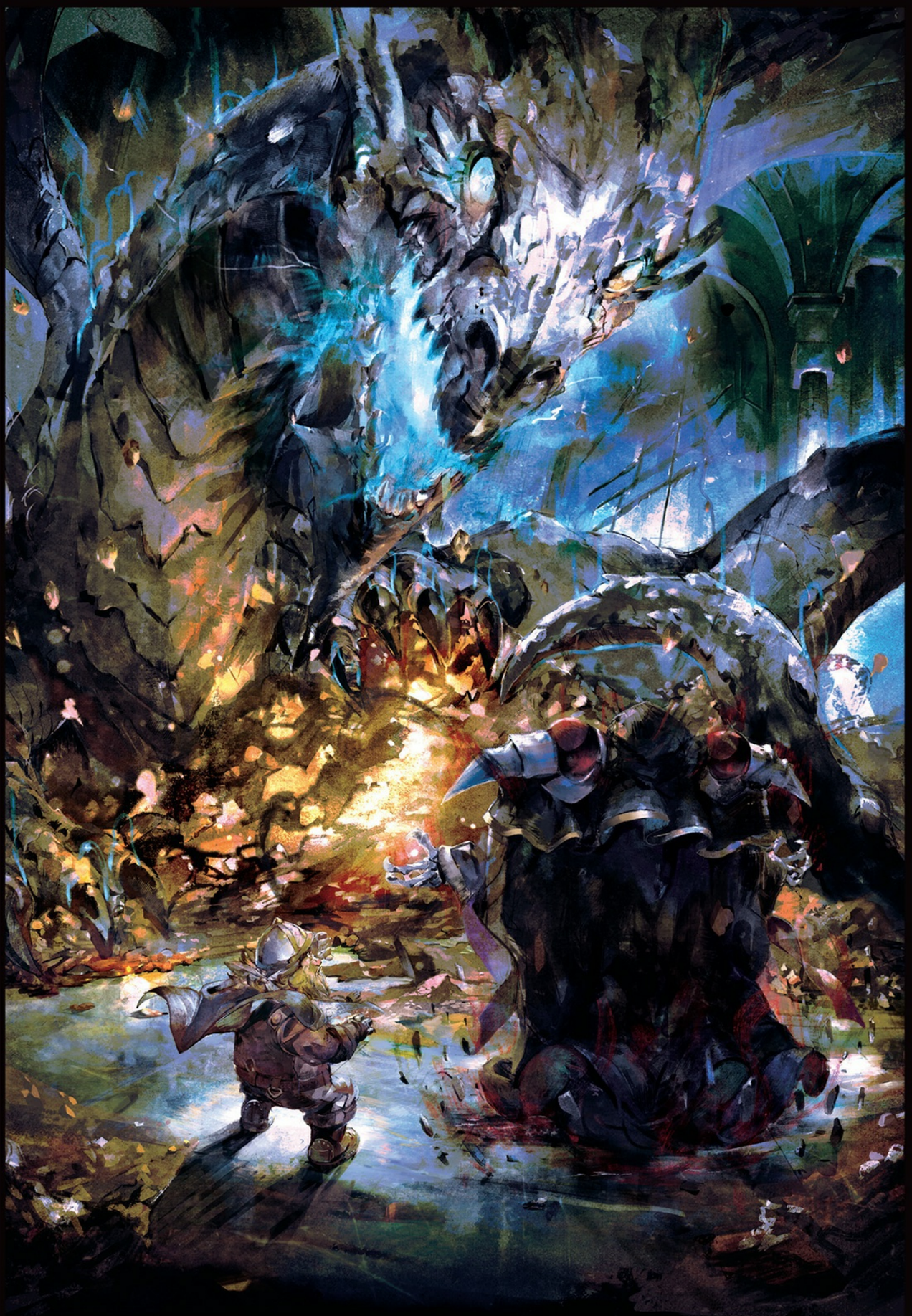


OVERLORD 11

The Dwarven Crafter

Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin





OVERLORD

Volume 11: The Dwarven Crafter

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

OVERLORD VOLUME 11

KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Emily Balistrieri Cover art by so-bin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

©Kugane Maruyama 2016

First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2019 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: October 2019

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Maruyama, Kugane, author. | So-bin, illustrator. | Balistrieri, Emily, translator.

Title: Overlord / Kugane Maruyama ; illustration by So-bin ; translation by Emily Balistrieri.

Other titles: Ōbārōdo. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016–
Identifiers: LCCN 2016000142 | ISBN 9780316272247 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363914 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363938 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397599 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397612 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398794 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398817 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398848 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398862 (v. 9 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316444989 (v. 10 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316445016 (v. 11 : hardback) Subjects: LCSH: Alternate reality games—Fiction. | Internet games—Fiction. | Science fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PL873.A37 O2313 2016 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2016000142

ISBNs: 978-0-31644501-6 (hardcover) 978-0-316-44502-3 (ebook)

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1 Preparing for an Unknown Land

Chapter 2 In Search of the Land of the Dwarves

Chapter 3 The Impending Crisis

Chapter 4 A Crafter and Negotiations

Chapter 5 The Frost Dragonlord

Epilogue

Character Profiles

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

Prologue

Gondo Firebeard changed into his work clothes.

It was a one-piece suit of rugged design made with sturdy fabric. Stiff and coarse on the skin, it certainly wasn't everyday apparel, but in the harsh environment of the tunnels, it was handy. Even if it was uncomfortable, looking back through dwarven history in the Azerlisia Mountains, there were apparently times when miners went to work practically naked. Having the suit made a huge difference.

Next, he put on a metal helmet, the kind light infantry might carry. Parts of the mines were very damp, so if he wore it directly, his sweat would steam him. That's why all miners placed some bunched-up cloth inside as a buffer.

Finally, he donned a necklace with a metal plate. The number on the plate was 5. That meant he was on the last day of their *five days on, five days off* work schedule.

In other words, starting tomorrow, Gondo was free—for a time anyway.

Now that he was dressed, he left the changing room and entered the waiting area, going to his usual spot. He slipped past a few other dwarves while making his way to the front, where he looked for his name on the board. There were four other names on the same row as his. That meant they were in the same crew as he was and they would be working together today.

He was familiar with his coworkers, and the waiting area wasn't very big, so it wasn't hard to find them. It seemed Gondo was the last to arrive. Before he could even speed up to meet them, their greetings came flying at him.

“Oh, Gondo! Been a while!”

“Hoy, Gagez! Glad you’re crew leader. Please look out for me today. You too, fellas.”

“Hoy, Gondo! Let’s do our best in there today.”

“That’s right. This is day five—the last day! Let’s give it all we’ve got.”

“Ahhh, I don’t wanna work.”

While their chatter continued, the work crew left the waiting area; grabbed their mattocks, shovels, and other mining tools; then collected their lunches—food and drink—and received two liters of water in a magic item that would preserve its temperature.

The dwarves’ favorite drink, alcohol, was nowhere to be found. That was only natural. True, dwarves could hold their liquor, and a few sips wouldn’t get them drunk. But the tunnels could be dangerous, so no boss who valued his laborers would give them alcohol on the job.

That said…

One of the dwarves took a sip from a flask on his hip that wasn’t included among the items they had been issued.

“Phew!”

His breath distinctly smelled of alcohol.

He wasn’t the only one who had brought in a little extra, either. Gondo had a stash of his own.

None of it was alcoholic, but he had an additional canteen of water, one of soup, five sticks of hardened sugar, and snacks like dwarven hardtack.

It got muggy in the tunnels, and he needed more calories than the rations provided and more to drink, to boot. The workers were issued only the bare minimum, probably because the higher-ups wanted to cut costs.

Once the party was ready, they made one last stop—a meeting with the dwarf who was in charge of this national mine.

The eccentric-and wily-looking bespectacled dwarf sitting across the counter

raised an eyebrow at them.

After sniffing a few times, the foreman shot a displeased look at the dwarf carrying a lingering odor of spirits. But he didn't say anything. Was it because despite being a manager, he was also a dwarf and understood how the miner felt? Or maybe it was because Gagez spoke first.

"Gagez here. Where we digging today?"

The wily-looking dwarf shifted his gaze from the party to his map. It was hidden behind the counter, but they knew he was looking at the assignment chart for all the dig sites.

"You're in plot 8,821."

"8,821 means heat ore, right?"

Heat ore was a very important resource for the dwarves.

Dwarves were a people of the earth and mainly lived underground, so it was difficult for them to use coal or wood—anything that pollutes the air—to create warmth, cook food, or forge metals.

Magic items that could purify the air certainly existed, but manufacturing those required a druid's powers. Unfortunately, dwarf druids were extremely rare, so they couldn't simply mass-produce air purifiers.

Instead, they used a metal called heat ore.

It was a special mineral that was at least as hard as mythril. When struck with metal, heat ore produced a large amount of heat, making it a natural substitute for fuel like coal. Since large amounts of the ore were also used in ironworks and smithies, it was an indispensable part of dwarven life. Incidentally, firewood was treated as a rare commodity.

"That's right. Take this."

What the foreman tossed onto the counter was a plate that authorized their entrance to the tunnel. Gagez's fingers seemed far too stout to grab the necklace as nimbly as he did.

Then he read the paper he was handed top to bottom before passing it along to the next dwarf.

Eventually, the paper reached Gondo. As usual, it detailed the route to their dig site. Gondo memorized the various paths so he knew where to run in an emergency. The tunnel they would be in belonged to the dwarves, but that didn't mean there was no chance of monsters appearing. It was important to exercise precautions on top of even more precautions.

"Use a cart at the third junction."

"Got it. All right, let's go!"

The work crew oiled up one of the handcarts at the third junction, and once their preparations were complete, they pushed the cart along as they advanced.

At fixed intervals along the tunnel were lanterns made of ore that naturally emitted light. The space between each was long, though, so at times the path was steeped in shadow. Fortunately, dwarves had eyes that could see in the dark. It wasn't as if they could make out everything, but for the distance between the lanterns, their night vision was enough to get them where they were going.

Creatures on the surface might have been overwhelmed by the creeping pressure of the cramped tunnel, but dwarves were a race that lived underground, so their surroundings didn't bother them. Though there wasn't much room, the tunnel seemed plenty big to the dwarves.

Dwarves were four foot three on average, so if they dug a tunnel around five feet eleven inches high, they would find it spacious.

A short time after the work crew set out, they heard some footsteps ahead of them.

If the noise had come from miners like Gondo and his crew, they should've heard the noise of a cart as well. But no one had heard anything like that. So who was it? The other party didn't sound too wary of Gondo's group. If the work crew had heard the padding of bare feet, they would have dropped everything to run away, but it wasn't that, either. Whoever those footsteps belonged to, they had proper shoes on.

Gondo's crew had an idea who it might be.

After a short while, a different group of dwarves came into view.

Gondo and the others moved off to the side so they wouldn't block the way. Of course, they had left the handcart right in the path, so their gesture didn't amount to much.

"You fellows are going up ahead? For the moment, there's nothing out there, but be careful."

"We will. Thanks for looking out for us. We appreciate it."

After that brief exchange, the other group passed by.

The one leading them was a caster who practiced an alternative tradition of magic—he was called a tunnel doctor.

His job was to make sure that rocks didn't break off and fall from the ceiling as well as to keep sharp edges left after digging from injuring miners—in essence, he used the power of magic to secure and strengthen the tunnels.

There was always a risk that a tunnel would collapse, so it was important to create supports. Usually wood was used, but that was something that was hard to come by in the dwarf country. Tunnel doctors could reinforce tunnels using magic.

Additionally, some of these casters could tell when veins of water or pockets of gas were near, allowing miners to swing their pickaxes without worrying about the bedrock collapsing or anything like that.

Trailing the all-important tunnel doctor were dwarf warriors clad in light armor.

There weren't many tunnel doctors, so this one had been assigned four escorts.

After the group passed by, their footsteps receded.

The dwarf city Fehu Jura was, like any dwarf city, established by digging into the side of a mountain so they could mine multiple veins of various ore—although circumstances prevented mining on the west side.

Dwarves were openhearted and didn't tend to quibble by nature, and they were also exceptional mathematicians. The countless tunnels running like blood

vessels to the heart of the city were constructed according to a thoroughly calculated plan of geometric artistry. The comparatively large level tunnel was laid with tracks for the passage of mine carts, and vertical shafts equipped with manual elevators were located at key points. From there, innumerable other byways branched off. If all the tunnels were connected end to end, they would span well over sixty miles.

But because this web of passageways was so vast, it was impossible to station security throughout the entire network. There weren't even enough people to assign escorts for each mining crew, so all they could do if a monster attacked while they were working was drop everything and run for the nearest guard post.

But unfortunately, it was well-known around the world that dwarves were slow. Escaping without losing anyone required an uncommon amount of luck.

Gondo and his crew stopped their cart, activated their handheld lantern-type magic items, took up their digging tools, and went down a side tunnel. The dead end they hit soon after was their destination—the site they would be mining today.

At Gagez's prompt instructions, the crew silently got to work. One dug with a pickax, one drove a wedge into the stone, one shoveled dirt and rocks into a box, one carried it to the cart, and another pushed the cart to the entrance…

"Okay, let's get started."

Their workday had begun.

•

Since the work was mind-numbingly repetitive, the dwarves had developed the necessary muscles. Even so, they were exhausted at the end of the day and their bodies craved rest.

Upon their return home, the crew stripped off their work clothes and headed to the bathhouse especially designated for miners.

The bath was heated by the national mine's giant blast furnace. The water was only lukewarm, but it was the perfect temperature to draw the excess heat out of their weary bodies.

Gondo used a pail to scoop up some of the brownish water flowing by and dumped it over his head.

The distinct color was due to iron or some other mineral content in the water, which incidentally also added some flavor. That's what Gondo used to rinse off his dirt-encrusted body.

He put a good amount of effort into washing his hair and beard. For a dwarf, having a dirty beard was proof that he was still a child.

"Hoy, Gondo! After we're done, how about a drink?" Gagez shouted over the sound of him scrubbing from the next seat over.

Gondo raised another pail of water over his head to rinse away the grime he'd scrubbed off and shouted back as he got into the tub. "Sorry, I've got something to tend to after this! Invite me again sometime, though!"

"Oh! That's too bad! If you change your mind, I'll be drinking at the White Spirits."

"All right! Thanks!"

Gagez seemed like he had started up a new chat with some other friends, so Gondo said, "I'll leave you fellas to it," as he got out of the bath and hurried away.

Feeling refreshed after drying off and changing into his ordinary clothes, Gondo went straight to the counter and stood before the wily-looking foreman, then turned in the plate he had been wearing around his neck.

The foreman glanced at the plate and set a leather pouch on the counter.

It was five days' worth of pay. Since miners had a not-so-low chance of dying, they were generally paid weekly. There was apparently a time when they were paid daily, but some thought that changed because people complained they weren't able to drink their fill at the pub on only a day's wages. There was some merit to that theory because even though the pouch contained a fair sum of money, Gagez and the others would probably spend half of it drinking.

"…Gondo, it's been a month now, right? Let's see your face."

"I'm fine. No problems breathing."

“I’m the one who decides that, not you.” He took a handheld light out from under the counter and pointed it at Gondo.

Gondo flinched at how bright it was but obediently showed the dwarf his face.

Inhaling mine dust over a long period of time resulted in decreased lung function. Once that happened, it caused the skin to take on an unhealthy bluish-white pallor. The disease was called Alabaster sickness, and the manager was searching for signs of it.

“Hmph, yes, it seems like you’re fine.”

“When you come down with it, the thing makes you wheeze, don’t it? As long as you’re breathing normally, there’s no problem, right?”

“This is how I’ve always diagnosed it.” The dwarf sighed. “Checking the face is more certain than listening to the breath. You discounting my experience?”

“No, of course not. Experience’s important.”

“Then, quit complaining. It ain’t helping no one. And, Gondo, don’t you think it’s about time you joined full-time? I want to make you a crew leader. You definitely have the experience.”

“Sorry, I can’t do that… I’m taking some time off. I’m going on a long journey, and as of today, I’ve saved up all the money I need.”

Gondo had been saving so much money that people had begun to assume he was antisocial, but it was all to buy equipment for his journey.

“…You’re going off somewhere again?”

“I’m going to the city we abandoned several years ago, Fehu Raido—to see what I can dig up there.”

The wily-looking dwarf’s eyes widened. “What?! It goes without saying that’s some risky business. You bringing anyone along?”

“As for the former, I know. And the latter is a no.”

Traveling with more people came with a greater danger of being noticed. Rather than losing someone or even getting wiped out, Gondo chose to operate

solo and be stealthy.

“…Did you leave something behind over there?”

“No. Like I said, I want to mine there.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. If you want to mine, you can do it right here.”

“Hmph. No matter how hard I work here…the most I can get is a slight bonus depending on how much I bring back, but it’s basically a fixed amount. There’s no way to make any serious money.”

“It pays better than a regular job.”

The foreman was right. That was exactly why Gondo had chosen this line of work for his short-term moneymaking.

“I need more money for what I’m looking to do. That’s why I’m heading for the tunnels of that abandoned city. I can mine whatever ore I want and no one can say a thing.”

The foreman frowned.

Gondo’s plan was extreme, but what he said was true.

“Yeah. That stuff. No one can complain if I keep whatever I dig up over there.”

The nearby mines were mainly run by the state. For that reason, anyone who wanted white iron had to pay a princely sum—market price—for it. But digging in an abandoned tunnel meant that any finds belonged solely to the miner. Of course, that also meant that if anything happened, they wouldn’t have the country’s support.

“…I’d be willing to pay handsomely for some.”

White iron hadn’t been discovered in the mines near this city yet. Once the supply they had dug up in older cities was gone, the price was sure to skyrocket.

Gondo knew the wily-looking dwarf wasn’t saying that in order to turn a profit. He was simply being kind.

The foreman was offering to negotiate with buyers to get a better price. But Gondo wasn’t interested in selling off his haul for money.

“What are you talking about? I already know how I’ll use it. It’s for my research.”

The wily-looking dwarf’s face darkened. “Are you still on about that…? I get how you feel, but isn’t it about time to face reality and get a job as a crew leader? You’ll upset your pa.”

For a moment, a searing rage flared inside Gondo, but before it could show, he looked away and covered his face. Gondo’s father had helped out this foreman a number of times. That’s why he was so worried to see the man’s child devoting himself to impossible research.

He may have been speaking out of kindness, but Gondo couldn’t accept that.

“Oh, I’ve got a grip on reality all right. The path my father chose wasn’t wrong! I’m going to rediscover lost technology!”

Unable to hold himself back, he vented the embers of his anger along with some fiery words, then turned on his heel and hurried away.

A part of him regretted taking his immature anger out on someone who was sincerely worried about him, but his zeal toward his mission weighed far greater than any remorse he felt.

That’s right.

As the inadequate son of a magnificent man, this was his reason for living.

Gondo bit his lip and stared straight ahead.



Chapter 1 Preparing for an Unknown Land

Chapter 1 | Preparing for an Unknown Land

1

After returning from the empire, Ainz entered his E-Rantel office and sat back in his chair.

He had been out trying to recruit adventurers for the Nation of Darkness's guild, but it would probably be some time before the results of his efforts became clear. In the meantime, he had to get ready to receive anyone who answered his call.

First, he would need a school to train the adventurers. The guild office would serve as a fine location. Constructing dorms for those who came from afar to study was the least he could do. For teachers, he could use the adventurers who had remained in the country.

I should talk to Albedo about how to best organize administrative divisions and some other things, but…more importantly, I wonder why he asked to become a vassal himself? Albedo and Demiurge are going to be so confused…

Ainz couldn't understand Jircniv's line of reasoning at all, which was why he had no idea how to explain what had happened to that wise pair. Why would Jircniv propose such a thing? It was possible that Demiurge had been making things happen while Ainz wasn't looking.

I guess I should talk to Demiurge first. Ahhh, I want to go somewhere far away and let them handle it while I'm gone. Would that be so wrong…?

He heaved a sigh internally. The anxiety and confusion made his nonexistent stomach ache. And when he thought about what would happen when those two returned, his suffering only got worse.

Ainz shook his head and took his mind off his future troubles by thinking about the important information he had gained in the empire.

"…Runes, huh?"

This unknown world was dotted with things he knew from *Yggdrasil*, such as the signs of other players and the existence of World Items.

To those things, he had recently added one more thing: a writing system from Satoru Suzuki's world called runes.

He had concluded that the reason people from the Theocracy summoned angels from a religion in Satoru Suzuki's world was because it had been magic in *Yggdrasil*.

But then where did runes come from? Why were they present in this world? Were they the same as the runes from Satoru Suzuki's world? Or did the automatic translation here simply render magic characters of a coincidentally similar shape as "runes"?

…The dwarf country is based in the Azerlisia Mountains not far from here. I need to investigate this more closely. I suppose…I have to go?

Naturally, before returning from E-Rantel, he had asked Fluder about runes.

The only things he had been able to find out were that the dwarf sovereign who came from the country in the mountains had the class "rune crafter," that the empire purchased weapons and armor from the dwarf country, and that the availability of magic items inscribed with runes had ended about a hundred years ago.

This was all important information but not what Ainz wanted.

Yggdrasil *didn't have a rune crafter class. If it's a class specific to this world, and if a fusion of techniques from the two worlds might be possible, then we need to check it out. But who should go?*

It was a simple matter of visiting the dwarf country and asking about the runes. Since the topic was related to rune crafters and their technology, it might be difficult to convince them to talk, but in the worst-case scenario, Charm could be used to extract info.

As long as he dispatched someone who could use psychic magic or abduct a dwarf for interrogation back at Nazarick, Ainz figured anyone would do. But what if it was a player who was behind the runes? It was possible that whoever brainwashed Shalltear could be lurking out there.

I'd like to gather some more intel before diving in, but if even Fluder doesn't have much, I can't imagine it'll be easy to find any.

Ainz stood up from his chair.

Immediately, the woman standing by in the room began to move. Her animated face and masculine cropped hair suited her very well. This was Decrement, the maid on Ainz duty for the day.

Ainz held up a hand to stop her and slowly paced the room while he deliberated. As he performed the logical calculation between the pros and cons, memories from long ago appeared unbidden among the numbers he crunched. A crisis in unmapped territory, the joy of discovery, the sorrow of a failed quest —each of those recollections brought up the faces of his old guildmates and the things they said. That was all it took for even the memory of being wiped out to paint the inside of his empty skull a dazzling array of colors.

By the time he had finished tucking away in his heart the tender emotions that had suddenly emerged, his thoughts had come together.

…This is a situation where I'll probably need to dive in even when I'm fully aware of the dangers involved.

The guild Ainz Ooal Gown was that sort of organization.

Some might disapprove, saying it's wrong to treat reality like a game where lives weren't at stake, but who could guarantee that sitting around and waiting wouldn't result in a missed opportunity that would ultimately cause Ainz Ooal Gown to fall behind?

After Ainz decided to investigate runes directly in the dwarf country, the next issue occupied his mind.

Who should go?

Who would be best?

Should I ask Demiurge and Albedo for their thoughts? No, if I do that, then I'll lose the chance to send the one with the most combat power.

Ainz was talking about himself.

It wasn't something he bragged about, but he was sure no one in Nazarick

had as much magical resistance to whatever they might run into than he did. Frankly, going by himself would be the most effective strategy. But if there were hostile players hanging around, it would be a fool's errand.

…If it's just a few, I can make sure we all get away, so I should bring some people who can buy us the time I need to prepare our retreat.

The first to come to mind were the floor guardians.

Level-100 NPCs would be able to buy Ainz time to escape, even against players. But he wondered if it was really okay to use the precious children of his old friends that way.

What about high-level minions led by an undead officer? No, they can't respond the way NPCs built from scratch can.

Unlike the lovingly crafted NPCs, minions came with the advantage that he could abandon them without hesitation in a pinch. But they also came with cons: a narrower range of skills and a doubtful ability to problem solve.

The NPCs were a perfect choice if he ignored the emotional component. Ainz hadn't tested whether a player like himself could be resurrected, but it was definitely possible for the NPCs, as he had proven with Shalltear.

Ainz returned to his chair and sat down.

"Hmm…"

He brought his hands up in front of him and pressed them together, lost in thought as he sought the optimal plan.

But even after thinking for a while, he wasn't able to come up with an answer.

I guess no matter how hard an idiot tries, they'll never come up with a genius idea…

With a self-deprecating smile, he turned his gaze to Decrement.

"If I told you to die for me, could you do it?"

"Of course, Lord Ainz. If it was your order, I would gladly die," she declared without a moment's hesitation.

"Does that go for the others as well? They don't think I'm a lousy master?"

“I believe everyone would unhesitatingly accept death, as well. There shouldn’t be a single one who wouldn’t. We were created by the Supreme Beings, and we exist only to serve you. No matter what orders we are given, it is our greatest joy to obey.”

“I see… Ah, I was only asking out of curiosity. No deeper meaning there. Forget I brought it up.”

As Decrement bowed her head, Ainz made up his mind.

He would mobilize the NPCs.

He took out a map of the area.

It was a fairly comprehensive map that incorporated the results of Aura’s surveys. The interior of the Tove Woodlands was especially detailed, and Ainz was confident no other map was as thorough. Unfortunately, since the scale wasn’t clear, he couldn’t say it was perfect, but having this map still made it far less likely he would get lost.

Ainz put a finger on E-Rantel. Starting at that city, he traced a line north through the woods. That distance would be no problem at all. The forest itself was already largely under Nazarick rule, and not counting the presence of unintelligent beasts and monsters, there were only a few subhumans and grotesques left to subjugate before their control was complete. The giant underground cavern said to span the entire forest’s length was something he would leave alone for the moment, but he could take it over anytime in the future if it would bring him some benefit.

His finger reached the lake shaped like an upside-down gourd at the edge of the map.

North of there lay the Azerlisia Mountains. An unmapped world.

“The unknown…”

Ainz cracked a smile.

He had spoken of tasking adventurers with seeking out the unknown. To be the first one to set forth would make for good promotional material.

“To the Azerlisia Mountains in search of the country of the dwarves…”

It sounded like a commercial for a TV show.

Wiping the smile off his face, Ainz considered the idea seriously.

What was the benefit of him personally going to a place where players might be lying in wait?

Surely the King of Darkness going in person was a show of good faith.

He likened it to a CEO paying a visit to another company. In Satoru Suzuki's experience, that got results.

And unlike some of his subjects, who believed anyone who didn't hail from Nazarick was a lower life-form, Ainz was a moderate. That meant he wasn't a bad choice to serve as the negotiator with the dwarves—although he couldn't claim to be a good one.

Besides Ainz, another option was Pandora's Actor.

Intelligence, problem-solving skills—he had everything it would take.

But…

Then who would run the nation?

He didn't even have to ask anyone to know the answer.

It would be Ainz Ooal Gown himself.

There was absolutely no way he could run the nation.

He screamed internally. He screamed over and over.

If that was the alternative, then he felt he had a better shot at handling the negotiations with the dwarf country.

And once he arrived, he could teleport thereafter. So if they said anything too difficult for him, he could play the *I'll take that back and consider it with the team* card. And if they said they wanted a decision on the spot, all he had to do was run away.

He had plenty of techniques for making an escape.

Last time there was business to do, I had Ainzach with me, but this time I'll be taking the brunt of it. This'll be better than having a boss breathing down my

back for results, at least.

Ainz grinned as the salesman Satoru Suzuki. Then he changed smiles.

And…if it takes longer than expected, maybe I can leave the issue of vassalizing the empire up to Demiurge and Albedo. Then I'll make them propose a draft of the agreement! Yes! There's no helping it. I mustn't shirk my business!

Having desperately worked to rationalize his thoughts, Ainz ran into another issue.

Who would he bring with him?

He crossed his arms and frowned.

He would have liked to take either Albedo or Demiurge, but they were both project leaders on critical matters. If he recalled them, their plans could fall through.

Aura and Mare were decent choices. And since they were humanoids like the dwarves, maybe they wouldn't be seen as a threat.

Choosing Cocytus would be tricky. Because the destination was a steep, chilly mountain range, he was a solid option, but he was in charge of the Tove Woodlands and the surrounding area. In other words, he was also a project leader. Ainz preferred that he concentrate on that. Besides, Cocytus's radically different appearance might make the dwarves anxious.

Sebas wasn't a bad choice. Currently, he and his aide were assisting Ainz with the management of E-Rantel, but since Pandora's Actor was there, too, maybe it was fine to pick him. But that made Ainz nervous about fighting power.

Gargantua and Victim were out of the question. Other NPCs came to mind, but considering the role was to guard him, most didn't make the cut.

Then, I guess it'll be Aura—and Shalltear.

The magical beasts Aura commanded would make perfect shields. In the worst case, he could abandon the beasts and make a run for it with Aura. And Shalltear had the highest level of solo combat ability, so she would be a great trump card against even the strongest enemies. He had a personal reason he wanted to use Shalltear, as well.

If they ended up facing an army, it would be better to have Mare along, but in any encounter with a player, their priority would be to withdraw, not annihilate the enemy, which meant it was probably better to leave Mare at home.

Right as Ainz was thinking, *In that case*, about to make a decision, a Message arrived in his head.

"—Lord Ainz."

"Oh, Entoma."

"Yes. I went with Mistress Shalltear to the lizardman village. She wants to send a lizardman bearing Master Cocytus's report on the status of the village and is asking for permission to open a Gate. Is that all right?"

Cocytus sometimes delivered written reports on his policies and the general state of the village.

Reading them didn't give Ainz any particular feelings or ideas, so he usually just responded with *Nice work*. Really, he would have liked to tell him he didn't need to submit anymore, but reporting in to the boss was the correct thing to do, and that was important when it came time for the boss to take responsibility.

"Go ahead and open a Gate at the designated area… Oh, wait. We have defensive spells deployed. Cast it in an hour"—Ainz took out a watch and checked the time—"at 13:46. I'll make sure to have the spells canceled for two minutes at that time."

The building Ainz was currently in wasn't defended as thoroughly as Nazarick, but it still had a magic field that prevented teleportation and so on that was kept charged with the MP of high-level minions. The barrier used so much mana that the minions had to rotate several times a day. It was quite the obstacle. Naturally, the teleportation of allies was blocked as well.

Because unlike in *Yggdrasil*, friendly fire was on.

This made it necessary to disable the defenses to let someone teleport in. Of course, once the spells were canceled, enemies could enter, too, so in order not to get "bombed" (in *Yggdrasil* slang), the barrier was only ever open for a narrow, prearranged window of time.

“Understood. I’ll inform Mistress Shalltear.”

The Message ended, and Ainz said, “Okay,” as he stood up. “…I’m counting on you to choose my clothes. A lizardman is coming as Cocytus’s messenger, so make sure it’s something that won’t embarrass me.”

“Yes, my lord!” Decrement’s eyes blazed with flames of passion.

So she’s the same as the others, huh? Ainz thought. It wasn’t the sort of thing a guy with no confidence in his fashion sense could say aloud.

Ainz brought Decrement along, and while they were on the move, he relayed orders to an undead he had temporarily created. Needless to say, his command was to alert the undead guards stationed at the main hall where the Gate would open that a lizardman was coming.

Once the undead was on its way, Ainz considered the utility of these undead he had created.

If the undead could report back to him, he would have been able to create a worldwide intelligence network, but unfortunately, that wouldn’t work. Even when Ainz was able to directly instruct them, he received only vague replies in return. And under circumstances like the present, where he had created so many undead, it was hard for him to keep track of them all. He ran the risk of accidentally giving orders meant for one undead to a totally unrelated one.

Perhaps someday he would be able to develop some kind of system, but for now, it was impossible.

Maybe in the future, Pandora’s Actor can manage that sort of work for me, but unless he’s taken on my form, the undead he creates won’t be anything better than scarecrows. We’ll have to solve that issue first…

As Ainz was thinking that he would have to get the perspectives of the wise Albedo and Demiurge before giving the idea some serious thought soon, he arrived at his dressing room.

Maids awaited him in a line as usual, their eyes sparkling. Decrement’s were actually bloodshot.

Ainz asked where Aura was as the maids dressed him.

Today's outfit was snow white.

Ainz was used to darker colors, so it felt flashy.

When they adorned him with precious metals, like a huge golden necklace, he was so shiny that he worried crows might attack.

The feathers jutting out from his back were a mystery.

He wanted to ask if the maids had mistaken him for a peacock or something, but when he glanced at them out of the corner of his eye, everyone seemed incredibly proud of themselves. None looked remotely worried. Moreover, not one of them seemed the slightest bit pessimistic. Their eyes were all syrupy and their cheeks flushed.

Like schoolgirls gazing at their favorite pop idol.

Is this actually good? Women like this sort of thing…? I really have no sense of style…

While Ainz was feeling glum inside, the maids finished dressing him.

Checking himself out in the mirror, he saw he had feathers protruding from underneath his arms as well. The sight reminded him of a certain monster from *Yggdrasil*.

What was it called? An archaeopteryx…? I'm pretty sure there was a dinosaur familiar like that for druids.

When he crossed his arms, the feathers made a racket.

But what would they say if he told them this outfit wouldn't do? He had no doubt that the first reaction would be, *What's wrong with it? Please tell us what kind of clothing you prefer going forward*.

"Okay!" Ainz gave up on all that. "Let's go!"

•

At the appointed time, Ainz sensed the Gate opening in the center of the hall.

He had disabled all the building's defenses, but due to Delay Teleportation, a spell he had used during his battle with Shalltear, there was no presence within the gate yet.

Delay Teleportation temporarily hindered all teleportation in the vicinity of the caster and introduced a lag of several seconds between the time the teleporter disappeared and the time they reappeared—precious moments that were usually used by the delaying side to gain some distance or prepare an attack. The other effect was allowing the caster to know how many people were teleporting and where they would arrive.

Now he sensed one teleporter.

Entoma and Shalltear were either not accompanying the messenger or they were coming later.

Delay Teleportation didn't cancel teleportations but merely delayed them. So after the set time elapsed, a dark dome expanded over the spot where Delay Teleportation had indicated it would.

A lizardman timidly emerged.

He—*probably…yeah, it has to be a he*—examined the room until his eyes met Ainz's, a king sitting on his simple throne.

"O-oh, it's the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. Do excuse me."

Ainz couldn't hide his surprise at the kneeling lizardman's cultured mannerisms. The one named Zaryusu stood out from the rest of his kin, but the way this lizardman talked was impressively polished. He seemed used to speaking like this.

This must be the product of Cocytus's training.

That's what Ainz idly thought, but he had more important things to do.

He had already been tipped off by Delay Teleportation, but after confirming that no one else was coming through the Gate, he told the death knight standing by to reactivate the defensive magic item. Seeing the death knight nod and walk away, Ainz turned to the kneeling lizardman.

Decrement spoke with such perfect timing that Ainz swore she must have been waiting for this exact moment. "Lizardman, you have been granted an audience."

Her attitude was entirely different from when she had been selecting Ainz's

clothing.

She seemed calm and capable.

Many would probably take offense if a palace maid spoke to them that way. It wouldn't be strange to find visitors who secretly sneered at the sight of a mere maid standing beside a king. Or perhaps they would pity the Nation of Darkness for being so lacking in manpower that it was necessary for a maid to fill such a role.

But thanks to the education this lizardman had received from Cocytus, he knew that the NPCs' standing was higher than that of a minion of any level, so he probably didn't find Decrement's attitude strange.

Ainz had Decrement tell the lizardman to rise.

What a pain. We could just talk normally without all this ceremony, but…I guess when in Rome…

It didn't sit well with the vestiges of Satoru Suzuki's mind, but Ainz could only accept the reality of his situation.

Unaware of Ainz's inner struggle, the lizardman rose obediently. If he was being honest, Ainz couldn't tell lizardmen apart. If they had different-colored scales or something unique about them—like a brand or one arm thicker than the other—it was a different story, but this lizardman looked like all the others.

Ainz ordered Decrement to ask his name.

"Lord Ainz permits you to state your name."

"Thank you! I am the former Razor Tail tribe chief Kyuku Zuzu."

Ainz had never heard that name before.

Was it better to be honest about that in his response, or should he feign some prior knowledge? Between these two choices, Ainz went for the third option—to do neither. In other words, he nodded benevolently and advanced the conversation. He was nervous about the report he had received from Cocytus last time.

Ainz ordered Decrement to ask why the lizardman had come.

This is so obnoxious!

This was pretty much how it went anytime he had an audience with someone of much lower status, like a subject.

As long as it doesn't make anyone belittle the Nation of Darkness, I want to talk about decreasing these annoying formalities ASAP…

While Ainz grumbled internally, Decrement relayed his command to the lizardman. "Lord Ainz permits you to state the purpose of your visit."

"Yes, ma'am! The ruler of our village and unifier of the lake, Master Cocytus, asked me to deliver something to his master, the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown."

That was one long-winded explanation, thought Ainz, who surprised himself by managing to not yawn and instead gesture to Decrement with his chin. She walked to the lizardman and accepted a sheaf of papers. Then Ainz took the obnoxiously unnecessary step of receiving the papers from Decrement before he was finally able to open the document.

Inside were a bunch of things scrawled in Cocytus's handwriting. There was quite a lot, meaning it would take too long to read everything on the spot.

Ainz reorganized the papers and called a death knight guard to hand it the documents. Then he finally spoke directly.

"Good work."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

That was all he could say, but it was such a boring way to end things.

Without standing up from the throne, he continued addressing the lizardman. "Now, then. I'm going to ask you some questions not as the King of Darkness but as Cocytus's master. Getting a subordinate's perspective directly can deepen my understanding of things."

The lizardman's gaze wavered a bit. He seemed unsure of how to respond to being spoken to directly. Ainz wasn't great at reading lizardman expressions, but that was the feeling he got anyhow.

"Relax. This is unofficial. It's like a dream that will remain in no one's memory

once you leave this place. I'll forgive you even if you say something impolite." He said it less for the lizardman's benefit and more for Decrement and the nearby death knights.

"Let's get started. Zaryusu was in the Great Tomb of Nazarick until recently. How is he?"

"Thanks to you, Your Majesty, he's doing well. A healthy child was born and the couple seems content."

"Oh, I see! I sent him back home because the baby was due, but it's already been born, has it? I see, I see. I'm very happy to hear the couple's relationship is good as well."

There had been married people in the guild Ainz Ooal Gown. They crossed his mind for a moment. If someone's wife was in a bad mood, that was enough—like magic words—to make it so no one would complain even if he logged off in the middle of a quest.

Smiling at the nostalgic memories—not that his face moved—Ainz asked another question. "And is the baby white?"

Zaryusu's wife was that white lizardman. That was quite a rare type, and it stimulated Ainz's collector spirit, so he remembered her well.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. No matter which parent the child took after, we would expect an exceptional lizardman, but this time the baby must have inherited more strongly from the mother's side, because it's pure white."

"Ooh… So it's a single—" He was about to say *lizard*, but he closed his mouth. *Person* was probably the best bet in this case. They probably wouldn't say anything either way, but that didn't mean it was okay to use the wrong word. If a slip of his tongue caused troubles for Cocytus's government, he didn't know how he could possibly apologize.

"Just one little person?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. A single child."

"Hmm. Just one, huh?"

Apparently, they didn't give birth to multiple offspring like reptiles. Still, if the

relationship between the parents was good, maybe they would have more.

Ainz felt the collector's impulse in him awaken. He almost wanted to ask for one, but he would feel bad taking a child away from its mother.

But lizardmen had a custom of travelers branding themselves and leaving the tribe. If Zaryusu's offspring grew up to be like him, perhaps Ainz could train the children as adventurers.

The guild of Ainz's dreams was a place where people from all races belonged. If an extremely rare lizardman joined, maybe it would be good advertising in the same vein as an attending idol popularizing their school.

"So how are mother and child doing? Are they getting the proper nutrients?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. We're grateful for your kindness. Both are healthy—the baby is doing so well that we're bound to deal with a lively little scamp in the future."

"I see, I see. Well, isn't that wonderful news. I should send a present to celebrate the bright future of this newborn. But even I don't know much about how to celebrate a lizardman birth. What do you think would make for a good gift?"

It wouldn't be very interesting to send a birthday fish in place of a cake. If possible, he wanted to give them something that would endure.

"We don't have the custom of giving gifts to celebrate a birth, but…I think Zaryusu would be happy to receive fighting equipment."

"Equipment…? Hmm."

Really, I wanted to give them something that would make the wife happy as well, but armor would protect her husband's life, so maybe it's not a bad idea. As he was thinking along those lines, Kyuku spoke up timidly.

"May I ask a question, Your Majesty, King of Darkness?"

"What is it?"

"Why do you think so highly of Zaryusu?"

I value him as the father of a rare lizardman and nothing else. But he couldn't

very well say that. Ainz racked his brain for something else to say. “…He’s a great man. I heard he got exceptional results during his training in Nazarick. That’s why, I suppose. Superior people who are loyal deserve to be treated well.”

“Thank you for answering, Your Majesty. We’ll work to devote ourselves even more fully to you.”

“Yes, that’s the spirit. Don’t forget it.” With an arrogant nod, Ainz tried to think if there was anything else he wanted to ask this lizardman. A truly adept leader would probably question him about the village and compare it to Cocytus’s report to see if there were any discrepancies. But there was no way Ainz was capable of that.

He was about to tell the lizardman to go when he suddenly thought of something. “This doesn’t have anything to do with your village, but do you know about the dwarves who live in the Azerlisia Mountains?”

The lizardman village was located in the foothills of that mountain range.

“Yes, I’ve heard of them.”

Ainz had posed the question with zero expectations, but *unlikely* wasn’t the same as *impossible*. Mildly surprised, Ainz ordered the lizardman to share what he knew.

“I’m afraid it’s only what a friend told me, but he said the dwarves are a race that often builds cities inside the mountains where they mine, that they use the various ore they dig up to craft all sorts of weapons and armor. Some of the items are even fashioned from an extremely rare metal.”

“An extremely rare metal, you say?” Ainz imagined himself gulping. As a player who loved rare items, those words were terribly alluring. “Have you ever heard the name of the metal?”

“My apologies, Your Majesty. I haven’t.”

Ainz felt somewhat let down, but at the same time, he reminded himself that it wasn’t right to have absurd expectations.

As the adventurer Momon, he had collected information about various

metals, but he had never heard of one sturdier than adamantite. Even orichalcum and adamantite were considered extremely rare. This mysterious metal had to be similar.

With that in mind, he could hardly contain the anticipation raging inside him.

Perhaps a people who lived as one with the land dealt in metals that even Ainz would consider incredibly rare.

If…yes, just if. I don't think it's possible, but if *the prismatic ore from* Yggdrasil *exists here, and if the dwarves are mining it, then what? Hypothetically—and it's a big hypothetical—if there's prismatic ore in this world, then I could test whether it's possible to reveal that secret item from* Yggdrasil*, the Caloric Stone.*

The Caloric Stone, a World Item, could be acquired by collecting a large amount of prismatic ore and using a certain amount of each type. It was extremely difficult to do, but the guild Ainz Ooal Gown had managed to succeed one time.

It was their discovery of a celestial uranium vein that made this possible. Normally, the first thing a guild that found a new mine would do was extract everything and get it to market, a feasible strategy because the mines in *Yggdrasil* replenished slowly over time even when they were completely cleared out. Ainz Ooal Gown had intended to do the same.

By an incredible stroke of luck, they acquired a World Item instead.

Right as they watched the price of prismatic ore skyrocket after off-loading a tiny bit onto the market, the rest of the ore they had stockpiled in the Great Tomb of Nazarick underwent a natural reaction.

Ainz could still vividly recall the strange feelings he shared with his guildmates when they discovered the item sitting in the vault that had become nearly empty after they lost almost all their prismatic ore. *This is something to be happy about, right?* Yes, he remembered the exact moment they exchanged confused glances and raised a hollow cheer.

Then, after using the Caloric Stone, they tried to get another one on purpose; after all, single-use World Items could be reacquired using the same method. Unfortunately, their celestial uranium mine was stolen, so that plan went up in

smoke.

Watching the guild that had stolen the mine make a killing on celestial uranium, Ainz and the others snickered half out of exuberance and half because they didn't want to admit their loss, thinking, *They'll never be able to get the World Item that way!*

As Ainz steeped in his memories, a sinister smile came over his face, and he laughed……

What idiots. The only way to amass enough ore is to establish a monopoly. There's no way you can get the item if you keep selling on the market. Or maybe…

He remembered something Squishy Moe had said at the time. *"There must be celestial uranium mines besides the one we discovered. Maybe they attacked ours to distract everyone from the fact that they already found one."*

But immediately after bringing up the possibility, Squishy Moe had rejected his own idea—because they had quickly found out that the other guild had stolen the mine by using the World Item Ouroboros to lock Ainz Ooal Gown out. It seemed dubious that the rival guild thought it was worth using one of the Twenty just to acquire a way to obtain the Caloric Stone.

Ainz shook his head to clear away thoughts of the past. Still, it was impossible to rid his mind of everything.

…Even if the dwarves don't know about prismatic ore, there's a good chance they know a lot about a variety of metals. There might be things they never tell the outside world! I could use a spell like Charm to— Whoops, I'm getting ahead of myself. I can't just pile daydreams on top of daydreams. There's the matter of the runes, too, so this is definitely something I should move on right away.

Only then did Ainz realize the lizardman was staring at him. Apparently, he had been holed up in his own world for a little while.

"…I seem to have gotten a bit lost in thought. So who did you hear about the dwarves from?"

"From another tribe leader, Zenbel."

“Oh! Him, huh…? Hmm. I wonder if Frost Pain was made by the dwarves. Could Zenbel have given it to Zaryusu because they’re friends?”

He had heard the history of the sword from Zaryusu, but he wanted to confirm it with someone else.

“The legendary weapon has been passed down since ancient times, so it’s not from Zenbel.”

“I see…”

This was the same story he’d heard before. But it was possible that the lizardmen as a whole were unaware of Frost Pain’s origins.

I’ve already seen multiple examples of equipment in this world that would be impossible to make in Yggdrasil*. Like that one guy’s weapon that could pierce my passive defensive skills…*

In this world, magic gear was created by having a caster enchant gear forged by a blacksmith. In other words, to make powerful gear, a brilliant caster was arguably even more important than a brilliant blacksmith.

But there were exceptions. The weapons Clementine had wielded could have been made according to the magic knowledge Fluder had, but Gazef’s sword was different. Though he wasn’t sure, Fluder’s best guess was that the magic items Gazef once possessed either came into existence naturally by passively absorbing mana or were created using dragon magic.

But that might not be correct, either. There are still plenty of things Fluder hasn’t figured out. Maybe dwarves have the means to craft those sorts of weapons. I realize I’m expecting too much, but…

Equipment in *Yggdrasil*, with the exception of certain items like Guild Weapons, had a data capacity based on the amount and quality of the metals used in the item’s construction, plus the skill of the crafter. Data crystals could be slotted into items up to whatever capacity they had. For that reason, the rarer the metal, the stronger the gear.

Crafter was the key word, though. This world’s dwarves seemed similar to the ones found in *Yggdrasil*. In the game, dwarves got racial bonuses for craftsman-type classes, making them popular among people who wanted to play as a

character who produced things like weapons or armor.

Perhaps these dwarves had knowledge about crafting that Fluder wasn't aware of?

And maybe runes are one of those things? Hmm. It might be a good idea for me to get some dwarves. The librarian is experimenting with scrolls using the materials Demiurge provided. Nfirea has potions covered. Fluder is working on magic tool development. And I can task some dwarves with armor and weapon crafting.

Ainz smiled in satisfaction at the various experiments underway to strengthen Nazarick. But the thing he had to remember was that if the Six Gods were players, he could very well be six hundred years behind.

Developing new technology might take years—no, it could easily be decades or even centuries. Only a fool lets their guard down.

Considering how even someone like Ainz had been able to figure this out, it would hardly be a surprise if someone had beaten him to the punch and started already. Rulers had to discard any baseless notions that they were somehow special.

If there are people thinking along the same lines as I am, chances are good someone's already paid the dwarves a visit. At this very moment, the dwarves could be conducting research and crafting gear for another player or teaching them about runes… Should I see what Albedo and Demiurge think and make military preparations before heading out?

Up until a short while ago, Ainz had previously considered making the visit with a crack team consisting of just Shalltear, Aura, and himself. Now that the dwarf country was a higher priority, he felt the need to revamp the entire plan and start from square one.

He could collect information about the dwarf country and plant a spy to further gather intel. It would be important to set up magical surveillance at the same time.

But there was no telling how long that would take.

If the player who brainwashed Shalltear was lurking nearby, giving them time

could be extremely dangerous. If Ainz stayed on the defensive, his opponent would have the initiative if they chose to go on the offensive. The best way to avoid that would be to launch his own attack first.

…Time to make a move. We need a diplomatic corps. We'll enter the dwarf country as ambassadors. And if a player attacks us, that'll provide enough justification for us to retaliate. Then it becomes a simple matter of digging the knowledge out from under the rubble.

Ainz silently listed his priorities for when he would meet with the dwarves:

1. Confirm the presence of any players.

2. Investigate runes and their origins.

3. Acquire dwarven blacksmithing technology, as well as their knowledge of ore and items.

That about summed things up.

Easier said than done, though, since it was unlikely the dwarves would share anything with Ainz just because he asked nicely. It was only natural to guard technological secrets. Information was an extremely valuable resource worth protecting.

If a player in *Yggdrasil* was sharing info all over the place, they would have undoubtedly gotten a stern talking-to from Squishy Moe.

…What if we bought their gear as a nation and sold it to our adventurers for a slightly lower price? Wouldn't that be extremely appealing? But in order to make that a reality, I have to establish friendly relations with the dwarves. I could have them work as slaves in Nazarick, too, but that'll be a last resort. Really, I'd like to persuade them with a deal similar to what I offered Ainzach.

Still, Ainz couldn't count his chickens before they hatched.

"…Lizardman. Is Zenbel familiar with the dwarf city?"

"Yes. He told me he lived there for a short time."

"I see. Do you think he would be able to lead me there?"

The lizardman thought for a moment, then cocked his head. "My apologies,

Your Majesty. I'm afraid I don't know. I think if it was an order, he would certainly do his best. But it has been several winters since he returned from the dwarf city, so I'm not sure how clear his memories are…"

"Ah… Magic will take care of that, so it's no issue."

If he used Control Amnesia, Zenbel's memory would come back, even if hazily.

Praying that Ainzach or Fluder knew something about all this, Ainz dismissed the lizardman.

2

Two hours after meeting the lizardman…Ainz internally heaved a sigh in his room.

He was reviewing his Message exchange with Fluder and Ainzach.

Why do I have to personally go over there in order for them to believe it's me? Especially Fluder. I would have thought he'd be used to it by now, but I guess not.

When Ainz had contacted the two via Message, they were so suspicious that he was forced to teleport and speak to them in person.

Their apologies were so similar that if Ainz didn't know better, he might've thought they had planned it all out in advance, echoing each other when they implored him to use Message only in an emergency. Putting Ainzach's reasoning aside, Ainz was almost certain that Fluder simply didn't want to deal with anything that might distract him from studying the book he had received, but Ainz was wise enough to not bring that up.

Though he knew about the tragedy that had been caused by Message, Ainz struggled to understand why people doubted the spell to this day. Sadly, Ainz didn't have much choice but to acknowledge their requests. After all, it was true that they stood to lose the most if they were deceived. All he could do was count the MP he used teleporting as a necessary expense.

His gloomy mood also stemmed from their discussion. If he had at least gotten some solid information out of them, using Teleport would have been worth it, but that wasn't meant to be.

Ainzach knew there was a dwarf country somewhere in the Azerlisia Mountains, but he didn't know where. The kingdom apparently had virtually no state-level contact with the dwarves, and if there was any, then it would be limited to small-time deals struck by the mining city of Re-Blumrushur. Even if some back-and-forth was happening, it was difficult for an outsider to get involved because that relationship was connected to the city's profits.

The talk with Fluder had essentially gone the same way.

Ainz had asked him about the dwarf country's culture and government, but he hardly knew anything. The elderly caster had heard that a dragon once caused horrific damage to a dwarf city, but he didn't know the name of the place, where it was, or the identity of the dragon.

Evidently, Fluder hadn't been very interested because he never looked into the incident. He did offer to check the details and talk to the person most likely to be informed about it in the empire, but Ainz refused.

Waiting for that would take too long, and since Fluder's betrayal had been discovered, Ainz felt that having him conduct an investigation might invite trouble.

In the end, the only lead left was the lizardman Zenbel.

I suppose I should send those two a Message and bring up the dwarves.

"First up is Shalltear… Hmm. 'The right person for the job…'"

It was a great idea but also harsh.

Ainz closed his eyes—not that he had any—and turned his thoughts inward for over a minute. The next time he opened his eyes, he cast Message.

"Shalltear Bloodfallen."

"Lord Ainz! Where shall I open a Gate this time?"

The fact that that was what the strongest floor guardian, the only one to guard multiple levels, asked him made him kind of sad, and he felt guilty that

casting Gate was the only work he had been giving her lately.

“No, this time I have a big job for you.”

“A b-big job?”

“Yes. You’ll accompany me and provide security.”

Several seconds of silence followed.

The pause was long enough that he started wondering what was wrong, especially since there was no way she hadn’t heard him. That was when Shalltear’s voice rang out, sounding frenzied due to her unbridled enthusiasm. “I shall fulfill this duty even if it’s the last thing I do!”

“A-all right. I’ll explain in more detail, so come to my room in E-Rantel.”

If he didn’t specify, it was possible she would end up at his quarters in the Great Tomb of Nazarick. It had already happened once. He had told Narberal via Message to come to him, but she never showed up. When he cast the spell to contact her again, he found out she was in Nazarick.

Ainz felt the misunderstanding had been his fault, though, for giving unclear orders. He took extra care to avoid repeating the mistake.

“Yes, my lord! I shall set out with all due haste!”

“Also, I’m planning to have Mare take over your surveillance duties inside Nazarick. I’ll send him by later, so if there’s anything you need to explain to him, do it then. Factor that in…and come when it’s convenient. I’m not planning on going anywhere, so I’ll be waiting for you here.”

“Understood! I, Shalltear Bloodfallen, shall carry out your orders immediately!”

“This handover is crucial. Don’t give him half-baked instructions because you feel like you’re keeping me waiting. I’ll have him go to your room, the Adipocere Burial Chamber.”

“Certainly! I’ll take this time to write down what I need to tell him!”

“And this goes without saying, but give your ring to Mare.”

“Of course! I’m well aware that I’m only borrowing this ring!”

It was more that taking the ring outside of Nazarick was extremely dangerous. As long as the Rings or the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown didn't get stolen, it would be possible to buy time against enemy incursions until all the guardians could be recalled. For that reason, with the exception of the one Ainz carried secretly and those in use inside Nazarick, the rings were hidden in the gold held inside the treasury.

The reason Ainz carried a ring despite the incredible risk was because if nobody had one and the entrance got blocked off somehow, they wouldn't be able to get in anymore.

"Very good. Then, make your preparations."

"Yes, my lord! And what should I bring when I come to your room?"

"A natural question. But you don't need to bring anything. I'm going to explain what I have in store for us, and then I'll give you some time to get ready."

"Understood!" Her passionate reply disappeared the moment the spell ended.

Next, Ainz Messaged Mare. The only thing he had to say was what he had already mentioned to Shalltear, that Mare would be taking over her duties in defending the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

Upon hearing Mare's tiny but reassuring reply, Ainz ended the Message.

Finally, he contacted Aura.

"Aura. It's me."

"Lord Ainz! What can I do for you?"

"Well, I want you to accompany me to the dwarf country."

"Understood! What should I do?"

"First, I want you to come to my room in E-Rantel. Then we'll wait until Shalltear arrives."

"Shalltear?!"

Her shrill yelp made Ainz thankful for his mysterious ears that could hear

despite the lack of eardrums. “Lower your voice, Aura.”

“S-sorry, Lord Ainz!”

No, I told you to lower your voice, thought Ainz, but he kept that to himself.

“Are we going to the dwarf country to destroy it?”

“No. Where do these terrifying misunderstandings come from? I want to try a friendly approach first.”

“Oh, I see! So you’re already thinking about what to do if the friendly approach doesn’t work, right?”

“Aura, you—”

“Lord Ainz, I’m here!”

“What? You mean you’re outside my room?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

The voice was followed by a knock at the door.

Ainz winced as Decrement went to answer.

“Lord Ainz, Mistress Aura is requesting permission to enter.”

When he waved a hand to allow, the maid stepped away from the door.

““Hello, Lord Ainz!””

Aura’s voice echoed itself.

Ainz greeted the dark elf girl in return.

“Okay, let’s talk over there.” He pointed at some sofas they could sit on facing each other and then turned to Decrement. “Get Aura something to drink, will you?”

“Understood, Lord Ainz. The drinks I can have ready immediately are apple juice, orange juice, lemon squash, tea, and coffee.”

As per Aura’s request, Decrement set a cup of apple juice on the table between the sofas the pair was sitting on.

Ainz told her she could drink and then said, “First, regarding your question

about whether we're going to destroy the dwarf country, I want to make something clear. Shalltear's strength in combat is part of why I chose to bring her along, but that's not the main reason."

"What?!" Aura's eyes widened in astonishment.

Her reaction reminded him again how limited people considered Shalltear to be. *At the same time*— Suddenly, he couldn't stop smiling.

He was reminiscing about the relationship between BubblingTeapot and Peroroncino.

Whenever anything happened, BubblingTeapot would ask him, *Is my dumb little brother causing you trouble?* Even when Ainz told her he wasn't, she would say, *That can't be true!* much like Aura's reaction a moment ago.

Ainz got the impression that their relationship seemed to live on in Shalltear and Aura, making it impossible for him to contain himself. Memories came fluttering down like snow, filling his heart with euphoria. The joy building inside him was released externally as a burst of laughter—or that's what would've happened if his emotions weren't automatically suppressed.

"Damn it," he swore quietly at his fun being ruined. He knew it was spoiled of him to find the emotion suppression ability useful when it benefited him and a bother when it got in his way. Still, it wasn't easy to set aside the annoyance of having the memories of his guildmates interrupted.

"U-ummm…Lord Ainz…is something wrong?"

But all his displeasure died down when he heard the timid girl's voice. He shouldn't have been visibly upset enough for a child to notice so easily. Ainz took a deep breath and smiled at her.

"No, sorry. It was nothing. Getting back to the topic at hand, I'm bringing Shalltear along this time to test her suitability. Shalltear was created as the strongest of the floor guardians. If she had fought correctly back then, even I wouldn't have been able to beat her."

"I don't think that's—"

"No, it's true. If I were Shalltear, I would have created Einherjar from the

start. Then, while my opponent was busy fighting my double, I would have prepped for combat, using as many spells as my mana would allow, and then followed up with skills. Then I would have figured out a way to activate Blood Frenzy and gone in for close combat with the Pipette Lance while my attack strength was boosted.” Ainz smiled awkwardly. “If she had come at me like that, I would have withdrawn with zero hesitation.”

Discounting skills, Ainz was a little stronger in combat than average out of all the players. Then, Shalltear’s class build and gear choices were a little weaker than the best. If her gear were complete—with all god-tier items—then she would probably be the middle of the best. And if she could change gear depending on her opponent, she would probably secure a place in the highest ranks.

“But that appraisal of Shalltear as the strongest is hindering her growth.”

“Huh?”

“The most advantageous way to employ Shalltear is to use her like an arrow to chip away at the enemy’s resources. Let her fly and task her with rampaging through the enemy camp. But is that really the right thing to do? It may be the most obvious strategy suggested by her specs, but does that really make it the best?”

“I’m not entirely sure… But if you think so, Lord Ainz, then it must be the right thing to do.”

In terms of the flow of conversation, a response like that put Ainz in a tough spot. He was thinking it wasn’t the right thing to do, so the proper adult thing for Aura to do would have been to draw that opinion out of him. Of course, it was more natural for a child to be obedient.

“O-oh? I was thinking maybe it isn’t. What I mentioned is only the optimal way according to her abilities. For Shalltear, with her experience, it might not be the best at all.”

Ainz had grown as a warrior. No, it was more accurate to say he had learned how to take full advantage of his abilities. Even if his physical strength didn’t improve, he could still develop in other ways.

