.”

His hands went around her, hugging her back. It was a tight embrace but comfortable.

Her tears overflowed and ran down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?”

“Idiot!”

“Sorry to bug ya while you’re flirtin’, but…”

They both let go simultaneously. Though a little sad about that, she turned to Lupusregina. “Lupusregina! The troll—” Shifting her gaze, she saw something that defied description.

“Oh yeah. He’s that raw-hamburger-lookin’ thing over there. Just gotta grill him up, and he’s done.”

In the direction her bloody holy staff was pointing, there was a gory lump of meat on the ground. There was nothing to show that it had once been a troll. The sight of it trying to regenerate was beyond horrifying and made Enri feel sick.

“Ahh, I’m glad you’re both all right. Seems like the other guys did okay, too.”

Enri heard the voices of the other goblins coming their way. It sounded like the fight by the front gate had ended in victory.

“Hup.”

A red column like fire raining out of the sky enveloped the troll, and the stink of burning flesh filled the air.

“That’s it for the troll. Anyhow, my work here is done, so I’m gonna head back. Nfi, Lord Ainz highly praises your work on the purple potion and would like to invite ya to his house, so ya better prepare yourself! Er, I mean, look forward to it!”

As if she’d said everything she wanted to say, she turned on her heel and headed for the back gate.

“Thank you!”

The eccentric maid neither turned around nor stopped at Enri’s shout but just waved a hand.

“Boss lady, boss man. We’ll lead everyone over here. Please rest.”

The goblins ran off without listening for a reply. Enri thought they could have left at least one behind, but she was more worried about Nfirea, so she lent him a shoulder as they walked.

“Phew…” Their sighs overlapped coincidentally. Then they both looked up at the stars at almost exactly the same time.

“She saved us.”

“Yeah.”

“We were lucky.”

“Yeah.”

“I never want to do anything like this ever again.”

“Yeah.”

Silence fell between them. Then Enri suddenly remembered something. “I don’t know if I love you or not, but I don’t want you to go away anywhere.”

“…Mm-hmm… Yeah.”

“Does that mean I love you?”

“…I dunno. But if it does, I’m glad.”

Enri and Nfirea waited for the goblins shoulder to shoulder while quietly gazing up at the night sky…

Epilogue

“Boss lady, looks like yer ready.” That was Jugemu’s remark to Enri when he came into her house and saw her.

“Yeah, but…you don’t think I look weird?” Enri asked, staring at the figure she cut in her best clothes, the ones she wore only for the harvest festival and other celebrations.

“Nothing weird about ya at all, right, boss man?”

“Yeah, you look pretty, Enri.”

“Agh!” Enri blushed and saw Jugemu and Nemu grinning out of the corner of her eye. Their smiles were more wicked than warm.

She was of a mind to say a word or two to them about those expressions, which had been appearing more frequently as her relationship with Nfirea progressed. At the same time, she wisely knew that her face would only become redder if she tried, so she kept her mouth shut.

Still, leaving them like that was dangerous. Especially Nemu.

Sometimes her sister asked her questions she had a hard time answering.

I feel like she’s developed an awful lot mentally over the past few days… I should let Nfirea rescue me here…

Catching her pleading glance for assistance, her boyfriend chimed in.

“Uh, ahem! By the way, how’s it going with the magic sword? Last time I asked it sounded like you were having trouble because it was different from other swords you had used.”

The greatsword Jugemu carried was a magical blade he had acquired in the attack a few days ago.

“I finally got used to the weight and center of gravity, so I can use it as well as my other swords now. As ya might expect of a magic weapon, it’s sharper and whatnot. However, it’s a bit lame that the poison running down the groove only

lowers yer opponent's strength."

"Really? It sounds like an amazing effect."

"It's not very strong poison. At our level, we can mostly resist it. If it only affects weaker enemies, it's not very…" Jugemu looked a bit gloomy all of a sudden.

"What's wrong?"

"Well…" Jugemu looked up at the ceiling and then reluctantly spoke. "The troll that had this sword… It just seemed strange."

"When I saw the corpse, it did seem different from a normal troll, like maybe a subspecies."

"No, I don't mean like that, boss man… The way it moved, the dysfunctional regeneration ability, the feel of cutting into it… It was strange… Yeah, I got this eerie feeling it was already dead but still moving around."

"A moving corpse? You're saying it was a zombie?"

"I don't know. That sort of troll could exis—"

"Heyyy, sorry I'm late!"

The door burst open.

Lupusregina walked right into Enri's house, sun at her back. As if to speak for everyone who had been caught off guard, a light *smack* sounded from her head.

"Ah, ow!"

"You dolt. Is that any way to behave? Please excuse us, everyone."

Yanking Lupusregina, who was pressing a hand to her head, behind her, the woman who had been in the rear stepped in front of the door and bowed.

"I am Lord Ainz's maid, Yuri Alpha. I've come to collect Master Nfirea, Miss Enri, and Miss Nemu. May I come in?"

"Oh yes, please do. Uh, you too, Lupusregina."

The woman thanking them as she entered with Lupusregina was another heavenly beauty.

“Now then, if you’re ready, I’ll make the preparations to teleport us.”

“T-teleport? You can teleport?!” Nfirea shouted.

Enri had no idea why he was shouting, but she figured teleporting must be a big deal.

I guess it was amazing that time the captain of the Royal Select and his men teleported, too.

“Oh no. It’s not my own power but that of a magic item Lord Ainz lent to me.”

“…The horn and the potions… It’s all so amazing. It’s just so incredible that I can’t really take it all in.” Nfirea’s shoulders slumped.

Enri realized she had the chance to ask something she’d wanted to know for a while and said, “Umm, is it really okay for me to go? And my sister?”

Today Nfirea was invited to the house of the village’s savior, Ainz Ooal Gown, but she’d been anxious ever since she heard it was probably fine for her to go along. Sir Gown was an immensely powerful caster, essentially from a different world than the one she lived in. Her stomach threatened to cramp whenever she wondered if she would accidentally do something rude.

“It’s totally cool. This is to celebrate the potion Nfi made, so Lord Ainz said it’s fine for you to come along, since you’re his girl. You don’t gotta fret over manners or etiquette.”

“…Lupu, please do something about that mouth of yours.”

“Aw, Yuri, s’fine, isn’t it? They’re my friends, right, En?”

“Huh? Y-yeah. Yes. You’re right, mm-hmm.”

The maid named Yuri sighed and walked over to the wall. Suddenly a big wooden frame appeared as if she had pulled it out of thin air. It was like an ornately carved picture frame large enough for people to pass through.

“Is that…Pocket Space? No, I don’t think you can put such big items in that, so it must be some more advanced magic…”

“Okay, please enter. Lupu, can I leave guarding this place up to you?”

“Yep!”

On the other side of the frame should have been the familiar wall, but instead it opened onto an unknown world.

Yuri led the way through to the other side.

Nfirea went next. Enri followed a moment later, and then Nemu, who was holding her hand.

There was no resistance as they crossed over, and they found themselves in a magnificent hallway lined on both sides with statues that seemed liable to start moving at any moment.

“Wowww.” Sighing in admiration, Nemu’s mouth gaped, and she craned her neck back to look up at the ceiling.

Supporting her so she wouldn’t fall, Enri looked up, too. “Fantastic…”

The hallway’s marble floor was polished to perfection and covered with a gorgeous rug. A bit astounded, Enri thought this must be what it was like inside the royal palace.

“This way.”

Yuri’s voice brought her to her senses, and she ran to catch up with the other two, but running seemed so out of place that she slowed to a trot.

After they walked a short distance, they came upon another frame in the wall. It was like the one from before except for two things. First, it was many times larger than the other one—several people could walk abreast and pass through without a problem. Second, they couldn’t see through to the other side; there was something covering the frame, like a thin film, radiating the colors of a rainbow.

“Please proceed through this one just like the last one.”

Enri and Nfirea exchanged glances.

“Okay, want to go together?”

They held hands. Lined up—Nemu, Enri, Nfirea, from left to right—they stepped into the frame.

For just an instant, Enri thought she saw a woman wearing red on the bottom

and white on top standing among falling pink blossoms—

“Welcome.”

A chorus of perfectly synchronized voices greeted them.

This was a hallway even more gorgeous than the last. Beautiful maids had lined up along either side. In the very back stood a figure wearing a strange mask and a robe such a deep raven black that it seemed to suck in the light. It was the caster who had saved their village, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Enri stood there blankly with her mouth hanging open.

A glittering chandelier hung from the ceiling, and there was not so much as a speck of dust on the white floor.

The lovely women lining the splendid hall seemed to have come from a fantasy world.

As she was standing, dazed, in this dream world, Enri felt Nemu suddenly let go of her hand. It registered hazily in a corner of her mind, but in the next instant she was jerked back to reality.

Nemu had taken off running.

“Wow! Wow! Awesome!” she shouted, racing around at top speed. She sprinted past the maids and over to where Ainz was.

The sight must have been too much for her to handle, so she couldn’t contain herself as she went on a giddy rampage.

“Wooooow! Amazing!”

“Nemu! Get back here!”

Enri ran after her a moment later. Her sister’s incredibly rude behavior turned her entire body into a fountain of sweat.

But this place, lined with beautiful maids, was like a holy sanctuary. Enri didn’t feel as though a village girl like herself should be racing around. Her legs expressed her contradictory thoughts directly and ended up moving with a gait like a dying frog.

While Enri was herking and jerking, Nemu had no trouble reaching the

village's savior.

"…Is it really that amazing?"

"Yeah! It's way too amazing!"

"I see. So it's amazing, huh…? Well, yes, I suppose it is…" Ainz slowly reached his hand out and gently caressed Nemu's head.

"This is where I live. It's great, isn't it?"

"Yeah, really great! Did you build it, Sir Gown?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. Yes, that's right. I built it with my friends."

"Wow! Your friends are great, too!"

"Hah! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Cheerful laughter echoed throughout the corridor.

Then Enri and Nfirea finally, nervously reached them. Enri grabbed Nemu's hand with a squeeze and the nuance that she wouldn't let her go again.

"We are humbled and honored by your invitation! Thank you very much!"

"Oh, you don't need to be so formal. We're here to celebrate the creation of your new potion. I do hope you can relax."

"My humble apologies, Sir Gown, for my little sister Nemu's rudeness."

"It's really nothing to worry about. She was moved by the sight of my home, right? In that case, it's my fault, isn't it?" Ainz replied in good humor. "Let's see… The plan was to hear from Nfirea, but… Nemu. What do you think? Would you like to take a tour of the house that I—no, my friends and I—built?"

"Yeah! I wanna see! Please show me your awesome mansion!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Okay, okay. I'll show you all sorts of things."

Ainz seemed to be in such a good mood that Enri couldn't say a word.

•

Ainz told Enri he wanted her to wait in the sitting room while he showed Nemu around, so she sat lightly on the sofa.

Like a little animal that had been kidnapped from its nest, she glanced around

nervously at her surroundings. Sitting next to her—though there was plenty of room, they sat huddled together—was Nfirea, who was so on edge that he also seemed like a frightened animal.

Enri had already known that the savior of the village, the great caster Ainz Ooal Gown, was an amazing person, but her imagination hadn't gone far enough.

She felt like she'd wandered into a storybook world where a princess would appear; everything was so glittering and dreamlike.

Above the fireplace on the left and right hung glass birds that seemed liable to fly away at any second. *If I broke one of these I'd probably never be able to pay him back even if I worked my whole life…*

The sofa she was sitting on was pristine, and she worried the dirt from her clothes would get on it.

The light shining down from the first chandelier Enri had ever seen in her life was neither torchlight nor candlelight but magic. She seemed to remember there being a chandelier at the Adventurers Guild in E-Rantel, but it hadn't been lit, and it wasn't as grand as this one.

All the furnishings were tasteful and of excellent quality, especially the impressively solid ebony lacquered table sitting in front of her. Even if she didn't know the prices of these sorts of things, she could tell they were extraordinarily expensive.

The painting on the wall was so detailed it was as if the artist had taken a beautiful live woman and covered her in paint.

She wondered if it was really all right for them to walk in their shoes on the carpet. It was so soft she wondered if she should lift up her feet as she sat on the couch and try to minimize their contact.

Enri was so nervous she thought she might collapse.

"Maybe we should have gone with them."

Ainz had opposed it, but now Enri's stomach was doing somersaults worrying about Nemu being on her own.

“I hope she’s not causing trouble for him…”

“I’m sure she’s fine. Sir Ainz is a very understanding man. I don’t think he’ll be bothered just because a little kid does something rude.”

“Mm, but you know, I heard making a noble angry can get you killed…”

“I’ve heard those stories, but I’ve never seen it happen. E-Rantel is directly under the king’s jurisdiction, so no nobles have flown off the handle there that I can remember… Is Sir Gown a noble?”

“You don’t think so? I’m pretty sure only a noble would be powerful enough to have such splendid rooms and collect such pretty maids.”

“Hmm… I wonder. I don’t think even nobles can get maids that pretty…”

Enri’s eyebrows stealthily tilted to a dangerous angle.

Although she’d called the maids pretty, too, it was uncomfortable to hear it from Nfirea. Just as she rolled her eyes to glare at him, they heard a knock.

“Eep!”

She jumped, and since Nfirea was so close they were touching, it spread to him, and his whole body shuddered.

The knock sounded again. As Enri thought frantically about what she was being asked to do, Nfirea spoke. “Uh, umm, please come in.”

“Excuse my intrusion.”

As Enri was falling in love with Nfirea all over again for the coolheadedness that had led him to the correct answer, a maid came in pushing a silver service cart. It was a pretty woman wearing an immaculate maid uniform that even an amateur could tell was well tailored. On her face was a gentle smile, but Enri’s mind was seized by the worry that the moment she looked at them, she would suddenly scowl furiously and say, *Wh-what have you done?!*

“I’ve brought you something to drink.”

“Th-that’s okay!”

The maid was momentarily caught off guard by Enri’s hasty reply. She shifted her eyes to Nfirea and then looked back at Enri. “…Oh, are you sure?”

“Y-yes.”

Enri’s stiff nervousness and Nfirea’s timidity must have conveyed their feelings to her. With a genuinely kind smile, she sat next to Enri, who was paralyzed with nerves. She put a friendly hand on her shoulder.

“Lady Emmott, please don’t be so nervous. You and Master Baleare are our guests. All you need to do is relax while you wait.”

“B-but…I just think what would happen if I accidentally broke something…”

“Not to worry. You could break any of the things here, and Lord Ainz wouldn’t be upset.”

“Wh-what? Any of these things?”

Enri got a headache just thinking of the prices of the things in this room. *Is she saying these things aren’t important to him at all?*

“Yes. Lord Ainz is exceedingly wealthy.”

“Th-that I know.” Because he’d given her that amazing magic horn like it was nothing.

“So you can relax. As long as you don’t destroy something on purpose, I’m sure he would smile and forgive you. And I think he would be able to repair the item with magic.”

“Still…I just…”

“I understand. Then how about a drink? Perhaps it will put you more at ease.”

“But…”

She ran her eyes over the cups on the silver cart. They were white porcelain and exquisite. The lips were gold. The sides had something painted on them—she couldn’t tell if it was a picture or a pattern—in a deep brilliant blue. They were so dainty Enri thought just her holding one would be enough to break it.

“Enri, let’s have something. It would be rude to refuse.”

“Oh, then, uh, yes, please.”

“Understood… Hmm. Preferences diverge when it comes to the fragrance and flavor of herbal tea, so would normal black tea be all right?”

“Wh-whatever you recommend.”

The smiling maid prepared their tea with fluid motions. After performing the incomprehensible act of throwing away boiled water she had poured, she eventually presented the pair with tea. Then she set down two little jars.

“Everyone has their own taste, so I’ve provided milk and sugar separately. Please help yourself.”

When Enri opened the sugar jar, cubes of snow-white powder peeked out. The village girl mechanically dropped several of them into her tea and then stirred until they melted.

Afterward, she poured in plenty of milk. Then she took a sip. Her face was pure bliss. “It’s so sweet!”

“Yeah, I imagine so, if you put that much sugar in. Well, we don’t get many sweets in the village. We don’t keep bees, after all… I guess syrups are about it? If I learned the magic to create spices, things would be different, but…”

Enri forgot where they were and shouted to Nfirea without meaning to. “Do your best to learn it!!”

“Oh, uh, okay,” she heard him reply as she drank another cup of tea. The flavor brought a smile to her face.

“It really is so sweet and good.”

That was when they heard several knocks at the door. The maid promptly went into action and opened it with an airy motion.

“Lord Ainz and your sister have returned.”

The door opened and Nemu came bounding into the room with a huge grin on her face. Ainz followed behind her.

“Enri, it was so amazing! Everything’s so shiny and pretty and awesome!” Nemu jumped into Enri’s arms.

Taking care not to let her sister’s feet get the sofa dirty, Enri stood and bowed to Ainz. “Sir Gown! I hope my sister didn’t do anything rude?”

“No. Actually, I’m sorry for taking her for so long.”

“No, it’s fine. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He waved her worries away.

“Why don’t you guys have something to eat before I discuss future plans with Nfirea?”

“Oh, but we weren’t intending to take advantage of your hospitality,” Nfirea blurted out, but Ainz calmed him down.

“I want to butter you up so I get a better deal.”

“Deal?”

“…Shall I give a brief explanation before you eat?” Ainz sat on the sofa opposite them. “First of all, I don’t intend to tell any outsiders about the potion you made. My understanding is that you can’t make a purple healing potion without the materials I gave you—is that correct?”

“Yes. I was only able to do it once you gave me those materials. I don’t know what power is at work. There are still a lot of unknowns.”

“I think there would only be trouble if word got out about it. If someone asked where you got the materials, that wouldn’t be a problem…but there could be some people who would come and try to take them by force. I heard from Lupusregina that your village was recently attacked by monsters. It’s possible that they were driven out of their homes and were looking for a safe place with sturdy walls to stay, but… Did you capture any to interrogate them about why they attacked?”

We couldn’t, Enri replied silently. With the howls of a monster at their backs—the troll that Enri and Nfirea had encountered—the goblins didn’t have the leeway to capture any enemies. When they devoted all their energy to ending the battle, the result was no survivors on the enemy side.

And it seemed like the one with the magic sword was pretty strong…

“I see. That’s too bad… I’m thinking that’s the reason your village was attacked. Your defenses had improved, but that ended up causing trouble. It’s only logical that valuables get targeted, right? If word about the potion got out, the same thing might happen…”

“…We should keep it a secret, I guess.”

“Thanks for understanding, Nfirea. If you succeed in creating a red potion like the ones I have, using just ingredients you can find around the village, the reasons to keep it secret might dramatically decrease, but… Anyhow, those are the sorts of things I’d like to discuss after you eat, keeping information confidential, defense, and so on… Okay, the food should be ready. Shall we go?”

“N-no, we’re fine. This place is so fantastic, we…” Enri shook her head back and forth.

“…Well, I won’t force you, but…the main course is dragon steak.”

“Dragon?”

Dragons—Enri had heard all sorts of stories where they’d appeared as villains or allies of justice. But in all the stories they possessed immense power. *Can you really cook it?*

That can’t be true. He’s just teasing us.

That’s what she would have thought if it wasn’t Ainz saying it.

But when it was the great caster standing before them talking, the possibility that it was the truth seemed more likely.

“There are sweets, too. Have you ever had ice cream? They have it in E-Rantel, but…it looks like you’ve never had it before, huh? It’s cold and sweet… It melts in your mouth. It’s like sweet ice or snow.”

Enri and Nemu both gulped in spite of themselves.

“It’s a high-class luxury item. Three meals’ worth of money, poof.

“Seems like you’ve had it before, Nfirea. So I’ll make sure to give you ice cream that is tastier by far. That and—what else is on the menu?”

The maid acknowledged his question and reeled off the courses. “We’re planning on a first hors d’oeuvre of piercing lobster and Nóatún seafood in a velouté sauce. For the second hors d’oeuvre we’ve prepared a poêlé of Víðófnir foie gras. The soup is cream of Alfheim sweet potato and chestnut. We’ve chosen to serve meat for the main dish. As Lord Ainz mentioned a moment ago, it’s nicely marbled Jotunheim frost dragon steak. Then for dessert, intelligent

apple compote over yogurt. And ice cream, so a side of golden tea ice cream. For an after-dinner beverage, we thought coffee might not be to your taste, so we've prepared fresh peach water. That's all. If you require any changes, we'll make them right away…"

She's casting a spell! Enri couldn't understand a word she was saying, so she was sure that's what she was doing.

"…Not everyone likes foie gras, right? I doubt kids would. And it seems like a lot of rich dishes. Is there anything a little lighter?"

"In that case, we could offer an hors d'oeuvre salad of scallops with plum star confit."

"Yeah…doesn't that seem better than the other one?"

"Huh?! You're asking me?!" Enri panicked, finding the question directed at her. She didn't even know what they were talking about, so she had no idea how to answer. "U-uh, I think…I'll just leave it to you."

Squeezing those words out was all she could manage. Ainz went on discussing their meal with the maid.

Nemu gazed at him admiringly, and Enri heard her whisper, "Wow…" Enri felt the same. Their worlds were just so different from each other's.

People who could spend money on luxury items were wealthy. Only a few could spend lavishly on food, which disappeared once it was eaten.

Money, knowledge, power—he was a caster who had them all.

A mere peasant like Enri wasn't proper company for him. He was probably fit for associating with kings or other lofty breeds. That's how amazing this masked caster seemed.

"Okay, shall we go? Although I won't be joining you. Eat, just the three of you—yes, as a family—without worrying about manners. When you're done, we can talk business. Oh, I have to tell Lupusregina there will be one more person."

"Huh? What did you say, Sir Gown?"

"Nothing, Nemu."

When Ainz stood, Nemu followed suit, smiling ear to ear with sparkling eyes.

Being called a “family” made Enri’s face hot. She thought something seemed strange about Nfirea as he sluggishly got to his feet.

His lips were shut in a straight line and there was no sign of them opening. But Enri knew how to cut through that knot—stare at him.

Through a gap in his bangs, his eyes were clearly darting around before he finally spilled what was on his mind.

“I just thought, *I can’t beat him*. I mean, there’s no way I could. We’re just not in the same league, as men.”

“But I like you!”

Does the league you’re in really matter that much? As she was thinking she still had a lot to learn, as a woman, Nfirea blushed. Then he grasped her hand.

“Shall we go?”

There was no gloominess in his voice anymore.

Enri didn’t really understand the change in her boyfriend’s emotions, but she was genuinely happy that he had cheered up. They linked hands and followed Ainz and her sister.



Story 2 A Day Inside Nazarick

Story 2 | A Day Inside Nazarick

Prologue

5:14 AM ***Nazarick Time***

A drop of water appeared at the mouth of the golden faucet, gradually swelled, and was then pulled by gravity to the bathroom floor.

There were a number of places to take a hot bath in the Great Tomb of Nazarick, and this was one of them.

In a marble bathtub big enough for multiple people sat a lone figure.

Drops of blue ran down the smooth white body. *Blue* is not poetic; it was a deliberate blue, as if they had been dyed that color.

Once the blue liquid had lapped the white porcelain form, it disobeyed gravity to go over it once again, bottom to top, not flowing, like water, so much as crawling.

“Phwah.” It tended to echo in the bathroom, so the unconsciously emitted moan reverberated loudly.

Was the sound embarrassing? A thin arm rose out of the blue liquid. There were none of the falling droplets that would normally be heard, nor ripples across the surface—due to the extremely high viscosity of the liquid.

A slender raised hand stroked the bather’s face, which was praised by many for its beauty.

“Phew…” With a sigh, the figure flopped backward but did not sink below the surface. The blue liquid gently supported the slim body. It was like lying on a soft waterbed, that sort of elasticity.

The liquid had a distinct mind.

That was proven beyond a doubt in the next moment.

The blue liquid wriggled and raised tentacles a finger or two thick. They wrapped around the body, both above and of course below the surface.

Head, chest, abdomen, arms, legs—and, of course, hips.

The liquid squirmed in satisfaction at having restrained its prey. It was actually a sapphire slime, an elite variety of slime.

The sapphire slime began to move its slender tentacles.

It slipped one of them inside a delicate area near the hips.

“—Ahh.”

Another moan. It was louder than the first, but this time there was no sign of any attempt to suppress it. All attention was focused on the sensation of the slime wriggling inside.

A murmur echoed in the bathroom.

“Ahh, it’s so damn good. I can’t even describe this feeling.”

Ainz soaked in his slime bath.

He scooped some up and let it dribble over his head. The slime, which had been diligently cleaning the area of his master’s pelvic bone around the obturator foramen, must have understood where he wanted to be cleaned next. Ainz felt it slither around his head.

“Phew, this is paradise. Just paradise.”

Ainz the undead’s body was made entirely of bones.

Since it didn’t excrete any waste products, he didn’t get oily or smelly, but that didn’t mean he didn’t need to bathe. Dust and dirt clung to him, and sometimes blood spattered onto him. He did get dirty.

And as a Japanese person, he couldn’t endure a life without bathing.

“I only took steam baths back in the other world, but… Just the idea of a real bath gets me excited. The practice of bathing must be deeply rooted in the hearts of Japanese people.”

Mimicking a relaxed exhalation, he submerged himself farther under the slime. With a slippery sensation, it made way for him.

Despite the high viscosity of the liquid, it didn’t feel strange to him.

Taking a normal bath is such a pain…

He looked down at the most troublesome part of his body—his ribs.

Washing them one by one took an awfully long time. He had experience with this, and just the thought of it made him sigh—although he wasn't actually breathing.

And that wasn't the only troublesome part.

His spine was the same. The protuberances got stuck on his towel, so he couldn't just give them a quick wash. It took attention to detail.

At first, he'd been washing himself with care. But even the mentally resilient Ainz got sick of the monotonous labor. His fastest attempt still took more than thirty minutes; that was no joke, and he felt it.

The next thing he tried was getting into a bathtub full of soapy water and spinning around as if he were in a washing machine. That wasn't as bad; he just didn't feel like he got clean. If he didn't use something to scrub himself, there was no sense that he'd gotten the dirt off.

So his next tactic was to procure a cleaning brush with a handle and scrub with that. That went very well.

It did get soap everywhere, but it wasn't as if Ainz had to tidy up after himself. Tidying up was the maids' job, and they were happy to have something to do. He basically killed two birds with one stone.

But even that brilliant plan had one problem.

He wasn't sure if he was really getting every part of himself clean.

He was anxious that even though he thought he was scrubbing his whole body, there might have been places he missed, like how even a tooth brusher with the best intentions can get cavities.

Eventually, he arrived at this final solution of having a slime crawl around his body.

"Yeah…this really is a landmark, original method. It leaves nothing to be desired—it's simply perfect," he murmured as he watched the blue slime slither over the surfaces of his body.

He nodded, totally in love with the effortless method he had come up with. It

might have been the most perfect plan he had devised since arriving in this world.

“It’s magnificent if I do say so myself!”

Continuing to pat himself on the back, he watched the slime moving around every nook and cranny of his body.

It’s so adorable…

It was a malicious monster with the ability to dissolve things with acid and constricting strength enough to easily bend an iron rod, but to Ainz it was a back-washer buddy who cleaned him. In a way, he was even attached to it as a pet.

A slime bath isn’t bad, but I would like a normal soak once in a while…

The ninth level of Nazarick had many different facilities. There was even a bathhouse. It was modeled after a spa resort, a complex of different kinds of baths.

“Maybe I should check it out…”

But it wouldn’t be very fun to go alone. In that case…

“Okay! I’ll invite the guardians. It’ll be great if we can find a time that everyone is free.”

Ainz smiled at his brilliant plan.

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7:14 AM ***Nazarick Time***

Nazarick had two types of maids.

