

OVERLORD 12

The Paladin of the Sacred Kingdom Part I

Kugane Maruyama

Illustration by so-bin





OVERLORD

Volume 12: The Paladin of the Sacred Kingdom Part 1

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

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Copyright

OVERLORD VOLUME 12

KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Emily Balistrieri Cover art by so-bin

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Chapter 1 Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth

Chapter 1 | Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth

1

The Sacred Kingdom Roebel was situated on a peninsula southwest of the Re-Estize Kingdom.

Ruled harmoniously by influential shrines and a holy king wielding powerful faith magic at the top, the Sacred Kingdom was a deeply religious country—though not to the extent of the Slane Theocracy.

The realm of the Sacred Kingdom had two unusual characteristics.

One was that its territory was split north and south by the sea. Of course, the two parts weren't completely cut off from each other, but the land's shape resembled a sideways horseshoe—and right in the middle was a giant bay stretching approximately twenty-five miles north to south and a hundred and twenty-five miles east to west.

This gulf is so great that some people distinguish between the northern Sacred Kingdom and the southern Sacred Kingdom.

There was one other notable thing.

A massive wall spanned the mouth of the peninsula, running over sixty miles north to south.

The purpose of the barrier was to prevent invasions from the various subhuman tribes who made their homes in the hilly area to the east that was situated between the Sacred Kingdom and the Theocracy.

The sheer thickness of this formidable wall, as well as the amount of time and national power devoted to its construction, spoke volumes about how much Roebel had suffered and mourned at the hands of its neighbors.

The gap in innate ability between subhumans and humanoids is vast.

Certain races like goblins could be considered an exception.

Goblins are significantly smaller in stature than humans. They are often inferior in terms of physical ability, intelligence, and number of casters born in the population.

But even goblins could prove a troublesome foe if they took advantage of their night vision and ability to conceal themselves—for example, lying in ambush under the cover of darkness in the forest.

As a matter of fact, most of the various races in the region were far more muscular than humans. Quite a few were born with arcane powers as well. If the Sacred Kingdom allowed an invasion to occur, the blunder would surely be paid for with a terrible amount of blood.

Which was why its people went to such lengths just to strengthen its defenses.

To prevent subhumans from setting so much as a foot in its territory.

To show them this land belonged to someone else.

To make sure all its enemies knew that any who dared to trespass would be in for the fight of their lives.

These were the reasons why the wall had been raised. Unfortunately, there was a problem.

Fully maintaining the fortifications required a vast number of soldiers. On one occasion, the Sacred Kingdom’s leaders estimated how many soldiers would be required to defend against a subhuman invasion.

The result of their investigation showed that the nation would collapse long before the invaders ever mounted an attack.

It wasn’t economically feasible to have so many soldiers on standby at the walls. At the same time, everyone agreed that they had to man the defenses to a certain degree.

The worst encroachment in the history of the Sacred Kingdom—that took place after the wall had been built—was an attack that came with rain that kept up for days.

This raid was conducted by the srasch, a race with suckers on their limbs and

long tongues that could cross great distances to deliver paralyzing venom. Some elite members of their kind could even change the color of their skin and achieve an effect similar to the Camouflage spell.

These were the invaders who scaled the wall and pushed westward.

Multiple villages fell victim to their predations. The tragedy was so great that rumors of srasch lurking somewhere inside the kingdom persist to this day.

With the past weighing heavily in their minds, the leaders of the Sacred Kingdom wanted to make sure they had enough soldiers to prevent a repeat of those dark days. The concept was simple in theory, but manning the walls using standard methods would have been too great a strain on the country. The solution was a series of forts, established at fixed intervals along the length of the wall, which were in turn supervised by larger regional fortresses.

The smaller forts were garrisoned with only enough soldiers to delay the enemy. In the event one came under concentrated attack, their main responsibility was to immediately light a signal fire to request backup from nearby fortresses. There were also companies that regularly patrolled between forts that could be used as flexible reserves in a pinch.

Once these new measures were in place, the subhuman tribes stopped attacking the wall.

Despite this improvement, the leaders of the Sacred Kingdom remained obsessively cautious. The string of bastions wasn’t enough to give them peace of mind.

A massive fortress that might intimidate a human was hardly a threat to races double their size or those who could fly. No matter how durably built, no simple stronghold could provide total security against the special abilities of other races.

The holy king at the time was a decisive ruler who wasted little time before starting work on a policy for what to do in the event invaders scaled their great wall. And so the National Mobilization Order was born.

The decree codified the conscription of the Sacred Kingdom’s citizens. Upon coming of age, everyone, regardless of sex, would undergo training as a soldier

and have their turn at a post somewhere along the wall. With this system in place, there was supposed to be enough soldiers to defend the land if the subhumans ever attacked.

Furthermore, settlements that grew past a certain size were fortified. This was both so the residents could hold out until the royal army arrived and so the locations could also be used as logistic bases. Thus, the villages and cities of the Sacred Kingdom were strengthened to an unparalleled level, essentially functioning as military bases.

•

Three large fortresses anchored the kingdom's line of defense. There were only three gates in the huge, sixty-plus-mile wall, and these imposing bastions defended the critical entry points. They also functioned as barracks for the troops that would reinforce the smaller forts in case of attack. If subhumans attacked in force and the National Mobilization Order was invoked, the large strongholds would also become the marshaling points for the massive armies of citizen-soldiers who would try to pin down the invaders for follow-up pincer attacks.

One of these forts served as the central base.

As the sun sank behind the distant horizon, the reddened earth gradually surrendered to the color of the advancing dusk. With his foot up on the battlement, a man frowned as he stared out at the red earth—specifically toward the hills to the west—before setting his leg back down.

He was a brawny fellow.

Sturdy neck, a bulky chest (obvious even beneath his armor), and muscular arms coming out of his rolled-up sleeves. No matter what part of this man was being described, the only appropriate word was *thick*.

His face, resembling a boulder exposed to the elements for years, had a feral look about it, perhaps in part due to his heavy eyebrows and stubble. Some might say his tough demeanor was in harmony with his rugged physique, but his eyes ruined that balance.

His beady eyes were those of a small animal, and the stark difference

between them and the rest of his body was downright comical.

He craned his head up.

Wispy clouds blew by at a surprising speed. He could spy the starry canopy peeking out from behind the thin veil covering the sky, but it was hardly bright enough to light up the ground.

Breathing in the chilly, early autumn air—mixed with a hint of winter's scent—made the coming of night feel closer, more immediate. Only a few lingering holdouts of sunlight still colored the horizon as the violet of evening rapidly expanded its holdings.

Turning his back to the hills, the man looked over the faces of the soldiers nearby. Those gathered around him, who believed in him, were all veteran warriors. Yet, even their expressions were slightly slack.

That was only natural. After all, it was the end of a long day of work.

"—Hey, any of you know what the weather observer's forecast is for the night?" His voice had the depth to match his robust body. The question he raised caused the soldiers to exchange glances. Eventually, one spoke up for all of them.

"Apologies, Your Excellency. It seems like no one here has."

The burly man—Orlando Campano—sat at a rather low rung as far as rank was concerned.

In the Sacred Kingdom, the ranks of the army were, from lowest to highest: trainee, soldier, soldier first-class, squad leader, company leader, and commander. Of course, depending on each person's role, there could be less intuitive pecking orders, but this was how the regular soldiers were generally organized.

The rank of squad leader certainly wasn't high enough to warrant being called "Your Excellency."

But the soldier who addressed Orlando wasn't mocking him. It was clear from his attitude and tone that the title was a sign of respect. And that sentiment was shared by all the soldiers present, a group of warriors that exuded power

and experience.

“Ah, all right, then.” Orlando slowly stroked his stubbly chin.

“Your Excellency, if you give me the time, I can go ask right now.”

“Hmm? Oh, that won’t be necessary. Our work is done. The rest is up to the next crew.”

Orlando Campano…

A man awarded one of the prestigious Nine Colors by the previous holy king on the merits of his strength alone.

Why was someone of his standing stuck as a lowly squad leader? This boiled down to two problems.

One was his penchant for going his own way—the man truly hated taking orders.

The second was his imprudent focus on strength above all else.

The intersection of those two issues manifested as *If you want to give me orders, then first you’ll have to put my rump on the ground*. Moreover, whenever he spotted someone strong, he would say, “You look like a tough customer. Let’s see who’s stronger,” and go at it until one of them was down for the count.

As a result, Orlando often and sometimes literally bashed heads with nobles and superiors. He also frequently got demoted—a whopping ten times so far.

An army has no need for people who can’t take orders—they’re pests. Anyone else with his record would either be reformed or thrown out. The only reason that didn’t happen to Orlando was because he was strong. Also, certain people were drawn to a man like that.

Apparently, the rough guys dissatisfied with being ordered around by feeble nobles found Orlando’s way of life an utter delight, inspiring them to also grasp what their hearts desired with the strength of their own two hands.

His troops consisted of people who admired that sort of ruffian.

It was a large squad, too. There were enough members for a full company,

and they were all strong—albeit not as much as their leader. Though infuriating for his superiors, the immunity Orlando enjoyed allowed him to essentially establish a rank not subject to the rules of the system.

Orlando's eyes shifted, and when he saw the approaching man, a smile spread across his face that wouldn't be out of place on a carnivorous beast about to pounce.

This man was as thin as Orlando was thick. But he wasn't thin like a twig. Perhaps it was best described as slim like steel. This was the ideal lean body that was the product of training until all excess had been cut away, as if it had been built with a specific purpose in mind.

And a sharp gaze emanated from his tense eyes that made it seem as if he was about to strike. Combined with the fact that they were small and dark, there was no helping how disreputable he seemed. At best, people would assume he was an assassin. At worst, a serial killer.

"Speak of the devil. Guess it's time for your appearance, Mr. Night Watch? Thanks as always."

The man who had appeared without a sound and walked while cloaked in silence was outfitted quite differently.

Orlando and his men were equipped with the gear of the Sacred Kingdom's powerful soldiers. Their heavy leather armor was made of several layers of hide that came from the magical beasts called ranker oxen. Each of them also had a small round shield and a single-edged sword. Incidentally, Orlando was the only one wearing two of those swords.

In contrast, this man was clad in enchanted light leather armor. Inscribed on the right side of his chest was an owl, and on the left, the Sacred Kingdom's coat of arms.

"…Orlando. I haven't gotten a report from your group. And what kind of tone is that to take with a superior? The nerve. How many times do I have to warn you?"

"Sorry, Commander."

When Orlando finally raised a lax salute, his group followed suit. It was

sincere in a way his men would have shown a random noble or someone merely higher in rank. This was a sign of genuine respect.

“Haaah…” The newcomer heaved a conspicuous sigh. He wasn’t satisfied, but he also understood that it was pointless to say anything further.

Sorry, sir, but my personality’s been like this for as long as I can remember, and it isn’t likely to be fixed anytime soon.

The reason Orlando showed what passed as respect among his group was because this man had defeated him.

I don’t want to quit without beating you at least once. On your turf. You understand, right, Commander Baraja?

The man—Pabel Baraja—was also known as the Night Watch. He was also a recipient of one of the Nine Colors, like Orlando.

The huge, sturdy bow on his back glowed faintly, as did the quiver at his hip. As his equipment implied, he was an archer—and an expert who many said could nail a hundred shots without missing a single one.

“I think all the time how hard it must be to work at night. Most subhumans aren’t fazed by the dark; it’d be rough enough just to find them, never mind fight them.”

“That’s why we’re here. Unless you were born with magic or special powers, there’s no way to get the same vision as subhumans without extensive training. And that’s exactly what we’ve been through.”

“Yeah, yeah. That daughter you’re so proud of has, too, right?”

Pabel’s cheek twitched, and Orlando regretted his remark the moment it was out of his mouth.

Pabel’s face never cracked, even when they went out drinking; the only exception was when his wife or daughter came up in conversation. If that happened, one critical flaw was immediately noticeable.

“Yes, she’s quite an outstanding girl.”

—Here it comes. Here it comes again.

Pabel continued with no regard for Orlando's regret. "That said, I have no idea why she wants to be a paladin. She's weak. But if you think that strength is everything— She's the kind of girl who cries that caterpillars are scary— I know I said that strength is everything, but that's excluding my wife…although my wife is a bit like that— My daughter looks just like me, which is so cute, though I guess I pity her for resembling me— But it's too bad our girl has no aptitude for the sword. Still, she's handy with a bow. She should really just keep working on her marksmanship, but instead, she's all worked up about becoming a holy knight—"

Orlando let the rambling go in one ear and out the other, occasionally grunting in response, but it seemed he had been found out.

"Hey, are you listening?"

The predictable question had already come.

…Nope, I'm not. Probably not since the third time this happened.

By the fifth or sixth time Orlando was forced to listen to the same story, he would normally have replied grumpily, *No, why would I be?* But reacting that way to Pabel in this situation would be a big mistake—because Orlando knew from experience that the response would be *Okay, then, I'll say it again*.

The right answer lay elsewhere. "Yes, yes, I hear you. Your daughter really is precious, isn't she?"

Pabel's expression changed immediately. His face looked so monstrous that even Orlando braced himself, but that was just how this man blushed.

Orlando had to seize this moment where Pabel briefly paused his own boasting to savor the fact that someone else had praised his daughter. Without drastic action, he would miss his chance to escape hell.

"So…" There was only one topic that could trump Pabel's daughter: work. "Doesn't working at night mess up your internal clock? Your body doesn't get thrown off?"

Pabel's expression changed from completely deranged killer back to run-of-the-mill mass murderer.

“…How many times have you asked me that? My answer will never change. It doesn’t bother me. But why are you so obsessed with that point? What are you really trying to get at?”

Orlando had expected the dramatic shift, but he still couldn’t help his eyes popping a bit.

Who are you, and where is the Pabel from a second ago? he wanted to jab, but he wasn’t interested in jumping into the grave he had just climbed out of.

“…Hmm. What do you mean, sir? That’s a strange question… I can’t have the guy who defeated me wearing himself out for some lame reason and retiring early. Once I beat you, I won’t care, but…”

When Orlando had first been assigned to this fort, he had been so full of himself that just recalling it was embarrassing. As more tough guys gathered around him out of admiration, his inflated confidence got even greater, and eventually, he found himself sparring with Pabel.

Orlando was skilled with a sword, specializing in close-quarters combat, while Pabel’s talent was archery—specializing in combat at range.

If the two of them were going to fight, the distance between them would be critical. But Pabel offered to fight at close quarters.

And then Orlando lost.

That was why Orlando respected Pabel. But at the same time, he openly stated his desire for a rematch and his intent to defeat his rival. He wanted to give Pabel the distance that would suit his specialty and win anyway.

“Oh. You want to fight me? In my prime, when there’s nothing wrong with a single part of me?”

The sharp, beastly grin on Pabel’s face stirred something in Orlando’s breast.

Yes, exactly. You understand, right? I want to fight you. I want to fight to the death. But I’m sure we can’t go that far. Still, I want to rush to the very brink, where one of us might end up dead. That’s the kind of battle I want to have.

But Orlando couldn’t say anything—because he felt the beast that had appeared before him suddenly flit away. And the next thing Pabel said only

confirmed his intuition.

“But sorry. I’m sure you understand. There are only a handful of people who could beat you in hand-to-hand combat now, and I’m not one of them.”

The words *Then let’s fight at range* never reached Orlando’s tongue—because he knew they would be an insult to a man he respected.

Knowing Pabel’s prowess with a bow, he wasn’t confident he could evade those attacks and close the distance.

Not yet anyway.

“Anyhow, if you’re done chatting, then let’s have that report.”

“There’s no need to hurry, is there, sir? It’s not time to change shifts yet. The bell hasn’t even rung.”

There was still quite some time before the scheduled chime that signaled the guard change.

“There are still preparations to be made, things that need to be done before the bell rings. We need to be ready so that the moment it’s time, we can get straight to work.”