Unlike back in the days when they were mere data, the NPCs of Nazarick now had hearts and minds that allowed them all to think for themselves. That was true for Shalltear as well. The Shalltear of tomorrow would certainly be different from the Shalltear of today.

“Instead of repeating the same things over and over, I should have her attempt different things so she can grow… She may very well make mistakes. It’s not that I want her to, but even if she does, those around her can back her up. That’s why I’ve called on you, Aura.”

Aura probably got along with Shalltear better than Mare, and he figured Aura would be good at taking charge.

She had been listening quietly, but now she nodded firmly.

“…But if we move too far away from her contractual obligations in the name of giving her more varied experiences, that’s wrong as a company—er, organization.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“…Well, for instance, it would be unforgivable to force her to do things she didn’t want to do.”

“Obeying your commands is why we exist, Lord Ainz!”

“…You don’t think it’s wrong to make Shalltear do things that go against what Peroroncino intended? If my orders contradict what BubblingTeapot wanted, how would you feel about following them, Aura?”

“Urk! That, uh…” She lowered her eyes nervously. She probably couldn’t say *That would be a problem* in front of Ainz.

“That’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I’m just trying to make a point. Anyhow, I’m going to have Shalltear take on a bunch of trials and see how she grows. That’s why I’ve chosen to bring her along.”

“I see! Such a deep, complex reason—brilliant as always, Lord Ainz!”

Those at the top must challenge those below to allow them a chance to grow.

This was the policy of a manager in a business book Ainz had read after being transported to this world.

The reason he hadn't been able to give Shalltear chances to grow until now was because the stakes had been too high and also his general lack of time. But now—no, there was no chance *except* now.

"The rest I'll explain once Shalltear gets here. I don't want to say it all twice."

Just as he finished speaking, a knock sounded on the door, and Decrement checked to see who it was. "It's Mistress Shalltear."

Apparently, the one they were waiting for had arrived. Ainz ordered Decrement to show her in.

"Shalltear Bloodfallen, at your service!"

Ainz had been about to say, *Good of you to come*, but he froze when he laid eyes on her. He blinked for a few seconds and then asked, "Wh-why are you in full gear?"

She wore full plate armor and carried her Pipette Lance.

"My lord! I'm prepared to protect you now! I shall utterly annihilate any who dare to defy you!"

Ainz eyed Aura to ask what they should do about eager and wide-eyed Shalltear. He couldn't exactly fault her thought process.

"Agh, aren't you being a bit impatient? You could listen to what Lord Ainz has to say before jumping into action."

Shalltear pouted at Aura's teasing. Before they could get into it, Ainz held up his palms to warn them.

"Shalltear, I can see where you were coming from, and it certainly wasn't a mistake. But what we're doing this time is a bit different. Forgive me for not explaining well enough."

Ainz hurriedly explained the objective of their journey to the dwarf country and establishing friendly relations.

It confused Shalltear. "A-are you quite sure you want me for that?"

"…There are several reasons I chose you. Protecting me is one of them. But the most important one is to have you gain experience. I feel like I can't leave

this job to you due to Blood Frenzy, but that's just me. But if I let you try it out, maybe we'll find that you're actually suited to it."

Shalltear's eyes gaped. "Understood, Lord Ainz! I'll be sure to achieve results you can be proud of!"

"…Very good, Shalltear. For this assignment, you'll be working under Aura. She'll be your superior, and you will follow her orders."

"Understood!" Shalltear bowed her head.

She seemed a little too high-strung, but that was better than lacking motivation. He just didn't want her to spin her wheels going nowhere.

"Now then, I appreciate your zeal, Shalltear, but let's rein it in a little… All right, time to think about who to bring with us. Thoughts?"

"Lord Ainz, may I ask something?"

Surprised at the voice coming from somewhere he didn't expect, he turned his attention to Decrement, who was perfectly composed.

"What is it? You have something?"

"Yes. If you're going to the dwarf country, Lord Ainz, I think it would be advisable to bring several of us maids along as ladies-in-waiting. Rulers have been accompanied by staff to take care of their incidental needs since ancient times. In fact, if you don't have ladies-in-waiting, they may make light of you in the dwarf country."

"I see… You do have a point."

Ainz had gleaned from his spying the fact that Jircniv traveled with several carriages, and in one of them were well-dressed women. They must have been the people who took care of the emperor wherever he went. If they had all stayed at Nazarick, he could have investigated further, but unfortunately, that didn't happen.

Well, perhaps it was rather impolite of him to have allowed the emperor's party to leave right away without hosting them for a night. Ainz had ultimately deferred to his guest's wishes because no matter how many times he offered accommodations, Jircniv had stubbornly insisted on leaving. Maybe the polite

thing to do would have been to convince him to stay.

There was even a chance that if they had gotten along better at that time, Jircniv wouldn't have proposed his nation becoming a vassal state when they met at the arena.

Whoops, I'm off on a tangent… What Decrement said does make sense, though. But…

He recalled her data. Though each of the forty-one regular maids had different faces, their data and equipment were the same.

The grotesques known as homunculi didn't excel at anything in particular and were extremely weak, being level 1. In terms of ability points, they were stronger than a level-1 humanoid, but if the two fought, the homunculus's chances of winning were only about 60 percent.

The maid outfits they were equipped with had a decent amount of defense but were still only upper grade. Even if that made them tough by this world's standards, a *Yggdrasil* player would find their gear as flimsy as paper.

To be blunt, there was no way he could take them into the dwarf country about which they knew almost nothing and where players could be lying in wait for them.

"It's unfortunate, but I can't do that. If I need attendants—Shalltear, would it be possible to bring some of your vampire brides?"

"You needn't even ask. All in Nazarick are subordinate to you, Lord Ainz. Simply say the word."

"I see. Decrement, your proposal is very natural, but the problem is that you're so weak, I would be anxious for your safety in unknown lands."

"I'm aware of the danger!"

Ainz held a hand up as a request for her to remain calm. "Your attitude—the way you all devote yourselves to me—gives me joy. So I tell you what I'll do. Once we confirm the dwarf country is safe, I'll send for you via Teleport. Until then, let's leave the work to the vampire brides."

Decrement opened her mouth a few times, but no words came out, and she

bowed her head. Ainz preferred that she understand herself rather than just accept his orders, but it seemed like that would be difficult.

He looked away from her. He had no other methods with which to persuade her, and no matter what she said, he wasn't going to change his mind.

It didn't cost much to resurrect a level-1 NPC. But that wasn't the issue.

Who would ever want to expose their friends' children to danger?

"So, Shalltear, let's bring—hmm—six vampire brides. And let's round up another thirty knights. Five of them will be Hanzos I recently summoned."

He had chosen the number thirty at random. He figured that was an acceptable number. Or maybe it was because that was the number of players on a team.

"While we gather party members, I'm going to get in touch with Cocytus. Yes. I'll go ahead of you two and talk to him. Once you've finished organizing the party, use Gate to come to the lizardman village. Then we'll head north to look for the dwarf country. How does that sound?"

"Roger!"

"Your wish is my command."

The two guardians agreed to his plan. Ainz had hoped one of them would present a better idea, but nothing came up. He didn't think these two were flunkies who would blindly agree, but it did make him nervous when the only response to anything he proposed was a *yes, sir*—since it wasn't as if he was confident in his own thinking.

"So do you have any proposals for the entourage?"

"If we took my magical beasts—"

"My undead could—"

The pair began talking at once and their eyes met. He thought it would devolve then and there into a fight, but Shalltear was the first to look away.

"Go ahead."

"…What's wrong? Did you eat something weird?"

“I was ordered to follow you as my superior on this mission.”

“…Mm, that’s kinda creepy.”

Shalltear’s eyebrows twitched, but she didn’t say anything.

“Then, what about having twenty-five of your undead ride my beasts?”

“I have no objections, but…” Shalltear turned to Ainz. “That makes the total greater than the number Lord Ainz decided. Is that all right?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Then, let’s go with that.”

It seemed like the pair had reached an understanding, so Ainz spoke up. “Okay, time to get cracking. I want the party members selected and ready to go within the next two hours. Don’t make any plans that assume you can teleport back to Nazarick at any time. Outfit yourselves with the intention of not returning for a while. Aura, take extra care, since you’re a living being. All right, you’re both dismissed. I need to let Pandora’s Actor know what’s going on.”

And I have to Message Albedo, too, he mentally noted.

•

“Finally! It’s finally time!” Once they had gotten a short distance from the Supreme Being’s room, where he wouldn’t hear them, Shalltear clenched her fist and crowed. “Now’s my chance to make up for my mistake and show everyone that Shalltear Bloodfallen is worth having around! That took forever…” She stared off into the distance.

Aura could tell how emotional she was from her unusually casual tone. Shalltear had already been punished for her error, and Ainz had even told her in the Throne Room that it wasn’t her fault. But as a fellow floor guardian, Aura understood the urge to wipe the mistake from her record so much it hurt. But she was nervous.

“The wait has been so long… All I’ve been getting are simple jobs or duties anyone could do. But… But…”

“True. But I do think all the jobs Lord Ainz ordered you to do were important.”

“No doubt, what you say is correct. But there’s a scale of importance.”

“And I’m sure protecting Nazarick is high up on that scale. Manning the first line of defense against any intruders is a job I don’t think Lord Ainz could assign to anyone besides his most trusted guardian.”

“Ngh!” Shalltear wasn’t sure how to respond. She fidgeted, tapping her fingers together. “Is that what Lord Ainz really thinks?”

“Well, maybe. He did say you’re really strong.”

Shalltear smiled from ear to ear. Her reaction put Aura at ease. Prior to this, she had been worried that if nothing changed, Shalltear would eventually end up doing something excessive and cause trouble for Ainz. If that happened, she wasn’t sure how she would apologize, and she would feel bad for Shalltear, who would have put so much thought into it only for it to go nowhere.

“And when we were in that human city, Demiurge warned me—only me. He thinks I’m incompetent. If the greatest mind in Nazarick thinks that, then there’s a good chance that the others, including Lord Ainz, who is even wiser than Demiurge, probably feel the same, don’t you think?”

“I dunno. Isn’t it precisely because he knows more than Demiurge that he doesn’t see you that way?”

“Ahhh.” Shalltear exhaled hotly. “Lord Ainz is always so brilliant.”

“Phew.” Aura sighed.

She felt slightly tired. But she didn’t feel like telling Shalltear in a straightforward way would have much effect when she was nearly at her wits’ end like this, so it was worth attacking from a different angle.

“But the others with the same amount of knowledge as Demiurge must think that way.”

“…I can’t deny that.”

Or rather, it was definitely true. Shalltear’s eyes popped wide open, so before she could say anything, Aura continued. “Lord Ainz wants you to experience lots of different things so he can find out what you’re suited for, right? So you can jump right in, but it might impress everyone, including Lord Ainz, if you study

beforehand.”

“Study beforehand?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re about to accompany Nazarick’s most elite being. Maybe you can learn something from the way he does things.”

“Aha! But…what should I do?”

“Shalltear. You’re already on the right track.”

“Oh! I see!”

Aura couldn’t think of anything immediately, so she left it all up to Shalltear, but she did wonder momentarily if things would work out all right. Still, the ball was already in Shalltear’s court.

Please do something that makes sense…

She prayed to her god, the Supreme Being BubblingTeapot. *Lady BubblingTeapot, please watch over Shalltear, your brother Lord Peroroncino’s creation!*

3

Ainz traveled to the lizardman village using Gate.

The Hanzos accompanied him for protection. Of the five of them, one had red cloth wound around his right arm.

It wasn’t enchanted or anything, merely indicating that he was their leader.

Ainz simply thought they would be easier to manage that way, but the leader was far happier than expected. It was obvious from a glance that he was grinning beneath his mask.

All Ainz had done was hand over a scrap of cloth, so he felt a bit guilty.

Guarded by those minions, Ainz appeared in a location facing a statue of himself.

This was the designated teleportation point, so he had seen it numerous times, but he never got over the embarrassment it roused within him.

In Satoru Suzuki's world, there were the occasional statues of founders. But wasn't it embarrassing if the statues were created while they were alive?

What bewildered him even more was that one part of his face was different. It must have been changed to depict him more beautifully.

Do I look cooler with cheekbones like that? I have no idea. Whose aesthetic sense are we going by here anyway?

With those things partially occupying his mind, Ainz turned to the prostrate Cocytus and lizardmen.

As he gained experience role-playing a ruler, he had gotten used to these over-the-top displays. But as a regular member of society, Satoru Suzuki didn't like them. But he recognized it was a demonstration of their loyalty to him, so he couldn't ask them to stop.

"Raise your heads."

With complex emotions swirling inside, he permitted them to rise, and it was like they finally came back to life.

"LORD AINZ. I THANK YOU FOR COMING ALL THE WAY HERE."

Cocytus was still on a knee, so Ainz gestured for him to stand. "Mm. Thanks for all your hard work. I got your report. I took a quick glance and nothing seems wrong, so that's great. You're doing a praiseworthy job."

"THANK YOU! EVERYTHING IS MADE POSSIBLE BY YOUR POWER, MY LORD."

I didn't do anything, though, Ainz thought as he accepted Cocytus's flattery. If he said anything, he knew from experience it would just turn into a back-and-forth of, *No, not at all. No, no, really. No, no, no, seriously.*

"…Even so, a good job deserves a reward."

He had given Albedo and Mare Rings of Ainz Ooal Gown, while Aura had received a watch that featured BubblingTeapot's voice, and Shalltear now possessed Peroroncino's Encyclopedia of monsters. He had also bestowed upon Demiurge a demon statue that Ulbert had made.

Additionally, Ainz had offered the lives of the lizardmen to Cocytus, but he felt like it was about time to give him a proper reward.

“You say you don’t need anything, but rewards and punishment keep all in order. Those who don’t reward cannot punish. Now, Cocytus, what is it that you desire?”

“B-BUT, LORD AINZ. THERE IS NO GREATER REWARD THAN SERVING YOU.”

If Cocytus wished for something similar to Solution’s request of innocent humans, that would be an issue in and of itself, but his reply was equally problematic.

Someone from the guild had once said that anyone who answered the question *What do you want to eat?* with *Anything’s fine* only to later whine *Yeah, Italian would have been better* was a stereotypical pain in the ass. Ainz agreed completely. Everything was a hundred times easier if people simply stated what they wanted.

“…Cocytus, understand that sometimes having no desire is worse than being greedy. I’m giving you an order. You have one week to tell me what you want. Let’s assume it will be some sort of physical object. Understood?”

Cocytus looked a bit troubled, but Ainz ignored that and repeated, “Understood?”

“IF THAT IS YOUR ORDER, LORD AINZ.”

“Yes, it is. Now then, Cocytus, I’m here to talk to Zenbel.”

“MY LORD! I’VE SUMMONED HIM HERE. PLEASE GO AHEAD.” Cocytus moved to a position diagonally behind Ainz. Then he called out to the kneeling lizardman. “ZENBEL. YOU WILL ANSWER LORD AINZ’S QUESTIONS. REPLY TO HIM DIRECTLY.”

Zenbel raised his head and said, “Yes, master,” but his voice contained a measure of uncertainty.

“Very well, let’s get right to the point. I want to visit the dwarf country. I’d like for you to act as a guide. Can you lead me there?”

Ainz got the sense that the lizardman’s eyes narrowed.

He didn’t know much about lizardman expressions, but even if he didn’t know exactly what emotion it was, it didn’t seem like a very positive reaction.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Majesty, may I ask for what reason you plan to travel to the dwarf country?”

The moment he finished speaking, a threatening clicking noise came from behind Ainz. “…ZENBEL. IT’S TERRIBLY RUDE OF YOU TO QUESTION LORD AINZ’S MOTIVES. ANSWER ONLY WHAT IS ASKED OF YOU.” Cocytus’s tone was the same as always, but he was clearly offended.

The disgruntled voice came from behind Ainz where he couldn’t see, which made him want to shrink away.

It rattled Ainz a great deal even though the emotion wasn’t directed at him, and yet, Zenbel maintained his silence. He watched Ainz’s reaction and didn’t shift his gaze one bit.

It was painful how quiet things had become. The only sound was Cocytus’s threatening clicking. Tension suffused the air. Not much time had passed, so when Ainz sensed Cocytus about to make an impatient move, he held up a hand to stop him. At this rate, the situation could become dangerous.

“It’s fine, Cocytus. Zenbel hasn’t done anything to offend.”

“BUT, LORD AINZ—”

“I said it’s fine, really. Now, then… I have to admit I’m a bit sad, Zenbel. I can’t believe you would misunderstand me to such an extent.”

Well, it’s only natural he would react this way, given what I did to the lizardman village, Ainz thought without giving any external indication of it. If he decided it was so, then any action by any member of the Great Tomb of Nazarick was in the right. If he didn’t display that attitude before his underlings, they would begin to worry about their own conduct going forward.

“Zenbel, I’m not going there to harm the dwarves. I want to build friendly relations with them.”

“Really?”

“WHY, YOU—”

Ainz turned toward Cocytus. “Cocytus. I’m happy for your loyalty, but I’m fairly certain I told you there’s no problem. No matter what Zenbel says right now, pay it no mind and forget it.”

“YES, MY LORD.”

Ainz wouldn’t go as far as ditching formalities entirely. Whenever a CEO said something to that effect, it was a trap.

Ainz turned back to the lizardman. “It’s true, Zenbel. I’m happy to swear so on my honor as Ainz Ooal Gown. I’d like to build friendly relations with the dwarves. It goes without saying, however, that a conflict could arise depending on how they react. I hope you can understand.”

“Of course. That makes sense. And it makes sense that might makes right. I just don’t want to repay kindness with pain.” Zenbel paused and took a breath. It reminded Ainz of the breathing technique warriors used when switching from defense to offense. “And if it turns out you’re plotting to destroy them the moment we get there, then sorry, but I’m taking their side.”

Ainz heard a clicking sound behind him, so he said, “It’s fine,” over his shoulder. He knew without a doubt that Cocytus was going for his weapon.

Sheesh, he thought as he stared Zenbel down haughtily. It seemed like Ainz’s practice had paid off, because Zenbel’s whole body tensed up.

“Well, if that comes to pass, I’ll simply destroy you along with them…but still, that’s quite brave of you. Have you considered that if you disobey me, all the lizardmen here could be killed?”

“…You’re the king. You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Ainz put a hand to his chin and answered Zenbel’s restrained question. “You seem to be misunderstanding something: I approach all things by weighing the pros and cons. I wouldn’t normally destroy an entire organization because of one rebel, but if the cons of that rebellion continuing in the future outweigh the pros, I’ll annihilate it without hesitation. Did you think I was simply a benevolent being with no brain?”

Zenbel’s expression changed.

But Ainz couldn't divine any information from the lizardman's face.

It might have been strange for an undead such as himself to say so, but he felt lizardmen were unfair in their own ways.

How could Ainz be expected to understand the expressions of other races? He was nothing but an undead creature who had only the limited experience of the human Satoru Suzuki to rely on.

Zenbel showed no signs of speaking, leaving Ainz no choice but to continue. "Relax. Even if you revolt against me, I won't be destroying this village. It's not as if a mass rebellion would occur. Plus, given your personality and history, it's obvious how you would react. I get that you would choose your old friends—or were they your saviors? In any case, I'll say it again: I'm not traveling to the dwarf country just to demolish it for no reason."

Regardless of whether players were there or not, Ainz didn't want to resort to force without at least talking first.

Things weren't going well with the neighboring countries at the moment.

The country he should have been on the best terms with was trying to become a vassal state—*what is that about anyway?* If he ended up at war with the dwarves on top of that, his nation would be seen as a force of pure evil.

If possible, he wanted to sign a treaty of friendship with the dwarves and demonstrate to other states that the Nation of Darkness could be as diplomatic as any other country. Then he would be able to cobble together some justification for putting a check on the players who might be lurking around somewhere.

What would players who were wary of the Nation of Darkness do?

The most likely action would be to paint it as an evil state and try to destroy it in the name of justice. But if Ainz signed a treaty with the dwarf country? Then what would happen?

Some people would think he had forced them to sign, assuming it was gunboat diplomacy. Even then, at the very least, observers would have to see that the terms of the treaty were fair.

For instance, if another player appeared in the future, they would surely team up with someone on the same level as them—probably another player—to fight. And some people might consider the Nation of Darkness as a party worth a request for cooperation. But if the battle was against someone Ainz wasn't interested in fighting, he could use the treaty with the dwarves as an excuse to not join in.

Maybe it was a self-centered idea, but if his side and the other ended up fighting before they were ready, and they lost, maybe it would set the bomb of *I told you I didn't want to fight!* off internally.

That was the point of creating a justification.

What Ainz feared was player teams, not individual players.

Certainly, a player with a World Item was threatening, as was a player with one of the powerful classes like world champion. But as long as it was a lone player and they weren't wielding one of the Twenty, there was no way the Great Tomb of Nazarick would lose.

"See? No need to worry."

"—I understand."

"Great. So, Zenbel, I can count on you, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I'll lead you to the underground dwarf city I once stayed in."

Ainz nodded benevolently and then turned his gaze to Zaryusu.

"Next, Zaryusu. I was happy to receive news about the birth of your child. I also hear that both mother and baby are doing well. Is that right?"

Zaryusu replied with what was probably a nervous expression. "Yes, Your Majesty. Quite well. The baby will be up and walking before long."

"Wow, so soon!"

That's how Ainz reacted, but after researching the topic, even human children in this world crawled and walked earlier than the one he had come from. Of course, his only frame of reference was what he had heard from Touch Me.

“Do you think so? I’m pretty sure it’s normal…”

“O-oh, right. I had assumed it was similar to humans. Children… Hmm. Right now, I’m in the middle of building a nation where people of various races can come together and live side by side. If I asked you to move with your family to a human country I rule as a part of that effort, would you be willing?”

“If Your Majesty orders it, I have no choice.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

Zaryusu might not have intended for his response to come across sarcastically, but that’s how it sounded to Ainz.

Ainzach made the same sort of comment, he thought as he continued. “I want to know how you personally feel about the idea. You were away from your tribe as a traveler, yes? In other words, you must think differently from other lizardmen. That’s why I’d like to understand how you feel and what kind of things are on your mind when you’re faced with a changing world.”

“I only became a traveler because I felt like I couldn’t go on the way things were. I felt trapped.”

“Nevertheless, your experiences abroad should have made you more worldly. I’d like you to think about what it would be like for you to go to a human country compared to a regular lizardman. How about it?”

“Yes, sir…” Zaryusu thought for a little while and then said, “Personally, I don’t feel like going to a human city. I’d be too anxious to bring along my wife and child. Even if it’s Your Majesty’s nation, I feel like coping with the sudden changes would simply be…incredibly hard.”

Anyone would be anxious if they were forced to live in a brand-new world after being torn away from everything they knew. Who wouldn’t want to cling to the familiar? Especially for a man with a family, it made sense to think that way.

Some might call this a life of defense, but Ainz felt that a person who couldn’t go on the defensive when necessary was weak. That went for PKers and PKKers as well.

“I see. Then…do you think your future children will get used to the idea?”

“Does that mean my children would be brought there, Your Majesty?”

Ainz sensed that the atmosphere had become critical.

Maybe Zaryusu thought he meant separating children from their parents.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I’m building a country where all sorts of races can coexist. I simply thought that as a first step, I could create a place where human, lizardman, and goblin children, all different races, could play together… And I do think you guys need to examine the greater world and not limit yourselves to the boundaries of this lake.”

The lizardman seemed to be having complex feelings.

“Do you mean…that we should have more children who will be travelers?”

“It doesn’t have to be on the same level as the travelers of the lizardman tribes. I’m just saying you could stand to gain more knowledge of the world in a casual way… I wouldn’t really know, but don’t parents want their children to broaden their horizons?”

Zaryusu made a strange face. “…Well, this is complicated. Really, I’d like them to stay in this village where they can live safely and not worry about food, but are you saying that times have changed?”

Perhaps the complexity of Zaryusu’s reply stemmed from his feelings as a parent? If Ainz put himself in his shoes, maybe it was the same as hoping that the NPCs would live happy lives? When he hit on that idea, he found it easier to empathize with Zaryusu.

“I understand your hesitation. Change is difficult for people set in their ways to keep up with. And the faster the change happens, the more the elderly try to find reasons to reject it,” Ainz said with a shrug, and Zenbel and Zaryusu seemed to smile.

“It’s just as you say,” said Zaryusu. “That’s exactly how our elders were. They still grumble sometimes.”

“But what he’s saying is that you’re one of those old people now, Zaryusu.”

Even Ainz could tell that the look Zaryusu turned to Zenbel with was

disappointment.

"'Cause I'm a parent now? Well, I guess that's how it goes."

Ainz turned to Cocytus with kind eyes. "Anyhow, I have to make sure I say this much. Cocytus, I have an order for you."

"MY LORD!"

"If Zenbel turns against me, do not harm any of his fellow lizardmen in this village."

"UNDERSTOOD, MY LORD."

Ainz nodded in satisfaction at Cocytus's low bow and fixed his eyes once again on Zenbel. "So, Zenbel. I want to learn everything I can about what you know. How did you meet the dwarves? What are their lives like? What kind of presents would they appreciate? Tell me whatever you can remember."

"Righty-ho, Your Majesty."

"WATCH YOUR MOU—"

"It's fine, Cocytus. If we were in public, I'd take his head off, but…" Ainz looked purposefully around the area. "This isn't exactly public. So this time we'll laugh it off. I like to think I'm at least that open-minded." Having said that, he chuckled slightly, and Cocytus murmured in confusion.

"L-LORD AINZ…"

Ainz held a hand out to stop Cocytus and turned a cool eye on Zenbel—at an angle he had practiced over and over in the mirror.

"But, Zenbel. Remember this: Cocytus has been embarrassed by your tone and feels guilty toward me now."

The shudder that ran through Zenbel's body must have been fear.

It couldn't be excitement, right?

"…My apologies, Your Majesty. I got cocky for a moment."

"That's fine. You should thank Cocytus, the supervisor of this village. I wasn't going to do anything… Anyhow, that's enough pointless chatter. Will you start telling me about the dwarves?"

“BEFORE THAT, LORD AINZ, WOULD YOU LIKE TO SIT DOWN?”

Ainz hesitated at Cocytus’s suggestion.

His body didn’t fatigue. So he didn’t need a chair. But he didn’t want to ignore such a kind offer.

“Sure. I’ll take a seat. I don’t need anything special, Cocytus. Anything I can sit on is fine.”

“YES, MY LORD! PLEASE EXCUSE ME FOR A MOMENT.”

Cocytus got down on his hands and knees.

A memory of Shalltear overlapped with the sight of him.

“…I don’t actually need to ask, but just to be sure… What are you doing?”

“I HEARD THAT SHALLTEAR DID THIS ONCE. I DECIDED I COULD AS WELL…”

“That was to punish her. There’s no need for you to do it.”

“BUT ONE OF MY LIZARDMAN CHARGES WAS RUDE TO YOU, LOR—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I’m fairly certain I said I wasn’t worried about that. Did you not hear me?”

“NO, BUT—”

Are you serious? With that thought in his mind, Ainz tried to persuade him, but Cocytus was stubborn. Even though Ainz was an undead who didn’t get tired, he began to feel exhausted. Finally, he was sick of everything and uneagerly declared, “Agh, fine. I’m going to sit now, Cocytus.”

“MY LORD!” Cocytus’s reply was extra spirited.

Sitting in front of other people was extremely—well, a bit embarrassing.

But hesitating would be even worse. It was perfectly natural for him as an absolute ruler to sit on his retainer.

So he did. Frankly, it was uncomfortable. Frankly, it was bumpy. Frankly, it was cold.

Not only that, but the ragged breath Cocytus was emitting in his bizarre enthusiasm was whiter and cloudier than usual. It flowed across the ground at

Ainz's feet like the kind of fog that emerges when dry ice becomes wet.

It was like a cheap attempt to manufacture magnificence and, thus, incredibly uncomfortable.

"HOW IS IT, LORD AINZ?"

Horrible. But he couldn't very well say that.

Not that he didn't have a perverse curiosity about what would happen if he did, but he was scared of how Cocytus might react.

"Pretty good…," he said, making him feel like some kind of perv. But what else could he say?

"SO BETWEEN SHALLTEAR AND ME, WHICH IS BETTER?"

"…" Ainz really had no idea what to say. What kind of answer was he supposed to give?

"Huh…? Wh-why would you ask that?"

"MY LORD! I FEEL AS THOUGH I MAY REQUIRE TRAINING FOR THOSE WHO WILL RIDE MY BACK IN THE FUTURE."

"……What?"

What was that supposed to mean?

Did Cocytus's race mate with the female on the male's back? Or did he have a masochistic kink?

Takemikazuchiii!

No, the warrior was more normal than this. He loved combat, but he was a good person who didn't cause very much trouble.

So was this just Cocytus's personality? Ainz felt shocked, as if he had discovered someone's fetish without meaning to.

"I—I see. Good for you." He had no idea how to act.

"THANK YOU! SO WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

"It's a bit uneven, but, well, not so bad that I can't sit on you. Still, in that sense, Shalltear was more comfortable."

“OH…”

“Ngh! No! I mean, you have your own good points. The, uh, chilliness… Yes, this chilly surface is perfect for summer.”

Ainz wasn’t exactly sure why he was trying so hard to console Cocytus.

“I SEE! BUT… HMM…”

“W-well, we don’t need to worry about that. Zenbel, let’s hear what you have to say.”

“Uh, okay.”

Summarizing what Zenbel said, he had climbed into the mountains searching for the dwarves, wandered around lost for a month without finding them, and eventually decided it was impossible, but just when he was about to give up, he encountered a dwarf out exploring the surface. After a certain series of events, the dwarf trusted him and guided him to the dwarf city.

A certain series of events apparently meant that the dwarf was apprehensive at first due to Zenbel’s appearance, but after some talking, he managed to gain the dwarf’s trust.

In the city, Zenbel learned various technologies while living with the dwarves, and when he gained enough confidence in his craft, he parted ways with them and returned to his lizardman village.

The most important thing was whether or not he could actually lead Ainz to the city.

In reply to that question, Zenbel made a face like it might be difficult but said he probably could.

The dwarf city was located within an underground cavern that was inside a mountain, so as long as the shape of the mountain hadn’t changed, Zenbel was fairly confident he could get them there.

When Ainz heard that, he recalled an underground city in *Yggdrasil* and got a little excited.

The last thing he asked was how far away the dwarf city was.

The answer was that following the route Zenbel took in reverse would take about a week of hiking in the mountains. That would bring them to the northern edge of the lake.

Lizardmen weren't built for walking on dry land, so if it took Zenbel a week, the actual distance was maybe around sixty miles.

The unfortunate thing was that Ainz only had Zenbel's memories to go by and couldn't use a map to find a shorter route.

I should probably be prepared to get lost any number of times.

It reminded Ainz of adventuring in *Yggdrasil*, bringing out a broad smile.

"…Was that helpful?"

"It was indeed. I'm not opposed to these sorts of journeys where you advance through darkness by only a lantern's feeble light. It psychs me up."

Maybe the lizardmen thought he was joking? They laughed a bit.

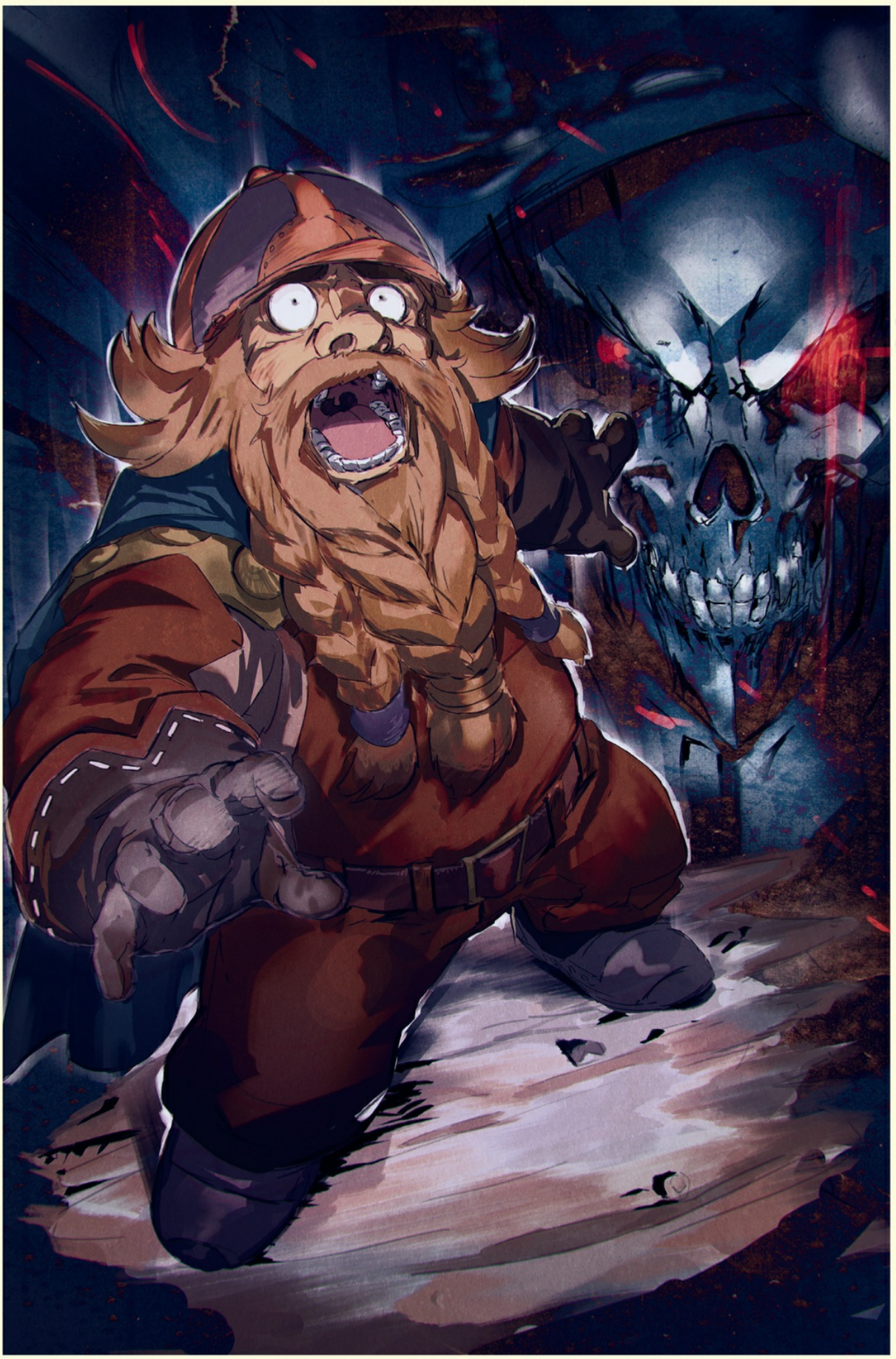
Ainz didn't feel like correcting their mistake. It was probably hard to understand for anyone who didn't have experience in *Yggdrasil*.

"Okay, Zenbel will serve as our guide. We'll make preparations based on the information we've just received. Aura and Shalltear are arranging for an escort. You get ready, too."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Ainz nodded benevolently and stood up from Cocytus.

He ignored the quiet murmur of disappointment from below.



Chapter 2 In Search of the Land of the Dwarves

Chapter 2 | In Search of the Land of the Dwarves

1

The group of monsters Aura and Shalltear selected was gathered on the coast near the lizardman village.

Shalltear's level-80-or-so undead numbered twenty-five. Aura's chosen magical beasts came in a group of thirty. Six vampire brides would attend to Ainz, Shalltear, and Aura. Additionally, Ainz had brought his five Hanzos.

There were also five mammoth-like creatures to transport their supplies. They were fitted with baskets on either side of their bodies; Ainz had used them often in *Yggdrasil*.

These mammoths were only around level 40, so in this party, they were rather weak. Still, there was a good reason they were relied upon for transport. Since they had resistance to chill and fire, they could operate without issue whether their duties took them to a region of ice and snow or a crater filled with bubbling lava. Their appearance belied their impressive speed, and another advantage they had was an ability to go for a long time without eating.

With Cocytus at his back, Ainz called Zenbel over.

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

Zenbel left the group of lizardmen Ainz knew the names of—Zaryusu and Crusch among them—and walked over. Ainz's gaze shifted to the white infant in Crusch's arms.

As if she had sensed his collector's instinct, she moved to shield the baby.

It's not like I'm going to steal your kid…

Feeling somewhat sad, Ainz handed Zenbel three items.

"Take these. This is a ring that will make it so you won't need to eat or drink. This one protects against chill. And I'm also lending you this Fly necklace. I'll

teach you how to use it, so it'll be handy if you slip and fall."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

That was the basic item set Ainz had used for mountain climbing in his *Yggdrasil* days. They could deal with any special environmental effects as they came up when the party entered the mountains.

"Sorry to interrupt your preparations. The handover is all I needed you for. You can go back."

Zenbel bobbed his head and returned to the others.

"Cocytus. Those kids sure are curious, huh?"

The children were maintaining a moderate distance, but they stared at Ainz's group with what were probably gleaming eyes.

Hmm. I'm sure if I took some of these children to a human city, they would fit in soon enough. Or maybe I should bring human children here? I could build a camp nearby and move human children there. And then lizardman children can be carried over, too.

Ainz pictured human and lizardman children—goblin, too—playing together. Plus Aura and Mare, dark elf children. He added Shalltear in, too.

He only put Shalltear in there because he happened to see her readying the magical beasts alongside Aura. There was no other reason.

What a nice scene. I should propose it to Albedo and Demiurge.

"IF THEY OFFEND YOU, I CAN ORDER THEM TO DISPERSE IMMEDIATELY."

"That's not what I'm thinking… Do you think children from different races could become friends right away? Do you think human children and lizardman children would hold hands?"

"I'M AFRAID I DON'T KNOW. BUT IF IT IS YOUR WILL, LORD AINZ, I'M SURE THEY WOULD."

…It's not about my will or orders. I'm asking whether people of two different races would be able to hold hands. Maybe it's not a good idea to have as a king?

Ainz's idle thoughts and musings were liable to become commands. That's

why so many things worried him.

"…I see. Well, it's about time to leave. Aura! Shalltear! Are you all ready to go?"

When he called out to them, their answers came back without delay.

"Yep, I'm good!"

"Me as well. I'm ready to go whenever you are, Lord Ainz."

"Zenbel!"

"No problems here!"

"Okay then, we're off!"

"TAKE CARE, LORD AINZ! IF ANYTHING HAPPENS, I'LL MOBILIZE THE ARMY RIGHT AWAY."

Cocytus had the right idea. In the event a hostile player turned up, Nazarick could very well be forced into deploying its army in preparation for an all-out war, but…

"It's true that's how things might turn out in the end. But what we're doing is more like reconnaissance in force. If we encounter someone powerful, we'll prioritize intelligence gathering and withdrawing. After that, I'll be counting on you."

"YES, MY LORD!"

•

They were to head north along the lake and then trace the path of Zenbel's memories into the mountains.

At the head of the party was a group of mounted undead holding the Nation of Darkness's flag aloft.

All sentient life-forms of the lake were under Cocytus's rule. As long as the flag was displayed, they wouldn't attack. Of course, this held true only for those who could grasp the meaning of *rule*—intelligent life-forms. Common beasts and lesser intelligences either gleaned no meaning from the flag at all or were possibly even provoked by it. Regardless, this forest held no monsters that

Ainz's party couldn't deal with.

Shalltear kept a sharp watch in every direction as if she was eager to encounter anything thoughtless enough to approach, but in the end, their party arrived at the edge of the lake without her so much as spotting a monster off in the distance.

Following the path of the wide, shallow river that ran into the lake brought everyone's eyes to the steep peaks of the Azerlisia Mountains. There was something about the magnificence of the season's refreshing breezes and clear blue sky that touched Ainz.

Right about then, Zenbel drew up beside Ainz with a proposal. "Do you mind if I take the lead now? I want to see the scenery as we go—to stimulate my memory, you know?"

There was no way Ainz could object.

"That's fine. Feel free to take the lead. But don't go off on your own. I'll assign some of my underlings to you. If you get attacked, use them as a shield and come back immediately. You're an extremely important part of this group."

"Thank you."

Zenbel gave an order to the magical beast he was riding—more accurately, he made a request—and the beast began to move in response. He didn't have experience riding, so he was borrowing one of Aura's mounts and controlling it via speech, not skills.

Once the party entered the mountains, its pace changed considerably.

They walked much, much slower.

At first, they were merely following the river north, but after they climbed up past a waterfall, their speed dropped even more.

Zenbel was desperately trying to remember the way, but as might have been expected, it seemed he was having an extremely hard time retracing a path he traveled only once several years ago—not to mention in reverse. It didn't help that their group was still at a low altitude where tall trees blocked their line of sight.

Even if the shape of the mountain hadn't changed, the trees had grown.

Working frantically to adjust for the differences between current day and his memories, Zenbel pressed on.

Most of the party members didn't require rest, but the critical Zenbel was included among those who did, so their silent hike was punctuated by occasional breaks.

Sometimes they saw what seemed like monsters in the distance, but whether it was due to the party's numbers or because the monsters weren't hungry, the wild creatures never showed any sign of approaching. Ainz was interested in capturing monsters he wasn't familiar with, but he had decided not to fuss about that on this trip.

His goal was to reach the dwarf kingdom.

Ainz knew very well that when people tried to accomplish multiple things at once, the most likely outcome was achieving neither.

He did find the missed opportunity slightly unfortunate, but he hurried on ahead.

The scenery traded taller trees for shorter ones as they approached the tree line in the setting sun.

The azure sky was dyed a deep, flaring crimson, and darkness fell soon after. There was no way to describe the mountains blocking out the sea of stars other than *majestic*, and when Ainz considered how even this view that stretched far into the distance was only a tiny part of the world, he felt like the enormity of nature might overwhelm him.

His nostrils quivered as he appreciated the scent of fresh air that flowed in.

Driving away the questions of how he could do such a thing—of particular interest was how he could smell but not taste food—Ainz savored air that couldn't be found on the outskirts of E-Rantel.

He never could have experienced this vastness of nature in *Yggdrasil*.

The sense of fulfillment, like when the adventurer Momon added another page to his experience, left Ainz quite satisfied. Honestly, he felt that it would

be fine even if, failing to find the dwarf country, they packed up and went home.

This—this is the scenery a true adventurer should gaze upon.

Ainz smiled and then, turning around, called out.

“Okay, let’s stop here for the night.”

Shalltear agreed and immediately asked a question. “Lord Ainz, does that mean you will go back to the Great Tomb of Nazarick temporarily?”

Certainly, setting up some sort of landmark and then teleporting to somewhere safe to spend the night was a perfectly fine option, but he didn’t feel like it. It wasn’t about the pros or cons but emotion.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll stay here.”

“But, Lord Ainz, I hardly think a place like this is suitable for…”

The place they had stopped at was a rocky area, and the wind whipping down from the mountain rapidly sapped body heat—though Ainz had total resistance to chill, so it didn’t affect him. Anyone who lacked similar resistances or at least thick fur would probably feel as if they were being stabbed with needles. Maybe it was because the wind was carrying the cold down from the patches of snow scattered among the peaks.

The grandeur of nature made Ainz smile even more.

In *Yggdrasil*, there had been a guild whose goal was to make the unknown known; those explorers must have gone on any number of journeys with this feeling in their hearts.

Since they focused entirely on venturing into the unknown, their headquarters had been shabby, and they never were very successful in the guild battles. At the time, Ainz hadn’t really gotten it, but with this splendid world laid out before him, it seemed he finally understood.

He had experienced this as Momon as well. Traveling the world, liberated from everything, was—

“Lord Ainz?”

All his thoughts scattered.

“What is it, Shalltear?”

“E-err, I didn’t mean to interrupt you while you were thinking.”

“Oh no, don’t worry about it. It wasn’t anything important.”

“Oh? If so, then I’m glad…”

“What did you need again? Oh, it was about staying here, right?”

“Yes. I must apologize. Even though you intend to stay here for the night, I have neglected to prepare a tent. I’ll fetch one right away from Nazarick, so may I cast Gate?”

“No need. It’s not like I forgot a tent. I didn’t put one on the list because it was unnecessary… You know how Mare can create accommodations using magic?”

Judging from Shalltear’s gestures, she was familiar with the concept.

“Very good. Then, know that I can do the same. We could use an item like a Secret Green House, but that might be a bit cramped for this many people. Watch this.”

Ainz searched for an appropriate location. It didn’t matter if the ground was sloped, but it had to be an open plot with no large boulders in the way.

He found what he was looking for right away and began casting. He chose a tier-ten spell. Create Fortress.

Once the spell was completed, in the space where there had been nothing, an imposing tower nearly a hundred feet tall appeared, seeming to bite into the stars above with its dark silhouette.

It had thick double doors that seemed like they could repel even a battering ram. In order to keep any who would try to climb in at bay, the walls were covered with sharp spikes. Demon statues glared in the four cardinal directions from the top floor. To those looking up from below, their presence loomed.

This tall fortress, with its massive or even overawing presence, was surely worthy of the word *towering*.

“Let’s go.”

Ainz led the party to the iron doors, which opened automatically. Then he stood to the side and allowed everyone else to enter. In *Yggdrasil*, anyone from the same team would be able to open these doors simply by touching them. Anyone else who tried would be attacked. What would the doors do in this world?

Ainz had two undead remain outside. Then he ordered them to try to open the door once it was shut and shut it.

He waited, but the door didn’t open.

“…Am I the only one who can open these doors? Aura, try touching them.”

“Okay,” she said and reached out to touch them, but they didn’t show any signs of opening.

Apparently, it really was the case that only Ainz could open them. He frowned inwardly. This, along with friendly fire, was terribly annoying. If there were other players in this world, there might be some who accidentally attacked or even killed their friends due to that one little change.

I’ve been here for almost a year, but…I still have to be careful when I exercise my powers. I don’t want to see us getting caught up in one another’s area-of-effect attacks. Should I tell the higher-level people to be mindful of this as well? Some are already paying proper attention, like Mare, so it might be obnoxious for them to hear… Maybe I can bring it up casually.

Giving warnings was harder than it seemed. Ainz knew well from his time in society that simply scolding people wasn’t enough.

Somewhat uneasy after his experiment, he opened the door to let in the two undead still outside. Once he confirmed that everyone was in the spacious foyer, he shut the door and led everyone farther in.

Across from the front entrance was a set of double doors that opened into a corridor. At the end of the corridor was another set of double doors. Magic lights illuminated the area well enough for everyone to walk with no trouble.

When the far doors opened, a dazzling light could be seen.

The room beyond was a circular hall. It had high ceilings and white floors. In the center was a spiral staircase leading up to the next floor.

“Now, then… We’ll stay here for the night. Those who need rest, rest, and everyone else… Well, we won’t feel very settled if we all hang around here, so stand by in your rooms.”

Ainz pointed at a door. There were ten in all. Incidentally, this space was expanded, so the tower was larger than it looked from the outside.

“The second and third floors also have rooms, so use them. Aura, Shalltear, and Zenbel, stay here. I want to discuss our plans, taking into account the route we took today. Let’s have our meeting on those sofas over there. All right, get going, everyone.”

“Lord Ainz, what should the vampire brides do?”

“Hmm…” Ainz didn’t have an immediate answer for Shalltear’s question. Frankly, the only reason he brought them along was to satisfy Decrement. He didn’t need them at all. He thought for a moment and then gave instructions. “I’ll have orders for them later, so have them stand by in their room.” He left it entirely up to his future self.

Then Ainz moved over to one of the sofas and sat down. He permitted the other three to sit as well, and once they had done so, he began the meeting.

“Okay, first let’s record the route we took today. Aura, I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, my lord.” Aura spread out a sheet of paper and started to draw while referencing a notepad she carried in her other hand. “I’m not sure about the exact distances, but I think this is what we did.”

“Hmm. Thanks, Aura.”

It was a rough map, but he could figure out the distances later from the sky.

“Now, I’m sorry, since I know you’re tired, but, Zenbel, I’m going to do something you won’t like.”

“…What does that mean, Your Majesty?”

Zenbel braced himself a bit, but Ainz gently smiled at him. “I’m going to take a peek at your memories.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“…That must’ve sounded like something a villain would say. Anyway, I know a spell that allows me to manipulate other people’s memories. And I developed a way to use it to peer into them. Frankly, this technique expends quite a bit of mana, so I don’t really want to use it if I don’t have to, but I’m a little worried about going based on your hazy recollections alone.”

“D-does it have any aftereffects?”

“You’ll be fine. I got help from a priest, so I have the skills of a veteran now. As long as I don’t attempt anything weird, there won’t be any issues. I even tried it on one of my maids and nothing bad happened.”

“You mean Shizu, right?”

“That’s right, Aura. That said, this isn’t an all-powerful ability. If the target doesn’t remember the memory, I’ll only be able to see a foggy version of it. There are some other factors that make it hard to use, but that might be because instead of memories from the brain, it could actually be accessing more fundamental records…” Ainz realized he had gone on a tangent and shrugged.

“I see… Just to be sure, I’ll ask one more time… Will I really be okay?”

“I understand your concern. You’ll be fine, Zenbel. I swear on my honor as Ainz Ooal Gown that I won’t rewrite your memories.”

“Then, what do I need to do?”

“Right. You can just sit there and relax. This won’t make you feel sick or anything. But before I cast the spell, I’d like to know some details. How many years ago was this? What day, what time? What other memories do you have from that time?”

After Zenbel answered the questions, Ainz cast a spell.

He could boast that he was an expert in this magic, with all the experience he had accumulated, but it was still difficult to use.

Memories that were tampered with could end up overwritten, so one false move could mean an irreversible error. It was like fiddling with a computer

system that had no backup. It was probably a great spell for manufacturing disabled people.

More than anything, the large amount of required mana made it hard to use.

Ainz could feel his MP draining away from simply going back a little through Zenbel's memories.

His plan was to find all the memories he wanted and then take his time sifting through them, but it seemed like he would run out of MP before he managed to do that. The other tricky thing about this spell was that even if he wanted to investigate again the next day after his MP recovered, he would have to start over again at the most recent memories.

Given all this, he was certain there had to be a more effective way to collect info than this spell.

As Ainz grumbled internally, the image of mountains suddenly appeared in his mind. Apparently, he had reached the memories he was searching for, but as expected, his mana was almost gone.

Peeking into old memories is the hardest. I can manage if they're more recent, but…

As expected, everything was indistinct, as if enshrouded in fog. Ainz could make out some dwarves, but perhaps because Zenbel didn't distinguish among them, all their faces looked the same. His only impression was that they all had beards and were all drinking and shouting in raucous voices.

This is no good. I was able to apply what I learned from the experiments I conducted on the priest when I tried this with Shizu, but I still don't feel like I'm very good at it… I can't afford to slip up when I'm handling something as delicate as memories; maybe I should mess with that priest a bit more? He's already pretty screwed up, though, so I shouldn't expect a decent answer out of him, but… Maybe I should have only poked around every few years so I could've tried to restore him to his original state. Wiping his memory completely to see what would happen was a mistake.

As he canceled the spell, Ainz thought that if a criminal was sentenced to death in E-Rantel, he would use them for experiments.

“How do you feel, Zenbel? Nothing out of the ordinary, right?”

“Eh? Well, it’s like nothing happened but also like something weird…”

Ainz chuckled. “All I did was look at your memories. I didn’t overwrite anything, so it’s weirder that you feel off. It must be something like the placebo effect. I’m sure it’ll wear off soon.”

Rather than pay attention to Zenbel shaking his head, Ainz examined the map.

Ainz had seen the memories, but sure enough, he didn’t understand them very well.

In the first place, the mountains lacked distinct landmarks, making it difficult to tell one place from another. On top of that, the most vivid memories were of hiding from monsters.

Honestly, even though he would regain his mana by tomorrow, Ainz didn’t think it was worth it to try again.

“Okay, tomorrow we’ll head north once more with Zenbel leading, as per our original plan. I might be able to help a little, since I checked over his memories.”

No one had any better ideas.

Even if they sent a scout ahead, the only point would be to preemptively deal with monsters that might attack the party.

“You’re dismissed. Everyone have a good… Well, I suppose Zenbel is the only one who needs to rest, but take your time getting ready for tomorrow.”

•

After seeing that their master was headed to his room, Aura turned to Shalltear and asked, “Do you want to be in the room on his left or right?”

Aura had a magic item, and Shalltear was undead, so neither of them required sleep, which meant they didn’t need rooms. But not using the spaces given to them by their master would be rude. And since they were protecting him, they wanted to avoid rooms that were too far away.

“Mm, either is fine. They’re both the same.”

“Well, that’s true… Hey, what are you doing?” When Aura wondered why

Shalltear's response was so absentminded, she looked over and saw the vampire was writing in a notepad.

"'…said Lord Ainz, period.' I'm taking notes so I don't forget anything Lord Ainz says."

"Wow, I'm impressed. Let me see!" Aura leaned over for a peek and then froze. The pages were bizarrely crammed full of writing, to the point that there wasn't any blank space left.

Wondering what she could possibly be writing, Aura skimmed the contents only to discover that it was word for word every single thing that Ainz had said, and it even described his actions.

Is this…okay? Of course, creating a record of the wise words of the Supreme Ones is a good thing to do, but that isn't what Shalltear's doing…

Shalltear should have been taking notes in order to grasp the main points of their master's wisdom as a path to making them her own. If this was what she was doing, Aura was a bit worried.

"Err, uh, so… Taking notes is great and all, but I'm not sure your objective is the right one…"

Shalltear stared at her in confusion.

"Listen, you might feel like you're doing a good job because you're taking notes. But really, you should be jotting down the important points so that when the situation calls for it, you can act on your own. Can you do that with the notes you're taking now?"

"I think so…"

"Well, that's fine, then. Just in case, when you get back to your room, it might be a good idea to read them over while considering what Lord Ainz was thinking when he said those things and what you would do if you were in his situation."

"You think?"

"I do," Aura declared. Then she wondered why she was saying all this. But for some reason, she felt like giving Shalltear advice was the natural thing to do.

I don't get why, but she feels like a helpless little sister sometimes… It's

irreverent to say so, but maybe this is how BubblingTeapot felt, too…

•

In the overly bright morning sun, Ainz made his preparations to leave. Not that he actually had anything in particular to do. He simply left the tower he created and had everyone form up. Compared to the journeys he had taken as Momon, this journey felt dull to him.

Then they resumed the search, but though they were on the march until evening, they didn't find anything.

Ainz squinted at the sun sinking behind the mountain slope.

The party was mounted on magical beasts, so they should have already covered the sixty or so miles he had estimated it would take to reach their destination. But they still hadn't found the dwarves. In other words, from here on out, they would have to leave no stone unturned. Which meant the next steps would be time-consuming.

That day, they used Ainz's magic to rest again and then came the third day since they had started on their journey.

Zenbel cried out. "This place! I know this place!"

There were no trees in the area, just the craggy mountain face. Zenbel's voice echoed. "Your Majesty, it should be near here!"

"Oh! In that case, keep an eye out, everyone."

Following his instructions, everyone formed neat ranks.

"All right, Zenbel. I'm counting on you."

"You can leave it to me, Your Majesty!"

The party followed his lead.

Eventually, they found an opening in the rock side that was less a cave and more a gaping tear in the mountain.

It did seem like something Ainz had seen in Zenbel's memories. He felt it had been bigger, but judging from how happy Zenbel seemed, this had to be the place.

Ainz had only a glimpse of the memories. They belonged to Zenbel, so surely he knew them best.

Smoothing out his robe, Ainz signaled Aura.

As they had decided ahead of time, Aura took off on her magical beast toward the crack.

“Kingdom of the Dwarves! Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness, sovereign of the newly established Nation of Darkness to the south, has arrived! Send someone out to greet him!” Aura’s loud voice seemed to fill the crevice.

But there was no reply.

She asked with her eyes what she should do next, and Ainz instructed her to shout one more time.

So she repeated herself.

But there was still no reply. They waited a little while, but there didn’t seem to be anyone coming out.

Zenbel said that in the past, there had been guards standing by to prevent trespassing. If they were truly there, they would have definitely heard Aura’s voice.

Were they avoiding the dark elf?

Ainz instructed Aura to come back and called Zenbel over. “Your turn. Go and call them out.” He cast several buffs on the lizardman. They wouldn’t keep him absolutely safe, but the difference between having them and not was huge.

Zenbel approached the cave and raised his voice. No reply.

“…Hanzos.”

“We have come, Supreme One.”

A shadow slipped out from behind Shalltear and a ninja appeared. The other four Hanzos stood behind their leader.

“Sneak inside and see what’s going on. Don’t attract attention.”

“Understood. How far should we explore? From what I’ve heard, dwarf cities are made up of numerous tunnels. It will take time to run through the entire

network.”

“Just the minimum is fine. All you need to find is the city center, where all the functional parts of the city are located. The tunnels can be investigated later.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

The Hanzo leader flew off like a shot, and the others swiftly followed. Running while seeming to leave their presence behind was something high-level ninja-type monsters could do.

Ainz called Zenbel back and had him stand by in the center of everyone else where it was safe. He would be very useful in the negotiation with the dwarves.

“Shalltear, keep your guard up!”

“Yes, my lord!”

Shalltear used a skill to instantly equip full gear and scanned the area.

With Nazarick’s strongest guardian at the ready, even the most powerful enemy wouldn’t be able to nail him with an instadeath combo. That said, in battles against players, experience was a critical element. Shalltear didn’t have much, so in that sense, it was dangerous to leave the watch entirely up to her.

All that meant that Ainz, the most experienced by far, had to set a good example.

That was why he also kept a vigilant watch until the Hanzos returned. It had taken longer than he expected, but he supposed that was simply how far away the city center was.

The Hanzos lined up before him and took a knee. Naturally, it was the leader who spoke. “Lord Ainz, we discovered what seemed to be a dwarven residential area and searched it, but we didn’t find anything that moved.”

“What happened?”

“We didn’t investigate closely enough to know that, but we found no corpses. There was no furniture in any of the houses or any evidence that they had been looted.”

“Did the dwarves voluntarily abandon this city for some reason?”

When he turned to Zenbel, the lizardman looked surprised. They had been traveling together for only a short time, but Ainz felt like he had a handle on Zenbel's personality. He wasn't acting.

"Very well. Lead us to the residential area."

"My lord!"

Ainz followed after the Hanzos. Of course, this was unknown territory. He didn't lower his guard. It went without saying that Shalltear, Aura, and Zenbel accompanied him, but he also had the high-level undead and their mounts come along as well.

The only ones they left outside were the low-level vampire brides and the mammoth-like magical beasts.

The main reason was because they made good bait. If an unknown hostile force was observing them and wanted to chip away at their fighting power, it would start by picking off the ones they were sure they could defeat. Plus, once they saw the monsters were carrying supplies, planning an attack to gain information was the most basic of basic strategies.

For that reason, in addition to the vampire brides and the beasts, he left one Hanzo behind.

Not to save the others.

It was to gain as much info as possible about the enemy by observing the attack. And if he could also find out where they withdrew to—where their base of operations was—that would be even better.

Another reason he hadn't returned to Nazarick at all during this trip was because he didn't want to let the enemy know he could refresh his party at any time using Gate; he wanted any observers to believe that they could chip away at his combat strength.

Of course, I hope they'll be all right even if an enemy shows up.

It wasn't as if he wanted them to all die. But they spawned automatically up to a certain number, so he didn't feel bad about losing some of them in order to gain intelligence.

Is that cruel? he wondered as he made his way into the cave.

No sunlight penetrated far into the cave, so it immediately became pitch-black. Ainz had Night Vision, so that was no problem. The same went for Aura, Shalltear, the other undead, and the magical beasts. No one's vision would be inhibited by mere darkness at their levels.

One of the undead carried Zenbel.

The fact that all the stalactites and stalagmites had been cleared away and the path was easy to traverse seemed to imply that this was definitely the location of a dwarf city.

Ainz followed the Hanzos. Along the way, the path branched a few times, but when he inquired, they told him the other tunnels were dead ends. The dwarves must have created them to confuse intruders so they could buy time and drive enemies out.

Ainz had a spell he could use in situations like that, but the Hanzos didn't, so it was no wonder their investigation had taken so long.

He was thinking about that when one of the Hanzos turned around. "Lord Ainz, we're almost to the residential district."