There were the combat maids, like Yuri Alpha, and then there were the regular maids with no combat ability whatsoever. The job of the latter—homunculi who were only level 1 even with race and class levels combined—was to perform all sorts of chores on the ninth and tenth levels, especially

cleaning. Tidying up the rooms of their masters, the Supreme Beings, was their most important duty.

Cixous, one of those regular maids, was hurrying without quickening her steps—a special ability maids had, though it wasn't technically a skill—toward the employee cafeteria.

There was only one reason to go to the cafeteria at this time of morning.

When she arrived, most of the other maids were already eating.

The women's cheerful, noisy conversations overlapped and rippled through the dull, mainly white cafeteria. No single person was talking all that loudly, but when their voices mixed together, it became an incomprehensible din. That plus the sound of clinking dishes made quite a racket.

Cixous looked for her close friends.

The maids in the cafeteria were split broadly into four groups.

The first three groups were maids created by the same Supreme Being. There were forty-one of these regular maids, but it wasn't as if each of the Supreme Beings had made one. WhiteLace, HeroHero, and Coup de Grâce had created them all.

The final group, though it might be misleading to call it a group, was made up of the maids who weren't in the other gatherings. These were the maids who wanted to quietly eat alone, or read, or chat with people made by other Supreme Beings.

Cixous, who had arrived a little late, belonged to the latter group. She waved to the maids created by the same Supreme Being—her sisters, so to speak—and said her good mornings as she made her way to her usual table.

The usual faces were already sitting there: Foäille and Lumièlle.

Cixous's face fell when she noticed there was no food in front of them. "Morning. Did you guys…eat already?"

"Morning. Yeah, we ate. It was really good. So creamy and fluffy… Ahh, it was great." Foäille had a sporty look—short hair, a maid uniform she customized herself to have slightly shorter sleeves—and always wanted to fib even though

she was horrible whenever she tried while constantly speaking in monotone.

The other maid, meek-faced Lumièlle, raised her eyebrows. Her blond hair gave off a mysterious light, as if there were twinkling stars inside. “Good morning. Foäille, you don’t need to eat twice, right? Please wait here. I haven’t eaten yet, so I’m going to get some food. Let’s go, Cixous.” Lumièlle stood up.

“I was just kidding! It was a joke!” Foäille hurried after her.

The familiar exchange ended, and they walked—not without asking Inclement, who was quietly reading next to them, to save their seats—to the buffet.

The first thing Cixous grabbed was crispy bacon. As part of the “floppy bacon is just wrong” faction, this was a required item for her. Next, she got soup. From “today’s special,” corn soup and onion soup, she chose the onion. Then she mounded sausage, fried potatoes, and Danish onto her plate and piled another dish to overflowing with a salad that was mainly onions. Finally, she moved toward a male servant wearing a mask.

“Um, I’ll have triple cheese, double onions, and mushrooms please.”

The male servant bowed and began frying up an omelet.

Cixous returned to her seat for the moment to put down her food. When she went back to the servant, with a cup of milk in one hand, he was just finishing up her order.

“Thank you.”

She took the perfect omelet, no burned spots, back to her seat, and her friends were just arriving, too.

“Okay, let’s eat!”

“Yum!”

“Mm-hmm.”

The three of them began to eat in silence. For an average woman, the portions were far too big, but they rapidly packed the mountains of food into their stomachs. One of their racial penalties was the need for a lot of food.

That was why, though they were good friends, they never chatted while eating.

Foäille chewed with her cheeks stuffed full, Lumièlle ate neatly with her fork doing unusually rapid laps between her plate and her mouth, and Cixous was somewhere in between.

In a surprisingly short time, the food on their plates was gone, and they were finishing off their milk.

“Ahh!”

All three of their milky exhalations overlapped. Then they exchanged glances.

“…Want to go around again?”



“Yeah, but let’s rest for a little while first.”

“I agree! My tummy’s even poking out a little bit. By the way, Cixous, isn’t it your turn to serve Lord Ainz today?” Foäille asked, grinning. “You’re looking sharper than usual.”

Cixous couldn’t help but smile, too.

“How lucky. I wonder how many more days until my turn.” Lumièlle started counting on her fingers.

The chambers of the highest rulers of Nazarick were spacious, so cleaning a suite carefully on one’s own would easily take half a day.

Certainly, by the numbers, it was possible to clean them all every day, even including other rooms like the spare one Albedo was using, but several people would have had to work full-time with no rest.

Still, that wasn’t a problem for them. They were created by members of Ainz Ooal Gown, who ruled the Great Tomb of Nazarick. Working their hardest for them was only natural—to them, it was quite literally serving the gods.

But the godlike being Ainz Ooal Gown stopped them from working like religious fanatics.

He knew the pain of working for a tyrannical company, so he couldn’t force that kind of lifestyle on what were basically his friends’ daughters.

He instructed them to clean unused rooms less frequently and also broke them up into teams in order to give time off.

And so Nazarick’s maids were currently split into morning and evening teams. Thirty were in the former group and ten in the latter. The one remaining person would take the day off. In other words, they got a day off only once every forty-one days, and some of them complained about the arrangements.

Not that there were too few days off—they protested the opposite. The servants petitioned to get rid of vacation days.

Their whole reason for existing was serving the Supreme Beings. When they were told they didn’t have to do anything, they lost their sense of self-worth. All they felt was the negative emotion that they weren’t needed.

So they negotiated with Ainz directly: *Please don't take our work away. We want to work all day.*

Ainz immediately rejected their appeals. On one hand, the concept of exhaustion had existed in *Yggdrasil*, but it could be cured with magic. At the same time, that didn't necessarily mean the same thing was possible in this world. Ainz was worried that even if he treated their fatigue with purely magic, their gears would slowly wear down and stop working.

Their stubborn ruler wouldn't back off, so they had no choice but to accept his decision. Seeing them fight back their tears, he proposed a compromise.

A position that would answer to him directly.

He declared that the maids would take turns, one by one, waiting on him and helping him with all his work.

To these girls for whom serving the Supreme Beings was the greatest joy, this was like icing on their cake. They jumped at the opportunity with zero hesitation and accepted that on the day before they would serve him, they were to take a day off so they would be ready to serve him to the best of their ability.

"You need to eat all your nutrients and work hard! There's a good chance you'll have to work through a meal, you know."

"Of course. The one serving Ainz needs to send a lot of nutrients to their brain."

"It makes you crave sweets."

All three of them nodded. Incidentally, maids carried supplemental meals high in sugar content on their person. When they were working for Ainz, they snacked on them whenever they found a spare moment, but if they were unlucky—or maybe, if they were lucky—they wouldn't have time. That was why it was so important to eat a big breakfast.

"Oh, did you hear? Apparently, they're going to start cooking with ingredients from the outside world, and I heard they're having a tasting."

Cixous's friends gasped at this news.

That's only natural, she thought.

No maids had positive feelings for the world outside Nazarick. Some of them looked down on it, but the majority simply thought it was scary—many remembered the raiders from the outside who penetrated all the way to the eighth level, the one above them.

"Can all the maids participate? It must be only some, right?"

As Cixous was about to answer Foäille's question, the atmosphere in the cafeteria suddenly changed. Something like a buzz of excitement went through the room.

They followed the gazes of the other maids just as the cheers went up.

"Shizuuu!"

"It's Shizu!"

One of the combat maids, Shizu, had just entered the cafeteria.

The regular maids admired the combat maids as if they were pop idols, and Shizu was the most popular one. Competition for seats near her was fierce.

"Oh, and the penguin."

She was carrying a penguin under her arm, and a perplexed-looking male servant followed them. The assistant butler was struggling, but he was a level-1 birdman—he couldn't escape Shizu's tough grasp. As they watched, his frantic resistance devolved into powerlessness.

Eventually he gave up completely and went limp. He was like a live stuffed animal.

"Shizu! Over here, over here! Let's eat together!"

"No, please come over here, Shizuuu!"

"Leave the assistant butler somewhere over there! Just chuck him!"

"Take that useless bird to the chef! Then he'll at least be able to contribute to Nazarick in *some* way!"

There was no helping the overt difference in reception between Shizu and the assistant butler. The birdman had a habit of spouting blasphemy about how he

wanted to rule Nazarick, so no one much cared for him. Even if the Supreme Beings made him that way, it was too hard to put up with his behavior when he was always talking like that.

Hearing everyone shouting for her, Shizu glanced around the cafeteria. Many maids were touched by the childlike way she either searched for someone or was contemplating where to sit.

“When Shizu is holding him, he looks kinda cute somehow. It’s so weird.”

“Maybe I’ll make her a body pillow to hold instead. Mistress Albedo seems to know a lot about them. Maybe I can get her to teach me.”

“Mistress Albedo is nice, so I bet she would. Why not try asking her?”

Shifting her gaze in response to the sound of a book snapping shut at the next table, Cixous caught Inclement standing up to leave.

“It got noisy in here, so I’m going back. If you’re serving Lord Ainz today, I think you should hurry up and finish eating, too, so you can go. If you make a mistake, it’ll reflect poorly on all of us.”

Having said her piece, Inclement walked away without waiting for a reply. Watching her go, Cixous checked the time on her pocket watch. She still had some leeway, but once she had eaten more and touched up her appearance, time would probably be running short.

“Okay. Let’s go get seconds quickly while everyone is fighting over Shizu.”

Her friends agreed with her suggestion.

“Ooh, nice idea.”

The maids nearly jumped out of their skin at the voice that had come from immediately next to them.

“L-Lupusregina!” Cixous turned to the voice’s owner, pressing both hands over her pounding chest. Just a moment ago, there had been no one, but in the brief time she’d been distracted by Shizu and looked away, Lupusregina had appeared. She was sitting sideways on a chair with her legs crossed and even had her meal placed neatly on the table in front of her.

“Don’t surprise us like that, geez!” Foäille, with pathetic, pleading eyebrows,

still clung to Lumièlle.

“I thought my heart was going to pop out of my chest!” Lumièlle murmured in a daze; she didn’t seem to have the wherewithal to be indifferent about Foäille’s embrace.

The three of them reproved her, but their faces were smiling. Lupusregina was the only combat maid who interacted with all of them on the level of friends, but her patterns of activity were erratic. Since she changed groups each day, being approached by her could be considered a sign of good luck. Hence, the jealous looks Cixous and her friends were getting from other maids.

“Nyee-hee-hee. It was worth experimenting in the village. Nice reactions, guys.”

Lupusregina propped her head up on her hands and grinned like a cat from a storybook. It was a spiteful smile but also strangely charming, which made it mysterious, and Cixous admired it for a little while.

The other two seemed to feel much the same, but the first one to recover was Foäille. “The village?” When she cocked her head, her short bob tickled Lumièlle’s face.

With a look like she was holding back a sneeze, she shoved Foäille away. Then she straightened up and faced Lupusregina. “Miss Lupusregina, I did hear you’re working outside.”

“Yup, I’m workin’ in a human village.”

“A human village… Sounds difficult.” Lumièlle gave Lupusregina a sympathetic look.

“Nah. Plus, I was ordered to do it by Lord Ainz himself, so it’s worth it… To be honest, though, it’s pretty borin’. If they would get overrun in an attack, that would be more fun.”

Cixous didn’t think twice about the remark. What became of the human village wasn’t any of her concern; it could flourish or go to ruin, as long as it was useful to Nazarick.

“Lord Ainz says it has value, but I don’t really know what it is.”

“Knowing Lord Ainz, perhaps he took pity on the worthless humans.”

“No, no, Lord Ainz is a gale-force wind of death. He’s probably just waiting for the right time to trample them.”

“What are you saying? Lord Ainz is a crystallization of wisdom! It must be part of a bigger plan.”

“Hold up, can’t let that pass. Might is Lord Ainz’s true forte.”

The four girls glared at one another, practically growling.

“Lord Ainz is a kind, beautiful person!”

“Lord Ainz is death manifest in this world!”

“Lord Ainz is an unparalleled genius!”

“Whoa, looks like we all have different ideas of what Lord Ainz is like, huh? In that case, a challenge: Who can give him the most fittin’ nickname?”

For a moment, silence. Lupusregina was smiling as usual, but she didn’t seem to have any intention of being left in the dust when it came to divining Ainz’s true nature. Still, that went for Cixous and her friends as well.

Regular maids may have been weak level-1 beings, but they wouldn’t back down when it came to respect and adoration of their master.

“You three can go first.”

“Then…” Lumièlle was the first to speak. “As I said before, I think we need to exalt Lord Ainz’s beauty. So how about ‘the Ever-Radiant Lord of Most Merciful Love with the Aesthetically Glorious Porcelain-White Visage’?”

Next was Foäille. “If we’re going to exalt Lord Ainz, what needs to be emphasized is his great power! Given that he’s an overlord, it has to be ‘Memento Mori,’ right?”

Cixous went third. “Lord Ainz was once the leader of the Supreme Beings, so he must have superior skills for running and maintaining an organization, so I say ‘the Resourceful King.’”

All the nicknames fit their master, but they all still felt that their own choice fit him best. Cixous, then Foäille and Lumièlle all focused on the last person.

Her turn having come around, Lupusregina cleared her throat, “Ahem,” and said with a smug grin, “It’s gotta be ‘the Absolute Strongest in—’”

“…So that’s where you were,” a soft voice said. It was Shizu. Éclair the assistant butler must have gone somewhere, because he wasn’t under her arm anymore. “…Please don’t go completely invisible all the time.”

“Sorry! Guess it’s just a habit now.”

“…And you started eating without me.” Anger like a haze of heat showed through beneath Shizu’s barely changing expression.

Cixous realized it could be risky to stick around any longer. “Oh, I have to get going to Lord Ainz’s.”

“Then I’ll head out, too.”

“I’ll walk with you partway.”

Cixous and her friends quietly stood, pretending not to notice Lupusregina’s glances pleading for help.

In the end, Cixous missed out on seconds. She had many regrets about that, but she had to compose herself.

Clearing her mind of the precarious atmosphere behind her, she slapped her cheeks to steel herself. Her face was that of a brave warrior heading to battle, but she walked forward with light steps.

9:20 AM ***Nazarick Time***

The sixth level of the Great Tomb of Nazarick…

This zone, boasting the largest area of any in the great tomb, was protected by not the typical undead but monsters that wouldn’t usually spawn there, like Aura’s magical beasts. Most of it was covered in thickly growing forest, making “sea of trees” an apt description.

But the enthusiastic members of the once extant guild Ainz Ooal Gown weren’t satisfied with simply painting the place green.

There was an arena, a giant tree, ruins of a settlement that had been swallowed up by the forest, a lake, a poisonous den, gnarled trees, mangroves,

a bottomless swamp, and more; it was designed with diversity. Recently they had even built a small village to welcome new residents.

In the center of this sea of trees with its many highlights was a big—although not as big as the underground lake zone on level four—body of water, and it was surrounded by grass, not trees. The meadow and the lake were only a tiny part of the sixth level, but it was big enough for the girls to do what they came for.

One of the girls was a guardian of the level, Aura. She looked impressive on the back of her giant jet-black wolf and seemed right at home.

But of course she did. Although she had extraordinary physical ability and could easily run to patrol the vast grounds, she preferred riding her magical beasts.

There were two other girls.

One was Captain of the Guardians Albedo. Instead of her usual white dress, she was wearing her black full plate armor, but she had no weapon or shield.

The other was Shalltear. Nothing about her was different from usual. There was a strange look in her eyes, like she was highly engaged or having fun.

“Okay, here I go. Come to me, mount!” Albedo used the skill Summon Mount.

A magical beast the same color as her armor wavered into sight where there had been nothing. The beast had a white mane and tail and resembled a horse. He wore equestrian full plate armor and was fitted with a saddle and reins.

His body was slightly smaller than a horse’s, but he had a much more powerful air about him. The most obvious difference was his head, which had two horns jutting out to the front.

The first one to react to the mount that appeared was Aura, who had the most detailed magical beast knowledge of anyone present. “Wow! He’s different from a normal bicorn! Those horns are magnificent, and his body’s really toned!”

Albedo emitted a proud laugh. “That’s right. His strength matches my level—he should probably be called a war bicorn lord. Though, actually, he’s a level–

one hundred bicorn…”

“Can he fly?!”

“No, that’s impossible. His abilities aren’t so different from a normal bicorn’s. He doesn’t have extra skills, just boosted health, muscular strength, and agility.”

“I guess you can’t power up mounts without rider skills, huh? So if we participate in a level–one hundred battle, our mounts’ skills will be weak and we’ll just be in the way.”

“Yes, but I can protect him with my skills, so we can go the distance in battle.”

“But then do you not have to split your resources? I daresay that is a lot of wasted energy during combat. What about equipping different gear to strengthen him? I have heard that mount monsters can equip things similar to armor and horseshoes.”

“Yes, some summoned beasts can equip gear. For example, and this is related to Aura’s earlier question, if I equipped him with horseshoes that included a flying ability, then he would probably be able to fly. But I already have him equipped with an item to boost his speed, so…I can’t really.” Albedo gave the magical beast beside her a pat. Perhaps she’d hit him too hard—he staggered.

A mount she summoned shouldn’t have staggered from a little tap like that. Albedo furrowed her brow, wondering if he didn’t like her or something else was wrong, when Aura jumped in with a question.

“Huh. So what’s his name?”

“He’s a bicorn. Didn’t you just say that?”

“No, not his racial name, his own name.”

“Does he need one?” Albedo looked at the vampire for her opinion, but she just shrugged.

“Pretty sure he does! He’s like your pet!”

“He’s not really my pet… Is a summoned beast even the same one every time?”

Shalltear chimed in with what she thought was a great idea. “Why not ask the

Prince of Fear? He excels at summoning his brethren, so he must be well versed in the details."

"I'll pass. I mean, he is a member of Nazarick, and it's not like I hate him, but I just…"

"Ahh, yeah. I know he doesn't mean any harm, but they kinda come in through the gaps in your clothes… I think Entoma goes sometimes, but…"

"Disgusting! Please spare me this talk of skin-crawling matters… That room is truly a fearful place. It may be on one of my levels, but I definitely have no interest in going."

"Shalltear, did you know that Entoma calls it the snack room?"

"Eeek! Really? Are you serious?! Ugh, I can't go anywhere near her now!"

Albedo agreed. Who would want to go near someone who declared those things snacks?

The atmosphere had gotten a little strange when Aura, perhaps to change the subject, raised her voice slightly. "So getting back to what we were talking about, you're not going to give him a name?"

"Well, if you think I should, then maybe I will." Albedo mumbled to herself as she became absorbed in thought. If she was going to go to the trouble of giving him a name, she wanted to make sure it wasn't an embarrassing one. Among the words and letters that came to mind, a song echoed through her head in a flash of inspiration.

"What are you mumbling about?"

"Oh, sorry," Albedo answered as if waking from a dream. "If Ainz will allow it, I'll give him a name that is dear to me—Top of the World."

"Hmm. That's a nice name. Is that a reference to Lord Ainz?"

Albedo didn't feel like answering, so she just smiled.

Shalltear's eyebrows tilted to a dangerous angle.

They were always like this. The atmosphere turned volatile, and Aura intervened. "Well, that's fine. You summoned the bicorn, so how about we

move on to the next experiment?”

“Sure, okay.”

Shalltear scowled upon being ignored as Albedo turned back to face her bicorn and stepped into a stirrup. She mounted him with movements so nimble it was hard to believe she was wearing armor. The moment she let her weight rest in the saddle, she felt the bicorn tremble.

“What’s wrong?” Albedo shouted in a panic. She had no idea why her level-100 bicorn would be stumbling like that. She remembered how he had reacted when she had patted him moments ago. Had something been wrong since then? Then what caused it?

“Aura! Shalltear! Something’s wrong with my bicorn! Can you come take a look?”

By that time, the bicorn had started staggering as if he couldn’t stay upright any longer, so the other two could see clearly that something wasn’t right.

“F-for now, hurry up and get off him, Albedo!”

“O-okay.”

The thought finally occurred to Albedo when Aura suggested it, and she dismounted.

The unstable bicorn collapsed on the spot. He was breathing hard and covered in sweat.

“…Albedo, did you gain weight?” Shalltear wasn’t asking entirely out of malice. That is, there wasn’t really any other way to interpret what she had just seen.

“How rude! I’m within a suitable weight range, taking into account extra muscle!”

“Is he weak because you don’t ride him regularly? Mine I keep loose and have them patrol the sixth level pretty frequently.”

“Huh? He shouldn’t… I thought a mount was just like any summoned monsters. So why would he be weak?”

“Should I try to ride him?”

“Unfortunately, you can’t. This is my mount. No one else can ride him. If you try to force your way onto him, he’ll be sent back.”

“Then maybe we should ask him. Hey, bicorn, what happened?” Aura asked. She didn’t have a special ability to talk to horses—bicorns were fairly intelligent magical beasts, so she was probably banking on that. But the bicorn couldn’t talk; he only neighed.

“If he can’t talk, I bet he can’t write, either…”

The bicorn neighed as if confirming her hunch.

The three girls looked at one another.

“Aura, can’t you do some amazing thing with your power?”

“No. What’s ‘some amazing thing’ anyhow? You interviewed us all a while back, so you know the full extent of my powers. Did the head guardian forget something so simple?”

“Ah… How do you usually communicate with Fenrir?”

“Just like normal. ‘Do this, do that.’”

“With words, then? So if you made a concerted effort, perhaps you could do the same with this bicorn?”

“Just because I can communicate with the beasts I control doesn’t mean I can communicate with all of them. Actually, I’ve already tried. Like, the lizardmen have that Rororo, right? I tried with him, and yeah, it’s like I just can’t connect.”

The three girls looked at one another.

“Demiurge is good to call if you’re in a pinch…”

“Unfortunately, Demiurge is working outside Nazarick on orders from Lord Ainz. He’s so busy it’s rarer to find him here. I could contact him, but honestly, I don’t want to consult him about things that aren’t work related.”

Jealousy showed up in Shalltear’s and Aura’s eyes. Demiurge, running around being useful to their master, was the envy of all.

“Ahh, I’m so jealous. I know protecting Nazarick is an important duty, but

unless there are raiders, I've got nothing to show for it, so I always wonder if I'm really being useful or not. I'd like to get out there and bang some heads together for Lord Ainz, too…"

"I've only failed…"

"It's okay, Shalltear! There will probably be some way you can be useful to Lord Ainz—no, I'm sure of it! Although it might be a little tricky unless you get smarter first…"

"Isn't that…a horrible thing to say?"

"Oh, but it's true that you failed, isn't it? Please get some results worthy of a guardian."

Shalltear ground her teeth audibly, but suddenly her expression brightened up like a lamp had gone on in her head. "Hoo-hoo-hoo. Why is this conversation turning against me? Demiurge isn't here, so you can't ask him—I mean to help you ladies out, you know. I guess we have no choice, so I'll do the research."

Shalltear took out a book. The thick, heavy volume had to be more than a thousand pages. But even though Shalltear looked like a little girl, for her totally different inner nature, this weight was nothing.

"Whoooaaa! Is that—? Could that be—?"

"Grr, it's the treasure Lord Ainz gave you, right?"

Aura wasn't the only one to turn an envious gaze toward her—Albedo did, too.

"Yes! This is Lord Peroroncino's Encyclopedia! Lord Ainz gave it to me as a reward for following his orders!"

It was an award for fighting bravely, a consolation prize, and recognition for her services all rolled into one, but for Shalltear, it was the best reward, and she grinned triumphantly. Of course she did. An item that belonged to one's creator was more precious than any other reward.

An Encyclopedia was given to each and every player right after they started the game. It was a one-of-a-kind item that couldn't be stolen or lost unless its owner destroyed it on purpose.

Yggdrasil was a game about enjoying the unknown, and this item could be said to be the embodiment of the developer's desire that players get to know the unknown.

The Encyclopedia recorded an image of each monster the player met. It didn't, however, reveal the monster's stats. Only the image and its name were included and the content of the myth, if the monster appeared in one.

Players who wanted to get the most out of this book item had to write their own notes in it, like what kind of moves the monsters had and what their weak points were.

The Encyclopedia Shalltear now held had belonged to Peroroncino and contained his notes. Ainz remembered Peroroncino had left it in the treasury when he quit the game, so he gave it to Shalltear.

But most of the things that should have been written there were gone, as if Peroroncino had erased them himself because he was scared for the information to be left behind.

For that reason, it wasn't terribly useful, but that didn't matter to Shalltear. To her, it was more important that it was an item that her creator had once used.

"B… Bi… Bic…," she said as she flipped through the pages.

Aura and Albedo tried to peek, but she held the book close to her body and moved away.

"Hmph! That's fine. I got a ring from Lord Ainz, so!" Aura gently stroked the silver band. Albedo stroked the ring on her left ring finger in the same way. Of course, they weren't the only ones who had received those rings.

I want him to give me something special, only for me, a special item from Lord Ainz… As Albedo caressed the lower part of her abdomen, Shalltear shouted. Apparently, she'd found the page she was looking for.

"Bicorn! Here it is! Let's see…" She suddenly froze, looked up, and stared at Albedo in surprise.

"Wh-what? What is it?" she asked timidly, but Shalltear had already lowered

her eyes to the book and was reading over the passage again.

"…A subspecies of unicorn. In contrast to unicorns, who preside over purity, bicorns are said to preside over impurity. Unicorns only let pure maidens ride them, while a bicorn would never let a pure maiden ride it… What?!"

Shalltear's and Aura's eyes nearly popped out of their heads.

"No way… Albedo, you're…?"

"What do you mean, 'No way'? What exactly do you guys think of me?"

"Huh? I mean, but…you're a succubus!!"

"S… Su… Suc… Succubus." Perhaps Shalltear was confused. She flipped through the book looking for the entry.

"Yeah! I'm a succubus! But I've never done it with a guy—*sorry!* What am I supposed to do about it? I'm the captain of the guardians! I'm cooped up in the Throne Room all day! When have I gotten the chance to meet someone? And Lord Ainz never calls me to his bed… I have zero interest in any man but Lord Ainz…" She'd been grumbling at her feet, but she suddenly whipped her head up. "But if you're gonna talk…" Albedo glanced at Aura but shook her head. On the contrary, it'd be bad if she *wasn't* pure. "…Then how about you, Shalltear?"

"…I have no experience with the opposite sex. But if it's with the same sex, then…"

Aura cocked her head for a second as if she didn't understand, then it seemed to click and she appeared weirded out. Her brow furrowed and she yelped, "Whoa!"

"C'mon! There're no good guys! I like dead ones better but not if they're rotting, so… Right? Right?"

"I get that you want me to agree with you, but it's pretty hard to when you have fetishes like those, Shalltear."

Their eyes met, and they all looked away as they silently agreed to end that conversation.

"…Well, now we know why I can't ride the bicorn… How unbelievable. What the heck." Albedo twisted her face up in displeasure.

The bicorn sensed he was being reprimanded and cowered.

“Hmm, it’s like part of your powers are sealed away.”

“But it’s not as if mounted combat is your specialty. You’re simply prevented from using a single ability. If you cannot ride the bicorn, you can borrow a magical beast from Aura, no? I think a unicorn would serve quite well.”

“Mmm, I don’t have a unicorn. I want one, but…”

“Isn’t there a better way? All I have to do is get Lord Ainz to help me out so I can ride the bicorn! That’s the best plan!” Albedo said with a huge grin.

“That’s not fair!”

“Ha!” Albedo snorted at Shalltear. “Could you not be so disrespectful, Shalltear? It’s necessary in order for the captain of the guardians of the Great Tomb of Nazarick to more fully utilize her powers!”

“Grrrr. Heh! So no one will sleep with you unless it’s for work? What a pathetic woman you are. You won’t be winning him on the strength of your charm, that much is certain.”