“There’s still time, though, right, sir? Let’s chat a little more.”

“In that case, why don’t I give the report to your aide, Commander?”

It was one of Orlando’s men who spoke.

“Good idea. You’re the best! Does that work for you, sir?”

“…*Sigh.* You’re really stubborn today. There must be something specific you want to talk about, right? I wish you would just come out and say that like a normal person.”

Unfortunately, that was impossible for Orlando.

Some chose to confide in people they respected, but Orlando was the type who couldn’t possibly go to someone he admired with his concerns. He wanted to be seen as a man’s man.

“I’m impressed as always, sir. Always on top of things.”

"…*Sigh.* So what is it? If it's something stupid, I'll make you regret it."

"Right." Orlando removed his helmet and scratched his head. The cold air on his flushed face was oddly comforting. "Actually, I'd like to undertake a journey to train myself. May I have permission to go on leave?"

He heard people around them gasp. But the face of the man in front of him didn't move a muscle.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're the man I respect the most in this country. If you won't stop me, then I have no qualms about leaving."

"You aren't a regular, right? If your conscription period is up, I can't stop you."

Due to the Sacred Kingdom's extensive conscription system, distinguishing draftees from career soldiers was often achieved by referring to the latter as regulars. Pabel and his subordinates were all regulars, while Orlando's group was a mix.

"So you mean it's fine if I quit?"

This was the first time Orlando ever saw Pabel's face move aside from when his wife or daughter came up. The change was so slight that picking it up took all the powers of perception that Orlando had honed as an exceptional warrior; it was doubtful anyone else had noticed.

This man who Orlando regarded as steel was moved by an action he took. A stormy mix of joy and sorrow roared in Orlando's breast.

"…The law gives you that right. There's nothing I can do… That said, losing a man of your caliber leaves…quite a hole. You could have gone training earlier. Why now?"

In the last six months or so, the subhuman tribes had stopped attacking the forts. Prior to that, dozens of them would regularly mount attempts once or twice a month.

Though these raiding parties numbered in the dozens and not hundreds or thousands, subhumans were physically superior to humans. And many of them had special powers. Even with relatively low numbers, it wouldn't have been

strange for such an attack to wipe out a whole garrison.

Consequently, during most of the attacks, Orlando or Pabel had been dispatched with their crew to reinforce the frontline troops.

“It’s not like I enjoy killing subhumans. What I like is fighting strong guys and getting stronger myself.”

“But you don’t care about the Mighty King?”

“Oh, that guy…”

“Not just him. Demon Claw, the Beast Emperor, the Ash Lord, Elementria, Screw-Spear…”

Pabel rattled off a list of notorious subhumans, but none of them inspired Orlando as much as the first.

The Mighty King…

He was the king of a race of subhumans, sometimes known as the Breaker Lord.

The name came from his skill with weapon-breaking arts and how his combat style centered around that unique ability. This nemesis of the Sacred Kingdom had defeated many a warrior. Orlando had fought him before in a battle that ended in the destruction of not only his sword but also his reserve dagger and hatchet, plus the ax he used to fell trees.

Though all of Orlando’s weapons had been destroyed, the fight came to an end when the Mighty King withdrew upon the arrival of reinforcements dispatched from the nearby fortress. In the sense that he had held out until help arrived, it was Orlando’s victory, and many praised his valor. But since he wasn’t an enemy worth the Mighty King taking on a risk to eliminate, Orlando himself had felt somewhat defeated.

“I do want to fight him again someday, but…I probably can’t beat him yet. You probably have to be what they call a hero to take down that guy. Which is why—oh, sir, you heard, right? That the great warrior Gazef Stronoff fell in battle?”

“So you heard that as well. The higher-ups are discussing how it will affect the countries in the region.”

The death of the strongest warrior in the Re-Estize Kingdom was a major topic among Sacred Kingdom soldiers and really anyone who was decent in combat.

“Do you know the details?”

“I’ve heard the gist. Apparently, a caster known as the King of Darkness defeated him in single combat. To be honest, I struggle to understand how a caster could fight solo.”

Orlando agreed.

But the term *caster* encompassed a wide range of people. If a faith caster boosted their strength with magic, they could easily be more than a match for a half-baked warrior. Plus, holy warriors in this country liberally used magic. In a broad sense, they could be considered casters, too. It wasn’t impossible to imagine a caster in single combat.

“…I heard this King of Darkness also wiped out an entire army and summoned giant goats or sheep or something.”

“That’s news to me. Giant goats…? Sounds like a weird guy.” Hearing about goats reawakened Orlando’s defeated feelings. He knew they couldn’t be regular goats if the caster had summoned them for battle. “Well, that weird guy is just another reason…”

“For what? I don’t follow.”

“Just like how when you beat me, sir—I always ignored projectiles and magic. I thought I could just force my opponents to their knees with my sword. So when I heard that the captain of the Royal Select was killed, I realized maybe I had underestimated those elements of combat.”

“So?”

“I want to retrain.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to challenge one of the people in our country you can’t defeat.”

“I won’t.”

The people Orlando couldn’t beat were a handful of the Nine Colors.

Deputy commander of the marines, Enrique Belsué the Blue.

Leader of the Paladin Order, Remedios Custodio the White.

Pabel Baraja the Black.

A merman of the sea, Ran Tsu An Lin the Green.

And though he wasn't one of the Nine Colors, the elite priest Kelart Custodio.

In other words, they were all people of rank, so fighting them would cause a huge commotion. Even if sparring between members of the Nine Colors were somehow permissible, a bout with naked blades would never be allowed.

Unfortunately, that level of sparring wouldn't be enough.

Fighting with practice swords was totally different from fighting with real weapons—so different that it might even affect the outcome of the duel. Many people did not perform the same in exams as they did in actual combat. And being strong meant being strong when it counted. If he couldn't gain any useful experience, it wouldn't count as training for him.

"Good…but then where are you planning to train?"

"We were just discussing the Nation of Darkness. I think I'll try going there. By the sound of it, the place is home to some pretty powerful undead."

The Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown…

Appending his full name to the country seemed to show just how self-aggrandizing the king was, but Orlando wouldn't dismiss the idea. Besides, it meant the king was influential enough to make it happen.

"I've heard the name from the merchants who travel between here and that kingdom."

The teachings of the shrines had permeated Sacred Kingdom society, so most citizens felt only hatred and repulsion toward undead. Pabel was probably no exception. *Then again…* Orlando thought about it for a moment. *Pabel doesn't hate them as enemies of the Sacred Kingdom but as enemies of his wife.*

But he didn't bring that up. The commander wouldn't lose his head quite as much as when he talked about his daughter, but it would still make the

conversation much longer than it needed to be.

“The official stance is tacit acceptance, I think? It’s probably no problem if someone from the Sacred Kingdom wants to go there…right?”

No matter how one spun it, the Nation of Darkness, with its army of undead, was a foe the Sacred Kingdom couldn’t coexist with. After hearing about the plight of the people in E-Rantel, which the king had made his home base, many people in the Sacred Kingdom were already calling for soldiers to be deployed. But the Sacred Kingdom was busy dealing with the threat that the subhuman tribes posed, so until the hills were cleared, there was no way it could take military action against another country.

Regardless of what the masses desired, the government was content with simply directing passive criticism at the Nation of Darkness.

“A trip to the Nation of Darkness…? If you ask the higher-ups, you could probably stay with the army and still go. That place comes just after the subhumans on their list of priorities. Apparently, they’re thinking of establishing a united front with the Theocracy.”

“Oh, really? But won’t our differences in faith make a mess of it?”

“Yeah, I’m sure they will. Anyhow, if you stay in the army, then you’ll be able to get support from the country, and there shouldn’t be any obnoxious border inspections…at least as far as I know. It’ll also be timely, since the higher-ups want to know more about the inner workings of the Nation of Darkness.”

“That’s not a bad idea, sir. But then I can’t just smack whoever I choose, though.”

“The fact that you’re not joking is…problematic.”

“I’d feel bad for you if I caused an international incident.”

A cold evening wind whipped by. Pabel, his expression unchanging, was silent for a moment. Then, looking disgruntled as always, he murmured, “Well, it’ll be lonely without your dumb face around here anymore.”

Orlando smiled. It looked like the grin of a ferocious beast, but this was an uncharacteristic sign of bashfulness. Pabel didn’t say not to go, but he didn’t say

to go, either. He also tried to give Orlando a place to come home to.

“Well, I am sorry about that… But I’ll get stronger and come back. By then, I’ll be able to teach you a lesson or two!”

“That’s some big talk.”

When Orlando flashed him an easy smile, Pabel returned it. It was as fierce an exchange as two beasts growling at each other.

Just then the bell rang.

Time to change shifts? I guess we chatted a bit too long; I might get a warning later. But Orlando’s thoughts scattered as the bell continued to ring.

When Pabel whipped around to face the hills, Orlando did the same.

This bell meant subhumans had been sighted.

For over four hundred yards out from the wall, there was nothing to obstruct their view. In the past, there had been hills and trees, but when the wall was built, clearing and flattening a large swath of the surrounding land had been a part of the public works project. The only light at this hour came from the stars. Across what was essentially a big meadow, toward the hills where there was more cover, shadows crossed the darkened ground.

“Sir.”

It was impossible for Orlando to see them at this distance in this gloom. That was why he called out to the man with better eyes.

“No doubt about it—those are snakemen.”

The response was instant.

Snakemen were humanoid creatures covered in scales, with heads and tails like cobras, a race thought to be closely related to lizardmen. Their cobra heads produced a potent venom, which they also daubed on their crude pikes. If possible, it was best to avoid close-quarters combat with them.

That said, Orlando and his men had trained their bodies to the point that they had a good chance of resisting the effects of the venom. The scales provided some defense but not enough to repel sharpened metal. Snakemen also

employed their tails to great effect in combat, but those could simply be considered another weapon. Finally, due to their snakelike senses, these creatures had the upper hand in the dark, but that disparity could be managed.

Will we be the vanguard? No, Pabel's team will probably feather them all before they make it over here.

Snakemen loathed anything cold, so they didn't have metal armor. That made it easy for first-rate archers like Pabel's troops to take them out.

"How many, sir?"

Most raiding parties would number fewer than twenty.

"…Sir?"

The lack of an answer gave him pause. When he looked at Pabel, what he found instead of the expected blank expression was one of obvious confusion.

"What is it, sir?!"

"…Their numbers are still growing. This could be trouble! Other races have showed up. I see armats, ogres, caven…"

"Seriously?!"

All sorts of subhumans lived in the hills, but it wasn't as if they all got along. On the contrary, there were often conflicts over turf. Aside from goblins and ogres, who often cooperated, and races who enslaved others, members of different races usually weren't seen working together.

There had even been cases where one race would attack the Sacred Kingdom because they had been forced out of their lands by another race.

Was it possible that was the driving force this time? If not…

"Is this a major invasion?" Someone spoke up. They may have meant to murmur it to themselves, but the comment sounded strangely loud.

"Orlando. There's something I want to ask you." There was an indescribable tension in Pabel's voice. Given the situation, that was expected.

Demographics, culture, religion. Observations of the many countries largely made up of people of the same race demonstrated how difficult it was to unify

a nation. That task became even harder when multiple races were involved. Bringing together the myriad subhumans in the hills seemed an insurmountable challenge.

But if they had managed to achieve that somehow, it would mean the beginning of a battle that would decide the fate of the Sacred Kingdom.

Orlando trembled.

In order to bring such diverse races together, there would need to be a clear source of power. For humans, wealth or knowledge could be that source, but for subhumans, physical strength was most convincing. In other words…

There could be someone crazy strong out there…

"Answer on your instinct as a warrior. Why do you think they showed up at this, our most heavily defended fort? Either they're a detachment attacking as a feint so that another group can break through a weaker area or—"

"They think they can smash through the front door. They want to obliterate one-fifth of the Sacred Kingdom's fighting power right here, right now." Though he felt Pabel's sharp gaze on his profile, Orlando continued. "At the same time, they can establish a bridgehead at this fort. They would also lower our morale while boosting their own to boot."

"…The National Mobilization Order might be invoked."

"Ha-ha! A war this big was only supposed to happen once in Roebel history. Can't believe we're gonna get another one in our lifetime…"

"…I'm going to report this up the chain. Come with me."

"You got it, sir! Boys, this party's about to get started! Go grab your spare weapons!"

The larger the enemy army, the longer it would take to get into position. And it would take all the longer if it was made up of various races. But the same could be said of the Sacred Kingdom's side. It took time to prepare an army. Even on the front lines.

There were an astonishing number of things to do. They had no time to waste.

Orlando set off running after Pabel.

2

As the enemy army took up its position, Pabel felt his throat begin to burn.

The longer it took them to attack, the more soldiers could be concentrated at the fortress and the more time the Roebel Sacred Kingdom's government would have to activate the National Mobilization Order. The military leadership seemed to welcome the delay, but Pabel felt differently. Some subhumans had intellects that equaled or even surpassed human intelligence. There was no way the leader of this army was an unenlightened imbecile; they would surely understand that giving their enemy time to prepare put them at a disadvantage. And it was the middle of the night. Subhumans had the advantage in combat now, even if the humans lit bonfires and other sources of light.

Pabel stared out at the enemy encampment four hundred yards away.

The host was gathered in groups by race that didn't seem to take into account what sort of weapons, tactics, or similar racial characteristics they had.

They probably weren't united under a single banner. If they were, there should have been a more logical way to form ranks. Or perhaps it was a polyarchy, some sort of subhuman alliance where each race had equal authority.

"I can't see very well, sir. Can you spot the general?"

"No, so far I haven't found anyone who looks like their leader."

And none of Pabel's subordinates had reported that they had seen someone like that, either.

But there had to be a commander. Without one, even getting people to form ranks was a challenge.

"They can't stay hidden forever. I'm sure the leader will show up on the battle line."

It was subhuman nature for the ruler to possess great strength and to publicly demonstrate their might.

And that was the perfect timing for Pabel to do his job.

He clenched his bow.

It was a composite longbow enchanted with magic effective against subhumans. Not only that, he had also been issued a Cape of Shadow that allowed him to melt into the shadows and conceal himself more easily, Boots of Silence to erase the sound of his footsteps, a Vest of Resistance to boost his defense, and a Deflection Ring to protect him against ranged weapons. It was clear how much his country valued him.

“Be ready to go at any time, you guys,” he instructed his subordinates lurking in the darkness.

If their opponents were human, war was sometimes a noble affair with an exchange of messengers and declarations, but neither the officers at this fortress nor the people of the Sacred Kingdom felt like negotiating with subhumans that hailed from the hills. If anything, they might pretend as a ruse to buy time. Pabel and his troops intended to shoot as soon as they located the enemy commander.

“…Shouldn’t you head back to your own unit?”

“All right, I will. Take care, sir.”

“You too.”

Watching Orlando go, Pabel felt slightly anxious.

Some of the special abilities subhumans had were fatal for their victims.

Like the gaze of the gigabinocs.

These subhumans had eyes so large the proportions of their faces were bizarre. They possessed two types of dangerous gazes. One was Charm, which would lure its victim into approaching unconsciously, despite the danger. Yes, even from the top of the wall, anyone affected by Charm would attempt to reach the gigabinoc via the shortest route.

Normally, magic items were equipped to boost resistance against such unique

abilities, but Orlando hadn't been issued any, so with bad luck, one attack could be the end of him.

When Pabel closed his eyes to calm himself, the image of a woman appeared in the back of his mind.

One of the Nine Colors, she of White.

She makes me nervous in a different way. She's liable to cause trouble with her ignorance. And it'll be Pink cleaning up after her… Why does my daughter want to work with her? She could just meet a good man, fall in love, and settle down like a regular civilian, but instead— Agh, can't be doing this now!

He shook his head to clear it of the spiraling worries about his daughter.