"Oh. I see a hazy light up ahead, but…you said there weren't any dwarves?"

"That's right. There were no dwarves. The light you see is emitted by a crystal-like ore."

At the end of the tunnel, a huge space opened up.

When Ainz searched for the light source with his eyes, he saw that crystalline things were protruding from the ceiling and natural rock pillars supported the growths. Like the Hanzo had said, they were the source of the light.

As far as Ainz could see, there was no other—artificial—light anywhere.

The Hanzo had called it a residential area, and yes, it was built like a city. The buildings all in a row were like little boxes, incredibly plain and probably two stories high.

Perhaps because the people who lived here were so short, the buildings were a fair bit smaller than those found in human cities. That said, the structures

were still taller than Ainz was, so he couldn't grasp how big the city was with them blocking his field of vision. Still, there seemed to be enough buildings that it didn't make sense to try and count.

"Hmm…"

As he gazed at that settlement, he felt the flame of desire inside him sputter out.

It was just so shabby-looking.

He couldn't find a scrap of the dignity and exquisite beauty he had imagined when he conjured up a dwarf city in his mind. And it didn't feel like *Yggdrasil*, either—there weren't any players around.

Ainz walked over to one of the buildings and pushed open the door.

Like the Hanzos had reported, it was completely empty.

As far as he could tell, there wasn't a stick of furniture. All that was left were things like built-in shelves that couldn't be transported. A layer of white dust carpeted the floor. It seemed like no one had been here in quite some time.

"Zenbel! Try calling out to see if anyone is here."

Zenbel obeyed and called the name of a dwarf he knew.

Though they were inside a cave, his voice seemed to go on forever and never echoed back. It must have been a massive space.

Zenbel called a few more times, but as expected, no one emerged.

"Hanzos, search the other tunnels to see if there is anything that could give us a clue. We need to find out why this city was abandoned. But there's no telling how far or deep these tunnels go. If it starts to go too deep, withdraw."

"Yes, my lord!"

The search would go faster if everyone helped, but Ainz wasn't reckless enough to do that under these strange circumstances. He told everyone to gather around so they could conduct some investigating. With them standing by behind him, he began to open all the doors.

Every building was identical to the first.

Occasionally, he found a house with furniture, but it was always a bookshelf at this place, a desk at another—never a fully furnished space.

This is going to take too long.

“Aura. You’re the one with the keenest senses. Are there any people around here?”

“No, I don’t sense anyone.”

“All right… Then, let’s split into two teams and have a look around. Shalltear, take command of your undead and guard me. Aura, after you go to the house of the dwarf Zenbel stayed with, take care not to stray too far, but go through the city and figure out why the dwarves left.”

The two guardians acknowledged their orders, and Ainz noticed Zenbel bowing his head in thanks.

He nodded benevolently and used Fly.

Slowly, he floated into the air.

It was an extremely dangerous thing to do if it was possible someone was lying in wait for them, but he somehow felt confident no one was here.

“Lord Ainz!”

Shalltear flew into a panic after him.

“This is too dangerous! Please come down!”

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe I was too lax.”

He had acted on a baseless feeling and flown into the air where it would have been easy to take a shot at him. It was only natural that Shalltear was upset.

“But since I didn’t get attacked, it seems more and more likely that there isn’t anyone here. Or it’s possible that if someone spotted me, they’ll move closer to gain more info. Keep an eye out.”

“…Please don’t use yourself as bait.”

Squishy Moe said that sometimes it was the right decision for the leader to act as bait… But I guess Shalltear can’t accept that, since she’s my escort, not my guildmate…

“Forgive me.” Ainz peered below.

It was indeed a city. It was laid out like a Go board with tons of nearly identical buildings.

“There’s a fancy building. And over there, too.”

Most of them seemed to have been pressed from the same cookie-cutter mold. But scattered among them were a few larger buildings.

“Should we check it out?”

“…Why don’t we call Aura back first? If someone is lurking over there, there could be trouble.”

Shalltear had been right on the money every time for a while now.

“Lord Ainz!” Aura’s voice called out from underneath with perfect timing. When he looked down, she was there with Zenbel. The way she was waving had to be meaningful.

“Seems like they found something.”

“It does indeed.”

Exchanging a glance, the pair landed next to Aura. The undead showed up a moment later.

“Look, Lord Ainz!”

Aura led them to a house and pointed through the open door.

He looked around, but it seemed no different from the buildings he had already investigated. He couldn’t find anything special about it.

“This is the house of the dwarf Zenbel knows?”

“No, this is a different one. While he was taking me to that house, we passed this one and noticed the door was slightly open. And when we looked inside, see? There are footprints. And they don’t seem like dwarf tracks. Zenbel, dwarves don’t go barefoot, right?”

“Nope—I mean, no, they don’t. They wear things on their feet. They almost never take them off, even indoors. I remember seeing lots of guys with sturdy-looking shoes reinforced with metal.”

“So these definitely aren’t dwarf footprints.”

“How much can you tell from those tracks?”

“Hmm.” Aura cocked her head slightly. “First, it’s a creature that walks on two legs. And between the left and right feet is a line—that’s a tail.”

“Perhaps it could be something like a lizardman?”

“Nope, it’s something else. Slender instead of thick like Zenbel. And there’s dust in the footprints, meaning it’s been some time since these prints were made. Whoever they are, they don’t come often…and it seems like they left right after coming in… Maybe it was someone who found the dwarf city and felt curious?” Aura checked around the house and then turned toward the street. “It wasn’t just one, either. There seem to have been…quite a few actually. Fourteen at least.”

“How far can you follow the trail? This is our only clue. I want to trace their route back as much as we can.”

“Understood. Then will you please come with me?”

He had no reason to refuse.

The party set off with Aura in the lead. Her attention was on the ground, so Ainz had Shalltear go right behind her for protection.

Most of the footprints went exactly where Aura guessed they would. In other words, like Ainz’s group before, there was no apparent destination to the movements—they simply seemed to be investigating the houses.

After tracking for a little while, Aura suddenly stopped and stared ahead at something down the path. When Ainz followed her gaze, he noticed one of the large buildings he had spotted from above.

“Here the prints meet up with another bunch—the same number actually. The other group seems to have come from that direction. What should we do? Do you want to follow the other group’s tracks?”

“…No, we should find out where the first group’s tracks went. We can check out the other group later.”

“Understood!”

Aura started walking again, and they crossed town before eventually reaching a building up against a wall.

It seemed to be only a single story but filled a considerable area.

"…I doubt anyone is here, but I'll use a spell just in case. There's a chance that enemy defensive magic could burst around me, so everyone please stand by at a bit of a distance."

Using intelligence-gathering magic sometimes resulted in getting countered. The only one in the party who could possibly die after only one hit was Zenbel, but Ainz saw no point in needlessly sapping his subordinates' strength.

"Lord Ainz, at the very least, please allow me to stay near you."

"Huh? Then I want to stay, too."

"No. You keep an eye on our surroundings from a location where you won't get caught up in any counter-spell."

When Shalltear argued her down, Aura looked to Ainz for support, but he agreed with Shalltear.

"She's right, Aura. You're the most perceptive member of our party. The chances of anything happening may be low, but if someone is lurking nearby, I'm counting on you to take care of them."

Since her master made a point of saying that much, Aura reluctantly nodded.

Ainz created a magic sensory organ and slipped it into the building.

It really didn't seem like anyone was in there. He sent the organ deeper inside.

What in the world is this building? There's a counter and…are these lockers? There's no sex separation that one might expect for a bathhouse… Is it some kind of facility unique to dwarves?

As Ainz watched, his magical eye passed through a number of rooms and reached an area that resembled the tunnel they had just passed through earlier.

Maybe it's a checkpoint or some sort of stronghold? Like a place to stop any enemies who enter this tunnel? Does that mean we'll find another entrance at

the back of this place?

After wrapping up a cursory search and finding no enemies, Ainz described the interior to the others and had Aura check inside to see if the footprints disappeared down the tunnel.

Ainz, Shalltear, and Zenbel followed. Since the Hanzos would eventually come back, they left the undead and magical beasts outside.

Ainz whispered a question to Zenbel as they followed Aura. “Are you familiar with this building?”

“Sorry, Your Majesty. I don’t know that much. All I remember is people saying that big building you were checking out earlier—the one down the road from that spot where we saw all those footprints bunched up together—was used by some kind of official or something. And I think the other big buildings you see sometimes used to be pubs, blacksmiths, shops, and whatnot. Not even the bosses—sorry, I meant to say not even influential dwarves lived in big houses often.” Zenbel also added that he didn’t know the reason behind that custom.

That was the moment Aura stopped in front of the tunnel.

“The footprints come and go through here. Should I go ahead?”

Ainz wasn’t sure how to answer. But that lasted only a moment. “No, don’t. There are still places in this city we should investigate. This will be the last place we cover. And we should make sure we have the Hanzos when we do.”

The fact that those ninjas weren’t back yet had to mean the tunnels were incredibly extensive.

When Ainz got back outside, he cast Message and contacted the Hanzo leader. “What’s going on, Hanzo? Still not done?”

“My apologies for taking so long! But rejoice. We have finally found something noteworthy.”

“What? Really? Did you find out why the dwarves left?”

“Nothing as concrete as that, but there seems to be a person deeper inside this tunnel—they’re making noise.”

“And it’s not a naturally occurring sound?”

“No, it appears to be digging! What would you like to do? Shall I collect as much information as I can?”

“No, don’t. First, lead us there. I’m currently by…” He tried to explain his location but didn’t really think he was getting through. “Oh right, I’ll use a torch as a marker.”

“Understood!”

Ainz ended the Message and took out a torch, which lit automatically. He handed it to a nearby undead.

The creature swung it back and forth as a signal for the Hanzos.

Of course, since Ainz was carrying it, this was no ordinary torch. It was an artifact he’d bought at a shop. When shoved into monsters such as slimes or whatnot, the attack dealt twice the usual amount of fire damage.

Using such a nice item for this was a waste, but Ainz didn’t have any regular ones.

By the time the sun was reduced to nothing but a strip of red afterglow in the sky, the Hanzos returned.

“Do excuse us.”

“No need for formalities. Time is money. Just take us there on the double.”

“Understood!”

Once the Hanzos took off running, Ainz and the others followed atop their mounts.

Eventually a building very similar to the one they had followed the footprints to before came into view, and the Hanzos stopped. This was definitely their destination.

Ainz dismounted his beast, and the Hanzo leader explained the situation. “There is a tunnel hidden in this building, and there is someone inside it.”

“Lord Ainz, there are new prints here. No sign of anyone coming out—only going in. This time there are shoe marks. Judging from the size of the feet, it’s someone about Shalltear’s height. Just one person,” Aura reported as she

examined the ground in front of the structure.

"…We're going to try to hold a friendly conversation. Even if they attack, I permit nothing beyond defense. Under no circumstances will we attack first. Get that through your heads. And in order to not intimidate the person, Aura will attempt a conversation first. And then…"

Ainz stroked his face.

Was it only human society that tried to avoid undead, or was that simply common sense?

Either way, since Ainz was accompanied by his army of undead underlings, perhaps it would make a better impression if he went in with his face uncovered, demonstrating that he had nothing to hide.

"Okay. Hanzos, take us to where you heard the noise."

With the Hanzos in the lead, they weaved through the building and into the tunnel.

The low ceiling was proof that the dwarves must have tunneled here. The dwarves in *Yggdrasil* were of similarly short stature.

If the dwarves from the game had dug a tunnel, it probably would have been right about this size.

Partway through, Aura's ears began to twitch, making it clear that the Hanzos' report was no mistake.

Ainz strained his ears, but he couldn't hear what Aura had picked up. "Oh… Is it close?"

"I'm not sure. It's hard to gauge the distance because of the echoes."

"Hmm. If it's a straight shot, I could send forth a magic eye to figure out what we're dealing with, but…"

For anyone without racial or class bonuses that granted sharpened senses like Aura's, the sound was still too far away to hear.

But if their group got any closer, the target was liable to detect them.

Anyone with common sense would prioritize their safety and flee if they

realized a bunch of who-knows-what was coming near. With Aura on the chase, they probably wouldn't get away. Then again, if their quarry could use Teleport or had a digging skill, escape was a distinct possibility.

Sending Aura and the Hanzos in alone was probably the smartest move. Maybe Ainz could include himself, if he was invisible.

"Only those who can operate in a clandestine manner will go forward. Aura and the Hanzos. Plus me. Shalltear, you'll stand by here."

"As you command."

"…Well, maybe having you stand by here is a bad idea."

Ainz looked up at the ceiling. He thought the rock seemed solid, but he couldn't be completely sure.

"Yeah, on second thought, go back to the building we were in before and wait for us to come back. But then the Hanzos… Aura, do you think the footprints are leading toward where the noise is coming from?"

"Yes, they are. I'm not sure, but it seems like the owner of the footprints is probably the source of the noise."

"I see. You can lead me there, right?"

Aura nodded.

"Then, just the two of us will go ahead. Everyone else, pull back to the building at the entrance of the tunnel. In the event something unexpected happens, especially if you encounter someone at your level, withdraw immediately. We'll do the same on our own, so don't worry about us. Set the exit of the Gate as the structure Aura erected in the forest."

"Yes, my lord! But will you really be all right with just the two of you?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to think so."

If he imagined all the things that could go wrong, there would be no end to it. At some point he had to just resign himself to whatever would happen and make his move. That was one of the things Ainz had learned recently.

Perhaps Shalltear couldn't think of anything that might change his mind.

Either that or she simply accepted his order. Whichever it was, she didn't raise any further objections.

Ainz proceeded with Aura. There still seemed to be a ways to go, so he didn't use magic.

After they walked in silence for a time, the sound began reaching Ainz's ears as well.

"…They're trying their best not to make too much noise." Ainz had no idea why Aura thought that, but if she said so, it must be true.

"Then we can probably assume our target is on guard, too."

"Should we catch them first?"

"If they try to run. If our first contact is violent, it will be extremely difficult to build friendly relations."

"Understood. Then, I'll start by talking to them like normal."

"Yes, do that. I'll go invisible—no, I'll go with Perfect Unknowable—and stand next to you. If they make a break for it, then we have no choice. We'll capture them."

2

The pair discussed a number of things, and once their preparations were complete, they advanced toward the source of the noise.

At the end of the tunnel was a small humanoid. In this world of total darkness, he was completely absorbed by his work of digging into the tunnel wall with his mattock.

Ainz couldn't be sure, since they weren't that close yet, but the digger appeared to be a little over four and a half feet tall with a body like a beer barrel and legs that weren't very long—it was probably safe to just call them stubby.

The digger was wearing a brown cloak, and on the ground nearby were what seemed to be a bunch of tools. There was also a lamp, which wasn't lit, and a canteen.

A single miner here in an abandoned city? This seems awfully strange, but I'm sure things will clear up after I ask a few questions.

Aura approached without making a sound.

On the other hand, Ainz walked without a single concern.

Perfect Unknowable erased all sounds along with any other trace of Ainz that could be detected. Only an awfully high-level thief would be able to sense his presence now. Even Aura had a hard time finding him—she had only the faintest feeling he was actually there.

Once she had gotten close enough to the miner, Aura spoke up. "Hello. What are you doing?"

"Eeheegh!" The shriek sounded like a soul leaving its body.

The miner had a long beard—there was no doubt this was a dwarf.

Wide-eyed with fear, the miner wrapped himself up in the brown cloak.

But that was all he accomplished. The dwarf was still there. But apparently the only one who thought that was Ainz.

"Hmph! Concealment, huh?"

When Aura said that, Ainz, who could see through invisibility, examined the dwarf more closely. Sure enough, Aura was right. The miner was a bit faded.

So the cloak is enchanted, and that's how he activates the Concealment? That's sort of like Shizu.

"Hey, hey, it's not like I want to hurt you, Mr. Dwarf. I know you're there, so let me see you."

It was obvious how Aura's cute, friendly demeanor made the dwarf waver.

He opened his cloak ever so slightly and peeked at her through the gap. "A-are you a dark elf? What are you doing here?"

"Hmm? I came to visit the dwarves, but all I found was an empty husk of a

city, so I've been looking for someone to find out what happened here. Then I ran into you."

"I—I see…"

"Until about five years ago, there were dwarves who lived here, right? So what's with all this? Did something happen? And come on, I think it's about time to show yourself already."

The dwarf inched away, but Aura's eyes followed his movements.

"Hmm. It seems like you can see me."

The dwarf returned his cloak to the way it was before. That must have canceled the effects of the magic. Ainz found it amusing because from his perspective, absolutely nothing had changed.

"Okay, so I'll start at the beginning. Nice to meet you. I'm Aura Bella Fiora from the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown."

"Nation of Darkness? Sorry. I'm afraid I haven't heard of it. Is that the dark elf country? Whereabouts is it? Oh, oops. I'm Gondo Firebeard of the Dwarf Kingdom. Pleased to meet you."

Aura held out a hand. Gondo recognized the gesture for what it was, so he wiped the dirt off his own, and they shook.

That seemed good. Ainz nodded emphatically as he watched, unknowable.

"Do you mind if I just speak casually instead of being all formal?"

"Sure! I was about to ask the same thing. I'm just an ordinary person, you know? If you were someone very important, I would only be able to hold my tongue."

Gondo smiled and Aura grinned in turn.

"Then, back to my questions. Where did all the dwarves who used to live here go?"

"Right. Three years ago, we moved to a new city. Was there something you needed?"

"Yeah—well, sort of. I have a lizardman with me who lived here for a short

time, so I want to tell him."

"A lizardman? From five years ago?" Gondo thought for a moment and then pounded his palm. "Oh yeah! I didn't meet him, but I heard about him. He was the first lizardman to ever visit us, so everyone talked about him. One of his arms was extra big or something."

"Yes! Him!"

Gondo kept saying, "I see, I see." It was clear that his guard was dropping.

"So it seems like the dwarves who knew the lizardman moved. Could you tell me where they went?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you, but… As far as I know, dark elves don't live beneath the surface. Are you sure you can get there on your own if I just tell you the underground route?"

"I think so, but if possible, I'd prefer a route on the surface."

Gondo's hairy face frowned. "Mmmph. Sorry, but I rarely go to the surface. I'm not sure I could tell you how to get to Fehu Jura—the new city—that way. It would be more of a vague explanation, like however many miles to the north."

"That would be fine, too. Really, I wish you could guide us there… Is that too much to ask? We can pay you."

"That's a tempting offer. But you said it's you and a lizardman—you came here on your own? You're not an adult yet, right? How many people are with you?"

"It's a fair number. We didn't want to bother you with so many, so they're waiting at the entrance to the tunnel."

"At the entrance…? Hmm?" Gondo sank into thought, as if something was bothering him. But it was only for a moment. Then he nodded and continued. "I see. That's a relief. But it wasn't a very smart idea to traverse this tunnel alone. You're not a race of the earth, so you might not know, but there are monsters who can swim through the dirt. This isn't the kind of place you can pass through safely on your own. Well, if you have certain items like I do, it's a different story, but…" He flicked his eyes over Aura, probably to check if she had a magic

item on her. “Now then, I need to tell your companions that they should be ashamed of sending a child into the tunnel alone.” Gondo turned his back to her and tossed his ore into a sack along with his tools.

The leather sack didn’t seem to fill up despite the new contents. It had to be a magic item. Then the dwarf picked up the lantern and raised its shutter.

A strange blue—and magic—light illuminated the tunnel. The two had been chatting right up until this very moment in pitch-black darkness.

“Okay, shall we? You seem to be able to see in the dark, but it’s probably better to have light, right? …Although this makes it easier for monsters to spot us, so I can’t really recommend it. Do you have a way to escape if a monster shows up? We don’t get them often in these parts, but that doesn’t mean it never happens.”

Ainz nodded in satisfaction. This dwarf didn’t know Aura’s strength and was acting with an attitude just right for someone a bit older than her. Personally, though, Ainz didn’t think he was worried enough. He should have been asking questions about a lot of other things, too.

“I’m okay. If I was alone, I could run away no problem. But I’m not actually alone.”

Aura glanced in Ainz’s direction but a little bit off to the side of where he actually stood.

“Hmm? Oh, I see. Well, I have my cloak, so you can run off without me, if need be. But some monsters who live inside the soil can track using vibrations. If we encounter one of them, I’ll tell you, so don’t move.” He hoisted his bag up onto his shoulder with a *heave-ho*. “Ready to go, then?”

Gondo took point, leading Aura and unknowable Ainz along.

“I heard you said this place isn’t safe, but didn’t it used to be a dwarf city? Did you run away because of something dangerous?”

“Not this city, but up in the northeast—that’s where capital Fehu Jura is—we’ve been seeing kuagoa around. It would have been horrible if all our cities got taken out one by one, so we abandoned this one, Fehu Raido, temporarily.”

“Kuagoa? Is that a race?”

“Yes, like us, they’re creatures of the earth, but…they’re a bother. We get along so poorly with them that whenever we meet, it turns into a fight to the death.”

As they walked through the tunnel, Gondo explained at length about what kind of race the kuagoa were—probably in part as a warning to Aura.

First, in terms of appearance, they were a subhuman race that resembled moles walking upright on two feet. Their average height was four and a half feet, and their average weight was a bit over a hundred and fifty pounds, giving them a short and stout physique.

Many of them had dark-brown fur, with the next most common being black and then plain brown. Any with blue or red, some special color, were apparently extra strong.

Though they dwelled underground and almost never ventured anywhere there was light, they had better vision than humans.

Their civilization was not particularly developed, either the same or lower than that of the lizardmen. They didn’t make weapons or armor. The reason for that was apparently that their natural bodies—equipped with claws and fur—were more effective than shabbily made gear.

For starters, their body hair boasted the toughness of metal armor, and it could withstand attacks from metal weapons. Apparently, the resistance was determined by the amount of precious metals eaten during their youth. It could also be ascertained from the color of the fur.

In *Yggdrasil* terms, these kuagoa probably had a racial skill that protected them from metal weapons. Perhaps it was called something like Metal Weapon Resistance. The question was *how* resistant. Ainz hardly guessed they could have balance-breaking levels of resistance, but it would be foolish not to confirm.

They had long claws like armadillos or anteaters, and it was said they could pierce steel.

“I think I might’ve found footprints earlier that they could’ve made.”

Gondo stopped in his tracks and turned around. “What?! Are they trying to make this place their lair, too? Like the other spot?”

“The other spot…? In any case, they don’t seem to be calling this place home yet. It was more like they were passing through or simply investigating. But if you were going to abandon this city, wouldn’t it have been better to demolish it?”

“That’s true, but we didn’t intend to leave forever. Once our military was a bit more established, the plan was to come back. I mean, there’s still ore left, like where I was digging earlier.”

“Hmm.”

The two walked on in silence. It was probably a natural lull in the conversation, but they had run out of things that needed to be discussed immediately. Since he had already heard what he wanted to know, Ainz decided to show himself. He felt it might be important to share some information about their party before they exited the tunnel and Gondo suddenly found himself surrounded by undead.

“Okay, I guess it’s about time to introduce myself,” Ainz said, but of course, he still had Perfect Unknowable activated. His voice didn’t reach the other two. He felt mildly embarrassed and then canceled the spell.

Perhaps sensing Ainz’s newly unveiled presence behind Aura, Gondo turned around and his eyes grew huge. His expression changed a surprising number of times in the span of a single moment: bewilderment, shock, fear, confusion, and then—

“Gehhhhhhhgh!”

Letting out such a wild scream that Ainz flinched, Gondo clamped onto Aura’s hand.

“A m-monster! R-run away! Go!”

But there was no way Aura would run. She knew who was there.

“Y-you’re not going to run?!”

Gondo’s feet couldn’t move. It was like he was chained to a boulder.

“Y-you’re so heavy! What’s wrong? Did it do something to you?”

“Don’t panic… Gondo.”

When Ainz spoke to him, Gondo stared at him in astonishment, trembling. “H-how do you know my name?! Did you read my mind?! Or is it magic?!”

Maybe I should have worn the mask, thought Ainz. He spoke quietly so as not to agitate the dwarf any further. “Calm down. I was listening to your conversation. My name is Ainz Ooal Gown, and I am the King of Darkness—sovereign of the Nation of Darkness.”

Gondo’s expression changed several times again, and he looked back and forth between Aura and Ainz. “The NNation of Darkness? I thought that was the country of the dark elves.”

“No. It’s a country I rule that’s home to a variety of different races.”

“…Eh? That can’t be true.” Gondo braced himself as he said it, but his eyes were guarded and doubtful. “You’re an undead, right…? And that’s not a mask, yeah? That makes you an undead…the ones who hate the living and hunt them down, no?”

“Ummm, actually it’s just as Lord Ainz said. We haven’t lied at all. I’m a dark elf, and it’s true that the lizardman we talked about is with us. And Lord Ainz has been with me ever since you and I met. I even told you I wasn’t alone.”

“What? So I didn’t mishear you? But…” Gondo gulped and took a few deep breaths before continuing with a determined look on his face. “Could it be, Your Majesty—it’s ‘Your Majesty,’ right? Uh, were you once a dark elf, King of Darkness?”

It was a question Ainz had never considered. Was he an undead human? Ainz thought for a moment and then explained his best guess. “No, I was born… although I’m not sure this is the right way to put it…as an undead. Well, don’t be frightened. There are good and bad humans, dwarves, and elves, right? In the same way, some undead hate the living and some are friendly with them. It goes without saying that I’m the latter type.”

“B-but a friendly undead makes about as much sense as a good-natured demon.”

Hey, this guy is pretty sharp, thought Ainz as he shrugged. “Hmm. I know both an angel who fell into darkness and a demon who yearns for the light.”

The demon who yearned for the light was an NPC in *Yggdrasil*. His name was Mephistopheles. He was famous for his constantly self-contradictory comments about good-natured beings and for being friendly and intelligent despite his horrifying appearance. Offering every sort of quest, from the low-hanging to the high-level, Mephistopheles was a game fixture who was second in popularity only to the dark young.

“Demons like that exist?”

Gondo was shocked, but Ainz merely shrugged. “I understand why you’re wary. But I hope you’ll understand this if nothing else: I mean you no harm. All right, Aura, let him go.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz.”

At some point it wasn’t Gondo holding Aura’s hand but Aura holding his—of course, their purposes for doing so were different.

When she released him, he backed up only a little; he no longer seemed liable to bolt at full speed.

How reasonable of him, Ainz marveled. He had figured there was a chance the dwarf would allow his instincts to get the better of him and run away. If that came to pass, the outcome wouldn’t have been very good for Gondo, but given how things were at the moment, it was possible to negotiate.

“Now then, I’m going to say it again. I understand why you’re wary, but I—we have no intention of doing you any harm. On the contrary, we’d like to get along.”

Gondo didn’t reply. He was still peering at them with suspicion.

“What I mean is, I’d like my country and the dwarf country to sign a treaty of friendship. That’s another reason I don’t want to harm anyone who lives in the dwarf country.”

“What’s a treaty of friendship?”

“…Sorry, but I probably shouldn’t have a national politics discussion with

someone who doesn't represent the government… What do you think?"

"Hrmm. That makes— Err, it's as Your Majesty—"

"Don't worry. I don't mind how you talk. Just don't clam up," said Ainz gently, and Gondo smiled for the first time since the king had revealed himself.

"Thank you—Your Majesty. Then, if what this gi—young lady…says is true, then is the reason you want to go to the city the same as hers?"

"That's right. But, Gondo, why don't we leave this tunnel first? You should probably hear from the lizardman we have with us. The one you heard rumors of. And we also have the kuagoa to worry about."

"Hrm…" Gondo glanced at Aura.

Aura smiled at him as if to say, *What's up?*

"All right. The young lady seems to trust you. I know for sure now that you're different from normal undead."

Gondo led the way, and Ainz and Aura followed.

"Oh. There's something I wanted to ask, if you don't mind?"

"What's that?" Gondo peered over his shoulder as Ainz asked his question.

"I'd like to learn about runes."

Gondo's forehead crinkled, and his eyebrows slanted abruptly. "What do you want to know about them?"

He was clearly upset.

Earlier Ainz had detected confusion and fear while they were talking, but not anger. That had completely changed with this one question. Did he have some bad memories tied to runes? Or was it because Ainz brought up dwarven technology?

Can I ask him about this or not? Ainz wasn't sure.

This was the first dwarf he had ever met. He didn't want to be offensive right off the bat. And if he could figure out why Gondo was angry, it could work to his advantage in later negotiations with the country—as long as this wasn't merely an expression of one dwarf's personal feelings on the subject.

Calmly considering that he could dispose of Gondo, Ainz spoke of all the runes he knew. Most of it he had learned from Tabula Smaragdina.

That said, he didn't know much. His knowledge consisted mostly of how many there were, what kinds existed, and other very general concepts.

Since he hadn't memorized the meaning of each character, he could describe them only in vague terms.

But the reaction was dramatic.

Gondo stopped in his tracks and turned around.

His face was crinkled in a different way from before. Perhaps it was excitement?

"Who…are you…? I mean…the King of Darkness… A long-lived undead… Our lost knowledge…"

Ainz could hear him muttering to himself. It didn't seem to be on purpose but something the dwarf did unconsciously.

Aura was impatient and wanted to keep moving, but Ainz stopped her. He figured it would be worth letting Gondo think.

Eventually he seemed to have arrived at some sort of answer and fixed his eyes on Ainz. He was still on guard, but some other emotion had apparently taken over.

"I know more than a few runes: fifty from the lower tier, twenty-five from the middle tier, ten from the upper tier, and five from the high tier—ninety in all. But some were lost, so it's not that many. There's also rumors about hidden letters and god-tier letters, but those are the stuff of legends."

"I see… Maybe we're not talking about the same thing? I thought runes were like this. Does that look right to you?" Ainz drew one from memory on the ground.

"Ooh! Yes, that's the middle-tier letter laguz."

Ainz wasn't sure why they had so many, but at least he found out that some of them overlapped.

“I see. Then, allow me to ask you some more about this technology.”

What Ainz really wanted to know was how dwarves learned about runes—stuff related to players—but he figured it would be better to talk to a historian about that, so he decided to confirm some peripheral matters first. “Up until a hundred years ago, magic weapons inscribed with runes flowed into a human country to the east of the mountains, the empire. Since then, however, that flow has stopped. Why?”

Ainz’s true intention was to figure out whether a player died a hundred years ago or not, but if he asked about it too directly, he would be giving away information. At the same time, this was a question he had been thinking about for a while, and it didn’t reveal anything about him.

Gondo’s expression darkened. Then he started to lead the way again.

“That’s a long story. I’ll tell you while we walk.”

“Mm-hmm…”

For a time, three pairs of footsteps were the only sounds in the tunnel.

Gondo was likely resolving some inner conflict in the silence.

“First, I know someone who calls themselves a rune tech developer.”

That must have simply meant that it was their claim.

Gondo didn’t wait for Ainz to reply before continuing. “At one time, dwarven magic items were made with runes. But two hundred years ago, an evil spirit attacked the royal capital. And when the royal family left the country to fight back, a ton of outside technology flooded in and we learned that runes were old-fashioned.”

Gondo took a sword out of his bag and handed it to Ainz. There was a rune inscribed on its blade.

“This is kun, the lower-tier rune that means ‘sharp.’ With this carved in properly, the sword becomes enchanted. It makes the blade sharper, so it’s easier to cut deeper into your opponents.”

“Yes, that’s a basic weapon enchantment. I heard that it takes longer to craft depending on how much of a damage bonus will be provided, but also that it

can be done fairly quickly if only the minimum is needed.”

“That right there is exactly why everyone thought runes were behind the times. To make the same item with runes takes double or triple the time. In terms of productivity, our technology is inferior to human methods of enchantment.” Gondo sighed abruptly. “Since better technology was being imported, the number of rune crafters kept falling. Instead, these days people think it’s better to become a magic caster who can enchant things.”

Ainz now understood the reason rune weapons had stopped appearing in the empire. It was a traditional art that was dying out.

Then Gondo frowned. “But abandoning our technology is the most foolish thing we could do! For instance, one good thing about runes is that they don’t cost money!”

Gondo’s wails echoed off the tunnel walls. Realizing that perhaps he shouldn’t get so agitated in such a dangerous place, he let out a long sigh. When he continued, he was calmer.

“Do you know how much it costs to enchant things? The material cost is quite expensive.”

That was true. Ainz had heard that half the market price was usually the enchantment’s material cost.

The percentage was unusually high, but apparently, prices were set on the assumption that wholesalers or retailers didn’t exist. This meant the Wizards Guild wasn’t taking a cut—although the annual membership fees could be thought of as a tax. The market was unregulated, leaving customers and casters to deal with each other directly.

If there was a retailer involved, the price went up a bit.

“But dwarven runes cost almost nothing!”

“That’s fantastic!” Ainz leaned in.

As the adventurer Momon and as the ruler of Nazarick, Ainz often fretted about expenditures. The appeal of not needing to spend any money was something he could feel in his bones.

That's why he was confused. Runes didn't seem like the sort of technology that would be abandoned.

"…There must be other downsides to runes, right?"

"Well, there are, but the productivity issue was the main one. Not only do runes take a long time to craft, but there aren't enough people with the aptitude for it. I heard from someone in the empire that they're even rarer than people who can become casters."

"Hmm, that makes me curious. If people started to think of runes as outdated two hundred years ago, then why would someone call themselves a rune tech developer? Isn't it a bit late for that? Or do dwarves simply live that long?"

Gondo didn't answer. Ainz pressed him.

"What kind of rune technology are they developing?"

Ainz came up beside Gondo.

There was none of the passion in Gondo's face as he looked intently forward. But then he shot back a question.

"What made you want to learn about runes?"

Ainz didn't feel like quibbling about how Gondo had replied to a question with a question. If he could deliver the right answer here, he stood a good chance of learning some of what Gondo was hiding. Considering the dwarf had dropped "Your Majesty," this must have been an important question.

But they didn't yet have the sort of relationship where he could speak frankly. Besides, to begin with—

Why does he seem so willing to leak info? Is this a trap? Or could it be that he doesn't understand its value…? There must be jealously guarded techniques, so surely he understands the importance. Right?

Despite his confusion, Ainz decided to say the lines he had prepared as his official motive. "They seem a bit different from the runes I know. Isn't it only natural that I would be curious about the history and derivations? Will you answer my question?"

Gondo averted his gaze again and was mulling things over. For a little while,

everyone was silent as they walked.

An irritating amount of time passed before he finally spoke again. “Currently, I’m experimenting with ways to shorten the rune-crafting enchantment time. Moreover, I’m looking into mass-production techniques. But that’s a means, not the goal. My aim is to develop technology that can only be achieved with runes. I want to make rune technology unique enough that it won’t be left behind.”

In other words, a value-added process. Company execs liked that phrase. They’re especially naggy about it during product development.

“Oh-ho. That’s some great research you’re doing. And how is it going?” he asked without expecting a response because there was something he didn’t understand. If this dwarf was developing revolutionary new technology, then he should have been a VIP in the dwarf world.

I don’t get why he’s digging alone in this dangerous area. You’d think someone this important would have guards with him.

But Ainz’s question was resolved in the next moment.

“It’s not. Not at all. I haven’t gotten anywhere with my work,” Gondo murmured gloomily. “We call someone who creates magic items with rune technology a rune crafter, but I’m not one of them. I’m not even worthy of being an apprentice.”

Huh? Ainz quipped mentally. That meant someone who couldn’t properly use rune tech was trying to develop it—which made no sense.

Was it even possible to develop new technology like that? Or was this how research always worked?

No, this can’t be normal. Gondo wouldn’t look so down otherwise. He must know he’s attempting the impossible.

Ainz wasn’t sure what to do. He had no idea if this Gondo guy would be of any use or not.

“I just don’t have the aptitude. I can manage carving a rune. But it takes so long… They say that all rune crafters go through that stage. But everyone else kept improving while I got stuck.” Gondo shook his head sadly. “I’m an

incompetent rune crafter. I only got the dregs of my amazing father's ability."

I see, thought Ainz. *His issues stem from lack of skill.*

Combining his knowledge from this world with what he remembered from *Yggdrasil*, Ainz figured the situation went something like this: Most likely, a person needed ten levels or so in another class to become a rune crafter. Gondo had managed to clear that hurdle and was now a level-1 rune crafter.

But the limit of his total levels was eleven, meaning he probably couldn't progress any further as a rune crafter. At the same time, he wouldn't be able to acquire any of the truly useful skills as a humble level-1 rune crafter.

There was nothing Ainz could do for Gondo. Consequently, he didn't say anything.

Sometimes consolation could save people, but other times it was simply offensive.

If Ainz were in Gondo's position, he wouldn't want to be comforted by someone he had only just met.

"…I see. Are all dwarves working toward the advancement of rune technology?"

"No, just me." Gondo cracked a sad smile. "All the rune crafters have given up. No one tries to pull away from existing techniques to develop something new. They seem to think it's fine if rune tech eventually fades away."

"I see… I have one question. What do you want to do once you develop new techniques?"

"What? I'll enchant things with runes, obviously. I want there to be more rune crafters. Runes are a wonderful technology. It would be a waste for them to disappear."

"Do you have any supporters?"

"No. As I said before, most rune crafters have given up—they're a bunch of drunks. They think the art will vanish within their generation. In the past, I tried to win them over, but they all refused."

"…Hmm. The weak shall perish. It's natural that a technology that can't be

used will fade away.”

Gondo shot Ainz a stern look but immediately wilted.

Watching Gondo hang his head, Ainz mused about value.

Honestly, he didn’t have any interest in runes aside from whether players were involved in their history or not.

But abandoned technology was probably cheap, meaning it could make for a good investment. The fact that it didn’t cost money or require expensive materials to use was fantastic. And the fact that it was a rare technology made him want to collect it.

The other bonus was that if other players were around and they had a similar interest in runes, then Ainz could use that to attract them.

“…There’s one other thing I’m wondering about. What basis do you have for thinking such development is even possible? From your comments before, it seems to me that you’re just saying what you want out of ignorance.”

“No! It’s true that I have no aptitude and couldn’t become a rune crafter even if my life depended on it. But my father and his father were the leading rune crafters in the country. My family has worked alongside the last of the royal family, the Rune Crafter King. I watched them do it. And I read their books, so I know it’s not impossible! My father even affirmed my ideas from his sickbed! He said it would be extremely difficult but that it wasn’t impossible!” Tears had formed in the corners of Gondo’s eyes as he laid bare his pain.

These must have all been emotions he had been bottling up finally bursting out.

Though Ainz was being hit with raw emotion, he wasn’t terribly moved. He did want Gondo’s research to succeed but only because he wanted to acquire a rare technology before it was lost. If that couldn’t be done, he could simply accept the fact and give up.

“It’s true that I, his son, have no skill! But I don’t want the art of my ancestors to disappear! I can’t allow the glorious name of my father to fade from history!”

Those were the words that moved Ainz.

He himself wanted to keep alive everything the guild Ainz Ooal Gown had created.

At that moment, he understood Gondo's feelings so much it hurt.

Suddenly, he felt a much greater affinity for the dwarf.

And at the same time, he realized why he was talking so much.

To Gondo, runes were already dead or dying. There was no reason to hide anything. He probably felt that on the contrary, spreading information about them far and wide would result in a greater chance of continued existence. Although Ainz wasn't sure if Gondo had consciously thought that far or not.

"…You'll have to excuse me. This might anger you, but let me say it anyway: You're you—not your father or your grandfather. Wouldn't you agree?"

Gondo's expression had shifted to what couldn't quite be described as furious, disconsolate, or sentimental. In the end, he seemed forlorn. "Your Majesty, King of Darkness, I thank you. But I have decided my path in life."

"Then I—or rather, my country—will support you financially. I'll be your patron and assist your research."

Gondo's eyes gaped and he flailed about. "D-do you really mean that? It's too good to be true… I can't believe it."

There was always a catch. Ainz was excruciatingly familiar with the way Gondo felt.

"All I can say is I want you to believe. But with you alone, someone unable to do any rune crafting, won't it be impossible to develop the techniques you were talking about?"

Gondo zipped his lips and said nothing.

"With that in mind, I'd like to move all the rune crafters of the dwarf country to my nation and have them aid you in your research."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I want to mobilize all the rune crafters, allow them to compare notes and develop new technology. To that end, I need your help

poaching them. Or is it impossible?”

Gondo thought on it before answering. “No, I don’t think it’s impossible. The rune crafters are at their wits’ end, but I think most would be open to a chance, if there is one.”

“We need to appeal to their emotions… So, Gondo. Will you join me? How much of your soul will you sell?”

“What?”

“If we don’t focus all the rune crafters on a single goal, it’d be hard to rehabilitate a disappearing technology, right? We can’t do this half-heartedly. We need to poach every last rune crafter. That means there’s a good chance we’ll have to resort to some underhanded methods. And someone cooperating with me may be forced to betray their country.”

“Oh, that’s what you’re talking about? Then the answer is simple. If it’s just my soul, that’s a small price to pay to make rune technology immortal.” Gondo held out a hand.

Ainz took it. “I’m an undead. That’s all right with you?”

Gondo smiled at Ainz’s question. “If you’ll give me the chance to make my dream come true, I don’t care if you’re undead or the terrible frost dragonlord.”

“Then first, will you lead me to the dwarf country? I want to meet with the king and sign a friendship treaty so we can invite the rune crafters to my country. It would be problematic to extend an invite to the artisans if our countries didn’t have any diplomatic relations, right? They aren’t trying to guard the technology at all?”

“We shouldn’t have any problems with that. I don’t think they even want runes these days. Oh, and we don’t have a king anymore. Now the country is run by multiple leaders in a regency council.”

“Hmm. I’d like to hear more about that. I’m fine with hearing it while we walk, so will you teach me?”

Gondo agreed, and by the time they reached the entrance of the tunnel, Ainz had learned all sorts of things.

When the three of them exited the tunnel, Shalltear and the others were waiting. Naturally, Zenbel was there, too.

Gondo may have been expecting undead, but seeing the magical beasts put him on guard. Or rather, Ainz heard him murmur, “There aren’t any dark elves.”

Shalltear came forward and bowed. “Lord Ainz, I’m sorry to trouble you immediately upon your return, but a slight problem has arisen.”

“…There are some Hanzos missing. What happened?”

“My lord! It appears some sort of creatures have invaded this cave. They came from the tunnel in the building Aura led us to earlier. My apologies for telling you after the fact, but I took the liberty of sending some Hanzos out to scout.”

“No need to apologize. You did everything right, Shalltear. We’ll wait for the Hanzos to return and analyze the information they bring back before deciding what to do next. And then…” He glanced over at the former resident of the city, but he was busy talking to Zenbel and not paying attention to the others. From what he could hear, it seemed like they were talking about the dwarf Zenbel was indebted to. “Gondo, sorry to interrupt, but it seems this city has been invaded. I may have to use my powers within your city, so if that happens, I want you to testify that I had no choice, even though I was in your country.”

“Of course. You can leave that to me. But please don’t cause too much damage.”

Ainz nodded. Of course he wanted to avoid doing anything that might hamper his future negotiations.

“Shalltear, what’s our security like?”

“I sent out Aura’s magical beasts, but… Aura, what do you think?”

“I’m pretty sure it’ll be fine. Even if the enemy is invisible, my beasts can sniff them out.”

“Got it. Then we just wait for the Hanzos.”

After a little while, the Hanzos returned.

According to their report, the intruders seemed to be kuagoa; a lot of them—

at least a hundred. When Gondo overheard that, he was shocked. A hundred was quite a large number, far more than necessary for scouting. Perhaps it made sense to consider them a combat unit. Or was this a tribe that was moving in?

There was only one thing Ainz could do in this case.

“…Shalltear, capture them all. Can you do it?”

“If that is your order, I shall carry it out without fail.”

“Consider it an order. Do you understand why I’m having you catch them?”

“To extract information from them and to avoid letting any leave with information about us.”

Ainz nodded firmly. “That’s right. If we only take one alive, then we can only get information from that one, increasing the chances of leaks or misinformation. We can also kill prisoners to make a point.”

And though he didn’t want to say it in front of Gondo, listening to only one side of the story could be a bad decision. It was possible that dealing with the kuagoa would be more beneficial.

“Get going, Shalltear. And bring back some good news.”

3

Shalltear, accompanied by her aides, hurried toward the location where the kuagoa had appeared. She leaped from rooftop to rooftop, running so fast, she was practically flying. She was already wearing her armor, so she didn’t have to worry about her extensive padding.

She looked over her shoulder to confirm that Aura was keeping up.

Normally, a guardian would have stayed behind to protect their master. Since Aura was with her, it probably meant Shalltear wasn’t trusted.

Well, why would she be?

She didn’t have any memories of the offense she had committed, but she had heard about it from the others.

Their kind master had said it wasn’t her mistake, but she couldn’t imagine that was true. That’s why she had been waiting for a chance to clear her name, but unfortunately, she hadn’t been blessed with one—until now.

Aura had consoled her, but that wasn’t what she wanted.

Shalltear stared straight ahead, her gaze determined. *I won’t fail even once on this journey.*

Before long, they arrived at a building not far from their destination, and Shalltear peered down at the kuagoa.

A few members of the race the Hanzos had described milled outside the building.

“Now then, what to do.” Shalltear considered her options.

Her voice was probably audible, but Aura simply stood behind her with arms crossed, saying nothing. That was as it should be. The orders their master had given Aura before coming were, *Watch over Shalltear, and if she tries to massacre them, stop her even if you have to hit her. Other than that, you’re not permitted to influence Shalltear’s operation at all.*

Shalltear had been told that Aura would only follow her and that she wasn’t to make use of the other guardian. In other words, this operation had to be planned and carried out by Shalltear on her own.

She had to follow her orders perfectly and achieve a brilliant success.

She loosened up her balled fists.

“Hanzo.”

“Yes, ma’am!” The minion dressed like a ninja came into view.

“I want to make sure none of them gets away. Can you check the tunnels to make sure there aren’t any inside?”

“Not a problem. Just say the word.”

She expected nothing less from a minion summoned by her master. With this,

she could cut off the enemy's escape. The next thing she had to prevent was her targets scattering and hiding all over the city. Of course, if she spent time hunting them down, she would be able to find them all eventually, but she wanted to avoid something that would take so long. Her master hadn't specified a time limit, but letting things drag on would be proof she couldn't manage her time well.

"Well then, let's begin."

Shalltear issued orders for the plan she had thought up on her way over.

Her forces would encircle the kuagoa and then close in to neutralize them.

In other words, it would be a brute-force maneuver that used the Hanzos as a wall to prevent any retreat and then overwhelm their opponents by completely surrounding them.

Considering she didn't know her opponents' powers, there was some slight danger involved, but if the kuagoa were strong enough to kill Shalltear and the Hanzos, there was no way the dwarf state would still exist—unless that dwarf Gondo was particularly weak.

After dispatching the Hanzos, Shalltear counted out three minutes. She had no way to contact the Hanzos, so they had to sync up action based on time.

Luckily, the kuagoa apparently decided to make their camp in the vicinity of the building and showed no signs of splitting up.

"Go. Move according to your orders. First priority is preventing runaways around the perimeter."

After giving orders to the undead she'd brought with her, she ran along the roof and launched into a flying leap at the edge that brought her right in front of the kuagoa. At the same time, the undead jumped down to complete the encirclement.

With the main points on the roads around the building occupied, the kuagoa had virtually nowhere to run. The chaos among their ranks was tangible, and before they could regain their composure, Shalltear cast a spell.

"Mass Hold Species."

As she had anticipated, her opponents weren't very high level. Multiple kuagoa were frozen stiff.

The kuagoa who weren't in range of the spell had recovered from their confusion, but none of them moved to attack Shalltear. She had appeared out of nowhere and frozen their friends with magic. It must have been difficult to even decide whether to fight or flee.

Shalltear grinned faintly.

Observing from above and aiming for what looked like the most important kuagoa had paid off. She tentatively identified her victim as the commander.

"Mass Hold Species."

She cast again. Now all the kuagoa outside the building were incapacitated.

"Tighten the circle!"

On Shalltear's shouted order, the undead encirclement contracted.

Hearing Shalltear's raised voice and noticing how strangely their friends outside were acting, the kuagoa inside began to panic, but they were already in check.

When Shalltear felt a sadistic smile was ready to creep onto her face, she gave her cheeks a good slap. She couldn't let her guard down now. That was probably what had caused her to fail in the past.

After mustering a new expression appropriate for the reborn Shalltear, she dove into the building. Coming in through a window would've made for a better surprise attack, but considering the time it would take to break the glass, she decided charging in through the entrance made more sense—plus, she figured she could draw more attention this way.

The kuagoa waiting inside brandished their claws and attacked.

Three right here, four in the back. No commander present as far as I can tell. With an eye on the future, I should probably let them attack me and learn what they're capable of.

Shalltear accepted their attacks without dodging at all.

As she expected, she sustained no damage.

Only enchanted weapons with a silver attribute could hurt Shalltear. High-level monsters sometimes had unarmed attacks imbued with magic and a silver attribute, but it was rare among lower-level creatures.

For Shalltear, this was quite reasonable, but for the kuagoa, it was world shattering. The kuagoa surrounding her apparently couldn't believe what they were seeing and swung their arms over and over. But nothing changed.

"All right, all right, this experiment's over. Would you kindly leave it at that? Mass Hold Species."

The spell stopped all the kuagoa in the area.

"Now then, what else?"

She turned her head around and, through the wreckage of the door, her eyes met those of the kuagoa in the next room. Dwelling inside those gazes was Shalltear's favorite food: fear.

The moment Shalltear started to move toward them, the kuagoa turned tail and ran off as if competing to see who could escape first.

But they were too slow. To Shalltear, they moved about as fast as slugs. Repressing a sneer, Shalltear shot off a spell at their backs.

I'm not letting a single one get away.

Shalltear couldn't afford any mistakes.

After restraining all the kuagoa in the building, she entered the tunnel and found six more on the ground at the Hanzos' feet. Noticing from the way they were moving slightly that they were still alive, she queried the Hanzos. "Are these all the kuagoa that ran this way?"

"Yes. No others came over here."

Shalltear hadn't let any escape, either, so she was confident she could call this a perfect performance.

"Just in case, please check if there are any hiding in the building. Then call the undead holding the kuagoa outside and have them restrain and carry out the

ones in the building, too, will you? I'll stand by here while you search the interior, just to make sure none escape this way."

The Hanzos acknowledged Shalltear's orders, lifted up the fallen kuagoa, and went back to the building. They reappeared before her two minutes later.

Having completed her job without a hitch, Shalltear ventured back into the building and then outside once more. Tons of kuagoa were tied up. Ainz was there, too. Aura, the Hanzos, the dwarf, and the lizardman were also present.

"Well done, Shalltear. It seems you completed your mission without letting a single one escape."

"Thank you, Lord Ainz!"

"And now, Shalltear, I have your next orders. Obtain information from these creatures, preferably without injuring them."

"Understood."

To start, she had an undead drag over one of the first kuagoa, whose spell had worn off.

"Eek! Save me!"

"Hee-hee. If you answer honestly, I won't kill you. You *have* to be honest, though. First, who is the most important one here?"

"That one. The one with some blue fur."

"You wretched blabbermouth!"

When she looked to see who had screamed, it was indeed a kuagoa with some blue fur.

"Now, now, don't fight. In that case, can you bring that one over? You can put this one back." She had the undead drag over the most important kuagoa.

"Hmph! You seem to be from a race similar to dwarves. Don't think I'll be talking! I'm staking my pride and my tribe's pride on that!"

"Hmm, then how about we do this? Charm Species. Now will you talk to me?"

"Yes, of course. What would you like to know?"

The other kuagoa gasped in astonishment at the docile reply.

The charm spell made the target feel like the caster was their trusted friend and equal. For that reason, the target couldn't be made to kill or severely injure themselves, since that wasn't something a friend would order them to do. And just as sometimes people kept secrets they wouldn't tell even their best friend, the charm spell didn't always allow the caster to draw out the information they wanted. In those cases, the only solution was to use even stronger mind-control magic, but that didn't seem necessary this time. Shalltear was grateful for her luck.

"First, are you really the most important of everyone here?"

"Yeah, I'm the commander of this unit. Hey, you guys are being obnoxious. What's so bad about me talking to my friend here? Oh, you can keep a secret, right?"

"Of course. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah, that's right. I trust you. But those guys… And wait—that's an undead, isn't it?"

The kuagoa eyed Shalltear's great master. His attitude offended her, but she had to control herself until she acquired the necessary intelligence.

"It's all right. I am, too, but I'm your friend, so you can trust us."

"Could it be that you're controlling that thing?"

I'm going to kill you. The words nearly got out, but she swallowed them—because her master spoke first.

"That's right. She's my master."

"Ohhh. That's my pal for you. Amazing!"

"Th-thanks."

Assailed by a complex, burning emotion, Shalltear wanted to roll around on the floor, but she couldn't waste her master's precious support.

The commander kuagoa was giving her comments serious thought. The ones behind him all called out, "What's wrong? What happened? Have you really

been best friends with her all along and we just never knew?" but the commander completely ignored them. Eventually, his face twisted up. It was a smile. Probably.

"All right. If you say so, I'll trust them. Our friendship runs deep, after all."

Shalltear snorted. "Then, can you make sure to speak loud enough so the people behind me can hear? Who are you and why have you come to this city?"

We're friends and you don't even know that much? is what one might expect the reply to be, but magic is amazing. The commander kuagoa answered obediently without suspecting anything. "We're a detachment from the attacking army. We're here to kill any dwarves who try to flee to this city."

"What?" the dwarf yelped in surprise. "Wh-what does that mean?"

"Shaddup, dwarf. You're too loud. Your dirty race can go extinct already."

"Now, now. That's enough of that. So what is this attacking army?"

"Oh, sorry. I got a little worked up. There's a dwarf city north of here, and the attacking army is planning to destroy it. Up until now, the fort guarding the bridge over the Great Chasm would repel us every time we launched an assault, but we discovered a way around the crack that exits to the side of the fort. Our plan is to use that and charge in all at once."

Shalltear looked at the dwarf, and he was awfully pale. It seemed like very bad news.

"And when are you planning to attack?"

"Our group split off from the main group and came here, so I don't know for sure, but probably today or tomorrow."

Shalltear could hear her master and the dwarf talking.

"That's what he claims, but is it true that the city will fall if that bridge is taken?"

"I can't say. But I've heard that since the bridge is the only way to attack, the fort repels all intruders with magic items. If that fort falls, it's a straight shot to the city, and it would be difficult to stop the advance of a huge army. In that kind of situation, it's possible everyone might abandon that city and come back

here. If they were then ambushed by these guys, that would be the end of the dwarves."

The commander kuagoa could probably hear their conversation, too. He laughed with a sinister "heh-heh-heh."

"Is your group the only detachment?"

"We're the only ones that came here. We don't know how strong the dwarf city is or how many soldiers they have, so most of our forces stuck with the main group."

"Lord A— Err, uh, is there anything else you want to know?" Shalltear asked, struggling not to say *Ainz*.

"Not really. If anything, maybe see whether they have a way to contact the main forces or not."

When she repeated her master's question, the commander answered right away. "No. Our mission isn't very high priority. We're only here to hunt down the runaways."

When she looked to her master, he nodded.

"How shall I dispose of this thing?"

"…Gondo. Sorry, but do you think you could start prepping for our departure?"

Realizing what that meant, the dwarf and the lizardman left.

After watching them go, Ainz gave Shalltear her orders. "…Okay, they're gone. Shalltear, send them all to Nazarick. Have the kuagoa imprisoned. Whether we kill them or not will depend on what sort of relationship we build with the other kuagoa. We won't kill our prisoners until we're total enemies. But we will have them undergo some experiments—test their physical abilities, like the strength of their claws, as well as their physical and magic resistances. Some may die from that, but…tell them to keep casualties to a minimum."

"Understood."

Shalltear immediately cast Gate and connected it to the surface level of Nazarick before addressing the group of kuagoa.

“All right, you lot, in you go.”

When their commander took the lead and went through, the others followed. Several of them were too scared to stand, so Shalltear picked them up and threw them into the portal.

After getting them all across, Shalltear herself returned to Nazarick temporarily. She repeated the orders she had received to the Old Guarders there and then came back through the still-open Gate.

Her master stood there with his arms crossed as if he had been waiting for her.

“Your interrogation was perfect, Shalltear.”

Something warm welled up in Shalltear’s flat chest when the first thing she heard coming out of his mouth was a compliment.

“Thank you, my lord!” Before she knew it, she had thrown herself at his feet. She couldn’t think of any other acceptable response.

“Uh, right. Continue to serve me faithfully.”

“Understood, Lord Ainz!”

“Well, don’t stay down there—stand up. We need to hurry and meet with Gondo… This is a great chance to earn some favors.”

“We were quite fortunate. It’s almost as if fortune has blessed all you do.”

They looked at each other and smiled.

Not that her master’s face moved, but she was absolutely sure he was smiling.

“Shall we?”

“Yes, my lord!”

Ooh! Incredible! I can’t believe we get to walk side by side like this… Ahhh, such happiness.

Shalltear reveled in her joy as they exited the building.

“Gondo, sorry we kept you waiting. What are your plans?”

“What *can* I do…? It would take six days to reach the city underground. That’s far too long a trip to deliver the news we just heard in time.”

Shalltear’s often relaxed face was tense, and even as she returned Aura’s suspicious look, Ainz and the dwarf started talking. She tried frantically to memorize everything so she could put it in her notebook later.

This was none other than their great master, so she was sure he would either completely break the dwarf’s heart or put a huge chain around his neck so he would never be able to betray them.

“I see. That’s definitely not enough time. How about this? Do you want to come to my country straight from here? You wouldn’t be able to do anything on your own right now even if you could get back, right?”

“N-no, I wouldn’t.”

“I wish we could at least evacuate the rune crafters… Assuming we raced over there offering to save the day, do you think talks would proceed smoothly? Are dwarves a race that feels properly indebted to people who help them?”

“Yes. I hope you’ll believe that. If you protect us from the threat of the kuagoa, I’m quite certain negotiations will go in your favor.”

“Then we’ll need to figure out the proper timing,” said their great master, as if testing the dwarf, but Gondo just shrugged.

“I’ll go along with what you—whatever Your Majesty decides.”

Shalltear wasn’t sure what it meant, but she could gather that this dwarf had chosen her master over his own race.

He had only just met the dwarf a short time ago in the tunnel, yet he already ruled his heart. Shalltear was awestruck.

It made sense that Lord Ainz was the leader of the Supreme Beings when he was this charming.

“…Well, I guess we’d better hurry. I want to avoid losing rune crafters. There’s no telling what will happen if we travel underground, so let’s go outside. You can lead us, right?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Then, everyone, get ready to go!”

Intermission

Taking a glass filled with a liquid that sparkled amber, he left the room for the terrace.

It was the terrace of the city's tallest building. From here, he could see the whole capital he ruled.

Within each of the innumerable pinpoints of light resided the life of one of his subjects.

Sneering at the scene, he brought the glass to his lips.

The heat of his drink burned as it traveled down his throat and spread from the pit of his stomach to the rest of his body. The breeze on the terrace was enjoyable. Feeling a bit better, he asked the kneeling weakling in the room, "So what is it?"

The weakling seemed to gasp in response, but he wasn't interested in that. All he felt was displeasure at not receiving an answer immediately. Still, he wasn't angry enough to kill, so he didn't resort to force.

Besides, the pungent odor of blood tended to linger. Even if he ordered someone to clean it up, he would be uncomfortable for some time. Rather than deal with that, shoving the nuisance off the terrace would be the cleanest method of disposal. And it was possible that the extreme situation would cause some power to awaken within it.

That wouldn't be a bad turn of events, but unfortunately, before he could act, the weakling spoke.

"The Theocracy is building a position on the outskirts of the royal capital. At

this rate, within a few years, they'll mount a major attack."

"What about it?"

"…We'll be wiped out. I beg you, use your power as king to—"

"Nonsense." He—the king—laughed. "Why should I have to lend my strength to you weaklings?"

He looked over his shoulder at the elf woman prostrating herself there, one of his subjects.

How foolish she looked.

Incredibly frail and in possession of no special powers. Worthless.

That was exactly why she failed to comprehend how wonderful it was that the Theocracy was attacking.