Aura had had enough of the two grunting and growling. “Would you guys stop talking over my head? Like, enough of the nonsense. It’s not like it’s an immediate issue anyhow, right? You can’t summon anything else?”

“I do have a magic item for that, so I can at least summon a mount.”

“Then that’s fine, isn’t it? What’s the problem?”

“Since summoning with a magic item means I need to change gear or take out the item, it has more steps than summoning with a skill. And this bicorn is much better in combat…”

“So can’t you have the bicorn stop your opponent’s attacks and take advantage of that opening to use the item? It’s one of a beast tamer’s most basic tactics.”

“I wonder if that’s the only way I can use him.”

“If so, you’ll be weak.”

“Don’t say it like you’re happy about my misfortune!”

“*You* seemed pretty happy about *my* misfortune!”

When she said, “That’s not true,” “Yes it is” was the reply.

“Agh, c’mon, you guys. If you’re only going to glare at each other, do it somewhere else. Lord Ainz was nice enough to give us the day off…”

Albedo realized she was right, and Shalltear, who’d been arguing, nodded. But…

“…We have this day off, but I wonder what we should do. We were made to guard the Great Tomb of Nazarick and work for the Supreme Beings in the first place. Our whole existence is work, so why…?”

“Even so, if Lord Ainz tells us to rest, then rest we must!”

The whole reason these three had gathered here was their master saying, *Thanks for working so hard every day. How about you girl guardians get together and hang out?*

“We already met up and hung out, so want to split up? Er, can this even be called hanging out?”

“I wonder. I’m still not sure—or more like rather unsure—what ‘hanging out’ means. By the way, what are you ladies usually up to?”

“I’m patrolling the first, second, and third levels. Other than that, collecting the opinions of the domain guardians, checking on the overall security of my levels… If I have extra time, I take a bath, make sure I’m dressed well…”

“So you actually work sometimes.”

“What do you mean, ‘actually’?”

“Baths, huh? What about you, Aura?”

“Mmm, while Mare is in the arena, I patrol the forest. We have new guys now, too, you know. Other than that, I go home and sleep… Guess that’s about it.”

“That’s it!”

Aura and Shalltear looked confused.

“Yeah, that’s what we should do! By ‘new guys’ you mean the residents of the

new village on this level, right? I've never been there. Let's go!"

"Huh? You've never been? You've visited before, right, Shalltear?"

"I have."

"Really?" Albedo looked a bit puzzled and Aura explained.

"The other guardians have, too. Cocytus came first 'cause he's involved with the lizardmen. Then Demiurge came by to see how things were going. The others drop by sometimes. Hrm, then do you wanna go? It's not that far from here."

9:38 AM ***Nazarick Time***

The newly built village on the sixth level, consisting of only ten log cabins, was smaller than a hamlet. To the right of it were fields, and to the left of it were orchards that were several times larger than the fields.

Naturally, it was surrounded by densely growing forest. Looking from above, it might have seemed like a wide-open space—a green hole, perhaps. When felling trees and removing the stumps, it was usually hard to avoid making the ground uneven, but inside the village it was bizarrely neat and level. That was thanks to Mare's magic.

Many figures were toiling away in the orchards.

The first ones they noticed were members of a race who looked like human women except their skin was the color and texture of bark. Next to them were creatures who looked exactly like trees that had started to move.

The former were dryads, and the latter were monsters called trents. The trents were assisting the dryads by using their tree trunk–like arms to lift them up to the tops of the fruit trees.

"There are also ten lizardmen living here. Sometimes they go up north to hang out at the lake near where we just were. It's not like they live in the water, so it's kinda weird."

"The village is much larger than it was last time I came. It seems like there are many more residents, as well."

“Yeah, after we conquered the Tove Woodlands, we discovered a few races who are okay with living in Nazarick.”

“The criteria for inviting a race here is that they have to be grotesques, fine without food, and of a mild temperament, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what Lord Ainz told us. Although, technically, ‘fine without food’ is ‘immediately self-sufficient…’ Both dryads and trents take nutrients from the soil, so they don’t need any food in particular, although I guess they’re in trouble if the nutrients in the soil run out or it doesn’t rain enough.”

“Hmm. Does Mare make it rain? Or is it a magic item?”

“That’s mainly Mare’s job. He’s also in charge of replenishing the nutrients in the soil. There’s a spell for making the earth more fertile, so when he casts that, it completely recovers. The dryads and trents said it was so yummy they’d get fat, but…well, obviously I don’t know how it tastes.”

As Shalltear and Aura were chatting, Albedo slowly looked out over the village with a levelheaded gaze, as if she were observing experimental subjects. Then the first hint of emotion appeared in her eyes.

“Oh? That’s the sous-chef over there in the field, isn’t it? I wonder what he’s doing.”

The others followed her line of sight and saw hidden behind tall stalks bearing red fruit, in one corner of a field surrounded by a simple fence, a monster that looked sort of like a mushroom moving around. If they squinted, they could see that he was wearing work clothes while picking fruit.

“It’s what it looks like. Sometimes he comes to get produce. He’s also growing a bunch of things. Should we go say hi?”

Albedo and Shalltear exchanged glances. Upon confirming that neither of them felt like rejecting the idea, they headed over to see their friend. They figured it was fine as long as they wouldn’t be in his way.

“Yoo-hoo! You’re working up a sweat as usual!”

At the sound of Aura’s cheerful voice, the sous-chef looked up and saw the three of them. “Not that my body actually sweats, but…”

He stood with an “oof” and stretched his back. It made sense, since he’d been sitting in the field working, but as he didn’t have anything that could be called a “back”—he didn’t have a waist, either—it was impossible to know if his back was actually stiff or if he was just doing it for a change of pace.

Then the sous-chef rotated his neck like a stiff-shouldered human would. His head was shaped like a mushroom cap, and it looked like it had reddish-purple droplets of some kind of liquid about ready to roll off it, but actually they had a bizarre elasticity like dried glue and wouldn’t dribble or spatter.

“Hey, is that a tomato?” When Albedo took an interest in the red fruit in the sous-chef’s hand, he held it up to the level of his eyes and marveled at it.

“Yes, indeed. A tomato of the variety you all know. It’s neither the type that gathers the sun’s energy and explodes, nor the type that attacks you, nor the type that glimmers golden when you cut it open—it’s a normal tomato.”

“In other words, it’s a not-very-rare regular tomato for eating, right?”

“Yes. I don’t have the skill to grow vegetables with special effects. Does your interest indicate that you would like to eat dishes made with tomatoes? Unfortunately, I can only make drinks…”

“No, I was just curious. Maybe Shalltear would like to eat tomatoes.”

“…Why does everyone think vampires drink tomato juice? Undead don’t get any buffs from eating food.”

“There are lots of people in Nazarick who don’t eat food.”

The majority of the NPCs made eating and drinking unnecessary with an item.

“Yeah, because if they did it would increase Nazarick’s maintenance costs. Big eaters like your magical beasts are a burden.”

“Ack, so are we in trouble if I don’t go out and make some money?”

“No, you don’t have to go that far. Lord Ainz and the other Supreme Beings calculated out a precise balance of expenditure and revenue when they built the tomb.”

“Ahh, so that’s why he gave the order to only accept races that are self-sufficient. They won’t disrupt the balance even if their numbers increase.”

“Yeah… You didn’t know that?” Albedo looked at each of the others in turn. “That’s no good. It’s pretty bad if you guys don’t even know about the place you’re guarding. Make some time in your schedules. I’ll explain everything.”

She sighed and looked out at the fields, since they happened to be there. Then she found the leaves of a plant she recognized. “Are those carrots—er, magic carrots?”

“No, those are something else. But, Captain, haven’t you heard?”

“About what?”

“Oh, uh, hmm, I guess we haven’t told you yet. Okay, Mistress Aura, what shall we do? Do you want to call them? I taught you how, right?”

“I did file a report…” Aura grinned. Then she took a deep breath and shouted, “Long live Ainz Ooal Gown!”

The row of the leaves reacted abruptly and began to move. They wiggled vigorously back and forth, pushing the soil aside, and the part that would have been the root underground, if they were carrots, popped out onto the surface.

They looked almost like ginseng, but there was definitely something different about them. They had distinct feet and were clearly moving according to will, not reflex. At the top of the root near the stalk were depressions that seemed to be their eyes and mouth.

Shalltear’s eyes widened, and she said the monster’s name. “Are those mandrakes? I thought we didn’t have any of those…”

“Ohh! That’s what those are! I knew about them from the report, but I had never seen one before.”

The mandrakes chanted, “Long live Ainz Ooal Gown! Long live Ainz Ooal Gown!” and were forming a line.

“These guys aren’t very smart. Supposedly their relatives galgenmännlein, alruna, and alraune are fairly intelligent, but…I did a general search in that forest and couldn’t find any. It’s pretty big, so maybe I just haven’t found them yet. There also seems to be a pretty sizable cave carved out in the direction of the mountains with a myconid colony in it. Haven’t bothered them yet,

though.”

“But I’m impressed you managed to teach them how to say this much.” The sous-chef plucked one of the mandrakes out of the line and took a closer look.

Perhaps it hurt to be grabbed by its stalk. The mandrake started to struggle.

“Long live Ainz Ooal Gown!”

“Long live Ainz Ooal Gown!”

The other mandrakes broke their line and surrounded the sous-chef to protest the mistreatment of their comrade—although they shouted the same thing as before.

“Oh, pardon me. Mistress Aura, could you send them back?”

“Okeydoke! All right, return!”

Beginning with the mandrake that the sous-chef had gently placed back on the ground, they all hopped back into their holes and burrowed into the soil. In only a few seconds, they were completely concealed underground, like the way someone burrows into bed in the middle of winter.

“I see. So the way they talk is just like an animal call, huh?”

“Indeed. They only parrot the sounds; they aren’t using them as words with meaning. Apparently, there is a minimum threshold of intelligence that must be crossed for language comprehension to be possible. I heard it’s being studied right now.” The sous-chef mentioned he heard all this from Demiurge.

“Hmm! By the way, Albedo, may I ask you something? Isn’t it sort of bad for you to not know about newcomers to Nazarick, as captain of the guardians? What would you do if there was a spy?”

Someone else objected faster than Albedo could reply.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Good one, Shalltear. It’s definitely natural to think that because the sixth level is so vast it would be harder to capture and slaughter raiders. If they escaped the arena…if they scattered like baby spiders, it’d be a pain to catch them if there were a lot.” The laugh was empty, and Aura’s eyes were like ice. “But aren’t you underestimating me? This is my hunting ground. Even if they scattered, I would hunt them all down. And even if they wanted to

hurt Lord Ainz and slipped out of the sixth level, they'd still have to break through Crimson's world on the seventh level, and next is the impassable eighth level, you know. Even if they wanted to run away, they'd have to get through the frigid hell of the fifth level, the dark waters of the fourth level, and all the domains you guard… Do you really think that's possible?"

Shalltear shook her head. "It's not possible."

"That's what I'm saying. So even if the newcomers multiply on this level, there's nothing to worry about."

"Aura said it all. Uh, so…so as a result the current plan is to gather all sorts of monsters here."

"Huh? Not just plant monsters?"

Albedo smiled in response to Aura's surprise. "That was the original idea. But thanks to you and Mare, we've seen that there shouldn't be any issues, so a more ambitious plan was drawn up. That said, it's still only a draft, so it's unclear if we'll actually implement it or not. That's why I hadn't told you guys yet, even though you're the guardians of this level." Albedo prefaced her explanation of the plan with, "Don't tell anyone, but…

"The plan is called the Paradise Project. It starts with the hideout Aura built, but it's a large-scale project to eventually gather monsters friendly with humans and have them live here."

"Why do they have to be friendly specifically with humans?"

Albedo had expected that reaction, so she smiled. It was an incredibly sinister smile. "That's the point of the Paradise Project."

"Honestly, I find that difficult to understand. We work in this place, Nazarick, to make it a paradise for the Supreme Beings, so why that name?"

"It's to appeal to the outside world, like, 'Hey, we live in peace with outsiders.'"

"I see… So that's the idea."

"No way! I can't believe you understood, Shalltear!"

She glared at Aura with a face that could obliterate a hundred-year romance.

“Do you by any chance think I’m stupid?”

“…H-hold up a second, Shalltear. Reflect on your past deeds and ask that question again, will you? All you have to do is remember a few things.”

It took only a moment—she must have considered what she had done so far. Shalltear’s pupils dilated like a dead animal’s. Then her eyes flickered as if she had been tossed around on rough waves.

She looked so distressed that Albedo changed the topic back for her. “U-uh, the plan is another of Lord Ainz’s proposals. We were discussing the sixth level, and he suddenly said he wanted to collect a bunch of different monsters. That’s not the kind of idea I could come up with, thinking within the confines of my small world. I was talking with Demiurge a while back about how resourceful Lord Ainz is. Our conclusion was that he really is a genius.”

“We already knew he was a genius. I heard he is a man of few words, though.”

“From Demiurge, right? Geez… Certainly, Lord Ainz does not speak of his plans in a straightforward way. And sometimes he does strange things. But just as the cowardly are often heroes, so are fools often wise. I really believe that.” Albedo shook her head, her eyes moist. “I couldn’t make out his aim in creating the adventurer Momon. What a terrific being… It’s astounding that he has been controlling everything that has happened…”

“Momon is Lord Ainz as an adventurer, right? So why did he do that?”

“You’ll understand soon enough… It’s precisely because he has the persona of Momon that Lord Ainz’s rule will be rock-solid. He’s so awesome… Maybe Demiurge’s proposals are even due to his influe—”

“What are you mumbling about? It’s a trifle disturbing.”

Shalltear’s voice brought Albedo to her senses, and she cleared her throat before looking at the other three. “Uh, what were we talking about? Oh, right! Each word Lord Ainz says, each move he makes—they’re all full of meaning. So what I’m saying is that even if you can’t reach his level, you should endeavor to at least understand the meaning behind his words.”

“That’s hard. Lord Ainz is a little too smart. Oh, spearneedles!”

Two big white lumps well over six feet tall lumbered out of the woods toward Aura. They were magical beasts that looked sort of like Angora rabbits.

“How cute!” Shalltear stood next to Aura and petted the white fur balls. “They’re so soft. I want one of these.”

“Yeah, it feels good, right? But this fur gets sharp like needles when they encounter an enemy.”

Spearneedles were level-67 monsters.

When they engaged in combat, they became balls of extremely fine needles. If they were killed in that state, they wouldn’t go back to being soft, so people requested that they be taken by surprise and killed in one hit before they could go on guard. For that reason, the players hunting them were always a much higher level.

“Really? Wow. Frightening!” Shalltear exclaimed these and other things as she continued petting them.

“Well, they won’t engage in combat unless I order them to. I guess it would be different if there were enemies around, but how would hostile forces—raiders—get in here? And without any reports from other levels?”

“Yeah. Of course. There are minions with superior detection skills stationed on the upper three floors, so it would be really hard to make it this far without being discovered.”

Just then Aura froze, then turned her head toward the arena.

“What is it, Aura?”

“Seems like the portal to the seventh level activated.”

“From below? Demiurge is outside, I think, so…one of his subordinates? Do you need to go check on it?”

“No, Mare is there, so I think it’s okay. He should get in touch if something comes up.” She touched the earring hung around her neck. “And it’s not such a rare thing. If you want to get to the surface from below, the only way is to use the teleportation gates and go up one level at a time. Oh right, I remember *someone* didn’t want to run and used magic instead.”

“Ahem, the Great Tomb of Nazarick certainly is an impregnable fortress.”

“Yeah. You probably couldn’t blow up a level even with the super-tier spell Sword of Damocles and the World Item I have. That’s why we really have to avoid getting the free teleportation rings stolen.”

Everyone’s eyes gathered on Albedo’s left ring finger.

“I’m pretty sure Mare leaves his ring here when he ventures outside. Just goes to show how important they— Oh, Mare’s calling.”

Aura moved a short distance away from the others, grabbed her earring, and began talking to Mare, who was elsewhere. Her face grew gradually sterner as their conversation went on, and by the time she was finished, she looked disappointed.

“Sorry, it looks like something came up and Mare has to go out, so I have to head back.”

“Oh. In that case, shall we go back, too? What do you think, Shalltear?”

“No objections.”

“I’m going to putz around in this field a little longer. I want to talk to the dryads and trents.”

“Then I guess we’re splitting up. Thanks, guys. I feel like I figured out how to spend a day off. Let’s do something again… Oh yeah, we should all go to the baths sometime.”

2

9:28 AM ***Nazarick Time***

Mare looked up from his book and slowly shifted his gaze to the teleportation gate that led to the seventh level.

At the slight sensation of power waves, he marked his place and quietly put his book on the chair next to him. He picked up his god-tier staff—Shadow of

Yggdrasil—and held it aloft.

He reached for the magic item hanging around his neck with his free hand but stopped.

He didn't need to contact his sister. He hadn't received any reports of intruders, so the person coming in had to be one of his colleagues.

He scampered away to the gate. His sister liked to jump from the arena seating, but Mare didn't. In the first place, there were stairs, so wouldn't using them to get down show the most loyalty to the Supreme Beings? They must have created the stairs for a reason.

But I can't say that to Aura… She'd look at me with her scary eyes…

Mare had decided that he, at least, wouldn't let the Supreme Beings' intentions be in vain, so he took the stairs. Then he raced into the waiting room to find someone standing before the giant oval mirror sparkling in the colors of the rainbow.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh, if it isn't Floor Guardian Mare. I am ever so delighted that you've come to meet me." The clown dressed all in white with a raven beak mask made a little bow, and Mare bowed back in the same way.

"Hello, Pulcinella. What can I do for you today?"

"Perhaps you've heard, but I am currently working for Master Demiurge. I've come today as his messenger. Please take this." The clown held out a folder.

"If Demiurge is giving it to me, it must be a circular?"

"Indeed. Ah, I'm so lucky you came, Master Mare. If it was Mistress Aura, I would have had to have her call you."

"Huh? R-really?"

The circular system was devised by the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, himself. All it entailed was writing a nonurgent message on a piece of paper and passing it around to each guardian, but they hadn't had anything like it before—which was why Mare, intrigued and moved, fixed his eyes on it so intently when he took it.

“So this is…? W-wait! Why c-can’t you give it to Aura?”

Both Aura and Mare were floor guardians, so there shouldn’t have been any reason not to. She could be surprisingly methodical, so it wasn’t as if she would have thrown the message away.

“That I don’t know, either. Master Demiurge ordered me to hand it directly to you and not to Mistress Aura.”

“I see… I—I wonder…”

He didn’t say enough to specify the question on his mind, but Pulcinella understood what he meant. “Hmm, no, I don’t know. Perhaps the answer or reason is contained within that folder.”

“I see… B-by the way, what is Demiurge doing now?”

“Crossbreeding experiments. Crossbreeding is possible between humanoid races but impossible between humanoid and subhuman races. How sad! Just because two lovers are of slightly different races, their love cannot bear fruit. Demiurge is endeavoring to rescue them from those unfortunate circumstances, to create the possibility between humanoids and subhumans!” He practically sang in a sonorous voice, spreading his arms wide and looking to the heavens.

Mare blinked in surprise at the sudden change in mood.

“Oh, do excuse me. Master Demiurge’s kindness as he tries to bring smiles to people’s faces excites me so. Please forgive my rudeness.”

“Su-sure. It’s all right. Yeah.”

“He told me they—the demons—are sacrificing themselves to avoid ill will between the races. What an impressive spirit of self-sacrifice! I can’t even see for the tears!” Pulcinella wiped his mask where his eyes were. Of course, he wasn’t crying, and not only that, he was talking in his normal cheerful voice and didn’t seem the least bit sad.

“…How could people be upset at them?”

“I don’t understand it, either. Why would they hate kind Master Demiurge? But he told me himself. Oh, oh, listen to this. Master Demiurge is so kind! The

other day he said it was a pity the livestock were starving, so he had them swap their little ones, roasted them whole, and served them up. A cruel person would serve them without swapping them first, right?”

“I-is that so?”

“Yes, it is! Then, in order that the parents might bid their children farewell, he called them to the opposite table. I don’t believe there is anyone—outside of the Supreme Beings—kind enough to provide an opportunity to part with one’s family with a smile besides Master Demiurge.”

Mare responded to Pulcinella’s entranced remarks with a half-hearted sigh.

He didn’t really care what happened to anyone who wasn’t from Nazarick. Two or three seconds later, he felt nothing about the livestock Demiurge was keeping.

“And when you’re starving, even if your brain wants it, you can’t stomach food, so he thought ahead far enough to warn them and make them eat well. He is truly so kind—”

Mare had the feeling this story would never end, so he quickly interrupted. “Uh, wh-what happened to C-Crimson? I would have thought he’d be the one to make deliveries. Where is he? What is he doing?”

“…He? Or she? He probably doesn’t have a sex, but when I saw him the other day, he was lurking near the teleportation gate on the seventh level while Master Demiurge is gone.”

“I—I see.”

Mare pictured Crimson.

Crimson, the huge domain guardian who waited submersed in flowing lava and pulled in unsuspecting opponents to fight in an environment that gave him the advantage… He was level 90, but since his specs were optimized for fighting, he was one of the strongest in Nazarick in terms of pure combat power, to the point where he could even match up against some of the floor guardians. For that reason, he was an appropriate choice to guard the seventh level while Demiurge was away.

“Oops, it seems I’ve stayed chatting too long. I’ve given you the circular, so I need to head off to bring smiles to many faces.”

“Th-thank you.”

Pulcinella responded gently to Mare’s bow. “No need to thank me, Master Mare. Seeing your smile is most satisfying of all.” The clown comically shrugged. “All right. Until we meet again,” he said with a wave and disappeared into the gate to the seventh level.

After seeing him off, Mare opened the folder. With mixed feelings about not being able to show his sister—superiority but also guilt and immorality—he scanned the document from top to bottom and blinked a few times when he reached the end.

This is…less like a notice and more like a message to the guardians from Lord Ainz.

It was addressed to all the male guardians and included gratitude and praise for their continued labor. The gist of the message was an invitation: “Why don’t we all go recharge in the baths?”

The participants’ names were listed from the top as Ainz, Demiurge, Mare, Cocytus, and out of the “going” and “not going” options, “going” was circled for the first two. Normally Sebas’s name would be here, too, but he was currently out in a human city gathering intelligence with Solution.

Let’s see, what day…?

The date wasn’t set yet, and the document said it would be decided based on what worked for all the participants, so there was no reason for him to hesitate circling “going.” The message said it was fine to decline, but Mare definitely couldn’t turn down an invitation from his kind, generous master. Who in Nazarick could?

He took the pencil from the folder and circled the “going” next to his name.

“Eh-heh-heh-heh.” He smiled at the “going” circle, but then his mood suddenly darkened. “Oh, but… How will I give this to Cocytus?”

Mare could detect their master’s wish that this remain a secret among the

men from the way he mentioned multiple times that it wasn't necessary to inform any of the women, so it was probably best to take it himself.

It would be bad to keep it a secret from Aura…yeah. I mean…I have to get her to guard the level by herself while I'm…what's that called again? Receiving affection?

Regardless of what happened when they were leaving on orders, if they were going to visit another guardian, the dark elf siblings always told each other where they were headed. The Supreme Beings had ordered both of them to guard the floor, so it was only natural.

Mare grabbed the magic item hanging around his neck.

"S-sis? Can you hear me?"

The reply was immediate.

"I can hear you. What is it, Mare?"

"Oh, good. U-uh, I need to go see Cocytus about something, so I'm heading out."

"To Cocytus's place?"

"Yeah, I need to hurry."

"What happened?"

Mare jumped. His voice threatened to crack, but he managed to squeeze out a normal tone. "N-nothing. It's nothing, but I just have the feeling I gotta go."

"Hmm…"

She sounded completely unconvinced, and Mare's hands got drenched in sweat.

But yeah. I can't help it. This is what Lord Ainz ordered me to do.

Apart from the words of their creator, Lady BubblingTeapot, those of Lord Ainz were the most important out of all the Supreme Beings'. Prioritizing them was only natural.

"Well, it's fine. Go ahead. But the fifth level is cold, so don't forget to take precaution against chi— Oh yeah, it's not a problem for you, huh, Mare?"

“R-right. I’ll be fine with magic. So I’ll be back later.”

If he chatted any longer, he felt like he might say something weird, so he hurriedly let go of the magic item. It sounded like she was about to say something, but unfortunately—or perhaps luckily—he couldn’t hear what it was.

“O-okay! Gotta hurry!”

Mare activated the power of the ultra-fancy ring he’d received from his master.

Right after he teleported, clusters of pure white swarmed him, sticking to his face. They were snowflakes swirling through the sky.

The white breath he exhaled was swiftly blown behind him—due to the air, frigid from lapping at the snow, gusting by.

The ice and snow whirled around by the storm wind caused a raging whiteout. The accumulating snow covered up his tracks.

The weather was meant to waylay invaders, but during peaceful times, it often wasn’t this fierce. Usually a light dusting of snowflakes fell from the dark clouds; even if it was a gloomy world, one’s view wasn’t obstructed.

“Umm…” Mare darted his eyes around. He’d used his Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown to teleport, so he had to be in the vicinity of his destination.

Finding his way, Mare proceeded with nimble movements. He didn’t leave footsteps on the snow. He didn’t sink—it was almost as if he were walking on solid land.

The deserted white world was so quiet he could hear the sound of the scattering, falling snowflakes. Of course, with his continuously active supersensory magic, he knew he wasn’t alone. It was only because the ones lurking out of sight knew that he was the guardian of the sixth level that they didn’t show themselves.

Mare reached his destination in that silence.

Before him was an enormous white ball the shape of an upside-down hornet nest.

Surrounding it were six giant crystals with their sharp points thrusting toward the sky. Inside them, humanlike figures were visible.

When Mare stepped forward, his foot made a worrying, creaking noise he didn't like. Looking down, he saw that instead of the ground covered in snow like up until now, there was slick ice. It seemed fairly thick, but it was awfully dark underneath, so he understood that the ice was covering a huge hole.

He stepped onto the ice. He strode forward unhesitatingly, as if he couldn't even imagine it breaking.

With scary creaking and squeaking noises, he crossed the ice with no problems and arrived at the white sphere.

"U-uh, Cocytus… Are you here?" He wasn't calling to the gigantic white ball but to the immense crystals.

In response, monsters that resembled human women came out. There were the same number of women as crystals, and they were dressed completely in white. Their skin was deathly pale, and their long hair was black.

These frost virgins—level-82 ice monsters—were basically Cocytus's personal guards for his residence, Snowball Earth.

"Welcome, Master Mare."

"U-umm, uh, is Cocytus here?"

"Master Cocytus is currently outside the Great Tomb of Nazarick at the new lizardman village."

"I-is that so?"

The frost virgin nodded that it was. "If you have a message for him, we can take it."

Mare wasn't sure what to do.

He had come this far, so he figured if he put the clipboard in Cocytus's room and left a message with the frost virgin, that should be no problem. But given the content, it seemed more likely that his master would want him to hand it over directly.

So how can I get to Cocytus if he's outside?

Leaving Nazarick wasn't forbidden, but there were conditions that had to be met, and their master strictly prohibited operating independently outside.

From the intelligence they had gathered and analyzed so far, the level-100 floor guardians were unimaginably powerful in this world, comparable to walking disasters. So it wouldn't be dangerous for Mare, a guardian himself, to operate on his own. On the contrary, everyone in the outside world should tremble in fear. But that was reckless thinking considering one key event in recent memory.

There existed an unknown enemy who had brainwashed Shalltear, which meant they probably possessed a World Item. There were also signs of other players here and there.

Those forces were operating at an uncertain scale, so Ainz was being cautious.