He turned to look at the subhuman camp again, partially to switch his mind's gears.

It was unclear how many of them lurked beyond the hill, but there were many banners flapping in the wind. The sole tier-three caster at the fort had flown into the sky and confirmed they weren't fake banners.

There really were that many enemies out there. It didn't seem likely to end as a staring contest.

Pabel performed his usual ritual.

From his breast pocket he removed a wooden doll and he gave it a kiss.

His daughter had made it for him when she was six years old. It was a strange-looking doll, four limbs jutting out of a circle, but apparently, it was meant to be her daddy. He still remembered vividly how she had cried when he complimented her on her "neat monster"—and the kick his wife had given him.

It had been rubbed so often, it was wearing down, and the indentations that had been carved for the eyes and mouth were smoothing out. She had grown so much since that time, and he would have liked her to make him a new doll that resembled him better, but perhaps she wouldn't understand his feelings—it didn't seem like she would be working on a new one anytime soon.

Maybe it was because he hardly saw his wife or daughter due to his long hours on the job. He felt like a gulf was growing between him and his girl with

each passing day. She used to run and jump into his arms the moment he arrived home, but at some point, even when he got to go home, he didn't get a hug anymore.

She's outgrown her daddy, laughed his wife, but to Pabel, it was a serious matter.

If I could get a couple of months off, it would be great to go camping together like we used to.

When he shared his ranger knowledge, his daughter had looked at him with admiration and respect. That's what his plan was centered around, though he realized it probably wouldn't be so easy.

Pabel tucked the doll back into his pocket.

His daughter was aiming to be a paladin, so she wasn't at home. Even when he finally got to go visit, she was often away.

Yeah, it would have been better—well, at least a little, and I really mean a little, just a teensy little bit—if she had married a man near home.

Life as a paladin was the last thing his daughter was suited for. He'd been watching over her all her life, so he knew it was a mistake.

She chose that path because she looked up to her mother, who was once a paladin. But that didn't qualify her to be one, too.

Only a knight who could realize the justice they believed in could become a paladin.

While he never said so, mostly because he was scared of his wife, Pabel thought paladins were fanatics.

Does my girl understand that…? I don't really want her to…

"There're so many of them."

Hearing his aide, short of breath and murmuring as he gazed out at the enemy encampment, brought Pabel back to his senses.

"Yeah, there are. But don't be afraid. All you have to do is support me." Those words helped his aide—and the rest of his unit—relax ever so slightly.

Yes, that's fine. Nerves are a sharpshooter's worst enemy.

Just as he cracked his emotionless face—though that's not how he thought of it—into a faint smile, he noticed movement at the enemy position.

A single subhuman slowly came forward.

Despite the huge numbers of their force, this envoy didn't have a single escort. Either they didn't need one, they were vain, or they were a messenger of such little value that it didn't matter if they lived or died.

"Should we shoot?"

"Hold. But line up a shot. Then wait for my order." When he gave the instructions in a lowered voice, his subordinates fanned out briskly like a scattering of shadows.

Pabel stared, trying to figure out if it was the enemy general or a lowly messenger.

What kind of subhuman…is that even? I've never seen one like that before… What's with those clothes? Some kind of folk costume? And that mask?

Whoever it was, they definitely weren't a human. Pabel spotted a tail or something trailing behind them.

The most notable thing was the outfit. He felt like it was in the realm of possibility that this was some kind of traditional outfit, but he could tell even at a distance that it was incredibly well tailored—on par with the craftsmanship a human could achieve.

Subhumans with advanced cultures can only mean trouble for us here…

It wasn't just Pabel—all the soldiers on the wall observed the subhuman's every move with bated breath. While tension filled the air, the envoy had come within fifty yards of the wall.

"Stop where you are! This is the Sacred Kingdom territory! You subhumans aren't welcome here! Leave this instant!" That cry came from the chief of the fort, one of the Sacred Kingdom's only five generals. The man in dull, battered full plate armor shouted in a voice that resonated in the pit of Pabel's stomach.

The reason only a single staffer was near him was probably so that in the

event of an attack, they wouldn't risk losing all their military planners. Instead, several soldiers with tower shields were standing by behind him to jump out if anything happened.

In contrast, the subhuman's voice was pleasant and easy on the ears. It had a deep timbre that slipped right into a person's heart, easily reaching deep within Pabel despite the distance.

"I'm well aware of that. Now then, who might you be?"

"I…I'm the general charged with the protection of this fort! Who in blazes are you?!"

You're under no obligation to give out that information! Pabel frowned. But he knew this general wasn't talented at finessing things, so there wasn't much to be done about it.

"I see, I see. Well it would be rude not to answer when I've been asked my name. Pleased to meet you, subjects of the Sacred Kingdom. My name is Jaldabaoth."

"Really?!" The one who screamed was the staffer next to the general. "The Great Demon Jaldabaoth? The one who led demons on a rampage in Re-Estize's capital?"

"Ohhh, I'm honored that you've heard of me. Yes, I'm the one who held that much-applauded party in the Re-Estize Kingdom. But 'Great Demon Jaldabaoth'? That's a rather sad title… How about you call me Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth?"

Pabel rolled the words *Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth* around on his tongue.

It was an awfully arrogant thing to call yourself, but given all the subhumans standing ready behind the demon and the stories of the disturbance in the royal capital, he felt like perhaps it was appropriate.

"Do you mean to assault my country like you did Re-Estize?"

"No, not quite. In Re-Estize, I met a terribly powerful warrior…" Jaldabaoth shrugged his shoulders helplessly. The motion was so elegant, Pabel almost felt like he was on par with a human noble. "But, well, I'll take the liberty of

omitting those details.”

“So why have you come?! Why have you led these subhumans here?!”

“I came because I want to turn this country into hell. I’d like to make this place a fun sort of nation where shrieks, curses, and wails echo without end. But when millions of humans are involved, I can’t take the time to toy with each of you individually. That’s why I brought the others. They will lower you human weaklings into the swamp of despair up to your necks, drawing out sobs of grief and supplication on my behalf.” He sounded so amused.

This was the moment Pabel learned the meaning of evil. When the ordained clergy shouted about “the evil subhumans,” it was mere propaganda meant to raise morale. Absolute nonsense. Broadly speaking, the usual subhuman attacks were about the utterly natural business of obtaining feeding grounds.

A primal fear assailed Pabel, making his skin crawl. But at the same time, he was fiercely determined.

This country was the home of his wife and daughter. How could he let this demon enter the Sacred Kingdom?

The hand gripping his bow tensed.

If Jaldabaoth or whatever his name intended to threaten them, he’d made a big mistake. Humans weren’t cowardly. This demon would learn how foolish it was to underestimate them once they mounted a formidable counterattack.

The soldiers on this wall would defend the Sacred Kingdom with iron resolve. Even if it appeared to have rusted in recent years, their devotion to their homeland remained strong.

“You think we would allow that?! Hear me clearly, foolish Jaldabaoth!” the general roared.

Yes, he really roared.

“This is the Sacred Kingdom’s first line of defense! And its last! We won’t let you trample the peace of our people!”

Primed by his shouts, the nearby soldiers raised a battle cry. “Rrrraaaaagh!” That was the moment their morale blazed brightest. If Pabel hadn’t been

concealed, he would have screamed with them. His subordinates, shivering slightly, must have felt the same.

But a mocking applause dampened their mood. After clapping, the demon spoke. “So you’re the dogs guarding the cradle? How delightful. It’s very important to have something to protect. I think I’ve taken a liking to you fellows. Any prisoners we take here will be given my finest welcome.” He laughed as he spoke, sounding truly pleased.

Jaldabaoth wasn’t talking very loud. So from where Pabel was standing, he shouldn’t really have been able to make out every word. But strangely, he could hear them all quite clearly. It sounded like the demon stood right behind them.

Nothing to worry about. It’s probably magic.

There were spells and enchanted items that could magnify voices. There was a good chance the demon was using something like that. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was creeping up on him.

“I won’t accept surrender. Please do your best to entertain me. Now then, let’s begin.”

Pabel gave his men the order to shoot to kill.

He didn’t wait for a signal from the general. He was authorized to act on his own discretion. When aiming for the enemy leader, that’s how it had to be. If they had to wait for permission from a superior, they would miss their chance.

Pabel stood.

His subordinates followed.

They only had a moment to aim. To Pabel, fifty yards was point-blank range. He drew his bowstring with the intent to kill without hesitation—and felt his eyes meet Jaldabaoth’s behind his mask.

I’m not giving you time to flee or defend. You’ll regret being arrogant enough to come to the front line alone!

“Loose!”

At the sound of Pabel’s voice, fifty-one arrows flew.

Enchanted missiles launched from enchanted bows.

Fire arrows trailed red; ice arrows, blue; lightning arrows, yellow; acid arrows, green, Pabel's holy arrows, white—all racing across the void.

Having been loosed from strings drawn to their limits, they flew in straight paths, none of them arcing. All stuck their target, Jaldabaoth, without fail.

Pabel's shot was particularly powerful. Boosted with arts and skills, its destructive energy matched that of an overhead blow delivered by a heavy warrior. Even a man in full plate armor should have gone sprawling.

But Jaldabaoth endured all fifty-one arrows without so much as flinching.

Then something happened that made Pabel doubt his eyes.

The arrows that should have pierced his body all fell to the ground.

What?! Some defensive ability against projectiles?!

As he prepped his second arrow, he frantically tried to figure out how Jaldabaoth managed to defeat the attack.

Some monsters had abilities that made them immune from certain attacks. For example, lycanthropes could hardly be hurt at all unless the weapon was made of silver.

So perhaps Jaldabaoth had a similar ability. In that case, what sort of attack would pierce his defenses?

The arrow Pabel had just shot was made of iron and imbued with holy energy, which was effective against evil monsters. A demon should never have been able to fully protect itself from that, but the irrefutable truth was that he had nullified it. Finding the path to victory now depended on trying different sorts of arrows to gather information and rip off the veil to uncover Jaldabaoth's weakness.

The next arrow Pabel nocked was silver. It was also blessed with holy power.

"Very good. Allow me to make my first move as well. It's not a very exciting present, but I'd be happy if you'd accept. Tier-ten magic: Meteorfall."

Pabel sensed something coming from overhead at a speed that was

impossible to evade. When he looked up, he saw a ball of light.

A giant red-hot boulder—but even bigger.

As the light enveloped his entire field of vision, he saw, for a moment in the blinding brilliance, his wife and daughter.

He knew it was a hallucination. His daughter was old enough to choose her path in life, but he saw her small, held tightly in his young wife's arms.

No, if I don't say she's still young even now, she'll ki—

•

The meteor that fell on the wall through the tear in the sky caused a massive explosion. The thunderous sound was enough to echo in the pit of every single person's stomach. The huge blast swept everything away and shattered the fortifications.

As the dirt that had been blown in the air fell back to the ground, the obscuring cloud gradually settled.

Once the dust cleared, the first notable sigh was of the crumbled wall—it couldn't even be called ruins.

As for the fate of the soldiers, one look at the gouged-out wall was enough to know.

There was no way for mere humans to live after being subjected to such a cataclysm.

Of course, Demiurge knew better than that. There were humans who could survive. The fools who had set foot in the sacred land created by the Supreme Beings, the Great Tomb of Nazarick, had been such people. But he had done his due diligence and made sure no humans like that were here.

"Now then, I think that's more than enough."

Demiurge brushed his suit off. He hadn't gotten very dusty, but perhaps a few motes kicked up in the impact had floated his way. And maybe he smelled a bit earthy. No, even if he didn't feel that way, he probably still would have made sure his clothes were clean. This suit was a precious gift from his Creator.

Naturally, Demiurge had plenty of other outfits, but that didn't make it acceptable to neglect taking care of this one.

The thought of his great Creator made him smile with joy beneath his mask; then he turned to face the humans in their shameful state.

If he launched a follow-up attack now, his enemy's confusion would only deepen, and if he then sent the subhumans in, a complete collapse of the defenses would be a simple matter. But that wasn't why he had used magic just now.

Demiurge had an extremely limited repertoire of spells. On tier ten, there was only one other he could use. His true value lay in skills; he had cast the spell to save energy, but the scene before him was already quite pitiful.

No one attempted to counter—they were desperate to gather information and reorganize.

I didn't even kill their commander… And this disarray doesn't seem to be caused by them finding it strange that I didn't try to cripple their chain of command… Are they all right over there?

Demiurge turned his back to the humans and started strolling back toward the camp his slaves were building.

He wasn't even on guard against an attack from behind him.

He already had the information he needed; that was why he could be so relaxed.

Demiurge was strong.

Among the floor guardians, he may have been near the bottom, but he was confident he would win in a fight—because he understood that fighting should only start after victory was assured. Unless he was ordered otherwise, he knew better than to fight if he wasn't absolutely sure he would win.

There was only one person Demiurge couldn't win against—in other words, he wouldn't be able to prepare a scenario where he could definitely come out on top. That being was the ultimate, the apex, the one who held everything in the palm of his hand, he who possessed a greater intellect than Demiurge, who

could conspire in unimaginably crafty ways, and whose foresight seemed to stretch into eternity.

The highest ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Yes, the only one he couldn't best was the Supreme Being to whom he had devoted himself.

Creating a huge number of undead is part of his scheme. Once that plan is in place, Lord Ainz will be untouchable. What a terrifying being. And everyone else must surely understand the joy of being ruled by one such as—

The thud was the first unexpected thing that had happened so far, and Demiurge turned around to see what had caused it.

A man was slowly rising to his feet. He must have jumped off the wall.

"He's dead! The man I wanted to defeat is gone!" the man said, drawing a sword with two hands.

Demiurge searched the data he'd collected based on the man's appearance. The answer came up instantly:

Threat Level: E—*a worm*.

Chance of Miscalculation: E—*none*.

Importance: E—*guinea pig*.

In other words, he was trash. But since he was one of the powerful Nine Colors—not that all of them were strong—Demiurge thought he would be useful as experiment material if taken prisoner.

"Rrrraaaghhh!"

The man charged at him with a battle cry.

How slow. Far too slow. If this is all the speed you can muster, shouldn't you use your head a bit more? Maybe try casting Silence and approach quietly to close the distance a bit…

The man came running—at a leisurely pace—across a distance Demiurge's colleagues would have closed in the blink of an eye.

According to the data he had gathered, this dim-witted man had a skill that

enabled him to land a blow many times stronger than his usual attack whenever he broke a weapon. That was why he held one sword in his hands and had more on his hip.

How should I kill him? Since I'll be taking him back, it would be better to do it neatly— Oh, he's finally here?

After taking care to stay back far enough to avoid getting spattered even if the man's blood spurted, Demiurge issued an order. **"Slit your throat with that sword."**

There was a thudding noise.

The eyes of the man who had sliced his own neck open were filled with confusion. When the light faded from his eyes, leaving only cloudy glass marbles—that was when he collapsed with a thud.

Screams of grief could be heard from atop the wall.

Demiurge approached the man, hooked a pointer finger on the back of his collar to lift him up, turned on his heel, and went back to his camp.

Upon his return, the representatives from each race—though none of them held any authority—gathered before him.

Demiurge had mentally divided the subhumans into two categories.

On one side were the bloodthirsty types who fed on humans. They willingly submitted to power and followed him out of positive emotions. On the other side were those who followed him out of negative emotions such as fear.

The ones he chose were from the latter group.

"You assembled rather slowly."

And then he grabbed the shoulder of a random subhuman from the group. It was a zerun. He tore its shoulder skin right off. Though Demiurge was one of the least powerful floor guardians, he was still capable of this sort of feat.

With an incoherent shriek, the subhuman who had lost its skin (and a chunk of flesh) fell to the ground in agony.

"All right, please begin your attack. Don't cause too much damage. The real

fight begins on the other side of the wall.” Demiurge’s demeanor suddenly changed, and now he spoke to them kindly.