"…I'm astounded. You lot aren't even ready to protect your own country yourselves? Or do you believe that I'll solve all your problems for you?"

"B-but the Theocracy is powerful. With us alone, it's…"

There was a clear power gap between his country and the Theocracy.

The staggering difference encompassed everything from the magic items each side possessed to the training of their soldiers, sheer numbers, and even the strategy and tactics they used.

The only reasons the elves had managed to hold the line this long was by relying on the one thing they were better at than the Theocracy—guerrilla warfare—and the fact that the enemy had slowed their advance due to fear of suffering attrition from encountering the monsters in the Eivasha Woodlands.

But recently, the Theocracy had been sending in the Firestorm Scripture, a special-ops group that excelled in assassination, guerrilla warfare, and counterinsurgency that was previously assigned to guarding the Theocracy's home front. That meant their advance was speeding up again.

"I'm really quite stunned. It's too much for you to handle because you're weak? My country is full of nothing but fools. That's why no matter how many children get made, all you produce are idiots."

It wasn't living in peace but surviving war that would make them stronger. War was his people's chance to unleash their true potential. And yet, he hadn't heard of a single one awakening.

But he couldn't lay blame squarely on his subjects. His own children were the same. The number meant nothing, so he didn't remember how many—who counts their trash, after all?—but perhaps they had inherited more from their mother? None of them commanded even half the power he did.

"Out of my sight! You disgust me. More importantly, make sure the child of mine you bore grows up to be strong."

The woman bowed low and withdrew.

He sipped his drink.

Children sired by weaklings would only produce more weaklings. What was really needed was strong mothers.

That was why he prioritized sending women to the front in response to the recent Theocracy aggression. He wanted to give the weaklings a chance to get stronger.

"My expectations were completely wrong."

None of them had anything even approaching the power he wielded. Perhaps one who did would be born in the future.

"…Maybe I should start considering all the humanoid races for mating?"

Humanoids and subhumans couldn't reproduce, but different races that were both humanoids could.

Suddenly, he stared into the distance. He recalled a memory.

"She even got pregnant, but then…"

Once, he had tricked and captured a woman who was the Theocracy's trump card. He'd chained her up and raped her, and he managed to impregnate her, but before the child was born, the Black Scripture stole the woman away.

He clicked his tongue.

That child belonged to him as well, so if it had been born, he wanted it

returned to him.

"…If this country falls, maybe I'll personally travel to the Theocracy and take that child back."

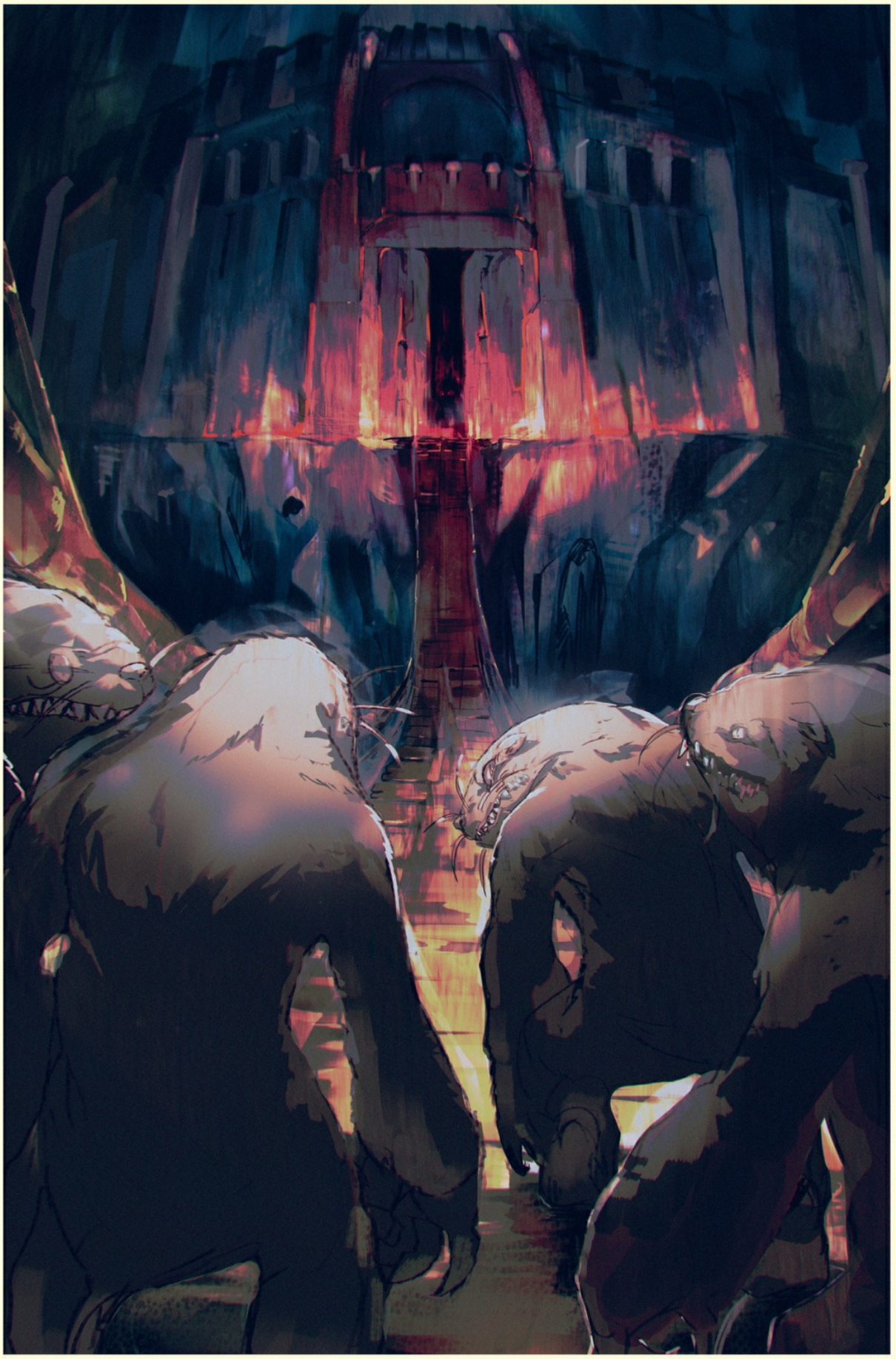
Not out of compassion.

If it was a girl, and if she was strong, there was a chance that if he got her pregnant, the resulting child would be even stronger.

"That's something to look forward to."

Someday a powerful army of my children will conquer the world.

Thinking of the shining future that would surely come, he returned to his room. His figure was reflected in the full-length mirror on the other side—the figure of an elf whose eyes were each a different color.



Chapter 3 The Impending Crisis

Chapter 3 | The Impending Crisis

1

The Great Chasm…

That was the name of an enormous rift that ran along the western side of the dwarf city Fehu Jura. This underground ravine stretched nearly forty miles and, even at its narrowest, was over 130 yards across. No one had managed to measure its full depth. It was unclear what was waiting at the bottom, but not a single member of the two exploratory expeditions sent to investigate had returned.

This natural fortification had long protected Fehu Jura from any monster attacks. As long as the dwarves held the bridge they had taken great pains to build, there was no danger of monster invasion from the west.

But on this day, inside the Fehu Jura garrison—a base situated between the Great Chasm and Fehu Jura—was a storm of shouts and confusion.

“What happened?! Can anyone give a precise explanation?” the supreme commander who had been leading the dwarf army for over ten years yelled.

The information that came in was disorganized, so it was impossible to tell what was true. The only thing the commander had confirmed was that the fort at the Great Chasm was having some sort of emergency.

“The last word we received said that the kuagoa were attacking!” One of the platoon leaders raised his voice to repeat the report from the fort.

That in itself wasn’t rare. The kuagoa were the dwarves’ loathsome rivals and they sometimes attacked in units of a hundred. He couldn’t even remember how many times it had happened since he became supreme commander of their military forces.

But the attacks had always been repelled by the fort, so the enemy had never even approached the garrison, much less Fehu Jura proper.

The kuagoa were fairly sturdy against blows from physical weapons, but they had a racial weakness to electric attacks. Since the dwarves knew that, they kept at the fort a magic item that could unleash a power similar to Lightning.

Lightning was an attack spell that could pierce through enemies in a straight line, making it ideal for dealing with anyone crossing the bridge. With this, the dwarves could nail all the kuagoa at once. Moreover, the guards at the fort were equipped with crossbows that dealt additional electric damage as well.

Compared to how well prepared they were equipment-wise, it was true that they didn't have much manpower stationed at the fort. At the same time, it wasn't as if they were deliberately leaving the fort undermanned despite its strategic value. The dwarf army simply wasn't that big to begin with. They stationed enough of their limited forces there that it couldn't be called negligent.

The fort was specially designed to combat the kuagoa, but the situation was apparently so bad that they couldn't even spare a moment to call for reinforcements.

What did that mean?

"Are there so many attackers that the fort troops can't fight them all off? There's no update from the guards?"

"Not yet!"

Cold sweat dripped down the supreme commander's back.

The words *great invasion* flickered before his eyes. There had been whispers about it for years, but he had frantically convinced himself that such a thing wasn't possible. Yet, he had the feeling that was exactly what was happening now.

The supreme commander pulled himself together. This wasn't the time to let his fears hold him frozen in place.

What was the correct thing to do right now?

A gently spiraling tunnel ran from the fort to the garrison under his command. Beyond the garrison lay Fehu Jura, making it essentially the city's last line of

defense. At the boundary between the cave where the garrison base was located and the tunnel, there were doors of mythril and orichalcum. If these doors were closed, they could stop an attack.

Should the doors be locked up?

Closing them would also mean not being able to send reinforcements. That would be the same as abandoning their fellow countrymen who were fiercely struggling to defend the fort at that very moment.

But he wavered for only an instant.

Only twenty soldiers manned the fort.

But in Fehu Jura, there were some hundred thousand dwarves. When deciding which to prioritize, there was only one answer.

“Shut the doors!”

“Passing it on! Shut the doors!”

Before the shouts even finished echoing off the cave walls, a groaning noise traveled through the ground as vibrations. The giant doors slowly began sliding into place to shut off the entrance. The doors had only ever moved during training exercises; today was the first time they were used for real.

“Commander! It’s the kuagoa!”

“What?!”

At the shout from the guards at the gate leading to the tunnel, the supreme commander shifted his gaze beyond them. What he saw were horrifying subhumans with bloodshot eyes, foaming at their mouths.

Without electric weapons, even one kuagoa was a tough opponent. But more than he could count on two hands were hurtling toward them now.

Did the fort really fall? How strong are the kuagoa forces? Are their numbers so great that even closing the doors won’t stop them?

With a great many questions on his mind, the supreme commander shook his head to clear it. “Don’t let them in! Pikemen, to the front!”

With a war cry, the soldiers formed a thicket of pikes.

But even seeing that, the kuagoa's charge didn't slow. They were confident in their fur's resistance to steel.

The supreme commander clicked his tongue. The enemy was making a smart choice. A crossbow volley might have repelled them, but a thicket of pikes could only keep them in check. But he had anticipated the kuagoa reacting like that, so they were ready.

"Wizards! Use lightning!"

From a watchtower situated near the gate, the tier-three area-of-effect spell Lightning Ball was launched at an angle that wouldn't hit the pikemen from behind, and two casts of Thunderbolt Lance flew to pick off individual targets.

These attacks were conducted by the dwarf military's three most powerful wizards.

Due to their weakness to electricity, the kuagoa leading the charge were easily felled by the Lightning Ball. The ones behind them were forced to stop as well.

That short time made all the difference.

With a loud bang, the doors slammed shut. Immediately after, the sound of pounding on the other side carried all the way through the thick metal.

The tense atmosphere relaxed slightly. But the supreme commander and all the soldiers around knew nothing was over yet.

The doors were durable, so a normal kuagoa's fangs wouldn't be able to chomp through them, but some had fangs reported to be as tough as mythril. Those were in the ruling class, but it wouldn't have been strange to find them participating in this attack. There was no guarantee that the dwarves were safe.

"Tch! If only the doors delivered a shock at fixed intervals, then…!!"

The commander had proposed the idea when he had assumed his current position. He said that for a final line of defense, these doors weren't enough. But due to their nation's dwindling strength, they didn't have resources to spare for the doors. And the fact that the fort by the bridge had repelled all previous attacks was also a major influence on the decision. There was a sense that the

other defenses made improvements to the doors unnecessary.

When he looked around, everyone's expressions were dark.

This is bad. If we lose hope, we'll be defeated when a melee breaks out.

The supreme commander raised his voice to change the mood. "Okay! Now the city will be safe! But it's not a sure thing just yet. Let's erect a barrier in front of the doors in case they break through! Hurry!"

Some life returned to a few dwarf faces. Having been reminded that there was still something they could do, the soldiers responded to his call with renewed vigor. A flimsy hope was better than none.

The supreme commander's chief adviser sidled up to him and leaned toward his ear. "Commander, shall we bury the doors?"

He considered the proposal.

It seemed likely they would receive objections from some dwarves complaining that they shouldn't shut down the entrance so completely.

"These people have no idea the situation we're in."

Noticing his adviser's surprise, the commander realized his comment to himself had been overheard and taken as a reply.

"Sorry, I don't mean you. I was thinking of the regency council's reaction."

"But you're one of them, aren't you? Is that why you know how they would respond if we completely sealed off the tunnel? Personally, I think we should not only seal the tunnel but consider abandoning Fehu Jura as well."

The supreme commander squinted and grabbed his adviser's arm to pull him somewhere their conversation wouldn't reach the soldiers' ears. He didn't want anyone to hear the rest.

"So you think so, too?"

It was unclear how many kuagoa were on the other side of the doors.

Because they were forced to quickly go on the defensive against the enemy's rapid advance, the garrison had lost the opportunity to collect all sorts of information. It was like being locked up with a blindfold on.

The only thing they could base decisions on was that the enemy force seemed to have been large enough to take down their hitherto impregnable fort.

If that was the case, it would be practically impossible for the dwarf forces to open the gate, fight off the kuagoa, and take back the fort. Perhaps abandoning the city was the best course of action.

“How much time can we buy if the tunnel is totally sealed off?”

“If we collapse this cave, quite a bit. Unfortunately, simply piling up dirt would only earn us a few days.”

“What are the risks of collapsing the cave?”

“As you know, Commander, this place isn’t very far from Fehu Jura. We’d have to call the tunnel doctors to investigate to know for sure, but it’s possible that the city would be affected. In the worst case, a pathway could open up behind the gate, allowing the kuagoa to surge into Fehu Jura.”

“In other words, we need to get the area checked out in a hurry. Then, I have a different question. Do you think the fort fell to a kuagoa wave attack? Why couldn’t the soldiers stationed at the fort contact us sooner?”

“I can think of several scenarios. The one I personally find most likely is that the kuagoa got assistance from another race.”

“Like the frost dragons?”

The kuagoa had occupied the onetime dwarf capital, Fehu Berkana, and were living there. The royal palace towering in its center was ruled by frost dragons.

The two races didn’t seem to be fully cooperating, but if they were coexisting, it was certainly possible they would help each other out.

The supreme commander made a grim face. An elder frost dragon was a living catastrophe.

Once there were four dwarf cities.

The royal capital that had been abandoned two hundred years ago during the evil spirit attack, Fehu Berkana.

The eastern city and current capital, Fehu Jura.

The southern city, which was recently abandoned, Fehu Raido.

And finally there was the western city, Fehu Teiwaz.

The western city had gotten caught up in a fight between two frost dragons, Olasird'arc Haylilyal and Munwinia Ilisusulim, and was left in ruins.

"It could be, although I don't know what kind of contract would get those proud creatures to make a move. Another possibility is that the kuagoa came up with their own way to cross the Great Chasm…like magic or something. Or they could have taken a long detour."

"Not even we dwarves could find a route around!"

"But that was years ago, Commander. It's possible that during that time, monsters moved, the kuagoa built tunnels, or the earth's crust itself changed, revealing a new path. They could have even gone aboveground."

"Kuagoa on the surface?"

"Maybe some of them gained that ability."

The kuagoa race went totally blind in the sun. For that reason, the commander had been confident the kuagoa would never attack via the surface, but was that simply his personal assumption?

Well, it was too late for regrets. All he could do now was keep that assortment of things in mind as he formulated a plan.

"I see. Then, we need to strengthen our defenses against potential attacks from the surface, too. Choose some personnel without leaving us too undermanned here and send them out. Then report to the regency council and propose that we evacuate south."

Besides the garrison base, the fort by the Great Chasm, and the regency council hall, there was one other military site in Fehu Jura.

At the entrance that connected to the surface, there was a fort large enough for the taller races—it was built with humans in mind—to be accommodated. The commander's orders were to strengthen that fort and keep watch for a potential attack from the surface.

"Yes, sir!"

“And tell them to get ready to bury the doors. We have to wait for the regency council’s approval, but we’ll convince them somehow.”

“What if it takes longer than expected?”

“Do your best. I’ll do mine, too.”

That was all he could say. Of course, as one of the association’s eight members, he intended to do everything in his power, but if the other members vetoed the plan, then he would simply have to do as much as he was allowed under his position’s jurisdiction.

As he was resigning himself to the duties of the supreme commander—*depending on what happens, I might even have to…*—a panicky voice rang out.

“I—I have a message! A message! Where is the supreme commander?!”

When he looked toward the voice, he saw a dwarf soldier on a riding lizard.

Riding lizards were a type of giant lizard. They could measure ten feet or longer from head to tail end. There weren’t many, but the dwarves kept them as mounts, and in times of peace, they were handy as pack animals.

They weren’t used for any old message. Riding lizards were broken out only in emergencies, much like the one the garrison was currently dealing with.

Anxiety gripped the supreme commander’s heart.

“Where was that messenger stationed?”

“This week he was supposed to be guarding the fort at the entrance to the surface.”

The supreme commander was now sure his fears had come to pass. No, it had been obvious from the tension in the messenger’s face and the wild tone of his voice. The reason the commander had asked anyway was because he didn’t want to accept the truth.

“I’m here! What’s the matter?” he shouted and ran toward the messenger. He couldn’t just stand there waiting. He needed to hear the message and take action.

The messenger practically tumbled off his riding lizard and shouted as he

desperately tried to catch his breath. “Commander! It’s an emergency! M-monsters! There are monsters!”

Kuagoa? he thought but immediately realized it wasn’t them. If the kuagoa had shown up there, the messenger would have said so. “Calm down! I don’t understand if that’s all you tell me! What happened? Are the others safe?”

“S-sir! A terrifying monster appeared at the entrance! He said he has business with the kuagoa attacking us!”

“Whaaat?!”

The timing was too perfect. It had to be someone connected to this series of events. Was it the kuagoa leader? Or perhaps this was the one who had helped them cross the Great Chasm?

“Who in the world is it? Explain what it looked like! You, round up as many soldiers as you can!”

“Yes, sir!”

He didn’t have time to watch his adviser rush off in a panic.

“How many are there?! Give me a damage report!”

“There are about thirty. But they don’t seem to want to fight! On the contrary, they said they want to negotiate, but they seem so sinister, I doubt we can trust them. It’s clear they have an ulterior motive!”

What made the messenger think the newcomers were sinister? And he still hadn’t heard what they looked like. When he repeated his question, the messenger gulped and began to explain.

“They’re horrifying undead wreathed in an ominous aura!”

“What?! Undead?!”

They hate life, spread death, and are the enemy of all living beings.

The moment he heard the word *undead*, numerous images came to the supreme commander’s mind—like frozen zombies and frost bones. But those weren’t terribly powerful. And the messenger should have known that as well. The natural question was: Who had terrified the messenger this much?

And why had the undead come? Did it please them to see dwarves and kuagoa—living beings both—fighting to the death?

"…Hey, are the preparations complete yet? As soon as they're wrapped up, we're moving out! I don't know exactly how many undead there are, but don't let your guard down! Show no weakness! We don't need to provoke them, but we shouldn't take them lightly, either!"

2

The party pressed onward with Gondo as their guide.

Most of his travels had been done underground, so he wasn't very familiar with the surface. For that reason, their navigation depended more on pure direction than the lay of the land. Ainz was nervous at first, but after seeing Gondo instruct everyone without hesitation, his trust gradually solidified until he eventually left their route entirely to the dwarf.

Moreover, since the dwarf capital was under attack, it didn't benefit Gondo to get the party lost. Following him was probably fine.

Obeying his instructions, Aura's magical beast traversed the snow-covered mountains as if they were trotting across a grassy plain.

The mounts truly were high-level monsters. Their agility and stamina were outstanding. They carried Ainz and the others on their backs over snowy mountainous terrain where the air was thin for a journey north that covered over sixty miles, but they didn't seem to slow their pace at all.

A few times, flying monsters appeared overhead, but one growl from the magical beasts was enough to send them scattering, wasting almost no time at all.

Ainz expected them to arrive at the dwarves' only remaining city, Fehu Jura, in less than a day.

He asked Gondo, who was riding the beast running parallel to his, "…So, Gondo, is Fehu Jura inside a fissure cave like Fehu Raido?"

If it was, they wouldn’t find it unless they searched very deliberately.

At first, Gondo had clung fearfully to his beast, but now he seemed to have gotten used to riding. He answered. “It’s true that the part of the city where the dwarves live is like that, but Fehu Jura is a bit different from Fehu Raido in that it was built for facilitating trade with human countries. There’s a large fort outside so people can find it easily and have a place to stay when they visit. If we look for that landmark, we should be able to find it.”

Ainz acknowledged what he was saying and made a cursory search around them, but he didn’t see anything like a big building.

“We need to go a little farther north before we’ll spot it.”

Gondo sounded fairly confident and seemed to have an idea of their current position. In any case, the dwarf was their only guide, so even if he was wrong, there was nothing Ainz could do. He had no choice but to follow.

“I see,” replied Ainz and then cast Message.

The captured kuagoa that had been taken back to Nazarick were being pressed for information. He figured whatever they knew could complement Gondo’s knowledge.

Kuagoa typically lived in clans ruled by a strong boss, and the eight clans of the Azerlisia Mountains were apparently united by a clan king. The total population was around eighty thousand.

Ainz inspected the data and gave the race his stamp of disinterest.

If he could lend his strength only to either the dwarves or the kuagoa, he would definitely favor the former.

At the same time, he was interested in the fact that the type of metal kuagoa ate during their youth affected their strength as adults. He felt like if he fed them some of the metals he had back in Nazarick, he might be able to create some superpowerful ones.

He recalled the prismatic ore he had been thinking about on the initial leg of the journey here.

Even if the kuagoa clan king hadn’t eaten that, could it be that he was the

result of eating some rare metal from *Yggdrasil*?

If this clan king held a power that Ainz could acquire, it was worth looking into.

If he's willing to swear allegiance to the Nation of Darkness, I'm not sure I can support eighty thousand subjects, but I should consider it. That's the sort of country I'm aiming to create, after all.

Ainz thought about the shape he wanted his nation to take.

He wanted all different races to coexist. He wanted his country to be like the guild Ainz Ooal Gown once was in the Great Tomb of Nazarick—the kind of country where his old guildmates could enjoy themselves.

That was why he felt he should show compassion to the kuagoa.

But even if they swear loyalty, where can I have them live? These mountains are a tricky proposition… Maybe the mountains south of E-Rantel? But there are probably already other people living there… Hrm. This is a pain. Maybe Cocytus can make use of his experience ruling the lizardmen, since the civilization level is about the same. It wouldn't be a bad idea to call him.

The yell that disrupted Ainz's train of thought came from Gondo.

"There it is!"

In the direction he pointed, sure enough, there was a fort-like structure right up against the surface of the rock.

Everyone moved toward it. If they wanted to hide themselves, there were plenty of ways to do so, but that would only defeat the purpose of their visit, so they openly headed for the front door.

As they got closer, there were signs they had been noticed as the soldiers guarding the fort began to move.

Like a businessman checking his appearance on his way to a meeting, Ainz made sure his robe didn't have any wrinkles. Of course, it was a magic robe, so it couldn't get wrinkled, but Satoru Suzuki's memories whispered that he should smooth it all the same.

As they continued their approach, the dwarves in the windows took aim with

their crossbows.

The only people in the party who would take serious damage from a crossbow bolt were Gondo and Zenbel. If Ainz had those two walk out front to show the party had no hostile intentions, they could be mistakenly shot, so he discarded that plan. Ainz would go first to negotiate. Zenbel and Gondo could come later.

He had the magical beasts stop just outside the effective range of the crossbows and got down off his mount. They were still within maximum range, though, so he ordered Aura and Shalltear to stand by and protect Zenbel and Gondo just in case.

All that's left is counter-player measures.

He directed everyone to prioritize withdrawal and defense in case a player appeared. On their way here, Gondo couldn't confirm the existence of anyone that strong, so it was more likely that there weren't any other players present, but Ainz definitely didn't want to let his guard down and lose one of the guild's NPC children again.

All the dwarves observing them had the same expression frozen on their faces. They were so beardy, it was hard to tell them apart, so the way they were standing with only their faces and their identical expressions showing was somewhat…comical?

Suppressing his laughter, Ainz feigned composure and walked forward alone.

Partway there, he held up his hands to show he meant no harm.

When he had nearly reached the fort—

"Stop right there!"

—a tense voice issued an order. Ainz internally lamented how cruelly they were treating him—he may have been an undead, but he wasn't exhibiting any hostility at all.

"What are you here for, undead?"

Ainz stroked his smooth skull face. "I am the ruler of the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. I, the King of Darkness, have come to build friendly relations with you, the dwarves. We will not be hostile unless you attack us. Lower your

weapons.”

The dwarves peering out the windows looked confused. Ainz decided to say what he came to say and continued.

“When I captured the kuagoa invading Fehu Raido, I learned they were targeting this city. If you’re lacking confidence in your military might, I—my country, rather—could support you. Yes, as a sign of friendship.”

Then he smiled. But perhaps because he had no skin, his benevolent expression didn’t get through to them.

“Who’s that dwarf behind you? A hostage?” The dwarves were still wary of him.

“How rude. I said I was a king, didn’t I? Is that how you talk to a king?”

The dwarves exchanged glances. Then one of them replied. “B-but wait. You need to prove to us you’re a king.”

“I see. That’s reasonable.” Ainz agreed emphatically. “Then, allow me to introduce him. This is Gondo, one of your own and an engineer I met in Fehu Raido.” Ainz indicated the dwarf with a kingly gesture he had practiced a million times.

It was the motion a ruler might use to summon their subordinate.

When he heard the faint sound of the dwarves gasping, he was deeply satisfied and knew the time he had spent practicing hadn’t been wasted.

Gondo had arrived, so Ainz cheerfully struck another royal pose and said, “Sorry, can you go into the fort and explain the details?”

“Sure, leave it to me.”

Gondo went to the gate. Then he introduced himself and asked to be let in, but the gate didn’t open.

“…What is it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe something weird is going on.”

“H-how do we know you’re really that oddball Gondo who never goes out with us? You might have used magic to change appearances!”

Ainz frowned when he heard the dwarves talking. Being on guard was extremely important. Ainz agreed wholeheartedly. But to have this little trust was next level.

He had heard on the way, though, that there might be someone on duty there who knew Gondo; fortunately, there was.

“Very well, Gondo. Can you tell them something—say, your address or whatnot—that only someone living in this city would know? That would prove it’s really you.”

“O-okay. Hmm… I’m going to spill his secret to his wife later. Uhhh…so there’s a joint in my ’hood called the Black Gold Beard! The old lady who runs it has a face like an anvil and serves food that tastes like shit. The simmered dishes are the only edible things there!”

The dwarves were silent. Ainz looked at Gondo, wondering what the hell he was doing, but the response a moment later was remarkable.

“You idiot! Nobody eats there! That place is for drinking! Their dark beer is the best!”

“That’s a lie! The best is the red shroom wine!”

“What are you guys talking about? The best is the unrefined stuff, with that full flavor.”

“Seems like you guys don’t know what real alcohol tastes like. The best spot is the Bearded Maiden!”

Ainz made a mental note that dwarves were extremely into drinking and asked them, “So? Do you believe he’s really Gondo now? And about the earlier topic I raised, all I really wanted to say was that the kuagoa are on their way to circumvent the Great Chasm to attack you. If you could just tell your higher-ups that I warned you, that would be great. Now, no matter what horrible things happen to your city, I know my country did the right thing, so no one can complain to me later.”

A few of the dwarves pulled their heads inside.

Some more time went by. They seemed to be consulting one another in a

group.

“Wait there for a little while! We’ll send a message to our supreme commander!”

According to Gondo, that was the highest authority in this country’s military.

So that meant this matter warranted the attention of a person at the top.

“Heh-heh-heh.” A laugh Ainz couldn’t contain spilled out.

When he looked in the direction of the *ker-chk, ker-chk* noise he heard, the dwarves were pointing their crossbows at him again. They were breathing hard and seemed extremely tense.

Crap. Are they mad because I laughed?

“Sorry. For the time being, is it all right for Gondo to enter the fort? We’ve explained who he is, right?”

“N-no! D-don’t move! Wait right there!”

He hadn’t even really laughed *at* them, but it seemed they were offended.

Any strong emotions he felt were normally automatically suppressed. But little waves of emotion got through.

If a businessman was caught snickering during his first time visiting some company, what would the hosts think? Ainz was slightly irritated that he hadn’t thought that far and made a mistake as a result.

I need to be a bit more careful, he thought as he and Gondo distanced themselves a little from the fort.

They stood there waiting for a while.

Even I offered Jircniv a welcome drink and chairs when he came to visit! Do dwarves not do that? Oh…but I guess this is a different case.

Jircniv had come with an appointment, but Ainz was making a cold call. He supposed he should be glad he wasn’t simply turned away.

Besides, he couldn’t drink with his body anyhow.

Still, we brought intelligence that can help the dwarves, so I think they could

be a bit more hospitable. Well, I can afford to be more aggressive once we actually establish a diplomatic relationship, so I guess I'll wait.

He did think maybe he should change his clothes to not be rude.

First, he took out his imitation Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown. Everything about it was visually the same, down to the metal used in its construction, but it didn't have even a tenth of the real one's power. It merely held jewels of the same color.

Ainz formed a red light in it and then darkened the color. Why did that adjustment function even exist? Ainz was troubled by the mind-set of his most perfectionist guildmate.

It wasn't as if it was synchronized to his aura or anything.

A dark halo appeared behind him. Sure enough, it was no different from the staff's aura.

…It's just visually appealing, I guess.

A crash interrupted Ainz's thoughts. He noticed three dwarves had plunked down onto the ground.

He had the feeling this group included the dwarves who had been on guard against the party but also their superiors. Partly because two of them had fancier clothes than the third one. Was one of them a guard from the fort and the other two officers?

Why are the three of them sitting down? Is it etiquette to sit when you talk…? They're staring at me with awfully wide, suspecting eyes. If that's some sort of expression specific to dwarves, I kind of hate it.

Since their beards hid their mouths, it was hard to tell what face they were making.

Ainz wasn't sure what to do, but he walked over to the seated dwarves and held out a hand—in a way that could be taken as either him offering them a hand to get up or a handshake. Personally, he would have preferred it if they stood to talk to him.

Interacting with a foreign culture was truly difficult. One wrong move, and he

could be making a gesture that to them was rude.

If they laughed at him and said, *If you're here for diplomacy, then how come you didn't even bother to look up our country's manners?* he would have had nothing to say in return.

Anxious internally, as well as thankful for his unmoving expression, he continued holding out his hand.

The dwarves looked between his face and his hand, perplexed.

Hrm? Could it just be that they're incredibly frightened?! I mean, I guess I do have a particular…appearance. Still, no one in the human world reacted this way.

People in E-Rantel were scared of him, but not like this. It was also possible that it was rude for dwarves to shake the hand of a superior.

Finally, he got impatient and grabbed their hands and pulled them up.

If they have time to waste on nonsense like this, the kuagoa must not have attacked yet. If they were under attack right now, I would've had a chance to make them seriously indebted to me, but maybe I should limit myself to simply warning them about the approaching danger instead. Ahhh, that's too bad. But anyhow, which one of these guys is the superior?

"Now then, I am Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. Are you in charge of welcoming me?"

It was unclear which one of the two officer-looking dwarves was higher ranking, so he directed his question to the space between them. Then one of them shook his head so hard, it seemed like parts of his face might come flying off before saying, "Kgh! I—I lead the military."

"The military… I see."

This is the supreme commander? Ainz was surprised. He hadn't expected the highest-ranking person to come directly. *Could it be that the executives of this country have heard about the Nation of Darkness somehow? Or maybe I just came at a good time?*

"I take it the kuagoa aren't posing too much of a problem at the moment? I'm

sorry to disturb you at what must be such a busy time.”

The supreme commander’s eyes gaped.

“I see… So you were able to discern that much from the simple fact that I came to this meeting?”

What is this guy talking about? thought Ainz, but he couldn’t very well say that. “Of course, yes.” He nodded benevolently in the kingly fashion he had rehearsed.

“I see… As you know, we’re currently holding off the kuagoa attack, err, Your Majesty.”

“Oh-ho. And…?”

Ainz wanted to know what this *as you know* was about, but having already pretended to understand, he couldn’t ask.

“First, we heard that you got information out of kuagoa you captured in Fehu Raido. Do you have any evidence to back that up?”

“I believe your countryman Gondo will—”

“Physical evidence.”

“Hmm. Will a kuagoa suffice? I’ll summon a few so you can hear it straight from them.”

“That was fast… Should I just come out and say everything? At this rate, it looks like we won’t be able to evacuate to Fehu Raido.”

“Commander…!” the soldier standing next to him shouted sharply.

As far as Ainz could gather, the outburst was to censure the commander for discussing military secrets in front of him.

But the commander didn’t seem concerned at all. “His Majesty the King of Darkness already knows everything. He essentially said as much a moment ago. If someone who should be leading the troops comes here instead, it must mean the fight is in a deadlock. And once you know that much, it’s not hard to imagine how our army will move when we can’t expect any reinforcements.”

Nah, I asked because I was curious if it was okay for you to be here during a

time like this, Ainz thought but couldn't say, and he simply nodded the way he had rehearsed.

The supreme commander shared details about their dire situation.

The fort guarding the Great Chasm had fallen, and the invasion was already at their final line of defense. That was a single set of doors, and if they were broken, the city would be attacked and many dwarves would die. The dwarves were considering an evacuation of the city and taking shelter in Fehu Raido while the military bought them time, but doing so involved changing their plans completely, leaving them in a crisis of survival.

Hearing what a horrible spot they were in made Ainz sneer inwardly. Everything was playing out to his advantage.

"Then, how about this? I'll lend you my soldiers, and we can repel the kuagoa for now."

The supreme commander narrowed his eyes—to hide what he was feeling.

"You can do that? But…"

Normally, Ainz would set up a conference and ensure he would get something out of it before lifting a finger. That would benefit him more. But if he lent the dwarves his strength for free this time, he was sure to earn their gratitude. Sometimes a debt could result in returns that wouldn't be possible through a normal deal. That's what Ainz was after.

Between tangible and intangible, intangible was certainly the messier of the two. It was like going to a restaurant and being told to pay whatever feels appropriate and then paying far more than necessary.

How does that saying go? Grasp all, lose all*? I think Squishy Moe was the one who said it.*

"I would hate to have the country I'm trying to establish friendly relations with get destroyed. Won't you accept my help?"

"…I need to ask the higher-ups."

"If you have time for it, I don't mind. I only promised to assist. You guys decide. I heard it's the regency council who makes the calls, but…you know how

it goes. The congress dances but doesn't move forward and whatnot. I don't want my trip here to have been in vain, but do what you must."

"…Your Majesty is confident the kuagoa can be driven off?"

"If they're like the ones we met in Fehu Raido, it'll be easy."

Gondo nodded next to him.

"But only if they haven't invaded the city yet. In the middle of a huge brawl, it would be too hard to target only the enemies. I'm sure you're not about to tacitly approve of the city ending up as collateral damage, right? If you're just managing to hold them off with one set of doors, then I'm sure this is your last chance."

The supreme commander made a sober face—

"How much time do you have? Will the gate hold for a few more days?" Ainz's confirming questions seemed to push the supreme commander into making up his mind.

"…I understand. Your Majesty, King of Darkness, we humbly request that you lend us your strength."

"Commander!"

The other soldier raised his voice, but the commander shot him a sharp look.

Then he said "Excuse us" to Ainz and took the other dwarf a little ways away, probably so they wouldn't be overheard.

Then came a flood of attempts to persuade.

Ainz could hear bits and pieces like *insane*, *un—*, *the kuagoa*, *we still*, *the immediate cri—*, and *if we have to choose*.

The commander must have been trying to argue the case that they should jump at the chance for Ainz's help, since it would be difficult to handle the kuagoa invasion on their own.

Now was a good time to press a little. Ainz put a little force into his voice and asked, "Have you decided what to do yet?"

3

There was a total of eight kuagoa clans in the Azerlisia Mountains.

Pu-Limidol, Pu-Landel, Pu-Srix, Po-Ram, Po-Shunem, Po-Guzua, Zu-Aigeno, and Zu-Ryushuk.

Three clans were descended from the ancient hero Pu, and the other clans were the children of Po and Zu, his rivals. There were slight differences in the number of kuagoa per clan, but they were all fairly close to ten thousand. Thus, eighty thousand kuagoa lived scattered around the Azerlisia Mountains.

Were they strong? The answer was not really.

These kuagoa, even with ten thousand in each clan, only had a primitive civilization and were considered an inferior species best counted in terms of how far up they ranked from the bottom. They were merely food for the strong.

So who were the kuagoa's natural enemies? That would be the other kuagoa clans. No, not only the ones from other clans. Sometimes even members of the same clan became enemies. Other monsters only preyed on the kuagoa—it wasn't as if they hated them or thought of them as rivals. But members of the same race were different.

The issue stemmed from kuagoa patterns of growth and development.

Adult kuagoa's abilities depended on the types of ore they ate when they were children. In other words, the way to strengthen one's family was to steal rare metals from kuagoa. Other clans were also opponents in this, but naturally the nearest rivals were the most problematic.

And since the dwarves were also competing for ore, the dwarves were opponents, too, but since they wielded lightning weapons, kuagoa attacks on them were usually driven off.

But then there came a time when a legendary hero who surpassed even the ancient hero Pu was born.

That was the chief clan king, Pe Riyuro.

His abilities went far beyond those of the blue and red kuagoa, and with his overpowering strength, he unified all the clans.

But Riyuro's achievements didn't stop there.

He discovered an abandoned dwarf city, gathered all the clans there, created an organization to combat monsters, and used dwarf hostages to gain knowledge of agriculture and raising livestock.

And there was more. Traditionally, kuagoa regime changes involved eradicating the descendants of the previous boss. But Riyuro didn't do that, and instead he had the existing bosses govern their own clans. He did, however, order that all ore be brought to him. Anyone who did good work for him was given ore, regardless of their social standing.

For example, in a monster attack, the clan that shed the most blood was most appreciated, and when he had them collect gold and gemstones, the clan who brought him the most was treated the best. He distributed ore accordingly.

Any enmity the kuagoa would have directed toward the king was instead channeled into competing with the other tribes, and Riyuro's position was secure.

Having accomplished something no other kuagoa had even thought to do, he began to work on expanding his influence.

He attacked the dwarves.

Obeying his orders, each clan contributed two thousand of their hardiest members, which combined to make a military force sixteen thousand strong.

This was an army on an unprecedented scale. But no matter how many warriors they had, if they tried to charge over the bridge, serious casualties were unavoidable. That defeated the purpose of assembling a large army and meant a real possibility of being beaten back before they captured the fort.

That was why Riyuro commanded that they discover a detour.

A few of the expeditions he sent out never returned, but eventually they found a way around the Great Chasm. From that moment on, the army split into groups with specialized roles.

One was the unit that spotted and captured runaway dwarves. It was made up of several smaller squads.

Another was the main forces. They were the ones who would loot the dwarf city once it had fallen, and they were also available to assist the elite team attacking the fortress if it seemed like it would take too long.

The last was the team of elite kuagoa who would attack the fort. This unit was sent in ahead of the main forces with orders to take the fort and the city itself if possible.

The leader of this vanguard unit was Yoozu.

He was a red kuagoa, and either the most valuable or second most valuable of all Riyuro's subordinates. With his clear head and high personal combat skill, he was the favorite to become the future boss of his original clan.

The unit he had put together was a rough bunch to lead because of the deep-rooted clan rivalries that remained latent in the diverse group of elite kuagoa. But Yoozu was able to take advantage of that.

By cultivating a competitive spirit among members of different clans, he managed to capture the fort.

Taking the flanking route around and coming up the stairs on the side of the fort meant victory was practically a given, but there was no doubt his leadership was exceptional. Probably not a single other kuagoa in any of the clans possessed comparable command abilities.

And now, he had the dwarves in check.

The elite of the elite in the strike team that was first to reach the fort now clawed at the irritating doors barring their way. But they couldn't even leave a scratch.

Just one more step. With just one more step, they could get past the doors, trample the dwarves, and take this land for their own. That was an extraordinary exploit, so if they could pull it off, the amount of ore they would be rewarded with was sure to be incredible.

But the cold portal before them blocked the way.

As the kuagoa said, *The worm hiding in its hole is always the biggest*.

One of the kuagoa bit a door out of rage that their chance was slipping away. Of course, that simply meant he tried to scrape at its surface using his sharp teeth like a plane.

Some others who saw him do it followed suit.

However, the average kuagoa's teeth were no match for these doors. They could spend a hundred years trying the same thing and never break through.

A lattice of the same kind of metal as the door covered the rock to either side, so they couldn't even bore through the earth way.

Normal kuagoa like them had no chance of opening the door. Blue and red kuagoa had been held in reserve as a last resort, so none of them was assigned to this strike team. In other words, their advance was temporarily halted.

Everyone was annoyed that they had so nearly missed out on the glory, but they weren't panicking, either. They had already reported the situation to the commander of the vanguard. Surely the outstanding Yoozu would soon produce some plan to deal with the situation that would have been impossible for them to think up.

Still, they didn't know how long it would take, so they rested in shifts according to clan.

Lower-ranking soldiers might have wandered around recklessly to cope with their stress or start arguing with members of other clans, but these were the elite of the elite. When it was time to rest, they rested wholeheartedly, saving up their anger and energy for the next operation.

So it was during their rest when suddenly, they all raised their heads.

With a low rumble from deep below, the doors had slowly begun to open to either side.

The strike team kuagoa exchanged glances.

They couldn't understand why the dwarves who had so frantically closed the doors were opening them now. Were they planning on surrendering? That's what many of the kuagoa thought. They wore fangy grins.

They would never accept a surrender.

The plan from the beginning was to kill as many dwarves as possible. They wouldn't even give them time to talk.

They would surge through the gap in the doors, create a bloodbath on the other side, and proceed into the city to kill the rest of the dwarves.

Before the murderous kuagoa, the gate cracked open. The gap wasn't large enough to fit through yet. But one of them stuck his arm in. He meant to kill a dwarf on the other side with his sharp, pointy claws.

But—

"Gyaaaaaagh!"

The kuagoa who tried to land the first kill shrieked and fell backward. The arm he had stuck through the crack was missing, and fresh blood spurted from the wound.

That unexpected turn of events put a damper on the kuagoa's bloodlust.

It was easy to imagine what had happened.

Someone with a weapon must have sliced off the arm, but was that possible?

Kuagoa racial characteristics worked well against races like dwarves who relied on weapons. Case in point, when they had caught the fort by surprise, the dwarves had managed to injure some of them, but none of the attackers had died. As long as there weren't any lightning attacks, that was how it usually went.

So why was their fellow soldier's arm severed?

There could be only one reason—the existence of a swordsman who could cut through a kuagoa's arm, with blade-turning fur, like nothing.

The kuagoa took a few steps backward in response to an emotion they hadn't experienced in any of their fights thus far: fear. And as they did, the crack between the doors grew gradually larger.

"Why are you falling back?!" one of the stronger members of the strike team shouted from the rear.

“There shouldn’t be any weaklings in the Pu-Limidol clan!”

“Rrrragh!”

The ones who answered must have been the members of the Pu-Limidol clan. The tough members of the other clans hurried to raise their own voices.

“We don’t have any cowards in the Po-Guzua clan!”

“The Zu-Aigeno clan isn’t about to lose out to any Pu or Po guys! You think we’re going to let our ancestors laugh at us from the Land of Dele?!”

It was said that brave kuagoa went to the Land of Dele when they died to watch over the prosperity of their descendants. But if any descendants did something shameful, they would become the object of their ancestors’ ridicule.

Those words seemed to finally incite the kuagoa to battle and spur them into action.

They dragged the one who had lost his arm to the wall, and then the strike team got into a tight formation in preparation to slay the powerful swordsman.

“We’re going to charge! No matter how strong our opponent is, they only have one sword! As long as we have greater numbers, we’ll be fine!” someone said.

“Eh, once the door is open, all we have to do is charge and shove. Once the enemy falls, we trample them. Then it’s straight into the city to destroy it!”

“I’ll take the lead!”

Two stripes of ground-up Nuran ore paint were the sign the speaker was a brave kuagoa.

Behind him, others pressed in close so they would be able to keep pushing forward even if the enemy’s blade cut him down.

The gap between the doors was finally large enough for one kuagoa to pass through. It was still too small for a charge, but the kuagoa didn’t want to risk losing warriors to a quick lightning spell only for the doors to slam shut again right after the dwarves completed their harassment attack.

“Go!”

With a war cry, over fourteen kuagoa surged toward the gap.

The courageous one at the head of the group went still. The ones jostling behind him knew instinctively that the swordsman had killed him. But they didn't stop. Stopping would have made a mockery of his courage.

And that was why the other kuagoa would push through without hesitation, trample the dwarf city, and— Their feet stopped.

No matter how hard they pushed, they couldn't go any farther. It was as if a huge, thick wall stood on the other side of the doors.

One of the kuagoa craned his neck to peer ahead.

He had the perfectly natural idea that perhaps the dwarves had built a wall.

And there was a wall. It was pitch-black.

The wall took up their entire field of vision. It moved.

"Rrrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The battle cry vibrated the air.

What they had thought was a wall was a giant shield.

The kuagoa didn't use weapons or armor, but they had seen the dwarves use them enough times. They were never this huge, though. This shield was large enough to be mistaken for a wall.

As the kuagoa were struggling to comprehend their situation, a horrifying being showed itself from behind the shield.

Something in black armor with crimson eyes full of loathing.

The kuagoa may not have known much of the world, but this they understood. This was evil; it was violence; it was death.

Something whizzed by.

That instant, three kuagoa heads went flying.

"Rrrrrrraaaaagh!"

The battle cry hit the kuagoa like a physical blow.

Shocked in a way that made their hairs stand on end, the kuagoa were

assailed by the urge to flee in the face of what they knew to be a futile fight.

These were the bravest warriors of their clans who held no fear of death. At least, that's what they had thought. But they never imagined facing something like this. The monster before them was more than enough to shatter their courage.

So why didn't they run away?

The muscles in their legs wouldn't cooperate. They knew instinctively that if they turned to run, they would be killed in a single swing from behind. Still, the glow in the black thing's eyes reminded them of their thirst for life.

"Rrrrrrraaaaaaaaaagh!"

The kuagoa yelped at the earth-shaking roar and took a few steps back.

When the armored creature moved forward to close the space between them, another of the same type of being came into view. And then—

"Eeegh!"

One of the kuagoa screamed.

The ones who turned to look at what happened saw fellow soldiers with their heads missing.

They were definitely dead. But their hands groped for something to hold onto. It was clear these weren't mere muscle spasms.

All they could think was that the corpses had begun to move.

It was as if they were trapped in a nightmare. The warriors felt as if they had been taken alive to the limbo all kuagoa feared.

Thomp, thomp. The two armored figures walked forward, their unusual swords—flamberges—held high.

•

"The strike team says they don't know when they'll be able to break through the gate?"

"That's correct, sir!"

A kuagoa whose fur had a faint red tinge to it frowned at his subordinate's report.

This was the commander of the vanguard, Yoozu, boasting fur as tough as orichalcum and superior resistance to metal weapons. He was a red kuagoa, an elite.

Yoozu looked past his subordinate's bowed head to the fort across the bridge. Beyond that fort was a tunnel and beyond that tunnel was the dwarf city.

If they could take out that city, not only would they gain a better base, but they would be able to wipe out their ore rivals.

Expanding their territory could mean a chance to claim types of ore they had never seen before, which could lead to a new level of prosperity for the kuagoa.

Then, someday, the kuagoa could rule these mountains.

"If we could only defeat those dragons…" Yoozu accidentally let his inner desires slip out, and when he realized, he hurriedly glanced around.

No one seemed to have noticed.

He was a little relieved.

The kuagoa home base was a former dwarf city that they now occupied. In the center of that city was a palace, but it was ruled by frost dragons—white dragons that could spit out Chill Breath.

Ostensibly, the kuagoa and the dragons were in alliance, but anyone who was familiar with the reality of the situation would say the relationship was nothing that equal. The clan king may have sugarcoated it as coexistence and coprosperity, but even he probably didn't believe those words.

The truth was the weak kuagoa served the strong dragons.

To the dragons, the kuagoa were surely an emergency food supply and convenient pawns in the meantime.

Yoozu had gone to meet them once, with the clan king, and that was the sense he got from every word that came out of those gigantic jaws. And the chief clan king had been surprisingly submissive.

He didn’t want to see their great hero act like that. But Yoozu wasn’t stupid. He knew what a huge power disparity separated the kuagoa and dragons.

Still, would they really tolerate being treated like such fools?

…At the moment, it’s still impossible. Even if we could defeat the dragonlord, victory would cost us so much that we wouldn’t be able to recover. But… someday…

He wasn’t the only one harboring this earnest wish. Anyone who had met the dragons—all the kuagoa in higher positions—felt the same way.

First, they needed to find a way to block the Chill Breath. If they couldn’t produce kuagoa with perfect resistance to that, they would never be able to minimize their casualties.

How long would that take?

Yoozu chased away his gloom. Before everything else came defeating the dwarves, and they hadn’t finished that yet. Looking too far ahead and ignoring what was right under one’s feet meant a great risk of tripping over.

Yoozu summoned a subordinate. “Hey, see if it’s possible to destroy the fort and widen the tunnel so we can attack in numbers. We need to prepare as much as possible before the main forces get h—”

There Yoozu abruptly stopped to listen. He thought he heard screams coming from somewhere.

No, it might not have been screams. It could have been a threatening monster call. One of the troublesome things about the subterranean world was that it was difficult to pinpoint where a particular sound originated.

But this time, he knew right away.

The strike team he had sent in came running back out of the fort.

That caused a commotion among the kuagoa around him.

The undisciplined way they ran away made their panic obvious. Some were even shoved off the bridge in the rush and fell into the Great Chasm.

“What? What’s going on?”

One of Yoozu's subordinates answered his straightforward question. "I don't know. Perhaps the dwarves counterattacked?"

That can't be it. They had anticipated a dwarf counter. There was no way the strike team would flee in a panic just because of that.

Did they get hit with a special attack? For instance, he had heard once that boiling oil was quite painful.

"Take some soldiers and find out what happened. If it was the dwarves striking back, keep pushing—don't let them retake the fort."

Following his orders, his subordinate assembled a group and set out across the bridge.

Meanwhile, the strike team was still routing, screaming.

What could have possibly made them so desperate to escape? Was it that mysterious power of magic or whatnot?

As Yoozu was racking his brain, something appeared at the entrance to the fort. Two somethings.

Large black creatures.

"Wh-what the heck is that? Giant dwarves? Dwarf kings?"

Yoozu had never seen anything like this before. They seemed to be wearing the armor dwarves used over their entire bodies, but there was definitely something different about them.

In their right hands, they carried wavy swords, and in their left, massive shields.

Maybe dwarf kings look different from normal dwarves in the same way the clan king looks different from other kuagoa?

Yoozu had no idea what the beings looming at the entrance to the fort were, but animal instinct informed him they were terribly dangerous.

And he understood very well that the strike team had been fleeing from none other than those monsters.

The kuagoa around him were all staring, frozen stiff—no one moved except

for the strike team members. They continued running across the bridge without looking back.

The dark armored figures let out a battle cry.

Even at this distance, the rumbling in the air made Yoozu's hairs stand on end and his blood run cold. It elicited the same feeling as a dragon's roar.

As if that was a cue, some kuagoa appeared next to the black armored figures.

They're escaping? No, they're traitors? N-no, that's not right, either!

Yoozu's eyes widened.

One of the kuagoa was missing everything from the neck up.

When he squinted, he saw that some of them were dragging entrails behind them, and some seemed to have been sliced in half, the left side of their body moving separately from the right.

They shouldn't have been able to move at all, yet here they were. That could only mean…

Magic! They're using magic to control the dead!

"Could that be the dwarves' trump card?"

His subordinate's comment made sense.

They must have been preparing this other ultimate weapon while repelling them with the lightning one.

"…Golems?"

He remembered hearing that when the dragons took over the dwarf palace, they had fought monsters with that name. They were like armored statues.

"Those are what the dwarves call golems?" his subordinate asked.

Yoozu shook his head. "No, golems are monsters. The dwarves must have tamed them."

"You mean like the Nuuk?"

The Nuuk were magical beasts.

Males grew to be about eleven and a half feet and well over two thousand

five hundred pounds. They were longhaired quadruped herbivores that could survive on just a little moss. Since they were hardy enough to survive in heavy snow, they lived all over the Azerlisia Mountains, and many monsters preyed on them.

In any case, the exact combat prowess of the black-armored golems was unclear, but given the gap between the strike team's head count and the ones who had made it back out, it wasn't hard to imagine. Even with no information besides the way Yoozu's hairs were standing on end, figuring it out was simple —they wouldn't be easy to defeat.

Luckily, the enemy was apparently content to simply watch and wait, not crossing the bridge.

"I-it seems like they came to take back the fort."

"Y-yes, it does. Okay. Let's regroup, as long as they're not moving. We'll think of a plan while we do that— Agh, here they come!"

The armored figures were charging across the bridge.

"Who was it? Who was the one talking about retaking the fort?!"

"Commander! Now's not the time! What should we do?"

The kuagoa he had sent onto the bridge raised their claws.

The figures carrying the giant shields rammed into them.

Flung away by the overpowering strength, a few of the kuagoa fell off the bridge. The armored figures didn't stop. With their shields still up, they continued to barrel across the bridge only slightly slower than before. It was like a surging wall.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before they finished crossing the bridge and arrived on their side.

What will happen now? The threat to his life made him scream, "C-cut down the bridge!"

If they dropped the bridge, the main forces would have to take a tedious detour. Surely the dwarves would fortify their defenses during that time. Considering that taking the fort had been their primary objective, this operation

was a failure.

The resources and personnel expended were such that Yoozu doubted he would get off with a mere reprimand. But it was more dangerous to let those armored figures cross the bridge.

If the enemy reached them, not a single kuagoa would survive. That was the kind of beings these were.

“Did I not just tell you to cut down the bridge?!”

The second time he gave the instruction, his subordinates peeled their eyes off the monsters sending other kuagoa flying and began to move. Most of their fellow soldiers on the bridge had been knocked away; only a few remained to face the enemy.

A handful of kuagoa bit and clawed the bridge’s ropes.

“Send in a unit to pin them on the bridge!”

Telling people to go fight the monsters on the bridge while they were trying to cut it down was tantamount to telling them to go die. Even so, a unit formed up and headed to their doom.

The shields kept many at bay, but a few managed to circle around to the monsters’ backs and attack. But they were ignored. Kuagoa bites did nothing to slow their advance.

The bridge isn’t collapsing.

At this rate, the monsters are going to make it across.

The minute Yoozu realized that, his body moved on its own. With zero hesitation, he leaped from the higher ground from where he had been issuing orders and used the momentum of his fall to land a powerful slash with his claws on the bridge’s ropes.

There was a sound like the air was ripping.

A huge wave rippled through the bridge, and it collapsed.

Unable to withstand the wild motion of the bridge, which was like a giant snake in its death throes, Yoozu was hurled off. But before he was swallowed

up by the darkness below, he grabbed a rope dangling into the void. It was pure luck that he was able to do that in midair despite having no way to adjust his orientation.

He managed to haul himself up the rope, his body twisting this way and that, and reach the edge of the cliff.

But without even a moment to sigh in relief, he responded to a chill that made him shudder by instinctively throwing himself on the ground.

And in that instant, the object that had been thrown with a grunt skimmed the hairs of Yoozu's back. As unlikely as it was, the object had been a kuagoa. Enraged, one of the black-armored figures had hurled one of the suicide fighters it had latched onto earlier with its outrageous strength.

The flying kuagoa crashed into Yoozu's frozen subordinates. Leaving behind truncated screams—"Pgyah!"—they were turned into chunks of flesh.

But that was the end of it. The monsters disappeared into the Great Chasm along with the rest of the warriors who had resigned to die.

Silence fell over the area.

Yoozu staggered over to the edge and peered into the darkness. It wasn't only him. All the survivors were staring into the blackness that had swallowed everything up. Though they knew there was no saving anyone who fell into that hole, they couldn't shake the fear that one of the armored figures would come climbing up the side of the cliff.

How much time had passed? Yoozu finally breathed a sigh of relief.

It seemed like they truly weren't coming back.

He surveyed the area and saw how few of his soldiers remained.

But up against those black suits of armor, having this many survive was surely a job well done.

"Fall back!"

They needed to report the golems to their superiors as soon as possible.

If those things were mass-produced, the kuagoa would be driven to

extinction. And Yoozu was sure the enemy had more than just those two.

“…Dwarves are terrifying.”

He regretted taking them lightly. The fact that they possessed the technology to create such monsters was a complete shock.

“First, we need to tell the main forces about what just happened. I need messengers!”

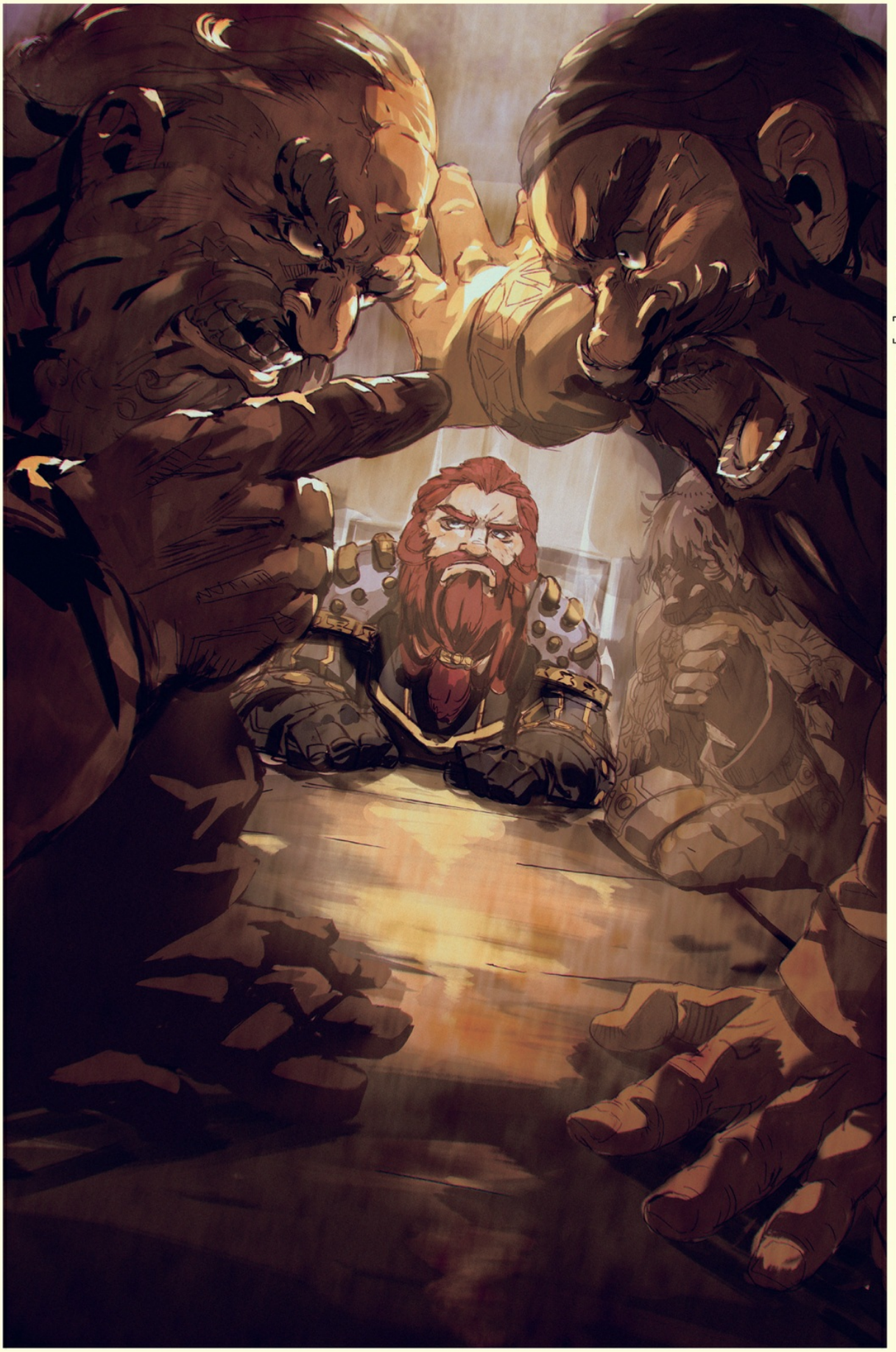
The ones who responded to Yoozu’s call were kuagoa riders, who could travel much faster than ordinary kuagoa. They had a skill that allowed them to run at full speed without tiring at all.