"H-hmm. What should I do?"

To go outside required an escort of at least five level-75 or above minions. Mare had two dragons under him, but taking them would be a bit too conspicuous. Asking his sister would be fastest, but when he remembered the grilling he had gotten just to come here, he knew he couldn't do that.

Then he got a flash of inspiration.

Their number and level were just right.

"Uh, umm… Would you come with me?"

"A-apologies, but we have orders from Master Cocytus to guard this place. We cannot disobey Master Cocytus unless word comes from Lord Ainz… Please forgive us!"

"Uh, er, no. That's fine."

There was nothing he could do about that, and when he stopped to think about it, it made sense. His next best idea was to borrow evil lords from the seventh level, but if he simply asked them, he would probably get turned down in the same way as just now. Still, it was true that Demiurge was his only hope.

In the first place, he wanted to avoid asking anyone who wasn't listed on the

clipboard for help. Secondly, most of the minions in the Great Tomb of Nazarick over level 80 worked directly under one of the floor guardians; there were very few free agents.

Under those two circumstances, if he wanted to borrow evil lords, the first thing he needed to do was get in touch with Demiurge.

But how can I contact him?

The only options for reaching Demiurge outside were dispatching minions or using magic.

Other than that… Mare recalled the book he had been reading. *I wonder if he has subordinates level 75 or over… But he's not a guardian…hrm. But he's a guy, so maybe it's okay. If I just have him keep quiet about it…*

"Th-thank you. I guess I'll take care of it myself."

"Oh? Understood."

Mare activated his ring. His destination was the huge library on the tenth level, Ashurbanipal.

•

9:54 AM ***Nazarick Time***

Mare's field of vision changed instantaneously from the snowy expanse to a spacious room.

The sophisticated space, done mainly in ebony brown, was dimly illuminated by orange light. The ceiling curved gently into a dome, and across from where Mare stood was a pair of giant double doors.

On either side of those doors, which were as large as the ones that led to the Throne Room, towered ten-foot golems. They were outfitted as samurai and had been fashioned out of rare metals by one of the Supreme Beings, which made them far stronger than normal.

"Umm, please open the doors."

In response, both golems put a hand on a door and slowly pushed. A heavy sound echoed, and Mare proceeded through the opening big enough for multiple people to walk abreast.

The scene before him was less like a library and more like something else—yes, it was more like an art museum. The floor and bookshelves were all heavily ornamented, and the books lining the shelves seemed to have been placed there as decorations.

Not a speck of dust sullied the polished floor, which featured a beautiful parquet design. The ceiling was double high, a balcony jutted out from the second floor, and numerous bookshelves surrounded the space as if peering in. The ceiling's dome was crowded with gorgeous embellishments complementing a magnificent fresco.

Here and there were glass-covered display tables with several books lined up inside. There were any number of light sources, but none of them was very bright. It was dark enough that a human would have to squint.

One glance wasn't enough to take in the whole room. Bookshelves obstructed the view.

In the silence befitting a library, the doors slowly closed behind Mare. With the light from the entrance gone, the room felt even darker. Combined with the quiet that could nearly be heard as a sound, that gave the room an ominous atmosphere.

Of course, with his eyes that could see in the dark of night, it looked no different from midday to Mare, so it didn't seem ominous to him at all.

He walked toward the back at a somewhat quickened pace.

The room he was currently in was the Room of Reason. The library was split into the Room of Knowledge, the Room of Reason, and the Room of Evil, plus small rooms for other uses, such as the private quarters of the staff. Thinking of it that way made his destination seem a bit far off.

On either side of the hallway stood rows upon rows of bookshelves, packed with countless books.

The books of *Yggdrasil* could be split broadly into five categories.

First, there was the data on monsters used to summon them as mercenaries.

Nazarick had three types of monsters. First were the NPCs, created just like

the players. Then there were monsters level 30 and below that spawned automatically. Finally, there were monsters that were summoned as mercenaries. These mercenary monsters could be summoned with a ritual using the book plus an appropriate amount of gold for the desired level. In other words, they needed the books in order to call upon those monsters.

The second type of book consisted of magic items.

Certain data crystals dwelled only within things that took on the form of books. Items shaped like books were generally single-cast items. They were different from scrolls in that while a scroll required the user to be a class capable of casting the spell it contained, anyone could use a book.

The third type of book was made up of event items. It was common for the items required for class changes to take the form of books. When Ainz changed from skeleton mage to elder lich, he needed a Book of the Dead. There were many others, such as the *Martial Arts Study Guide* and *Strange Rumors of the Four Great Elementals*. Besides class changes, some books allowed the user to learn new spells.

The fourth type was graphical data.

Those were books containing the graphical data of swords, shields, armor, and so on. If someone with the right blacksmith skills used one on the appropriate resources, the corresponding appearance could be created.

The fifth type was novels passed around in the form of books.

Most of them were old, out-of-copyright works from the outside world. The next largest number were background stories handed out by the admins. Finally, there were also original stories written by *Yggdrasil* players. There was also fan fiction set in *Yggdrasil*, as well as strategy guides based on journals.

Most of the Great Tomb of Nazarick's innumerable books were of the first type, collected in order to summon mercenary monsters. Of course, there was no reason to have collected so many of them.

In reality, even if they invested all the guild's assets, they wouldn't be able to summon even a tenth of these monsters. Despite that, the reason they had so many was that since the books themselves were cheap, a guild member went a

little overboard on a copying spree. The excess books were also used to hide more valuable items.

Mare gazed sidelong at the books as he walked past.

Then all of a sudden, a ghostlike figure appeared from between some bookcases to block his path.

It wore a hooded raven-black robe that melted into the library's gloom. On the belt around its waist, which was threaded with multiple gems, was a jewel-tipped wand.

Beneath the hood was a whitish face that seemed to have already turned to grave wax. Its hands were all skin and bone. With every move it made, the darkness surrounding it wavered slightly.

It was one of the most famous undead casters, an elder lich.

In *Yggdrasil*, this type was known colloquially as the white faux millionaire. It was level 30, which made it the second-least-powerful elder lich. It had close palette-swapped relatives, the red faux millionaire and the black faux millionaire.

What made it different from an ordinary elder lich was the band around its left upper arm.

It said, "Librarian J."

"Welcome, Master Mare." The elder lich greeted him in a hoarse, difficult-to-understand voice and bowed slowly but deeply. It was a proper bow in which he placed one hand on his chest.

"U-umm, I came to see the head librarian. Uh, is he in the back?"

The elder lich pondered for a moment and then spoke. "The head librarian is currently creating scrolls, so he is in the Crafting Room."

"Thank you."

"Allow me to guide you. This way."

"Oh, it's okay! I don't mean to interrupt your work."

"Not to worry. Our role is to be of use to those who visit the library."

Refusing at that point would have been rude.

“Understood. Then please take me there.”

A smile appeared on the elder lich’s horrifying face, and he set off walking out in front.

Mare followed, looking sidelong at the elder liches and other undead casters they passed on their way.

“By the way, shall I put that book back?”

“Oh yes, please.”

The elder lich looked at the title of the book as he took it. “*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*? Was it interesting?”

“Yeah, it was! I’m trying to think of what to read next.”

“Oh, I have a recommendation for you. This book is so funny you won’t be able to stop laughing. It’s about a murderer who— Oh, here we are.”

“Thank you.”

Mare opened the door he’d been led to.

The room had originally felt fairly spacious, but it was cramped now, with huge shelves along every wall.

Lined up tidily on the shelves were countless catalysts: ores, precious metals, stones with attributes, gems, all sorts of powders, organs of various animals, and so on. There was also a large amount of parchment—both rolled and not.

These were all resources for scroll creation.

Of course, this wasn’t all the Great Tomb of Nazarick had. There were many hundreds of times this amount in the treasury.

The resources in this room were just the ones prepared for immediate use.

A fairly large drafting table stood in the center of the space, and a piece of parchment was spread across it. Standing before the table was a skeleton that looked like a combination of a human and some animal.

It wasn’t very tall—a little less than five feet, perhaps.

Two horns like an ogre's stuck out of its skull, and its hands each had four fingers. Its feet were hooves.

This strange figure was wrapped in a bright saffron himation. A hoodlike sheet was draped over its head in a way that its horns wouldn't tear it, and another sheet was wrapped around its hips.

It also had a silver bracelet with jewels the colors of the rainbow, a golden ankh around its neck, multiple bizarre rings curled around its finger bones, and gems studding its himation. All of these were fairly powerful magic items.

And at its hip, hanging like swords, were several scrolls.

Although its appearance and gear were peculiar, it was a skeleton mage, one of the early races of undead. It was a being a step below the elder lich Mare had just met.

But this skeleton mage, Titus Annaeus Secundus, was head of this huge library.

A Supreme Being created him to be specialized in crafting, not combat. His total levels were actually higher than that elder lich's.

"Hello, Guardian Mare. I welcome you."

"Oh, hi, Titus. I came to ask you a favor."

"I see. Then let's hear it, shall we?"

"O-okay. Umm, so I'm hoping you can lend me some level-seventy-five or higher minions."

"Understood. So you're heading outside."

"Hmm? Y-yes, I am. You knew right away, huh?"

"…I would never forget the words of our ruler Lord Ainz. So when I considered your position, I arrived at the answer immediately. Very well!" He thought for a moment. "I'll lend you our overlords Cocceius, Ulpius, Aelius, Fulvius, and Aurelius."

"What? Really?"

"Yes, really. Honestly, their fighting power is a bit excessive for the library.

They would be happier to guard you than to do the dusting here.”

“U-umm, uh, thank you!”

“That said, I can’t let you take them for free. I’d like you to assist me with something. We’re going to make a scroll.”

“Oh! Yes, sir! What do I need to do?”

“You don’t have to worry about a thing. All you need to do is cast a tier-four spell at the scroll when I give you the word.”

“Wh-what spell should I use?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

Mare looked puzzled. Being left to choose for himself was the most difficult. *Is a common spell fine?*

Titus reached a bony hand toward a small desk placed adjacent to the drafting table. His objective was at a mountain of golden glimmers—*Yggdrasil* gold.

Suddenly, some of the gold beneath his hand began to melt. Then, as if it had a mind of its own, it moved onto the parchment.

The snake of gold that had flowed onto the parchment writhed, and as if a place for it had been designated ahead of time, it began to spread.

In the space of a breath, a magic circle had been drawn in gold on the parchment. It was complex but in a delicate way.

“Okay.”

Mare, who had been waiting nervously for his turn, heeded the signal and cast his spell.

He felt his magic getting sucked into the magic circle.

Normally, that would mean the scroll was complete. In any case, that’s what Mare thought.

But then—

Crimson flames.

The unthinkable occurred on the drafting table.

Mare watched in horror as the drafting table blazed up the way the alcohol ignites when flambéing and vanished in the space of two blinks.

The flames left hardly any trace behind—it was as if they'd been an illusion. There wasn't even a burning smell.

But the top of the drafting table proved the fire really happened.

On it were the remains of the scroll—*charred* remains.

As if he had been expecting just such an outcome, Titus snatched up the burned remnants and took a closer look. "So we can't load it with a tier-four spell. It seems like it definitely doesn't depend on the skill of the caster, either." He mumbled about ten-year-olds being no good as he scribbled in his log.

"Uh, wh-what happened? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, don't worry. In order to conserve parchment, we're trying to create scrolls using materials we can gather in this world, but the quality is so awful…"

There were limits on what kind of parchments could be used depending on the tier of the spell.

For instance, regular parchment could be used for spells up to tier two but no higher. With the highest-quality parchment, dragon hide, however, it was possible to make tier-ten spell scrolls.

Naturally, dragon hide was a first-class material that could be acquired only by hunting a dragon.

And so all the members of the guild Ainz Ooal Gown had hunted them like crazy, but that was back in the *Yggdrasil* days. Until they could confirm the existence of dragons—and other creatures—in this world, Ainz had limited the use of dragon hide, understandably so.

He wouldn't allow the folly of using up their stores without a way to secure more. There might come a time when they absolutely needed it.

"No! Not my dragons!"

"Of course not. We wouldn't do that. Your dragons and all the other summoned beings exist by the will of the Supreme Beings. Naturally, it is strictly prohibited to harm them."

With an amused look at Mare, who had relaxed, Titus tossed the ruined scroll into the garbage.

“Uh, so does that mean the regular parchment in this world is no good for making scrolls?” Mare eyed the charred remains.

“There’s a very good chance that’s what it means. Well, I don’t know. It’s possible that in this world the way I make scrolls is heretical. Apparently, the way the people here make potions, for example, is quite different.”

“B-but you can’t say from just one failure that it’s the parchment’s fault, can you?”

“Just one? We’ve done a number of tests on parchment from the outside, but when we try to imbue any with spells over tier three, it always ends in a fire. Bursting into flames must be what happens when the magic cannot be sealed inside the parchment…”

“…But the casters in this world use that parchment, don’t they?”

“No, it’s possible that the sheet we just threw away wasn’t the typical variety used in this world. Of course, considering all the various countries, it’s not impossible, but… When we tried with the parchment used in the countries in Nazarick’s vicinity…” He held up a sheet with a different texture from the one they had just used. “…The results were even worse—it could only contain up to tier one.”

“Does that mean humans are good at making the best use of inferior materials?”

“No. Probably it’s a difference of techniques. It’s painful to admit, but perhaps theirs are more polished in a way. Somehow, I want to gain new techniques and advance beyond them.”

“That’s great!” Mare respected the head librarian for his spirit of self-improvement.

“It’s all thanks to the great Supreme Being. Now then, Guardian Mare, I’ll lend you the overlords as I promised. Come with me.”

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10:28 AM ***Nazarick Time***

After leaving his ring behind for safekeeping and passing through the ground level, Mare teleported with his party to the center of a room in a stone building.

Stone architecture was sturdy and heavy, but it required a solid base, so it wasn't suited to the wetlands, and it required architectural technology that the lizardmen had no way of possessing. Obviously, this building had been made by a third party—workers dispatched by Nazarick.

The reason they had gone so far as to send personnel over to build the place was explained vividly by the object enshrined in the back of the room behind Mare.

He bowed to it deeply. The overlords accompanying him followed suit.

Elevated a few steps up was an exquisite statue of the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, so lifelike it was as if the man himself had been turned to stone. The way he was thrusting his staff up at an angle gave him the air of a ruler and imparted a sense of his majesty to all who saw it.

A number of offerings had been placed on the altar before the statue. Of course, to Mare, none of them had any value. They were all fish and sad little flowers.

But Mare didn't find it offensive.

The offerings had clearly been made out of respect and worship. For example, the flowers were not the ones blooming on the marsh but rather varieties picked at the risk of life and limb in the forest. And the size of the fish far surpassed the average of the ones the lizardmen ate—they were offering their best.

Mare nodded in satisfaction.

That the rabble should admire his great master made him very happy.

"You've done a good job," he called to the lizardmen who were nervously watching him.

They were the ones in charge of cleaning this shrine. They had druid powers—rare among lizardmen—and around their necks they wore medals with the Ainz Ooal Gown guild crest etched into them.

Really, the difference between Mare and them was night and day; he was with the conqueror, and they were the conquered, so there should have been no need for him to thank them. But his deep satisfaction stemming from the same reason as before compelled him.

Leaving behind the lizardmen as they bobbed their heads to him, he and the five overlords left the shrine.

Before them lay the marsh and the lizardman settlement. The lizardmen were more prosperous than before.

Of course, their numbers had decreased in the war, but as a result of the five tribes coming together, their village was bigger and stronger.

The large area was enclosed by a fence, and several watchtowers had been built, although it was unclear how, given the uneven ground. Keeping watch up inside them were bony white beings—probably Nazarick Old Guarders—armed with bows. There were also Nazarick Old Guarders in the marsh itself. They seemed to be on patrol to keep out any foreign threats.

“U-uh, I wonder where Cocytus is.”

Cocytus stood out in more ways than one. If he was in the village, it should have been easy to pick him out immediately, and if he was inside a house, his attendants, fitting the same criteria as Mare’s, should have been standing outside the door. Mare scanned the area with those things in mind but couldn’t see any sign of him.

“Can you ask someone where Cocytus is?”

“Understood. One moment please.”

The overlord who replied, Aurelius, returned to the shrine.

Mare looked out over the marsh, the peaceful lizardman village. The lizardmen didn’t seem on guard against the Nazarick Old Guarders. That went for the lizardman young as well. They coexisted as if it were perfectly natural.

They don’t seem to hold any grudges after being attacked and conquered by undead, so it must mean Cocytus’s policy of friendly relations is working. Or are lizardmen just a docile species?

Mare absentmindedly wondered about those things until Aurelius returned a moment later.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master Mare. The ones working at the shrine say they don’t know where he is but that the chief of the united tribe, Shasuryu Shasha, might.”

“Oh, okay. Then, uh, let’s go see him.”

Mare set off following Aurelius. They weren’t aiming for the village on the marsh, but rather they walked along the lakeshore to a place just outside the forest. They could see Nazarick Old Guarders in the trees from a distance.

The party’s destination was on the edge of another marsh, a place where a fairly large-scale construction project was under way.

The water had been dammed, and about ten stone golems were digging. They carried the dirt to land, after which lizardmen carted it away in wheelbarrows.

As Mare watched them to figure out what they were doing, a big lizardman ran over to him, all flustered.

It was a splendidly built lizardman covered in scars, and he was clearly different from the other lizardmen in more ways than one. The medal around his neck swung wildly in his panic.

The medals, worn for protection and as a sign of subordination, had no magic power themselves, but they were proof of being owned by Ainz. And that was the reason no one in the Great Tomb of Nazarick, under the influence of the Supreme Beings, could harm the lizardmen for no reason. Of course, if they deserved to die, that would have been a different story, but luckily, perhaps, lizardmen knew their place and respected the strong—no one among them was foolish enough to offend their keepers.

“Welcome, Master Mare. My name is—”

“You’re Shasuryu Shasha, right?”

“That I am. I’m honored you know me.”

“Oh, I—I heard about you from Cocytus… Uh, do you know where he is right now?”

Shasuryu began to think. “I’m fairly certain he took several of his subordinates to go conquer the toadmen. He also took a few dozen lizardmen so they could observe.”

“Toadmen?”

“A toad-like subhuman race that inhabits the northeastern part of the lake. We don’t get along very well. They have the ability to order around large monsters and magical beasts, so from our perspective they’re a difficult opponent. I heard that in the generation of my father’s father, there was a huge war, and the lizardmen lost so badly that one tribe collapsed.”

“F-figures they’re strong if they’re from the north.”

The large body of water was actually more like two lakes stuck together, shaped like an upside-down gourd. The southern, slightly smaller lake where the lizardmen lived was half-marshland, half–open water. Not many large monsters lived there because the water was shallow. In contrast, the northern lake was deeper and was home to many larger monsters; they tended to be more powerful than the ones from the southern lake. Of course, to Mare the difference was negligible.

“These toadmen, they aren’t actually tsveiks, are they?”

Tsveiks were the monsters that lived in the poisonous swamp that once surrounded Nazarick. Mare knew that his sister had a few.

“I’m afraid I don’t know about that. Perhaps you can ask Cocytus when he returns? I imagine he’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll do that. Then I wanted to ask about something else, u-uh… This seems like quite a big construction project. What are you making? It’s not very close to the village, and it doesn’t seem like a fence or something for defense…”

“We’re building our fourth fish preserve.”

When Mare heard Shasuryu’s detailed explanation, it made sense to him.

It was a good thing that the lizardman tribes had combined, but when they all gathered, food became a problem. Many of their members had died in the war, but in this location, they couldn’t catch enough to go around. Of course, if they

went back to their old villages to go fishing, the problem would be solved, but their new ruler, Cocytus, wouldn't allow it.

Regardless of how it would have gone if an entire tribe of adults traveled the marsh, sending a small number would increase their chances of getting attacked by monsters. The lizardman numbers were already down, so he didn't want to lose any more.

Cocytus wanted the lizardmen to thrive, so he had started to work on the food issue.

First, he brought and distributed food from Nazarick—with Ainz's permission, of course. Then he struggled to come up with a lasting source of food for them. It goes without saying that he found Zaryusu's fish preserves. And with advice from Demiurge, he helped them build preserves that were even more efficient.

Construction proceeded rapidly, and they already had three large preserves. This was to be the fourth.

"But you haven't raised any fries yet, right?"

"No, all we can do using our—no, my brother's—knowledge is care for fish that are already grown to some extent. But using what we learned from Demiurge, we've built fry preserves and are nearly ready to use them. Within the next few years, we should be able to support double the number of lizardmen we currently have with farmed fish alone."

"I—I see. So after a few years, we won't have to bring any more fish from Nazarick, huh? Of course, I'm sure you'd be able to get some anytime if there was an emergency."

"We're all exceedingly grateful to Lord Ainz. He's given us so many fish… But those fish, they don't have any innards. How do they survive? Are they like those monsters that don't need to eat? But they don't have bones, either…"

"Those are food created by Lord Ainz and the other Supreme Beings."

The fish Cocytus had brought them came from an item called Dagda's Cauldron.

"What? They can simply 'create' enough fish for us to live on?" Shasuryu

shook his head. “When Zaryusu and the others visited from the Supreme Beings’ castle, they told us fantastic tales. They said that the Great Tomb of Nazarick contains multiple separate worlds, that it was the realm of a true god. So Lord Ainz has the power of a god?”

“Well, yeah!” *That should have been obvious by now!* Mare cocked his head in genuine confusion.

Ainz Ooal Gown was the greatest god and their creator.

“I see. Everything is thanks to him. We are very grateful.”

“I’ll let him know.”

3

10:30 AM ***Nazarick Time***

“What a racket. Silence!” Ainz made a sweeping motion with his left arm. Then he froze and held the pose.

After a moment, he returned to his original stance.

“What a racket. Silence!” He swung his left arm and froze again. Watching himself in the full-length mirror before him, he made minute adjustments to the position of his hand.

“…Silence! Here…? No, maybe it’d be cooler to tilt my hand more to the left?”

He returned once more to his original stance.

“What a racket. Silence!”

Satisfied with his pose, he picked up a notepad sitting on the table next to him. “Another pose down. Next up, practicing lines for buying time.”

He circled with a pen the lines he’d been rehearsing and then turned the page.

Most of the lines written there were variations on “I’ll think about it.” Any that were too roundabout or trying so hard to be cool that they wrapped back

around to lame were crossed out.

Ainz was only a normal guy, so it was hard for him to act like a ruler. That's why he made sure he was prepared for anything by repeatedly rehearsing like this. It goes without saying that the notebook was a collection of lines he had come up with.

It had already been an hour since he had started practicing, but the word *rest* wasn't in his dictionary.

Ainz was a supreme ruler, but to be frank, he barely worked at all. The one at the top had to decide policy, so unless they were dealing with an emergency or something of high importance, he was free. Albedo took care of minor affairs, so all he had to do was take a look at reports that came in.

But when he read the reports, he never found anything that worried him, so he really only had to glance through. It felt like a leader should have a heavier workload, but as long as he had Albedo and no emergencies cropped up, he figured it was fine.

That's just how things work in a properly functioning organization. The one at the top doesn't need to be laboring on the front lines.

Outside of raising morale, there was no reason for the general of an army to be swinging his sword out in front. It was foolish to take the risk.

Really, instead of doing the adventurer thing, I should be gaining knowledge—training my brain—so I'm prepared for an emergency. But how can I do that? Who can I get to teach me—without destroying everyone's image of Ainz Ooal Gown?

All beings in Nazarick loved, respected, and bowed down to Ainz, their absolute ruler. Yes, the children—in a way—created by his former guildmates looked up to him. In the same way a father can't betray the respect of his children, Ainz couldn't betray the members of Nazarick. That was why he practiced so hard—he at least wanted to look the part.

Of course, what he was doing embarrassed him.

If it didn't, he wouldn't have locked the door and prohibited maids or his eight-edged assassin bodyguards in the shadows from entering. Neither would

he periodically grow incapable of tolerating it and dive into his bed with a mortified cry.

"I need to act…like the highest ruler of Nazarick should…" Anguished, he flipped through his notebook. There were still many more lines he had come up with in his spare time. They were never-ending.

Ainz Ooal Gown was an undead, so large emotional fluctuations were automatically suppressed. Still…

"I want to relax…"

The vestiges of Satoru Suzuki's mind were shrieking in exhaustion. *I'm sick of this!*

But— He clenched his teeth. "What am I doing? C'mon, Ainz!" He jeered at his pathetic wishing for escape and looked back at the mirror with renewed energy in his eyes.

Beep-beep-beep-beep! Just then an electronic noise sounded.

It was music to his ears. He seized the band on his left wrist to stop the beeping and sighed in relief. "If time's up, time's up. Yeah. Time's up, so that's it for now."

He didn't forget to throw the notebook into a box. When he closed the lid, multiple locks clicked shut. If anyone tried to brute force their way in, they would trigger multiple attack spells, which would utterly destroy the vicinity. Its defenses were so tight only someone level 90 with a thief-type class or someone level 80 or higher who was specced specifically to be a thief type could open it.

Only after using this serious item did he put the notebook away in space. He put it into a place with many rare items. High-level thieves could even steal items that were put away. That said, even if they restrained their opponent, they couldn't steal everything. The limit was an item or two from a single player. Still, the prospect of being robbed once or twice was enough to make Ainz shiver even though he wasn't supposed to feel fear as an undead.

And in this world, some people were born with special talents, so who knew what might happen? That's why he put the box in with other rare items—he

figured any thief would steal something that looked more valuable.

After putting it away, he reconfirmed something.

Just like a housewife repeatedly making sure the door to the house is locked before going on vacation, Ainz made his checks and then finally sighed.

Only after all that was done did he leave his bedroom. He was headed for the room he used as his office. Greeting him with deeply bowed heads to show their loyalty were Albedo, a regular maid, and then Mare.

The appearance of the other two wasn't rare, but the boy was unexpected in this place. Surprised, he crossed the room and sat in his ebony chair by performing a movement he had rehearsed more than thirty times—a way of sitting that didn't involve treading on his robe or loudly adjusting the position of his chair.

Next, he focused on the way he leaned into it. Sitting back too fast, or with too much of his weight behind the motion, was lame. A king had a king's way of settling into his chair—probably.

But I have no idea how a king leans back… I'd love to see a king do it sometime…

Business manners prescribed sitting on the middle of the seat and not leaning on the backrest, but Ainz Ooal Gown wasn't a businessman.

And so Ainz practiced a way of sitting that he felt must be correct for a king.

"Raise your heads."

The three of them finally looked up. He found it rather annoying and a waste of time that they would never raise their heads unless he said something, but he couldn't disregard their desire to express their loyalty, so every time he bit his tongue and said the same thing.

"Okay, first I'll ask Mare what he's here for. How about it?"

"S-sir!" His voice cracked a bit out of nervousness.

Ainz smiled. Of course, his fleshless face didn't change shape, but it took on a sense of warmth.

Perhaps Mare was sharp enough to pick that up. He took a breath and seemed a bit less stiff. “U-uh, I, umm, brought this for you.”

Ainz didn’t ask, *What is it?* like a nastier boss might. If Mare had something for him, he would simply take it. It was possible he was forgetting some order he himself had given.

“Oh? I mean—good.” The maid stationed in the room today moved to receive it on his behalf, but Ainz held out a hand to stop her. “Mare, bring it here directly.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Mare straightened his back and came forward to offer the folder.

Ainz took it unhurriedly and looked inside.

This is… Oh, it’s the invitation I sent around.

Three guardians had responded in the affirmative.

“Given the order of the names, I expected one of Cocytus’s underlings to bring it. Thanks for going out of your way, Mare.”

“N-no, it was nothing! Cocytus was busy, so I insisted on coming instead. Besides…” Mare stroked the ring on his left ring finger. It was a loving gesture.

His Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown. Well, I am glad he values it, but it’s a little weird to put it on that finger… And why do his eyes glisten so much when he looks at me?

Feeling someone bristle, he glanced at Albedo out of the corner of his eye. She wore her usual smile.

His eyes moved to her left ring finger.

As he thought, she wore her ring there, like Mare did. It was as if putting it there was the correct thing to do.

What was the story? From ancient Greece or somewhere? A long time ago Yamaiko had told him the meanings behind wearing rings on certain fingers. *Something about how a big artery that leads to your heart is in that finger on your left hand? And so if you touch something bad for you with it, it sends a*

signal to your heart? So in Japan we call it a "medicine finger" and mix medicine with it…? Does the sous-chef wear his there, too? Oh, this is no good… He's still looking at me.

Ainz folded his hands on top of the desk. "What is it, Mare? What are you looking at? Is there something interesting on my face?" He took extra-special care to make sure he didn't sound angry.

"N-no, I was just thinking how cool you are…"

"I'm…cool?" He unconsciously stroked his face. "Hoo-ha-ha! Quite the talented brownnoser, aren't you, Mare?"

"It's not flattery!" He shouted so loudly no one would have ever guessed it was him. "P-please excuse me, Lord Ainz. But I really do think you're cool. Even just before, when you sat in your chair, it really seemed like the way the highest ruler of Nazarick should sit."

Ainz sent a questioning glance to the maid. The homunculus, intuiting her master's intentions, said nothing but nodded emphatically to say, *That's right.* He hadn't even looked at Albedo, but she was nodding vigorously to agree as well. Even her wings were fluttering.

"I see. I'm glad," Ainz replied briefly, stood, and approached Mare. The boy thought he was going to be scolded, but instead Ainz petted his head.

It was a rough motion but full of love.

"L-Lord Ainz…"

"Thanks, Mare. You always say things that make me happy." He didn't show any of Satoru Suzuki's feelings, *but it's kind of embarrassing*. "I'm always thinking how grateful I should be to my guildmates."

"To the other Supreme Beings?"

Ainz got down on one knee to meet Mare's eyes. "Yeah. I'm so grateful to them for making the Great Tomb of Nazarick, and you, and everyone. That includes you, too, of course, Albedo and Cixous."

Albedo's wings stuck straight out as if she was feeling rapturous.

And the maid who had been called by her first name got incredibly flustered.

She was usually so calm and composed that Ainz had to smile at her distress.

“You are all my treasures.” Ainz lifted Mare up. “I wouldn’t even want to give you back to BubblingTeapot!”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz!” Cixous thanked him instead of Mare, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. “All of us in Nazarick thank you for remaining when so many of the Supreme Beings have gone. We may be inexperienced and offend you often, and perhaps it’s rude to say this to one of our creators, but I will anyway: Please allow us to devote ourselves to you.”

“I’ll allow it. I believe I’ve said something similar to Albedo and Demiurge before, but I am the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, your master, Ainz Ooal Gown.” He was momentarily surprised that he pulled off these lines he hadn’t rehearsed. But when he thought about it, it made sense. He was only saying what he truly thought, so what was there to even pull off?

Mare hugged him, burying his face in his shoulder.

Good thing I’m not wearing my usual gear, he heard the coolheaded part of his brain say.

He felt the robe around his shoulder getting wet, but he let Mare be. When the sniffling quieted, he petted his head and put him down.

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped Mare’s face.

It might have been the careless mopping of someone who had never wiped someone’s face before, but Mare let it happen.

“Okay, Mare. Go wash your face.”

“Wh-what are you going to do, Lord Ainz?”

“I have to go to E-Rantel. There’s some kind of meeting with the guild leaders. I’ve been begging out of them up until now, but I’ve run out of excuses. Off I go…”

Ainz checked on Albedo, who was conspicuously quiet. Because her head was lowered, her hair hid her expression. But the slight trembling he could detect scared him. It made him think of an active volcano about to blow its top.

“What is it, Albedo?”

Just then—

“Guh! Hagh!”

—the scenery flew past his eyes as he was struck in the back.

Of course, it didn’t hurt. He wouldn’t take damage from anything that wasn’t magic. He did feel a slight impact from being hit, but there was nothing that could be termed pain. Even so, his human vestiges caused him to reflexively shut his eyes for a moment—despite the lack of lids.

It was so sudden he couldn’t quite think straight. His undead mental makeup shouldn’t have been able to be confused, so it had to be Satoru Suzuki again.

“Nngh, mrrf…”

When he opened his eyes, he saw his eight-edged assassins clinging to the ceiling. *In other words*, he realized, *I’m lying on the floor*, and he tried to get up, but there was some unknown softness crawling over his body, pinning him down.

What the hell? I have an item that should give me perfect resistance against travel obstruction—and that includes holds! I should be freed the moment I’m restrained… That must mean this is an extraordinarily powerful hold skill!

The supple creature on top of him was exactly who he thought it was: Albedo.

“Lord Ainnnnnz!” Straddling him, she sat up.

“Wh-what is it? What happened?”

“Oh, you! We don’t have to hold back anymore, do we?” Her eyes opened wide. Her golden, dilated pupils made his spine freeze.

“Wh-what are you talking about?!” he asked, disturbed.

Ignoring him, Albedo reached for the chest of her dress. With a little grunt, she tried to pull it down, but the garment didn’t budge. “Magic clothes are a pain. You either need to break them with a skill or take them off normally.”

“Calm down, Albedo! Get off me!”

He tried to shove her away, but she was a level-100 warrior. On top of that, when he pushed her, he felt something tender squish and he couldn’t follow

through. Her hands moved and began to remove his robe.

“Don’t strip me! Don’t move your hips! What the—?!”

“Wh-whoa—whoa—whoa—whoa…”

“This is your fault, Lord Ainz! I controlled myself for so long, but then you went and said something that made it impossible! This is all your fault! A little while will be enough! Just a little! A tiny little bit! Take pity on me for a few moments! It’ll be over in the time it takes you to count the eight-edged assassins on the ceiling!”

If she had blamed him for rewriting her backstory, he probably would have lost the will to resist. But Albedo’s behavior—put one way, it was like she was about to devour him—elicited more fear than guilt, so he struggled.

Finally, everyone else, who had been overwhelmed with confusion, leaped into action.

“Mistress Albedo, you’ve gone insane!”

“Mistress Albedo, you’ve gone insane!”

The eight-edged assassins jumped down from the ceiling.

“Get her away from Lord Ainz! No! Don’t completely restrain her—the hold’ll get canceled! Drag her away!”

“It’s impossible! She’s too strong! It makes sense, since she’s the captain of the guardians! Master Mare, give us a hand!”

“Ahhh, okay!”

Ainz was eventually freed, and after slowly rearranging his robe, he pointed at Albedo, whose arms and legs were being held by the eight-edged assassins. “Albedo, three days of disciplinary confinement.”

The eight-edged assassins dragged her out of the room.

“U-uh, Lord Ainz…are you all right?”

“I’m fine, but…was Albedo always that much of a weirdo? Did she eat something funky…? I know demon races don’t have to eat, but she’s still able to…”

Mare averted his eyes.

“I see… Well, no, hmm. I’m sure there’s a lot going on. We can’t rule out work-related stress.”

Ainz rose and called to the maid. In an attempt to regain some of his obliterated dignity, he spoke in a forceful voice. “Call Narberal and Hamusuke. It’s almost time for us to head to E-Rantel.”

•

1:35 PM ***Nazarick Time***

Ainz, astride Hamusuke, pulled the reins and brought her to a stop. He looked silently at the towering gates of E-Rantel up ahead.

Though the massive gates could repel even a huge army, Ainz wasn’t averse to them. In the video game *Yggdrasil*, there were plenty more splendid gates, but these were made not with data but human hands (although the possibility of magical aid couldn’t be ignored).

Before those gigantic steely gates fairly oozing history and hardship, an emotion he couldn’t put a finger on welled up inside him.

Even in Yggdrasil *there were guilds that conquered cities. I used to wonder why people would base their guild somewhere so difficult to protect, but…now I kinda get it. Maybe conquering a big city is just one of those male fantasies…*

In the *Yggdrasil* days, fights between guilds over cities broke out all the time. Most of the members of Ainz Ooal Gown had looked on coldly, saying they were unable to comprehend it, but a few voices called for them to take part.

War crazy, huh…?

He didn’t really like the phrase, but when he looked back on those times, they were good memories.

“What is it, master, hmm?” Hamusuke asked, wondering why she’d been stopped if he wasn’t going to do anything.

“Eh, don’t worry about it.” Ainz’s flat tone was meant to put an end to the conversation. He did it to hide the fact that if it got out he had been reminiscing, it would have been embarrassing.

“Okay, we’re going to the guild, showing up at the meeting for a minute, and then immediately taking on a monster extermination job!”

They could have gotten a room in E-Rantel, but he didn’t have the cash to spare. Ainz neither ate nor slept, so the only reason for him to stay at a first-rate hotel was to show off his rank as a first-rate adventurer…and to make connections. But he was already acquainted with the movers and shakers in this city, to the point where they would welcome him if he visited, so there was no reason to spend money on an inn.

Plus, even if he took a room, he would only teleport to Nazarick and stay there doing odd jobs like creating undead until morning. In that case, it was much smarter to take an extermination job and leave the city right away.

Honestly, he didn’t feel there were many advantages to continuing to operate in E-Rantel.

“Is that so, hmm? You like to battle, that you do, master.”

“It’s not that I like it. And besides, I say we’ll go exterminating, but we’ll get it over with so fast we’ll be spending most of the time at Nazarick like usual anyhow.” He bopped Hamusuke lightly on her huge head. “We’ve got to train you so you can use weapons, armor—all kinds of gear!”

“I’m always working hard, that I am! Those lizardmen teach me many things, that they do. In no time, I’m sure that I’ll be able to learn a special move, that I will!”

“Oh? It would be perfect if you learned how to use martial arts. And how is your training partner doing? Does it seem like he’ll learn to use martial arts?”

“Him, you ask? He’s quiet, not much of a talker, that he isn’t, so I don’t know. But I don’t think he can yet, no I don’t.”

Yeah, probably not, thought Ainz. He didn’t expect that one to be very talkative. And he expected it to be impossible for him to learn martial arts. It was only an experiment. But if, on the off chance, the death knight Ainz created could acquire warrior skills, they would need to make big changes to their plans. That is, if it was possible for him to get stronger via training, that might become their highest priority.

“Undead don’t sleep or get tired. They can train an infinite amount, so logically it would be strange if he didn’t learn martial arts faster than you. But if he hasn’t yet, then maybe it really is impossible.”

“Wait, that I ask! He’s doing his best, too, that he is! Even after I teleport to my residence, he stays, silently working… Don’t kill him, that I beg you!”

“…I’m not going to kill him. What kind of monster do you think I am, anyway?”

“Indeed. There is no one kinder than Lord Ainz in this world. He’s even showing mercy and allowing a sad creature like you to live.”

Narberal’s icy comment from behind them on her horse caused Hamusuke to shudder.

“Nabe, we’re almost to E-Rantel. Call me Momon from now on.”

“Understood.”

“And Hamusuke is an important figure in our plan to strengthen Nazarick… Treat those who work for the good of Nazarick accordingly. Know that this applies beyond Hamusuke as well!”

“Sir! My apologies!”

He wanted to say, *And stop calling humans ticks and lice*, but she didn’t listen when he reproved her, so he’d given up on that of late. If it was part of Narberal Gamma’s character to say those things without even realizing it, he didn’t want to trample on the wishes of the guildmate who created her.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Yes, that I say!”

Ainz proceeded atop Hamusuke.

Several people were in line at the gates. That the examination to enter the country was stricter than the examination to exit was only natural; the guards inspected cargo quite thoroughly. For that reason, if there were peddlers or traveling merchants in the queue, it could take quite a while to get into E-Rantel.

“I guess it won’t take too long…”

“Wouldn’t they let you go ahead?” Narberal quietly asked as they lined up behind a few other travelers, including some who looked like adventurers.

She was right. He had passed an extremely annoying inspection the first time he went through, but as his renown grew, the exams had grown simpler and simpler until now he essentially got a free pass. Not only that, but sometimes he was even allowed priority entrance.

Raven Black wasn’t special in this regard; many teams mythril or above were treated the same way. The consideration was given so as not to displease the city’s trump cards.

If they really wanted to do me a favor, they’d get rid of the entry taxes…

Considering how much adventurers earned, the fees were extremely cheap, but for Ainz, who was bringing in the lion’s share of foreign currency to Nazarick, it was a cost he didn’t appreciate. That said, he didn’t simply use a flying spell to go over the walls, either.

Momon was a hero. That meant—

“I shouldn’t cut in line—unless there is some extenuating circumstance and I need to get in quickly.”

Still sitting on Hamusuke, he noted Narberal’s bow of acknowledgment out of the corner of his eye and gazed absentmindedly at the line ahead. “We’re really not moving, though…”

Just like a giant traffic jam, the line of people wasn’t budging.

“What the…? It seems like they’re checking a wagon, but they’re doing an awfully thorough job. Wait, they’re just surrounding it, not inspecting it. Did they find something illegal? ’Scuse me.” He addressed the countryman ahead of him.

“Wh-what can I do for you?”

“No need to get so flustered. I’m just wondering if you know anything about why the line isn’t moving.”

“I don’t know the details, but they took a village girl to the guardhouse. Then

all of a sudden…”

Ainz listened to the man’s story but didn’t end up learning much. He craned his neck to get a look at the guardhouse. Focusing his ears, he could hear irritated voices.

Suddenly, he was curious.

When he first came to this city, he had been asked several questions at the gate, but he had gotten through more easily than he expected—to the point where his impression was that in this world they were surprisingly kind to drifters like mercenaries, adventurers, and travelers. Now, however, it seemed like that wasn’t actually the case, so he wondered what kinds of questions they were asking the village girl.

Now Ainz had the rank of adamantite, which was valid in other countries as well, so apparently most places would admit him.

That was precisely why he wanted to know what kinds of questions she was being asked. There could be times in the future where he infiltrated the city not as Momon but under some other guise. His aim was to be prepared for that by getting information ahead of time.

“Wait here a minute. I’ll see what’s going on.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m just taking a quick look.”

He got off Hamusuke and walked toward the guardhouse.

All the soldiers yelped in surprise when they saw him. There wasn’t a soul in E-Rantel who didn’t know who Momon the adamantite-rank adventurer was.

Taking care to appear confident, he arrived in front of the guardhouse. Inside, he could see a village girl sitting in a chair as well as a caster and a soldier who appeared agitated.

“We’d like to enter the city already… What are you doing?”

“Ahhh!”

Both men emitted an identical yelp to the soldiers outside. The village girl

looked his way, dazed.

“I-if it isn’t Sir Momon! Do excuse us!”

“What in the world are you—huh? That girl…”

I’ve seen that face somewhere before. He searched his hippocampus—not that it existed—for information about her.

“Yes! There was a suspicious girl here, so it took some time to investigate her. We apologize for inconveniencing y—”

As he was thinking how annoying the man’s voice was, the girl’s name came to him in a flash. “Enri, that’s right. Enri Emmott, right?”

“Uhh, umm, who might you be? …Oh, wait. Y-you came that one time with Nfirea, right? I don’t remember speaking to you, but…perhaps you heard my name from Nfi?”

Suddenly, Ainz put a hand over his mouth in spite of himself. The one who had met Enri was the masked caster Ainz Ooal Gown. Now he was the adamantite-rank adventurer clad in raven-black armor, Momon.

Shit! I just talked in my normal voice! This is bad. I gotta get out of here. But why is she here? If she’s looking for me—or rather, for Ainz Ooal Gown—that’ll be trouble. I should get the details from her.

It didn’t seem like she had figured out his identity from their interaction just now, but he still had to consider the possibility. He didn’t really think she would be able to recognize a voice she had heard briefly several months ago now through armor, but one could never be too careful.

Ainz waved over the caster. He figured the caster knew more than the soldier.

He pulled him out of the guardhouse and took enough distance that their voices wouldn’t carry.

“So…that girl is a friend of an acquaintance. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

He wasn’t lying. Ainz and Momon were acquainted with Nfirea.

The caster’s eyes widened. It was an expression similar to surprise but different in some way. It was as if he had connected the dots, like he had solved

some puzzle in his head.

"I see… So that's it…"

What's "it"?! Ainz bit back the jab and waited.

"She kept saying she was just a village girl, but she was concealing an immensely powerful magic item shaped like a horn. We thought it was suspicious that she would be carrying such a thing, so we were trying to get the details."

"What kind of horn? What does it do?"

"Well, its power is to…"

After hearing the man's story, Ainz suddenly looked up at the sky—to escape the reality that it was the item he had given her.

When he had given it to her, he didn't have any idea what kind of items were commonplace in this world; he just wanted her to protect herself. Who could have guessed it would cause trouble for her later? He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but neither did he feel like he could abandon her.

I guess I should help her. This isn't my fault, but I should take responsibility for giving her that item… It would be worse to ignore her and have it fall into someone else's hands… Besides, if she gets taken prisoner…

Nfirea knew that Momon and Ainz Ooal Gown were one and the same. Under these circumstances, if he heard Enri's story, he would think that Ainz abandoned her.

That would definitely make him resent me. I wouldn't care if he was just any worthless human, but he's extremely valuable to me. I can turn this issue to my advantage! If I save her, Nfirea will be grateful. I gotta tighten my chains on him little by little…

Ainz spoke in what he felt was a calm, dignified voice. "You don't need to worry about her at all. I know her character well. She's not the kind of person who will cause trouble, so please let her through. Can you do that for me?"

"Of course. We would even let a criminal in if they were someone you knew and you vouched for them."

“Is that so? Well, thanks. And then, sorry to trouble, but do you think Raven Black could also go in ahead of the line?”

After getting permission to enter, Ainz returned to Narberal and Hamusuke.

“We’ve been cleared to enter ahead of the others. Let’s go through the gate.”

He rode Hamusuke past the people in line. The travelers waiting their turn noticed him, but when they saw his raven-black armor, Hamusuke, and Narberal, they looked away in resignation—they had seen the status gap between Ainz and themselves.

With deep, reverent bows from the soldiers guarding the gate, Ainz and his party passed through it and entered E-Rantel.

“Okay, Nabe. I have a favor to ask you.”

“Understood. Your wish is my command.”

He wondered how this loyal attitude looked in the city between fellow adventurers, but he knew saying anything would be pointless, so he continued with his order. “Talk to Enri, the girl on the next wagon that will come through the gate, and find out why she’s here.”

Next, he looked for a place to hide. He wanted to avoid any further conversation with Enri himself.

He glanced around the area, decided ducking behind a stack of wooden crates would suffice, and had Hamusuke dash over there. The two of them appeared so suddenly, the soldiers working there got flustered.

“Do you have a moment, sir? I’d like to ask you about these crates,” Ainz asked one of the soldiers after confirming that his position wasn’t visible from the gate. Of course, he had no interest in the crates. It was just an excuse so they wouldn’t shoo him off for being in their way.

“Y-yes. Thank you for taking an interest, Sir Momon. These are crates of a vegetable called kinshu from the Grandel domain. It’s…”

Ainz listened to the soldier’s earnest explanation, occasionally muttering a vague “I see” or “Really?” He was rather unengaged, but the soldier took no offense and continued explaining. About the time Ainz was learning a great deal

about different ways to prepare kinshu, he sensed Narberal appear behind him.

“—Sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your explanation. I appreciate all the useful information you’ve given me, but my friend is back, so I need to go,” he declared unilaterally and had Hamusuke start walking.

“So what did you find out?”

“First, she wanted me to thank you. Then she said she has three aims: to sell herbs, to check at the shrine if there are any people who want to move to her village, and finally, to visit the Adventurers Guild.”

“The Adventurers Guild? What kind of request is she going to make?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t find out that much. Should I catch her and force her to tell me?”

“No, no need. We’re headed to the Adventurers Guild anyway. We can probably just ask someone there.”

He figured it wasn’t about wanting to thank Ainz Ooal Gown directly. If that was the case, she could have said it to Lupusregina when she visited…

“Oh, right. Nabe, have you gotten any special reports from Lupusregina lately?”

When he saw her shake her head, his brow—not that he had one, of course—furrowed.

Originally, he had stationed shadow demons in the village, but in order to deepen friendly relations, he sometimes sent Lupusregina instead. He had instructed her to report immediately if any problems occurred in the village, but he hadn’t heard anything yet.

So he was under the impression that Carne wasn’t having any issues.

Perhaps it wasn’t necessary to report that Enri had gone to E-Rantel on her own, but worry appeared in Ainz’s mind like a dark cloud.

“I thought Lupusregina was the kind of person who took her job fairly seriously, but what do you think, Nabe?”

“It’s as you say. She comes off as frivolous due to the way she talks, but it’s

only an act. She's a crafty, brutal maid."

Crafty and *brutal* were not compliments. He furtively searched her face for any trace of negative emotions, but her imposing expression contained only respect for her teammate.

"So, master, is it all right to go to the Adventurers Guild as planned, hmm?"

"Yeah. You know where it is, right? Okay, Nabe, get on. No need to take your Animal Statue: Warhorse out again."

After Ainz took Narberal's hand and pulled her up behind him, Hamusuke sped up as if she'd been raring to go. Ainz was no longer mortified to swagger down the streets atop the giant hamster. On the contrary, he loved that she could understand him and that he could give her orders. Riding her was like taking a taxi.

Eventually, the Adventurers Guild came into view. At the same time, he saw the wagon from earlier, as well as Enri disappearing inside the building.

"Dang… Hamusuke. I'm going in the back entrance. Take me around the other side."

"Understood, that it is, master!"

Adventurers weren't usually allowed in the back door, but adamantite ranks could get away with anything. That said, it was still his first time. Taking excessive advantage of his privileges would have been bad for his reputation.

He went in the back and asked the first guild employee he saw to take him to the head of the guild's office. Luckily, perhaps, he was in.

"Oh, Momon! Thanks for coming!"

The head of the guild, Ainzach, welcomed him with open arms, grabbing and enveloping him in a forceful…hug. Ainz was wearing armor and a helmet, so it didn't bother him, but if he had been only lightly dressed, he would have rather avoided it. The embrace was warm in too many ways.

After giving him a friendly pat on the back, Ainzach slowly pulled away. "You haven't been coming around lately, so I've been lonely! Now take a seat on the sofa. We can have a nice chat until the other members of the meeting arrive."

The head of the guild gestured at the sofa cheerfully, like he was welcoming a good friend he hadn't seen in a long time.

"Thank you."

When Ainz sat down, Ainzach sat next to him.

The space between them was negligible. It made it hard to breathe; their knees were even touching.

"Momon, we've known each other so long. You can relax with me, you know."

"No, manners are important even among friends. That's a very important lesson I learned from my predecessors."

Certainly, at work he would have sometimes gotten on friendlier terms with clients, and even spoken in a casual tone, but he didn't want to open himself up like that with the head of the guild. He felt it was appropriate to keep things businesslike.

If you have too many connections inside an organization, it can start to pin you down. I don't want to get stuck at one Adventurers Guild in one city. Maybe it's time to move on? Or really… Ainz stared at Ainzach next to him out of the slit in his helmet. *Why are you sitting next to me anyway? Normal etiquette would be to put Narberal there and sit across from us.*

With that uncomfortable closeness, he couldn't help but wonder if Ainzach was into him.

I heard from the head of the Wizards Guild that he's married, but maybe that's for show? I thought he was just really eager to be better friends, but… there's definitely something else going on. Or does he think I'm *gay?*

The last thing he suddenly imagined made him shudder.

Ainz was straight. Well, he had been anyhow. Incidentally, not that it mattered, but Satoru Suzuki preferred women with breasts over flat-chested ones. All this seemed to hold true even now, judging by the way he felt a faint desire for Albedo over someone like Cocytus.

After taking some distance by repositioning his butt, he turned to look straight at Ainzach. "Do excuse me, but I came here to ask you something.

Someone I know visited the guild just now, and I wonder if you can tell me what her request was about."

"We have rules against that…"

"That's why I'm asking you. I know I'm being unreasonable, and I understand how important it is to follow the rules, but please."

Ainz bowed his head, and Ainzach crossed his arms and stared up at the ceiling with a stern face. But that lasted only a moment.

"All right." He smiled at Ainz. "I just can't say no when it's you asking. Can you tell me this person's name?"

"She's from Carne. Enri, er, Enri Emmott."

"Enri, okay. Give me a minute."

Before long, he was back. Behind him followed a receptionist Ainz had seen before. She came in stiffly, nearly paralyzed with nerves.

"Sir Momon!"

Wow, Ainz thought upon his first time seeing someone so nervous they were walking completely out of step. He would have liked to tell her she could relax, but he only nodded benevolently. Not coming off too free and easy was one of those things adamantite-rank adventurers worried about.

"This is the receptionist who talked to Enri Emmott. You'd probably like to talk to her directly, right? Anything you want to know, ask away!"

"Oh? In that case— Ah, but first, why don't we have her sit down? This isn't my office, so it would be weird for me to say it, but…"

"No! That won't be necessary! I'm fine as is!"

Satoru Suzuki would have felt awfully strange sitting while the person he was talking to was standing, but during his time acting as Ainz Ooal Gown, ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, those kinds of feelings had faded. He had grown to simply accept the gap between those at the top and those below. It seemed like proof that his role-playing as a masterful being wasn't for nothing, that he had actually gained experience points.

So how many more points till I level up? Oh, wait…

"Are you sure? Well, then let's begin. I'd like to hear the details of her request. It's very important, so can you make sure not to leave anything out?"

"Y-yes, sir!" Sticky, cold sweat beaded on her face.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No, I…" Her eyes wandered side to side.

"Did I phrase the question poorly…? Hmm. Then let's try this way. Was her request about searching for someone?"

"N-no, sir."

"Oh, okay… Then what was it about? Did she not even make a request?"

"…It wasn't an immediate request, more like a consultation about a request she might make in the future. And well, she said there were monsters in the woodlands—the Giant of the East and the Serpent of the West—that are as powerful as the Wise King of the Forest you tamed."

Though Ainz found the barely coherent receptionist strange, he continued questioning her. "A future request?"

"I-it's not what you think! I didn't realize she was someone you knew, Sir Momon! If I would have known, I would have asked for more details! Honest!"

Faced with this tearfully shouting receptionist, Ainz was puzzled. *Is it really all right to have someone so emotionally unstable manning the desk?*

"Guild Master…"

"…Sorry. I should have supervised her better."

"What? It's the rules of the guild!"

Listening to their conversation, Ainz realized what their twisted understanding was.

They were both under the impression that he and Enri knew each other, and out of respect for the guild, she would make a request for a job that he normally would have done for her free of charge.

Then the receptionist coldly turned her away due to assumptions about financial issues. So they were arguing over who should take responsibility for refusing an adamantite rank's friend.

Uh, if it's the rules of the organization, then the one who followed them is right…

Ainz lowered his opinion of the head of the guild, glaring at him.

Pretty sure it's a boss's job to cover for their subordinates. Or is he using the advanced technique of ripping into her while I'm standing here to inspire pity and get me to forgive her? He sure is reaming her.

Ainz felt the receptionist's handling of the situation was correct. The head of the guild probably thought so, too. But just as when Ainz had come in through the back door or when he made the request to Ainzach in the first place, adamantite-rank adventurers were easily made exceptions to the rules—that was how badly they wanted to keep him around, and that was why they were fighting.

"I didn't know!"

Ainz spoke gently to the sobbing receptionist. "You didn't do anything wrong."

The receptionist's eyes went round in surprise, and all the tears in them streamed down.