The kindness he showed to members of Nazarick was genuine. He was tenderhearted when dealing with his friends. But the kindness he showed outsiders was the sort of care that a useful tool would receive.

Having received their orders, the subhumans rushed back to their groups. The one who had fallen was no exception.

They had been told that a happy outcome awaited only those who obeyed Demiurge’s orders and got excellent results. And they’d also been told that those who achieved the opposite would find an appropriate future awaiting them.

With a gentle smile, Demiurge watched them set off.

“All right. I suppose it’s time to move on to the next order of business. Demons.”

He activated one of his skills and summoned a large number of disposable demons. To him, they were an extremely weak variety, but summoning stronger ones would mean not being able to field as many. In this case, the most important thing was that the Sacred Kingdom soldiers would spread the word that they were being attacked by demons. For that, he needed numbers.

“Listen up. You’re to support the subhumans. And drive the humans off in a clever way. Don’t do anything stupid like killing every last one and leaving none to return home.”

The low-level demons nodded and flew into the air.

Though summoned monsters shared the knowledge of the summoner to some extent, it was never terribly detailed. Only assuming they could perform basic tasks like differentiating between friend and foe was the best bet. For that reason, it was important to give orders at the time of summoning.

All right…I hope the chips fall where I want.

Demiurge had employed his intellect to plot out various scenarios, calculate dozens of potential developments, and prepare contingency plans that would

achieve his aim. He had anticipated things might go slightly awry. But sometimes a real idiot would show up and do something utterly unexpected.

Someone as wise as Lord Ainz can probably predict even a fool's moves, but… I'm not quite there yet. I do hope Lord Ainz enjoys this…

The thought made his pulse quicken. What would he do if this show he had spent so much time planning for the amusement of his supreme master failed to please?

People of the Sacred Kingdom, I beg you from the bottom of my heart: Entertain Lord Ainz—with your pathetic lives. That said, I wonder how I can tweak this plan in order to get the best results.

Like a student waiting for feedback from a professor he admired, Demiurge's breast blazed with anticipation and excitement as he smiled.

I study Lord Ainz's actions to improve and devote myself even more fully to him. What joy!

To Demiurge, who was born to serve the Supreme Beings, there was nothing more fulfilling than doing his best for his master.

"Ahhh, I can't wait…"

3

News quickly spread that an allied subhuman army—a huge one—had defeated the largest, sturdiest, most well-garrisoned central fortress. Word that they had gotten past the wall raced throughout the entire Sacred Kingdom.

The commander of the subhuman alliance was Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth.

He was the demon who had gone on a rampage in Re-Estize, and now he had ripped through the Sacred Kingdom's defenses with his devastating magic like it was so much as paper.

The subhuman alliance was made up of sixteen races, and their total head count was estimated to be over a hundred thousand. Their great war host had

run into difficulties breaking down the wall and destroying the fort, so its advance had stagnated.

Upon hearing that, the highest authority in the Sacred Kingdom, the Holy Lady, invoked the National Mobilization Order.

Since the Sacred Kingdom extended north and south sandwiching a bay, when it mobilized an army, it necessarily raised two: the northern army and the southern army.

The armies gathered at their respective strategic hubs—the cities of Karinsha in the north and Debonay in the south. Meanwhile, they observed the enemy's actions for several days.

Then the scouts observing the wall reported something that made the situation more tense.

The subhuman alliance army is advancing west in full force.

Estimating arrival at northern fortress city Karinsha in a few days.

"I see. So this will end up being the battlefield." It was the Holy Lady, Calca Bessarez, who spoke.

She was quite a few steps down the line of succession—and it was usually males who took the throne—so she never should have become the supreme holy ruler, but she received the crown for two reasons.

One was her physical beauty. Her blooming features, sometimes praised as the Roebel's greatest treasure, combined formidably with both her charm and her determination. She also had a reputation for her long hair often likened to shimmering golden thread. It practically looked like an angel's halo graced her head, and not a few people who caught sight of her gentle smile spoke of her as a saint.

The other reason was her high aptitude as a faith magic caster. After being recognized as a prodigy who acquired tier-four spells by the age of fifteen, she became ruler with the backing of the previous holy king and the shrines.

And in the ten years since, though some complained she was too soft, she had reigned over the kingdom without making any mistakes serious enough to be

called mistakes.

But her rule was not, in fact, uncontested. Coals were smoldering.

“I understand your sorrow, Your Holy Majesty. But the people who live in Karinsha knew what was at stake. Even back…er, ahem! This city has been the main battleground before, once in a previous conflict. It boasts a stronger wall than anywhere else.”

The one comforting her was a woman with brown hair.

Though she had the same regular features, the steely glint in her sharp eyes imbued her with a chilly atmosphere. She wore silver full plate armor and a white surcoat. Both were historic items passed down from the commander of the paladins. And there wasn’t a single person in the Sacred Kingdom who didn’t know the name of the sword at her hip.

It was one of the famous Four Holy Swords, Sacred Sword Safarlissia. Those four blades of legend were counterparts to the Four Swords of Darkness said to have been possessed by one of the Thirteen Heroes, the Dark Knight: Evil Sword Humuris; Demonic Sword Killineiram; Canker Sword Coroquedavarre; and Death Sword Sufiz. Incidentally, the other Holy Swords were Justice Sword, Pure Sword, and Life Sword.

Anyone gifted with such a weapon would have found it tempting to rely on its strength and slack on the fundamentals. For that reason, this woman didn’t carry this sword around very often. She wore it now because she knew she would have to face the impending fight with indomitable resolve if there was to be any hope of victory.

Her name was Remedios Custodio.

She was Calca’s close friend, and as the commander of the paladins, said to be strongest in all their history, she provided military backing for the Holy Lady’s authority. She was also White of the Nine Colors.

“Right, right. Plus, we had all the noncombatants evacuate, so they won’t be in danger. The only issue after the war is who will pay for it all!”

The source of an unsavory “oh-ho-ho-ho” was a different person.

The slant of her eyes and the shape of the corners of her mouth were a bit different, but she bore a strong resemblance to Remedios. Still, those subtle distinctions resulted in a dramatic change in the impression she made. She seemed like she had a hidden agenda—to put it unkindly, like she had some scheme up her sleeve.

This was Remedios's sister, two years younger than her, Kelart Custodio.

She was a high cleric and head of the clergy.

Her magical ability allowed her to use up to tier-four faith spells—or rather, that was her cover story.

The public had no idea of her true ability; those close to her knew she could cast tier five as well.

Incidentally, she was not one of the Nine Colors. Though she was subordinate to both the influence of the shrines and the Holy Lady, due to various considerations for the balance of power, the country thought it politically wise to avoid bestowing a color on her.

Together, these two were known as the genius Custodio sisters, the right and left hand of the Holy Lady.

Since many nobles suspected that Calca, despite being a woman, had ascended to the throne thanks to the Custodio sisters working behind the scenes, unfavorable remarks were often aimed at all three of them.

They had cleared plenty of bad rumors, but there was one—that since they were all unmarried and had never even gone around with men, they must have been in some inappropriate relationship together—they couldn't get rid of no matter how many times they denied it, which pained Calca.

"Hearing that makes my head hurt. It's really just a lot of trouble if we win and don't stand to gain anything."

"But there are reports that the subhumans are well outfitted this time. Couldn't we sell their gear or something?"

"Exaaactly…is what I'd like to say, but I can't agree, honored sister. You say we could sell the gear, but to whom? You aren't thinking this through. We'd

have to sell them to another country, and no one will want to pay premium prices for subhuman gear. Plus, we should avoid furnishing the armories of our neighbors until we finish rebuilding the battered section of wall. I especially don't want the Nation of Darkness flooding in."

"Oh? You're against the Nation of Darkness? I never heard anything about that at court…"

"None of the priests like them. Do you feel differently, Your Holy Majesty?"

Calca thought for a moment. As a person of the cloth, as the holy ruler, she hated it. But as the head of a state…

"A sovereign's job is to care for subjects. And to give them peace. If their king is capable of that, then why should I mind?"

The sisters exchanged glances in front of her.

"Care for people? A thought like that would never enter an undead's mind."

"I agree with my sister. I hardly think an undead could have compassion for the people the way you do, Your Holy Majesty."

"You're both so harsh. You mustn't bad-mouth someone you've never even met."

The two of them, at a loss, wore nearly identical expressions. *Yep, they're sisters*, Calca thought, and she suppressed the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth to speak in a more solemn tone.

"What do the staff officers have to say? Tell me about our plan to counter Jaldabaoth, Kelart."

The Holy Lady had been visiting the base to raise the soldiers' morale, so she missed the war planning meeting. The Sacred Kingdom's soldiers had better training than those of other countries, but they were still a levy army. Maintaining morale was crucial.

"Yes, Your Holy Majesty. There's a debate about the various scenarios we can envision—if the subhumans surrounded the city, if they pass us by, if they veer south, if they split their forces into two or three groups to go after multiple objectives, and so on."

This was the sort of moment where Calca recognized that although the sisters resembled each other, they were quite different. If she had asked the elder of the two, she would only have been able to get a frustratingly meandering report that never got to the point.

“I see… And which scenario do they believe to be most likely?”

“Given the way the subhumans tend to conduct raids and what has happened so far, they feel that an encirclement is most likely. But there’s one problem this time.”

“Yes, there is, isn’t there?”

“What’s that?”

Remedios had been escorting Calca, so she hadn’t attended the planning meeting, either. But the fact that the Holy Lady understood immediately and she didn’t stemmed from different issues.

“…Honored sister. The demon who rampaged in the capital—Jaldabaoth. I don’t know what kind of intellect he possesses, but demons tend to be quite crafty. He may have some stratagem we’re not prepared for.”

“Oh… That makes it tough for the staff officers who have to plan the operation, then, huh?”

Calca had a thing or two she would have liked to say to the commander of the paladins, but she held her tongue.

“…This is a real pickle we’re in. So what will we do if the subhumans surround us? We have plenty of provisions, but what I’m scared of is what happens if morale falls among the defenders. The planners took that into account, right?”

“Yes, Your Holy Majesty. Normally we would only have to hold out until reinforcements from the south arrived, but there are reports that Jaldabaoth uses mysterious powers and is capable of breaching our wall with a single attack. That’s making everyone rather nervous…”

All three of them furrowed their brows.

Considering what had happened at the border wall, anyone’s face would go cloudy. But Calca knew better. Remedios was only imitating her and Kelart.

Remedios didn't use her head. And she was stubborn. If it were only that, they would merely be personality flaws, but those qualities were also what made her capable of dispensing absolute justice.

Thinking about what justice actually is complicates things significantly. For instance, say there are two children. One is human; one is subhuman. Since they are both pure and innocent, they become friends, but adults discover the subhuman and capture the child. The human child begs them to have mercy. But if they let the subhuman go, the child could grow up and one day return to take revenge on them. Would killing the subhuman child be just or not? There is no easy answer to the question.

Calca would hesitate to take a life in such a situation.

But Remedios would kill without a second thought. She had the unwavering belief that it was the right thing to do. Anything that could give the people of her country joy was something she agreed with.

When she assumed the throne, Calca told her two friends that she would "bring joy to the weak and make this a country where no one cries," and in response, Remedios swore to "uphold justice" as her ardent supporter.

She had taken that vow further than anyone, and the fire in her eyes was similar to fanaticism.

If that was all there was to the woman named Remedios, she would have been a dangerous individual. However, Calca had never felt the need to steer clear of her. It made sense to be fond of goodness that loved people, loved peace, hated evil, and wanted to help the helpless.

And due to that personality, she had no hidden motives. Since she never used her head all that much, it was clear that everything she said and did came from the heart.

Organizations, especially those that had existed for many years, often grew inflexible over time as obligation and ceremony mounted. And in the same way, blood grew cloudy.

It was only natural that siblings should quarrel over ascension to the sole seat that rested at the pinnacle of authority. And the race continued out of

suspicion, envy, fear—right up until a life was taken.

Calca had been freed from that fate early on—because she had been able to acquire the most powerful magic of any holy king in history. Once people obtained something to be proud of, they usually rested easier. Thus, Calca had been prepared to give up on becoming holy king. Her siblings, however, were not.

The only blood relative she could trust now was an older brother, Caspond.

Because she'd lived in such a simple way, Remedios was an oasis for Calca's heart.

"Hmm. That's unbelievable power. It reminds me of the evil spirits that show up in stories."

"Honored sister. Not even the evil spirits were that powerful. It's possible that Jaldabaoth is superior to them!"

"…Well, that's no good. How can we beat him?"

"What are you worried for, Your Holy Majesty? I hear that in the Re-Estize Kingdom, an adamantite adventurer drove him off. Don't you think we should be able to handle him?"

"…Hmm. Yes, if an adventurer on par with us was able to, then… The question is whether Jaldabaoth can use that wall-crumbling power multiple times in quick succession."

"The staff officers feel that since he only used it once when he struck the wall, he must not be able to use it again immediately."

"That makes sense. If he could cast it often, that was an opportune time to do so. If he didn't, that means he can probably only use it once."

Calca and Remedios agreed. There was little apparent reason for him not to continue blasting the wall apart if he was capable of it.

Calca was of the same mind. She lightly touched the crown on her head; it was a magic item, the focal device of the hereditary great ritual spell of the Sacred Kingdom, Last Holy War.

"Well, high-ranking adventurers familiar with hunting down monsters have

obeyed the National Mobilization Order and joined the military. I'm sure if we bring all our power to bear, Jaldabaoth wouldn't be impossible to defeat. After all, we have the precedent of him being driven off at least once."

The Adventurers Guild had vehemently protested the drafting of adventurers as soldiers, but Calca refused to make exceptions to the order. Of course she didn't. It would be the height of folly to divide their strength during a national emergency. And the Adventurers Guild in the Sacred Kingdom didn't have the influence it did in the neighboring kingdom. Forcing it to obey was a simple matter.

"Right. But not getting the details about what happened with him in the kingdom was a screwup."

"My apologies."

"Oh no, Kelart. I don't blame you. I should have prioritized gathering information from abroad."

"No, Your Holy Majesty. It's actually Kelart's bad."

"Honored sister…"

"Hey! It's definitely not my fault! I was busy guarding Her Holy Majesty Calca and exterminating monsters! I did *my* job! I do what I'm best at!" *Heh-heh.* Remedios puffed her chest out.

She was right. What she said was correct, but there was something wrong with it.

"…Could the people vanishing from their villages be related to Jaldabaoth somehow?"

"Maybe…"

It had happened a while ago; all of a sudden the population of several villages simply disappeared. They weren't able to find any clues to lead them to a perpetrator, but maybe Jaldabaoth was the one behind the incident.

"Then before we kill him, should we interrogate him about that? But if that's the case…dang. If only the Kingdom had slain him when they had the chance. Gazef Stronoff didn't fight him?"

Kelart shot a quizzical look at Calca.

It must have meant, *You haven't told her yet?* So Calca replied perfectly with a tired smile.

In words, it probably would have been something like, *Of course I did. I told her how Jaldabaoth attacked the capital, how he was repelled by the adventurer, and how other demons showed up, and how the captain of the Royal Select drove them off… It either went in one ear and out the other or was pushed out by newer information…*

"…I feel bad for your deputy commanders, honored sister."

"Huh? What do they have to do with anything?"

Kelart massaged her temples with her fingers instead of answering.

Since Remedios didn't use her brain, she needed people to clean up after her—her two deputies.

Kelart understood their pain all too well. But because Remedios was so naive—or to be blunt, rather stupid—she was a healing presence for a tired heart, so things more or less balanced out.

"…*Sigh.* I don't know all the details, but apparently, he was fighting other demons, ones with scales."

"Ah. None of this would have happened if he could have just defeated him for us. I can't imagine that adamantite adventurer is stronger than Gazef."

"I don't know, but I wouldn't rule it out."

Remedios made a sour face.