The reason they traveled in a group was so that if they were attacked by monsters, there was less of a chance of them getting completely wiped out. It wasn’t that they would be safe traveling with this number but that even if some of them died, others would survive and reach the main forces.

“Okay! Now, go! Don’t forget how critical your role is!”

Yoozu watched them race away and then announced his next orders.

It went without saying that everyone would withdraw so he could discuss the situation with the clan king.



Chapter 4 A Crafter and Negotiations

Chapter 4 | A Crafter and Negotiations

1

As the two death knights he created disappeared through the gate, cries of joyful slaughter and shrieks of violent death went up again and again. When he finished slowly closing the doors, perhaps because they were so thick, the massacre on the other side only rang ever so slightly in everyone's eardrums.

"Now, we should be fine for a while."

Since Ainz hadn't used corpses to create them, these death knights came with a time limit, but judging from the prisoners they had taken, the kuagoa weren't terribly strong. Even without knowing how many were attacking, he was sure those two would be enough to repel quite a lot. Unless the enemy was completely inept, they would probably back down and set up camp after taking too many losses.

Don't withdraw completely. If you build a camp, then the dwarves will know the danger is still right there. That'll force them to make a deal with me. I ordered the death knights to take it easy, but…keeping yourself from winning too thoroughly is hard.

With those things somewhat on his mind as he performed various calculations, Ainz examined the supreme commander, who was staring at him with a twitching smile plastered across his face.

He couldn't think of any reason the dwarf should still be regarding him with a smile that could have been born only from fear, but—at that moment, the light bulb in Ainz's mind turned on.

He's used to my face now, so it must be from the screams of the kuagoa on the other side of the door, right? True, the voices of things being killed are unpleasant.

That said, it was the screams of their enemies, so Ainz didn't think it should be

that much of an issue, but maybe it was because the commander was human—because he was dwarven—that he couldn't agree.

But can you command a military with a mind-set like that? That's concerning.

Ainz knew it was a worry he didn't need to have, but nonetheless, that was what he was thinking when Gondo walked up to him.

"All right, Your Majesty. I'm going to head home for a little while."

"Okay, and you'll get to work on what we discussed?"

"Of course. I'll split it up and give them out. The timing we originally discussed is still fine, right? If anything comes up, I'll contact you via magic."

Gondo thrust out a fist, and Ainz bumped it. This rapport must have been the result of all the chatting they did on the way over.

He sure talked forever…

Gondo's conversations were one-directional and seemed like they would never end. It was probably because Ainz had shown some interest in the disappearing art of rune crafting, and the dwarf had been so isolated for so long that the dam just broke.

Ainz had the same feeling—of wanting to talk to someone with the same interests. He keenly understood how Gondo must have felt. But it wasn't out of kindness that he listened to the dwarf blather on.

Gondo patted the magic pack on his back as he headed off.

The supreme commander seemed to want to say something, but in the end, he didn't call out to stop him.

"What should we do now? Shall we open the door in a little while to check on the results?"

The commander must have been expecting that question from Ainz. He seemed to already have an answer in mind, as he replied immediately. "It would be rude to keep the sovereign of a nation like yourself waiting here, Your Majesty. First, I'd like to take you to the regency council, where you can inform everyone of your proposal."

“You don’t need to see what’s happened?”

“Introducing Your Majesty should come first. We sent a message to the regency council that the kuagoa were attacking. I imagine they’re groping for a solution even now. I’d like to bring them a fresh report before they panic and issue inappropriate orders.”

“I see. In that case, I have no objections. Take me to them.”

“Understood. But I fear Your Majesty’s magical beasts will cause chaos among the people. I hate to ask, but would you have them stand by here? If you’ll teach us how, we’ll be sure to look after them…”

Ainz glanced at Aura, and she nodded.

“Okay. Then, let’s have them stand by over there.”

Ainz pointed to a corner of the garrison compound, and the supreme commander nodded.

“Also, there’s no need to take care of them. We’ll handle it. And I’ll only bring three people with me.”

Ainz chose to bring Shalltear, Aura, and Zenbel. He ordered the others to wait with the beasts.

The commander looked somewhat relieved. He must not have wanted undead swaggering around town.

“Then, shall we go?”

“Yes, please.”

Ainz and his party followed the commander openly through the dwarf city. They got enough weird looks that it stung, and he was disappointed to see mothers who saw his face hiding their children indoors.

Certainly, he could have taken measures to not stick out.

If he had worn a mask, there definitely would have been fewer stares. But he had a reason for not concealing his face.

Ainz wanted their arrival to be public knowledge. He couldn’t imagine there were players here if the dwarves had needed help from a foreign country to

deal with the kuagoa attack. But it was possible there were low-level players around, or maybe items that players had left behind.

Like those magic-sealing crystals…

That's why Ainz wanted to leave evidence of his visit. It was so he wouldn't be attacked with an item like that. It was likely no one would try to do away with him if he approached them like this.

Additionally, he hadn't decided what sort of ambassadors he would send, but he could certainly imagine using undead. It would be good for the dwarves to get used to seeing them.

"The kuagoa assault came so close to breaking through and yet no one seems tense," Ainz said. A dwarf who had come out of a pub red in the face with an arm around a friend gaped at him. The dwarves obviously reeked of booze.

"The citizens don't know the kuagoa are attacking."

"Is that…all right?"

Aren't you taking this crisis a bit lightly?

The commander must have understood what Ainz was thinking. "It's simply that they came so fast, information hasn't reached the general populace yet. It's up to the regency council, but I expect that within the next hour, everyone will know."

"Hmm. Well, I did tell my minions to retake the bridge, but if we do that, will the city be safe for now? That's something I need to take into consideration if I'm going to be trading with this country."

"It's difficult to say. That depends on how many attackers have come, but we also don't know how committed they are to this invasion. After retaking the bridge, we'll have to strengthen our defenses and try to figure out what route they took."

Ainz smiled internally.

It seemed there were still more chances for him to shine—to make this city indebted to him. Having the death knights take the bridge would be fine.

As he was happily walking along, he was assailed by a sudden shock.

“What?!”

Ainz’s voice made the supreme commander jump. “Eeegh! Wh-what’s the matter, Your Majesty, King of Darkness?”

“N-never mind. It’s a personal issue. Nothing to concern yourself with.”

The severity of his voice said, *Don’t ask any more*, and the commander’s questions dried up.

Ainz’s reply was out of character because he was entirely preoccupied.

The two death knights he had created, which were supposed to be on the outskirts of Fehu Jura, had vanished.

There was only one thing that shocking truth could mean.

The death knights had been defeated.

Huh?!

Compared to Ainz, a death knight was weak. But in this world, they were tough enemies even for a country’s finest warriors. If someone could defeat two of them, they had to be formidable. And both had even disappeared at the same time.

Did they get defeated simultaneously?

Was it an area-of-effect attack?

Had a powerful individual slain them with a devastating blow?

No matter what the answer, the culprit had to be an enemy more powerful than the mysterious caster he had met in the royal capital.

If it was an individual, and they took out two defense-type death knights at once, they had to be over level 40.

“Have I found someone?”

The supreme commander glanced up at him in response to his murmur to himself, but Ainz had no intention of speaking with him.

The first thing that came to mind when Ainz thought of an unknown power was naturally another player. If it was another high-level player like him, they

would have no trouble killing two death knights.

So the player's not with the dwarves but with the kuagoa? Is it possible they have something to do with the one who brainwashed Shalltear?

A scorching flame flared in his chest.

The embers he had banked grew with this fuel. But it was suppressed immediately.

No, it can't be. If there was a powerful player, they would have been able to conquer the dwarf city sooner. There's a higher chance that the suspect is a strong person originally from this world. But I can't say for sure. This will require a change of plans, huh…?

Ainz wanted the war between the dwarves and the kuagoa to drag on.

The existence of a clear threat could drive the dwarves under Ainz's umbrella. But maybe leaving the kuagoa alone—that was to say, giving them time—was dangerous.

If they were a race that occasionally produced powerful specimens… This time they had gotten only his death knights, but who knew how far they would be able to reach in the future? It was better to collar or eradicate them now, while he still could.

The ideal would be to take over the kuagoa and secretly manipulate them to continue threatening the dwarves… But one false move and the jig would be up. Might be safer to drop that idea.

"Your Majesty, the regency council is just over here."

Ainz looked in the direction the commander was pointing and saw a fairly large—for dwarves, naturally, but also for Ainz—building.

The commander exchanged a couple of words with the soldiers guarding the door, allowing them to pass unchecked.

Surely only the supreme commander's authority could get an undead past a security check despite the way they stared at him wide-eyed.

"Your Majesty, I'm going to report everything to the regency council. My apologies, but would you mind waiting for a little while?"

There was no reason for that to bother him. Besides, Ainz needed him to report in that this undead newcomer had already helped out the dwarf country.

“All right. Where should I wait?”

The commander glanced at one of the soldiers guarding the door, and the dwarf stepped forward. “I-I’ll show you to the waiting room.”

“Oh? Thanks.”

The dwarf, whose voice and body were both trembling slightly, led Ainz to a cozy little room. Actually, considering the average dwarf height, it probably wasn’t supposed to feel small at all. With Aura or Shalltear as the standard, it was plenty spacious. But their party included Zenbel, who was huge. His mere presence made the space feel tighter.

The fact that the soldier had led them to this room after seeing Zenbel meant it was either the largest they had or a room for their most honored guests. In fact, it was so gorgeously furnished, the statues seemed liable to start moving.

Ainz knew from his experience making the Avataras in Nazarick what a pain it was to create such intricate sculptures. It was often the case that something seemingly perfect from the side would look weird from the front.

Ainz picked up one of the statues—a dwarf riding a lizard.

You can understand with just one look why everyone says the dwarves are so skilled. I wish I could make stuff like this… I don’t know if I could remake the Avataras or not, but maybe I could improve if I trained? Anyhow…

Zenbel seemed to feel out of place, so Ainz spoke to him. “I’d like you to stay with us a bit longer, Zenbel.”

“Oh, Your Majesty, I would actually appreciate it if you would leave me here, if possible. To be honest, talking with important people tires my head out.”

Zenbel was speaking a bit strangely. His tone was slightly different from what he’d used while they were traveling. Maybe he was speaking more formally because they were in the dwarf country?

“…Weren’t you once the chief of a tribe yourself?”

“Mistress Shalltear, there’s such a thing as strengths and weaknesses, ya

know—I mean, I'm sure you're aware. And causing trouble for His Majesty would be unforgivable, right?"

Ainz understood what Zenbel was saying, but he shook his head. "No, you're coming with us. If anything happened and you were too far away, I wouldn't be able to protect you. I can't imagine we'll run into danger, but only a fool lets his guard down. And it's possible that we're in the palm of our enemy's hand right now. Keep that thought in the back of your head at all times."

"Yes, my lord! I'll burn it into my memory!"

Ainz didn't believe the dwarves would try to harm someone who assisted their country, but he figured an extra warning never hurt.

What's gotten into Shalltear? That was a great reply she made, but did something happen?

"S-so then, Your Majesty, what should I do?"

"Hmm? Just obediently follow our instructions. And no matter what happens, don't start a fight."

Zenbel meekly acknowledged, and Ainz nodded at him.

"Okay then. Aura, Shalltear, sorry, but can you see if my clothes look all right?"

Once the two of them had checked his clothes as well as their own, the dwarf soldier came to lead them to the regency council.

•

Ainz was shown to the room where the dwarves were waiting.

He walked proudly in full gear. With his back straight and his chest thrust out, he cut a kingly figure. And where someone else might have worn cologne, he instead activated a black halo and aura. No one could take him lightly once he had done all that.

Instead of carrying a scepter, he wore a gaudy wand on his hip. The spell it contained was tier one, but he had no intention of casting it, so he didn't expect that to be an issue.

When he had looked at himself, he felt that perhaps he had deviated somewhat from his original goal of proceeding in a friendly fashion, but Aura's and Shalltear's reactions were excellent.

Still, those two thought too much of him, so he was still anxious about whether their opinions were really to be trusted or not.

That's why he asked what Zenbel thought.

Faced with a question about a topic outside his realm of expertise, Zenbel seemed confused, but he said, "Go in like that and they'll definitely respect you," so Ainz had trusted him and proceeded without any changes.

But all the dwarves he had met seemed surprised and on edge. That made him nervous, but it also could have been considered an appropriate reaction to a king's appearance.

"His Majesty the King of Darkness has arrived."

He could hear the dwarf announcing him beyond the door.

Then it opened, and Ainz entered.

There were eight dwarves inside the space that resembled a conference room.

He had heard from the supreme commander each of their identifying physical characteristics, roles, and names.

The chief of the great earth shrine, despite the title implying otherwise, was in charge of all magic affairs whether faith related, arcane, or otherwise.

The chief of the smith shops mainly supervised blacksmith production.

The supreme commander, who had brought Ainz here, handled everything to do with the military and police. There was a time when he had commanded a huge army, but now there were barely a hundred soldiers in total, so he laughed that he didn't feel worthy of the title anymore.

The chief of the food industry managed food and other non-blacksmithing products.

The chief of administration dealt with all the affairs the other chiefs didn't.

The chief of alcohol's existence was a measure of exactly how much dwarves loved to drink.

The chief of caves and mines, who mostly oversaw mining matters, was one of the most influential members.

The chief of the merchant council handled foreign affairs. At one point, the merchant council had been its own organization, but due to the decline in the number of merchants and generally lower trade activity, the title remained in name only.

Those were the eight members of the regency council.

Ainz slowly examined them. Seven of them gaped back at him. Then his eyes met those of a somewhat tired-looking dwarf—the supreme commander.

Ainz feigned composure, but inside he was completely bewildered. *Hey! I can't tell these guys apart! You can say* his beard's a bit shorter *but that doesn't help if they all look the same length to me! Was the commander lying? Or can he actually tell the difference? What should I do?*

In Zenbel's memories, all the dwarves had the same face, so Ainz had assumed that Zenbel couldn't tell them apart because he was a lizardman or that it was a personal issue with facial recognition. But that wasn't the case.

I'm sorry I doubted you, Zenbel. You showed me the truth, huh?

How many times had he lamented the fact that this world didn't have the custom of exchanging business cards? Feeling the same way today, Ainz braced himself.

It was time for the presentation he had been practicing. Only this time he had two of the guardians and a subordinate of his subordinate watching from behind him. He couldn't afford to mess this up.

…Maybe I shouldn't have brought them.

Worrying about it now wouldn't do him any good. The die had been cast.

However, though he had prepared himself, the conversation failed to start. It had been a good minute since they had arrived, and no one had said a word yet.

What's going on? If this was a meeting at a company, usually you would first introduce everyone to the guest. Isn't the supreme commander the go-between here…? I don't really want to be the one to start. I'm not familiar with court etiquette, and I'm not keen on exposing my weaknesses.

Apparently, court etiquette dictated that the king didn't speak directly to those below him, and anyone wishing to speak directly to him needed permission. In other words, the king's person was just that inviolable. Did that mean that if Ainz spoke first, the dwarves would look down on him as a king?

He felt it could go either way.

That said, considering this country's situation and what I've done for them, I highly doubt anyone would dare belittle me. And if anyone did, maybe it would be better not to deal with such idiots.

Having made up his mind, Ainz decided to get things rolling. "I am the leader of the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness."

The dwarves began to move as though their power buttons had been pushed.

"S-so good of you to come, Your Majesty, King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. Would you first please take a seat? Your attendants may sit over there."

Ainz nodded and sat at the head of the table with a practiced air of kingly dignity. Shalltear, Aura, and Zenbel took the seats behind him.

"All right, Your Majesty. Allow us to introduce ourselves. First, I am this country's—"

And the dwarves each introduced themselves.

Apparently, Ainz had started the conversation off right, but he couldn't help but be irritated.

Sure, all eight of them could give him their names at once, but his brain's notepad was full. He was listening, but pairing titles with names and looks was proving difficult.

It was easy enough to remember the names, but when he had to remember their roles as well, that was when he started to have trouble. *Was it the chief of caves and mines or the chief of mines and caves?* Ainz quickly became confused.

Even so, he managed to remember them all. That said, if he hadn't heard about them from the supreme commander ahead of time, it would have been an impossible feat.

"On behalf of all dwarves, I'd like to thank you. If it weren't for Your Majesty, our country would have been destroyed."

It was the chief of caves and mines who spoke. All the other dwarves present followed his lead and bowed their heads as well.

Apparently, the eight of them took turns leading the association, so perhaps it was currently the chief of caves and mines's turn.

"Don't worry about it. Everyone needs help sometimes."

"Your Majesty is so generous. If you ever need help, we'll do our utmost to assist. Unfortunately, unlike you, who can save our entire country with just two soldiers, I'm not sure there is much we can do."

"That's hardly the case. I have military strength, yes, but I'm less confident in other areas. If you could help me with those things, I would really appreciate it."

"I see. We'd be happy to be of assistance to Your Majesty—and the Nation of Darkness. But first, could you tell us what the purpose of your visit is? The supreme commander explained it, but we'd like to hear once more from you directly, if you please."

The chief of caves and mines's eyes narrowed slightly.

His gaze seemed to resolutely declare, *We'll see through any lies!*

I'm not getting many positive vibes from this audience… Well, I suppose it's only natural to be wary when you're dealing with such a huge power disparity.

If the top-ranked guild in *Yggdrasil* showed up offering them a World Item and saying they wanted to negotiate, Ainz would have assumed it was a trap, too.

So he wasn't offended by the dwarves' reactions.

"First, I'd like to establish friendly relations. After that, I'd like to begin trading between our countries."

“I see.”

“I heard from one of your people that your main foods are mushrooms and meats. I also heard that you have vegetable fields at the base of the mountains but you can’t grow many varieties or large quantities. We can offer you fresh vegetables and also—are you interested in the alcoholic drinks of the human countries and the Nation of Darkness?”

At the mention of alcohol, the dwarves’ eyes sparkled. It was an extremely honest, easy-to-read response.

“I’ve come to learn that you’re trading with the humans in the east but that the deals aren’t terribly large.”

“That’s right. At the moment, our trade deals are limited to what twenty dwarves can carry. That’s why we’re working on developing bags that can hold an infinite amount of objects.” It was the chief of the merchant council who answered.

“I see. The reason you can’t send a larger dwarf caravan is apparently because the mountain paths are steep. Is that true?”

“Yes.” A different dwarf answered. “The roads are so sheer, we can’t take too much luggage. And if we travel in a bigger group, we would attract the attention of monsters. There are a lot of beasts that will attack despite being outnumbered. It’s especially tricky if we’re set upon from the sky.”

Coming to the dwarf kingdom via a normal method certainly would involve a lot of work. The trade between the empire and the dwarf country must have been so small-scale because the returns weren’t high enough to be worth the risk. But that made the dwarf country a great trading partner for the Nation of Darkness.

At the moment, unfortunately, the Nation of Darkness didn’t have any specialty product that was superior to what could be found in other countries, besides undead. But when dealing with the dwarves, even regular food was an acceptable trade good.

They’re a perfect trading partner.

Ainz grinned internally and said, “If that’s the case, then I recommend

negotiating a deal with me—with the Nation of Darkness—and importing foodstuffs."

"…We haven't heard where your nation is located yet. Is it somewhere we can carry the cargo on our own?"

"Currently, it would be too dangerous to have you transport everything with your people alone. First, we'll take the lead, and in the future, I'd like to set up a proper trading route so your people will be able to transport goods safely, too. We'll even make roads for wagons. Of course, we won't use anything as weak as horses. We'll rely on something with more powerful locomotive forces."

"Do you mean…undead?" one of the dwarves asked with a disgusted look on his face.

Ainz seemed to recall this dwarf was the chief of the smith shops.

"That's correct. Wagons pulled by undead, who are strangers to fatigue and have the means to defend themselves, are a superior form of transport. In fact, we've already implemented them in my nation, and the response from the citizens has been extremely good. And those aren't the only reasons to use undead—"

Ainz was happily chattering away when the chief of the smith shops interrupted. "I heard undead attack the living, though."

Ainz pouted due to his internal dissatisfaction but replied with confidence. "It's true that many people feel that way about undead. And that is a fact: undead despise and attack the living. But!" Ainz forcefully declared, "With an absolute ruler like me, the undead being used in the Nation of Darkness pose no threat. I hope you can trust me."

The chief of the smith shops twisted his mouth into a frown. He didn't seem to believe Ainz.

Does he have some bad memory of his family being taken from him by undead? Ainz thought as he played his trump card.

"My nation also can offer a workforce for hire."

"A workforce?"

“During my travels, I heard from a dwarf I saved from the kuagoa”—not that Ainz had saved him per se, but it wasn’t a total lie, either, so he decided to score a favor—“about dwarves laboring in the mines. I think we could replace dwarf miners with undead.”

“What? You could do that?” the chief of caves and mines bit out, his eyes open wide.

“Of course. We’ve already attempted it in a human country and succeeded. The mine owner who is borrowing undead has even asked for more hands.”

This was no lie. Albedo had told him about it when he sent a worried Message one time.

“Human countries are doing that sort of thing?” The chief of caves and mines sounded impressed.

“You seem to understand the characteristics of undead…”

“Yes, well, at least the general gist,” the chief of the great earth shrine chimed in.

Ainz asked, “Then I don’t have to tell you what a great workforce undead can be, do I?”

The dwarves exchanged looks and began commenting all at once.

“We understand very well what Your Majesty is saying, certainly. If you can really control the undead safely…”

“If we could use the manpower currently committed to the mines for something else, it’s quite a tempting proposition.”

“But…”

The rest of the sentence must have been, *Can we really trust undead?* Besides, it was only natural to feel resistance toward changing the way things had always been done.

Really, Ainz was only promoting his wares a little; it wasn’t as if he was full-on recommending them already. But of course, he would be happy if the dwarves would accept undead laborers.

“I simply meant that offering such a workforce is one possibility. I understand your anxiety regarding un—”

“Your Majesty, King of Darkness, first, I’d like to ask something about these undead. Would it be possible to use them for defense?”

The supreme commander’s question caused a stir to ripple through the group of dwarves.

“Commander, leaving the safekeeping of our country up to another nation’s military strength is a huge risk!”

“I know that. But His Majesty’s undead are powerful. They could probably halt the kuagoa if they attacked again. Purchasing them as a last line of defense could be a great boon. Our top priority is the safety of the nation’s people. Now that the fort has fallen, we need something else to rely on, some other power.”

“Don’t you think it’s more dangerous to be under the thumb of another country?”

“I’m saying we’re not in a position to discuss such things!”

The chief of the smith shops and the supreme commander glared at each other.

“…How about we leave it at that for now? We can review that later among just us dwarves. It’s not the kind of thing to discuss in the presence of visiting royalty. Apologies for that embarrassing display, Your Majesty. I would appreciate if you could laugh off this argument and interpret it as a sign of how very attractive your proposal is. Now then, what is it you want from our country? I don’t think we have very much to offer, but…”

“That’s not true. First, I desire ore. My country has little in the way of natural deposits.”

“I see.” The chief of the merchant council grinned. “So that’s why you brought up the idea of an undead workforce earlier. Increasing mining yields would result in a surplus. That in turn would lower the price of the ore, is that it?”

Ainz hadn’t thought that far, but he nodded anyway. “That’s exactly it. You saw through my plan.”

A round of “I see” went through the dwarves.

“And I would also like to acquire weapons and armor crafted in your workshops. I recall hearing that items of dwarven make are the best.”

This was a truth multiple people he had talked to agreed on.

But processed goods cost more, and if he bought too much gear from the dwarf country, the number of blacksmiths in the Nation of Darkness would decrease. If there was an obvious gap in the technological skill between the two countries, he preferred to improve his own country’s capabilities rather than committing the blunder of importing too much superior dwarven gear.

On the other hand, without a rival in the market, the blacksmiths in the Nation of Darkness wouldn’t be motivated to improve. It was possible importing equipment produced in the dwarf country would inspire them.

Of course, there were various ways to strike a balance, such as imposing tariffs, but when he thought far ahead enough that he realized it would involve not only convincing the dwarves to buy his products but also spending money on foreign goods, it all started to seem like a pain.

Frankly, it was a matter that could be entrusted to Albedo and Demiurge, but Ainz was thinking about it, too.

Maybe he could sell the gear exclusively at the new Adventurers Guild or lend pieces out to working adventurers.

That would be appealing for low-ranking adventurers, and if it meant more of their lives would be saved, that would benefit the Nation of Darkness as well. And once the items got older, they could be sold at a discount, further increasing adventurer survival rates.

“Your Majesty, there are no words to express our gratitude for all that you’ve done for us, but that’s a question that is difficult to answer on the spot. If possible, we’d like to discuss this at length, especially regarding the weapons and armor. Might we have some time?”

“Of course. I want for you to talk it over until you reach a conclusion. And I’m in no great hurry, either. My subordinates already have first-rate armor. I’m after equipment for my country’s citizens to use.”

Now, then, thought Ainz.

This is where it gets serious. It's time to do what I came here for.

"Should we talk about the kuagoa now?"

The atmosphere abruptly tensed.

"I went ahead and dealt with the kuagoa invasion myself. That's correct, isn't it, Commander?"

"It's as you say."

"And if I hadn't been there, what would have happened?"

"We had been holding back the kuagoa behind a single set of doors, so if the gate had been breached and Your Majesty hadn't been there, we probably would have had to mobilize the city's inhabitants for an urban battle. I imagine that while we bought time that way, others would have found a location to evacuate to and helped the children escape."

The dwarves all wore sober looks.

It probably helped that the supreme commander had come to talk to them first, but the fact that there were no objections or refutations spoke to what capable individuals were gathered here.

Ainz was confident he could say that because no one was bringing up their ideals, no one was purely interested in what was personally convenient, and no one was arguing based on their emotions. When people who got carried away like that were involved, especially in positions of power, it was a waste of time where nothing was decided, and negotiations would inevitably end on an ambiguous note. The fact that the regency council was nothing like that was praiseworthy.

"Could we hear what would have happened after that? How would the battle have ended up?"

"I can't say for sure, since we don't know the size of the enemy army, but if we estimate a thousand kuagoa, we would have been in a fairly precarious situation. It would have been difficult to repel them, and even if we could, the losses of both resources and personnel would have ramifications on the

country’s strength.”

The supreme commander explained why that was the case.

It was because the fort at the Great Chasm was so strong. The history of thinking *As long as we have the fort, we’re protected* bred conceit. That was an issue Ainz couldn’t ignore, either.

He had learned himself during the incident with Shalltear what happened when he was careless.

“If you only have one last resort, then its failure spells the end. That’s why I believe we should have another card up our sleeves, even if we have to accept His Majesty’s assistance.”

Ainz held up a hand to interrupt the dwarf who seemed to want to say something. The supreme commander had hijacked the flow of the conversation, but Ainz wasn’t done talking yet. “The kuagoa have been repelled for now, but it’s not as if we’ve secured lasting peace for Fehu Jura. At least, I don’t think we have yet.”

The dwarves looked grim.

After making sure everyone understood that, Ainz felt that now was the time to push. “Without me, the next kuagoa invasion will be difficult to stop. And it would be problematic for me if this country ceased to exist because I want to establish a trade agreement. So how about it? Will you accept my help? With my nation’s strength, I think we can get you set up so at least the kuagoa don’t attack for a while… Yes, perhaps we could take back the dwarf city they’re currently using as their base.”

A tremor disturbed the air.

This was different from their previous reactions.

The chief of caves and mines licked his lips. “Your Majesty, are you saying that would be possible?”

“I would pour all my energy into making it happen.”

The chief of the smith shops crossed his arms with a surly attitude and rolled his eyes to take in Ainz. “That’s too good to be true. Why would you help us

that much? What are you after in exchange?”

“Hey, that’s going too far!”

The chief of the smith shops snorted at his fellow dwarf’s rebuke. “You wouldn’t be wary of a stranger suddenly offering you tasty drinks?”

“Mmmph!”

“That’s a fair doubt to have. Then, let’s speak frankly. One reason is that I’m more interested in a diplomatic relationship with your country than with the kuagoa. I think your people are more likely to have common sense, understand what a deal is, and be grateful. And in the first place, which side would be more grateful for the help—the one about to win or the one about to lose?”

“Hmph. That makes sense.”

“And the second reason is that I don’t want mere gratitude but payment in goods.”

“I see, so it’s compensation. Would that be in precious metals like gold or rare ore? Would you want mining privileges as well?”

Yes, Ainz wanted to say, but he forced himself to hold back.

“No, what I want is something different. I want to invite this country’s rune crafters to my country.”

All the dwarves blinked.

“What? You’re going to have to explain.”

The chief of the smith shops was frowning harder than the others.

“…There are very few rune-enchanted items in the countries around the Nation of Darkness, so they’re prized. In other words, the added value is high, so I want to invite the rune crafters to work in my country.”

“You mean you’ll take them as slaves?”

Ainz replied to the chief of the smith shops with an overt sigh. “No, I won’t do that. Did you listen to what I was saying? I want to establish diplomatic relations and trade, and you’re asking if I want to enslave your people…? Honestly, I’m a bit disappointed. I only want to invite your artisans to craft in my country.

That's all."

"Then, what if instead we gave you the right to purchase before items go to market?"

"…No. The returns aren't high enough. If you want to borrow my country's strength, I want to have the rune crafters working in the Nation of Darkness and selling exclusively to us. That's what my country wants in return for retaking your former capital. When can I expect a response?"

The dwarves exchanged glances.

"Could we have you wait until tomor—?"

"That's no good," the supreme commander interrupted. "You're forgetting that we're under attack. If we say we want His Majesty to fight the kuagoa, he'll have to amass an army. With that in mind, we should decide now, not wait until tomorrow."

Ainz looked around at the dwarves. "It's not my place to say anything about that. But if you wait until things are dire to tell me you accept my current offer, that'll be a problem. If the situation worsens considerably, I'll take the liberty of adding more terms. It's only natural that a rush job requires extra compensation."

"Yes. What the supreme commander says makes sense, and what Your Majesty says is a matter of course. In that case, I apologize, Your Majesty, but could you return to the waiting room? We'll make our decision as fast as possible."

"That's fine. I'll be waiting in the other room, then."

Ainz stood up and left, accompanied by his subordinates.

•

Even after the King of Darkness left the meeting room, silence reigned. Finally, someone let out a deep sigh, and the tense atmosphere softened.

"Wh-what is that guy?"

"He's a complete monster. Commander, what's this about a 'terrifying' monster? Are you sure you didn't mean 'utterly bloodcurdling'?"

“I nearly pissed myself!”

The dwarves began shouting at once. All the thoughts they had just barely been holding in flooded out.

“What should we do? He’s clearly evil. If even one of the things he said was true, I’d be surprised.”

“Anyone giving off such an evil aura can’t be good. There’s no telling how many he’s killed up until now!”

“Right. With that horrifying face, I can easily picture him saying something like, ‘Only the heavens know how many lives I’ve taken.’”

“He must be stockpiling weapons for an invasion. For his army of darkness.”

“And the worst part is how everything he says makes sense and is so easy to understand. I’m sure when you sell your soul, the devil behaves exactly the same way. In other words, I bet he’s trying to catch us in a bad deal and reap all the benefits himself.”

“In which case it makes sense that he would go out of his way to ask us nicely. Maybe it’s fine to take him up on his offer, then.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because we can coexist. It would mean that as long as the King of Darkness wants ore, we’ll be under his protection. Think of it like this: The King of Darkness is a very hungry, very thirsty mercenary.”

As the conversation shifted from how dangerous a deal would be to how they would actually be safe as long as they were valuable, one dwarf raised a cold voice.

“You mean you’re willing to serve that undead?”

It was the chief of the smith shops, who had been consistently negative. Everyone else turned to him.

“It’s not about liking it or not. Our country is in crisis. If we don’t at least do something about the kuagoa, we’ll be destroyed.”

“…And we can’t handle the kuagoa on our own.”

“Then, what about asking the empire for help? Wouldn’t it be safer to work with a country we already have a long history with? We don’t know anything about the Nation of Darkness!”

“I doubt we could beat the kuagoa even with the empire’s cooperation. They’re a tough opponent for anyone fighting with weapons. And in the first place, humans can’t see in the dark, so they’re not well suited for combat underground. If we could lure the kuagoa to the surface, it’d be a different story, but we don’t have a way to do that.”

“Then our only choice is the Nation of Darkness. First, let’s ask for help. We can consider trade once we’ve seen the place.”

“That would be the safest option, but isn’t the whole deal that we start diplomatic relations and trade in exchange for driving off the kuagoa? If we refuse to trade, we’d have to pay an appropriate amount in compensation… I don’t even want to think about how much it would cost to save an entire country.”

The dwarves wore solemn expressions.

“Is accepting his proposal the only way to save our country? I guess all we can do is devote ourselves to one day becoming independent from the King of Darkness, probably several decades in the future.”

Everyone was agreeing except the chief of caves and mines, who muttered, “If we adopt undead miners, we’ll be even more dependent on him in a few decades,” but no one showed any interest in his concern. That was because someone else said something that grabbed all their ears.

There was a loud pound on the table.

“You’re forgetting one very important thing. We can’t force members of our own race to be slaves! I’m firmly against this.”

“Slaves?”

“The rune crafters!”

“Didn’t the King of Darkness tell us they wouldn’t be slaves?”

“Are you serious?! You actually believe him?!”

“Nnngh…” The other dwarf hung his head.

“See? You can’t even say for certain.”

Even if the King of Darkness was telling the truth, it was a hard idea to swallow for anyone who knew the basic fact that undead detested the living.

“They’re not just hostages?”

“I don’t think so. They wouldn’t have to be rune crafters if that was the case. He would have asked for our families.”

“…Do we have any treasures that might change his mind?”

“No. Although, if he takes back the capital and the royal coffers are still intact, we could give him the contents.”

“Nah, he won’t agree to that. We’re getting his help to take back the capital. Would you feel like you got a good deal if as payment for capturing a city, you were told to just take the items out of the treasury?”

“…Honestly, I think we should accept his proposal.”

The chief of the smith shops shot a sharp look at the chief of the merchant council.

“But slaves!”

“You’re just convincing yourself of that! The King of Darkness said they wouldn’t be enslaved. We can send someone in the future to ascertain the truth of it. And in the first place…this is an awful thing to say, but…rune crafting is a technology of the past. Considering they’re about to disappear, I don’t think it really matters if that’s what we hand over. Aren’t we getting a good deal, actually? If that’s the fee?”

“We’ll lose one of our technologies completely!”

“But this is probably the time to sell!”

“I’m against it!” the chief of the smith shops shouted, sending spittle flying.

“Is that conclusion based on logic? It doesn’t seem like it to me.”

“I can’t understand why you all trust the King of Darkness so much!”

At that point, the supreme commander chimed in coolly. Having fought directly with the kuagoa, he was the one who best understood the position the city was in. Which was why, though he had been taking a back seat despite feeling all this talk was worthless, he couldn't stand by any longer. "It's less that we trust him and more that without his help, this city is already lost. I can only see your attitude as throwing away the one lifeline we have."

"Why, you little—"

"I'm the one responsible for the military! And I'm saying that there's no way to protect this city without accepting His Majesty the King of Darkness's help! Do you mean to destroy this place?! If not, then what's your plan to repel the kuagoa without him, you old fart?!"

"Ha! You've been calling that monster 'His Majesty' this whole time. Are you sure you haven't committed treason?!" The chief of the smith shops stood and grabbed the supreme commander by his lapels as he laid out his accusation.

"What's that, old fart? You wanna go? I'm pretty sure it's only natural to show some respect to someone so unbelievably powerful! *I* can't believe *you* guys! We're talking about someone who could easily destroy this country on a whim! If I'm a traitor to our country, then you're putting its people's very lives in danger!" When the supreme commander grabbed the smith shops chief's lapels as well, their foreheads bumped against each other.

"Hey now! It's fine to disagree, but let's not start a fight!"

The other dwarves stood up in a hurry and pulled the two apart.

But they glared at each other and seemed ready to grapple again.

"Let's take a vote for now. If you're still dissatisfied, we can talk more about it later. That's healthier than a brawl, right?"

"So what are we voting on, then?"

"First, assuming we accept the King of Darkness's assistance, who agrees with sending the rune crafters? Put your hands up."

Everyone but the chief of the smith shops raised their hands.

"Hmm. On to the next item, then. Should we begin diplomatic and trade

relations with the Nation of Darkness? Raise a hand if you agree.”

The results were the same as the first vote.

“I see. That’s the end of the debate regarding…His Majesty the King of Darkness. Sorry, Commander, but will you call him in?”

2

Ainz and his party were once again called into the regency council’s conference room. When he went inside, there was one disgruntled-looking dwarf, but the others seemed friendly. The supreme commander appeared relieved.

Apparently, things have gone according to my demands, thought Ainz with an internal smile.

“My apologies for having you come again, Your Majesty. We’ve discussed your offer, and we’ve decided that we’d like to accept. First, we wish to take advantage of your kindness and garrison your soldiers here. Then we’ll establish a diplomatic relationship and begin trade. But we think the decisions on what particular items and the deal’s exact structure should be made in a separate meeting.”

“That makes sense. For now I’ll lend you enough soldiers to retake the fort immediately and keep the kuagoa at bay. As for diplomatic relations and the rest, I’ll send for someone to handle that at a later date. We can hash those out then.”

Ainz sighed internally.

He didn’t know anything about that kind of stuff, so he needed to leave it up to Albedo. He was relieved they didn’t press him to settle it all now.

“And regarding sending the rune crafters to your nation in exchange for you retaking our capital city, we accept. But in order to make sure they’re being treated properly, we’d like to send an inspection party to the Nation of Darkness in the future. Can Your Majesty agree to that?”

“Of course. I promise the Nation of Darkness will grant access to your inspection party.”

The dwarves were visibly relieved.

Did they want to observe the factory work? They probably wanted to make sure labor regulations were being adhered to. *It’s normal to be incapable of complying with all the regulations, but I swore I wouldn’t produce people like HeroHero. I’ll establish rules that will wow even the dwarves when they come to visit and have the rune crafters doing all sorts of things, including developing their technology.*

Ainz nodded at the concerned dwarves.

But wow, I really owe it to the kuagoa. The whole reason we’re in this situation in the first place is that they captured the fort. If this invasion hadn’t taken place at exactly the right time, things never would’ve gone this well, and I’m sure it would have taken a whole bunch of time and money to invite the rune crafters. I feel kinda bad exterminating the kuagoa…

Wasn’t kindness supposed to be repaid with kindness?

“When do you think you will be able to carry out the operation to take back the capital?”

“Hmm… I intend to act immediately.”

It was highly unlikely that the kuagoa who killed the death knights was a player, but he couldn’t say for sure that there were no links. He needed to find out right away.

“Thank you. Fehu Berkana returning to the dwarven fold is truly a dream come true. I’m sure the people will be glad to have Your Majesty’s assistance, too. They’ll probably be willing to tolerate things that otherwise might have been difficult for them to swallow.”

Does that mean if I can’t retake the capital, diplomacy will be tricky? I didn’t really think I was asking so much, but I guess that was only my personal feeling on the matter?

“Understood. Then, let’s get ready.” Ainz nodded and then remembered

something. “Oh, I did have a question. Do you mind?”

“Wh-what is it, Your Majesty?” a dwarf asked timidly.

The frightened attitude was bewildering to Ainz. He was fairly sure he hadn’t done anything to scare them, but now he had to wonder. Somewhat anxious, he asked for a favor. “I want to give a present to a lizardman, so I’d like to ask you to use your superior dwarven crafting methods to create some fitting armor.”

Someone behind him gasped.

“Oh right. Zenbel.” Ainz turned around to speak to the shocked lizardman. “It’s for Zaryusu. To celebrate the birth of his baby.”

The reason he brought this up, naturally, was to keep Zaryusu alive. He needed him to father a great many rare lizardman children. It was only natural to give such a man fine armor.

The dwarves all looked at the chief of the smith shops.

With his arms crossed and his lips twisted into a frown as he stared at Ainz, he didn’t seem very keen.

“Well? Will you make the armor for me?”

When Ainz asked again, the other dwarves pressed the chief of the smith shops, and he nodded, though he didn’t seem happy about it.

“What size? We can cover the cost.”

“Magic armor adjusts automatically. Is it possible to enchant it like that here?”

“I don’t know about magic. That’s under the chief of the great earth shrine’s jurisdiction.”

“Lower-tier magic is doable. But is that all right with you, Your Majesty? I’m sure you can get more powerful enchantments in your realm.”

Truth be told, there weren’t really any good magic artisans in the Nation of Darkness. Magic artisans were casters with a specific set of skills who belonged to the Wizards Guild, but at present the Wizards Guild in the Nation of Darkness

was as good as disbanded.

Aside from that, there was the option of enchanting it in Nazarick, but that would require *Yggdrasil* data crystals. Since he couldn't acquire any more of them in this world, he wanted to conserve his supply as much as possible. At present, no members of Nazarick possessed the skills to enchant items the way they did in this world.

In other words, it was virtually impossible to enchant things in the Nation of Darkness. But that didn't mean Ainz had to come out and say so.

"In that case, we'll just fortify them even more. The main thing is that I want armor made in this city. It can serve as advertising for dwarven gear, too."

"Oh-ho." The chief of the smith shops smiled slightly. "I'm sure we can have it done within a week."

"Is that so? Glad to hear it. All right, I'll take the capital by then. Well, I might finish early and just enjoy myself around town."

"Hmph. Then, I'll make it faster."

He didn't mean that it would be unfortunate to make Ainz wait. More likely, he meant he wanted Ainz out of the city, so he would get it over with as soon as possible.

Why does he dislike me so much? I'm basically a hero to this country! Not to mention the soon-to-be liberator of its occupied capital. I'm fairly certain I haven't done anything to earn so much hate… Is he just one of those stubborn types?

"Regarding payment—"

"Like I said, not necessary."

"For the production costs this time, I'll accept your offer. I mean in terms of sample merchandise. Can you tell me what you can do and what price you can do it for?"

"…Setting prices isn't part of my job. Hey, merchant council chief. I'll leave the pricing up to you."

"…In which case, the price depends first on the type of metal you use…"

“I see.” Ainz took care in phrasing his next question so as not to reveal his true feelings. “What’s the name of the most valuable metal this city has?”

If something like types of prismatic ore were mentioned, there was a possibility he would have to scrap all their negotiations thus far and conquer the dwarves by force.

But that worry turned out to be unnecessary.

The metal the dwarf mentioned was adamantite.

“Adamantite, huh? There’s nothing harder? Or even if it’s not quite as hard but is some rare metal that can only be mined in these mountains or something, that would be of interest, too.”

The dwarf said he didn’t know of anything.

It was possible they were keeping it secret and simply not answering honestly. Which meant they would never answer a straight question. However, if he used Charm or some other mind manipulation power, the dwarf would retain the memory of Ainz’s manipulation, so he couldn’t do that unless he killed him afterward. Unfortunately, it seemed he wouldn’t be able to acquire any more information at the moment. Gondo had said he didn’t know of anything, either, so all Ainz could do was hope the older rune crafters had an idea.

Ainz hid his disappointment and grasped the ingot he had kept under his robe for this occasion.

“Then, allow me to offer this metal. You can let me know how much it will cost to process it.”

What he produced was a level-45 metal. It wasn’t all that strong, but it was far harder than adamantite.

With armor made of this, Zaryusu’s defense would increase dramatically and he would be protected from almost any opponent this world had to offer.

“What is this?”

The puzzlement on the smith shops chief’s face when he picked up the ingot convinced Ainz that they weren’t able to mine metal like it in this area.

“Disap…” Ainz nearly slipped up and said *disappointing* out loud but managed

to trail off instead. This armor was going to be a gift for Zaryusu; he didn't feel like it would be very nice to whine in front of the artisan who would create it. "It's a fairly decent metal. I'm pretty sure I have a weapon made with it. Excuse me for a moment."

Ainz stood, left the room, and opened his inventory. After digging around a bit, he took out an oddly shaped dagger—often in *Yggdrasil* one would come across items that weren't for practical use but for fashion. Then he returned to the meeting room.

At the sight of Ainz entering with a dagger, the dwarves all started to get up; he slid it across the table, and luckily it stopped in front of the chief of the smith shops.

Instead of picking it up, the dwarf just stared at it in fear. There must have been something bothering him about it.

"This is made of the same metal. It's a dagger, and what I want you to make is armor, so I'm not sure how useful a reference it will be, but… Do you think you can do it?"

For some reason, the chief of the smith shops blushed. "I'll do it!"

In response to the dwarf's enthusiastic reply, Ainz nodded. "Great. Thanks. For now, I'd like a mail shirt. I'll lend you the dagger, so if you need it for something, feel free to use it. Zenbel, you're probably the one who knows the most about Zaryusu. If he has questions about the size of his body or something, answer them."

"Got it, Your Majesty."

"Well…that's all I have for the moment. Unless you have something, I'll take my leave."

"Where will you go, Your Majesty?"

"Oh, Commander. You remember the dwarf I saved down south, right? I was invited to his house, so I'm planning to stay there tonight… We can save the welcome ceremony and whatnot for later."

Of course, he couldn't very well say, *Don't hold one because I don't want to*

make a fool of myself.

The supreme commander looked a bit troubled. “What Your Majesty says is quite right; however, I can’t help but feel it would look bad for the savior of our country to arrange his own accommodations. We’ll prepare our finest room, so would you do us the honor of resting there?”

Ainz thought. What the commander was saying made sense. There didn’t seem to be any reason to refuse the offer.

“All right, let’s go with that. Later on, I’ll pay a visit to Gondo, the dwarf who guided me here, and let him know about the change of plans as well as apologize.” Ainz asked if that would be fine, and neither the supreme commander nor anyone else had any objections.

3

A dwarf opened the door again and came in. It was a rune crafter. There weren’t many in the city who still called themselves rune crafters, but this was one of them.

Gondo had handed something from the King of Darkness out to all the rune crafters he knew, and the effect was massive. It wasn’t even time yet, but 90 percent of them had already shown up at his workshop-cum-laboratory. He was sure the others would be there by the appointed hour.

“Over here!”

“Oh! Hey, Gondo. I made it, kid!” The dwarf coming toward him with thumping footsteps had an expectant look on his face. “So can I have the thing you promised?”

How many times had he repeated this exchange so far? It was a pain, but it was work, so he sucked it up and gave the same response he had given to all the others. “The King of Darkness has something to tell everyone. Then you can have it.”

“What?”

“I’m pretty sure I told you before I gave you the small bottle. There’s something the King of Darkness wants to tell you, and if you listen to everything he has to say, then you’ll get a big bottle.”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I do seem to remember something about that.”

“If you understand, then please go take a seat and wait.”

“Okay… But, kid, I, uh…”

He didn’t need to hear the rest to know what it was about. It was the same thing all the other rune crafters had said.

“Only His Majesty the King of Darkness has that tasty drink. I’m sure you know that. Did we ever have anything so delicious in our country?”

“Y-yeah. You’re right. That mellow flavor… The heat in your stomach after it flows down your throat…”

“Uh-huh, I know, so go sit down.”

“Why so heartless? I’m sure you drank some, so you must know how I feel.”

“I didn’t have any. I don’t like alcohol.”

“What a waste! You’re missing out on eighty percent of life, kid!”

“Sure, sure. Now go sit down. Look, all those guys drank it, so you can have more fun chatting with them.”

“Ooh, okay!”

The dwarf walked off cheerfully but then froze and turned back. Most of the other crafters had done the same.

“Hey, but, kid…”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“Are you sure? It’s just that—”

“I’m really all right, so… Okay?”

“…I getcha. But remember this: You can count on me anytime.”

With that, the crafter walked off again. He took a seat and began discussing the drink with the other crafters.

Gondo sighed, feeling a twinge of pain in his heart.

What he had received from the King of Darkness to distribute among the rune crafters was alcohol.

Gondo didn't drink, but dwarves were suckers for tasty spirits. He had assumed that if they handed out a small bottle of a rare drink and promised larger portions to any crafters who attended a meeting, probably half of them would show up. That had been his proposal, but…

It was practically a full house.

Gondo emitted another sigh. Personally, he would have liked to avoid this sort of trick and instead appeal to their pride as crafters.

But maybe that was an issue of his own ego.

The King of Darkness had managed to gather everyone using the quickest optimal method. Gondo was sure that if he had tried to assemble them all based on pride alone, it would have taken much longer.

Half the crafters were desperate prisoners of the despair resulting from the horrible situation they were in, their gloomy future prospects, and the loss of the proof that they and their ancestors had been alive. There weren't many who still called themselves rune crafters and did that sort of work. Most of them had taken their workshop signs down and now led dark, dreary lives that earned just enough for their daily bread.

Would this light become a flame inside them once again?

When it was time, Gondo counted heads. No one was missing.

"Well? Lord Ainz is asking if he can start."

It was Aura, the dark elf who assisted the King of Darkness, who had jogged over to him.

"Oh, can you tell him that everyone's here, so he can go ahead?"

"Sure thing."

The girl dashed away. As Gondo watched her go, he cocked his head.

He didn't really understand her. *Why does such a terrible monster value her as an aide? Is she proof of his friendship with the dark elves?*

As Gondo was thinking those things, Ainz Ooal Gown got up on the slightly raised dais. Another woman aide was beside him.

"Whoooooaaaa!"

"It's an undead!"

"An enemy?"

The dwarves made a clattering commotion. Of course they did. Undead were the natural enemies of all life.

"Th—"

"Quiet."

The woman, Shalltear Bloodfallen, raised a bottle she held in her hand.

Everyone could see the amber liquid gleaming inside. The dwarves knew what was good for them, and they all shifted their gazes from the face of the undead to the bottle and fell silent.

"Lord Ainz, did you say something?"

"No, nothing. Thank you, Shalltear… Now then, I appreciate you all coming. We have enough of these bottles for everyone, so please take one as you leave. Until then, I'd like you to listen quietly to what I have to say. Of course, if you don't think an undead could say anything worthwhile, you can leave right now. But in that case, we won't be able to give you a bottle."

The King of Darkness surveyed the dwarves.

His attitude and the pacing of his pauses conveyed an overpowering awesomeness befitting someone on a throne. His dramatic demeanor was especially magnificent. Power seemed to thrum in his very being, down to the tips of his fingers.

"So…may I begin?"

The dwarves nodded, maintaining their silence.

“For starters, I am Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. I am the ruler of a land south of these mountains, past the Tove Woodlands. I am truly happy to make the acquaintance of you rune crafters. Now, what I have to say is extremely simple, and it’s a request. I want you to come to my country and work on developing innovative enchantment technology using your runes.”

Gondo felt like he had been stabbed through the heart with a thorn—a small thorn made up of emotions like despair and resignation.

He shook his head slightly.

Clearing his mind of the memories of his father and grandfather, Gondo surveyed the rune crafters and saw that they all wore grim expressions. It didn’t seem like they would respond favorably.

“’Scuse me, I have a question.” The dwarf who put his hand up glanced at Gondo. “Why do you want our technology? Honestly, it’s on its way out even in this country.” He was one of the oldest of the rune crafters.

“…That’s simple. I want to have you reproduce lost knowledge.”

“Lost?”

In response to the dwarf’s puzzled look, the King of Darkness drew a sword from thin air.

Everyone yelped.

They were astounded to see him pull a sword out of nowhere. Additionally, the sight of a skeleton king with a sinister aura wielding a sword was terrifying. Those were both certainly factors.

But Gondo, like the others, shouted mainly in awe.

It was such a beautiful sword with a black blade. The sharpest blade they had probably ever seen gleamed with the magic it harbored.

“What…what a gorgeous sword…”

“Amazing… I’ve never seen anything like it in my entire life…”

“Ohhh! What a wondrous sight!”

The King of Darkness held the sword up where the dwarves could see it.

Gondo followed the sparkle without thinking.

“Now, dwarves, I want you to focus on the blade.”

When Gondo looked where the king’s bony finger was pointing, he yelped in spite of himself. “Ah!” All the other crafters reacted in the same way.

There were twenty purple runes carved into the blade.

But Gondo was the only one who knew that one of them was the rune the king had mentioned when they first met in the tunnel.

Aha, so that’s why he knows so much about runes.

He must have studied the sword and learned that way.

“I want to ask the crafters here a question. This sword has twenty runes carved into it. Is that possible?”

The answer was obvious. *No, it can’t be done.* No matter how much any of those present labored, it was impossible. But here was a sword that laughed at them for it.

The crafters stood up with a clatter. Passionate flames burned in their eyes. Yet, it was a completely different emotion from when they were talking about the drink. They all pressed in on the King of Darkness like zombies swarming around a living thing.

“Let me see!”

“Please! Let me touch it!”

“I might be able to learn something! I beg you!”

“Stay back!” The silver-haired woman scowled at the approaching dwarves with a terrifying grimace. Just as the dwarves froze from the chill that went through them like an icy blade—

“Quiet, all of you. What a racket.”

There was a true ruler.

He had a presence that only someone who was certain of his sovereignty could produce. Or perhaps it was because he was a being who ruled even death.

Gondo realized that when they met in the cave, the king had merely been concealing that part of himself, acting so Gondo wouldn't shrink away. It was only now that he laid eyes on his true form.

I can't read his expression, but he seems happy. Must be because everyone is reacting the way he wanted.

"Wait, crafters. Listen to the end. When I'm finished, you can touch it. Until you're seated once more, I'm not saying anything else, and I won't give you the sword."

Reluctantly—withering beneath the energy of the king—the dwarves returned to their seats.

"Thank you. Now I'll continue. My question from before—is it possible to carve twenty runes into a single sword like this?"

Everyone's eyes gathered on the eldest veteran. His shook his head sadly. "No. As far as I know, the most that can be done is six."

The revelation caused a stir and shouting erupted.

"What? Six? I've only ever seen five."

"…Oh, I suppose lots of people aren't aware. It was two hundred years ago, but the king at the time had a hammer with six runes. It's one of the dwarven treasures from the rune crafters' golden age."

Gondo remembered his grandfather—the face of the master rune crafter who had a hand in producing weapons two hundred years ago.

"Ohhh! You mean the hammer that could cause massive earthquakes? I heard of it in a song…"

"Yes. Even in the age where such crafters said to possess both genius minds and supernatural skills were working, there were no weapons carved with twenty runes…"

"I see. Then, this must have been made with technology that has since been lost."

"What? Your Majesty doesn't know?"

“I don’t know how it was made. I merely acquired it. And…the ones who created it are no longer of this world.”

“How awful… So another precious technology has been lost.”

The crafters all wore pained expressions. Gondo was brimming with the same feeling.

“That’s exactly why”—everyone looked up when the King of Darkness spoke—“I want to bring it back. That’s why I want your power. I want you to create something on the level of this sword.”

Silence fell.

It went without saying how practically impossible that would be.

Even the most skilled rune crafter present could probably carve no more than four into a single piece. The king was telling them to accomplish something five times more difficult. But they couldn’t admit it was impossible. Having been shown the godly work of an artisan who must have lived in the past, their pride as crafters didn’t allow them to reply with a no.

Gondo felt as though that sword was a challenge from past crafters to the crafters of today.

“I want to make one,” a quiet voice said.

Soon, it was more than one.

“Me too.”

“I’m up for the challenge as well.”

“Heh. I want to drag it right out of the legends and into the present day.”

“Nah, I’ll be known as a new legend!”

“What are you talking about? That job’s too important—it’ll have to be mine!”

Suddenly someone was clapping. It was the King of Darkness up on the dais. Gondo had no idea how he was making that sound with his boney hands, but a caster that great could probably do anything.

“Wonderful. But do you think you fellows here are enough people to develop

the technology? Can you rival the legends? You might be able to, but you might not. For that reason, I'd like you to take apprentices in my country and spend the rest of your lives working toward this goal."

Another silence.

Gondo understood their feelings so much that it hurt.

They had clung to this declining technology in the dwarf country, and now they were being given a last chance at glory—wasn't it worth risking their lives for? "Okay, now I'll give you the sword."

The King of Darkness stepped off the dais, held the sword by the blade, and offered the grip to one of the older dwarves—whether by coincidence or because he had looked into it ahead of time, it was unclear—who was second only to Gondo's late father in terms of being considered a genius at rune crafting and one of the more articulate crafters present.

The dwarf's hand did not reach out.

It was only natural to be nervous, getting handed such a splendid sword.

"A-are you sure? You're fine giving this sword, the likes of which is impossible to acquire again, to me?"

"You are no longer dwarves lured by the promise of drink but rune crafters with the spirits of challengers. I can trust you. Plus, I'm going to be away from this city for a time, so I'm just lending it to you while I'm gone."

The dwarf straightened up. "…I see. Then, I shall humbly borrow it, Your Majesty." He bowed low and reverently received the sword.

"By the way, I don't know much about this sort of crafting. Would it be possible to simply carve runes on the blades of tools or whatnot and then enchant them?"

"No, that wouldn't work, Your Majesty. Runes are letters imbued with mana. We draw that enchantment out when we carve them. If a powerful caster were to try to enchant them, the runes would warp."

"Hmm…"

"By the way, you said you're leaving Fehu Jura for a while. Where are you

going?”

“I’m going to your old capital.”

A wave of groans passed through the dwarves.

“To that ruined—?”

“To that dangerous—?”

“But the kuagoa still control—!”

These were the voices Gondo heard.

He had heard all those things before, but there was something else that he couldn’t simply let go in one ear and out the other.

“If he’s going from here, there are three trials waiting for him. Will he be all right?”

“You mean the Three Impasses? They say it’s impossible to get past them. Even if you can manage the first one, getting through the Maze of Death is impossible.”

It was mainly older crafters talking about them. Sure enough, their experience as his elders meant they knew some things Gondo didn’t. He would have to get the details and report to the King of Darkness.

One of the older rune crafters straightened up and warned the king. “Your Majesty, that place is a dragon lair now. The king of the frost dragons, the White Dragonlord, might be there, too. That’s the dragon who destroyed the city we once had in the west, Fehu Teiwaz. Your Majesty is powerful, but I humbly caution that the dragon is every bit as strong. Please be careful.”

“…Dragons, huh? They make exceedingly intriguing opponents. I’ll be sure to keep my guard up.”

After that, there were a few more simple questions and answers before the meeting ended. They probably didn’t want to take too much of the king’s time because he was on his way to recapture the capital.

Or maybe they just wanted to start investigating the sword.

Gondo didn’t know which, but given the fire in their eyes, he guessed it was

the latter.

•

The urge to shout *Yahoo!* came over Ainz.

He always felt that way after giving a presentation. That hadn't changed from when he was Satoru Suzuki. Whether it succeeded or failed didn't matter—deep down, he just wanted to bask in the sense of liberation.

"Amazing, Lord Ainz! You really inspired them!"

"You were splendid, my lord. The only one in all of Nazarick who could accomplish such a thing is you."