"It's important to follow the rules of your organization. Of course, other times it's necessary to ignore them. I'm not blaming you at all in this case."

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"So I'm sorry to press you, but please ask her for the details. Don't tell her I'll take the job. I just want to be informed so I can move at any time."

"Understood! Right away! I'll go ask her right away! Excuse me!" The receptionist spun on her heel and raced into the hallway. She was like a receding typhoon.

"…I'd like you to not pretend to blame innocent people just to arouse my pity. That was unpleasant."

“Ah… Can’t fool you, I guess.”

Ainz gathered from the guild master’s strained voice that his guess had been correct.

It seems Japanese business techniques are used everywhere. But the problem is… Lupusregina came into his mind. *Did Lupusregina miss these monsters that even this village girl knows about? Did the intelligence net fail? I need to find out what happened.*

With returning to Nazarick and getting the story on his mind, he waited for the receptionist’s report.

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4:41 PM ***Nazarick Time***

Lupusregina nervously entered Ainz’s office. Confused by the sudden summons, she couldn’t hide her anxiety.

Once she arrived, those present included her, the regular maid Cixous, the combat maid Narberal, Aura (the one who understood the forest the best), the eight-edged assassins clinging to the ceiling, and Ainz himself. Incidentally, Albedo was in disciplinary confinement.

Lupusregina began to make her most polite bow, but Ainz stopped her. “Lupusregina, is there something you’re not telling me?”

When she looked confused, he wondered if she hadn’t known after all and explained about the Giant of the East and the Magical Serpent of the West.

But then she looked like she did know, and Ainz’s mood quickly soured.

He emitted a long, quiet sigh.

“You knew?”

“Yes, I—”

“You fool!” Overcome with rage, Ainz let his anger carry away his shout, and it echoed.

Everyone trembled like they had been struck by lightning, and Ainz felt his emotions being suppressed. Still, new stormy waves crashed over him one after another, so his anger wasn’t completely extinguished.

“Why didn’t you report it to me? Were you trying to hide it?”

“N-no, it wasn’t anything like that.”

“Then why haven’t I heard anything about it? What reason could there possibly be?”

“I didn’t think it was very important, so I didn’t report it…”

When she looked up at him, frightened, his emotions returned like a raging fire. “Lupusregina! I’m disappointed in you!”

Lupusregina wasn’t the only one who shuddered. Cixous, Narberal, and the eight-edged assassins on the ceiling all froze in shock.

“Yes, I’ve given you discretion in overseeing that village. But that doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want based on your personal judgment! I told you to report in if something might change in a big way, so what is going on?!”

“Well, I…”

He grimaced as she trailed off.

A working adult would never be forgiven for this kind of mistake—no, no one would. *Reporting in to your superior and consulting with them on what to do next isn’t just business manners—it’s common sense for any adult! If she can’t even do that… That’s not acceptable in this org… But…*

Lupusregina was terrified. Ainz wondered if perhaps it was his fault as well. Perhaps the mistake was due to his unreliable leadership—a lack of grip on the reins.

If my wishes aren’t making their way down the chain properly, it’s my fault as everyone’s boss. Have I not made myself clear…? Maybe it would be better if I retired and left things up to Demiurge or Albedo.

“…Lupusregina, do you understand how valuable that village is to us?”

“Huh? Er, I’ve heard from you that it’s valuable, my lord.”

“No, no. I’m asking you how valuable *you* think that village is.”

“W-well, it’s full of toys…”

“Oh, I see. Right… I’m sorry. This is my mistake. I didn’t realize that’s all you

thought…” Ainz smiled an exhausted smile, realizing it was his fault after all. “I take back my disappointment. I said too much—forgive me.”

“What are you talking about? Blame me—I’m the idiot!”

“Then all you need to do is be more careful next time. So, let’s start over. You must understand that the village of Carne is very valuable. Nfirea and his grandmother Lizzy have particularly crucial roles inside Nazarick.”

“What?! R-really?”

“Yes. I’m having them develop new potions for us.”

“O-oh! I was going to give you this!” Lupusregina suddenly shouted, completely pale in the face, and pulled out a purple potion. Narberal took it from her and carried it to Ainz.

“What is this?” Ainz took the potion and held it up to the light.

“It’s the latest healing potion developed by Nfirea!”

Ainz’s anger flared anew, but he held it back. “With this, the Baleare family is even more important.”

Lupusregina gave him an uncomprehending look, and Ainz quietly smiled at her.

This potion had to have been made using the various materials he had given them from Nazarick.

Even though Nfirea and his grandmother couldn’t use the potion synthesizing techniques of *Yggdrasil*, they had used *Yggdrasil* materials to create something that was neither the blue potion of this world nor the red potion of *Yggdrasil*. That point deserved some attention.

“First of all, the healing potions in this world are blue. But the ones I know are red. So I wonder about this.” Ainz went on at length.

The knowledge and powers he had gained in *Yggdrasil* could be used in this world, that much was certain. His encounters with angels, the existence of things that seemed to be World Items—this and other evidence pointed to a very good chance of *Yggdrasil* players existing in this world in the past. So why were only the potions different from *Yggdrasil*’s red ones?

He could think of three possibilities.

One was the loss of technology and a break in knowledge due to countries falling to ruin. Because technologies, once known, were very likely to spread to neighboring states, this had to have taken place over a wide area. Without entire countries being destroyed, it was impossible, so the chance of it being this type of disaster was low.

His second idea was that either Nfirea personally didn't know how to make them, or the knowledge hadn't spread to countries in this region. Just as it was said that in the past the color of Japan's noodle soup was different in the east and west, so was it possible that in far-off countries, the potions were red or something like that.

His final theory was the one that made the most sense: Synthesizing *Yggdrasil* potions required *Yggdrasil* materials. And they either couldn't be gathered in this world, or they had run out, so the best that could be created here were blue potions.

"So excluding idea number two, this potion Nfirea made…" He shook the potion in his hand. "…This potion could be a technological revolution the likes of which hasn't been seen in hundreds of years. Well, if number three is right, it could just be a retrogressive failure. Everything depends on how hard Nfirea works from now on. Understand?"

What he was asking Nfirea to do was to make *Yggdrasil* potions without relying on *Yggdrasil* potion technology or materials. Or to perfect some third type of potion.

"So are you going to have a lot of people study potions based on this one?"

Ainz frowned at Narberal's question. "That's a foolish question, Narberal. Certainly that route would get us to perfection faster, but it's extremely dangerous. Knowledge is power. To senselessly hand it out is a fool's errand."

That's exactly how the world of *Yggdrasil* had been, so Ainz could say it with confidence.

"For example, we can't say for sure that an advanced form of this potion wouldn't kill me in one hit, so it's safer to monopolize this technology rather

than spread it around, probably… If our servants are simpleminded, it's fine to share it with them. We have to advance technology carefully, and that includes Nfirea's potion. That's why, really, I'd like to lock him up in Nazarick and have him focus on nothing but research." It would be a good way to maintain secrecy on top of barring him from using the potions he'd made.

"So why don't you do that, my lord?"

He could tell she would leap into action as soon as he said the word, so he answered in a hurry. "Building trust and binding him with chains of gratitude will lead to greater future profit than forcing him to work from a dungeon. I had Demiurge analyze this, and it appears that making someone feel indebted to you is effective—hmm? What is it, Lupusregina?"

"I'm too much of an idiot to understand, so please tell me one thing. If that's the case, then why did you give a potion to Brita, that adventurer?"

Hearing the name Brita threw Ainz into confusion—because he couldn't remember having ever heard it. Maintaining an expression—or perhaps an attitude, since his face didn't shift—that said he had everything under control, he dug frantically through his memories.

Oh, that potion?

He finally remembered the incident at the inn the first night he had stayed in E-Rantel.

Recalling what he had said, he was glad he didn't have the sort of body that broke out in a cold sweat.

What should I do? What should I do?!

He couldn't stay silent forever.

Demiurge! Albedo! Why are neither of you here? Agh, Demiurge is working outside, and Albedo is in disciplinary confinement. It's too late to call them back now!

"I see. You don't understand why?"

"No, my apologies. Could you please explain?"

He wanted to scream at her not to ask so innocently. There was nothing he

could do now besides a make-or-break gamble. Having decided that, he felt bravery welling up inside him.

“Hoo-hoo…ha-ha-ha-ha. Ce-certainly it was a dangerous move, as you suspected, Lupusregina. There was the possibility of runaway technological advancement. But I had an important purpose for daring to give her the potion anyway.”

“R-really?! It wasn’t just to replace the potion she lost?!”

At the outburst from Narberal, Ainz swallowed what he had been about to say. He spun up the gears in his brain and remembered that first day in E-Rantel in more detail.

Oh, right! Back then, I said it was to avoid doing something that would tarnish my reputation! Crap!

Ainz feigned calm. Lying to cover another lie inevitably led to being trapped in a corner like this. He frantically scraped together his rapidly fading courage.

“…Is that really all you thought it was, Narberal?”

“Please excuse my error!”

“…No, you don’t have to apologize. At the time, I wasn’t sure if it would work out, so I only mentioned the simpler of my aims.”

“So then, what was your true aim?”

In response to Narberal’s question, Ainz slowly opened his mouth, but even at that moment, he had no clue what to say. Just then, though, he was struck with a hunch and unhesitatingly seized on the idea.

“…Nfirea…” Having made his solemn declaration, he looked at each of his subordinates. But while Albedo or Demiurge would say something like, *Oh, I see. I would expect nothing less, my lord*, at this point, Narberal only furrowed her brow and said, “Nfirea…my lord?”

Ainz put a hand to his mouth. “Mrph…”

Narberal and the others looked ashamed of themselves. They must have taken his pose to mean, *I’ve explained this much and you still don’t understand?* But actually, he had unconsciously put his hand there while trying to think what

to do next.

For a short while, he was overly nervous, riding the waves of emotion that were suppressed and renewed in turn, but after the fierce storm, he discovered an exit. He didn't know what he would find on the other side, but he was ready to grasp at any straw he had, so he stepped into the dark unknown.

"…I-I've succeeded in capturing the apothecary Nfirea. Does that answer your question…? Oh, I know… If someone gave you a potion totally different from the normal blue ones everyone knows, what's the first thing you would do?"

"…Ask someone?"

"Yes! You're exactly right, Lupusregina. And just as I planned, she took it to the most knowledgeable potion merchant in town. That's how I made contact with Nfirea." He remembered Nfirea telling him that story back in Carne.

"Oh, I see! So that was your aim!"

"Seems like you get it now. It was bait used to acquire a capable apothecary. There was a risk of issues in the future depending on how things turned out, but I decided it had to be done regardless."

Comprehension filled the air, and admiration shone on everyone's faces.

Guess my story lines up…

Then a voice sounded, as if its owner had been waiting for Ainz to internally sigh in relief. "Um…I don't mean to be rude, but may I ask something else?"

Agh, just stop. No more questions, Ainz cried inwardly but didn't let the slightest hint of those feelings show on his face.

"What is it, Lupusregina? If you're sure it's something I should be the one to answer, go ahead."

"Yes, my lord." She swallowed hard; her expression was earnest. "Do you always think two or three steps ahead like this when you do something?"

Of course not.

Ainz's actions were mostly haphazard. Sometimes he did think things through, but most of the time, he was plunged into situations that betrayed his

expectations. He couldn't very well say that to a subordinate, though.

"Of course. I'm the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown!"

They oohed in admiration, and Lupusregina's eyes went especially wide.

"What is it, Lupusregina?"

"The Resourceful King…"

She practically choked out the words, and Aura took a step forward with a frown on her face.

But Ainz stopped her. "Don't worry about it. Was that your only question?"

"Well, I guess I have one more. Why don't you have monsters attack the village and then save them? I think if you rescued Nfirea and his grandmother from the burning village, they'd feel even more indebted to you and make themselves useful…"

"That's not a bad move at all. Perhaps it's worth considering. But in that case, it's possible that Nfirea would turn his hatred on monsters—he might not want to cooperate with us anymore… If they were being razed by a group of humans, it would be different. In that case, we should save Enri Emmott as well, to tighten our hold."

Although the fact that Carne was useful as a village that the caster Ainz Ooal Gown had saved did made it a hard decision.

"By the way, the most important person in that village is Nfirea. And since he's in love with Enri, she is number two. Lastly, there's Nfirea's grandmother Lizzy. I don't care what happens to the others, but protect those three at all costs. In a worst-case scenario, guard Nfirea even if it costs you your life… So, Lupusregina, will that be all?"

"Yes! Thank you!"

"Okay. I forgive this mistake, but now that you know my intentions, I won't forgive another. You understand, right?"

"Of course, my lord!"

"Good. Then go. Go and do a splendid job."

Lupusregina left with a bow, and Narberal followed her like a prison guard.

After the two disappeared behind the door, Ainz turned to the guardian standing by next to him. “So, Aura. Have you heard of the Giant of the East or the Serpent of the We—”

They heard a voice behind the door say, “Lord Ainz is seriously not screwin’ around! Thinkin’ everything out that well before he makes his move—the word *monster* doesn’t even begin to cover it!” The thick door muffled it, but it was still loud enough to interrupt the pair’s conversation. And if they could hear it in the room, how loud was it out in the corridor?

“…Should I tell her the door is thinner than she thinks?”

“She’s pretty worked up, huh? I could punch—”

Just then from behind the door they heard a difficult-to-place slamming noise and then the sound of something heavy being dragged away.

“…Looks like you won’t need to intervene, Aura. Well, we’ve been disrupted, haven’t we? Okay, so have you heard of them?”

“Uhh, my apologies. I don’t have any information about the Giant of the East or the Serpent of the West. After the fight with the evil tree, I did a search of the forest—albeit a quick one—looking for any powerful monsters, and although I didn’t reach the subterranean cave…”

“Well, if they’re at Hamusuke’s level, I can understand why they wouldn’t catch your attention.”

A gardener wouldn’t be aware of every bee that flies by. The strong having that sort of oversight was a fairly difficult issue to solve.

“My apologies. Then, Lord Ainz, shall I mop them up?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Maybe we should kill the obnoxious maggots and bring the forest entirely under Nazarick’s control.”

“Understood! Then I’ll send in a few of my pets.”

“Hmm. That’s no fun. If this Giant of the East and Serpent of the West are as strong as Hamusuke, I’m curious to see what they’re like.”

“Then should I capture them and drag them back here?”

“No, going personally wouldn’t be so bad. Thanks to Hamusuke, I’ve learned the value of old knickknacks.”

Aura looked like she didn’t know what he was talking about, and he smiled at her.

“Of course, that won’t be all. Let’s see if we can’t devise a test for Lupusregina, too.”

7:16 PM ***Nazarick Time***

Fenrir walked leisurely through the dark forest without making a sound. Even if branches or tangled vines barred his path, neither his movements nor those of the two riding him were hindered. On the contrary, it was like the three of them were incorporeal ghosts—they didn’t so much as snap a twig.

It was the power of Fenrir’s special ability, Land Navigator.

“According to the report from my minions, the lair of what might be the Giant of the East is up ahead.”

The trees grew so thickly in this place that the starlight didn’t even shine through, but Aura didn’t sound a bit nervous. Unlike humans and other beings with ordinary vision, Ainz and the others could see everything as if it was the middle of the day.

“I see. The Giant of the East and the Serpent of the West, huh? If we’re lucky, they’ll be having a party together, but I guess that’s a lot to ask. If the snake isn’t here, I’ll leave it up to you, Aura.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll do my best! And how will you deal with these fools who dare show hostility to you, my lord?”

“I think I’ll try talking to them first.”

Aura turned around to look at Ainz with a questioning look on her face. “Huh? You’re not going to subordinate them to your will?”

“Well, the Giant of the East and the Serpent of the West are both unknowns. It’s probably better, from a variety of perspectives, to go into it with that attitude. I’d like to obtain them if they don’t exist in *Yggdrasil*, you know?”

“You’re so kind, Lord Ainz.”

She wasn’t being sarcastic.

“Y-you think so? I’m really only kind when it benefits me—or members of Nazarick… If these monsters are like Hamusuke, they might be valuable, that’s all. Might as well take the chance to see what they’re about.”

“You were mentioning that about Hamusuke earlier, too. Is she really so valuable?”

“She sure is. She’s great for experimenting on.”

Hamusuke was currently training as a warrior under the lizardman Zaryusu. Incidentally, there was another student as well—a death knight Ainz summoned.

The aim of the training was to test if it was possible for them to acquire the warrior class. Ainz was especially interested in the death knight’s results. If he could become a warrior, it would be possible to rapidly boost Nazarick’s military strength.

It was probably impossible, but they wouldn’t have the results unless they did the experiment.

“Is that why you’re having the blacksmith make her armor? Because she’s so important?”

“You sure have good ears. That’s one reason. But if I’m going to ride her on a battlefield in the future, I need to strengthen her defenses.”

If Hamusuke acquired the warrior class, she would probably be able to wear full plate armor. When he put the heavy armor on her now, her mobility and evasion capability markedly decreased, so it only made sense…

If she can’t operate well in armor unless she acquires the warrior class, it’s just like the game… Well, even I’m bound by the game rules to the point where I can’t even put on metal armor, so compared to that, she has fewer restrictions… If we had one more Hamusuke, we could investigate the differences between them…

These gamelike restrictions were another mystery of this world. If he had

Demiurge investigate, he could probably get an accurate understanding of them, but for whatever reason, he didn't really feel like it.

I might just have to force myself to acknowledge that this world has laws of magic that are totally different from the laws of physics and accept that anything could be possible…

"Lord Ainz, is something wrong?"

"Hmm? No, it's nothing. What do you need?"

"Ah, you seemed to be pondering something, so I just wondered if there was something on your mind."

"Oh. Well, I just got caught up thinking about a bunch of things. It didn't mean anything else."

"I see."

Seeming relieved, Aura turned back around, and Ainz moved his eyes down lower from her hair like golden silk. His gaze passed her slim back to his own hands around her little waist.

Such a delicate waist. I guess this is what kids' hips are like?

Ainz had never had children, so out of curiosity, he patted her waist as if testing the sturdiness of one of his belongings. Then he brought his hands higher and lightly struck her back. Since they were riding Fenrir, he obviously didn't use too much force.

But Aura still jumped and whirled around. "Wah! What, Lord Ainz?" Her face was bright red—so red even someone without Night Vision would be able to tell.

"Ah, I just thought you had such a tiny waist. Are you eating enough? Even with an item that makes it so you don't have to eat, you still can, right?"

"Y-yes. I don't get any magic buffs or anything, but I can eat."

In *Yggdrasil*, humanoids and subhumans developed in exchange for having a life span, but grotesques stopped growing after a certain point and aging ended. If those rules were valid in this world as well, Aura and Mare would grow up. He didn't want anything bad to happen to them because they didn't

get proper nutrition when they were young.

Since his guildmates weren't around, the growth of these children was Ainz's responsibility.

"Make sure you're eating!"

"Okay! I'll eat a lot and annoy Shalltear!"

He wondered why Shalltear suddenly came up but decided to ignore it. "… Items that make eating and drinking unnecessary might be bad for your development, so it may be better to exchange them for a different magic item. Growing up… Someday, you two will have lovers, huh?"

Both Aura and Mare were adorable kids. Surely, they'd grow up to be beautiful young dark elves. Ainz imagined all sorts of people confessing their love for them—not that he had any experience with that personally, but he'd seen it in dramas on TV.

Perhaps because of the conversation they'd just been having, he imagined them surrounded by a ton of Hamusukes.

"Er, huh?"

Little Aura and Mare surrounded by a ton of Hamusukes. It wasn't a bad scene, but it wasn't at all what he had meant to be envisioning.

A hamster is a mouse relative, so Hamusuke can probably reproduce like crazy. I wonder if we'll have problems if we don't get her fixed. That said, I wouldn't mind if she reproduced a little bit… I wonder if there are even males of her race around…

"What?! It's a bit soon for that, Lord Ainz. I'm still only in my seventies."

"Oh, ahh, I see. So you're still a kid for a while, then. By the way, of the members of Nazarick, who do you like? What's your type?"

Ainz had zero romantic experience, so he got jealous when he saw a random handsome fellow flirting with a pretty lady, but he was confident that he could be genuinely happy for the NPCs.

"I love *you*, Lord Ainz!"

“Ha-ha. That’s sweet of you.”

Ainz was glad for little Aura’s flattery. Since he loved the NPCs, hearing they loved him back made him smile.

“So, who do you love the most, Lord Ainz, Albedo or Shalltear?”

“Ha-ha. I love *you*, Aura.”

“Huh?”

Ainz petted her head from behind, letting her golden hair slip between his fingers.

“What?!”

I guess I need to think about the quality of their education as well. If there’s a dark elf school or something, would Aura and Mare turn out better if I sent them? I wonder what BubblingTeapot would think if she were here. School, though…? A rom-com set at a school? Peroroncino was shouting something about that. That he wanted to established a Nazarick Academy with Suratan. Wonder where that data went…?

“Whaaaat?!”

“What is it? You’re awfully loud, Aura.”

“Ah! S-sorry. I know we’re near the Giant of the East’s house, too…”

“It’s fine. You don’t need to apologize. More importantly, about your future…”

“M-my future?”

“Y-yes. Is something wrong? You seem panicky… Did something happen?”

“N-no. It’s nothing. Right. You want to talk about my future?”

“Yeah, I do. In the future, I think it’d be a good idea to visit a dark elf country, if there is one. I’ll have you come with me when the time comes.”

“Huh…? Oh, y-yes, sir! *That* future, right. Understood! I’d be honored to accompany you. And—oh, we’re almost there, Lord Ainz.”

Up ahead in the darkness, past where the forest cut off, was an unnatural

light.

“I see. Could you station around us the magical beasts you brought? I’m going to get ready, too.”

Ainz used one of his skills, Summon Upper-Tier Undead.

What appeared was an ominous-looking knight atop a pale-blue horse. Their numbers increased each time he used the skill.

“Okay, four should be enough. All right, pale riders. You guys stand by in the air to capture anything that tries to flee.”

When the pale riders silently acknowledged their orders and pulled their reins, the blue horses galloped into the air. Once they turned incorporeal, they could proceed straight into the sky through any branches in the way.

“Okay, the perimeter is secure. All we have to do now is see if this is our monster.”

“Yes! Oh, you’re not going to test his stamina?”

“That’s the very last thing. I’m not actually looking for a fight. Let’s try to have a conversation that benefits both parties.”

He meant that. It wasn’t as if Ainz liked combat. He didn’t mind being cruel if there was something in it for him, but that didn’t mean he relished brutality. He wasn’t the type to go out of his way to step on ants on the road. Nothing would be better than settling this encounter with a discussion.

Fenrir arrived at the edge of the woods. The “edge of the woods” in this case was the edge of one of the clearings here and there within the forest where trees didn’t grow.

There were some areas where the trees died for special reasons, such as the way the area around an evil tree was a pile of withered trees. There were various different reasons, but this clearing was probably created by the monster.

The trees were scattered around where they had been felled. It was as if someone had undertaken a large construction project, failed, and abandoned everything in a huff.

“This is kinda funny. Aura, he must have been trying to copy the building you’re creating. The product of this fool’s efforts is appalling. This is what happens when cave-dwelling creatures try too hard…”

“You’re exactly right. Lord Ainz, there’s its camp.”

In the middle of the abused plot of land, so dead it seemed to have been burned, was a crevice.

“…No lookout? That’s pretty careless. Well, I guess we’re not knocking this time.”

Ainz followed Aura toward the cave opening in the ground. When he peered inside, a gentle slope seemed to lead to a somewhat more spacious area in the back. The ceiling was quite high, so a fairly large creature could live there with no trouble.

This reminds me of exploring labyrinths in Yggdrasil*. Whenever we found a cave in the mountains, there was that excitement of wondering what we would find inside.*

Back then, Tigris Euphrates or one of his other guildmates would have taken the lead and Ainz (Momonga) would have followed. Or they could summon monsters to send out front, undead in Ainz’s case, and have them set off all the traps, a method called warrior tripping or summons tripping.

Those were good times…

His steps were light as he reminisced, but his good mood lasted only a few seconds.

He furrowed his nonexistent brow at the smell coming from below. It wasn’t gas but stagnant air reeking of animal fat and putrefaction.

A trap of foul air? I wouldn’t expect such an elaborate trap from the kind of less intelligent creature that would live here… I suppose it could also be a coincidence.

Because Ainz was an undead, and thus didn’t need to breathe, he had perfect resistance against those sorts of air attacks. Aura had a magic item for protection, so if the awful stench was an attack, its effects would be cut. At that

point, it was basically only a smell.

“This Giant of the East fellow doesn’t seem to be very tidy. I’ll settle for enough intelligence to have a conversation, though…”

“Seriously. But I don’t know how much we can expect. From the footprints, it seems like there are numerous inhabitants of this cave, but none of them is wearing anything on their feet. Calculating from the large foot size, I’d say they have to be at least eight feet tall.”

“I see… That must be one of them.”

As they proceeded steadily down the slope, they could make out a monster at the bottom.

“Lord Ainz, they’re…ogres.”

There were two of them ripping something apart and bringing it to their mouths. A new bloody smell filled the air.

Ainz slowly aimed a finger but then smiled bitterly. If they were raiding a dungeon, they would kill the ogres without a sound and quietly proceed to the back to clean the whole place out, but their objective this time was different.

“…Well, we didn’t come here to wipe them out. We have to start by striking up a friendly conversation. Hey, you ogres, there! Sorry to disturb you at mealtime.”

The pair of ogres looked up at Ainz in a synchronized motion. Then they roared.

The cave echoed a lot, so it was hard to tell for sure, but it seemed like there were similar roars coming from farther back as well.

“What a vile racket they’ve got for an intercom system. Aura, fall back.”

Ainz sighed a “sheesh” as he watched the ogres charge up the slope at them. They didn’t seem at all interested in talking.

“Skeleton! Skeleton! Enemy!” When the ogres arrived before Ainz, shouting in their raucous voices, they unhesitatingly raised their clubs.

“I’m sorry—”

With a snarl, the ogres attacked.

“—we entered your house—”

They whacked Ainz, but he wasn’t injured, of course, since the clubs weren’t magic.

“—without permission.”

The ogres raised their clubs again.

They bashed Ainz’s skull, and his vision wavered slightly. He didn’t feel any pain, but they were annoying him. That said, Ainz himself would be furious and ready to kill anyone who barged into the Great Tomb of Nazarick. In that sense, it was only natural that they attack him, so it could be said that he should reconcile himself to that and accept it.

If the messengers of peace drew their weapon, it was too much of an endgame scenario.

The ogre who arrived later thrust out not his club but his empty hand. Ainz figured he had come to capture him, seeing as how the others’ attacks weren’t working.

His brow twitched but not really, of course, since his entire face was made of bone.

He was fine with being captured, but his eyes could see through the darkness that the hand was covered in blood.

“Gross.”

He immediately took a wand out of space and waved it. It didn’t have any fancy magic, but one hit from the item specialized in dealing battering damage was enough to burst the head of the ogre reaching for him. A mixture of blood and brains spattered the ogre standing next to him, who dropped his club as he retreated a step. “Y-you…not…skeleton…”

“Yeah, don’t lump me in with skeletons. We came to see your boss, the Giant of the East. Could you call him for me? Well, I imagine he’ll show up if we wait, but…”

Ainz waved his hand at the ogre to be gone, and the creature turned his back

to them and scurried into the depths of the cave.

"…Sheesh. This would have gone faster if they had realized the strength gap." Ainz rubbed the spot where he had been hit with the club and descended the short remaining slope.

In the ogres' original position lay the half-eaten corpses of something that seemed like goblins. How many was unclear, since it was just scattered remains, but it had to be more than one or two.