She must have been displeased at the idea that someone she considered strong could be inferior to a stranger.

"Well, yeah, he can only wield a sword. If he had attacks for countering demons like I do, it might be a different story."

In terms of pure combat ability, paladins were a notch below warriors, but against evil beings, they performed extremely well. What Remedios said was right, but Kelart emitted a little sigh.

Just then, Calca thought she heard the faint ringing of a bell.

Remedios leaped into action. She was always the one to move first in these situations.

She pushed the window open.

An early autumn breeze rushed in, forcing out the air inside that had been somewhat warmed by the trio's body heat.

Carried on that bracing gust was indeed the sound of a bell—proof that the earlier noise hadn't been her ears playing tricks on her. How much she would have preferred it to have been a figment of her imagination…

At the same time, a set of footsteps could be heard as several people pounded down the hallway.

"Holy Lady Calca, get behind me."

Remedios stepped forward, drawing Sacred Sword Safarlissia, and took up a position between Calca and the door.

The door banged open.

"Your Holy Majesty!"

She recognized the man who was first through the door—the chief of staff.

"What is it? What a racket you're kicking up!"

Scolded by Remedios, the man answered as he tried to catch his breath. "There was no time to leisurely stroll over! Your Holy Majesty! It's Jaldabaoth! He's inside the city! And multiple demons are tearing through the streets! The subhumans are also on the move—they're probably advancing on us!"

"What?!"

"The subhuman army was spotted on the outskirts of town. I have no idea how they slipped past the patrols, but we had the wrong info! I have no doubt they'll mount an attack in no time!"

It was so much news at once Calca couldn't take it all in, but that hesitation only lasted a moment. With the face of a queen, she gave orders. "This is not what we anticipated, but the fight against Jaldabaoth starts now! Prepare to

battle the subhumans while we keep Jaldabaoth busy! Pass on my orders to the adventurers, too!”

As she listened to her subordinates acknowledge, her doubts returned: *Are we sure we’re not underestimating him?*

She certainly didn’t mean to underestimate a demon who had broken their nation’s great wall. But was it a mistake to even think they could win? Would it be better to flee until they gathered more intelligence?

No, thought Calca, crushing the apprehension that had sprouted inside her.

If they didn’t fight now, then when? Intelligence was important certainly, but there was no better chance to bring their powers into play. As the war went on and resources dwindled, it would only become more difficult for the Scared Kingdom to muster its full strength.

And fleeing while collecting intelligence would mean allowing the people and land of the kingdom to be ravaged.

There was no telling how many of her subjects would be harmed if that happened.

“…Bring joy to the weak and make this a country where no one cries, right?”

“Yes, Holy Lady Calca!”

Remedios met her private comment with a resounding reply.

Boy, I was naive when I was younger. I could hardly have set more impossible goals for myself…

“Hmph! He’s all full of himself because they got past the big wall! He even waltzed right into our midst completely alone!” Remedios barked in anticipation.

But is that true? Well, it’s what I’ll have to believe. But she couldn’t get the feeling that they were making a serious mistake out of her head.

“…Still, don’t let your guard down. You should approach him with the understanding that he’s more than powerful enough to do terrifying things on his own.”

“Of course, Holy Lady Calca. Please consider me fully guarded! I’ll present you with his head after I cut it off with the Sacred Sword Safarlissia!”

It’s no good. Getting her to calm down is beyond my power. Despite that thought, Calca wasn’t worried. Remedios was like a completely different person in combat.

“Ahhh, a severed head doesn’t do much for me, but I’m very glad to have your loyalty. Chief of staff, please work according to the plan to defeat him and…buy us time?”

“Of course. I’ve already sent out a vanguard.”

Calca felt a dull pain in her heart. The order just now essentially meant *Send them to die*. She was telling him, *Take soldiers who have no chance of winning and throw them at Jaldabaoth to slow him down.*

A ruler’s job was to abandon a minority to save the majority.

She had no right to complain. Soldiers would die as a result of her order, so to honor them, she had to play her role to perfection.

She had to act the part of the supreme ruler, Holy Lady adored by all.

“All right, everyone! Let’s go!”

The moment she clapped her hands, everyone leaped into motion.

4

Clutching her holy sword, Remedios cut down a demon; one of her deputies had told her what they were called, but she couldn’t remember. Imbued with holy energy, the sword delivered terrible damage to evil beings—an effect worthy of its name.

The rampaging demon tumbled to the ground emitting something like steam from its wounds and disappeared.

After only a few seconds, there was no trace that a demon had been there at

all. But the victims of its violence remained.

“What have they done?!” Remedios exclaimed upon seeing the soldiers—not the vanguard but ones who had been patrolling the city—strewn upon the ground.

One’s leather armor was split, and the hand pressed desperately against his abdomen was stained bright red; pink intestines peeked out from beneath it. His face had gone past pale to bone white.

Remedios didn’t have any medical training, but she knew from experience: There was no time to take him to a surgeon. He needed immediate magical healing.

The reason this man wasn’t dead was neither a coincidence nor due to superior skills. It had to be exactly what the demon intended to do. Not that Remedios had any idea why.

Still, that didn’t mean not saving these soldiers—abandoning them—was an option. Who could forsake those brave troops who were out there fighting for their country to buy their comrades time? Above all, she was a holy knight of justice.

“Treat him!”

She was working with a team of elite paladins, but they also had a few priests with them. The order was directed at the latter.

A deputy was in her ear whispering immediately. “I think it might be better to take him to a surgeon in the rear. If the priests use their powers now, they might run out of mana in the fight against Jaldabaoth. That might be why the demo—”

“You talk too much! My order stands! Heal him to the point that he can move on his own! And—” She looked at her deputy. “I can’t hear you mumbling through your helmet! Speak clearly!”

“Uh, er, never mind…”

“Good!”

Healing magic patched the soldiers up instantly. Of course, they weren’t

completely mended. It was tier-one magic—it couldn't bring half-dead soldiers back to full health. But it helped them enough so they could move. If they were no longer on the brink of death, there wasn't any more magic to spare for them. Remedios remembered how insistent her little sister had been about the judicious use of resources.

"Brave soldiers, listen to me. Your wounds should have been healed the minimum amount necessary. Fall back and have a surgeon take a good look at you."

The pain of walking would surely bring tears to their eyes. But she didn't have time to listen to whining like that. She had to reach Jaldabaoth within the allotted time.

The troops must have grasped the meaning in her gaze, because they agreed with no objections.

"Good! Then farewell!"

Remedios sprinted off in the lead. Her metal armor was lighter and easier to move in than it looked. That plus her muscular strength meant she could run faster than anyone else, but her sister, Calca, and her deputies had told her over and over not to go charging into a fight on her own, so she slowed her pace to match the others—suppressing the feeling that they had to hurry to make up for lost time.

Before too long, they arrived at their destination, a certain corner of the city.

The streets looked utterly normal, but they had already been evacuated, so there wasn't a single soul to be seen.

"Commander! We turn right on this avenue and head straight down it. Then it's just one more right, and we'll come out onto the square where Jaldabaoth should be waiting. Shall we go ahead ourselves just to confirm?"

"No, we'll wait for Holy Lady Calca and my sister, as well as the adventurers. Once everyone is here, we'll do the final checks. Raise the flag!"

Following her order, one of her knights attached a flag to a building a short distance away. That was the signal to the other units that Remedios's elite squad of paladins had arrived.

There were about five hundred paladins who belonged to the order. Most of them could hold their own in a fight against monsters of difficulty level 20, but some were so tough they could take on 60s. The best twenty-five of those most elite paladins formed the core of Remedios's unit.

Incidentally, the other three hundred or so paladins she had brought to this city were headed toward the wall to prepare to meet the advancing subhuman army.

Normally, it might have been better to have all the groups work together and avoid the risk of being picked off one by one, but Jaldabaoth had that mysterious, wall-shattering, area-of-effect attack. To avoid giving him an easy target, they were operating separately. Along the same line of thought, the flag they had raised earlier was kept slightly away from the unit in case Jaldabaoth aimed for it.

"…Do you think he can use that power he broke the wall with more than once, Isandro?"

The Paladin Order had two deputy commanders.

One was a mediocre swordsman who was valued for other reasons: Gustav Montagnés. He was leading the knights headed for the city wall.

The other was next to Remedios: Pink of the Nine Colors, Isandro Sanchez.

"If he could use it as many times as he wanted, I don't understand why he wouldn't be using it right now. I believe it's safe to assume there is some sort of condition that has to be met or that it will be some time before he can use it again."

"Right. Maybe I was worrying too much, splitting us up like this."

"No, not at all. He could be conserving some vast power. We can't let our guard down."

"Ah, true. Got it."

Remedios ended the conversation. She really wasn't one for using her brain.

Politics, especially, gave her a headache. In particular, she didn't understand why the nobles frowned and complained about there being no precedent for a

woman being holy king.

Calca's title was the greatest proof of that discontent.

As a female holy king, people called her the Holy Lady. That's what was decided on when they refused to give primacy to a female title by calling her holy queen or changing the title to something else.

In that sense, Remedios found it simpler to just think about things in terms of strong and weak.

"Commander Custodio. The flags from the priest and the adventurer groups have also been raised."

"And Her Holy Majesty Calca?"

"Not yet."

"I see… But go ahead and start casting defensive spells that will last. Once Holy Lady Calca arrives, we'll make first contact with Jaldabaoth. We'll distract him as bait. Steel your resolve and be ready for his special attack."

Her troops responded with a brave cheer.

"He hasn't moved from the square?"

The initial unit had already been wiped out. If their target had moved, the adventurers scouting ahead should have notified them. If there was no report, it meant that Jaldabaoth hadn't gone anywhere.

"This demon is going to be sorry if he's underestimating us! He probably thinks if he kills us all here that he'll have no trouble conquering the whole kingdom."

"B-but Commander. He could be buying time. If Jaldabaoth pins us here, the subhumans will have an easier fight."

"…Aha. That could be it… This Jaldabaoth guy is pretty smart."

"He's a demon so I suppose he's devilishly intelligent."

"…Hmph. I'm gonna thrash this cocky demon and make him cry." Remedios vowed to the gods, and as if it had been waiting for that moment, the last flag rose.

“Deputy!”

“Yes, ma’am! We’re ready to go!”

“All right! Follow me!”

Remedios ran, determined to stick her sword through that ridiculous demon’s face.

She turned the corner, sprinted, and turned another corner.

Then, in the middle of the square dyed red with the blood of scattered corpses, she saw a strange figure. He wore a mask, and a tail curled out from his backside.

He looked just as the soldiers who had escaped said he did.

No bat wings or curved horns—the only thing that pointed him out as a grotesque was his tail. Seeing him like this gave the impression he was just a man with a mask on.

But…

“So you’re Jaldabaoth?!”

“I rolled out the red ca— Oh?”

As she stepped into the square, the pungent stench of innards and blood hit her nose, and a chunk of flesh squished beneath her foot. But she wasn’t aware of any of that. All she cared about was charging in and bringing down her sword.

When he dodged her attack so easily, she became even more uncomfortable and raised her blade again.

And he evaded once more.

Remedios knew that even if she spent hours and hours studying, she couldn’t get good results. That’s why she had put all her time into raising her fighting power. It was clear that she had some aptitude in that area. And that’s how she became known as the strongest warrior in the country.

Paladin Remedios Custodio’s instincts screamed at her.

It’s no accident that Jaldabaoth is dodging. He only appears relaxed because

he's that skilled. There are only a handful of humans capable of keeping up with the battle that is about to unfold. I need more magic support.

And at moments like these, Remedios's instincts were never wrong.

"Take cover! You guys need to find shelter! No—give us a wide berth! This demon is strong!"

As she said that, she took some distance like her subordinates did. Her troops shifted back a lot, but she didn't go quite that far—four yards at most, so she was within striking distance if she took a running start.

Jaldabaoth's shoulders slumped. "You're like a bull, huh? What? Did someone wave a red cloth?"

Ignoring the demon's comments, Remedios noticed the soldiers led by Kelart and Calca out of the corner of her eye.

They were rushing over, surprised that Remedios had already engaged.

The demon turned his entire body to face Calca, leaving his unprotected back open to Remedios. But she knew that he was waiting for her to attack him from behind, so she didn't move.

"You guys, he's strong! If you don't have the soldiers fall back, they'll die for no reason!"

The two listened to her shout and acted accordingly. Only Kelart and Calca approached.

Remedios maintained her distance from Jaldabaoth but circled around to stand in front of the other two.

"Remedios, please don't try too hard."

"Listen to her, honored sister. Isn't this the sort of adversary we should all take on together?"

Though registering their nagging behind her, Remedios never took her eyes off Jaldabaoth. He could use the power that broke the wall at any second. The instant he seemed like he was going to try it, she intended to attack.

But she didn't get any sense of that from him.

His leisurely air made her nervous.

I'm definitely—no matter what—going to make you crawl in the dirt!

"So you're Jaldabaoth, are you?"

The way he shrugged his shoulders in response to Calca's question offended Remedios even more. Every single thing he did annoyed her.

"That is correct… Your slave attacked without even waiting for my reply. What was she planning to do if she had been mistaken? Though I am impressed to find nonverbal barbarians in the Sacred Kingdom. Oh, just in case, let me confirm: You're the current holy king?"

"That's right."

"You don't need to introduce yourself to this villain, Holy Lady Calca!" Remedios thrust the point of her sword at Jaldabaoth. "If we know this is Jaldabaoth, all that's left is to kick his ass back to the demon world. No need to sully our tongues with conversa—"

"U-uh, Remedios, wasn't the plan to see what he had to say…?"

Remedios cocked her head in response to Calca's confusion. *Is that what we decided?*

It seemed that Kelart had cast a spell from the rear—a blaze of warmth spreading inside her brought forth a surprising amount of power. Her previous attacks had been dodged, but now she was confident she could hit him. That's when she realized: *Ohhh, listening to him was about buying time.*

"—But I'm generous, so we can talk a little bit. Is there anything you want to ask?"

Jaldabaoth had his hand pressed over his mask on the spot between his eyes. It was the same gesture she often saw from Kelart, Calca, and her deputies.

"…Please take all the time you need. You can prepare in desperation, but a power greater than you will trample and rob you of your lives. And those who look on will despair even more. What a delightful scene."

"I would never allow that to happen!"

“Sorry, Remedios. Could you be quiet for a second?” Calca spoke somewhat firmly, and Remedios closed her mouth. Her tone of voice changed only slightly, but Remedios knew from experience that it meant she was annoyed.

“Remedios, let’s back up a bit.”

“B-but if I back up any farther, I won’t be able to strike if he does something…”

“Oh, that’s all right. How about we say that I won’t attack until either our conversation is over or someone from your side attacks first?”

“Why would I take what a demon says at face val—?!”

“Remedios!”

“Fine.”

When she followed the order and fell back, Kelart whispered an explanation in her ear through her helmet. “Holy Lady Calca wants to get some information out of him. No matter what he says, control yourself.”

Remedios grunted her disapproval.

They were up against a demon, so they should consider anything he said a lie. Slaying him at once would be easier since it required less brain power. But upsetting her master’s plans wasn’t a very loyal thing to do. She had to sit tight and tolerate this.

“Now then, Evil Emperor Jaldabaoth. There’s something I’d like to ask you. What is your purpose in coming here? If you want to overrun this country, why aren’t you operating alongside the subhumans you had with you when you broke our wall? Could it be that—?”

“Yes, you can stop right there. I know what you’re going to say. It seems you’re operating under a misunderstanding. It’s not as if I came alone because I want to negotiate.”

From behind her, Remedios heard Calca murmur a disappointed “Oh, I see.”

“There are two reason I came alone. One is that you being crushed by me alone is more despair inducing than if you fell in battle against an army of subhumans. The second is to avoid making the mistake I made in the kingdom. I

never imagined a warrior with strength on par with me existed in those lands. So I came to investigate whether there was someone like that here or not."