Aura's and Shalltear's comments made him want to blush and shyly answer, *Nahhh*, but he held himself back. If it were Albedo or Demiurge, he would have been examining their expressions to know for sure if they were being serious or sarcastic, but when it was these two, he could simply accept the compliments. Satoru Suzuki would have said, *Agh, I'm beat. Guess I'll grab a drink*, and saunter over to a vending machine, but the ruler of Nazarick and king of the Nation of Darkness couldn't behave that way.

"Oh, it was nothing. Albedo or Demiurge could have gotten them even more excited."

"No, they couldn't have!"

"She's right! Those two couldn't have manipulated them as skillfully as you did!"

Ainz wasn't so sure about that, but it was true that he hadn't expected everything to go quite this well. He even felt slightly guilty.

It went without saying, but the sword he showed the dwarves was from *Yggdrasil*.

Yggdrasil didn't have a rune system. It was possible that it existed in the code, and the players simply never discovered it, but in any case, the runes on that sword were just for looks—pure decoration.

But it did well to stoke the dwarves' curiosity as to how it was made. He hadn't expected them to get so worked up, and he felt sort of bad if they were

coming to the Nation of Darkness specifically to re-create that sword.

But he suppressed the feelings of guilt.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick absolutely needed to be strengthened. He needed to amass fighting power to resist the people in possession of World Items and players he would probably encounter in the future.

Ainz looked at Shalltear.

The little vampire girl with a slight blush of color in her cheeks (though when he thought about it, he had no idea how that was possible). A child left to him by his friend Peroroncino. And the first NPC he had been forced to kill with his own hands.

The rage that billowed up inside him was quickly suppressed. Still, he would never forget that someone out there in possession of a World Item had forced him to do such a thing.

If he could get his revenge, the unhappiness of others due to a lie he had told was a trivial matter. The most important people in this world were those of Nazarick. Anyone else's lives were two or three notches less valuable.

Only a madman would value all lives equally.

If all lives are equally important, then put a criminal who tormented and murdered people in one electric chair and in another, put someone precious to someone who blathers on about equality, before telling the idealist to kill one. If that person can choose which to kill by rolling a die, then I'll be convinced they truly believe what they say.

But Ainz would absolutely kill the former—because he knew that all lives were not equally important. There was a huge difference between the people of Nazarick and everyone else.

"You're really always so brilliant, Lord Ainz!"

"How very true!"

The pair's overestimation of him continued, and it was starting to prick at his heart. Especially—

"Don't say stuff like *manipulate*; that sounds awful. I only told them the

truth.” He said it loud enough so that Gondo could hear it from behind him.

But Ainz didn’t get any reaction, so he turned around, perplexed.

Gondo, who had come to see him off, was trudging along with his head hanging down.

“…What’s wrong, Gondo?” he asked, and Gondo looked up.

“…Your Majesty, King of Darkness. Does that mean the regency council agreed to sending the rune crafters away during the meeting you just had?”

“That’s right. They’ll send an inspection party to make sure we’re not mistreating them, but they fully agreed to my plan.”

“I see… So the people in charge have really decided that we don’t need runes anymore…”

Tears spilled down Gondo’s face.

Ainz was surprised. Apart from childhood, it was awfully rare for him to see a man cry.

The technology he admired, the technology he was so proud of, had been declared worthless by his country; that must have been why Gondo was crying, but Ainz wondered if that was really true. In other words, the dwarf country wasn’t in a position to reject the request of someone offering them reinforcements.

Sacrificing something small for the greater good was the correct decision for a nation.

Ainz would kill any number of humans to protect the greater good of Nazarick.

But he didn’t need to say that to Gondo.

“Yes, Gondo. It seems this country has determined that it doesn’t need runes any longer. When I said I wanted the rune crafters, they hardly resisted at all.”

He needed Gondo, and the other crafters who might hear about this from him, to give up on this country to some extent. It was probably impossible to get them to completely turn their backs on the people of their ancestors, but

even so, he needed to make them want to devote themselves completely to the Nation of Darkness.

Ainz put a gentle hand on Gondo's shoulder. "But I'm different. I see potential in runes."

Even if Gondo's ideal never came to pass, as long as Ainz monopolized this uniquely skilled group of crafters and tasked them with conducting research into rune crafting, then if he ever encountered an enemy wielding rune weapons, he would be able to counter them.

Knowledge is power.

"…One country may have discarded them, but another country will protect them. That means this is far from the end, right?"

When he patted Gondo's shoulder a few times, the dwarf roughly wiped his face. "…Thank you, Your Majesty, King of Darkness. I'll do my best to fulfill your hopes."

"Good, good. I expect a lot out of you."

Ainz smiled to appear trustworthy, but of course, his face didn't move.

Anyhow…, he thought.

He was glad to have gotten some information about the dwarf capital. He would have to ask Gondo to check if there was anyone else who had additional information. And he needed to ask the supreme commander about it as well.

In Yggdrasil*, dragons didn't have life spans. I wouldn't be surprised if some individuals have unimaginable power. The ones likely to be there are frost dragons, eh…?*

A fading memory of the face of a boy—no, a girl—came to mind.

"She was going to look that dragon up for me… What a shame."



Chapter 5 The Frost Dragonlord

Chapter 5 | The Frost Dragonlord

1

The next morning by the great door… As Ainz was about to set out to recapture the dwarven capital, Fehu Berkana, he ran into a face that was becoming quite familiar.

It was Gondo.

Ainz cocked his head—because he couldn't think of a reason why the dwarf would be here.

"You came to see me off?"

"No, I'm your guide."

Ainz blinked. True, he did request for a dwarf to guide him to the capital. He figured the reason they had immediately agreed was that they wanted to send someone to observe him, so he had expected a dwarf he didn't know at all.

"Yesterday after I left you, I talked to the other rune crafters. I'm pretty sure I know the way to the kingdom better than anyone else."

"Including how to take a detour if it turns out the underground road is collapsed? I need someone who can think on their feet. Can you handle it?"

"I'll do my best. I hope you'll allow me to continue guiding you."

Hmm, Ainz thought.

Frankly, the downside to taking Gondo with him was considerable. But if the regency council already approved it, he figured there was little chance they would swap guides just because he had a complaint.

"…Are you strong like a warrior, or do you have any ways of participating in combat?"

"N-no. I'm not confident in those areas at all. I understand it's dangerous, and

no one will blame you if I die. And I have this cloak my father left me. That's probably another reason I was chosen."

Having a cloak of concealment *was* persuasive.

Ainz had planned on protecting whoever accompanied him in the first place, but a dwarf who had nothing in the way of self-defense made him nervous. If the guide was high-enough level, a resurrection spell could solve the problem, but Ainz feared that if Gondo died, that would be the end of it.

"You'll be checking if I've really cleared all the kuagoa out of the capital, too, right? It'll be a problem for me if you die in the middle of that, and plus, there's the matter of the rune crafters. I'd rather have you stay here."

Gondo sidled up to Ainz and lowered his voice. "There's a huge treasury in the capital. If it hasn't been pried open, there are all sorts of dwarven treasures inside. There should also be weapons my father made. A manual of technology passed down in the royal family should be there as well. There could even be a book of secrets from an older rune crafter."

"Ooh." Ainz showed he was listening and urged Gondo to continue.

"I want to sneak that out for myself…though it may be rude to Your Majesty. Will you overlook what I get up to after you retake the capital?"

"…First, do you have a way to open the treasury?"

"No. But I figured Your Majesty would have a way to do something about that."

How omnipotent does he think I am?

"You're telling me to be an accessory to your pilfering?"

"Your Majesty's role would be to merely open the treasury door to check whether the place has been looted or not. After that, all you would need to do is look the other way. I'll be the sneaky thief, and you won't have anything to do with it."

"…Dwarven royalty has been wiped out, correct? Could there be a catalog somewhere of their riches?"

"I doubt it."

“You need to find out. If there is, this plan is too dangerous. I wouldn’t be able to allow it… And in the first place, it’s a national treasury of your own country. Wouldn’t you be ashamed to steal from it?”

Gondo smiled sarcastically. “A country that doesn’t care if it loses rune technology doesn’t need a book about its secrets, does it?”

Man, he’s really sulking, thought Ainz, but it was no skin off his back—not that he had any. On the contrary, if such a useful book remained forgotten in the dwarf country, it would be quite a loss for him.

And more importantly, Gondo’s thievery would probably sever him completely from the dwarf country. There was no way the dwarf kingdom would accept a criminal who stole a national treasure. Ainz would also be able to use that as a threat—as a chain—to make sure the dwarf didn’t betray the Nation of Darkness.

But he ran the risk of it becoming a chain for his side, too.

“…What you say is true. Owning something you don’t need doesn’t do you any good. I have the feeing I might suddenly go blind at what happens to be the most opportune moment. But like I was saying before, make sure you check for a catalog. I want to avoid future issues.”

“Understood. I’ll do as you say.”

“Then, let’s be done with that.” Though they were in a slightly removed location, it didn’t automatically mean there wasn’t anyone listening in. “Now, to change subjects… Give me a rough idea of where we’re likely to run into danger on the way to the capital.”

“I’m glad you asked. There are Three Impasses along the way.”

“Impasses? How interesting. For now, you can give me just a basic overview, but tell me about them.”

“Right. The first Impasse is the Great Chasm. Beyond our gate is a slope that leads down to the entrance of a fort. After passing through the fort, you come out and there’s a rift in the ground. Right now, it’s not much of an impasse because there’s a bridge over the gap, but if you’re going to cross, you should be prepared for a concentrated enemy attack.”

“Do the kuagoa use projectiles much?”

“Mm, not that I’ve heard of. But it’s probably risky to assume they don’t, though.”

Gondo was right. There was also the possibility that the magic item at the fort would be used against them.

“The second Impasse is a place where magma flows. It’s a river where the heat alone can be lethal, and the only way through is a narrow path carved into the cavern wall. A huge monster shows up sometimes, too.”

“A monster?”

Crimson, a domain guardian on the seventh level, came to mind.

Things could get hairy if this monster was a similar type.

…That reminds me, slimes have a close relationship with human society, but I wonder if it’s the same here. If they’re using a rare sort of slime, I’d like to take some back with me.

As Ainz was recalling the slimes in the sewers that basically acted like a filtration system, Gondo moved on to the third of the Impasses.

“The last is the Maze of Death. It’s a cave with countless branching paths where extremely poisonous gas is emitted on a regular cycle. If you breathe it, you become paralyzed starting from your arms and legs, and eventually it stops your heart.”

Gondo looked toward Shalltear and Aura.

He seemed to want to say that Ainz would be fine but that the other two would have trouble.

They’ll also be fine, but… Well, I can tell him when we get there.

“So you know the correct route through the cave?”

“Unfortunately, no. I used all my contacts, but even the elderly dwarves don’t know the way. Not even the regency council members have any idea. It might be written in some ancient document, but…”

“You couldn’t find it. Well, it can’t be too easy to find a document pertaining

to national security. Let's just gather info once we get there and play it by ear." Taking care to remember the Three Impasses, Ainz signaled to the rest of the party. "Okay, let's go."

Ainz, Shalltear, and Aura took the lead, and behind them came Gondo plus ten dwarven soldiers and a commander who would accompany them as far as the fort. The doors opened wide. A particular smell had been seeping through the crack, so he could imagine what was waiting for them—it was a gruesome scene.

The gently sloping tunnel was fairly wide and well kept, so it would have been easy to walk if it weren't for the blood, entrails, and sticky chunks of flesh that covered every surface. Kuagoa corpses littered the floor.

"Urk!"

The space filled with the thick, sour stench of gore seemed a bit much for Gondo, who had never fought as a warrior, and he looked like he was about to throw up. Even the soldiers looked pale, and it wasn't due to the lighting.

Ainz's body had no relationship with nausea, so that wasn't a problem, but that didn't mean he liked the smell.

His footsteps made a squelching noise. When he looked down, he seemed to be standing on an organ that had spilled out of a kuagoa sliced in half.

Ainz sighed and cast Mass Fly so that everyone could avoid the mess.

The death knights must have enjoyed the slaughter. If he slipped and fell in this tunnel of fresh blood, he was sure the muck and the smell would sap his energy. And he definitely wanted to avoid walking next to someone covered in blood, hence the considerate mass spell.

The party flew down the slope, bypassing the filth.

There were stones that emitted a hazy glow embedded in the walls, so the tunnel wasn't completely dark, but shadows reigned in the spaces between the stones. Of course, Ainz could see anyhow, so there was no issue.

At the bottom of the slope—a little over a hundred yards from the gate—the entrance to the fort came into view. To be more precise, it was the back door.

Through the fort, there was supposed to be a bridge. A few days' walk west from there would bring them to the former capital.

The entrance to the fort was cluttered with kuagoa bodies as well. Some of the bodies had been bitten to death, which was a method the death knights wouldn't have used; those were the victims of zombies.

The reason Ainz couldn't detect any undead was probably because the death knights had turned back into regular corpses once destroyed.

Ainz looked around. At the moment, he couldn't spot any undead, but considering how undead worked in this world, it was dangerous to leave this carnage here.

"In the human world, it's common sense that if we leave things as they are, undead will spawn, so what are you going to do?" he asked the soldiers.

"We've been tasked with cleaning up," the commander answered. "Well, I say 'cleaning up,' but we're just going to dump all the remains into the Great Chasm a short distance away, where it won't matter if the remains attract whatever monsters might be down there."

"And after that, you're going to repair the fort and investigate the route the kuagoa took to invade? That's quite a job."

This was where they parted with the soldiers. It was only Ainz, Aura, Shalltear, and Gondo who were continuing on to retake the capital. Well, the Hanzos were also going, but the soldiers didn't know that.

The dwarves winced. While they had their own dangerous investigation to undertake—an adventure with a high chance of encountering kuagoa for sure—to get that sort of comment from Ainz, who was invading the kuagoa's home base, was probably a bit…

"Okay, let's enter the fort. We'll go in first and make sure it's safe. Until then, please wait here. Just in case, will you protect Gondo?"

Upon receiving the soldiers' affirmative reply, Ainz went through the open door.

Standing at the scene of this disaster, he asked Aura behind him, "Aura, can

you sense anyone hiding using stealth abilities?”

“No. There isn’t anything alive in this fort,” she answered while holding her hands to her long ears, apparently listening for any sounds. If Aura, a ranger, said there weren’t any living things here, then it had to be true.

Still, he couldn’t be careless.

Someone powerful enough to kill Ainz’s two death knights had been here. If that person specialized in stealth classes, it was possible they could deceive even Aura’s investigation abilities.

Well, but in that case, they would have lower combat capability, so they wouldn’t be hard to handle even if they managed a sneak attack.

There were lots of bodies inside the fort. Unlike on the slope, however, there were dwarf corpses here and there, as well.

Ainz cut across to the large opposite set of doors, which had been left ajar. Outside was a massive fissure in the ground, the bottom of which not even Ainz could see.

And there were no kuagoa on the other side. Apparently, they had withdrawn instead of building a position.

“This must be the Great Chasm, but…” Ainz looked to either side. “There’s no bridge. No, there are the abutments. That makes this the wreckage of a bridge…?”

“It would seem the enemy took the bridge down as they withdrew,” said Shalltear, standing next to him.

“Hmm…”

Would an opponent strong enough to slay death knights take the bridge down? Taking measures to prevent this side’s attack shows a lack of confidence in their strength— No. Ainz shook his head.

In this world, death knights were rare. Seeing two would probably make most imagine something even more powerful waiting in the wings. And losing this bridge probably wasn’t a huge problem for the attackers.

“Well, that’s smart… Go tell the dwarves we’ve confirmed that everything is

secure up to this point.”

“Yes, my lord!”

As he watched Shalltear head back to where the dwarves were, he saw Aura sitting on the ground looking at the dirt. He wondered what she was doing, but noticing her intent expression, he decided not to distract her.

Turning back to the Great Chasm, he picked up a small rock and tossed it in. He had just done it for kicks, not for any real reason, but he never heard it hit the bottom.

“We don’t know how deep it goes, Your Majesty.” The dwarf must have seen him throw the rock. Shalltear had brought over the commander. “Twice we sent in exploratory expeditions, but no one ever returned.”

“I see. There must be monsters down there… They never come up?”

“So far they haven’t. In the end, we decided to stop sending people down. Nothing good could come of disturbing them.”

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

Ainz could create an incorporeal undead, such as a ghost, and use a spell to share its vision to investigate, but that wasn’t what he needed to be doing right now.

Surveying the surrounding area was low priority. Not that it didn’t need to be surveyed at all. In *Yggdrasil*, a place like this would have been hiding something —like a valuable item or a dungeon.

Knowing those damn devs, they would have programmed some tiny offshoot where you could mine super-rare ore or something. They definitely would—or more like, that’s literally what they’ve done before.

“Now then, let’s get to the other side and chase those kuagoa back to the capital.”

They were still flying, so crossing the gap itself wasn’t an issue. But Ainz imagined something horrible looming up out of that darkness.

He was getting flashbacks to a time in *Yggdrasil* when they had been crossing a lake and a giant snake monster suddenly swam beneath them. Horrible

experiences like that had been handy when designing level five of the tomb, but still.

Ainz bid farewell to the commander and had Aura and Shalltear look out below as the four of them crossed. As expected, his worries were for nothing, and they reached the other side without anything appearing from the hole.

Still, when he landed, he emitted a small sigh of relief—a fact he kept from the other members of the party, naturally.

He glanced around.

There were only four enemy corpses on this side. That meant the death knights must have been defeated around here.

“Shalltear, I have a few warnings for you.”

After calling her over, he noticed Aura was still looking at the ground.

Maybe I should have Aura listen, too, he thought, but Shalltear was the main fighter this time. He could fill in Aura later.

“Please wait one moment, Lord Ainz.” Shalltear took out a notebook and opened it. “Okay, now I’m ready.”

“Uh, okay. You’re taking notes…? That’s a good attitude. Ahem! So we’re about to enter an extremely dangerous area. The reason it’s dangerous is that there is definitely an enemy out here who was able to defeat two of my death knights. It might be insulting to compare you to a death knight, bu—”

“Not at all, Lord Ainz. I’ll do everything in my power to defeat the formidable enemy who destroyed the death knights you created.”

“No, absolutely do not do everything in your power.”

“Wh-why not? Wouldn’t it make sense to attack a powerful enemy with every bit of strength available? Ah, please excuse me. That was no way to respond to you, my lord.”

“No, that’s fine. Your question is only natural.” Ainz folded his hands behind his back and explained how to confront the unknown enemy. “But we need to think about what the enemy’s likely course of action would be. What the enemy wants most of all is information—about how strong we are. They’ll probably

send in a disposable strike team to measure our capabilities. If, after determining what abilities we each have, they decide they can win, they'll close in on us with a deadly attack that leaves us no openings for escape."

"Wow, that's so…"

"Well, I don't know for sure if they'll think that far ahead, but…"

"Ummm, Lord Ainz?"

Aura called him in what was an unusually timid tone for her. Normally he would have paused his explanation to Shalltear and listened to her.

But he really enjoyed explaining areas of his expertise.

That's why he replied by putting a pointer finger to his lips.

"Oh, okay!"

The gleam of understanding lit up her face. She must have gathered that he wanted her to be quiet while he was giving a serious explanation.

"As I was saying, Shalltear… That's what I would do if I encountered a strong enemy. Well, my friends would have, too."

"You mean the Supreme Beings? But I can't imagine our enemy could be as powerful as any of the Supreme Beings…"

"Really? You should assume that anything I can do, our enemy can as well. Only a fool gets conceited and assumes they're special. Don't let your guard down. I also want to make sure that the enemy can't grasp our full potential."

The reason he had hidden the Hanzos, too, was to throw off the enemy's calculations.

"So, Shalltear, until we charge into the dwarf capital—the enemy's headquarters—I want to place a few restrictions on you."

"Yes, my lord! What sort of restrictions might they be?"

"As for magic, you can use tier-ten spells, but not a lot of them. Stick to one or two."

"…I see. If we do that, the enemy will get the wrong idea, which will make them careless, and then we can defeat them in a counterattack. But if that's the

idea, then wouldn't it make more sense to limit me to a lower tier? Say, five or so?"

"No, I doubt that would make them careless. The moment the enemy thinks they know everything we're capable of and comes to crush us is our chance to deal a fatal blow. If a small party of enemies attacked us and were only using up to tier-five magic, I would infer that they were withholding information."

"And what would you do in that case, Lord Ainz?"

"I would think of a way to acquire more information. If I was in a position that I could afford to lose, I would cede them ground temporarily. Then I would take my time gathering intelligence. Once you acquire a strategic point, you don't want to lose it, which limits the moves you can make. I'm sure they would leak some info at that point."

"It's impressive that you're so aware of all those things."

In the game, it was possible to come back from a few losses. But there was a chance that in this world, it wasn't. Especially for Ainz, who hadn't tested anything about player deaths yet.

"That's just how important context is. Shalltear, always think ahead." Having said that much, Ainz turned to Aura. "So, Aura, what did you need?"

"Oh, it was nothing!" Her eyes sparkled.

For a moment, he had no idea what had gotten into her, but then he realized that maybe she was impressed by the strategy he had been explaining to Shalltear.

Hmm, but that was the most basic of the basics. Maybe I should make sure she gets educated in all these things, too? Should I lend her the guidebook about PKing? But that's the only knowledge I have that I can use to show off to the NPCs… What should I do? I was always told not to spread knowledge around…

Ainz was lost in thought when Gondo asked, "Hey, sorry to bother you while you're busy coming up with a plan, but should we get going? If the road is collapsed, we'll need to find another way."

"Yeah… Shall we use the magical beasts?"

“No, I think we should hold back on that. There are some narrow caves to get through along the way, so we’d have to leave them behind.”

Ainz thought he could just create soul eaters or some other undead they could mount as necessary, but he figured it would be wiser to heed his guide’s advice in this case. “Got it. Then, let’s head out.”

•

“His Majesty has departed!”

Six of the members of the regency council—the chief of the great earth shrine, the chief of the food industry, the chief of administration, the chief of alcohol, the chief of caves and mines, and the chief of the merchant council—trembled with glee.

True, the King of Darkness hadn’t done anything wrong. But there was no way they could relax with an undead—a being who hated living things—radiating that much power in the city.

Those present had gathered for the city’s safety and for the people. Having imagined the worst-case scenario, they had to act. They had spent the whole day in fear wondering if the King of Darkness might go on a rampage and murder their children. They considered all sorts of countermeasures and tried to find a plan that would work.

And now, the object of the deliberations—which had lasted so long, their voices had gone hoarse—was finally gone. What was so wrong about basking in that sense of relief?

“Drinks, we need drinks!”

Just as parched land required rain, exhausted minds required the consolation of alcohol.

Obviously, no one was going to object.

“But…isn’t he coming back?”

The uplifting atmosphere deflated in an instant and turned dark.

The triumphant fists in the air withered.

“Should we run away?”

“And go where? If we ran after making that agreement… Besides, we asked him to retake the capital! Wouldn’t you be furious if it were the other way around?”

“I would be mad, but I wouldn’t be able to be assertive against someone so powerful.”

“Ahhh, yeah. I know how you feel.”

“…So you’re fine with it? Has the dwarf in charge of the merchant council lost all pride?”

“I mean, there’s no way to do proper deals with that thing. Normal deals are possible because the parties are equal to some extent. You can’t do business with someone so overwhelmingly powerful.”

They all sighed at once.

None of them still had any reason to doubt that the king would retake the capital. One glance at the magical beasts he had left behind was enough to convince them. He was heading out to a dragon lair but didn’t even feel he needed to bring those monsters along to help.

“Getting back to what we were saying, does anyone have any idea when he’ll return?”

“How would we know? It’s not like we could ask. If he grinned and said, ‘In no time,’ I’m pretty sure I’d piss myself.”

It was a pathetic thing to say, but none of the other dwarves made fun of him.

“…How could you not? I’m sure I’d do the same.”

“Me too. I’d probably even do a number two.”

Despite the indecent conversation, they all exchanged glances.

“Have we learned anything new? Did anyone find out anything about that Gondo guy?”

“Nothing. I know he called a meeting of all the rune crafters, though.”

“The rune crafters? About going to the Nation of Darkness?”

“Who knows? Should we summon someone and see what they have to say?”

“That might be good, but won’t it get back to His Majesty if we do that? It’s probably dangerous to stick our noses into that business. Just like how only an idiot would stick his nose in a hot furnace.”

“In that case, we need to tell the rune crafters they’ll be going to the Nation of Darkness. What if we nonchalantly brought it up?”

“…I’m not sure I can be that nonchalant.”

The other dwarves all nodded and agreed.

“Okay, then let’s forget about asking. I’m not interested in digging a hole we don’t need only to fall in and die.”

Everyone agreed. They wouldn’t be able to face the people if their meddling angered the king and caused a slew of casualties.

“Then, let’s inform the other two who aren’t here about the plans for tomorrow and that there’s no need to get involved with the rune crafters. I heard the supreme commander will be back later, but what about the chief of the smith shops?”

“I’ll go,” said the chief of administration. “I’m interested to see what sort of fancy armor he’s making. Or rather, I’m curious what kind of metal the King of Darkness provided.”

“He said it was rare, but I’m sure it couldn’t be as rare as adamantite.”

“Then, maybe something like orichalcum?”

Even if they weren’t blacksmiths, dwarves were naturally fascinated by the idea of a metal they had never seen before due to their nature as a race of the earth.

“We should have grabbed him and gotten a glimpse. I realize we were busy and didn’t get a chance, but…”

The chief of the smith shops had accepted the ore and hurried back to his workshop. The others understood why he was in a rush and refrained from stopping him.

“Well, knowing him, he’s probably made some progress. If he’s forging mail, there will probably be some extra links. Can you grab a couple and bring them back for us?”

The chief of administration agreed, and the meeting came to a close.

After that, they had decided to rest their weary bodies. But the dwarves were a race of people who would declare they needed a break right before promptly starting a drinking party.

Drinking booze at work always makes it taste better, they would say as they began enjoying their special high-proof dwarven drinks. The chief of administration, however, left the conference-room-turned-party venue as if someone was yanking him by his beard.

His aim was, of course, the chief of the smith shops.

As might be expected of the workshop belonging to the head of the country’s smith shops, it was huge. It had to be either the first or second biggest in Fehu Jura. Many dwarves were employed there; the furnace, hot enough to melt even adamantite, was always lit, and the symphony of hammers never stopped ringing out. That day, however, it was eerily quiet.

Of course, the furnace was burning.

The chief of administration could tell because as he approached, the temperature was rising.

What was the cause of this silence?

Spurred on by his growing anxiety, he sped up.

He had visited several times, so he unhesitatingly proceeded to the furnace where he figured the smiths were working.

All the faces he knew were there.

He breathed a sigh of relief in spite of himself. But the puzzled looks on their faces and the object of their gazes brought his anxiety right back.

“What’s wrong?”

When he spoke, their eyes pleaded to him as if he was a savior.

“He’s holed up and won’t come out.”

Separate from the workshop that housed the massive furnace was an atelier for the chief of the smith shops. The chief would hole up in there for days at a time when he had a particularly important project to do.

That was normal, so there was no reason for his apprentices and the other blacksmiths to look so concerned.

“…That’s not out of the ordinary, is it?”

“True, he shuts himself in there fairly often, but…we can’t hear his hammer. And it’s already been half a day—almost a whole day, actually.”

“…Could he be thinking about what shape he wants the final product to be?”

“He’s never done that before.”

The chief of administration stroked his beard.

To him, it didn’t seem so strange, but if all the blacksmiths who regularly worked with the chief of the smith shops thought so, maybe this truly was an emergency.

“Then, why don’t you open the door? Is it locked?”

“No, it’s not locked. He just hates having the door opened on him while he’s holed up.”

“Ah. So you want me to open it, is that it?”

It was difficult for the disciples, but they must have thought that someone of the same status wouldn’t be as objectionable.

It was rotten luck, but he had no choice.

“Fine. I’ll go. You guys can scram. You probably won’t get in trouble if it’s just me busting in on my own.”

After the blacksmiths showered him in thanks, the chief of administration approached the door and knocked.

But there was no reply. He knocked a few more times.

Urged on by his imagination, he threw open the door.

As expected, it was the same old room. For being only one door away from a huge furnace, there was a surprising lack of heat. That was thanks to a magic ventilation system. When he looked to the back, he saw a bright-red flame burning in the furnace.

A single figure was facing it.

So he's here after all. He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he stopped—because there was something strange he could sense even from behind the chief of the smith shops. For one thing, why didn't he react despite the chief of administration walking in uninvited? From what the blacksmiths had said, merely opening the door should have annoyed him.

"Hey." His first greeting stuck in his throat, coming out only as a hoarse murmur. It still should have been audible, though, but the chief of the smith shops didn't react.

"Hey!" Worried, he shouted, but the chief of the smith shops still didn't respond at all.

Breathing heavily, he strode over to where the other dwarf was sitting. "Hey!!"

"What?"

Finally he got a reply, and he nearly crumpled to the ground from the tension draining from his body. "What? Sheesh, don't make me wor—"

At that point, he lost his words.

Why hasn't he turned around?

He nervously went over to get a good look at his friend.

His face looked different—like that of a cornered beast or more like the terrifying look of a dwarf who would kill members of his own kind.

"What's wrong?"

Upon hearing the question that slipped out, the chief's face shifted for the first time. He rolled just his eyeballs to glare at the chief of administration. "What's wrong? What's wrong…you ask? Hmph!" He moved his hand, grabbed the tongs, and then reached into the furnace for a scorching-hot metal ingot

and hurled it at the chief of administration.

“Whoa!” The chief of administration frantically dodged. The ingot fell to the floor with a thud.

“A-are you trying to kill me?!”

That was unforgivable even between friends.

But the chief of the smith shops wore a cold smile. “Trying to kill you? I guess that’s what you would think.”

Then he reached out his hand to pick up the ingot. It was standard for blacksmiths to wear gloves resistant to heat. But surprisingly, he wasn’t. And it wasn’t as if he had a magic item that would have given him that effect.

He truly grabbed the heated metal with his bare hand.

As the chief of administration goggled at this feat that made him hallucinate the sounds and smells of burning flesh, the chief of the smith shops practically spat, “It’s not even hot!”

“H-huh?”

“This thing hasn’t gotten even the slightest bit hot!”

This time he caught the tossed ingot without thinking. The momentary flash of intense heat he thought he felt must have been his mind’s misunderstanding, because it wasn’t even warm. Shockingly, it felt cool to the touch.

“Wh-what…?”

Really, he didn’t need to ask. Metal that could be heated and not get hot? There was only one thing it could be. That was why his question slipped out as a fragment.

The next words the chief of the smith shops spoke confirmed what he suspected.

“It’s the ingot that undead gave us! I’ve been heating it all day, but it won’t warm up even a little! I strike it, and it doesn’t change shape! I can’t even scratch it! How am I supposed to make armor out of this?!”

“M-maybe he gave you some metal that he couldn’t handle himself?”

“That’s what I wanted to think. But he has a dagger made of the same metal! When you strike it with that, you *can* make a scratch! How can I call myself the most experienced craftsman?! I’m a fool who loses his mind in the face of an unknown metal!”

The chief of administration desperately tried to think of a way to calm the agitated chief of the smith shops.

“Wh-why don’t you ask that undead how to—?”

“‘The one who asks when he doesn’t know is wiser than the one who doesn’t?’ Well, I suppose you’re right. The ancient dwarves knew a thing or two. But then…what has all my experience been for? Look at my fists.”

He thrust out his hands. They were the toughened hands of an artisan, covered in burn scars. Any craftsman would be proud to have those hands.

“I’ve been working metal ever since my days as a foolish apprentice. I’ve been working it longer than anyone else. I thought it was only natural that I would be called the greatest—I’ve put in more effort than anyone else!” The smith shops chief’s face crumpled. “I’ve spent my whole life blacksmithing, to the point that I thought nothing was impossible. I was sure I could make whatever shape I wanted from any metal. What a clown I am! Ha-ha! How vain. In my little world, I thought I was a genius. But I’m the biggest fool.”

“B-but you could learn…”

“You’re right. Yes, you’re exactly right. So right, my ears burn.”

The chief of the smith shops took the ingot and clenched his hand around it.

The lack of expression on his face worried the chief of administration.

“I’ll be fine. I can learn again. So what did you come here for?”

“What did I…? You… Well, whatever. That undead has left the city. The regency council is going to meet again tomorrow to discuss what to do. I just came to tell you that. And also to say that you don’t need to worry about the rune crafters.”

“Ah… Got it. Then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The chief of administration was still anxious, but he couldn’t quite put his

feeling into words.

When the body is exhausted, the spirit also tires. Figuring that the chief of the smith shops would be back to his usual self after a good night's rest, the chief of administration headed straight home.

The next day, he learned that the chief of the smith shops had taken the ingot and skipped town.

2

There were Three Impasses on the way to the former dwarf capital.

The first Impasse was the Great Chasm.

It went without saying that the massive gorge was impossible to cross by foot. Naturally, the only thing to do was look for a huge detour, but of course that meant a much higher rate of monster encounters. The predatory monsters who lurked in these rock formations posed an alarming threat to both dwarves and humans.

It was difficult to evade that first strike when the creatures burst out of the earth after sensing movement nearby. The unlucky were often swallowed in one bite and ended up being helplessly digested. There were other monsters that unleashed a psychic attack first and dealt the fatal blow while their prey floundered.

In this place, humans, dwarves, and elves—all humanoids—were frail beings fit only to be snacked on.

The safest way past this obstacle was to go aboveground and cross the mountains, but for races who lived with their feet on the ground, that was an unparalleled challenge—because they had to be wary of the huge flying animals and monsters such as perytons, harpyias, itsumade, and giant eagles that would attack from the sky. Humans and similar races don't have a very good vertical range of vision. For that reason, it wasn't hard to catch them unawares from above. And there was no guarantee that one swoop wouldn't kill them

straightaway.

Thus, the Great Chasm was a major obstacle even when people tried to go around it.

That was why the dwarves built a city nearby and put a bridge over it: so that if the bridge was dropped, their home would be protected by that naturally impassable barrier.

Since the kuagoa had in fact destroyed the bridge, the Great Chasm became a true impasse.

However…

Ainz's party wasn't bothered at all. They simply used Fly to cross it.

The second Impasse was the magma zone.

It was a red-hot sea that glittered with a dazzling light. The area was so incredibly dangerous that inhaling too deeply would cause lung damage.

The reason there was magma flowing only a few miles underground was because this world was ruled by magical laws rather than common sense. A naturally occurring portal with properties similar to the spell Gate connected this magma flow to one quite far away.

There was another reason that intensely hot sea was considered an impasse.

Swimming inside was a magical beast that made this body of magma its territory.

It was a huge monster with a fishlike body well over 150 feet long. If asked to compare it to something, the most likely reply would probably be an Atlantic footballfish. This creature was most well-known for its ability to use the lure attached to its head as an appendage to capture prey from a distance and hurl them into its powerful jaws.

Its outer skin was thick and tough. It was covered in scales far harder than orichalcum.

Some magical beasts that lived a long time acquired immense power. Those beasts were bestowed with a more prestigious name and often categorized separately from their original race. This monster, however, had achieved such a

particular evolution, there wasn't another like it in the world.

Mt. Lapaslair, where the natural gate went, was ruled by three monsters:

The ruler of the sky, the phoinixlord.

The ruler of the ground, the ancient flame dragon.

And the ruler of the subterranean magma sea, the l'angler lavalord.

If the adventurer difficulty rating system was applied to this magma ruler, the value would be about 140—so combat meant that first and foremost, anyone who challenged it wasn't coming back alive.

Luckily the l'angler lavalord wasn't very good at maneuvering on land, so attacks could be avoided by staying away from the magma. But the way to the dwarf capital was a narrow path carved into the cliff only a short distance above the flow. It made anyone who took it quite uneasy, but this was the only route.

If unable to withstand the rising hot air, it was inevitable that travelers would lose their footing, slip, then fall straight into the magma.

When the kuagoa had mounted their invasion, a number of them had slipped and fallen in along the way to the dwarf city.

However…

With complete resistance to fire and a Fly spell, Ainz's party had no problems. They flew so high over the magma, they didn't even see the l'angler lavalord, and it never noticed their passing.

So far, it had been possible to get past all the Impasses with flying magic. For that reason, it was difficult to really consider them incredible obstacles. But the final one was a true impasse.

It was a long, winding cave with various branching pathways.

A network of interconnecting tunnels confusing enough to be called a maze.

Certainly, that alone was a bit too simple to be called an impasse. There were no monsters in this area, so with time and effort spent mapping, it could be conquered. It was only an impasse for people who had limited time and no food or water.

Yes—the reason it was considered an impasse was something else.

There were holes that spewed volcanic gasses at fixed intervals. And there were pockets of gas here and there, too. In other words, this area was filled with invisible but nonetheless deadly poison.

There were multiple routes to the exit, but only one route could be taken without encountering any of the gas, and even that one had pockets of it depending on the timing.

Even if Ainz's party used Fly, the way they had for the other Impasses, and flew along the ceiling, there were times when the airborne gas reached that high. The only way they could manage with Fly was hope they didn't run into any pockets of toxic gas.

However…

Ainz's people all had protections against noxious air. In other words, the only one who could be affected by the gas was Gondo. Undead had natural resistance, so unless it was a gas that dealt acid or fire damage, they were fine. Aura had a magic item that enveloped her in a bubble of fresh air for her to breathe, meaning she was immune as well.

All Ainz had to do was cast a spell to protect Gondo, allowing the whole party to pass through the poisonous air unhindered.

Thus, Ainz's party managed to get past the Three Impasses, which were thought to be impregnable, without any preparation or intelligence gathering.

Ainz's spell Titania's Blessing, which had found the best route through the maze for them, faded. Its departure was probably less about a time limit and more the fact that it had performed its function.

"…Hmm. There were fresh-looking kuagoa corpses in that cave, but we still haven't caught up to their army. I guess a day's head start is significant."

"But it looks like we've closed the gap quite a bit. We don't seem too far behind now," Aura declared after examining the kuagoa tracks left on the ground.

"…I see. Well, let's discuss our next steps… Gondo, we're almost to the

capital, right?”

“Right. I’ve only ever heard tell of it, but if that cave was the Maze of Death they talk about, then the capital is only a little farther.” There Gondo’s expression turned sober. “Was it really the Maze of Death, though? Supposedly, anyone who loses their way inside dies, but…”

Ainz didn’t have a reply. It had been incredibly simple to get through. He couldn’t rule out the possibility that it was a dummy created to make people think they had escaped while ensnaring them in the real trap.

“…Well, if it’s a trap, we can just break out of it. That said, it’s stupid to get caught in a trap you’ve anticipated. Let’s slow our pace a bit and keep a sharp watch as we proceed.”

Thus far, they had been trying to catch up to the enemy, so they had been moving at a fair clip. But if they hadn’t caught up by this point, it was better to assume the enemy had already reached their home base and to rethink their strategy.

“Time to decide what to do when we reach the enemy.” Seeing everyone nod, Ainz looked to the dwarf. “Gondo and I will capture the palace. I’ll take care of the dragons.”

Neither the two guardians nor Gondo objected.

The elite dragons were the most powerful opponents in *Yggdrasil*, too, so it was dangerous to operate separately from the guardians without knowing their strength. But Ainz had a World Item. It had a few different functions, but one of them worked particularly well against dragons. That meant that even in the worst case, he would at least be able to escape. If, however, he brought the guardians, and the dragons turned out to be more powerful than expected, he would have to buy time for them to get away.

He was fine with abandoning Gondo if it came to that, but he couldn’t leave his friends’ children behind. Consequently, he chose not to take them with him at all.

Dragons, huh…? This should be fun.

In *Yggdrasil*, dragons were not only the most powerful enemy but also meant

a mountain of treasure.

They dropped good data crystals, and their artifact drop rate was higher than that of other monsters. On top of that, there were a variety of uses for the skin, meat, blood, teeth, claws, eyes, and scales harvested from the body.

They could be called a delectable enemy.

Ainz couldn't help but feel a mix of ambition, anticipation, and nerves as he prepared to encounter his first dragon of this world.

According to the dwarves, the dragon who destroyed their western city might be there. That meant he could be plunging into a fight almost as unpredictable as his battle with Shalltear.

Someone powerful enough to kill death knights plus dragons? It'd be simple if they were one and the same, but it's a bit trickier if they're separate entities. Should I have brought more than just my stealth Hanzos? No, I think I made the right choice.

"Lord Ainz?"

"Hmm? Oh, Shalltear. Sorry, I guess I got caught up in my own thoughts. Okay, here are your orders, Aura and Shalltear. Take on the kuagoa. If they want to submit to our rule, that's fine. If they refuse, show them the might of Nazarick."

The two guardians replied with spirited acknowledgments.

Ainz glanced at Gondo, but he didn't look like he had anything to say. He seemed ready to go along with what Ainz had decided.

The promise to the dwarves was to clear out the kuagoa, but Ainz wasn't of a mind to kill them all.

He simply felt it was a waste to exterminate a race that didn't exist in *Yggdrasil*. If he wiped out these guys, it was possible that the entire race would go extinct. Even if that didn't happen, as long as he kept them alive, they could be of some benefit to Nazarick.

Of course, it was equally possible that they would harm Nazarick, but Ainz thought it would be a shame to eradicate them without figuring out which it was.

Killing is easy, but resurrecting is hard. That means there's only one thing to do. Besides…

"If they're too stupid to swear loyalty, cull their numbers to ten thousand. Gather mostly strong ones. But keep the future in mind—don't select only based on power. Make sure the number of females is equal to the males. Don't let any get away, especially not the king."

"But…Lord Ainz."

Aura spoke with a gloomy expression, and Ainz prompted her to continue.

"We don't even know how big the dwarf capital is. It could be huge. It'll be awfully hard to keep the kuagoa from escaping such a vast place with just the two of us. What should we do?"

"Yes, that's a natural question to have. That's why—Aura—this is your time to shine. Use the World Item I gave you."

"I—I can use it?"

"Yep. Times like these are precisely what it's for."

"U-understood!"

The guardians both essentially had the word *nervous* hanging over their heads.

"While that World Item can be used unlimited times, you can lose it if someone meets certain conditions and escapes. If nothing else, avoid that worst-case scenario."

He recalled the time Ainz Ooal Gown stole it.

The other guild had asked for it back so many times.

Ainz snorted.

No one was as foolish as the guild that couldn't be reasonable and accept the obvious answer of, *If you don't want it stolen, then don't use it*. The key to preventing theft is to lock up possessions in a treasure chest and not walk around carrying them. Ainz figured they were fine, but it was still important to exercise caution.

“Be wary of anyone not affected—because it means they’re carrying a World Item.”

“Does it mean you won’t be able to come in, either, Lord Ainz?”

“Once you activate it, I won’t be able to enter. But it’s possible to choose to enter later instead. Just pay attention to the timing… Okay, shall we?”

The party advanced with Aura in the lead.

Perhaps because of the proximity of the dwarf capital, the cave was easy to walk through despite being naturally occurring. The stalagmites must have been cleared away to make the terrain open. They walked along, appreciating the work of dwarves from long ago.

Aura paused. Cupping her hands below her long ears, she seemed to be listening for the enemy.

Ainz stood very still so as not to make any sound and waited for Aura to speak.

“Lord Ainz…I hear multiple creatures up ahead. They probably number in the hundreds. I don’t have a good estimate of how far away they are, but I imagine we can make contact in a few minutes.”

“Ohhh…? Did we catch up?”

“No, it wasn’t walking sounds. I think they set up a camp.”

“I see. Did they realize we were following them? Is it a unit sent to intercept us?”

If that was the case, their opponents must have been using some intelligence magic to track their location.

Ainz smiled faintly.

They hadn’t shown their hand yet, so the enemy probably wanted to hit them with this unit to see what they were capable of.

Sensing a bit of desperation in their willingness to make sacrifices, Ainz felt like he had won this contest of wits.

“Lord Ainz, shall we capture them?”

“Hmm. We shouldn’t have revealed any info about us yet, so before we swoop in on their camp to trample them, let’s do something intelligence gathering.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Even if they managed to collect info, it wouldn’t be easy to formulate a plan.

Yggdrasil characters came in two main types: those narrowly specialized in one thing and well-rounded builds.

If their opponents were the former, unless the intelligence they acquired pertained to that specific thing, it would be hard to know how to counter. If they were the latter, there were plenty of options available, but it would be less effective than a hard counter.

There were also characters like Ainz, who could deal with a diverse array of opponents thanks to the variety of spells he knew and the items his friends had left him, as well as unusually strong all-rounder characters like Touch Me, but those were outliers. For that reason, there was something he needed to be wary of.

Specifically—it’s important to be aware of the number of powerful enemies. It scares me a bit that we still don’t have any idea. We should keep the option of falling back in mind and— Hrm. Well, either way, we have to attack to see what kind of cards they have in their hand. Ooh, the spirit of Yamaiko has come to me.

“…Shalltear, no rampages this time.”

“Of course not, my lord!”

She took out her Pipette Lance.

“Good. Really, I’d rather avoid revealing that we have god-tier items, but we’d need some awfully powerful investigation magic if we wanted to find out much. All right. Begin.”

“My lord!”

•

Built during the golden age of dwarf culture, the one-time dwarf capital, Fehu

Berkana, was both magnificent and gorgeous. Its largest building besides the palace was the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Its size was due to the multiple conference rooms and vaults that had been used for temporary storage.

Many dwarves had made use of the place, and it was more spacious than any building in any of the other cities. Currently, it was the palace of the king of all the kuagoa clans, Pe Riyuro.

When Yoozu returned, Riyuro was seated deep in a huge, soft cushion. Even though word of Yoozu's defeat had already arrived, the commander seemed his usual self, neither irritated nor harried.

Yoozu bowed his head and explained what had happened.

He knew the messengers had brought the important news, so he filled in the details. He wanted to emphasize the dwarves' new black-armored last resorts, having seen them with his own eyes.

As Riyuro listened in silence, his hand slowly moved, reaching into a basket his attendant carried. It pulled out a squealing lizard—a plump one, fit for the chief clan king to eat.

Riyuro gestured to Yoozu with the hand holding the lizard. "Want some?"

"No thank you."

"Ah, okay," the king murmured and bit the lizard's head off. The faint odor of blood and guts reached Yoozu's nose.

All eight inches were in Riyuro's mouth within three bites.

He used a nearby towel to wipe the blood off his hands and mouth.

"…So that's why you withdrew. Did they follow you?"

"I don't know. That is to say—"

With the bridge down, he didn't think such a thing was possible. Moreover, they had gotten awfully close to dealing the dwarves a fatal loss. He expected them to fortify their defenses, seal off any routes around the Great Chasm, and only then mount a counterattack.

Unless they were the sort of fools who had no issue with committing troops in a piecemeal fashion, the reason the dwarves had sent out two of those black suits of armor when the fort fell was because that was all they had.

Yoozu explained those thoughts of his to Riyuro.

After a period of silence, Riyuro quietly responded. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they had another one or two of those things.”

A questioning look appeared on Yoozu’s face without him meaning it to. Perhaps the king noticed? He offered a lazy explanation while poking around in the basket of lizards with his claws.

The dwarves had been confident in their defenses. If those defenses were badly pressed, that meant their fear that the entire city might fall was heightened. They would probably send most of the black armors out to intercept.

But they most likely didn’t realize exactly how the fort had fallen. In that case, it was too great a risk to commit all their strongest troops to one front—because if there had been more than one invasion route, that would be a grave error.

It wasn’t the sort of situation the dwarves could resolve with a trivial amount of force, but neither did they have enough information to fully commit to a counterattack there.

That’s what led Riyuro to conclude that there was probably one more, maybe two more suits of black armor.

Wow, he’s exactly right, thought Yoozu, impressed by his king’s intellect.

“Tell me, who do you think can win against these golems?”

“I’m sure you could!”

Riyuro reigned at the top of all eight clans. And he did have outstanding combat ability—great enough that he might have even been able to make enemies of all the other kuagoa and still win. He was the strongest in all of kuagoa history.

What came to Yoozu’s mind was a time Riyuro had fought off monsters in a

difficult battle. The strength he had exhibited there was enough to beat the golems. Yoozu was sure of that.

“…That’s what you really think? No flattery?”

“Yes, I have no doubt!”

Riyuro’s voice had a tinge of wryness to it, but Yoozu answered honestly. What other answer could he give?

“…What clan are you from?”

That was a strange question. When Yoozu told him, Riyuro thought some more.

“I see… Then, you really must believe that I could win.”

“Wh-what do you mean by that?”

“I just wondered if maybe you thought this was a good opportunity to kill me. I’m stronger than all the kuagoa, but you could report to me the golems were weaker than they actually are and convince me to fight them. Then the golems could kill me for you. Well, in that case there would be no one left to defeat the golems, but I imagine I’d at least be able to wound them, so maybe numbers would be enough to beat them after that point.”

Though his ruler had just doubted his loyalty, Yoozu felt only respect.

If it was him, he never would have thought that far ahead.

Convinced that Riyuro was fit to rule the kuagoa, Yoozu’s devotion to him only grew.

Then Riyuro asked him suspiciously, “Why aren’t you immediately saying, ‘I wasn’t thinking that at all’?”

“Oh! M-my apologies! I was just so fascinated listening to your thought process! As you say, I wasn’t thinking that at all!”

Riyuro burst out laughing. “You’re a funny one… I have to punish you for losing so many of the troops I gave you without putting up much of a fight, but I’ll make sure it’s not the kind of penalty that will affect you in the future. You did discover the golems and make it back here with important information,

after all. And it was also quick of you to have part of the army guard the city in case anyone was in pursuit."

"Thank you!" Yoozu bowed deeply.

"I have a question for you, since you're such an excellent commander. What should we do if we want to collect more details about those golems?"

"Attack the runts' country."

"That's definitely one way. We could learn about whether they still have golems or not at the same time."

"Yes! And if there don't seem to be any, we'll need to take the city as fast as possible, no matter how many losses we suffer!"

"Indeed." Riyuro nodded.

Living creatures took time to grow up, but golems were simply created. Time was the kuagoa's enemy and their opponent's ally.

"What else?"

"My apologies. I can't think of anything else at the moment."

Riyuro reached for the basket of lizards and pulled another out.

"…You sure you don't want any?"

Do I look that envious?

Certainly, since he had hurried back, Yoozu hadn't had proper food or rest yet. But he wasn't so hungry that he would covet his king's food.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Suit yourself," said Riyuro, biting the head off the squealing lizard just like he had the last one.

He was finishing it off in the same manner when Yoozu asked, "My king, is there another way you thought of?"

"Yeah, there is. We could ask someone who knows far more than we do… Of course, it's annoying that the price they'll ask in return is so high."

"Price…? You don't mean—!" Yoozu understood from the phrasing.

“Yes, the d—”

Just as Riyuro was answering, there was a commotion outside. After a clamorous knock, the door was thrown open. “My king!”

It was one of the guards.

“Seems like an emergency. What happened?”

“Something is coming toward the city.”

“From what direction?”

The guards said it was the side where Yoozu had stationed his unit. In other words, the direction of the dwarf country.

“They sent a unit after us…? I guess we underestimated those runts.” Having said that, Riyuro stood.

Yoozu asked with his eyes where his king was going, and Riyuro seemed to pick up on it.

“They saved us a lot of brooding. I’m going to visit the dragons right now.”

“To learn about the golems?”

“No. To convince them to clash with the approaching forces. If they’ve come this far, they must have golems with them. If we have the dragons fight them, we can weaken both our enemies at once… Hmph. We’ll need them to do a proper job.”

The king’s ill will toward the dragons who occupied the city’s prime location, the royal palace, was intense. Only a few of his closest aides knew that—along with the fact that he skillfully hid those emotions and bowed his head whenever he interacted with the dragons.

There was a huge power gap between dragons and kuagoa.

Until they could whittle away the dragons’ power, the kuagoa had to be humble. But there were few in these mountains who could fight the dragons—maybe the frost giants, if anyone.

Riyuro was saying that now was their chance.

“Yoozu. I can’t imagine it’s necessary, but just in case, start moving into the

abandoned district. I don't want anyone getting caught up in a fight with the dragons."

There was one district in the city that had been completely destroyed before the kuagoa took control. They hadn't done anything to rebuild it but instead made preparations that would allow a large army to take up position there.

Apparently, this was the time to use it.

"Understood."

"And…since I'm going to meet the dragons, I'm counting on you to ready the gifts. Find some jewels they'll like. I think you know this, but they're greedy. They probably won't agree to the first price we set. They always try to get more, so with that in mind, choose less valuable items to start."

Yoozu bowed to acknowledge the directions and got to work.

•

In this world, the most powerful race was the dragons. Even in harsh lands humans could never hope to reach, there was almost always a type of dragon that was fully adapted for that environment. The Azerlisia Mountains were no exception. The ruling class was dragons—the type known as frost dragons.

Dragons normally had slim trunks. They were less lizard-shaped and more catlike. And frost dragons were even slimmer, bearing a striking resemblance to snakes.

Their scales were a pale blue at birth, but as these particular dragons aged, they gradually turned white as if frost were settling over them. Appropriate for their environment, they had perfect resistance to the chill, but that came with a weakness to fire attacks.

Their version of a dragon's ace move, their fearsome breath, was imbued with chill.

The king of those frost dragons, Olasird'arc Haylilyal, coiled around his throne, looking coldly down at the kuagoa who had come for an audience.

"Welcome. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, Great White Dragonlord Olasird'arc—"

“Skip the brownnosing. Get to the point.” That’s what he said, but he smiled faintly.

Dragonlords occupied a special place among the various dragons. Generally speaking, they were the most ancient, or very powerful, or could use unique spells—in other words, it was a prestigious title given to those who were superior to other dragons in some way.

Who wouldn’t enjoy being addressed by an honorable title?

“As you wish! First, please allow me to humbly thank you for this audience.”

The kuagoa behind the clan king stepped forward bearing large shabby sacks. When they opened them, sure enough, the glimmer of gold spilled out.

It wasn’t enough to satisfy Olasird’arc, but he decided to accept it, since it was probably all they could muster.

“Very well. What is it you want?”

“Thank you! Some rabble has come to attack our home, so we were wondering if it would be possible to request your assistance, Great White Dragonlord.”

“Hmm…”

To Olasird’arc, the kuagoa were an inferior race, creatures that served the immensely powerful dragons—in other words, they were mere property. It would be a bit irritating if someone else up and killed them. That said, the idea of lifting a finger for the sake of an inferior race was infuriating.

Olasird’arc peered down at his gleaming throne, a mountain of gold and jewels.

Dragons as a race had a penchant for amassing wealth such as precious metals, gems, magic items, and so on. Olasird’arc was no different.

But although they could dig holes and acquire metals and gemstones, they had no way to process them. That wasn’t a job for the powerful anyhow. Dragons felt it was work fit for their slaves—in this case, the kuagoa—to do.

This was a request from those slaves. The benevolent feeling that he would like to help them out a bit welled up inside him.

“So who is it?”

“We don’t know. We haven’t figured out who or what it is yet, although we suspect it’s the dwarves.”

“The dwarves…? Hmm…”

Olasird’arc glanced at the huge door behind him.

That door led to what was the treasury when this city belonged to the dwarves.

No matter how hard he attacked it, the door wouldn’t open or break. The protective spell the rune crafters had given it defended the treasures against numerous attacks.

At this point, his insistence on claiming the riches had faded, and he used the door only to sharpen his claws occasionally, but when he heard the word *dwarves*, the smoldering embers flared up.

If there were dwarves coming all the way over here, perhaps they had a way to open the door.

Is it time to abandon the kuagoa? The dwarves would be more useful in many ways.

As Olasird’arc was making those calculations, coolly looking down at the kuagoa, the kuagoa king was wrapping up his plea.

“I’m sure that you, White Dragonlord, could easily defeat the dwarves! I beg you, please lend us your strength! Of course, if you do, we’ll give you double—no, even more—in thanks.”

The last bit piqued Olasird’arc’s desire, and he raised his head. “All right. I’ll think about it.”

“Please wait, White Dragonlord! The enemy is already quite close! And if it’s the dwarves, I’m sure they’ll try to recapture the city!”

“What? Are you saying you think the dwarves are capable of driving me from my lair?”

“No, certainly not! But there’s no telling what they’ll do. They might know

how to destroy the whole city!”

“If so, wouldn’t they have done it sooner?”

“It could be that the trigger is somewhere inside the city!”

Hmm, thought Olasird’arc. That sounded awfully far-fetched, but neither could he completely deny the possibility.

This location was crucial for building the dragon empire.

He had seized the ruins of the dwarf palace and ordered his wives to lay their eggs and raise their young here.

If they kept doing things as they had been—laying eggs in a random location and leaving them there or kicking their offspring out of the nest after about a year—the power of the dragons would never grow. Olasird’arc wanted to have more children, subjugate the frost giants, and take full control of the mountain range.

The frost dragons and frost giants were both top-tier predators in these mountains, so they had been locked in a long power struggle to see who would come out on top.

Frost giants had perfect resistance to chill, so the frost dragons’ ace move, Chill Breath, couldn’t hurt them. Meanwhile, the damage that frost giants could deliver when they swung their massive weapons was so great that even the dragons couldn’t take it lightly. If the giants showed up in large numbers, losing was a distinct possibility. There were even some frost dragons who had lost to the frost giants in the past and had been relegated to serving as watchdogs.

The frost giants were aware of these facts, too. If Olasird’arc was in their position, he wouldn’t let an opportunity slip by and wait for his enemy to increase in number—he would attack. If he lost this land, there was no way the giant tribes wouldn’t band together to attack before he found a new stronghold.

Olasird’arc looked around at the queens lounging nearby.

There were three female dragons.

Minataron Fuvienes was the youngest and had a single pale-blue horn.

Munwinia Ilisusulim had battled with Olasird'arc for territory several times.

Chiristoran Denshushwa was the sole dragon in these lands who could use faith magic, albeit only tier one.

"What do you all think?"

"…Why not lend them your power? Defeating the dwarves will be almost nothing for you."

"I agree. I couldn't care less what that thing said earlier, but if the dwarves know we're here but are still coming to attack, they're underestimating us. We need to burn some fear into those impudent little creatures' hearts." Munwinia gave the floor a scrape with her claws.

Olasird'arc shifted his gaze to Chiristoran. "And what do you think?"

"I'm against but also for it. Against because we don't know if it's really the dwarves or not. And if someone is attacking despite the knowledge that we're here, we should really consider how strong they may be. The idea of destroying the city sounds preposterous, but given the dwarves' technology, building in a mechanism like that probably wouldn't be impossible. It would be foolish to not address the matter one way or another."

Olasird'arc gave a wry smile. She was so contrarian. He loved it. "Seems like more are in favor of action. Very well, I'll entertain the wishes of the inferior kuagoa."

"Thank you, master!"

Coldly looking down on the prostrate kuagoa, Olasird'arc announced, "You owe me ten times what you just presented."

"T-ten times?"

Olasird'arc scoffed when the kuagoa raised his face. "You haven't even explained who the attackers are, so what can you expect? And…? What's your plan? If you're not going to pay, then you can deal with this on your own."

"P-please wait! We'll give it to you! Please allow us to make the offering!"

Olasird'arc suddenly had a thought.

Did the kuagoa even have enough gold to match his request? Or were the dwarves so incredibly strong that they would accept even if they struggled to pay?

Well, either way was fine. If they failed to meet his demands as promised, he could do like Munwinia said and burn some indelible fear into the weaklings' hearts.

"Very well, be gone."

"Yes, master! And when can we humbly expect your presence?"

"I'll be there right away. Just wait until then."

"Understood!"

As Olasird'arc watched the kuagoa go, Minataron asked, "You're going?"

"Ha, no."

Olasird'arc was the strongest dragon in the land. Even if he was going to be compensated, it would be ridiculous for him to personally fight on behalf of his slaves. Which was why…

"I'll send someone else. Which child would be good for this?"

By that, he meant which one of his children should go. Apart from the queens, all the dragons here were of his blood.

"If possible, one of mine."

"Yours? Who?"

Chiristoran had four children with Olasird'arc. They had all lived for over a hundred years and were far more powerful than the kuagoa.

"The eldest."

"Hejinmaar?" Olasird'arc's expression was sober.