Ainz and Aura gave the area a wide berth to avoid the mess and arrived at the bottom of the cave.

"Damn. I got so annoyed that I accidentally drove them off. My plan was to hold off on massacring and proceed in an amiable manner unless negotiations failed…"

"You had no choice, my lord! Those vulgar ogres tried to lay their hands on you!"

"I'm glad you think so. Squishy Moe always said, 'Punching someone to get them to listen to what you have to say isn't a bad move,' or was it the Warrior Takemikazuchi?"

"If one of the Supreme Beings said it, it must be true!"

Before he could remember which of his two extremely different guildmates had said it, a ton of monsters walked out from the back of the cave. They were all far larger than humans.

"A mob of trolls? Calling a troll a giant is sort of false advertising, but I guess it's not a total lie."

Trolls were giants with long noses and ears, incredibly ugly faces, and brawny bodies that were repulsive in the same way as a deformity. They wore clothes made from skins of an animal similar to a tiger, with the heads decorating their shoulders.

They were taller than the ogres, easily over eight feet, and possessed a shockingly powerful regeneration ability that, unless stopped via fire or acid, would regenerate them from even a lump of flesh. There were six of those, plus

ten ogres.

The one Ainz paid special attention to was the troll at the head of the group.

Not only was he physically superior to the other trolls, but his hideous face projected self-confidence.

Compared to the other trolls, he was also better outfitted.

He wore leather armor that seemed to be made of a number of different animal skins, and in his huge hands, he held a great sword even more gigantic than the ones Ainz used as Momon. The sword seemed to be enchanted, and some kind of slimy liquid flowed continuously down the groove in the center to the edge of the blade.

“Does that one look as strong as Hamusuke?”

“That’s the sense I get, yeah.”

Then this troll must be the Giant of the East. So what kind of troll is it? Ainz observed the Giant of the East closely.

Trolls were highly adaptable, so they were as diverse as the places they lived.

For example, volcano trolls were resistant to fire. Sea trolls were great swimmers and could breathe underwater. Mountain trolls were big and strong. The rare toll trolls that inhabited bridges were another of the many varieties.

So what was the specialty of the troll standing before Ainz?

The ones adapted to caves were called cave trolls, but this one looked different from those.

Seeing an unknown type of troll for the first time in this world activated the merch collector within him.

The Giant of the East was a troll with an extremely rare mutation.

With countless battles behind him, he had adapted to combat and was now specialized in it. To give his variety a name: war troll. Of all the troll-derived races, his was the most exceptional. Compared to any other troll the same age, his combat ability was superior.

Certainly, in terms of size, war trolls lost to mountain trolls, but when it came

to muscles and ability level, their bodies were better. And they wielded not a primitive, easy-to-use battering weapon but possessed natural prowess with bladed weapons, which were inferior to clubs without proper technique. They were trolls awakened as warriors.

“So you’re the Giant of the East?” After confirming there was no objection, Ainz pointed a little to the right of the giant. “Then if you’re the Serpent of the West, I’d be thrilled, so how about it?”

Someone with only ordinary vision would think he was pointing at empty space. But Ainz, who could see as if it were broad daylight, plainly noticed a grotesque.

“You might think you’ve disappeared with Invisibility, but my eyes can see through that. Why don’t you give up the futile tricks and answer me?”

It must have canceled its Invisibility. Where there had been nothing a moment before, a monster appeared.

It was indeed a serpent. Well, it would be more accurate to say it had the body of a serpent. It was a grotesque with the thin, withered body of an elderly human from the chest up and the lower body of a snake.

This type of monster was in *Yggdrasil*, too; the name came to Ainz’s tongue immediately. “A naga, huh? I guess *serpent* isn’t wrong, but it seems like there would be a better way to describe it. Well, given what the Wise King of the Forest turned out to be, maybe I should have guessed…”

“I can’t believe you saw through my Concealment; you’re nothing but a—”

“Why are you here, Skeleton?”

The naga’s voice was drowned out by the scream that echoed through the entire cavern. The Giant of the East took a step forward.

Ainz faced him head-on in order to negotiate. “First, allow me to say this one thing: I’m not a skeleton. I’ll take the liberty of having you correct your mistaken impression.”

“What are you if not a skeleton?! I permit you to call me Gu, ruler of the eastern lands!”

For a moment, Ainz wasn't sure what the troll was saying. First, he thought it was a word like *king* or *chief*, but then he realized the monster had introduced himself.

"I see, Gu… Apologies for the belated introduction. My name is Ainz Ooal Gown."

Laughter filled the cave.

"Hwa-hwa-hwa-hwa! That's the name of a coward! It's a pathetic name, not a powerful one like mine!"

In response to those remarks, the other trolls began emitting grating laughter in imitation.

"How dare y—"

Aura stepped forward, but Ainz stopped her.

"It's fine. I'm not even offended. Keep your head. We're here as friendly messengers to talk, but just for my edification, I'd like to ask why you think my name is cowardly."

"Oh, these fellows believe long names indicate a lack of courage, Mystery Undead."

It was the naga who replied. The old-man face wore a sarcastic grin.

"So he's not an old knickknack but just a piece of junk, huh? And do you also think I have the name of a coward?"

"No, I don't think that way—because my name is long, too. I am Ryuraryusu Spenia Ai Indaloon, whom you call the Serpent of the West, invader Ainz Ooal Gown. I constantly wish his brains were on par with his magnificent body. But if that were the case, he surely would have conquered this forest, so it's tricky."

"…Well, that just saved your life."

When Ainz let slip his feelings, Ryuraryusu gave him a questioning look and was about to ask what he meant, but the timing didn't work out. Gu and the other trolls' laughter died down.

"So, weakling, why did you come? Do you want to be eaten? Crunchy bones

are so tasty! I'll start with your head!"

"I'm the one building a fortress in the center of the forest using golems and undead. Maybe you've heard of me?"

The atmosphere changed. Gu and his men grew intensely hostile, while Ryuraryusu grew intensely cautious.

"I have, interloper! If this snake hadn't been so whiny, we would have gone to kill you already! Well, you saved us the trouble, puny black coward!"

"Well that makes this quick. The reason I came is to negotiate with the two of you."

Ainz gestured at them to bow down. "If you value your lives, submit to me."

"You idiot! Why would we obey a coward like you? We're going to eat you! Then we'll eat the runt behind you!"

"Gu, he's the master of that horrible building. It's a big risk to take him lightly! And that's a dark elf behind him. They were the rulers of this forest until they fled from the evil tree. They're strong—listen to me!"

Ainz couldn't hold back any longer and burst into refreshing laughter. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You bark better than a dog, you meathead! Then how about this? The guy you call so weak challenges you, with the tough name, to a duel. You're not gonna get scared and run away, are you? If you're frightened, bow your head down to the dirt. I'll keep you as a slave!"

"Interesting! I didn't think I needed help to fight you anyway! I'm going to tear you apart and devour you!"

"Okay. That's your choice, then. As of this moment, negotiations have fallen through. Aura, back up a bit. I'm going to play with this one by myself."

The moment he finished speaking, a sword came swinging down at him from overhead—a blow from Gu's nearly ten-foot-long blade.

Ainz didn't move. He stood facing the sword and took it head-on.

"Uh?"

"What is it? You seem puzzled."

Ainz didn’t so much as flinch. Gu, his ugly face warped in surprise, swung his sword from the side this time, but Ainz let it hit his body, the same as before.

“Ngh?!”

Gu retreated a few steps and looked between Ainz and his sword. Then he confidently turned his back and stood before one of his subordinates.

All of a sudden, the sword sliced through the air into the troll that should have been on his side. The blade entered at the shoulder and cut smoothly through the flesh, sending fresh blood spraying everywhere.

The troll emitted a dim-witted shriek.

Gu nodded in satisfaction at the body that tumbled to the ground. He must have been happy to know nothing was wrong with his weapon.

“Ah, right, trolls can regenerate. Seeing it firsthand like this really is impressive.”

The cut rapidly healed. Rather than the damage rewinding, it was as if the healing process were fast-forwarded.

Although he had probably tested it due to the regeneration ability, Gu looked down at his subordinate with a sinister expression that made it seem like he would have done it regardless.

“Deciding the fate of the weak is the privilege of the strong. But you’ve made me extremely…uncomfortable.”

Ainz stepped forward. He felt less and less like playing around any longer.

“Gu! This Ainz Ooal Gown is no normal adversary! We should work togeth—”

“Shut up! Stay where you are and watch in silence, you coward. Grraaoohh!”

What came at Ainz was like an explosion of blows. The chain of attacks unleashed by this body far surpassing human physiques delivered destructive power on par with those of the highest-class beings he had faced in this world.

But how much pain would a hit that couldn’t knock down a tough castle wall or put a huge crack in the ground cause for Ainz?

He let the sword slicing through the air hit him.

“Sheesh. Could you stop making wrinkles?” He looked away as though he had lost interest and tugged his robe, disheveled by the impact, to straighten it out. Then he suddenly looked up at Gu as though he had just remembered he was there. “Oh, are you satisfied now?”

“Grraaoohh!”

Having realized his sword wasn’t very effective, the troll cast it away and charged with the intent to punch Ainz. The attack was a swing of a giant hammer. If it had hit a human, they would have no doubt gone flying in a splattered mess.

The blow would have been lethal for some, but Ainz took it head-on. Afterward, he brushed off the place where he had been hit as if something unclean had touched him.

Gu’s attacks stopped. His hideous face warped to be even uglier, and he stared at Ainz, who remained unflinching.

“You with the heroic name, is that the end of your confident attacks?”

“Your defense is pretty—gyaaaaah!”

Ainz rushed the troll and waved his wand, blowing away half of one of Gu’s legs. Unable to stay upright, his huge body crumpled to the ground.

“So have you got it through your pea brain that just because someone is a coward doesn’t mean they’re weak?”

The trolls and ogres watching the battle gasped in shock at the shameful state of their ruler.

Ainz emitted an annoyed sigh. If this monster only just managed to understand his situation, he was worth nothing. One with the intelligence to make a run for it with good timing, however, was a different story.

“Aura. Don’t let that one get away. Capture it.”

Aura instantly understood what Ainz meant despite his vague instructions. The naga was attempting to sneak away under cover of Invisibility, but she arrived at its side instantaneously.

“Lord Ainz, I caught it. Now what?”

Ainz ignored Gu and looked over to where Aura had a one-handed vise grip on the naga's neck. His attitude spoke volumes to Gu and everyone else in the room: He didn't consider Gu anywhere near a worthy opponent.

When Gu bared his teeth and growled in response to the scalding condescension, Ainz didn't care.

"Hey, kid!" The naga wrapped its body around Aura until she was completely covered. "I'm going to constrict until you pop!"

From inside the ball of snake body came a composed voice. "Uh, I can't see Lord Ainz's majestic figure like this. If you make a fuss, I'll crush half your throat —I have to be careful you don't die."

Sensing the power gap from that tiny fist, the naga shrieked and unwound its body.

"Aura, time is money, and only fools spend unwisely. Please move somewhere a bit out of the way so it doesn't get killed in the cross fire."

"Understood!"

Aura had no trouble dragging away the naga, though it was several times her weight, and Ainz shifted his gaze from that scene to Gu, who was finally able to stand up after the flesh around his stump bulged and his muscles healed thanks to his regeneration ability.

"You're patched up? Then shall we continue?" Ainz tapped his wand on his shoulder and readied himself in an unconcerned way. His attitude made it clear he wasn't going to bother defending himself.

"Wh-what d-did you do? What are you doing? Magic?"

When Gu, with his sword up, withdrew a few steps, Ainz stepped forward after him. Ainz's gait was short compared to Gu's, so there was more space between them now than before they had started the fight.

"Hmph," Ainz snorted. "What's this? How strange. I'm the one with the cowardly name, but I stepped forward, while you with the brave name are backing away. Why is that, Gu?"

The answer came in a monotone. "It's because Lord Ainz's name is brave, and

Gu is a weird, cowardly name, right, snake?”

“Y-yez! An’ you, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, are the proof of thad!”

Ainz nodded a few times at the one cute girlish voice and the other sobbing voice.

“I see, I see. That makes sense, then. So short names are cowardly, and Ainz Ooal Gown is a name for great, courageous people, right?”

“Why you!”

“Shush, coward.”

Gu overcame his fear with fury and lashed out, but Ainz neither defended nor dodged but swung back with his wand. He didn’t allow it to be blocked with the sword or evaded.

The wand obliterated one part of Gu’s body.

“Khaaaaa!”

Amid the echoing scream, Gu’s subordinates looked on in fear.

“I’d expect nothing less from a troll. You can be turned into hamburger meat and still come back to life. But it does seem to hurt. That last blow was your weakest yet—the swing of a coward with defense in mind, trying to protect himself from my attacks.”

Ainz was looking at Gu’s head, which was now half its original thickness. Any normal creature would be dead, but Gu returned to his former shape before Ainz’s eyes.

Though the troll had gone back to normal, his face was bizarrely contorted. There was terror in his eyes—the fear of someone helpless, twice as intense as before.

“Wh-what are you? Why don’t my attacks work?”

Ainz cocked his head. Then he slowly spread his arms. “…I am death. And I have come to deliver it unto thee.”

“K-kill him, you guys!”

“Oh-ho, just what I’d expect from a guy with such a cowardly name. Breaking

your word to duel me one-on-one? How fitting. So I'll forgive you," Ainz said in extremely good humor.

Captive to the fear of an unfathomable monster, Gu's subordinates moved sluggishly. No matter how stupid they were, they could sense Ainz's might, and they had just gotten such an eyeful of it they felt sick. Within them, two fears were in conflict; they all hesitated, looking between Ainz and Gu.

"Now!"

They still didn't move. How could they?

That went for Ainz as well. Everyone was frozen in a delicate balance. If anyone moved, the balance would collapse and everyone would go scattering.

It would be a pain if they ran away. Chasing them all down individually to kill them would be a bother.

"Then, yeah, playtime is over."

Ainz activated a skill that he didn't consider very effective but was actually overpowered in this world. Aura of Despair V.

The aura radiated from his core and spread throughout the area.

The ogres, the trolls, and Gu crumpled to the ground exactly like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

Sprawled on the ground, the monster didn't so much as twitch. It was clear that though the bodies were still warm, the flames of their lives had gone out.

In the now silent cave, a fearful elderly voice echoed out. "Wh-what did you do?"

Ainz turned to look at the naga, who was shrinking back in order to move even a short distance away, and answered. "I just used a skill. Trolls may be able to regenerate, but that doesn't mean they have perfect resistance to instadeaths… You're all worthless in the first place. I thought rather than meaninglessly killing you, I would use you for something, but I figured if you refused to bow to my rule, I would off you and be done with it."

"I will be your servant! Yielding to the strong is only natural for the weak. Going forward, I would like to exert myself to the fullest for you, my lord."

Ainz looked quietly at the naga pressing its head into the ground and then shrugged lackadaisically. “…Well, whatever. I don’t care. I mean, I did come here to negotiate, after all.”

“T-terrible. You truly think nothing of me at all. Though I have ruled the western forest all this time, you feel about the same for me as if I were a rock on the ground that just happened to look like an animal.”

“No, I have a little more interest in you than that. You mentioned something about dark elves, didn’t you? I’d like to hear more.”

“Of course…of course, my lord. I will tell you everything I know! So…” Ainz gestured for it to continue, so the naga spoke again. “If I talk, please don’t kill me.”

“I can promise that. If you work earnestly and loyally for me, I’ll provide adequate compensation. Before that, do you have any underlings? Were you ruling the western region on your own in the same way that Hamusuke—er, the Wise King of the Forest—ruled the south?”

“No, I have subordinates. But I didn’t bring them to this talk with Gu. They don’t have the power to turn invisible and flee in the event the discussion broke down.”

“I see. Next question: Do you have any trolls?”

“Just one.”

“Wonderful. So can we have him play the role of the Giant of the East? Er, well, no, that’s tricky… Okay, in a few days I’ll bring some of my— No…you should come to the building this one’s constructing. Aura, let it go.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s fine. It swore its allegiance. If it betrays us, I’ll just come up with a different way to use it.”

Aura’s slender hand let go of the naga’s neck. Beneath it was a blue bruise in the shape of her grip.

No longer paying attention to the nervous yet somewhat relieved naga, Ainz walked over to Gu’s corpse.

“I can’t remember what the stats for troll zombies are like.”

Ainz could create undead from corpses using a skill. They were only zombies and skeletons, but depending on the corpse he started with, the zombies could be fairly strong. For a well-known example, dragon zombies.

Ainz picked up the fallen great sword. It was far longer than Ainz was tall, so he took advantage of the basic ability contained in magic items to convert it to an appropriate size. If he tried to swing a sword too big for him to equip, the action would be immediately canceled, but just holding it was no problem.

“I guess I should up the fighting power of the individuals in that village. Maybe giving them this magic weapon is a good way to do that. After all, there’s no point in bringing it back to Nazarick.”

“Lord Ainz Ooal Gown!”

You still have more to say? Ainz turned apathetically back to the naga.

“Th-there’s no way I could possibly betray you, my lord. Who could, who has seen your chilling eyes and the way they gaze at us like an ant at the side of the road?”

“I don’t think my eyes are that expressive, but is that a special ability you have? Demiurge is observant, but not even he can understand how I truly feel.”

“It’s not a special ability, but I can at least tell whether someone takes an interest in me or not.”

Ainz thought maybe nagas had a racial skill or something. “I see… Got it. Now get out of here and bring us your underlings. That’s your first order.”

“Yes, sir!”

4

9:07 *PM* ***Nazarick Time***

Demiurge arrived at Ainz’s office with his usual elegance. First, he bowed

deeply to Ainz, seated before him, then shallowly to Mare and Cocytus, who were also present. To the maid in the room, he nodded.

Ainz replied with a nod and continued his Message with Entoma. “All right, Entoma. Give Lupusregina permission. Just make sure she protects those three with her life.”

“Understood. I’ll give her the orders.”

Demiurge strode to the center of the room. Ainz had to wonder jealously how he managed to look so cool when he walked. *Every movement is bursting with confidence. Is it because he stands so straight?*

Demiurge stopped sharply, and Ainz came back to himself. “Thanks for coming, Demiurge.”

“My lord! Thank you very much for the invitation. Have you finished your Message with Entoma?”

“There weren’t any issues. I got the report, and she had some questions. The test went fine.”

“Wonderful. And thank you for working around my schedule.”

“No worries, Demiurge. It’s only natural to schedule around the man who works the hardest for Nazarick. And you’re not late at all, so really, don’t worry about it… Now, I’d like to ask for your impressions…” Ainz handed him a piece of paper. When he had seen that Demiurge’s eyes had gone over it, he asked a question. “As you can see, it’s a menu, but what do you think? It’s for a human couple and possibly a child.”

“…I think humans should eat anything you serve them without complaints, my lord, but that isn’t the answer you’re looking for, so…not all children can appreciate foie gras. Also, don’t you think it might be good to have something a bit lighter?”

“I see. Thanks for the input.”

“Oh, you needn’t thank me… Lord Ainz, are you inviting someone to the Supreme Beings’ sacred tomb?”

“Yeah. I’d like to give them a nice welcome.”

Well, less making them welcome than winning them over. Essentially, he was using his assets to pressure them and presenting them with benefits in order to maintain good relations going forward.

“Are you sure?”

“Why not? Is there a problem with it?”

“No, my lord, nothing like that. Your word is correct.”

Back in the days of the game, they almost never invited non–guild members to the Great Tomb of Nazarick. They invited member Yamaiko’s little sister, whose screen name was “Akemi-chan,” a few times, but that was about it. Still, there was never any rule that said they couldn’t have anyone over. It just happened that they hadn’t really.

So I don’t think any of my guildmates would be upset if I invited Nfirea and Enri. There’s a clear difference between raiders and guests.

Demiurge seemed to have something on his mind, but Ainz addressed him and the two waiting guardians. “Guardians, you’re ready for the baths?”

“Apologies, but Mare and I will pick up what we need on the way.”

“I see. Cocytus, you brought your own supplies? Then let’s meet in front of the baths. Inclement, if anyone comes to see me, have them wait.”

“Understood.”

Upon getting the maid’s response, Ainz stood up and left his room. After stopping the servants who were going to follow him, he led the way to the bathhouse, which was also on the ninth level.

Personally, Ainz wanted to walk side by side and chat on their way, but Cocytus was too reserved for that. He probably hadn’t noticed Ainz feeling a bit lonely, but he did close the distance between them a little and ask, “LORD AINZ. THERE SEEMED TO BE FEWER EIGHT-EDGED ASSASSINS IN YOUR ROOM. DID YOU SEND SOME SOMEWHERE?”

Though disappointed he brought up work, Ainz consoled himself, *That’s how small talk goes sometimes.* He concealed the fact that his voice had been about to come out so happily. “They’re at the inn in E-Rantel. Narberal is in my room

in case of any unexpected visitors; they should be keeping an eye on her from a distance."

"ISN'T IT DANGEROUS TO LEAVE ONLY NARBERAL?"

"It probably is. Now would be the time to attack."

"I SEE. SO SHE'S LIVE BAIT, THEN?"

"Yeah. If the enemy who brainwashed Shalltear is watching us, Narberal would be a drool-worthy target. No one has attempted to approach Momon, who defeated the immensely powerful vampire Shalltear (well, under a different name), so if Momon isn't around, and it's just one caster, then…"

"THEY'LL BITE?"

"Who knows? If they did, we'd catch them for sure." Ainz gestured pulling up a fishing rod.

"THEN WILL WE MOBILIZE THE ENTIRE ARMY?"

"Ha, no. First, we'll investigate our opponent. If they're equal or stronger than us, we'll have to adjust our attitude accordingly."

Cocytus emitted a little groan like he understood but couldn't endure such a thing. "LOGICALLY, I UNDERSTAND THAT WE NEED TO BE PATIENT, BUT MY EMOTIONS REMAIN AGITATED."

"We only have to wait until we've made a careful investigation of our opponent and grasped their weakness. Once that's done, we'll rip their intestines apart with our teeth and make them faint from the pain. To brainwash Shalltear and force me to kill her is a serious crime."

Even if their opponent was a player, Ainz didn't feel any particular affinity with them. The ones Ainz was close to were his guildmates and their NPCs. If players came out swinging, he would use pain to teach them what fools they were.

"One good turn deserves another, but that goes for bad turns, too. It's only natural." Ainz smiled with an air of indifference. The thought that they would be able to do even better experiments if they had players to work with excited him. They would start with the horrible ones he could never perform himself—

terminal ones.

“AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH?”

“Yes. But did you know that those words are also meant to prevent excessive retaliation? I want to retaliate excessively, so I don’t use that saying.” Ainz continued in his head, *…Is what Squishy Moe used to say.*

“OH! JUST WHAT I’D EXPECT FROM LORD AINZ! NOT ONLY IS YOUR COMBAT PROWESS WORTHY OF ADMIRATION BUT SO IS YOUR WISDOM.”

Ainz didn’t have to turn around to feel the wave of respect aimed at him.

“SO WILL YOU SPEND THE REST OF THE DAY AT NAZARICK, MY LORD?”

“No, after we have our bath, I’ll work here for a bit before going back in the middle of the night. I have a lot to do over there, too. What are you up to?”

“MY PLAN IS TO RETURN TO MY GUARD DUTIES AT NAZARICK FOR A WHILE. I’VE TAKEN CARE OF ALL THE THINGS I FELT I SHOULD BE PRESENT FOR IN PERSON, SUCH AS EXPLORING THE VICINITY OF THE LAKE.”

“So once you’ve returned, the ones working outside Nazarick will be Demiurge with his various responsibilities, Sebas and Solution collecting intelligence in the royal capital, Aura building our base in the forest, and Narberal and me?”

“THAT ONE OF THE SUPREME BEINGS IS DOING THE WORK WE SHOULD BE DOING DOESN’T SIT VERY WELL WITH ME…”

“Ha-ha. Forgive me, Cocytus.”

“ME FORGIVE YOU? HOW ABSURD. YOU ARE THE RULER OF THIS LAND, LORD AINZ. YOUR WORD IS LAW. WHAT I SAID EARLIER WAS SIMPLY SOME FOOLISH NONSENSE. MOREOVER—”

The atmosphere shifted and Ainz thought, *Hmm?* He looked over his shoulder at Cocytus’s dark—though he couldn’t read his emotions—expression.

“IF WE WERE ALL AS OUTSTANDING AS DEMIURGE, YOU WOULDN’T NEED TO GO OUT YOURSELF, MY LORD. ULTIMATELY, IT’S OUR LACK THAT—”

“No, that’s not right. You were each made for specific purposes, so it’s

important that you all do the jobs you were made for. To be frank, you don't need to be able to do anything else. Demiurge is versatile due to his knowledge and wisdom. That's all."

Cocytus didn't seem quite convinced, so Ainz continued.

"If you want, you can increase your repertoire little by little. Yeah, you should be learning by reigning over the lizardman village, right? Your experiences in governance there will surely benefit you. And if you continue on like that step by step, someday you'll be as versatile as Demiurge."

"DO YOU REALLY THINK IT'S POSSIBLE?"

"I don't think it's impossible." Ainz spoke euphemistically. "No one can match Demiurge when it comes to strategy. Aspiring to be a man like that is a long, hard road, but your efforts will not be in vain. That's how I see it."

The two of them walked in silence down the corridor. Then Cocytus said quietly as if squeezing out the words, "THANK YOU, LORD AINZ."

"I haven't said anything that deserves thanks, you know. All right, Cocytus, we're almost to the baths. Stow that gloom away somewhere before Demiurge and Mare get here."

"YES, SIR!"

Spa Resort Nazarick on Nazarick's ninth level was a wonderful facility containing a total of seventeen baths, including men's and women's, of nine different types. The most unusual was probably the Cherenkov bath. The blue light so bright it seared one's eyes made for a luxurious atmosphere.

When Ainz and Cocytus arrived, they ran into someone they didn't expect to see.

"Lord Ainz!" The exclamation point might as well have been dotted with a heart. It was Albedo. No, not just Albedo. Behind her came Shalltear and an exhausted-looking Aura.

Meanwhile, Demiurge and Mare were nowhere to be found. *Are they waiting in the changing room?*

"A-Albedo. What are you doing here?"

“Huh? We thought we’d all come take a bath… Is that why you’re here, too?”

“Oh, right… Yes. Exactly. What a coincidence, Albedo.”

“It really is…! I’ve heard it’s good to get some exercise and work up a bit of a sweat before taking a bath. Maybe I should sweat with you, my lord.”

A chill went up Ainz’s spine.

“Ping-Pong or something like that wouldn’t be bad…”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, you meanie.”

With the swift motion of a level-100 warrior—impossible for a caster to evade—she approached Ainz, who was dressed in only a single robe, and reached out a finger to doodle on his chest. But it slipped—*fwoop*—right between his ribs.

“Ah.”

“Oh.”

Their voices were loud in the quiet corridor.

Of all the stupid things that could happen. Ainz winced and was about to say something to Albedo when her next comment made his face twitch.

“My finger went into your special spot…”

Albedo’s cheeks were red, and her eyes glistened. A fragrant perfume was in the air—like the scent he sometimes detected in his bed.

“Hey, I know I’ve asked this before, but has she always been this weird?” Ainz asked Aura in earnest, with zero affectation, as she flailed around, trying to restrain Shalltear.

“…Sorry, Lord Ainz. A lot has happened. Uh, you know how things are in Nazarick—please just consider this overtiredness.”

“W-well, I guess it can’t be helped, then. H-hmm. Albedo, I appreciate your hard work every day.”

As Ainz was about to swiftly move away, a hand clutched his robe. He didn’t even have to look down to know who it was. “Seriously, Albedo, what’s wrong with you? What has you so worked up?”