"There might be!"

"I can say with certainty there is not. I gave you this much time. If such a person existed, they would surely be next to you, the most important person in this country. But I don't see anyone who matches the description. Not even among those sneaking around like rats."

"Hey! Are you saying I—we're not as strong as that warrior?!" Remedios shouted, unable to hold herself back; that was a comment she couldn't ignore. She had forgotten half of what Calca and her sister had told her, but she at least managed to keep herself from attacking.

"That's exactly what I was saying, but did you not understand for some reason? Is that all you want to know, Your Holy Majesty?"

"There was one other thing, but no matter—angel unit, forward!"

Calca's determined shout filled the square, and the angels hidden among the guards and priests forming the perimeter behind her all spread their wings and flew into the air.

Five flame archangels—armed with swords of flames and summoned with a tier-three spell. Twenty angel guardians summoned with a tier-two spell. And a single principality peace that Calca had been summoning with a tier-four spell the whole time on their way over.

Remedios didn't remember what sort of powers the angels had, but she knew that the principality peace that Calca summoned could cast low-level faith magic and had skills that allowed the angel to smite evil, grant some protection from enemy attacks, purify ailments, and more. She had seen her summon it any number of times.

Soaking in the crackling energy around her, Remedios realized she didn't need to hold back any longer and charged. Normally the priests would launch attack spells to support her, but there weren't any this time; perhaps they were saving their mana to summon angels.

Remedios used a skill from one of her classes, evil slayer, that boosted the

holy energy in her Holy Sword.

Suddenly, five adventurers appeared behind Jaldabaoth. They must have been using a spell to go invisible and close the distance. Remedios had no idea why they abruptly showed themselves—because while she was aware that Invisibility existed, she had no idea what kind of spell it was or why the effects might cut off.

Jaldabaoth showed no signs of intercepting the suddenly visible adventurers. No, he didn't even appear to notice them.

Was the threat she had sensed from him an error? Or was this a phantom or a double instead of the real thing?

No—she rejected the latter thought. That couldn't be. Her instinct, her nose for evil, told her that Jaldabaoth was here.

The adventurers panicked and attacked. Just as their weapons should have connected, strange wings sprouted from Jaldabaoth's back, skewering the adventurers behind him like knives.

Their chests penetrated, blood must have flooded their lungs.

Coughing up bloody foam, a single adventurer mustered the last of his vitality to bring his weapon down again.

But even though the hit landed cleanly on Jaldabaoth, it didn't seem to hurt him in the slightest.

The fact that they were here meant they had to be capable adventurers. Surely, they had armed themselves with consecrated weapons as part of their preparations. If they still couldn't harm him, Jaldabaoth had to be one high-level demon.

As the situation continued to evolve rapidly in the space of a few blinks, Remedios had closed their distance and swung her Holy Sword down diagonally.

Jaldabaoth jumped aside and used his tentacle-like wings—*Or maybe they really are tentacles?*—to hurl the bodies of the impaled adventurers at her.

She had no interest in catching them.

Removing her left hand from the hilt of the sword and punching them aside, she simultaneously used a martial art—“Flow Acceleration!”—to swoop in. Then she lunged.

The Holy Sword she’d thrust toward his throat was parried with nails that had lengthened instantaneously—

“Holy Attack!”

The moment her sword connected with the claws, her power flooded into him through the blade.

This skill paladins gained early on was really supposed to be used when their sword cut deep into their opponent’s flesh, but it was still possible to use even with a glancing blow. The holy energy would bubble away on the surface of their target’s body, so the damage wasn’t terribly high, but the reason she used it anyway was that her instincts as a paladin—“animal instincts,” her sister called them—screamed at her to prevent a fall in morale by demonstrating they still had a way to fight Jaldabaoth even after all those adventurers were killed.

“I see…”

The angels positioned themselves between Jaldabaoth, who had jumped back farther, and Remedios.

Floating at nearly her height, they attacked Jaldabaoth.

Tch, Remedios clicked her tongue.

The high-pitched metallic noise that had rung out when her Holy Sword clashed with Jaldabaoth’s claws told her how hard they were. And though her form hadn’t been perfect, the fact that he could easily parry her boosted attack spoke to his physical strength.

Only a handful of the strongest could fight an opponent so powerful. Angels summoned with tier-two and -three spells were fine for exterminating regular old monsters, but in this fight, they were only in the way. The angel shoes dangling right in her field of vision were especially maddening.

“Penetrating Magic: Holy Ray!”

Her sister loosed a spell. But it disappeared before Jaldabaoth as if it had been

repelled.

“Twin Penetrating Magic: Holy Ray!”

Calca shot two rays. She must have hoped that at least one of them would get through Jaldabaoth’s magic immunity ability, but unfortunately, both of them ended up just like Kelart’s.

He must have quite high defense against magic. Which means…I have to do everything I can!

She roared with even more spirit. “Please use your brains and make the angels fight smarter! This is pointless!”

And in fact, despite the angels occupying an advantageous overhead position, and the soldiers surrounding him, Jaldabaoth was still composed. But that made sense. Despite the number of opponents encircling him, no one had managed to land an effective attack yet.

Adventurers raced over to recover the bodies of their fallen comrades lying on the ground near Remedios. The fact that they didn’t so much as twitch must have meant they were dead, but maybe the living were choosing to have faith in slim possibilities.

“…What a pain. Even puny worms are irritating when so many gather up in one spot.” Jaldabaoth was completely at ease.

And if he was immune to the spells being cast and could evade every physical attack, then he probably thought he had an overwhelming advantage. But…

You think I’ve never fought someone like that before?

Unless the caster specialized in summoning, the summoned monsters would be weaker than the caster themselves. So it wasn’t unheard of for the attacks of angels to be ineffective.

The optimal way to use angels against a powerful opponent—

The angels swooped down to attack Jaldabaoth all at once. Not slashing with their swords, but tackling.

—was to stop them in their tracks.

That was effective.

Perhaps he was feeling some pressure? Jaldabaoth transitioned to offense and sent several angels back to the void with a single swipe of his claws.

But the gap made by any angel that had been cut down was simply filled by another that continued the assault.

That was the true horror of summoned monsters. They were beings for whom death didn't count as death, so they could use their abilities to the fullest.

Remedios's eyes widened as she watched the waterfall-like hammering of angels and the way Jaldabaoth handled them as if he were working an assembly line. However…

He's letting his guard down!

After approaching quietly, she waited for Jaldabaoth to be critically distracted by the onslaught of angels and then leaped into range.

"What?!"

"Ahhhrraahhhh!"

She activated a skill and struck a mighty blow with her Holy Sword using a martial art.

Her instinct whispered to her that it wasn't time to unleash the sword's greatest reservoir of power that could only be used once per day.

On the receiving end of her second most powerful attack, Jaldabaoth went flying in what seemed like a horizontal flight path. Then he ducked into a shop on the opposite side of the square.

Remedios stared down at her sword hand.

"Crap!"

"Honored sister, you did it!"

Kelart sounded so happy, but Remedios yelled back at her. "Not yet I haven't! There's no way he'd go flying like that."

"I think it's possible given how insanely strong you are…"

“No, he flew away on his own!”

Yes. Not only had she let him slip through the encirclement, she’d given him the opportunity to hide in a building.

The only reason they’d had half a chance against him was because they had him surrounded and forced him into a fight of one against many. Combat in a cramped house would be too dangerous for Remedios.

And maybe Jaldabaoth had decided that playtime was over and would change up his moves.

“Remedios! What should we do?” Calca cried out to her.

Usually it was Remedios asking the questions and Calca answering, but this time it was the reverse. Apparently, when it came to combat, Remedios was still more likely to arrive at the correct answer than the other two.

“Destroy the building without getting anywhere near it!”

Following her directive, the priests began casting attack magic.

The building came tumbling down bit by bit, but it was hard to imagine Jaldabaoth dying under a pile of rubble. With her enchanted armor, even Remedios wouldn’t die from something like that unless she got awfully unlucky. And besides—

Remedios eyed her clean blade.

Did he really absorb that powerful blow just by flying away? Did he use a martial art like Fortress? Or was it a special demon ability? There were lots of possibilities, but if she couldn’t figure out the answer, they were in serious trouble.

With great cracks and pops, the building was completely demolished by the area-of-effect spells. Remedios found herself having a coughing fit in the cloud of dust it kicked up.

“Hey, Remedios, why isn’t he coming out?”

“…Honored sister, do you think he could have teleported away already?”

That arrogant demon? I doubt he would unless he were injured…

“…It’s time for a fire attack. Let’s pour oil over this and burn it. And then could you bless it, Holy Lady Calca?”

“A Holy Flame Rite, honored sister? Should a paladin really use that to damage an opponent…?”

“I don’t mind. If Remedios thinks that’s our best option, I’ll do it. No, it’s what we *must* do. If he’s a demon, there’s no way it won’t hurt him.”

Many demons had resistance to fire, but a Holy Flame had both holy and fire attributes, so resistance to fire would only block half the damage.

“All right, Holy Lady Calca, let’s prepare for the ceremony…”

“There’s no time. Can you do a simplified version?”

Looking at Calca, she saw her sister out of the corner of her eye as she said, “Um…”

Simplifying the Holy Flame ritual magic put quite a large strain on the caster. This wasn’t the sort of proposal someone entrusted with her safety should have been making. But they couldn’t afford to give Jaldabaoth time.

“If you say that’s better, then let’s go with that plan. But if I cast it alone, I won’t be able to give you any more support afterward. Please remember that… So will you light it for me right away?”

“Understoo—”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh. That puts me in quite a pinch.” Jaldabaoth’s voice suddenly came to them from beneath the rubble.

“Honored sister!”

“I’m on it!”

Remedios stood in front of Calca and held her sword at the ready.

Apparently, the demon really was trapped beneath the rubble. And if he was talking to them now, it must have meant that Holy Flame was the correct attack. Surely he hadn’t been knocked out by the impact of the rubble.

“It seems I’ll have to actually start putting some effort into this fight.”

“Ohhh? You could have done that a long time ago. I’ve been waiting, so won’t

you show me what you're capable of…? Holy Lady Calca, Kelart, get back." She instructed the pair in a lower voice.

At the same time, Remedios backed up and left a wall of angels between her and Jaldabaoth.

"Hmm. Then please take some distance. It wouldn't be much fun if you were killed in the shock of me getting up."

The pile of collapsed bricks and wood rose. And as the debris fell away, some sort of giant slowly stood up.

"…Jaldabaoth?" Remedios murmured in spite of herself.

The being standing before them was something altogether different from the Jaldabaoth of a few moments ago. She wondered if he had switched places with another demon. But there couldn't be that many demons this powerful out there.

There was no doubt in her mind: This was Jaldabaoth; it was Jaldabaoth's true form.

Wings of flame whooshed open. The tip of his long tail was also burning. Even the ends of his terrifyingly thick arms were on fire. His sinister face was rage incarnate.

"Priests! Have the angels charge!"

Following Kelart's order, the priests sent their angels forward. Jaldabaoth didn't even counter when the angels attacked with their weapons—he simply took the hits in silence. Being surrounded and assaulted didn't seem to bother him one bit. It was like a paladin in full plate armor being pummeled by a child.

"This is my true nature." Jaldabaoth spoke in a deep, weighty voice that seemed to come from the pit of his stomach. Then he took a step forward with a massive leg, forcing the angels back.

Ignoring the angels' attacks entirely, he clenched a fist enclosed in flames. Fire blazing, it was red-hot like a volcanic bomb.

"You daft, flying insects—be gone!"

With a bang, the angels that should have been shielding Remedios vanished.

Even her sharp vision only registered a momentary afterimage of Jaldabaoth swinging his fist at great speed. The resulting blow had demolished the wall of angels that had been protecting her.

This was the real Jaldabaoth.

Slaying several angels at once so easily. In the face of such overwhelming power, Remedios swallowed hard and gripped her Holy Sword. She broke into a sweat and could sense the clothing beneath her armor changing color.

Can I win? Eh—

“Daaaaaagh!” Remedios charged with a roar—to shake off her fear. Perhaps it was a reckless move, but if she didn’t advance now, her mind would have been forced to acknowledge her defeat. Clenching her sword, she raced forward.

Jaldabaoth neither defended nor dodged.

He repelled her so simply it was laughable.

“—Huh?”

Her sword, forged of an unknown metal as hard as adamantite, glanced off Jaldabaoth’s skin.

When she looked up, his gaze wasn’t even directed her way—just like how a human wouldn’t look down on bugs crawling in the dirt.

“It’s a chore to fight you unarmed… Oh, wait, I have a good weapon.”



Jaldabaoth set off walking, paying no attention to Remedios. She was forced aside by his hulking form.

“H-hey! Sh-shit!”

She attacked from behind, along with newly summoned angels, but her sword couldn’t penetrate the skin that possessed a strange metallic gleam.

Attack spells flew at him but were all deflected.

He’s not even slowing down. Where is he head—?

When Remedios figured out his destination, the blood drained from her face. He was aiming for Calca and Kelart.

“What are you guys doing? Attack! Cut him down!”

She gave orders to the paladins behind them. She didn’t think they could accomplish anything, but she couldn’t let Jaldabaoth waltz right over to Calca and Kelart.

“Get Calca and Kelart out of here! He’s aiming for those two!”

The paladins and priests formed a wall in front of the pair. What a fragile barrier it was.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!!” she screamed, swinging her sword over and over.

But none of her attacks could break the demon’s skin.

The paladins slashed with their swords, and the priests cast their spells. But they couldn’t stop Jaldabaoth. He continued striding forward as if nothing were happening.

Anyone brushed by the flames coming off his body fell shrieking to the ground, but Jaldabaoth didn’t even seem to be conscious of attacking.

“Run, you two! We can’t stop him!” Remedios shouted, her brain in a muddle.

Didn’t an adventurer drive him off in the Kingdom? She should have been equal or superior to an adamantite adventurer. So why couldn’t she contain this demon?

There must be something! I have to figure it out! There has to be a way to deal

damage!

There had to be some trick to his invincibility. Just as some monsters were strong against all materials besides silver, he had to be protecting himself with some specialized defensive ability.

What is it?!

The instincts she relied on told her nothing.

At times like this in the past, one of her deputies, or Kelart, or Calca would swoop in with a tip, and all she would have to do was act on it. But this time they had nothing for her.

If those two escaped, they could at least prevent Jaldabaoth from doing as he wished.

They seemed to understand that and ran away without even looking back.

That was fine. On a real battlefield, there was no time to dither like an idiot. Even if Remedios died, as long as they could ensure the survival of the head of the country, the Holy Lady, things would work out. And in the worst case, even if the Holy Lady died, as long as Kelart survived and they could recover the body, she could be revived.

A few priests—who could probably use up to tier-three magic—stayed near Calca, protecting her. That shield was probably enough to buy them time to escape.

“Hmph. Greater Teleportation.”

Suddenly, Jaldabaoth disappeared, and Remedios’s sword sliced through thin air.

“Wha—?!”

Whirling around in a panic, she heard a terrible wail. Her heart pounded sickeningly. The scream came from the direction the other two had run in.

But there were paladins in the way, so Remedios couldn’t see what had happened.

Her terror was automatically soothed by a magic item she wore, but

impatience blossomed in its place. If Kelart and the priests protecting Calca had been killed, that meant the Holy Lady was facing Jaldabaoth on her own. The leader of the country. The kingdom would be doomed without her.

“Out of my wayyyy!”

With that scream, Remedios set off running. The paladins jumped out of her path.

Calca was so far away.

How sluggish Remedios thought her body was.

Remedios considered herself to be at the peak of human performance when it came to physical strength and running, and she had always been quietly proud of that. But at this moment, she learned what a sham that all was.

If she can just survive one hit… Even if she gets horribly injured, there are plenty of priests around. As long as she doesn’t die, things will work out somehow.