"He does use his head, you know. He'll figure out the identity of these intruders, and I'm sure if it's the dwarves, he'll be able to negotiate with them to your benefit. You're sick of having kuagoa servants, aren't you?"

"Can he really manage such a thing? Wouldn't someone else be better?"

Olasird’arc agreed with Minataron’s comment.

“He’s better than Tranjelitt.”

“…Chiristoran. The most important thing for a dragon is physical strength. It’s impossible to force someone strong and quick to their knees with intellect. Olasird’arc was able to defeat me because he was more powerful. Get that through your head. Tranjelitt has a splendid body and is far superior to Hejinmaar.”

Tranjelitt was one of Olasird’arc’s children, borne by Munwinia, and was the strongest of all the offspring.

“But someone who can’t think for themselves is a risk. If you send a child who kills kuagoa for no reason, there’s no telling what’ll happen.”

“That’s enough.” Olasird’arc interrupted before Munwinia could retort. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Minataron looked disappointed a fight hadn’t broken out.

“I’ll take Chiristoran’s suggestion. Call Hejinmaar.”

“Impossible. Hejinmaar won’t come out.”

Olasird’arc sensed that his plans had been making no progress from the get-go.

Munwinia chuckled with a faint nastiness. He didn’t want another fight to start. Olasird’arc raised his voice slightly.

“We can just break down the door and drag him out.”

“Oh? You’re the one who said not to destroy your castle. That’s why I haven’t done anything like that yet. I take it I have permission now? The door might not be the end of it, though.”

Certainly, he did remember making that rule before. Dragons may have been dexterous, but they weren’t able to build doors. And they didn’t have the magic necessary to do it, either. Once something was broken, it was broken.

The White Dragonlord found the idea of living in a castle full of holes shameful, so he had given strict orders to his queens and children to be careful.

If he ordered one of them, they would probably go, but…

“Fine. I’ll go.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

Olasird’arc cast a disappointed look at Chiristoran.

He wasn’t satisfied with going himself, as the king. *Maybe I should have some kuagoa servants living in the castle for times like this.*

But like every other time he had considered that idea, he rejected it.

He couldn’t stand the thought of lower life-forms like kuagoa prancing around in his home. Someday he would defeat the giants and take on some of them as servants. Until then, he would simply have to be patient.

•

Considering the height of dwarves, the palace they built was surprisingly large. That was why dragons were able to live in it, but it also meant that going from one end to another involved crossing quite a distance.

Olasird’arc climbed higher and higher until he reached a large door on what was nearly the top floor.

He called through it. “It’s me. Open the door.”

He waited a little while, but there was no sign of movement on the other side.

There was no way he was out. The son in this room was a shut-in. Olasird’arc had almost no memories of ever seeing him leave. Apparently, his little brothers and sisters even brought him his meals.

His attitude—pretending to be gone to ignore his father, the king—was quite irritating.

“I’ll say it again. It’s me. Open up.”

Dragons had sharp senses. A shout this loud, the son inside would hear, and even if he was sleeping, it would wake him up.

But the door didn’t open.

The anger that welled up was channeled directly into action.

Olasird'arc struck the door with his tail.

Taking that blow from an object thick as a great tree trunk and covered in scales harder than iron, the door emitted a crushing sound. It seemed the dwarves who built it hadn't taken into account that it might one day be struck by a dragon tail.

Olasird'arc sensed movement inside, but it wasn't enough to quell his rage.

He struck the door again, and this time it was considerably damaged and crumbled rocks flew into the room like scattershot.

From inside came a pathetic "Eeeek!"

"Get out here. Now!"

The roar had the dragon up and out instantaneously.

Frost dragons had slender trunks. But this one looked different. Frankly, he was fat.

A dragon with little spectacles on the end of his snout looked timidly up at Olasird'arc.

The child was so pathetic, he had to sigh.

Of course, there was nothing to be done about the fact that he was nervous before the ruler of the land. But this was his child, so he would have liked if he had a bit more vigor in his eyes.

And that sad physique. He's less like a dragon and more like a lardon.

Honestly, maybe it's humiliating to have a kid like this go out in my place.

As Olasird'arc was thinking those things, his son, frightened to have his dad staring at him like that, asked, "F-Father, wh-what in the world is it?"

Still, he *was* a dragon. And dragons gained power as they grew up. So even with that obese body, he could probably fight to some extent.

"I have a job for you, Hejinmaar."

"A-a job?"

"Yes. Apparently, dwarves or some such are attacking the kuagoa. Repel

them.”

“Eep.”

“Eep?”

“N-no, I didn’t say anything, Father. M-more importantly, I, uh, hmm, I don’t have much confidence in my physical abilities, I guess you could say…?”

“Then, what are you confident in? Do you think you can slay them with magic?”

As dragons developed, they acquired arcane magic skills. But it wasn’t much—certainly not enough to be called a caster. But some dragons did learn moves that used magic.

One of Olasird’arc’s queens, Chiristoran Denshushwa, was a perfect example. Or there was the Blue Sky Dragonlord, Svelia Myronsilk, one of the councilors of the council state who had druid powers and used faith magic. Reportedly, another dragon far to the east trained to be a holy knight and was able to use spells from various trees.

“…Well, uh, since I don’t have a master, I’m just studying on my own…”

“Then, what are you doing locked up in here all the time?”

An intense light filled Hejinmaar’s eyes. “Studying. I’m accumulating knowledge.”

“What? Knowledge? You mean groping for the ability to wield arcane magic?”

“N-no. Father, studying isn’t just for learning magic. I’m deepening my cultural knowledge, learning how this city was built, what sorts of races live in this world, and so on.”

“…I don’t know what you’re talking about. Does learning all that toughen you up? If you don’t get stronger, it’s meaningless, isn’t it?”

There was nothing more important in this world than acquiring strength. It was a world where living without growing more powerful was impossible. Life meant getting stronger. Not doing that was tantamount to refuting life itself.

Just then, even though his son did his best to hide it, he noticed Hejinmaar

had reacted with a seemingly exasperated expression.

“What? If there’s something you want to say, say it.”

His son said nothing. The pitiful attitude was aggravating.

Right as he was about to yell at him, he remembered why he had come.

He wasn’t worried about what happened to the kuagoa, but he needed the reward.

“Staying cooped up inside poring over books till you lose your speed isn’t going to help you. If you want to amass knowledge, you should get out and see the world, don’t you think?”

Olasird’arc had been swiftly losing interest in Hejinmaar. *Did you really let your flesh grow so saggy for this utter nonsense?* Running out of patience, he no longer cared about what happened to this particular child of his.

“I—I was getting ready to do that. If I don’t know what kind of beings are out there, I might die before I get to see them.”

“How about you just die, then? You’re a fool. Why didn’t you pursue strength from the start? If you have strength, there is nothing to fear going out into the world. Just look at me.”

“But, Father, it’s important to know what powerful beings live where. Frost giants are a difficult opponent even for you, right? If you got on their bad side without knowing that—”

“—I’m not scared of frost giants.”

“Th-then, do excuse me, Father.”

Olasird’arc’s shoulders slumped when he saw his son rubbing his face into the ground before him.

“That’s enough. I have orders for you. Follow them. Then you have a month before I’m kicking you out. That way you can live however you please.”

3

“Haaagh…”

In the tunnel leading to the capital, Hejinmaar emitted a sigh identical to his father’s.

“I’m just not so good at fighting.”

It was worse than *not so good*. He was so weak, he had a feeling he would lose to his younger brother in a fight. When he was anxious, he tended to talk to himself more.

“I hope…the sight of me is enough to scare them away.”

Hejinmaar sucked in his stomach with a grunt. Then he put up his claws and opened his mouth wide. He figured he looked a bit more dragon-like that way.

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

He carefully took the spectacles off the tip of his snout and hid them nearby. They weren’t rare magic items or anything, but if they broke, there was no way to get a replacement pair. He had to take good care of them.

“Haaagh… I heard you can make tough armor out of dragon scales. I guess I just have to pray the dwarves aren’t that barbaric of a race.”

If they are, then what?

No, they must be—I got the info about using dragon scales out of a dwarven book.

Hejinmaar steeled himself to keep from trembling.

He knew the kuagoa from the city were watching him. Really, he would have liked to move farther down the tunnel to fight where there weren’t so many onlookers, but his father had prohibited it, saying that would prevent the kuagoa from seeing him fight.

His father had told him to figure out who was attacking and, if possible, bring them under his rule, but the dragonlord had no intentions of allowing a friendly approach. It was an order to put on a display of power to subjugate the weak.

In other words, defeat here was synonymous with death. If Hejinmaar fought and lost, he would probably die, and even if he managed to survive losing the

battle, the kuagoa would respect the dragons less and his father would kill him out of displeasure.

Why not just run away, then? Either way, I'll be kicked out in a month anyhow.

The idea itself wasn't horrible, but he felt he could use the month of prep time.

In the end, his best bet was to defeat and subjugate the dwarves.

Hejinmaar blew using his breath power.

The bitter cold frosted the wall.

"Good! I can blow chill normally. That's fine for my age."

That was one of the dragons' most powerful moves, Dragon Breath. In a frost dragon's case, it was Chill Breath, but either way, it became more powerful as the dragon grew. Hejinmaar's was normal for his age, so he could rely on it more than his general physical abilities.

"…But still."

Everyone with even a little knowledge knew how terrible Dragon Breath was. After all, it was a power every type of dragon had.

It was even written about in the dwarves' books. Surely the ones headed this way had come up with some kind of countermeasure to deal with it.

Hejinmaar's despair mounted.

His father had said it, too, but maybe if he could really use magic, things would be different…

"I'm nothing but a sacrificial pawn…"

His elder brothers obeyed their father and had proper dragon-like personalities. If his father was sending him out instead of entrusting this duty to them, it had to mean he didn't care whether his shut-in son died or not.

All he could do was lament his fate.

If he hadn't encountered books and known the pleasure of slaking his thirst for knowledge, it never would've come to this, but there was no point in regretting it now.

His nose twitched.

When he listened intently, he could hear multiple sets of footsteps approaching through the cave.

It was clear from the sounds of shoes that they weren't kuagoa.

Dwarves? If there are so few…do they think they can win with numbers that small? Or is it a scouting party? If I defeat them, can I assume my work is finished and go home?

If he really forced it, he could interpret his father's orders as a request to simply drive off this scouting party. The question was whether that excuse would fly or not.

In the hazy glow of the fluorescent ore, there appeared to be four figures, although they were too far away to make out what sort.

Are the three little ones dwarves? Then, what's the big one? None of the races related to dwarves is that big. Does that mean that just like how the kuagoa asked Father for help, the dwarves turned to this guy?

Whether it was someone the dwarves asked for help or not, the big figure was probably the one Hejinmaar needed to be wary of.

But whatever the size, his opponent was still no match for a dragon.

Would it be better to take the initiative and use my breath? Hejinmaar rejected that idea immediately. *No. I should ask what their goal is and find a way to settle this through negotiation.*

A normal dragon would have immediately launched themselves into a fight. But Hejinmaar lacked confidence and wasn't interested in getting beaten, so he was looking for the safest way to resolve things.

Before long, his sharp dragon eyes—though slightly less keen than a typical dragon's—made out that the figure leading the way was not a dwarf.

I've seen one of those in a book before! That's one of those dark elves said to live deep in the forest.

It made no sense for one to be here.

But compared to the average height listed in the book, this one is awfully small. Maybe it's a dark elf–dwarf mix? Or is that just a dark elf child?

Having thought those various possibilities, Hejinmaar shifted his gaze to the larger figure behind the dark elf, and the moment he did, his eyes popped wide open.

Huh?! An elder lich?! What is that doing here?! This'll be a pain. He has perfect resistance to Chill Breath and *he can use Fireball!*

Fire was a frost dragon's weakness. In other words, Hejinmaar's greatest attack wouldn't have any effect, while his opponent could deal massive damage.

And what…the…? What's with the expensive robe?

Dragons had something of a nose for treasure, a vague perception of how much things were worth. And at the moment, Hejinmaar's nose was telling him that the elder lich's robe was incredibly valuable.

…But now that I look at it, the dark elf leading their band has similarly fancy clothes. I get the feeling I've never laid eyes on anything so valuable.

It was possible that his instinctive sense for treasure was off due to him holing up in his room for so long and staring at prices in books the dwarves had left behind. Even instincts could get rusty if they weren't given the occasional workout. But he couldn't believe that was the case here.

The next one seems like a female from the shape, but…is she an elf? Or a human? I don't know. And she's wearing awfully expensive clothes, too… Hmm, maybe my nose really is off. But if it's not…

When he saw the dwarf bringing up the rear, he was relieved.

A normal dwarf. And his clothes don't seem to be worth much.

At that point, he shook his head.

But I can't underestimate him! The other three aren't anywhere near normal. There could be something different about him, too. It'd be dangerous to drop my guard.

As he watched, the dark elf pointed at him and seemed to be alerting the

others to his presence.

He wondered what he would do if they suddenly attacked—perhaps with Fireball—but they only stopped walking and discussed among themselves for a moment before continuing to walk toward him.

…Should I assume the worst?

If they had attacked right away, he could have assumed they were wary of him. What did it mean that they hadn't?

Ugh. My stomach hurts. Please let this be a kind-hearted undead who only came to negotiate!

He could be killed. The time until the party came to a halt was too suspenseful for Hejinmaar, who had lived all his life until this very instant in safety.

They eventually came close.

Hejinmaar took a breath and spoke, taking care not to appear too threatening.

This group walked right up to him even though he was a dragon, so he figured doing anything that could be perceived as a threat would be dangerous.

"Up ahead is the lair of the kuagoa and we dragons. What are you d—ahem—? Why have you come?"

The dark elf in the lead traded places with the elder lich. That was the moment Hejinmaar learned who the leader of the group was.

"Hmm? We're invading and yet there's only one dragon here to meet us? As far as I know, dragons grow larger and more powerful with age. Given your size, I doubt you're terribly strong… What's the big idea?"

What did he mean by, *What's the big idea?* Hejinmaar didn't know. But as he suspected, this elder lich wasn't the least bit intimidated by him.

Ah, this is actually awful. I don't have the words for it—aside from that it's awful.

"Even if you're trying to collect information about us, one dragon is a joke. Is this part of the enemy's greater plan? Or am I just being overly cautious? Given

what we learned from the kuagoa we captured earlier, I'd say the latter…"

Hejinmaar still had no idea what the elder lich was talking about. And the lich didn't seem to care whether this lone dragon understood or not. In other words, it was sort of like the undead creature was talking to himself. But then, why was he so frightening?

"…I'm sick of thinking about it. Let's see how much of a dragon you are."

A shudder went through Hejinmaar's entire body.

He spoke so casually, as if he was going to pick up a pebble that happened to be lying on the ground. He sounded confident that he was capable of it.

When Hejinmaar saw the lich raise his hand—

"Gr—"

"Wait!" he roared and laid his head on the ground.

This was a dragon's most reverential, submissive gesture.

"—asp, what?"

Hejinmaar pleaded frantically before the elder lich, whose hand had stopped half-raised. "Wait! My name is Hejinmaar. May I ask yours?"

He could see the dwarf gaping at the edge of his field of vision. But he didn't get a similar reaction from either the dark elf or the elf-like person. In other words, they seemed to think it was a matter of course.

Hejinmaar was confident his choice was the right one.

"…My name is Ainz Ooal Gown… What's that pose about?"

"Sir! If I remember correctly, other races are often addressed by their last name—Sir Gown! This is the most reverential gesture we dragons can offer!"

"Hmm… Then, why are you making it?"

"Because I realized immediately what an exceptional being you are, of course! How else could I greet such a great personage? Anything less would be unthinkable!"

This was a gamble. Hejinmaar was betting everything.

The dwarves called the heat of taking a risk being “in the forge,” but Hejinmaar felt chilled to his core.

After a few moments frozen like that, the elder lich finally *hmm*ed. “…You’re submitting to me?”

“If, indeed, you’ll allow me to, Sir Gown!”

When he glanced at the dark elf and the elf, they still seemed to think this was nothing unexpected.

“…There are lots of uses for dragon meat, skin, teeth, scales, and whatnot, but… Wait, what’s this? Get up for a minute.”

He seemed accustomed to giving orders and unfazed by Hejinmaar’s surrender. This elder lich was clearly not the least bit concerned about facing a dragon.

True, dragons were the strongest race, but they weren’t invincible. There were innumerable beings that could kill dragons. The frost giants were a good example.

Still, when comparing the two races, the dragons came out on top overall.

The reason was their growth. Dragons developed as time went on and only then became the strongest. With long lives and continuous growth, they became strong automatically.

From that perspective, it was possible to say that undead were actually stronger than dragons. Elite undead didn’t have bodies that grew and developed, but they could amass knowledge and gain experience.

Hejinmaar had read about legendary undead in a book before.

There were soul eaters who ate the souls of the living just as their name implied; wriggling pestilences that spread infectious diseases; legions of wizarding undead led by an elder lich; the undead dragon Kuphantera Argoros, who lurked in a mountain of corpses and could use psychic magic; astral reapers, shadow undead that wandered shadowy valleys; and more.

Was this elder lich another one like them who might have his name in a book somewhere? Maybe he just happened to not appear in the dwarves’ books.

Hejinmaar slowly raised his head.

Sensing the lich's staring eyes on his body, he felt ashamed of his un-dragon-like physique.

"I see. So dragons who live in such cold temperatures store lots of fat under their skin. I thought frost dragons had racial resistance to chill, but… Or is it because you're worried about being able to get enough food that you end up with that body type?"

"N-no. I'm the only one like this…"

"Ooh. You mean you're rare…?"

I doubt I have any special value, but given I'm the only dragon like me in my family, he's not wrong, right? "Perhaps, Sir Gown."

"I see," said the lich. And then, with his sharp dragon ears, Hejinmaar heard him murmur, "Then, I guess it would be a waste to kill him."

Hejinmaar did his utmost to steady his breathing. Apparently, he had made another choice that would connect to his continued survival.

"Are there other dragons here?"

"Yes, there are: four larger than me, six around the same size as me, and nine smaller than me."

"Wow!"

Hejinmaar was sure the lich sounded so happy because he was making sinister calculations in his head.

"So how many of those are stronger than you?"

"All of the ones larger are also more powerful than I am. The ones the same size as me are also probably stronger."

He couldn't say, *I might also lose to my little brothers and sisters*. If his worth fell, he could very well be killed instantly.

"I see. And up to what tier of magic can the large dragons use? Is it only arcane magic?"

"The most powerful one can use up to tier three. And as you say, it's arcane

magic.”

It was a racial quality of dragons that as they grew, without having to specifically learn it, they would acquire arcane magic. The number of spells, however, was limited. Even Hejinmaar’s father knew only three tier-three spells.

“What? You can only use up to tier three…?” It was apparent that he lost interest in that angle, but he seemed to think of something, and then his voice grew energetic again. “Well, let me ask you this. Is it possible it’s a bluff? They say a skilled hawk hides its talons. Could it be that the immensely powerful dragons are hiding the fact that they can use up to tier eight?”

“No. That is to say—” Was it appropriate to tell this lich the truth—that an eighth tier didn’t exist?

He couldn’t. Sometimes the truth hurt more than a lie. Nothing good would come to Hejinmaar if he shamed this elder lich here.

“No, he can’t use such high-tier magic. I recall hearing that he had acquired tier-three spells to defend against fire.”

He figured that was something he needed to convey; his father was not to be taken lightly.

“Hmm, I see. Well, it’s only natural to come up with a plan to cover for your weaknesses.”

It worried Hejinmaar that the lich didn’t seem to be taking this very seriously.

“Aura.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz?”

Apparently, the dark elf’s name was Aura. From the scent, she seemed to be female.

The other elf-like being didn’t smell like anything. She seemed to have no body odor, just like the elder lich.

“I’ll give this dragon to you. You wanted one, right?”

“Thank you. But I wonder, can he fly?”

Her doubtful look and his more satisfied look both turned toward Hejinmaar.

“I—I believe I can.”

I may have been cooped up, but I must still be able to fly. To a dragon, flying was as natural as walking. As he spoke, he regretted not flying on his way to this place.

“All right, Lord Ainz. I’ll take him. Uh, so I have to make sure he understands that I’m his superior.”

Before he could even wonder what was going to happen to him, thousands of icy blades pierced his body.

I died. I definitely died. The fear that assailed Hejinmaar was so intense that his primal instincts told him he had been killed, the terror piercing his body as though it was an invisible blade.

For a moment, his consciousness faded. Through the haze, he distinctly felt his heart stop beating.

“Wagh!”

The dark chills enveloping his body dispersed with a flutter.

His heart muscles hesitantly resumed their motions. His limbs shuddered, and his lungs frantically worked to take in oxygen.

He had read about this in a book. It had to be what some called “bloodlust.” In other words, this dark elf, Aura, who was going to be his mistress, had a murderous presence so overwhelming, it nearly frightened a frost dragon to death.

So then, if she calls this elder lich her master, what in the world is he capable of?

The answer was clear. He didn’t even want to think about how powerful that undead had to be.

He was an absolute being—an overlord.

All of Hejinmaar’s choices had been correct.

Once he came to his senses, he realized everyone was standing a bit farther

away with surprise on their faces.

It was as he was wondering what that was about that he noticed the gross feeling in his nether regions. When he peered down, the sight he was greeted with gave him a shock.

Apparently, his muscles down there had relaxed and he'd had an accident. He was standing in a puddle of his own making.

"Oh…"

What should I say? If they were disgusted, he could even be killed.

"I was just so happy that I peed myself!" That was a desperate play. He didn't think they would actually buy that, but it seemed better than saying it had happened because he was scared. "From now on, I will obey Mistress Aura—she has my absolute loyalty."

"Uhhh…"

She seemed less than thrilled.

This is bad. If she thinks I'm worthless, she might throw me out like a piece of garbage. That's what the powerful do. My dad is the same way! But a helping hand appeared from the most unexpected place.

"I see… Well, I guess it's not too much of an issue, then."

"Huh? Really, Lord Ainz?"

"Yep. I heard once from my old friend Ankoro Mocchi Mochi how her dog's piddle parties always caused her trouble. I suppose it just happens sometimes, when emotions are running high."

"Oh, Lady Ankoro Mocchi Mochi said that? I see! Maybe it's kind of like how Fen and some of my other magical beasts mark their territory?"

"Maybe so. I'm no expert on the habits of dragons, but if that's what he says, then it must be true."

The one who was maybe also an elf, who had been quiet until now, cocked her head and asked the elder lich, "Lord Ainz, should we do that as well?"

"Shalltear. Did you really just open your mouth to say *that*…?"

“Mm. Aura’s right. If you guys did that, I’d collapse in shock. This sort of thing is only cute because little toylike animals do it… Well, I guess part of the reason Ankoro Mocchi Mochi was annoyed was the age of her dog. Remembering how she would always try to calm it down before it got too excited is so nostalgic now.”

The three of them had a totally different attitude from before; none of the murderous mood remained. For the moment, Hejinmaar moved out of the puddle and wiped himself on the wall to clean up.

“So what are we going to do now?” The dwarf who had been watching in total silence spoke up. He didn’t seem very strong compared to the other three.

Had the dwarves hired these three as mercenaries and sent this one along to supervise them? Did Hejinmaar need to show him respect as well? *What exactly is my position under these people?* Those sorts of questions crisscrossed through his mind amid the vague anxiety over what sort of orders he would be given.

“Right. We’ll leave the kuagoa up to Aura and Shalltear. I’ll take this dragon and kill any hostile dragons.”

A cold wave traveled down Hejinmaar’s spine.

The lich’s tone was so easygoing. It was clear he hardly thought anything of dragons. It was a fitting attitude for someone so powerful.

Hejinmaar wondered what to do. He couldn’t decide if it would be wise to beg for the lives of the other dragons at this juncture or not.

Weighing his interests carefully, he opened his mouth. “…Lord Gown, Mistress Aura. May I have permission to speak?!”

“Sure. What is it?”

“My lord! I was thinking. No one here knows of your greatness. What if you showed these fools mercy? In other words, I think the other dragons should know of your greatness, Lord Ainz!”

“Hmm. What do you think?”

“You should do as you wish, Lord Ainz.”

“Indeed. How could anyone object to something you decided?”

“As long as they leave the capital, isn’t that fine? Dragon, can I ask you a bit more about this?” It was the dwarf who inquired.

Hejinmaar glanced at his masters. Frankly, he didn’t know how to address this dwarf. That said, being arrogant was probably risky. But if he bowed and scraped like a minion, he feared it would inadvertently lower the status of his masters. “Yes.” After mulling it over, he simply answered in a concise manner that could be taken either way.

“Mm… I’m still amazed that she tamed this dragon completely… Well, I guess it’s only natural given how much of her strength she revealed… Oops, sorry. Are there dragons somewhere else besides here?”

“There might be.”

“There might be? If there are, can you give them orders?”

“No. They’d be from a different tribe.”

“Hmm. Then, the first thing we should do is report in that we’ve succeeded in driving everyone out of this land as requested. If we inform everyone there may be other dragon tribes, they’re sure to ask Your Majesty to assist with defending the newly retaken capital. No one will want to lose it again. I imagine that’s the most profitable plan.”

That was a word Hejinmaar couldn’t ignore.

Apparently, this elder lich was a king. And he had elves and dark elves as his subjects?

“It doesn’t bother you to pull one over on your own people?”

The dwarf gave a jocular shrug that meant, *What are you saying?* “If someone asked which is more important, I’d answer Your Majesty, since you chose us. That devotion goes both ways.”

“I appreciate that, Gondo.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Your Majesty. I don’t know how to thank you enough. All the anguish that had been tormenting me has been cleared up within a few days of meeting you. You saved me.”

“I’m glad we were able to build a relationship that benefits both of us.”

“I hardly think I’ve repaid you yet. I promise I’ll make it all worth your while!”

Hejinmaar could understand their relationship even as an outsider.

The dwarf felt tremendously indebted to the elder lich. It was a debt so huge that he had betrayed his entire race to repay it.

“…As long as that works for you, I’m fine.” The elder lich shrugged and then turned to Hejinmaar. “Okay, take me to the dragons who are stronger than you. Also, I heard there’s a treasury somewhere in this old dwarven capital. Do you know where that is?”

Hejinmaar was familiar with its location. He nodded, full of confidence. “If that’s what you’re here for, you’re in luck—both of those things are in the same place.”

•

Hejinmaar gave the dwarf and his mistress’s master a ride to his father on his back. Even if he was out of shape, he was a dragon. Carrying two people was nothing.

While they were walking, he learned why the elder lich was called His Majesty, which convinced him that knowledge and intuition were the two most important things in the world.

If he had appeared initially with the properly haughty attitude of a dragon, he would have been killed, without question. No, if he hadn’t loudly sworn allegiance, if he hadn’t caught their attention, his life would have ended before he realized what was happening.

It’s seriously a miracle that I survived.

Hejinmaar strained to keep his bladder from relaxing.

If he had a second accident, his evaluation wouldn’t simply hit rock bottom; it would go underground.

Luckily, they didn’t run into any other dragons along the way and soon found themselves near his father’s room, which was something between a throne room and a treasury.

Hejinmaar took a breath.

“Your Great Majesty. In addition to my father, there are three more dragons, his queens, inside. Are you going to bring the dwarf along?”

He was worried that if the frigid breaths of four frost dragons came whooshing toward them at once, the dwarf would die.

“Is there a problem with him coming?”

“N-no. If Your Great Majesty has no issues, then I certainly do not.”

“I gave him perfect resistance to chill, so he’s fine. That said, it would be a pain if they cast multiple area-of-effect spells of varying attributes.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that, Your Great Majesty. Dragons take pride in their breath. Attacking first with that is standard, rather than coming out with weak arcane spells.”

“Then, I think we’re fine.”

“Hey, Your Majesty, can I say something? You can probably take four dragons like nothing, but this one’s mother must be among them. Wouldn’t it be nice of you to spare her at least?”

“Hmm…”

Hejinmaar twisted his long neck around and waited to see what kind of judgment his master would reach.

He didn’t feel like making a bigger request than what he had already asked for. He was fine with there being a chance that his mother could be saved like him, but he wasn’t going to risk his own life to beg for it. It wasn’t as though he held anything against his mom. Dragons simply didn’t have very strong bonds between relatives.

It was normal, once adults left the nest, for even parents and children to compete for territory. And dragons loved treasure, so they sometimes went to battle over each other’s riches, family or not.

It was extremely rare for a large number of dragons—who were old enough to leave the nest—to live in one place; that rarely occurred unless an overwhelmingly powerful dragon took charge and gathered them together.

In that sense, Olasird'arc, who kept his family close to unite against external enemies, could be said to go against the grain. Or perhaps it was better to say he was clever.

"Very well. I'll do what I can to spare your mom."

"Thank you, Your Great Majesty."

He expressed his gratitude immediately. He didn't want to make the lich feel awkward for showing him kindness. And he also figured that if his mother was saved, his share of the upcoming struggles would decrease. Although, with more numbers, he would be less rare, so to avoid becoming someone expendable, he would have to strive to earn favor with his masters.

"…That 'Your Great Majesty' thing is a bit much. From now on, you can call me the King of Darkness or just Ainz."

Is it a trap? Am I being tested? Without a moment's hesitation, Hejinmaar said what he felt was correct. "Yes, Your Majesty, King of Darkness!"

There was no way he could drop the *Your Majesty*.

"Right. Now go."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

He breathed a sigh of relief, taking care that it wasn't noticeable.

Yes, it must have been a test. If he had lowered his guard and left off the honorific, he probably would have been horribly punished—or even killed and dismembered.

Hejinmaar chiseled it into his heart: *If there's one thing I won't become, it's cocky*.

Before long, they arrived at their destination.

The door was big enough that a dragon's strength was necessary to open it. The dwarves had used a smaller door next to it for regular comings and goings; the larger door was apparently used only for ceremonies.

Hejinmaar put his shoulder against the door and pushed, taking care not to drop his master.

Coiled around the golden throne was his father, Olasird'arc. His mother, Chiristoran, and the other two queens, Minataron and Munwinia, were present, too.

Three gazes turned to him in suspicion when he entered. The gaze of his master above fell down on him. His mother's was the last.

Before anyone else could open their mouths, Hejinmaar barked, "Seated atop me is His Majesty, Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness! He is the king who will henceforth govern this land and have the dragons do his bidding!"

Technically, they would serve the dark elf Aura, but this was easier to explain, so he had gotten permission to declare it that way.

When he finished, silence enveloped the room for a moment. It was the short time necessary for everyone to digest what they had just been told.

"Have you lost your mind, boy?" His father was immediately furious.

Of course he was. *He* was the king who ruled this land—no, he used to be. It was a natural reaction.

He rose from his reclined position and got into a combat stance so he could come flying at his son at any moment.

Eep!

Hejinmaar was genuinely frightened.

Between his father and him, his father was unmistakably stronger. The disparity was insurmountable not only in terms of pure strength but also combat experience. His father's body was even slim like an average dragon's, unlike Hejinmaar's.

He had less than no chance of winning in a fight.

But he had no choice but to make that announcement. He had read in a book once that no subordinate would ever make their leader introduce themselves.

That's why he was trying to signal to his father with his eyes that he was saying it against his will, but Olasird'arc didn't seem to notice at all. His raging glare was piercing only Hejinmaar. His father believed dragons were the strongest race, so Hejinmaar's master and the dwarf probably weren't worth his

attention.

“Dragon king. I’ll let you live if you submit to me, so how about it?”

“Who are you, filth?! A skeleton?!”

He’s obviously not a skeleton! shrieked Hejinmaar in his head.

He nearly scoffed, *Aren’t your dragon senses alerting you to the fortune he’s wearing?* but then realized maybe his father was just too angry to notice.

Maybe he wouldn’t have acted this way if I hadn’t made him mad…

No, that wasn’t the issue here. He might have acted even more problematic instead.

As Hejinmaar was fretting, his father suddenly narrowed his eyes.

“…Wait, what’s that outfit he’s wearing?”

Apparently, once he had calmed down a bit, his dragon nose kicked in.

Hejinmaar had a bad feeling about this. He looked around for help, but the queens were all equally interested in his new master. They all had the eyes of beasts starved for wealth. His mother was the only one trying to slowly back out of this situation, but she didn’t seem to care about saving her son.

“I’ve never seen such riches. If you want to be forgiven for your rudeness, give me that clothing, skeleton!”

“Hmm… It’s torture to talk with someone this stupid.” A cold voice rang out.

Why don’t you realize your instincts as a living thing are telling you death is near?! It must have been his miserly ambitions as a dragon getting in the way.

“You ignorant fool! You’ve just abandoned your only chance for staying alive! No, I’m going to kill you and—”

“Grasp Heart.”

Hejinmaar’s father crumpled to the ground.

Everyone’s eyes gathered on this land’s most powerful dragon.

He didn’t move a muscle and appeared to be sleeping, but that couldn’t be the case.

As a chill settled over the room, the absolute ruler spoke. “I have no interest in listening to what you lot have to say. So, Hejinmaar. Which one is your mother? She’ll be the only one I spare. The rest I’ll take apart and put to good use.”

“Me!”

“Me!”

“Me!”

Three voices shouted at once. It almost had Hejinmaar shouting *Me!* too.

“…What? You mean one birthed him, one raised him, and one…incubated him?”

Hejinmaar eyed the two dragons who weren’t related to him—two dragons consumed by fear.

Their eyes were clouded over with terror. Of course they were. The most powerful dragon they knew had just been killed instantaneously. Reaching for the lifeline dangled from above without thinking about fighting or fleeing was the correct choice, much like how it had been for Hejinmaar.

Their frightened eyes turned to him ingratiatingly. What would happen if he said, *No, only one of these is my mother*? His absolute master would surely kill two of them with no hesitation.

At this moment, he held the power of life and death over those two. But he took no joy in it. All he felt was sympathy for these fellow dragons in the same boat as him—and the calculating urge to have these “mothers” in his debt for the future.

“That’s correct, Your Majesty. All three of them are my mothers.”

“I see. That’s too bad, but a promise is a promise. Very well, I won’t kill these three. I guess we still scored one dragon body? We have so many uses for dragons that one definitely isn’t enough, but…well, it really is a shame.”

When he glanced at the three dragons, they all lowered their heads in submission.

“Leave this place and bring back all the other dragons. Then I’ll announce that

I’m your leader now… If anyone has an issue with that, I’ll deal with them personally.”

The queens raced away. It was impressive—astounding, even—how fast they moved.

Hejinmaar didn’t think they would try to escape. They knew that running away when up against a caster of this caliber was a gamble only one in a billion would win. Well, Hejinmaar didn’t care if they ran—because then he would get to learn how the King of Darkness would track them down and punish them.

Hejinmaar felt a light bonk on his head. When he turned around, his master was looking at him.

“I have a different order for you. It’s very important. Bring me any dwarven books you haven’t read yet, as well as all the other books that are here.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! Understood! I’ll bring them just as fast as I can!”

Hejinmaar let the pair down in a hurry and rushed off at full speed.

•

“Okay, he’s gone.”

Ainz watched Hejinmaar’s figure fade into the distance. He already knew how many dragons there were in this land, so if enough didn’t show up, that was perfectly fine.

He had a single dragon corpse, but he could think of so many ways to use it that he wanted more. Acquiring corpses by punishing subordinates who had done nothing wrong, however, went against Ainz’s self-imposed rules for reward and punishment.

“Heh-heh,” he sneered.

If they tried to flee, he would pursue and kill them, then harvest their bodies. As he did the math regarding how to use their parts, he shifted his gaze to the huge pile of gold the dragon had been lounging on.

“…That’s a dragon for you. This really is a mountain of treasure.”

It wasn’t much compared to Nazarick’s treasury, but this was more wealth

than he'd seen in the possession of any other individual in this world.

There were gold coins, but there were even more minerals that seemed to contain gold. Besides that, there were what looked to be raw gemstones.

Among the items were a golden chain over five yards long, the skin of some sort of exotic animal, golden gauntlets inlaid with jewels, and a rough-hewn staff that seemed to have magical properties. Wherever had they found these things?

The answer may have been something only the dead dragon knew.

"Hmm… There doesn't seem to be any pyrite or chalcopyrite mixed in. Is it mostly naturally occurring gold? This is what a dragon's sense of smell can accomplish, eh…?"

That was the sort of thing Gondo was saying as he examined the minerals giving off a golden gleam. *Is that gold or something else?* wondered Ainz, thinking he would have to get it appraised once they returned.

"It's no issue if I take ownership of these dragon treasures, right?"

"That's your natural right. But how about you open that up now while everyone's gone?"

"Hoo-hoo. You're a rotten one, too, huh?"

"It's for research. In any case, if there's something Your Majesty would like, let me know. According to that dragon, there's no catalog, but it's probably not a good idea to take any of the famous dwarven treasures."

"Why not say the dragons took them?"

"In that situation, I would have to assume they'd ask you for them, since you're seizing the dragon's loot. I doubt the regency council can really confront you about it, but wouldn't it be better to avoid anything that could cause trouble in the future?"

"That's exactly right. Okay, I'm going to go close the entrance. The fewer people who know what's about to happen, the better."

"Thanks, Your Majesty."

Ainz and the dwarf split up and went about their respective tasks.

First, Ainz cast Gate and summoned eight-edged assassins.

“I have orders for you guys. Search this entire castle, including hidden rooms, and bring back any books you find. If you meet any dragons, tell them you work for me. If they attack, feel free to kill them, but do not under any circumstances strike first. And…I doubt this will be an issue, but considering the possibility of powerful enemies lurking around, operate in teams. If you encounter anyone strong, prioritize bringing back intelligence.”

Books written in the dwarven tongue he would have Gondo read for him.

After watching his underlings scatter, he tossed the dragon body through the Gate.

Hmm. If the body would accept a resurrection spell after we process it for parts, we could theoretically get a whole other set, but I suppose that’s impossible…

When the combat maid Yuri Alpha peeked out of the Gate, he ordered her to freeze the dragon corpse on the fifth level so it wouldn’t rot.

“Your Majesty! As expected, there’s nothing open. The treasures must be exactly how they were originally left.”

“I see. Then, I’ll open it.”

He said bye to Yuri, and after closing the front door, he stood before the entrance to the treasury.

His breast buzzed as he remembered his *Yggdrasil* days. There was just something incredibly fun about drops in the form of treasure chests. It could have been a single data crystal, but there was no telling until it was open. He felt that same thrill now.

But that feeling was neutralized.

The discomfort of having a nice emotion suppressed weighed on him, but he still felt a trace of excitement.

Ainz took out a magic item shaped like a board.

It was the artifact Epigonoi.

The item could be used only seven times, but it had lock-picking abilities on par with a level-90 thief.

It was incredibly rare, so he didn't really want to use it, but he hadn't summoned any minions with high-level lock-picking skills. The eight-edged assassins were specialized in stealth combat and had next to no lock-picking ability.

"I guess I have no choice."

Ainz usually had a hard time using rare items he had managed to acquire. The reason he could do it this time with only a little hesitation was probably the promise of treasure.

He pointed the artifact at the treasury door and unleashed its power.

Peeking through the narrow opening, Ainz exchanged a firm handshake with Gondo.

Neither of them had any words. But their faces said it all.

A golden glimmer was a reflection of light—if there wasn't any light, there wasn't any glimmer. But in spite of that common sense, this enormous treasure seemed to glow from within. Unfortunately, the place apparently had no concept of organization, but still.

"…It's fantastic."

Like the dragons' hoard, the dwarves' was no match for Nazarick's wealth, but as an individual, Ainz had to hand it to them.

He picked up a gold piece. It was a coin he had never seen before. It wasn't like the gold trade currency, either. But he had the feeling it was different from the things dwarves made, as well—because of the human profile engraved on it.

"Apparently, at one time we had a trading relationship with the vast human country that ruled the area around these mountains, so it must be their king's face. That was back during the golden age, when crafters were more influential."

“Hmm.”

Ainz flicked the coin back into the mountain of treasure. The sound of the *clink* when it hit the other coins was loud and clear.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I’m going to take the liberty of hunting for any technical manuals or rune items that might be useful for my research.”

“Go ahead. I’ll check things out, too.”

Pandora’s Actor would probably be overjoyed.

Recalling that guy’s bizarre demeanor, Ainz made sure to lock the door from the inside before floating into the air.

He could see some weapons and armor partially buried in the coins. Why didn’t they care if any of them got damaged?

I see. If everything was neat and tidy, any thief who got in would be able to see at a glance what was most valuable, so they did it this way on purpose? Hmm? In that case, this place might also follow the common pattern of…

“Gondo. There’s something I want to ask you. Is there any chance they hid a door beneath this mountain of gold pieces?”

Gondo turned around in surprise. “Oh! I can’t say for sure that there isn’t one. But if there is, it’ll be hard to find. We’d have to move all this treasure out of the way first.”

They would at least have to move the coins.

“What if we measured up from the floor below to see if we could detect any suspicious thickness?”

“Nah, even if there was a hidden door under here, I imagine it would just be a sliding door for a treasure compartment only big enough for a few items. It would be difficult to judge based on thickness. And besides, it’s normal for a vault to have thick walls, floor, and ceiling.”

Gondo asked with his eyes what they should do, and Ainz shook his head. Poaching items from this place was more of a bonus than anything else. It didn’t make sense to prioritize putting all his energy into that.

“That’s not why I’m here. It would be foolish to spend time searching for something that we’re not even sure exists. I think I’d rather be here when the dwarves recapture the place and offer to purchase things at a fair price so they feel like they should be considerate of me, too.”

“Understood. Then, let’s find what we’re looking for.”

As Gondo resumed his search, Ainz selected a few items with a lot of magical energy.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Among them was a sword.

It was quite possibly the most enchanted item out of the entire collection.

“Hmm… In terms of level, I guess it’s fifty?”

It had the length of a longsword and was gorgeously ornate.

He wasn’t sure if it was from *Yggdrasil*, but it had an awful lot of mana for something from this world.

Ainz ran a finger along the naked blade but didn’t feel any bumps.

“It’s a splendid, beautiful sword. No runes on it? Then, why?”

He clenched a hand around the grip. That instant, the sword trembled. It was as if mana had coursed through it.

“You mean…I can use this?”

The classes Ainz had acquired didn’t allow him to wield longswords. But perhaps this sword was made of magic? The limitation didn’t seem to apply.

“Interesting.”

He swung it a few times and then stabbed it casually into his hand.

As expected, he felt no pain. His power to neutralize all attacks from level 60 and below was functioning normally. This sword didn’t seem to have any magic as special as the enchantment that graced what Gazef had wielded.

Losing interest slightly, he cast a spell. “Appraise Any M—”

“Your Majesty, King of Darkness! How about it? Did you find anything that

strikes your fancy?”

“A few things, so I’m in the process of deciding what to take.”

“I see! Well, I’m counting on you.”

Gondo had interrupted his spell, but Ainz tossed the sword back into the mountain of riches.

A sword he could use was intriguing, but at this point, that’s all it was. If he was going to take an item with him out of this place, he wanted something different, something that would really benefit him.

I guess it’s just magic items like this? It’s too bad, but, well, maybe it’s my fault for fantasizing about finding a World Item or something.

Ainz continued searching until he found something that pleased him.

“Gondo. I’ve made my selection. I don’t recall hearing about any national treasures like this, but will you check for me?”

4

“Okay, here I go.”

With that announcement to Shalltear, who stood at her side, Aura unfurled the World Item she had brought—a scroll—and activated its power.

Scenes of Nature and Civilization…

In a nutshell, it allowed the user to trap their target in an isolated space. More precisely, the world depicted on the World Item and the real world intersected, altering the real world to match the painting.

The target would be an area, just like how the super-tier spell the Creation worked, which included all things animate or not—if something was in that location, it had no way to resist.

In this case, everything inside the gigantic cave, including the capital city, was trapped in the alternate world created by Scenes of Nature and Civilization.

Naturally, since Ainz and Shalltear were protected by the World Items they carried, they weren't imprisoned by the effects, instead merely appearing in the painting world that had been created to replace the reality that had been swallowed up. Since Aura had used the item, she was forcibly pulled into the alternate world.

The world of the painting seemed identical to the real world—except it was an illusion created by the World Item; that meant once the power of Scenes of Nature and Civilization was cut off, or people inside the area of effect stepped beyond the boundaries, any changes that occurred in the temporary painting world would all disappear like smoke. In other words, even if they acquired treasure in the painting world, that would go up in smoke, too.

Of course, Ainz and Shalltear entered the altered real world voluntarily. Normally, World Items didn't affect people carrying World Items, but if they accepted the effects, that was a different story. Or more accurately, this function came about mainly thanks to a patch from the admins, who hated becoming stuck somewhere.

The user of Scenes of Nature and Civilization could choose one of a hundred different overlays for the alternate world.

For example, it could be a lava zone that dealt continuous fire damage, a freezing zone that dealt continuous chill damage, a shock zone where a lightning storm struck at fixed intervals, or a world with horrible visibility due to rainstorms or fog.

One strange option was an encircled battlefield. At set intervals, a sizable amount of reinforcements would show up to fight the enemies. But the reinforcements would be only about 60 percent as strong as their opponents' average strength, so they wouldn't be useful for much more than chipping away at the enemy and wearing them out.

The single combat battlefield overlay allowed the summoning of powerful fighters who had 80 percent of the user's strength and in enough numbers to evenly match their opponents. If defeating the enemy was the goal, this was the best option.

The most fearsome property of this item wasn't that it sucked people into an

alternate world but that the user was able to select who the effects would apply to. In other words, even if the user created a lava zone, they could selectively grant some people immunity to the fire damage.

But there was a weakness.

With certain exceptions, each time the item was used, one of forty possible escape routes would be randomly implemented. If any of the targets managed to escape, they would gain possession of the item. Of course, none of the escape methods were simple, but compared to the other World Items, which required defeating the owner to steal, this one was easier.

Aura chose an alternate dimension; it was a simple closed area.

Other than offering nowhere to run or hide, there were no adverse effects on those who were trapped. There was still a single way to escape, though.

“Okay, Hanzos. I want you to camp at the exit. It would be a pain if anyone got away. C’mere.”

A Hanzo emerged from the shadows, and she whispered into his ear how the escape method worked.

She didn’t think anyone was hiding within her field of perception, but it was better to be on guard.

“So, Aura, how many people infiltrated this world after the beginning?”

“Hmm? Just two.”

That answer meant the enemy didn’t have any World Items. It was only natural that they both sighed in relief.

Shalltear scanned the rows of buildings lining the old capital’s streets. It was quite a large city, but everything seemed so still that it was as if all its inhabitants had fled.

She had to hurry up and catch the kuagoa clan king and give him the Supreme Being’s message, but her view was obstructed, and she couldn’t tell which building he was in.

“We can’t get rid of these vexatious buildings?”

“Huh? No. But we could manifest an area that deals continuous damage. Like, if they were wooden buildings, we could burn them in a lava zone.”

“Meaning, you refrained because it would wipe everyone out?”

“Yeah. We could have it run for a limited time and then round up all the survivors… But if the ore and whatnot melted, that would be a waste.”

Kuagoa fed their children various metals, so there had to be huge stockpiles of metals, gemstones, and ore in the city. Shalltear could understand how destroying those would be a shame.

“And Lord Ainz’s orders were to first see if they would accept his rule.”

“He also said to crush them if they rejected that proposition, didn’t he?”

“…Shalltear.”

When Shalltear saw Aura’s sharp look, she realized what she meant to say. “Never you fear. I definitely, definitely, definitely—Def. In. Ite. Ly.—won’t mess up.”

“If you say so.”

“I appreciate your understanding. I’m thinking ahead. Shall we get started?”

“Yeah, let’s. I can leave the culling to you, right?”

“I imagine I’m more suited to the task than you, but are you sure you’re all right with that?”

Aura’s strength depended on her magical beasts, so she wasn’t the best person for this job.

“Yeah… If Mare were here, he could cause an earthquake and decrease their numbers all at once, but…”

“He really does have the best area-of-effect attacks in all of Nazarick. I’m pretty proud of mine, too, but a location like this limits their effectiveness.”

In reality, if they used an earthquake to take out most of their targets, they wouldn’t be able to follow Ainz’s order about being selective. If they were allowed to disregard that, Shalltear could have simply used her kin to exterminate the kuagoa indiscriminately.

“That’s why he gave you the order, right? I’m pretty sure the point of this whole job was to give you the opportunity to learn.”

Aura reiterated what their master had already ordered her to do numerous times.

“Yes, that’s right…,” Shalltear replied and then casually asked something that had been bothering her. “Given the strength of the enemies we’ve been encountering, it’s hard to imagine anyone powerful enough to defeat death knights is here. Was it just a fluke? It seems more likely that they used some kind of item to send a summoned monster back… It’s rare for Lord Ainz’s hunch to miss the mark.”

She realized Aura was staring at her with narrowed eyes. Shalltear didn’t think her question merited such a reaction.

“What is it? Did I overlook something?”

“No, it’s not that. Mm… Ugh, you’re just so stupid.”

Shalltear looked back at her in dissatisfaction in spite of herself.

If she had missed something, Aura could have simply told her so. After some hesitation, she finally got an explanation.

“All right, the thing is, Lord Ainz would never make that kind of mistake.”

“Do you mean to say that the defeat of the death knights was part of his plan? The death knights created by Lord Ainz are high-level performers. Defeating them really wouldn’t have been possible for any of the enemies we’ve met thus far today…”

“Oh, that could be it, too.” Aura struck her palm with a fist. “I see. So Lord Ainz could have let them kill the death knights on purpose. I hadn’t thought that far, though; I’m just saying that his hunch didn’t miss the mark. Those death knights either fell into the Great Chasm when the bridge went down or were pushed in. There were death knight tracks past the fort but none on the other side of the crack. That means they were defeated while crossing. The cause of death could only really be one thing.”

“If that’s the case, doesn’t it mean Lord Ainz’s guess was wrong?”

“No! If he was being serious, then you would be right, but he wasn’t.”

“What do you mean?” Shalltear furrowed her brow in a lack of comprehension, which prompted Aura to stomp her feet in frustration.

“Agh! What do I mean? Exactly what I said! Look, Lord Ainz knows that the death knights died by falling into the Great Chasm.”

“What?!”

“Agh. Remember back when, you know, he was explaining it all to you. I was going to ask if the death knights had gotten pushed off the edge and if that was how they died, but Lord Ainz looked over and signaled me not to. Did you not see that? When he signaled me?”

Shalltear fluttered her eyelids in spite of herself. She in fact did remember him making some sort of gesture like that. She had thought it was merely to keep Aura quiet because she was about to say something, but given that this was one of the Supreme Beings and a genius strategist they were talking about, Aura’s idea made more sense than assuming Lord Ainz was wrong.

But then why was he explaining it to me like that?

“You’re making a *why?* face, but if you think about it for a second, you’ll understand.”

As if Aura’s impatient words were the cue, the whirlpool within Shalltear coalesced on a single point. “It wasn’t for my sake, was it? Are you saying he said all that as part of my training?”

“…What other reason could there be? On the way here, you were asking him all sorts of things about the possibility of encountering powerful enemies, right? If you had known the death knights had fallen into the Great Chasm, would you have asked that much? Oh, and don’t tell Lord Ainz that it was me who told you. I only did it because you were doubting his abilities…”

“Doubting his abilities?! I would never!”

She wished Aura wouldn’t say something so horrifying so calmly.

“Well, just keep it a secret. Because his gesture to me meant I shouldn’t tell you.”

“I will, of course.”

When she took a moment to think about it, Aura was committing an awful crime. She was ignoring an order from a Supreme Being. But she was doing it only because Shalltear had said something insolent.

Does that mean Aura is being disrespectful? Am I? Or maybe neither of us is? Hmm…

She was starting to get a headache, so she tried to wrap up the issue by deciding to keep it a secret and not mull it over anymore.

…But is that in itself disrespectful? Hrmm…

“…Hmm. By the way, Lord Ainz said to cut their number down to ten thousand if they weren’t going to submit, right? He said to make sure there were females, but what about children?”

“I’m planning on leaving some.”

“But those guys have that thing where their strength depends on what metal they eat as children, right? If we took control of them, the kids would be the easiest to brainwash, don’t you think, Shalltear?” Aura grinned teasingly. “The fact that Lord Ainz didn’t give you more detailed orders probably means…that this is a test. You could have just sent the Hanzos out and awaited instructions, but he told you to take care of it, right? I think that means he wanted to see how you would deal with the situation…like, ‘Can my guardian handle this?’”

Shalltear answered with a faint smile. She had already been thinking of her answer since then. “Four thousand each of males and females, plus two thousand young should be fine.”

“Hmm. Well, I guess. Seems like you coul— Huh?” Aura stopped mid-sentence and held her hands behind her long ears. Shalltear knew what she was doing, so she tried not to make any noise. Before long, Aura smiled. “Ah, I heard something that sounded like a ton of kuagoa on the move.”

“Are they evacuating? Or deploying troops?”

“Since I can only base this on sounds, I can’t say for sure, but I don’t think it’s evacuation. They seem to be spreading out beyond the city limits.”

There were supposedly sixty thousand kuagoa here. Subhumans grew stronger as they aged. In essence, they were all soldiers. If they mobilized even ten thousand and sent them into the city, their numerical superiority would be reduced by half.

Though the attacking forces were too small to be called an army, their incredible might should have been apparent to the kuagoa from the earlier incident with the dragons. Anyone with half a brain would commit forces to hold the rear while everyone else evacuated and then construct a position before luring in the enemy for a fight. If those enemies were holed up in the city, the appropriate strategy would be to encircle the place and conduct sporadic harassment attacks to tire them out before sending a crack team to storm in and end it.

Either way, they would need a large area for gathering the troops.

And that lined up perfectly with Shalltear's objectives.

"So they're over there. Okay, let's start with negotiations."

"Of course. We mustn't keep Lord Ainz waiting."

•

The total of over sixty thousand kuagoa who were capable of fighting awaited their enemy. The mobilization was so large because females who hadn't gotten pregnant or given birth could fight alongside the males. But even directing the largest kuagoa army ever assembled, the clan king, Pe Riyuro, was unhappy.

This was just so out of the ordinary. The entire huge cave had suddenly been enveloped in a hazy fog. *What could it possibly mean?*

The battle-ready army tidied up their ranks facing the capital. If the enemy got scared off by their numbers and didn't even leave the city, that would be terrific. They had taken only the bare minimum of food with them when they left their homes, so the dwarves' treasures were all still inside. The enemy would have to be stupid to find any merit in fighting.

But someone did come out of the city.

It was a figure in red armor and another figure with dark skin, clearly not

dwarves.

Going by reports from the people who had witnessed the meeting between the strangers and the dragons out in front of the city, there should have been two others, but they were nowhere to be seen. Were they gathering up the treasure, and these two were simply buying time for them?

“Just to be sure, that’s not a golem, right?”

“No, the golems weren’t like that.”

According to Yoozu, the golems were huge and wore black armor. *This one in red armor is something different. Ah, but…*

We should probably assume that it might be another type of golem. But why has it marched out here against an army tens of thousands strong? It can’t be that it’s meeting us head-on because it’s confident it can wipe us out…right? No, no, that’s impossible no matter how powerful it is.

Riyuro shook his head to clear away the horrific image from his mind.

True, he was shocked that they created this strange atmosphere, and they seemed unimaginably strong. The dragons had even submitted without a fight, so their power had to be immense.

But the kuagoa had assembled over sixty thousand warriors. This wasn’t a force on the scale of hundreds or thousands. There was no way they could put up a proper fight against numbers like these.

But if this was a golem, maybe it made more sense.

Golems didn’t fatigue like living things. Since golems could fight on forever, if this one was powerful enough to kill Riyuro, then theoretically, it would be able to kill them all.

Theoretically, of course.

If one in every few kuagoa was lucky enough to scrape it, thousands of minor injuries would eventually add up to cause enough damage to defeat it.

There was strength in numbers. These sixty thousand kuagoa could have even taken down the dragon king in a straight land battle.

“I’m going to talk to them. You guys stand by here. If I get killed…well, then you can do whatever you want.”

“It’s too dangerous!” An aide stated the obvious.

“…It’s impossible to discuss things with a golem, so I guess I’ll be addressing the dark one. I just need to find out what they’re after.”

Riyuro was committed to attempting a dialogue no matter what anyone else said.

He had no doubt their opponents were powerful. If he could hear them out and negotiate, he was fine paying them. If they were going to drive away the dragon royalty, he had no problem paying respects to them instead of the dragons. Or if they would side with the kuagoa, he was happy to offer compensation better than whatever the dwarves had promised.

“No one come with me. If we go in a group, it could start a battle.” With that last comment to his aides, Riyuro set off.

Since the ranks parted, the other side seemed to realize he was approaching. They stopped moving and observed him.

“Sorry for the wait.”

The first thing he said caused the other two to exchange glances.

Riyuro looked around. No, they weren’t there. The other two who had confronted the dragons—the dwarf and the one wearing a skull helmet—were nowhere to be found.

“Hmm? Who are you?”

It was the little one with dark skin who spoke.

Was that a sign the red one really was a golem? It seemed like a humanoid made larger and with whiter skin, so maybe it was one? But observing it with sidelong glances, he somehow had the feeling it was a crafted object, so he had no idea what its true identity was.

“I’m Pe Riyuro, the clan king of the kuagoa of this region. Who the h—who are you?”

“We’re here with a great king who ordered us to come conquer you.”

It can talk!

The one in the red armor answered. He had heard that golems couldn’t talk, so it must not have been a golem after all.

Riyuro suppressed his surprise and answered, “Conquer?”

“Yes. Our king came here to take over. Now, get on your knees and bow your head.”

All right, what should I do? Riyuro thought as fast as he could.

He didn’t really object to bowing his head and welcoming their new ruler. He was fine growing his influence beneath the conqueror and rising up later.

The issue was whether it would be okay to agree to enter under someone’s rule without knowing their strength. Apparently, a dragon had bowed to him, but that dragon hadn’t been the dragonlord. What if after agreeing to be ruled, he was ordered to fight the dragonlord?

“…I believe there were two others with you. Where are they now?”

“There’s no need for you to know. The only words you’re allowed to speak right now are ‘We accept your rule’ or ‘We decline.’”

It seemed like they weren’t about to disclose any information. In which case he needed to investigate whether they really intended to fight. Perhaps their confident attitude was mere bravado. And he had no idea how strong they were.

“You say you are conquering us, but can you try to understand how it would be extremely difficult to accept your rule without knowing how powerful you are?”

The implication was that if they would reveal the extent of their power, the kuagoa would submit. But the pair looked at each other and shrugged.

“I see. If you don’t accept, our orders are to cull your numbers and subjugate you by force. We’ll fight a deadly battle until there are four thousand males, four thousand females, and two thousand children remaining. You probably know best which of your people are most valuable, right?”

“Once there are only ten thousand left, you’ll all be taken to the Nation of Darkness.”

For a moment, the clan king was overcome by fear.

Not at the cruelty of their words but because it had been declared in such a matter-of-fact tone with no trace of arrogance.

These two had no doubts it was possible.

Yes.

These two thought it was perfectly natural that they should be able to take on all sixty thousand of the kuagoa soldiers on their own.

Are they mad? Or overly confident? Or…

Riyuro had no idea how to respond to their unprecedented attitude.

There was no way the kuagoa could accept whatever outrageous orders these people would have without a single fight.

Perhaps sensing his hostility, the pair turned to each other, and their expressions warped.

Dwarves were covered in hair, at least, so they were easier to identify with. These two had hair only on the tops of their heads, so he couldn’t quite comprehend their expressions. The racial barrier was thick.

“P-please wa—” He couldn’t get out the rest of his *Please wait*.

“Okay, so we’ll go ahead and start decreasing your population now. Don’t even think about handing your outfit off to someone else.”

Kuagoa didn’t have a habit of wearing clothes. They already had hair covering their whole body.

But the king had a king’s authority, and there needed to be some easy way to make that understood. For that reason, Riyuro wore clothes as well as a crown he had the dwarves make as the symbol of the clan king. He also figured that if he gave the outfit to someone else to act as his double, someone from a different race wouldn’t notice.

It was clear they had seen through that ploy and were warning him against

trying.

Certainly, killing the king was the simplest victory condition. But then, why hadn't they done that yet?