“When you say those things to me…a flame lights in my breast. I can feel it all the way in my stomach, a twinge. So, Lord Ainz—!”

“No, hol— Wai— Calm down, Albedo! C-Cocytus!”

“I’LL HANDLE THIS.”

A wave of chill blew down the corridor. The sudden change in temperature seemed to bring Albedo to her senses, and the light of reason appeared in her eyes once more.

“I CAN’T STAND BY AND WATCH THIS DISRESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR TOWARD LORD AINZ, EVEN IF YOU ARE THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARDIANS.”

Cocytus stepped between Ainz and Albedo with a silver spear in his hands, and it was clear that depending on her reaction, he wouldn’t hesitate to gut her.

“Please excuse me, Lord Ainz. It seems I forgot myself.”

“I accept your apology, Albedo.”

Following that act by his master, Cocytus withdrew, but he didn’t put away his spear yet.

“I know how much pressure your job puts on you. I’m sure there are times you lose yourself and just want to vent. For now, have a nice soak and relieve some of that stress. Cocytus, thanks for your assistance.”

When he had said what he had to say, he headed into the men’s bath and was just about to duck under the curtain at the entrance when he heard footsteps behind him.

“…Why are you following me, Albedo? Just in case, I’ll remind you: This is the men’s bath, and you go in the women’s bath.”

“I thought I would wash your back…”

“…No. Besides, I’m not going alone; I’ll be with the other male guardians. Do you mean to say you have no problem showing them your body?”

He thought she might say it was fine, since she was a succubus, but she answered immediately. “There’s a family bath in another area…”

“That’s not what family baths are for!”

“But, Lord Ainz, it’s not fair for you to give your affection only to them.”

“That’s right! Quite right!” said Shalltear, stopping Aura from breathing from her mouth. The dark elf was just being dragged along. Her eyes were open but contained no light. Cocytus stood behind them, miffed.

What kind of affection is taking a bath together…? Albedo has been seriously weird lately, ever since… Could that be why she’s so off the rails?

“Albedo. First, let me say one thing. I like women better than men. I’m purely heterosexual.” Albedo was about to say something, but he raised a hand to stop her. “In the future, who knows what kind of relationships we’ll have, but right now, when our place in this world is uncertain, I can’t have relationships of that sort with any of you, as leader of the organization.”

Albedo’s brow furiously furrowed.

“In the first place, you’re like the daughters of my best friends to me… It’s a bit too complicated.”

“I was wondering what you were doing standing around outside the entrance, and it appears you’re bothering Lord Ainz.”

“S-sis is…d-dead…”

“I am not!” came the retort from the lifeless girl.

“We’ve been waiting for you guys.”

“Terribly sorry to be late… Perhaps our captain needs to learn to control her emotions?”

Demiurge’s slit eyes were just slightly open. His gaze was clearly hostile. The atmosphere was filled with the serious vibes that show how frightening it was when someone who was usually so mild got angry. Cocytus followed suit and went on guard against Albedo.

Albedo, as always, remained smiling. Well, perhaps her smile intensified.

“You fools!” Ainz roared in spite of himself. “How dare you squabble among yourselves in front of me! You idiots!”

All the guardians shivered and dropped to one knee.

“Apologies, Lord Ainz!”

“…It’s fine. Stand up, everyone.” Upon confirming they were all on their feet, he spoke in a mild tone one would use to reprove children. “Stop bickering about stupid, pointless stuff. That sort of thing is what disappoints me the most. Got it?”

Hearing everyone’s acknowledgment, Ainz felt his anger completely disappear.

“Okay, let’s take a bath and refresh. Men, come with me. Aura, I appoint you the observer of the women. Make sure those two don’t try to pull anything stupid.”

“Understood!”

A fire leaped into Aura’s eyes. Perhaps she thought this was her chance to counterattack—Shalltear and Albedo couldn’t conceal their alarm at the blazing heat wave.

Ainz went through the curtain that said MEN, choosing to ignore the clamorous voices he could hear behind him.

He took off his clothes in the locker room. If he had come with his usual gear set, there would have been a lot to remove, but since he had prepared ahead of time, he could disrobe quickly.

He threw off his clothes and walked forward.

Whenever I’m naked I wonder how I manage to move…

He was a skeleton with neither flesh nor muscle. According to Satoru Suzuki’s common sense, he was impossible. Of course, in this world it was natural, so he just had to accept it, but questions like these still popped into his head from time to time.

“I’m going in.”

“P-please wait!”

Mare ran over to him buck naked.

He may have been an exceedingly effeminate boy, but seeing him like this made it clear he was male.

His build was that of a child, with basically no muscle. The fact that a body that would probably squish when poked could unleash so much power struck Ainz as another one of this world's unfathomable laws.

As he examined Mare's nakedness thinking those things, he gave the boy a warning. "Don't run in here. It's dangerous with the wet floor."

A guardian couldn't die from slipping and cracking their head open, but Mare looked so much like a child Ainz couldn't help but worry.

"Y-yes, sir. My apologies."

You don't have to apologize, thought Ainz.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting." Demiurge and Cocytus appeared.

Demiurge's body was toned and muscular, sleek. Even though the parts beneath his clothes couldn't be fully designed, with those muscles he definitely looked like the work of Ulbert.

"Nothing different about you, huh, Cocytus?"

"Well, he's always naked."

"COULD YOU PLEASE STOP MAKING ME SOUND LIKE A PERVERT?"

"Sorry. You've got outer skin armor, so it's no wonder you always look the same."

Outer skin armor was a type of bodily armament. As with Shalltear's nails and fangs, the hardness and resistance, as well as the amount of data crystals it could be augmented with, increased as the character leveled up.

There were many pros to this sort of armor, including less gear swapping, simple repairs after being damaged by a weapon-breaking attack using any healing spell that recovered HP, and the assurance that it couldn't be dropped upon death.

On the other hand, there were some cons as well. Its stats would never match up to the main gear of a player of the same level. Even a bodily armament at

level 100 almost never reached God tier. Maybe someone with a class that could acquire skills to boost bodily armaments could push it to God tier, but Ainz wasn't sure if it was really possible or not.

For a player, that seemed like an awful lot of cons, but for an NPC it was a great option. With bodily armaments, they didn't require a ton of different gear, which meant less work for the player who created them.

"THANK YOU." Cocytus bowed.

It wasn't as if he had said it to defend him, but…

Is he being tormented—or messed with—over this so much that it warrants a thank-you? Maybe I should say something to the others…

Is this what a teacher feels like when there's bullying going on in the class? Ainz wondered how Yamaiko felt as he called to members of the men's bath group. "Okay, let's go."

Ainz led the way into the baths.

The large facility was divided into twelve areas.

First were the baths. The largest was the jungle bath, then there was the atmospheric ancient Roman bath, the yuzu bath, the carbonated bath, the jet bath, the electric bath featuring a low-level current that caused a full-body tingling sensation, a cold bath with charcoal floating in it, the Cherenkov bath with its mysterious light caused by who knew what, and the mixed-sex outdoor (though the scenery was artificial) bath.

Besides that, there was also a sauna, a hot-stone spa area, and finally the recreation room.

"So where should we go? I'd like to hear your suggestions."

"I FIND THE COLD BATH A TEMPTING CHOICE. I WOULD LIKE TO INTRODUCE YOU TO THE DELIGHTS OF A COLD BATH, LORD AINZ."

Ainz had resistance to chill, so getting into a freezing cold bath wouldn't bother him, but going to the cold bath first seemed wrong.

"Cocytus…we came here for a relaxing soak…"

Cocytus realized what the issue was once Mare voiced an objection. Another comment followed.

“We came to soak, so we should probably choose a warm bath that will improve our circulation… Oh, wait. I should probably ask: Can you go in hot water? You won’t cook like a lobster or something, will you?”

“NO PROBLEM. MY EXOSKELETON PROVIDES FIRE RESISTANCE, DESPITE YOU ALL CALLING ME NAKED.” He chuckled proudly.

“Uh, so, in that case I think a normal bath would be fine.”

“THE COLD BATH IS THE BEST… IT FEELS GREAT IF YOU GO IN HUGGING A BLOCK OF ICE…”

“I won’t say it’s only you, but it has to be a very tiny minority who enjoy that…”

“W-well, this won’t be any fun if we all go separate ways. Let’s just head around to each bath in turn. We can start with the normal jungle one. My friend worked really hard on creating it.”

Everyone said they were looking forward to it, although Cocytus sounded a bit forlorn, and Ainz led them to the jungle bath.

The jungle was thick with artificial flora. Though he knew it was fake, it seemed so real that it felt like a monster would come crawling out at any moment.

“This is a bath based on a place that used to really exist, the Amazon River. Belliver helped Blue Planet build it.”

The guardians were impressed. Ainz took a pail and bath stool into the washing area ahead of them.

Why are all the pails in this spa yellow? I heard it’s traditional, but… Maybe it’s just the standard color?

“This goes without saying, but you need to wash before you get in the bath. The way I wash myself gets stuff everywhere, though, so you guys should keep your distance.”

With that, he dumped the pail of hot water over his head. The liquid dropped

surprisingly quickly through his body and splashed hard on the floor. Since he was full of gaps, it was really hard to get his body wet with just one pailful. After a few more, he was finally wet all over, so he took out the brush he had brought along.

He squirted a generous amount of liquid soap on it and began scrubbing. Once again, due to the gaps in his body, he might as well have been scrubbing a colander; bubbles went flying everywhere.



Yeah. I should have brought my cute little bath buddy Sankichi.

He didn't want his subordinates to see him covered in goop, so he hadn't brought the slime along, but he hadn't washed himself in a while, and it was quite a pain.

As Ainz was scrubbing with all his might, Mare approached with a yellow stool in one hand. He seemed nervous, but his face, flushed from the heat of the bath, gave Ainz a smile.

"L-Lord Ainz, I-I'll wash your back!"

"Hmm? Oh! I see. You'll wash it for me? But my body is such a pain. Use the brush. It'll be too hard to do with a cloth."

Ainz turned his back and Mare slowly began to scrub.

"Hey, you're pretty good at this."

"Thank you!"

Really, he had no standards for good or bad, but his gratitude toward Mare inspired him to say that.

When Ainz looked to see how the other two were doing…

"Okay, then I'll wash your back."

"MUCH OBLIGED."

…he couldn't help but smile ear to ear, not that his skull had ears.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick is the best place there is.

He smiled even more when he heard the boy's voice behind him saying, "Okay, so I washed that spot."

"Thanks, Mare. Next, I'll wash your back. Come on."

Ainz grabbed the flustered boy's shoulders and whirled him around. Then he grabbed his towel and put soap on it.

He rubbed carefully so it wouldn't hurt, aiming for a less forceful version of the way he washed himself.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?"

“I-I’m all right!”

After washing Mare’s bizarrely stiff back, he handed the towel back to him.

“You can do the front yourself, right?”

“O-of course!”

Ainz picked up his brush and began working on his ribs, careful not to spatter Mare.

“I’ll be inside.”

Demiurge, having finished washing, headed for the bath, his tail swaying. Next was Cocytus, whose body was probably second to only Ainz’s in difficulty to wash, but since he could use four arms, it didn’t take so long. After that, of course, was Mare. Ainz didn’t finish until a few minutes after everyone else.

The bath was fairly large, and water poured out of the mouths of quite detailed lion statues. The air was hot. As he waded through the steam, he noticed Cocytus slightly off to one side while the other two were soaking together, having secured a reasonable amount of personal space.

“Ahh, this feels great.”

Ainz had the idea that kids usually swam around in the bathwater, but Mare just relaxed with his towel on his head. Seeing the boy act like more of a tired adult, he was shocked. *The guardians’ jobs must be seriously exhausting.*

“Yeah. It feels almost like the tiredness gets rinsed out of your core.” Demiurge had taken off his glasses. He cupped some water and poured it over his face with a sigh like a middle-aged man.

“IT’S SO HOT…”

“Huh? W-wait, I thought you said you had resistance.”

“I DO, BUT I NEVER GO TO SUCH HOT PLACES, SO I’M NOT USED TO IT.”

“…Still, that’s no excuse to use your chill aura. Please don’t come over here. A bath is more comfortable when it’s hot.”

Ainz realized why Cocytus was off on his own. The area in his vicinity was probably only lukewarm.

“YOU HAVE FLAME RESISTANCE, SO MAYBE IT’S GOOD FOR YOU, DEMIURGE, BUT…THE COLD BATH ISN’T BAD, EITHER, YOU KNOW.”

“Not interested. Besides, I turned down my resistance to enjoy this. Don’t you have the strength to withstand a little pain?”

“THAT’S A PRETTY DULL CHALLENGE COMING FROM YOU, DEMIURGE, BUT I LIKE IT.”

“Cut it out. We’re in the bath to have fun. If you want to test each other’s endurance, go to the sauna. You don’t have to soak in here if it’s not fun for you.”

Mare, whose face was beaded with sweat, let out a steamy sigh.

“Look. That’s how you enjoy a bath. Mare, get out if you start cooking.”

“I-I’m all right, Lord Ainz! I’ll use magic if I need to!”

That’s sort of missing the point, too, thought Ainz, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he looked over at Demiurge. “…Do you think you should bathe if you have to use resistance?”

“Isn’t that one way to do it, Lord Ainz? You don’t overheat because you’re an undead, right? That strikes me as sort of the same thing.”

“…You’re right.”

He could feel the warmth seeping into his body, but it didn’t feel as good as it did when he was human.

I guess there are pluses and minuses to being undead…

As he was lamenting his lost happiness…

“Hmm?”

He looked up and around the steamy bath.

“What is it, my lord?”

“I thought I heard someone call my name…”

“MAYBE FROM NEXT DOOR?” Cocytus pointed at the wall he was leaning against.

“Over there is…ah, the women’s bath?”

“I see. But aren’t those walls supposed to be pretty thick?”

“MAYBE THE VOICES ARE LOUDER DUE TO THE ECHO?”

Ainz focused his ears in spite of himself. He didn’t have any untoward purpose; he was simply curious as to what the women talked about when they were alone. So he didn’t do anything unbecoming of the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, like press his ear up against the wall. On the contrary, he moved away from the wall and lingered across from it.

“Albedo, you have a lot of hair down there!”

Ainz frowned at the conversation he heard.

“Aura, don’t make it sound so weird! Ahh, Lord Ainz must be just over this wall. I wonder if there’s a peephole.”

Ainz earnestly scanned the wall, suddenly worried someone had included some kind of pervy prank. There was a period during which the members of the guild really got into making that sort of thing. There was a good chance some kind of gimmick was left over from those days.

“Isn’t it usually the other way around?”

“Lord Ainz would never do that. If he wanted to see us, all he would have to do is order us to show him, so there’s no need to peep.”

“Oh, for once you said something that made sense, Shalltear.”

“For once? How rude. But hey, is that a toothbrush? I wish you wouldn’t brush—er, wash—in the water.”

“I can’t help it. It’s so hard for me to wash; I can really only manage it in a big bathtub like this.”

He heard Albedo’s voice from a slightly elevated position and then a loud brushing noise.

“Ah, I see what you mean. I guess it’s fine, then.”

“Thanks.”

“Ugh, don’t stare like that. It’s creepy. You’re not going to brush, Shalltear?”

“I brush normally in my room, so there’s no need. Speaking of which, though, is it even possible for us to get cavities?”

“Even if we can’t, kissing with stinky breath could cool a love that blazed for a hundred or even a thousand years.”

The brushing stopped, and he heard someone moving around.

“What? Are you going in like that? At least—”

There was a huge splash and the sound of the water sloshing around. She must have jumped in quite energetically.

“Gagh!” Shalltear coughed. “If I were like a vampire from a story, I would have sunk in the running water!”

“C’mon, you’re not a kid. No jumping.”

“Tee-hee-hee. Ahh, this feels so good. We should come here more often.”

“Maybe if you learned proper bathing etiquette…”

“What? Huh? The lion moved!”

“If you don’t know the etiquette, you aren’t qualified to take a bath! This is an execution!”

At the sudden male voice, Ainz and the other guys all looked at one another.

“U-uh, that sounded like a man just now.”

“IS THERE A BATHHOUSE DOMAIN GUARDIAN WE DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT? BUT I CAN’T BELIEVE THERE WOULD BE A MAN IN THE WOMEN’S BATH.”

“No, I’ve heard this voice before… It’s Luci★Fer.”

Hearing the troublemaker’s voice reminded Ainz of various problems he’d caused. Honestly, he didn’t care for the guy.

“A Supreme Being?! Really?!”

“It’s hard! That’s no mere iron golem. Albedo!”

“Die, golem-craft garbage!”

Something slammed into the wall with tremendous force and a loud bang. The blow even shook the walls of the men’s bath.

“…I guess we should arm ourselves and get ready to charge into the women’s bath.”

The guardians didn’t seem very keen on that order.

If friendly fire weren’t on, it would have been only a joke, but under their current circumstances, it could really end up becoming a fight to the death. Moreover, they were vulnerable with their gear off. There was a distinct possibility they would require rescuing.

“Next time I want to have a more leisurely soak…,” Ainz murmured as he waded through the water to the changing room, and the guardians all nodded.

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



Character 35



Enri Emmott

Humanoid

The new chief

Position — Chief

Residence — Carne, the Emmott family house

Class Levels — Farmer — 1 lv
Sergeant — 1 lv
Commander — 2 lv
General — 2 lv

Birthday — 10 Mid-Wind Moon

Hobby — Working on the farm (or rather, there's nothing else fun to do in the village)

{ personal character }

The girl who became the new chief of the Carne tribe. She has a very healthy work-hard, eat-well lifestyle, and her bulging biceps and toned abs are proof. Of the humans in Carne, she can probably be counted as one of the top five strongest. These stats are her at the end of Volume 8. At the beginning, she had only farmer and sergeant level 1.

Nfirea Baleare

Humanoid

Genius alchemist apothecary



Position — Apothecary

Residence — Carne, the Baleare family house

Class Levels — Wizard — 3lv
Alchemist (Genius) — 4lv
Pharmacist (Genius) — 4lv
Doctor — 1lv

Birthday — 18 Mid-Wind Moon

Hobby — Alchemy experiements
(learning new things in general)

{ personal character }

A boy who has not only a surprising inborn talent and unparalleled alchemy skills but a fairly nice face, too. Well, people do say good things come in threes. Though he calls himself an apothecary, he's really an alchemist, but in this world the two jobs are so closely related that it wouldn't be strange to call him either.



Goblin Troop

Subhuman

Robust guardians

Position — Enri's protectors

Residence — Carne

Class Levels
- Goblin Mage — 10lv
- Goblin Cleric — 10lv
- Goblin Soldier — 8lv
- Goblin Leader — 12lv
- Goblin Archer — 10lv
- Goblin Rider and Wolf — 10lv

Goblins in the Village

- A Goblin Mage — 1
- B Goblin Cleric — 1
- C Goblin Soldiers — 12
- D Goblin Leader — 1
- E Goblin Archers — 2
- F Goblin Rider and Wolf — 2



personal character

The group of goblins Enri summoned (nineteen in total). They are absolutely loyal to their summoner. Their allegiance to Enri is comparable to how the members of Nazarick feel toward Ainz. But their relationship with Enri is closer than the one between Ainz and the guardians. These goblins are more robust than most and look quite different. It's definitely not the case that goblins in general look like this (so muscular).

Character 38



Lupusregina β

Grotesque

A sadist with a smiling mask

Position —— Combat maid of the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence —— One of the servants' rooms on the ninth level

Alignment —— Brutal (Karma Points: -200)

Race Levels —— Werewolf —— 5lv

Class Levels —— Cleric —— 10lv

Battle Cleric —— 5lv

Warlord —— 4lv

Hierophant —— 5lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] —— 59 levels

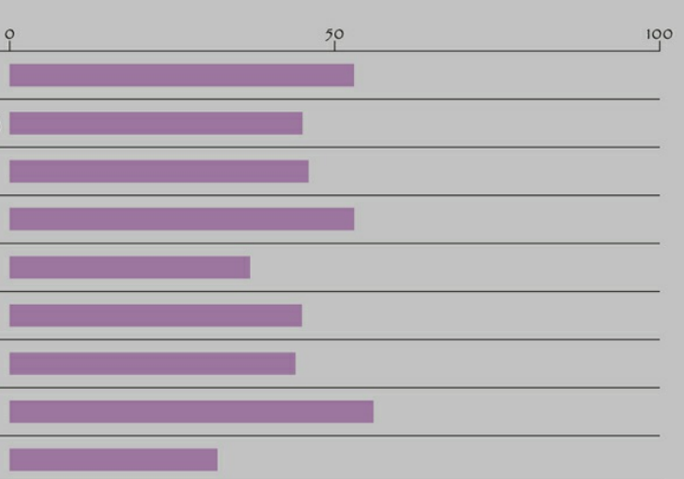
Race levels — Class levels

5 acquired total — 54 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



OVERLORD
Character Profiles

The Forty-One Supreme Beings

COMPLETED

1/41

Touch Me

Grotesque

The pure-silver holy knight



{ personal character }

A well-known *Yggdrasil* player and one of the strongest. He was once in a position similar to guild master but stepped down after a certain incident occurred. Momonga was his successor. In the real world, he's a good father with a beautiful wife—in other words, a winner.

Tabula Smaragdina

Grotesque

The great alchemist



{ personal character }

A man with a thing for unexpected contrasts. He loves horror films, watches everything from the latest releases to those considered classics, and was always surprising the guild members with his knowledge. One of his hobbies is tabletop RPGs, which is probably where his love of designing lore comes from. He used to ramble on to Momonga about all the pointless, random things he knew about mythology.

Afterword

I'm so incredibly busy. That's why I've got some extra meat around my stomach and under my chin. Yes, it's me, the author Kugane Maruyama, turning into a pig. Thank you very much for buying or checking out this book!

This hectic schedule is the result of the work for the anime overlapping with all sorts of other things like stuff at the office.

Currently the anime is moving along on schedule as we have heartwarming conversations such as, "How does Ainz smile?" "He just kind of does." "I'm sure the director will think of something."

But it's not only the anime! The *Overlord* manga (with art by Hugin Miyama) started in *Comp Ace*. By the time all of you have this book in your hands, I think the second chapter will be out. Reading the manga, I'm impressed with and surprised by how cool Ainz is. Check it out, if you feel so inclined!

Now then, this book, for the first run only, has a reversible cover.

I asked so-bin for the impossible, a masterpiece right up there with many light novels' color inserts, and I am deeply moved by the results (a scene of the girls in the bath).

I have the feeling you won't see an illustration like this in this series again, but if you'd like to request something similar, please write your idea down on the postcard included with the book and mail it in.

Okay, from here on out it's thank-yous.

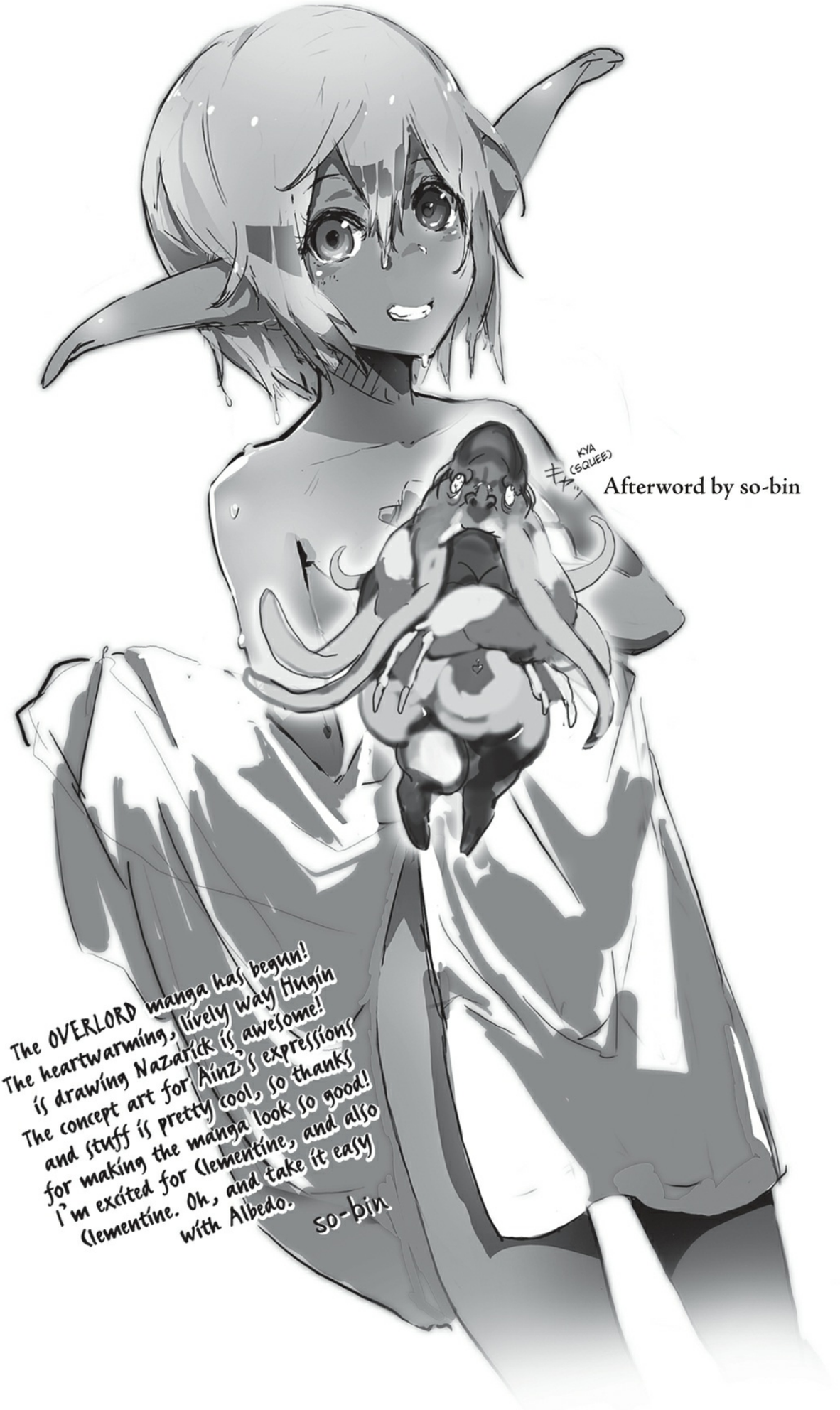
To so-bin, who, though busy with a huge amount of projects, nails my impossible requests, thank you very much.

To the designers Code Design, to Osako for the proofing, F——ta for the editing, and everyone involved in creating *Overlord*, thank you!

And Honey, thanks for so many things, like finding my horrible mistakes.

Most of all, to the readers, I truly thank you. I hope you'll continue to follow along!

KUGANE MARUYAMA



Afterword by so-bin

The OVERLORD manga has begun!
The heartwarming, lively way Hugin
is drawing Nazarick is awesome!
The concept art for Ainz's expressions
and stuff is pretty cool, so thanks
for making the manga look so good!
I'm excited for Clementine, and also
Clementine. Oh, and take it easy
with Albedo.

so-bin

EVERY YEAR, THERE'S A WAR BETWEEN THE KINGDOM AND THE EMPIRE THAT USUALLY ENDS AS NOTHING MORE THAN A STARE DOWN. BUT WHEN THE EMPIRE'S RULER, THE FRESH BLOOD EMPEROR JIRCNIV, VISITS THE GREAT TOMB OF NAZARICK

AND AINZ ENTERS THE FRAY, THE FIGHT TURNS INTO AN ALL-OUT WAR. CONFLICT SWIRLS OUT OF CONTROL IN VOLUME 9

Volume Nine

OVERLORD

Volume 9: The Caster of Destruction

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