Telling herself that as she ran, Remedios spotted Calca trapped by Jaldabaoth. There was no time to look for Kelart.

Jaldabaoth had grabbed Calca’s legs with his huge hands. Both of his limbs were enveloped in flames. The sound of flesh roasting was audible from beneath her heated armor. Her face in her helmet was nearly mad with agony, her neat rows of teeth clenched.

The coward! He’s taken her hostage!

What does he want?

Remedios braced herself and then couldn’t believe her ears when she heard what Jaldabaoth said next.

“This is a good weapon.”

“—Huh?”

For a moment, she looked down at her Holy Sword.

Does he want my sword?

“I thought she would make a good weapon the moment I saw her.”

Jaldabaoth lifted his arm, dangling Calca at eye level before bringing her down again—as if he were swinging a sword.

There was a snapping noise and a muffled cry from Calca.

The combination of Jaldabaoth's overwhelming power and her own weight proved too much for Calca's knees, which bent in a direction they were never intended to go.

That was when Remedios finally understood what he meant.

The demon was saying that he would use Holy Lady Calca Bessarez as his weapon.

"Wh-what are you…?"

She couldn't comprehend it.

But she had to.

"Ready? Here I come!" A faint, sinister grin appeared on Jaldabaoth's furious face as he approached.

What was she supposed to do?

Remedios backed up, as did the paladins who must have been behind her.

Wh-what should I do? What can I do?

Casting around for help, she saw Kelart and the priests who had been protecting Calca sprawled on the ground.

The priests didn't so much as twitch, but her sister was twisting around. Maybe she was silently using a spell.

She's alive! I guess I'll have to ask Isandro who to save first.

"Isandro! What should I do?"

"Retreat!"

"Okay! All units, retreat! Fall back! Fall back!"

"What? You're not going to fight? And right when I got my hands on this perfect weapon to crush you with…Fireball." Jaldabaoth lifted the hand he wasn't holding Calca with and loosed a tier-three attack spell. The flames burst

and burned all the paladins in range.

The paladins had fire resistance magic cast on them, so they managed to avoid fatal damage, but that just meant they weren't dead yet.

Calca flailed all she could, but it didn't seem like she could escape Jaldabaoth's clutches.

"Woman, you exasperate me. You're my weapon right now, so act like it." He bent down slightly and raised the hand holding Calca.

"No!" Remedios screamed, realizing what he was about to do.

But Jaldabaoth didn't so much as glance at her as he swung his arm down.

Splat.

Calca's attempt to defend herself didn't make it in time, so her face slammed straight into the ground.

As Jaldabaoth lifted his hand again slowly, she hung limply, seeming to have lost interest in resisting.

The front of the helmet she was wearing was open. It was designed that way so she could raise the soldiers' morale with her beauty. But now that once pretty face was flattened—perhaps her nose had been crushed—and covered in blood.

"You bastard!"

"Don't! You idiot!"

One of Remedios's subordinates had instinctively drawn his sword and charged. She tried to stop him, but it was too late.

Jaldabaoth swung his "weapon" around so quickly, it was hard to believe he was holding a whole human.

The two collided, and with a forceful metallic *clang*, the knight went flying.

His armor sported an indent like a giant had punched him, which told exactly how powerful the impact with Calca had been.

Remedios couldn't take her eyes off the Holy Lady.

Even humans, with more vulnerable outer skin than other races, could robe themselves in chi or mana and take a slash unscathed, if they were powerful enough and conscious.

Yes, *if they were conscious*.

Her helmet must have flown off somewhere in the crash—her long hair fluttered in the wind. Hanging upside down with her bloodied face and crushed nose, missing front teeth, groaning faintly with only the whites of her eyes showing, Calca no longer had a shred of the beauty praised as the great treasure of a nation. She looked utterly miserable.

“What should we do? Isandro! How can we save Calca?”

“I—I don’t know!”

“That doesn’t help me! I thought your brain was supposed to shine at times like this!”

“I never could have imagined something like this! We have no choice but to withdraw!”

“And leave behind my sister and Calca?!”

“What else are we supposed to do?!”

When he said that, she realized she had no reply.

“Sheesh. You awful humans, how can you waste time arguing like that before an enemy? Time’s about up. Yes, I think that’s enough playing around.”

“What?”

Jaldabaoth slowly looked toward the sky.

“My army has nearly reached this city. I need to hurry, break the gate down, and cause a storm of atrocities and murder.”

“Y-you think we’d allow that?!”

“You don’t need to. Just accept it—like this celestial gift.” Jaldabaoth raised his free hand up into the sky as if reaching for something.

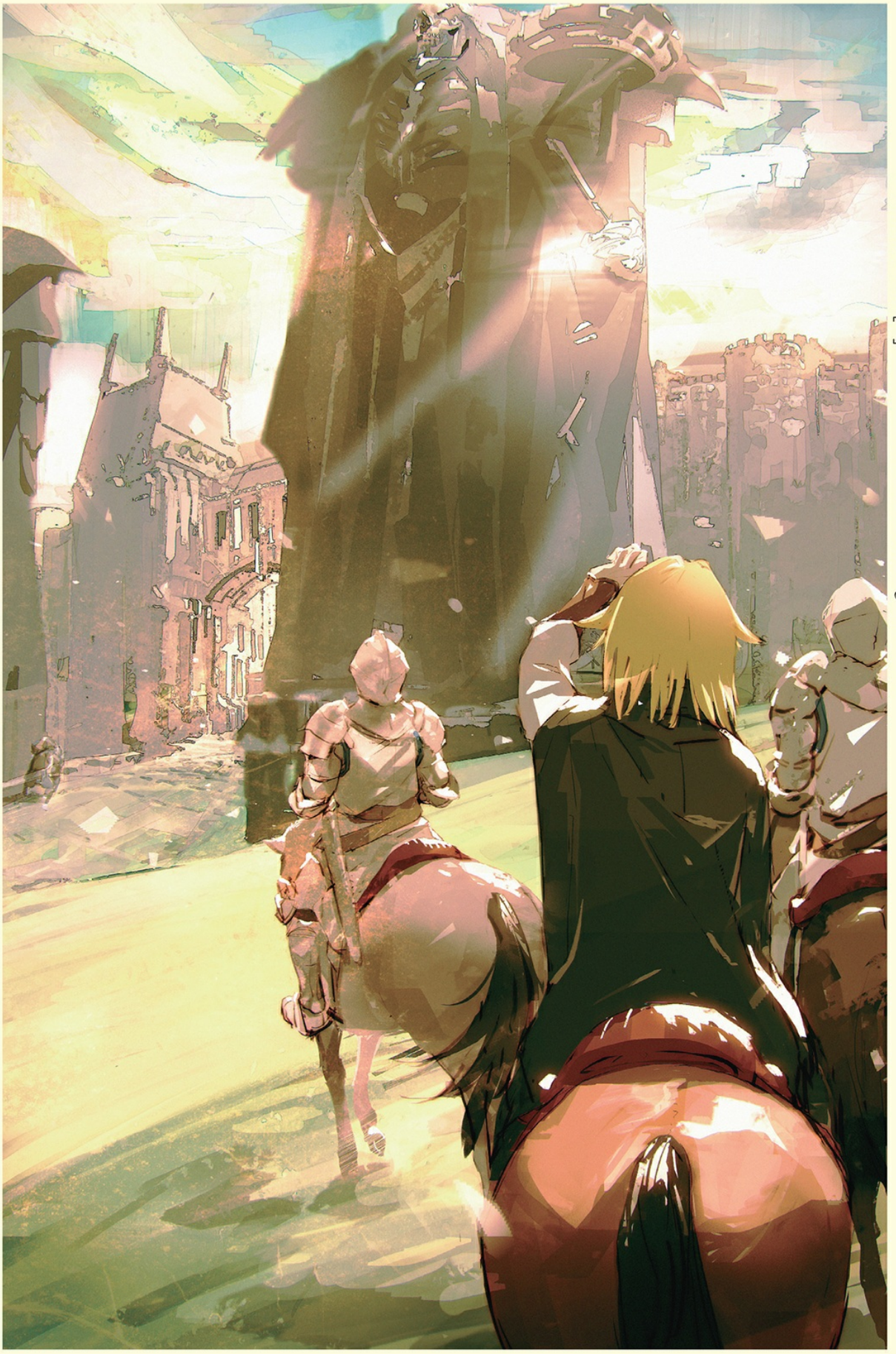
“No!”

Remedios shouted because she realized what he was going to do.

But everyone just stood there watching, unable to move. Jaldabaoth had the Holy Lady hostage, so no one could attack him.

No, they were afraid that if they did attack him, he would use Calca's body to absorb the hit. What would they do if that was how she died?

Paying no mind to their indecision…the star fell.



Chapter 2 Seeking Salvation

Chapter 2 | Seeking Salvation

1

A lone girl walked the streets of the Kingdom.

She had neither a particularly cute face nor the kind of body that would turn heads, but there was certainly something about her that did attract attention—in a bad way.

It was the slant of her dark, tapered eyes, which always made her look like she was always scowling, and the bags under them only accentuated the violent demeanor that wouldn't look out of place on an inhabitant of some seedy backstreet.

Those eyes may have been handy for walking in a crowd, but they also got her possessions checked extra carefully at the city gate. She—Neia Baraja—looked up at the sky.

Thick, heavy clouds blocked out everything above, so while it wasn't even noon yet, it already felt like evening.

The worst of winter may have been over, but spring was still a ways off.

Emitting a bone-tired sigh, she activated the keen senses she had inherited and headed down the road to the inn where she was staying.

The reason Neia had her guard so high was that ever since she had arrived in this city, she'd felt something like a sense of rejection as an outsider.

Of course, it was probably just in her head.

She was hiding her face with the hood of her cape. Like that, there was no way to tell she was from another country. But the weight she sensed in the air wasn't just in her head. Glancing furtively at the people passing by, she saw their faces were gloomy, their steps heavy. They seemed to be cloaked in winter blues.

As she was thinking that the sky was usually clear, it occurred to her that the closed-off feeling in the Re-Estize Kingdom's royal capital, the mysterious depression, stemmed from something else.

It could be because they recently lost a war. Compared to this, the people of Roebel are practically skipping.

The region of the Sacred Kingdom south of the bay was apparently still safe; only the north was hell.

But knowing that didn't cheer her up. Not as a member of the liberation army made up of the remnants of the defeated Northern Sacred Kingdom and not as a member of their delegation to this foreign land.

Demoralized, Neia reached for her hip as if toward salvation, and there she felt the cold touch only steel could offer.

The sword she wore bore the crest of the Sacred Kingdom's paladins that indicated her rank.

Paladins wielded blades that were slightly enchanted, but hers wasn't—because it was a trainee-sword for squires.

Only after completing her training and being knighted would her trusty sword be imbued with magical power. It was part of the knighting ceremony. Until then, the blade was only a sharp lump of steel, but it had still been her partner throughout the long, arduous training process. It was no wonder she had gotten into the habit of reaching for it when she was anxious.

Having calmed herself a bit with the touch of steel, Neia exhaled a puff of white, pulled her cape close around her, and sped up.

Thinking of the bad news she had to deliver made her feet drag. That's why she had to consciously move faster. It was better to get unpleasant work over with as soon as possible.

Soon, the inn where the delegation was staying came into view.

It was a gorgeous inn, and the price was proportionately high. She had heard it was one of the top five places to stay in the royal capital.

Thinking of the state of the Northern Sacred Kingdom and how her

countrymen were suffering, it felt wrong to be enjoying such luxury. And in fact, the woman heading up the delegation had opposed it on those exact grounds, saying it would be better to choose a lower-class inn and use the money they saved for something else.

But the man who was second-in-command made a suggestion that overturned the leader's opinion. "If we, as representatives of the Sacred Kingdom, stay in shabby lodgings, people will think Roebel is done for. To avoid giving that impression, we need to stay somewhere expensive to show that our country is still sound."

Logically, he was right, and no one from the delegation objected. The leader was the only one to disagree—it just didn't sit right with her emotionally. They argued for a while, and the others urged her until she reluctantly agreed.

Still, everyone understood that they didn't have money to spare. In order to keep their visit short, they were even putting Neia, a squire, to work.

The delegation's purpose for visiting Re-Estize was to request aid for Roebel; Neia and the other members were ordered to make appointments with strong people in the kingdom.

The delegation leader wasn't wrong to think that a squire could make an appointment.

But the only squire in the group was Neia; all the other members were full-fledged paladins. Even if she made an appointment, when whoever she visited heard that their peers were visited by paladins and they only met with a squire, what would they think?

Probably, they would be offended. Even Neia realized that, so she suggested as much, but her orders didn't change. A mere squire like herself couldn't say much else, but still she persisted.

If it was her own failure and only her own, that would be one thing. But it might end with the Sacred Kingdom getting less assistance in this time of agonizing struggle. She couldn't simply say, *Yes, understood*, when so many lives were on the line.

A squire not immediately following orders had put the delegation leader in an

even worse mood. She acted as if everything was Neia's fault. The second-in-command stepped in and resolved the issue, but it was clear that the leader didn't think very highly of Neia.

The reason Neia had come was supposedly to keep watch on their travels with her sharp vision. Expecting anything else out of her put her in a tough spot.

Not like I can tell them that…

Neia sighed up at the sky and watched the white puff of her breath disappear into the chilly air. The thought of returning to the inn and being under all that pressure made her stomach hurt.

The noble she had gone to visit wasn't terribly influential—in terms of rank in the Kingdom—so though she didn't manage to get a meeting, it probably wasn't a big deal. Still, she knew the delegation leader would gripe at her.

…What can we expect? We're asking people with some degree of standing to meet without forewarning. They probably need time to investigate my background and gather information. I might have been able to get a meeting after waiting a week or so.

Or maybe that was just an excuse.

And it was our leader who decided we could only spend a few days in the capital… Our leader…

Their leader was always on edge as of late; she seemed to be having a hard time controlling her emotions.

She didn't used to be like that, Neia knew. Their leader was once tolerant and generous—or sloppy, to put it less kindly. But after the battle where the Holy Lady had been lost, her personality changed dramatically.

"…I just can't catch a break."

As a squire, Neia had to hang her head in response to her leader's scolding, even if it wasn't fair.

That said, this burden was nothing compared to what the people still living and fighting in the Sacred Kingdom were experiencing. She could just lower her head and wait for the storm to pass.

Having steeled her resolve—or perhaps just resigning herself—Neia arrived at the inn.

With a deep breath, she took off her hood and pushed the grand door open.

Since it was such a high-class inn, it didn't open up immediately into the lounge; there was a little room first. Apparently, this was a place to wipe the mud from one's boots.

That said, she'd only been to a wealthy area paved with stones, which had been much the same as the area around the inn. It hadn't even been raining, so of course her boots weren't dirty.

Neia opened the door opposite the one she had come in.

Warm air flowed out.

Directly across from her was reception. And to the right was the bar. To the left were the stairs, and near there were some sofas facing each other.

There was no hearth in the room—the difference in temperature from the outside was supposedly thanks to a magic object.

In Roebel, most casters were priests, and they didn't create many items for use in everyday life. It seemed Re-Estize was ahead in terms of technology. If that was the case, then the empire her father spoke of had to be amazing.

She figured she'd live out her days without ever visiting, but she couldn't help wishing a bit.

Most village girls lived their whole lives without getting to see anything beyond where they were born. People like Neia who served their country but weren't particular adept at anything usually didn't get to go abroad.

In that sense, maybe the chance to see a foreign land is a bit of luck in the middle of this catastrophe.

With those thoughts lightly on her mind, Neia climbed the stairs to the second floor where the delegation was staying. The innkeeper recognized her, so she wasn't challenged.

Considering the cost of this inn, it would have been better to rent one room here for the leader and her second, while the others stayed somewhere

cheaper, but when the deputy pointed out that some people might take such fussy economizing as a sign that the Sacred Kingdom had no future, the leader conceded the point.