No, that's not it. There must be another reason… Could it be…? Agh, that's it. It's not so they can kill me. It's so they don't accidentally *kill me!*

The racial barrier was thick. They must have been saying, in a patronizing manner, that as long as he was wearing the clothes, they would be able to tell it was him, so they would spare him.

"Will you go back over there now? If they move toward us, we'll start, so before that happens, we'd appreciate it if you'd select who you want to survive."

"Yes, go on back."

They waved at him to go away. They didn't even seem like they were interested in negotiating anymore.

This was so far beyond anything he had expected.

I'm saying we're willing to yield, but they won't compromise at all? If they're not willing to do that much, then…do they really find our lives to be of so little value?

Their reply made Riyuro feel so helpless that he found himself desperate to suppress his fear.

There's no way… They can't possibly bring these sixty thousand soldiers down to ten thousand… Oh. That must be it. They saw our army, and it drove them insane!

Common sense said that had to be the answer. Even a dragon wouldn't be able to decrease these numbers so—

At that moment, it dawned on him.

Maybe they'll fly, attack from the air, then pull away!

If they fought like dragons, things would get difficult.

Gathering his army in such a large, open area would backfire on him.

Would it be better to send everyone back to the residential zone?

That would be dangerous. If the enemy had the power to destroy buildings, a great deal of chaos would befall their homes. Yes, this was the only battlefield Riyuro could fathom.

His aides gathered around him when he returned to his army.

“Was it a golem…? Is something wrong? You seem unwell.”

It was likely the fear that pair had brought out was bleeding into his expression. He rubbed his face and issued orders.

“Yeah… For now, assemble the blue and red kuagoa.”

“A team of bodyguards?”

“Not just them—all the heroes from each tribe.”

•

Riyuro let out a brave howl. It was a war cry with a special power he had acquired when he became the chief clan king who ruled over all. Seeing more than ten thousand warriors charging toward the enemy was truly a sight to behold. But the result was too horrific to watch. They crashed against an invisible wall like a wave.

What went spraying, however, wasn’t water droplets but kuagoa—or what used to be kuagoa. A dragon or a frost giant might have been able to do that. But their opponent this time was smaller than they were.

“They went flying…,” one of the aides murmured in shock.

It wasn’t a metaphor. The attacking kuagoa really did go flying. And not one by one. Dozens were blown away at a time.

The fleshy remains of their bodies rained down over their comrades. The soldiers doused in sticky bits of gore paid no mind and charged ahead, only to be splattered as scraps of flesh on the ones behind them. It was a truly nightmarish scene.

The fact that for some reason it seemed like there were no airborne droplets of blood only made it more surreal.

“Wh-wh-what is that thing?!”

Riyuro didn’t have the energy to answer his aide’s scream. But his thoughts overflowed and became words on their own. “I didn’t think it would be so…”

“My king! What in the world is that thing?! The golem I saw doesn’t even compare!”

With each attack, the charging kuagoa all hurtled away. It wasn’t even a fight anymore. It wasn’t even a massacre. This was processing. The fellow kuagoa he had gathered for maximum power were being disposed of as unnecessary chaff.

“I—I think our only choice is to run!”

“To where?” Riyuro snapped at his panicking aide. “Where are we supposed to escape to inside this strange space? They said they’re going to kill us until there are only ten thousand left!”

The aides were speechless.

Having witnessed that overwhelming—that monstrous power, they knew it was neither an empty threat nor a joke. It was hard to believe, but they had no choice: Only ten thousand of their sixty thousand people would be allowed to live.

He wondered if it would be possible to beg for a pardon even now, but there wasn’t any warmth in that pair’s eyes. Compared to them, the dragonlord’s eyes had been overflowing with kindness.

I’m sure they won’t change their minds.

“This can’t be happening! My king! What is that thing?! What have the dwarves enlisted?”

“Why is that little runt so powerful…?”

The aide’s murmur made Riyuro realize something. “Maybe the thing in red is another dwarven weapon? When they realized their golems were defeated, they sent in something more powerful.”

“…Does that mean if we defeat this, something even more powerful will show up?”

In the air filled with the shrieks of the soldiers, only Riyuro's immediate area fell abruptly silent.

"We should have the soldiers withd—"

"No! Have them fight! We have no other option! No matter how powerful that thing is, it must get tired at some point. We'll wait until it can't swing its weapon any longer and then go negotiate again. We just need a bit more of a compromise."

"I—I see. But…will that thing really get tired?"

Riyuro had been thinking the same thing in a corner of his mind. But…

"All living beings do. It certainly has greater physical capabilities than we do, but it will get exhausted at some point. We have to make that thing keep swinging its weapon until then…! It might even get sick of killing before it gets tired and decide to talk to us again." The clan king was forced to say the thing he didn't want to say. "Besides, we can't fight against that thing and win! Not a monster like that!"

There was no chance that the soldiers would suffer a mental break and flee. Riyuro's battle cry turned his subordinates into fearless warriors. Similar to a Berserker's Berserk skill, it boosted attack power in exchange for lowering defense. And most importantly, it granted perfect resistance to all types of fear. The fact that those affected would follow the clan king's orders no matter how risky could be considered both a pro and a con.

As the soldiers continued their charge without so much as looking back, it took almost no time for the large force's numbers to dwindle.

By then, no one had the wherewithal to open their mouths.

There was no one who wasn't completely discouraged by this massive disaster, even more so because it was being committed by a single person.

No, there was one exception.

That one—Riyuro—mustered the last of his courage.

"Chosen heroes!"

There was no roar.

He was looking at the red and blue kuagoa with special powers who had been gathered, the team made up of the strongest members of each clan.

The reason no one responded was that they were all watching the figure in red armor with despair in their eyes.

They probably felt like winning was impossible. When they had first come together, there had been more of a twinkle in their eyes. But now all the light was gone, and their gazes seemed dead.

To avoid lowering their defenses, he hadn't made them into berserkers, but maybe he should have.

The king raised his voice to see if he could rouse them even a little bit. "You all are our most powerful weapons! Our opponent has killed many of us, so it must be incredibly exhausted! If anyone can show this thing some pain, it's you lot!"

He said it was incredibly exhausted, but there was no sign of that. The figure in red armor was still sending dismembered kuagoa attackers flying as if it didn't feel even the slightest fatigue, swinging its strange spear-like weapon unhindered.

"Yes! As long as that thing is a living being, it must be getting tired! You can defeat it! Go, heroes!" He roared at them, practically begging, and sent them off.

Then he instructed the other soldiers to let them through to charge the enemy in red armor. Then the heroes attacked it and…

Riyuro slowly closed his eyes.

"Oh, my king. My great king…"

When his aide spoke, he opened his eyes.

"You…you don't have to say anything. I know. I…I saw it, too."

Nothing—not a single thing—had changed.

Just like the rank-and-file soldiers, the chosen heroes were sent flying as chunks of meat. And it had taken only an instant. The heroes met the same end as all the others.

“…What in the world…? What could this be…?”

There was nothing else Riyuro could say. He had no idea what the figure in red armor was, but he knew for sure that it was stronger than a dragon.

Riyuro no longer had the will to do anything. If he just waited silently, eventually their opponents’ wishes would come to pass.

“…They said two thousand children. Make the selection.”

“My king…”

“…There’s nothing else we can do. If ten thousand survive, then…we should… we should have a chance to rebuild in the future.”

No one said anything in reply—because they all understood.

This was the only option they had.

Riyuro helplessly hung his head. He felt like he had been walking down a safe path only to find himself ambushed by a monster. “What’s the Nation of Darkness anyway? What does it have to do with the dwarves? Someone please explain…,” he murmured from the bottom of his heart.

But though it made him feel sick, he knew the horror in front of him was only a taste of the tragedy to come.

Suddenly, he noticed the basket his attendant was carrying. The basket of lizards he had been eating. He knew this was no time for a snack, but the stress made him reach out. He had an energetically wriggling lizard clenched in his hand and was about to bite its head off when a sharp pain in his stomach doubled him over.

There was no way they would win against the absolute power that would conquer them. The idea of rebuilding was such an obvious lie, he disgusted himself. No matter how many generations passed, they would never be able to successfully revolt. The kuagoa of the Azerlisia Mountains would forevermore be bound to serve this horrible master, chains around their necks.

The wildly struggling lizard slipped out of Riyuro’s hand and disappeared into the mass of soldier legs. “Ahhh,” he lamented pathetically and felt so pitiful that he began to softly weep. “If you’re that strong, just say so! Why…why didn’t you

tell us?”

The sobs of the most celebrated king, both in all kuagoa history and certainly their future, melted into the cries of the children being disposed of by friendly soldiers.

5

Ainz exited the treasury with Gondo. The dragons were waiting prostrate outside. Including Hejinmaar, there were fourteen total. That meant all the dragons he had mentioned were present, so there was no need to go running around catching anyone.

…It’s fine if they all out obey me, but it’s also a shame that we can’t acquire any additional dragon corpses… Should I just kill a few for some random reason? No, that would be brutish. If I’m going to do that, I should have them reproduce and harvest the… Hmm? I guess that’s just as bad.

“Your Majesty, Great King of Darkness. I’ve gathered those who swear allegiance to you.”

Ainz was lost in thought when Hejinmaar spoke to him. He decided to give up on those thoughts for the moment and answer. “Raise your heads.”

The dragons all looked up at once.

Given the dragons’ size, once they raised their heads, they were far taller than Ainz, but he didn’t feel like he was being looked down upon in the slightest.

There were a few puzzled gazes, though.

They had heard what happened, but it was probably hard to believe that Ainz had killed their father with one blow. Ainz would probably feel the same way if their positions were reversed. *There are plenty of things you can’t believe till you’ve seen them.*

Just as he thought that, one of the dragons shouted.

“I can’t accept it! Who is the one who slew our father?”

Ainz walked over to the dragon. Then he smiled and said *Come at me* with a hand gesture.

The dragon's claws came toward him immediately.

They were fast but still slower than the troll Ainz had fought recently.

He made no effort to dodge, instead taking the attack head-on. Waiting to confirm that the dragon, thinking it had landed an attack too fast to dodge, lost its beaming smile after realizing Ainz simply had no need to dodge. Then Ainz cast a spell.

"Grasp Heart."

The dragon crumpled just like his father had, and Ainz shifted his gaze to the others.

"Anyone else?" he asked quietly, and the dragons all lowered themselves even farther than before, scraping the ground. No one doubted his power anymore.

After Ainz tossed the dragon corpse through a Gate, he and Gondo got up on Hejinmaar.

The mother dragons were much larger, so they might have been a more appropriate mount for the conqueror than Hejinmaar, but Ainz figured he had ridden the dragon this far, so he might as well finish things this way.

"Go outside. Some of my subordinates should be waiting there."

They and the group of dragons all left the capital and were led by a Hanzo to an area where a ton of kuagoa were prostrating themselves.

The sight of more kuagoa than he could count all bent over on the ground was so strange that Gondo emitted a hoarse little yelp.

Ainz felt like reacting the same way, but he couldn't very well act like that in front of his two guardians, who were smiling as if to say, *Look at what a good job we did*.

"Lord Ainz! They've been selected as you ordered: four thousand males, four thousand females, and two thousand children. The rest are all corpses now. We also had them recover the corpses that were in decent condition, so they're

gathered up elsewhere.”

“I see. So we offered them mercy, and they rejected both our offer and the idea of having gratitude for it. The fools.”

He noticed the kuagoa kneeling at the front of the group shudder.

“And where’s the one they call king?”

“Over there.” When he looked in the direction Shalltear pointed, sure enough, it was the kuagoa from earlier.

Before calling out to him, Ainz activated his black halo. According to his research, this made him seem more ruler-like.

With the sound of the dragons shivering in his ears, he spoke to the king.

“King of the kuagoa! Raise your head.”

“Yes, sir!”

Trembling, the kuagoa king looked up. Then he opened his eyes wide and stopped in place as if frozen.

The *hoo* of an exhalation sounded extra loud.

“…I’m known as a compassionate king. I consider the crime of failing to accept my offer immediately to have been paid for with the blood of your race. If you’ll all work hard for me, I’ll guarantee your prosperity.”

“Yes, sir! Even our children and grandchildren will humbly serve you with all their might.”

“That’s a fine answer. I like that very much.”

“Thank you, sir!”

When Ainz waved his hand to signal that the conversation was over, the king lowered his head once more.

Nice! I guess all my practice has paid off.

He did a mental fist pump to celebrate that all the trial and error in the mirror testing out different lines had been worthwhile. Then he turned to the two guardians who had performed so well.

“You both did magnificently. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you!”

“My heart is bursting with the thought that those words have washed away my previous shame!”

“Uh, okay…”

Seeing how happy Shalltear was, Ainz was sure he had said the right thing.

“And are the numbers all right? If there are still too many, I can cull them as much as you wish.”

“N-no… I think this is a fine amount. By the way, was there anyone around there very strong? Not compared to us, but someone who would be considered strong in this world.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see anyone like that…”

“N-no. The kuagoa you were just talking to is apparently comparatively strong. Although we didn’t see him do anything.”

“I see…”

How the death knights were killed was still a mystery. Perhaps it was a fluke. Or maybe…

I suppose it’s possible they fell into the Great Chasm…

Ainz was mortified it had taken him so long to come up with that idea. He had been discussing their defeat in such a heated way with Shalltear that the thought his guess was wrong was…no longer enough to make his face blush with shame. But the smoldering remnants of embarrassment made him want to writhe on the ground. Especially when he recalled that Shalltear seemed to have been taking notes, he…was returned to a stable emotional state.

I should probably just gloss over this in the most convenient way possible.

But if he blundered here, he might end up with someone pointing out that he had said one thing when reality was different.

This is bad! This is really bad! I shouldn’t have gotten so full of myself and said all that stuff. Man, I wanna cry.

Ainz heaved a sigh.

Well, when I think about it, maybe this is a good time to show the guardians that I do make mistakes sometimes. If I could gradually get the guardians to see me not as some kind of amazing ruler but as a decent, normal ruler, maybe I'd be freed from some of this stress. And then maybe the guardians would keep an eye out for my errors and give me advice.

He had heard dragons possessed sharp senses, so he made up an order as an excuse to send them away and then shifted to a location slightly removed from the kuagoa. Gondo seemed sad that he had been left behind, but this time he would just have to bear it.

Once it was only the three of them, Ainz swallowed hard.

What he was about to do could ruin everything he'd worked so hard to accomplish so far. He was nervous about changing the status quo, as well as what might happen next. Despite his inability to feel fear, he was slightly scared. Even so, he mustered his courage.

"I have a question for the two of you… Do you remember how I said there might be a being here strong enough to defeat the death knights?"

The two of them exchanged glances with some recognition.

"Yes, that's right. Apparently, it was my mistake. The dragon I killed might have been able to defeat the death knights, but aside from that, there doesn't seem to be anyone."

"We know, Lord Ainz. You were teaching us a lesson. That you would take the blame for my inadequacy… I'm so grateful for your compassionate consideration, Lord Ainz!"

"…Huh?"

Strangely, the two of them were looking at him with reverent eyes. Shalltear's were especially over-the-top. Her cheeks flushed red, and her eyes were moist. She was so emotional, it seemed like she would burst into tears if she didn't strain, keeping her lips tight.

What did I say that was so worthy of respect? Ainz was confused. What was it

that had tugged at their heartstrings?

But what Shalltear said… Would the right thing to do be to deny it? N-nah, she did get some training on this trip. So I'll go along with it this time, Shalltear!

"It would appear you saw through my plan, eh, Shalltear?"

"My lord!"

The light in both guardians' eyes grew even brighter.

Huh? He did wonder, but he felt it was best to say what he meant to say.

"But I do sometimes make mistakes and misread things. I want you to remember that in some corner of your minds."

"My lord! I hardly think you, our great ruler, could ever do such a thing, but I understand!"

Shalltear had apparently reached her limit and began to sob, still keeping herself low to the ground. As she wept, enduring her pain, teary-eyed Aura placed a hand on her shoulder. It was a touching scene that displayed the friendship between them, but Ainz had no idea what was going on, so he escaped reality by wondering how Shalltear could secrete bodily fluids like tears and drool when she was an undead.

He was completely confused as to how things had reached this point. But he decided it was fine. *Yep, the world is full of things we have to accept without understanding in order to avoid trouble—like explanations during addresses given by the company president.*

He got the sense he was shoving this particular issue off onto his future self, but he decided to be satisfied with the thought that in the future, he would be smarter. Ainz did the only thing his current self knew to do.

He crouched down in front of Shalltear and wiped her tears away like a parent would do for a child.

At that instant, her eyes flooded anew.

"Lode Aind."

"There, there. Don't cry, Shalltear. I've said it before, but all your beauty will

go to waste, you know?”

“Wuhd I usevul to you?”

“Yes, you did a magnificent job. I’d expect nothing less from my guardians.”

“Lode Aiiiind!”

She clutched at his robe.

“Er, mm-hmm. It’s about time to stop crying now, don’t you think?”

“Y-yes…” Shalltear looked up at him with her crinkled face. “Thank you so much for being so merciful.”

“Sure. Mm. Now, let’s move on to the next order of business. We have lots to do.”

•

The regency council had been clamorous since the morning, but when the latest news came in, it fell silent.

The dwarves couldn’t decide whether to hang their heads or pull their hair out. Not a single one of them managed to maintain his composure.

Someone finally murmured, “…He’s back.”

“…How…? That was so fast. Did he really…take back the capital?”

“…Are you complaining?”

“How could you say such a thing about the monster—err, great one who has returned after conquering the dragons that made our palace their lair? How brave you are. You’re every bit as courageous as this legendary hero of a king… Please tell His Majesty the King of Darkness that we believe him wholeheartedly.”

The messenger reported that the king came back riding a dragon.

Dragons were said to be proud due to their immense power. Thus, dominating a dragon was an astonishing feat, and the question of how he had managed it was deeply intriguing.

Common sense might say that he coerced the creature to obey using magic,

but anyone who knew the King of Darkness could imagine the possibility that he had frightened the dragon into submission with brute force.

No, that was probably the more likely option. Surely he didn't need to use magic to subjugate the dragon. They could even imagine it bowing down after receiving a single glance from the king.

The chief of the food industry heaved a sigh and looked around at everyone with a stony expression. "So what are we going to do? We're out of time. His Majesty is already back. We need to go see him right away, which means we have to decide this now—about the chief of the smith shops!"

The chief of the smith shops had taken the ingot from the King of Darkness and fled the country.

It went without saying that it was unforgivable to leave the country with an item from another nation's king who had requested an item be made from it. This incident would surely hound them into the future when they opened trade with other countries.

This was a lethal wound to a country that was planning on doing major trade in the blacksmithing industry.

Who would commission work from a country that was responsible for such a scandal? And it wasn't just any smith who had run off with the ingot. It was one of the leaders of the nation! In the worst case, it wouldn't be strange for people to think the country itself had masterminded the crime.

Having envisioned what the future might bring, they launched a search and had also been discussing how to cope if they didn't find him.

But no one had been able to come up with something that seemed like it would work—something that would earn the King of Darkness's forgiveness.

"…I still just can't believe it. He wouldn't take the ore and run off like that…," the chief of administration murmured, but it was a meaningless utterance in this room. The time that those words could have made an impression on someone was long past.

The supreme commander looked coldly at him. "Then, what are you saying happened? There's no question that the chief of the smith shops had it with

him and now he's gone. We even have eyewitness testimony from people who saw him exit the city!"

"…You don't think the King of Darkness was controlling them?"

The room fell silent.

No one agreed. On the contrary, the supreme commander looked displeased.

"To say something like that about the person who retook our capital—a feat that was impossible for us—just because you don't want to admit that a friend and fellow dwarf committed a crime… Honestly, it makes you trash."

"Stop it, Commander! You know he's put the most effort into the search out of all of us—he's tired!"

"I don't think this is an issue of shooting your mouth off out of exhaustion."

"Now, now, Commander, let's save unconstructive conversations like that for later. We have more important things to decide. Should we inform the King of Darkness right away? I don't think it would be a horrible idea to not tell him and buy time while we search some more…"

The chief of the merchant council shook his head. "That's a bad move. It would look like we withheld information. Better to come clean and beg for forgiveness. In the first place, are we really going to find him? If he's unlucky, he could be in some monster's belly right about now. If we could at least get the ingot back, it would be fine… That idiot."

It wasn't the sort of thing to say about a friend, but no one stopped him from disparaging the chief who had caused this huge issue. On the contrary, the supreme commander was even nodding in agreement.

"That he didn't take the dagger is the only silver lining. But still. If we apologize…will His Majesty forgive us? Not that we have any other choice…"

"Giving an honest explanation of what happened is more important than the apology itself. And then we just need to be prepared to accept whatever demands he might have."

Everyone agreed.

"What do you think his demands are likely to be?"

The stolen ingot was a type of metal the dwarves had never seen before, so it was difficult to properly appraise its value. That meant they couldn't suggest an amount to pay in compensation. If they proposed an amount that was too low, it wouldn't be strange for the king to be angry.

Their only choice was to have the King of Darkness set the price. But they imagined that he would rather have something else besides money. They just didn't know what.

"I have no idea. Maybe the question should be how much we are willing to accept? Or rather…what would we turn down?"

"Can we even? Seems impossible. This city may have historical value, but we don't have any national treasures with magical or physical powers."

Back when an evil spirit trampled the capital, only one dwarf from the royal family survived. That last king, known as the Rune Crafter King, took their most powerful magic item and left the country, so they had no national treasures to speak of.

"…Mph! That's it! What about the treasury in the capital?"

"Like I said before, it's pretty lame to offer that to someone who reclaimed the city… Though it's true we have nothing else."

Looking around, he saw that everyone was nodding in agreement.

"…We just have to hope the dragons didn't break in."

"Don't even talk like that… Okay, so I guess this time we should have His Majesty come alone?"

Hmm? One's missing. Did something happen?

When Ainz entered the room, the dwarves were all wearing calm expressions.

The one who spoke as representative was… Well, Ainz wasn't sure because they all had the same face. He at least knew that it wasn't the supreme commander.

The various comments expressing gratitude beginning with "Thank you for taking back the capital" wore Ainz out because they went on for so long. And just as he was starting to forget what had even been said during the earlier part

of the speech, the commander's mood suddenly changed.

"Now, we also have a profound apology to make, Your Majesty, King of Darkness. Your Majesty gave our colleague, the chief of the smith shops, an ingot, and he has run away with it. We're currently searching but haven't been able to find him or the ingot thus far… You trusted us with the ingot, and this incident has resulted in a total breach of that trust. I don't know how we can apologize…"

All the dwarves bowed their heads.

To be honest, Ainz had no idea what was going on. So first he asked, "Why would he do that?"

They said he made off with the ingot, but was his idea to sell it to someone? Was it valuable enough to abandon a national leadership position in the regency council?

For a moment, he wondered if a player was behind this. Maybe someone had infiltrated the dwarf kingdom. But a player probably wouldn't want an ingot like that so badly. Ainz hardly thought it was worth enough to even a low-level player that they would want to throw away their status. There was far greater merit in staying undercover as a leader in this country.

"I don't know. I really don't know. None of us has any idea why he would do something so outrageous."

"…Then, here's the next question. What about the armor I ordered?"

The dwarves exchanged glances.

"…No matter how much we apologize, it could never be enough. Though he left the dagger, he ran off with the ingot, so at present, we're unable to return it to you. We sent out a search party, so if we obtain it in the future, please allow us to return it then. And if it pleases you, we would like to give you a different suit of armor… Compared to the ingot you provided, it's inferior, but we did our absolute best."

"It's adamantite armor. We'd like to present you with three suits. And we'll enchant them as much as our powers allow."

“If you’d like shields as well, they’ll be orichalcum, but we can make them.”

“Hmm.” If he was the type to lodge complaints, he’d be having a fit right about now, but he didn’t want to be like that. Certainly, losing the ingot was—

—a pain, but is it really? It wasn’t that rare, and I still have plenty of ore of that quality… And it could be that it can be mined in other areas and simply doesn’t appear around here. In that case, having them make me a bunch of armor is a better deal. They even said they would enchant them… And if they find the ingot, they’ll return it? Normally, you wouldn’t ask for it back at that point, so this is a pretty sweet deal.

“…There’s not much that can be done if you don’t have it. What you proposed in return is fine. Consult with Zenbel later and craft it to his specifications.”

The dwarves were visibly relieved.

He wondered if he should have made things a bit more difficult for them. But if he got too stingy, his caliber as a king could come into question. More importantly, if he accepted everything they offered, perhaps word would spread that he was a broad-minded leader.

Still, maybe I can ask for one more thing.

“…There is one other thing I’d like to request.”

“…What might that be, Your Majesty, King of Darkness?”

The hardness in his voice must have been wariness.

“You don’t have to be so on guard. It’s not such a big deal. I’d just like your country’s backing when I invite the rune crafters to my land.”

“What would that entail?”

“Would you, as a country, hold a ceremony to inform everyone that they’ll be going to work in my country? I’m sure the rune crafters would appreciate it, too.”

The dwarves looked at one another and then nodded without quibbling.

“Great. Then, my country will handle the food to be served and whatnot to some extent. Since we’ll be preparing for that, may I stay here for a little while?

That’s no problem, right?”

None of the dwarves objected.

Ainz couldn’t help but smile internally. This meant he wouldn’t have to go back to E-Rantel for some time.

He had expected it to take longer, but the negotiations and retaking of the capital had both happened so quickly that it was problematic.

First, when Albedo returned, he wanted to tell her via Message about the empire’s wish to be a vassal state and have her come up with a plan along with Demiurge when he went back for his regular checkin. If Ainz was there, too, that would be extremely bad, so he had been wanting a reason to not return.

The other perfectly natural reason was that he wanted to deepen his friendship with the dwarves.

There were three types of information he hoped to gather in this city.

One: whether there were players around or not. At present, it seemed like not, but whether there had been a long time ago was unknown.

Two: about runes and their history. He still didn’t know enough. He had heard a lot from the rune crafters, but although runes had existed for quite some time, it was unclear who had introduced and spread them. One of the reasons for that was the chaos following the evil spirit attack, but Hejinmaar’s book didn’t mention anything about it. Neither did any of the books in the treasury.

Three: about their knowledge of blacksmithing and ore. He had already gained the rune crafters, so he could learn bit by bit from them. But there didn’t seem to be any prismatic ore after all.

In regards to number two, he was hoping to have investigated more thoroughly when they went to the capital. That was why he wanted to build a stronger friendship with the dwarves.

•

A long table was covered in a number of plates heaped with food.

The warm dishes were giving off good smells that wafted over to Ainz.

The undead Ainz Ooal Gown had no appetite, but the vestiges of Satoru Suzuki did. He felt both that he wanted to eat it and also curious about what the flavor would be like.

This body really is a mixed bag.

He could suppress the hunger, but the curiosity was harder to control—because it functioned normally despite him having an undead body and mind.

If the food in front of him had been from E-Rantel or Nazarick, he might not have been as intrigued, but this was dwarven fare.

The rune crafters would bring their families with them to the Nation of Darkness, and this food had been prepared by wives and mothers. Of course, the huge amount of ingredients, probably about two thousand people's worth, was procured by Ainz—that was to say, Nazarick.

Of course, he couldn't go using items willy-nilly, so he mainly limited himself to what he could obtain in E-Rantel. The meat was sourced from the dragons of these mountains, and the drinks he had the merchants remaining in E-Rantel gather from the kingdom and the empire.

There was already so much food, but even now, the women were bringing out more freshly made dishes.

Dwarven men and women didn't look very different from each other. The biggest difference was the beards. The men's were long and sometimes braided, while the women hardly grew any. That said, they grew about as much as a human man, although they seemed to prefer shaving the upper lip.

I have no idea what they see in a look like that…but I guess that's how culture works. The Nation of Darkness will gather people from diverse races. I won't be successful if I get hung up on something so minor.

Ainz turned away from the group of women, who were still bringing out food. He looked past the group of dwarves, over their heads, to the dais behind them.

Some of the rune crafters were lined up there with the regency council.

Then one of the regency council members began to announce how the rune crafters would be going to the Nation of Darkness.

“And we’re off.”

“Yep.” The one who responded was Gondo, next to Ainz.

“…You’re okay not being one of the representatives up there?”

“Give me a break, Your Majesty. I’m practically useless as a rune crafter. It would be embarrassing to be a representative like that… But what about you?”

“I’d like a break, too… And the rune crafters are the focus right now. I’m not that great as a spokesperson.”

Ainz and Gondo turned to each other and quietly chuckled.

Of course, Ainz’s true feeling was that he had absolutely no interest in standing up onstage and giving an address. His comments just then were made up, with no small effort, on the spot.

“Still…” Gondo’s face grew serious. “We can’t possibly thank you enough.”

“For what?”

“For this farewell party. Look at all the people in charge.”

Ainz looked back to the group on the dais. They were still talking. Apart from that, he didn’t notice anything in particular. But if Gondo made a comment like that, there had to be something Ainz was supposed to recognize or otherwise risk looking like he couldn’t read the atmosphere.

“Hmm… I see…” He decided to go with a vague reply to throw him off.

“It’s just as you thought, Your Majesty. Everyone’s eyes look different now.”

“It does seem that way,” he replied, but he didn’t really get it. “But how come?”

Gondo looked amused. “We’re happy to get envious looks like we used to. Thanks to this ceremony—with all the tasty food made with ingredients we’ve never seen before and the large varieties of drink on hand—everyone understands that the rune crafters didn’t sell out to the Nation of Darkness but were invited.”

“I really do expect a lot out of you guys.”

“I know. I said this before, but I’ll definitely make up for all the kindness

you've shown me, Your Majesty. And the others feel the same. We're all truly grateful. Oh, seems like it's about time, Your Majesty."

Ainz took a full mug from Gondo. After raising it in time with the toast from those up on the dais, he handed it back to Gondo, since he couldn't drink.

The dwarves immediately grew rowdy, as if they had been holding back. Many of them dashed for the buffet to pile their plates high with food. Then they scarfed down one item after another.

"What *is* this? It's insanely good! Did your wife really make it?"

"Yep, with ingredients from His Majesty the King of Darkness. It took some trial and error."

"Hmm, it's tasty, but at my age, I think milder flavors agree with me better."

"That goes best with a drink, you know."

"Oh? Let's see… Whoo! This is fantastic! It's got the perfect amount of spice to it."

"It's because the drinks are good, too. I wonder if my wife could make something like this."

"I heard that soon we'll be getting food from the Nation of Darkness. Once that starts, you'll be able to eat this whenever you like."

"I'd rather have the alcohol. This is from the Nation of Darkness, too, right? I'd better save up some money."

Everyone was shouting excitedly as they ate. There was also a conversation like this:

"I envy the rune crafters. They'll probably get to eat like this all the time."

"Nah, these ingredients are probably pretty expensive, don't you think?"

"Supposedly not. It's like how vegetables and whatnot are cheaper in the human countries. I heard it's the same in the Nation of Darkness."

"Mrrrf. Then, that does make me envious. And I've only had a bit so far, but the Nation of Darkness has excellent drinks, too."

"Right. That one we only got a single sip of, that was tasty. But the stuff made

with grapes was pretty good, too—though it's a bit strong for me."

"I wonder if we have any excuse to go to the Nation of Darkness."

"I heard there're plans in the works to allow citizens to come and go between the two countries."

"Sheesh. I realize it's only fairly high-ranking people who have come over, but shouldn't they be a bit more careful about leaking info like that?"

"Nah, they'll make a big announcement. It sounds like there are a lot of different things happening with this country… For example, I heard they recaptured the capital."

"…Yeah, apparently, they subjugated the dragons roosting there. The Nation of Darkness is quite a country."

Ainz listened to everyone chatting.

Rather than brownnosing because Ainz was present, it seemed they genuinely had good impressions of the Nation of Darkness. The two countries would probably be able to get along.

Ainz turned to Gondo with a satisfied smile. "Gondo, you should go talk to everyone. You probably won't be back for a while."

"Ah, right… Maybe I'll go talk to people from the mines." He was eyeing a cranky-looking dwarf. "What will you do, Your Majesty?"

"…A messenger has come from my country, so I'm going to talk with them for a little while. I'll see you later." Ainz raised a hand casually and then walked away.

He had been standing in the corner of the large hall, but now he left and went to the sitting/meeting/waiting room. In the rather luxurious space furnished with a table, chairs, and a closet, among other things, was Demiurge.

"Sorry to have you come all this way."

"Not at all. Wherever you are, Lord Ainz, is where we should go."

Ainz crossed the room and took a seat in one of the chairs. Then he instructed Demiurge to sit as well.

“…I took a look at the document. Sorry I troubled you to write it all down because I was out working here.”

The document was something Demiurge had written describing his preparations in the Sacred Kingdom and what would happen next. Ainz was worried that if he had received a verbal explanation, he would have screwed up somehow and revealed what a poser he was, hence this desperate tactic.

“…Still, I’m impressed, Demiurge. All I can say is that you’ve done a magnificent job.”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz.” Demiurge bowed deeply. “But I’m still nowhere near your skill… You split the dwarves with a giant wedge.”

The only things Ainz could think of that might be a *giant wedge* would be retaking the capital or extending his invitation to the rune crafters. But was that really what happened?

“…Mm-hmm. So you’ve already figured it out, huh, Demiurge? Do you think the dwarves will notice?”

“They’ll probably notice, but I think it’s already out of their hands.”

Why isn’t a third party present? Then I could use my usual trick, he thought, and when he looked over, Demiurge was wearing a faint smile.

…What’s so funny?!

Ainz was utterly out of his depth, so Demiurge’s quiet grin pained him. Albedo’s similar smile was equally frightening. When he thought that the royal act he’d kept up all this time might become transparent, the heart he didn’t even have seemed to pound hard.

“If…they do notice, what do you think we should do?”

“I doubt you need to worry about it. All you did was offer food for the rune crafters’ farewell party, so if anyone says something, you can just laugh it off.”

…I wonder what he’s talking about.

“Then, I guess that’s fine.”

Having failed to lead the conversation where he was aiming, Ainz put a stop

to that topic. It was too dangerous to pursue things too far with someone so intelligent.

“And what about the empire becoming a vassal state?”

“Yes, I met with Albedo and we drafted an idea. All that’s left is for you to read it and give us your thoughts.”

If Albedo and Demiurge came up with it, there’s no need for me to do anything, was what he thought, but he said, “…Are you giving them carrots? Will they be a test case nearby countries can reference to see how well people are living in a Nation of Darkness vassal state?”

“I believe so.”

Good, said Ainz in his head. Then, he didn’t even have to look at it to give the okay.

“Still, I’m just so impressed, Lord Ainz, by both this matter with the dwarves and the empire as well. The extent of what you can achieve is difficult to fathom.”

“No, that’s not true. You could easily do as much, Demiurge.”

Demiurge showed a rare expression for him—a wince—and shook his head.

“Now, *that* is not true, my lord. How far ahead—how many years—have you planned out the future of the Nation of Darkness?”

There was no way Ainz could say he didn’t even know what would happen tomorrow.

Ainz tried to think what would make him sound most like a ruler. Just then, the name of a guild from *Yggdrasil* popped into his head.

The Thousand-Year Kingdom.

They probably called it that out of the wish that their nation would go on for a thousand years. From there, some memories came back to him.

For some reason, their guild crest was a crane. When he asked Yamaiko why, she said it was probably from the saying about how cranes live a thousand years. And tortoises live…

“…Ten thousand years.” Having let it slip out without thinking, he furrowed his nonexistent brow. The scale there was a bit too enormous.

He quickly turned to Demiurge to correct himself but saw that it was already too late.

“Rreally? That grand a scale?” Demiurge goggled, revealing his gemlike eyes.

Oh shit.

“I was jo—”

“—So then is the reason you’re trying to spread the use of undead not to plant latent forces that could instantly become a military force loyal to you at a snap of your fingers but to make the whole world dependent on you? If you’re taking such a long view, that must be it. Truly formidable, my lord…”

Ainz had no idea what Demiurge had just said, but there was only one way for him to respond: *I’d expect no less from you, Demiurge. You’ve seen through all my aims.* But wasn’t that attitude what had been causing him issues? So instead…

“Hoh-hoh-hoh. I hadn’t thought that far, Demiurge.”

“…Oh, is *that* it? I see. I’ll lock that away where it’ll be safe.”

Demiurge’s quiet grin made Ainz break out in a mental cold sweat. *Huh? What? Is* what *it…? I have a bad feeling that I just plunged into an even riskier situation…*

But he didn’t know how to deal with it, so all he could do was force a smile. “Hoh-hoh-hoh. I’m counting on you, Demiurge.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh… Understood, Lord Ainz.” And Demiurge responded with a nice smile Ainz had never seen before.

He felt like he wanted to cry, but he put some energy into his voice, which was threatening to tremble, and asked, “…So, Demiurge, regarding the documents you gave me…what times are you considering?”

“I’ll start in the fall and ask for you sometime around winter. There’s no issue with the start time, but depending on when they move, your part could shift slightly earlier or later, even if I guide them.”

“Well, you’ll be in charge. I’ll operate with full faith in your plan.”

“Thank you, Lord Ainz. Now, about the empire—”

“—Let’s talk about that when I get back. First, can you send over the draft?”

“Understood.”

“Then, I’ll be looking forward to the event you’re ringleading…”

Epilogue

Epilogue

When Enri woke up, she got out of bed quietly so as not to disturb her sleeping husband. When the still-cold air hit her, she suppressed the urge to dive back under the covers where the warmth from two bodies had made it so cozy.

The bed creaked, but perhaps her husband of some six months was tired—he remained fast asleep like a puppet with its strings cut.

Enri was in charge of their routine, so he was keeping more regular hours than he ever had. Was this deep sleep just the way he usually slept, then?

…He wasn't always like this.

She didn't think he had slept so soundly when they first married.

Maybe he was nervous? But that would mean now he's used to it, so that's a good thing.

Enri stretched with a little *mph*.

Her bare breasts swayed.

She blushed slightly and looked around for the clothes she had stripped off.

Even if it was only her and her husband in this house, she felt indecent.

If her little sister, Nemu, had been there, she never could have walked around like this, but Nemu wasn't currently staying here—at the Emmott family house—but at the Baleare family house.

Enri's grandmother-in-law, Lizzy, had said Nemu mustn't disturb the newlyweds, and they had also decided that one or the other of the houses

needed to be remodeled.

Though it had been about two years since they lost their parents, Nemu still hated to leave her sister's side at night. The fact that she agreed meant she must have inferred something on her own.

Living on a farm, she would commonly see animals do that sort of thing. Maybe she had heard about what the young couples did deep in the bushes when they slipped out of the ring of the harvest festival dances. She probably had some vague idea that married couples did something at night.

But Enri hadn't explained the details—because she didn't have any recollection of knowing them when she was Nemu's age. Still, before long, she would have to teach her. Knowledge could be a poison or a medicine.

Lupusregina would probably say something really weird…

Most everyone in the village loved and respected the aide of this country's ruler who sometimes came to visit. Enri was no exception. But she couldn't approve of every aspect of her personality. Having known her for so long, she had realized that Lupusregina was the type who would commit a crime for fun — or rather, the type who would laugh if she saw someone get trapped in a pitfall.

She got the sense that unless she explicitly asked Lupusregina to tell her something, she wouldn't be informed until it was absolutely critical.

Meanwhile, she felt like she had to head off Lupusregina before Nemu asked her anything. Enri hadn't forgotten that Lupusregina told her she would teach her adult matters anytime.

Having made up her mind to catch Lupusregina at the earliest opportunity, Enri scooped her clothes off the floor and threw them on.

Then she went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet. She gathered in a small vessel the water that poured out. Timing it right with the water reaching the top, she turned the handle the other way, and the flow stopped.

Her morning work used to begin with a visit to the well. But now she could get fresh water from this magic item—and the temperature was always the same no matter if the weather outside was hot or cold.

She had heard that this item, a Faucet of Spring Water, could produce up to two hundred liters of water per day. Supposedly, a wise foreigner came up with the shape and everything.

Apparently, these weren't rare in big cities. She had even heard that in certain times and places, a huge version of it was used as the water supply for an entire town.

Enri wiped herself down with a damp towel.

"Ooh, brr."

Even if the water temperature remained stable, if the air was cold, the warmth that seeped from her wet skin was significant. But Enri simply put up with it as she ran the towel over her various body parts. She had washed up before bed, but she was doing it again.

As long as she didn't forget the time Lupusregina had come up to her sniffing loudly and grinning, she would never let her guard down.

Magic items sure are great, though.

She had thought the same thing any number of times.

Currently, there were quite a large number of people living in the village of Carne.

Over 90 percent of them were the goblins Enri had summoned, but at first, the village didn't have the infrastructure to support them all.

Problem one was housing.

The goblins solved that issue by cutting down trees in the Tove Woodlands and building simple accommodations. But there was nothing they could do about food and water shortages.

First, they thought the village could take advantage of the forest's bounty, but they couldn't gather enough food to support the goblins' lifestyle. Eventually, they had asked Lupusregina for help and gotten food aid. It was only a loan, so in the future they would have to repay it—thankfully, not in blood.

Then, there was the water issue. In the old days, there weren't that many people, so the little well had been plenty, but the population increased so much

that they had to put people on well duty and draw water all day long.

That still wasn't enough, though, so they were forced to dig another well a fair distance away. If they dug nearby, they would simply be drawing from the same source, and there was no guarantee that it wouldn't run dry.

That issue was solved by the dwarves who moved to the village.

They had arrived in the middle of summer, and now it was nearly spring.

I wonder if they're working on a new magic item now.

Up until two months ago, there had been bright flashes of light and explosions, but now it was peaceful. Sometimes they had outdoor drinking parties, which were noisy, but that was the extent of it.

The dwarves now provided an indispensable contribution to the village's livelihood.

Originally, there were no blacksmiths in Enri's village, so they either had to buy items in town or request the services of the rare traveling smithy.

In the goblin army she summoned the second time around, there was one blacksmith, but he had a hard time doing all the necessary work on his own. Then the dwarves showed up and took on the brunt of the smithing jobs.

More than anything, it was great that the humans of Carne felt some loyalty equivalent toward His Majesty the King of Darkness.

The great caster, His Majesty the King of Darkness, had saved the village a number of times. That was why they felt they were indebted to him. If anyone in this village insulted the king, a person would no doubt punch their lights out.

And the dwarves seemed indebted to him as well. Whenever they drank, they said things like, "That ceremony gave us back our self-respect," "Did you see the jealous looks on their faces?" and "Yeah, when they drank that stuff!" and while Enri didn't know what any of it meant, she could tell it was said with gratitude to His Majesty the King of Darkness. That was why the villagers accepted the dwarves so readily.

Having finished up, Enri straightened out her clothes.

There was still no sign of her husband waking up. *I'll finish the cleaning before*

then!

Her husband had been working to develop potions with his grandmother, but since there were so many more people now, she had him focus on stockpiling medicines. Not only that, but he helped out with Enri's duties as headwoman. He was working very hard for the village. *I have to do my best for him, too.*

When she went outside, the familiar scene of Carne—albeit more developed than before—came into view. It was actually bigger than what could technically be called a village because of all the summoned goblins' houses.

"Now, then." Enri balled up her fists.

To prepare food, first she had to go to the storehouse and gather ingredients.

"Good morning, General." A goblin dressed in black slipped out from the shadows.

This was something Enri saw every morning, so she wasn't startled at all. "Good morning. Nice weather today."

"You're exactly right, General. According to the goblin weather forecaster, it'll be clear skies all day."

"Is that so?"

Enri didn't even react to the nickname "General" anymore.

She had told them countless times she was no general but couldn't convince them, so she had accepted that *head of the village* and *general* were basically the same thing.

Incidentally, there was a unit called the Goblin Rear Support Squad made up of goblins with rare classes. The goblin weather forecaster was one of those, but there were twelve classes in all, including goblin strategist and goblin blacksmith.

"Oh, General, it looks like your escort has arrived. I'll be taking my leave, then." The goblin in all black faded back into the shadows and in his place, the usual redcap goblin appeared beside Enri.

Personally, Enri didn't like the redcap goblins much—because of their sinister faces. Frankly, they were quite scary.

Jugemu used to go with her, but he was now a senior commander leading the huge goblin population, so he couldn't stay with Enri anymore. Really, a silver-armored goblin was supposed to escort her in that case, but circumstances were such that she got a redcap goblin instead.

Really, I don't even need a bodyguard, though…

She hardly thought anyone could sneak past all the goblins to the center of the village. But she couldn't disregard their concern for her, either.

Enri went, accompanied by the redcap, to the food storehouse adjacent to her place.

She opened the door, and inside, barrels and pots were crowded on the floor, while the shelves were lined with bottles and jars. The back was a mountain of wheat sacks, and dried meat and herbs hung from the rafters like willow branches.

The reason they had so much food was because the goblins put their all into cultivating the land.

There were fields all around the village for miles. It would still be difficult to repay the food they borrowed, but this year they had harvested enough that they could feed everyone without borrowing more. They had also captured some chicken-like magical beasts and were trying to breed them. If everything went well, they would be able to repay their food debt in a few years.

Having selected the ingredients she needed for the day's meals, Enri went back outside.

She could see a huge wall out of the corner of her eye.

Despite it being inside the village, the dwarves' workshop was protected by a wall made of something that wasn't wood. And the death knights who had trampled the enemies that once attacked Carne stood guard around it.

That wall had been built by the ruler of the country, the village's savior, Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness, himself. *This is so that if one of the dwarves' experiments happens to fail, the damage will be kept to a minimum*, he had said.

She wondered why they hadn't built it outside the village, but there was no way she could ask something like that to someone so great who had helped them so much.

"I wonder what kind of items the dwarves are making in their workshop."

"Shall I find out?"

"No, I said this before—definitely do not."

She couldn't get the dwarves to tell her what they were making, but it wasn't anything that would harm the village, so she let it go.

The goblins suggested collecting intelligence secretly, but she had rejected that idea in the same way she shut down this one.

Ainz Ooal Gown had come in person to say he wanted them to accept the dwarves. He had told her then that their research was top secret.

He may have been a life-hating undead, but he was a caster who had saved the village more than once, so she trusted him more than anyone among the living.

Then the redcap goblin slipped in front of Enri. There was only one reason he would do that.

When Enri looked over, a familiar pretty lady was standing there surrounded by four redcaps.

"Hiya, En. How ya doin'?"

"Oh, good morning, Lupusregina."

Ever since Lupusregina and these goblins first met, things had been this way. There weren't even that many redcap goblins, but there were always a few gathered around her. And they were equipped with weapons they didn't usually carry.

Enri heard there were others besides redcaps keeping watch, but she had never spotted any.

Still, at that point, she realized that the redcaps—no, the goblins in general—were on guard against Lupusregina. But though she was a mystery, Lupusregina

was subordinate to the one whose statue graced the center of the village, so Enri couldn't imagine that she would harm them. She had even saved her and Nfirea's lives before.

Really, Enri was worried the goblins might upset her.

Though she tried talking to the goblin strategist, he said only that they would try to be careful, and she hadn't seen any noticeable change.

The one saving grace was that when she had mentioned it to Lupusregina, she replied that it didn't bother her…

"They dash right over the moment I get here! It's such a drag!"

"Haven't you realized that if you show up on that thing, we'll be on guard?" It was one of the redcaps surrounding Lupusregina who answered.

Even Enri could sense the caution in his low voice.

"U-ummm!" Enri spoke up, realizing nothing good would come of things continuing as they were. "How did you come here anyway?"

"Huh? Flat Vamp Air, flight Frodr 05."

"Huh? Flat Vamp…?"

"Yeah, what I call the one who handles all external transport."

"Flat Vamp Air?"

"Yep, that's about right. If ya ever meet her, you can tell her that's what I said. In fact, definitely tell her it was me. If ya don't, there's no tellin' what'll happen!"

Enri looked perplexed in spite of herself, and Lupusregina responded with a smile. "This version of you is a good one, too. You're really my fave…" Her eyes crinkled. "I mean it." Her red tongue appeared between her parted lips to lick them.

It wasn't alluring. But Enri did get a chill up her spine.

At that instant, the redcap goblin standing by leaped into action.

He pulled her back while simultaneously filling the space between Lupusregina and her.

In that extremely tense atmosphere, Lupusregina shrugged while wearing a rare serious expression. “…I’m not gonna do anything. Would you relax? But if ya can’t believe me and would rather fight, then you guys can start. That way I don’t have to hold back or nothing.”

The redcap goblin lowered his eyes and went back to his original position.

“Anyhow. Oh, by the way, Frodr is short for frost dragon.’”

“Frost…dragon?! By *dragon*, do you mean like those legendary monsters?! Wow! Is that dragon one of Lord Gown’s subordinates, too?”

“Yup. In the Nation of Darkness, dragons do all sorts of air transport.”

“That’s amaaaazing!” Enri’s eyes sparkled.

She knew about dragons from legends. It had to be impossible for any old caster to tame one of them.

“Lord Gown really is fantastic.”

“…That’s true.” Lupusregina seemed troubled. “A dragon like that… I or someone… Well, whatever.”

Enri wanted to ask more, but if Lupusregina was satisfied, it was fine. Probably.

“So is there something you need today?”

“Oh right, right. Mm, well, I might not be able to come for a while. I just came to tell y’all to be careful.”

Enri had known Lupusregina for over a year, but this was the first time she had ever said anything like this.

“What happened?”

“Mm, well, maybe I can tell you, En. It appears that Lord Ainz lost a fight and died.”

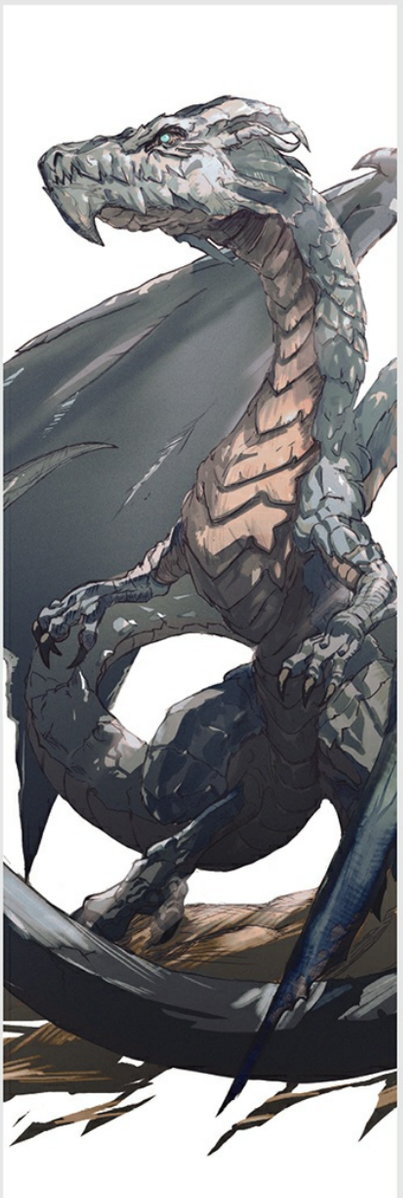
Enri mulled over what she had just been told and then finally comprehended.

So she reacted in the obvious way.

“What?!”

OVERLORD
Character Profiles

Character 46



Olasird'arc Haylilyal

Grotesque

The White Dragonlord

Position — Azerlisia Mountains, frost dragonlord

Residence — The palace in the former dwarf capital, Fehu Berkana

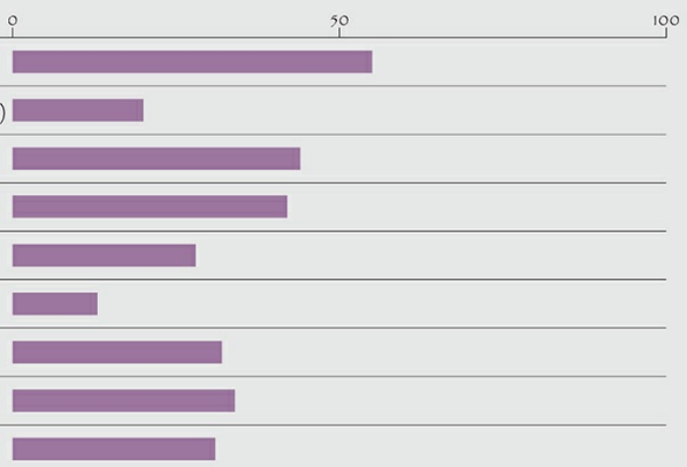
Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: -25)

Race Levels — Dragonling — 10 lv
Young — 10 lv
Adult — 10 lv
Elder — 5 lv
Ancient — 1 lv
Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 46 levels
Race levels — Class levels
46 acquired total — 0 acquired total

status

Status
Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



Character 47

Gondo Firebeard

Humanoid

Rune Researcher



Position — Arbeiter (at the beginning of Volume 11)

Residence — The dwarf city Fehu Jura

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: 45)

Class Levels

Weapon Smith	4 lv
Armor Smith	3 lv
Item Smith	3 lv
Rune Smith	1 lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 11 levels

● Race levels — Class levels ●

0 acquired total — 11 acquired total

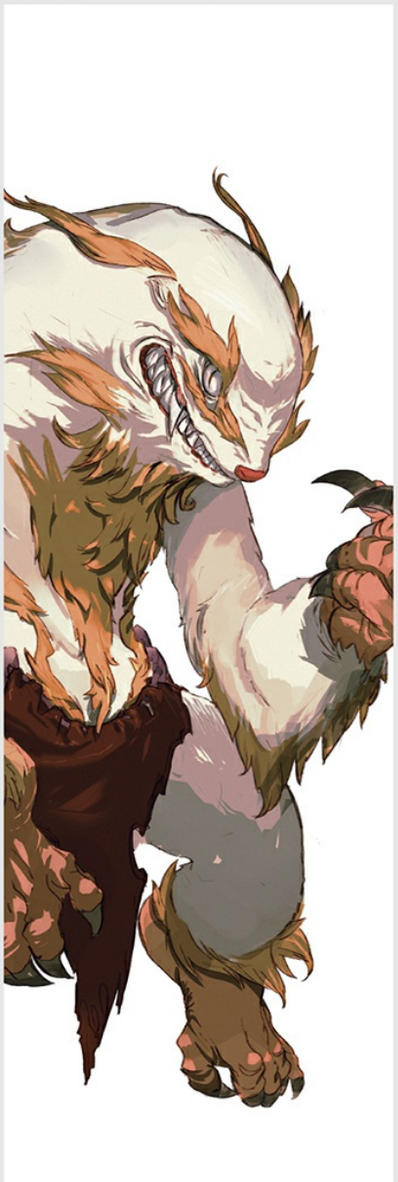
status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100

	0	50	100
HP (Hit Points)			
MP (Magic Points)			
Physical Attack			
Physical Defense			
Dexterity			
Magic Attack			
Magic Defense			
Total Resistance			
Special			

Character 48



Pe Riyuro

Grotesque

The strongest king in the history of his people

Position — Azerlisia Mountains, kuagoa chief clan king

Residence — The Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the former dwarf capital, Fehu Berkana

Alignment — Neutral (Karma Points: 40)

Race Levels — Kuagoa — 10 lv

Kuagoalord — 10 lv

Class Levels — Emperor (regular) — 2 lv

Monk — 6 lv

Chi Master — 4 lv

Etc.

[Race levels] + [Class levels] — 38 levels

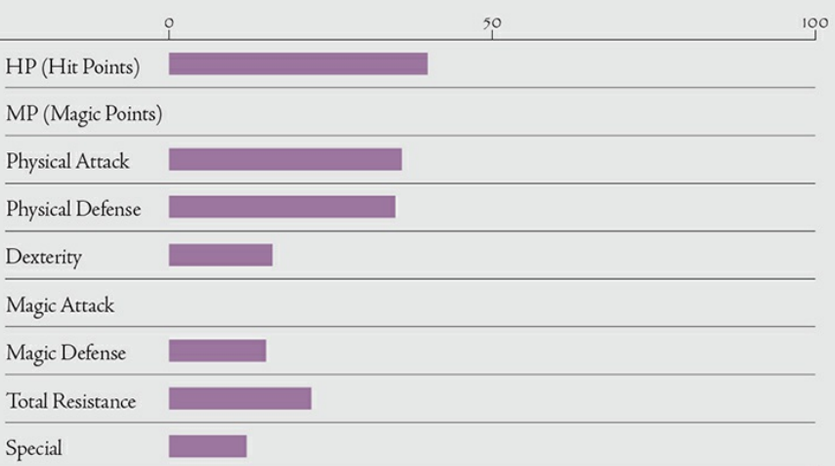
● Race levels — Class levels ●

20 acquired total — 18 acquired total

status

Status

Comparative ratio on a scale of 100



OVERLORD
Character Profiles

The Forty-One Supreme Beings

Compilation

7/41

Ulbert Alain Odle

Grotesque

Calamity Demon



{ personal character }

Of all the magic users in the guild, he was the one who possessed the most firepower, and in terms of highest damage dealt in a short amount of time, he was probably first or second place. He seemed to have a thing for the word *evil* and enjoyed showing off how evil he could be. This is a tangent, but at the moment *Yggdrasil* was ending, he was confronting a certain someone in the real world—evil vs. evil…

Yamaiko

Grotesque

Meathead Teacher



personal character

A woman who teaches at an elementary school inside the arcology. She has a genius younger sister and has always been compared to her but has a psyche so strong—like an ancient tree—that she could shrug it off. That might be partly because her sister has always looked up to her. Everyone called her a meathead, but that was probably because she would say things like, "Well, I don't remember the opponent's stats, so let's just try punching them (and run away if they're strong)."

Afterword

Now then, Volume 11 had the highest page count so far. Did you enjoy it? When books are thick, holding them wears out your hands, so I'd rather avoid such length. How did it end up this long, then…? If I was going to make it shorter, where should I have cut it? By the way, this is quite a bit shorter than my first draft. Back then it was getting into the six hundreds… Right. So it's not that different.

Well, just count this as savings and forgive me, please. In the future, I'm sure there will be a three-hundred-page volume. When that time comes, instead of thinking, *It's so thin!* pay out of these savings. I think on average, you'll find that the books are quite thick.

Okay, now we're going to change moods completely… I'm writing this in the middle of a hot summer. In my room, the air-conditioning is working with all its might to protect me from this scorching hell.

I really hate summer. There's nothing I hate more than brushing against people on my way to work when I'm all sweaty. *I won't go near you, so stay away from me!* is what I'm always screaming in my head. The only saving grace is that there are less students, so the trains aren't as packed. In contrast, winter is the best! And I can sleep so well, I never want to leave my futon! People who live in Hokkaido, Tohoku, or other regions where it snows a ton may have a different view, but I'm still going to shout this from the rooftops: Winter rocks!

In that most wonderful season of winter, it seems we're going to be releasing *Overlord* compilation films! So I need to work hard… I definitely will. Anyhow, I

think you'll start to hear more about this project soon. Hope you enjoy it.

Once again, a lot of different people helped me out. Thank you for drawing the cover multiple times, so-bin.

To Osako, who proofed for me, next time I'll definitely make it fewer pages! Thank you, Code Design, for designing the special edition on top of the regular one. Thanks to Ashina, whom I entrusted all the jokes to, and his staff. (Those of you who bought the special edition, please watch the OVA over and over.)

F___ta, let's meet and discuss how to lower my page count.

And thanks, Honey, for checking my manuscript.

Finally, thank you very much to all of you for reading (this thick book)!

September 2016

KUGANE MARUYAMA



Afterword by so-bin

Aura and Shalltear really give us a sense of what Teapot and Peroron are like. It was so cute, I got a twinge in my heart. I want a beer.

So-bin

A DEMON KING TRAMPLES THE SACRED KINGDOM, TURNING IT INTO HELL ON EARTH. UNABLE TO BEAR THE SUFFERING, THE PEOPLE TURN TO THE RAPIDLY DEVELOPING NATION OF DARKNESS FOR

HELP.
AINZ OOAL GOWN
VS.
JALDABAOTH!
WHO WILL WIN?
THE FIERCE
CLASH AWAITS
IN VOLUME 12

Volume Twelve

OVERLORD

Volume 12: The Paladin of the Sacred Kingdom

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from YEN ON!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1 Preparing for an Unknown Land

Chapter 2 In Search of the Land of the Dwarves

Chapter 3 The Impending Crisis

Chapter 4 A Crafter and Negotiations

Chapter 5 The Frost Dragonlord

Epilogue

Character Profiles

Afterword

Yen Newsletter