When she reached the leader's room and knocked, the door opened a crack. There stood a paladin on guard.

The security detail was for the Sacred Kingdom's strongest paladin, the leader of the delegation. Well, the one answering the door was more like a footman than a guard, so Neia felt like it might have made more sense to have her fill that role. Of course, she knew that a nail that stuck out would get hammered down, so she didn't say anything like that.

"Neia Baraja, reporting back."

The door opened wider, so she went inside.

She could see a large room at the end of the hall. In the center of the room was a big, long table where the leader was sitting.

It was the leader Remedios Custodio and her second-in-command, Gustav Montagnés. Additionally, over half the seventeen delegate paladins stood at attention against the wall.

The two leaders had some documents spread out on the table. Stealing a glance, Neia could see that most of the names were crossed off.

"Neia Baraja, reporting back, ma'am." She announced herself standing tall with her chest out.

"How'd it go?"

"My apologies. Apparently, there was no time for a meeting. The minimum wait would be two weeks."

"Tch." Remedios clicked her tongue.

Neia's stomach twinged. Was the irritation directed at her or the kingdom noble who refused to meet her? It seemed like it could be either, but she didn't dare ask.

"Ah. Well, thanks for going out in the cold. Head back to your room and rest up."

“Yes, sir!”

Neia suppressed the sigh of relief that threatened to slip out in response to Gustav’s kindness. She got ready to leave as fast as possible, but Remedios stopped her.

“…Before that, I want to ask… Did you try to negotiate for an earlier meeting?”

“Huh? Um! Yes! Of course, I asked, but unfortunately, it wasn’t possible…”

“Are you sure you aren’t just a lousy negotiator?”

“Uh, w-well—”

Who could just outright say no? And it was clear that she would get a talking-to either way.

“—Commander, it’s not only the noble she called on. Other nobles have also refused. Although some said they can’t help but would still like to talk.”

Remedios rolled her eyes to glare at Gustav when he interrupted. A tension beyond description continued to mount.

“Neia Baraja.”

“Ma’am!”

So I’m going to be the target of her attack after all? she thought, disappointed, but of course she responded energetically so as not to show it.

Gustav tried to mediate, but Remedios ignored him and stared Neia down.

“While we’re here doing this, droves of people are being slaughtered by the subhuman army Jaldabaoth leads. Four major cities have already fallen, and there’s no telling how many towns and villages have been ravaged.”

The four cities were:

The political center of the country and capital, where the main shrine of the Sacred Kingdom’s religion, the Holy Sanctuary, was located, Jobans.

The bayside city west of the capital, Limun.

The city nearest the great wall—the fortress line—boasting the strongest

curtain wall of any settlement, since it was positioned to be the first major target of any major invasion, Fortress City Karinsha.

And finally, the city between Jobans and Karinsha, Prato.

In other words, all the major cities of the north were now under the control of Jaldabaoth's subhuman army.

"And on top of that, many of the survivors have been caught and taken to camps built in the cities and villages. I'm told that what goes on there would make your blood run cold."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The camps Remedios was talking about reportedly had walls erected around them, and no one had managed to infiltrate the sites yet, so no one had actually seen what happened inside. But there were whispers that they were guarded by subhumans, and according to people who had snuck up close enough to hear, groans and screams filtered out on the wind.

More than anything, the demon ruler Jaldabaoth hardly seemed like the type to show human prisoners compassion.

"You know all that, and yet you dare to bring back such pitiful results? Are you really trying? If you are, then show me some real progress."

"My apologies, ma'am!"

That was true. Remedios was absolutely right. But—

Neia had another feeling she couldn't suppress.

Then what does that make you as the commander of the paladins if you can't even save our imprisoned people?!

She wanted to throw her words back in her face. But as a squire of the Sacred Kingdom, there was no way she could do that.

"So you're sorry, but what does that do? How are you going to get things done?"

Neia had no reply.

She was just a regular person. She didn't have noble standing or wealth or

anything at all. She wasn't even a paladin, only a squire. What could someone like her offer that would attract a noble of the kingdom? Her only option was…

"I'll work hard."

…pressing on with attitude. But Remedios didn't seem to like that answer.

"I'm asking what kind of hard work. Working hard in the wrong way won't—"

"Commander," Gustav interrupted her. "How about we leave it at that for now and start getting ready? The Blue Roses will be here soon. It could offend them if our welcome is delayed."

"Right. Squire Baraja, apply yourself harder and get something to show for it!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Remedios waved Neia off as if she were saying, *Now get outta here*.

"Excuse me, then, Commander Custodio!" Though she was exhausted, internally she trembled with happiness—*Yes!*—as she turned to go. But her reinforcements up until a moment ago suddenly turned into her worst enemy.

"Commander, maybe she should stay for the meeting with the Blue Roses."

Neia's vision went fully dark for a moment when she heard what Gustav said. Why should a mere squire participate in that discussion?

Remedios looked at her deputy. Her gaze was so different from what she had been directing at Neia a moment ago. It was like she was like another person; she looked so friendly.

"Oh? If you say so… But why?"

"Well, even though she's a squire, we brought her along for her uncommonly sharp senses. She may notice something that only she could."

Many paladins and squires had died in the battle against Jaldabaoth. But there were still survivors. The reason Neia had been chosen over a knight was her keen perception.

Paladins had superior combat skills, but other than that, they were ordinary people. In other words, they needed to be supported by someone with scouting skills who could travel without being noticed, detect enemies at a distance, and

slip through encirclements.

Normally, that would mean adventurers or light infantry, but many of them had fallen, and those who survived had fled south or to other countries. With such a severe lack of experienced personnel, the job fell to her.

She wasn't anywhere near as skilled as her father was, but she still boasted keener senses than most paladins. She was glad that her abilities were useful to the country, but what happiness it brought her had mostly worn off. At this point, she even somewhat resented having been chosen for this mission.

"Hmm. Well, if that's what you think, then we should do it. Permission granted."

"Thank you, Commander."

"…Squire Baraja, as you just heard, we're going to have you sit in the corner and listen. Let us know if you notice anything… Now go to your room and make yourself presentable before you return."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Finally, I'm free. That's what she was thinking when Gustav followed her out. Once they were clear of the room, he spoke to her in a low voice.

"Sorry about her."

Neia stopped and turned to ask something that had been on her mind. "I must have done something to make her mad, right? I heard that she changed completely when that city fell. Do you know what happened?"

"…A lot of paladins died in that fight against Jaldabaoth. As well as the Holy Lady and the commander's younger sister."

Neia knew that. *But so what?*

She was no different.

Her parents were probably both dead. And such circumstances were no longer rare in the Sacred Kingdom. But it wasn't as if she could say those things aloud.

"She doesn't have an outlet for the loss and rage she feels as a result of those

events, so she's taking it out on you. The reason she doesn't lash out at the paladins is probably because they experienced the same battle and thus share her pain."

Seriously? Neia said in her head.

So it was because she didn't fight in that battle?

How stupid.

Half the squires had participated, and many had died. That Neia wasn't selected to go was mere luck. It wasn't the result of any choices she had made herself.

"So with all that in mind, let me say this. Please just hang in there. The Sacred Kingdom needs her now."

"…Even if she takes out her unhappiness on others and causes them pain?"

"Yes." He looked at her with sorrowful eyes.

Fury coursed through her veins, and she wanted to scream at him. She could acknowledge that Remedios was strong. But Neia had worked hard to ensure the delegation arrived safely in the kingdom. She stayed on top of the subhumans' patrols and kept watch longer than anyone else when they camped for the night. They had arrived safely because of Neia's efforts, so it seemed to her that for the duration of this trip, she was no less valuable.

In the end, she suppressed her seething emotions.

She had to keep it together for the sake of the people suffering in the Sacred Kingdom. If removing one of them from the equation meant they became powerless to stop the people's suffering, that would be far worse.

And once they returned home, she would be freed from her duties. She only had to endure a little longer.

Neia nodded with a smile. "Understood. If that's what the Sacred Kingdom needs from me, then I happily accept."

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Not long after Neia returned to her room, the Blue Roses arrived at the inn.

Neia stood at attention along the wall with the other paladins.

Eventually the door opened, and the party entered.

She wasn't a fangirl, per se, but the arrival of these adventurers who were famous even in the Sacred Kingdom did thrill her a bit. These were other women who had reached heights she could only dream of. There were so many things she wanted to ask them. Not that she would get the chance, but…

They're one of the three adamantite adventurer teams in this kingdom… The Blue Roses…wow…

She had heard their names and appearances in rumors, but seeing them right in front of her, she noticed some discrepancies from what she had imagined.



In front stood their team leader. A priest wearing a water god sigil around her neck. Judging by her Demonic Sword, this was Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra.

Her features were so alluring that Neia felt attracted even though she didn't have much interest in the same sex. She didn't look like someone who had reached the highest adventurer rank through combat prowess alone. If she were wearing a dress, she would have been the embodiment of what a commoner like Neia dreamed a princess was like.

She spoke with a voice that matched her beauty. "Thank you for inviting us. We are the Blue Roses."

Remedios, who had stood to welcome them, bowed her head slightly and greeted them. "I thank you for coming, Blue Roses."

"To receive an invitation from Lady Remedios Custodio, bearer of the Sacred Sword and a paladin whose unparalleled abilities are known far and wide, is an honor."

Remedios was rather stiff and monotone during these formalities, but Lakyus spoke naturally. The rumor that she was a noble's daughter must have been true.

"Ah, I'm also, uh, happy to meet the bearer of the Demonic Sword. Ahem. Please have a seat. Oh, and these people around us are paladins. I'd appreciate if we could allow them to listen to our conversation. And, ummm, if there's time afterward, I'd love it if you could show me your sword…"

"With pleasure. And I do hope you'll show me yours, too. All right, we'll be accepting your hospitality. Everyone, please."

The Blue Roses all sat in whatever position they pleased. Some were already propped up on their elbows, while others crossed their arms. The casual brazenness was strangely becoming due to their famous power and capability.

"Should we introduce ourselves first?"

Gustav piped up, perhaps to give Remedios a breather. "No, that won't be necessary. Stories of you all have traveled far and wide in the Sacred Kingdom. Apologies, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm the deputy commander of the

paladins, Gustav Montagnés.” Remedios smiled calmly at his reply.

“Is that so? I hope the rumors are good.”

“O—”

“Yes, we’ve heard nothing but good things. The stories of your exploits thrilled me.”

Remedios was about to say something when Gustav intercepted. Glossing over the momentary confusion, he exchanged smiles with Lakyus.

“I’m happy to hear that. I’d love to know what rumors you’ve heard, but we’re here because our presence was requested. We wouldn’t want to waste your time. Could we begin by going over the matter in question?”

“Hmm. Before we do that, I’d at least like to get that girl’s name.”

Surprised at the remark, Neia discovered one of the thief twins pointing at her. The other twin was also eyeing her with interest.

They must have been Tia and Tina. In all the tales of the Blue Roses that had made their way to the Sacred Kingdom, none featured these mysterious twins.

And they were pointing at her.

She felt like she’d be thrust out from a dark wing onto a brightly lit stage. The words *Why? How? What?* raced circles around her mind.

“She doesn’t have the build of a warrior. Her muscles are totally different from ours.”

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was Gagaran the warrior who jumped in to respond.

“Just what I said… She’s not a warrior no matter how you look at her. *This* is a warrior.”

“Whoa there. A body like this gets built through experience.”

“You mean she’ll transform into something like you?” The thief’s expression sharpened. “Don’t be ridiculous. That’s horrible to say to the poor thing.”

“Hey, aren’t you being a bit harsh? You’ve trained with me! C’mon!”

“Nothing changed, though. I only got sore ribs because you gave me a crazy bear hug while I was sleeping and—”

“That’s enough, you two… Apologies for my half-wits.”

“Nothing to worry about. This here is Neia Baraja, one of our squires. Her keen senses helped us a great deal on our journey to get here.”

“Got it.” She said it with zero emotion, so it wasn’t cute at all.

“…Hmph. It’s our fault, but this conversation isn’t getting anywhere. If neither of you have any objections, why don’t we get down to business? And there’s not really any point to you two acting like nobles. Does anyone have an issue with just speaking frankly?”

Lakyus said, “Evileye,” disapprovingly.

The arcane caster, Evileye. She was immensely powerful and never removed her mask. Her body was particularly petite—some rumors said she was from a different, smaller race.

“No, that’s fine. I’m not so clever when it comes to nuanced communication.”

“Commander…”

“…Hoh-hoh. Your boss is quick on the uptake. Now how about ours? If they’re going to pay us a proper intelligence fee, then they’re our employers. Rather than taking forever to feel one another out, why not just jump straight into money matters and get the contract over with?”

Lakyus sighed, and Evileye grinned as she continued.

“There’s our boss’s tacit approval. Now, before we decide the fee, let’s confirm the nature of the request. I’d like to hear it from you, but I presume it’s about the demon Jaldabaoth rampaging through your country, right?”

“You know already?”

“Whoa, whoa. You think nobles would have info we don’t? Some merchants travel by water to the Kingdom. And the various branches of the Adventurers Guild exchange intelligence to some extent. Putting that aside for now, how about it? Want to trade what we know? We’d rather have the info than the money.”

“Mmph… C-can I consult with Gustav for a moment?”

Evileye gave them a go-ahead gesture, and Remedios and Gustav stood and went to the room next door—the bedroom.

“Um, is it okay if I get some water?” Gagaran asked Neia, pointing at the pitcher and cups on the table.

Why are you asking me?! Though a nervous wreck, she managed to reply, “Yes, of course. Go right ahead.” Her voice didn’t shake, and her manner was so perfect, she wanted to pat herself on the back.

By the time Gagaran finished pouring the water, Remedios and Gustav were coming back.

“We’ll pay an intelligence fee, so could we just hear what you have to say?”

Huh, thought Neia. She wondered why Remedios didn’t agree, when she found even paying for their accommodation a waste. Probably because Gustav told her not to, but what was his reason for convince her?

“Well, that’s fine. I just thought that if we knew the current state of the Sacred Kingdom we would be able to offer more targeted information.”

“We’ll pay the agreed fee.”

Gustav put a small leather pouch on the table.

“Hmph. Hey.” Evileye jerked her chin at one of the thieves. The thief’s hand zipped out to grab the bag, and she tossed it once. Catching it, she nodded at Evileye.

She must have confirmed from the weight in her hand that it was the correct amount of money.

“All right. I, Evileye, will speak as our representative… That said, as I mentioned before, saying you want ‘all’ the information there is about Jaldabaoth is a bit like trying to lasso a cloud. I’ll tell you what happened in this country in detail, but first we should confirm the basics. Jaldabaoth looks like this, correct?”

Evileye took a pen and paper from the reading desk on the side of the room and began sketching a portrait with flowing motions. But what she ended up

with, no matter how kindly one viewed it, was no better than a child's scribbling. Remedios was saying, "No, he was m—" when one of the twins grabbed the picture and ripped it in half before anyone could stop her.

"Why you— What do you think you're doing?!"

Evileye was furious, but the other twin took the opportunity to grab the pen, move it rapidly over a new piece of paper, and thrust the finished portrait out. "Mm…nnnngh…" came a frustrated groan from beneath the caster's mask. To be blunt, the new drawing was incomparably better.

Yes, the outfit was difficult to describe in words. It comprised unfamiliar garments from some foreign land. And that weird mask. When Remedios saw the picture, she clenched her first and said, "That's the guy," like a snarling beast.

Seeing that response, Evileye seemed to compose herself; she quit chewing out the thief and turned back to Remedios.

"Then that's one thing we know for sure. It's the same man—er, demon. Well, if there were a whole bunch of them popping up all over, that would be a problem, so I suppose we should consider this a blessing. Okay, so—"

Then Evileye explained what had happened in the kingdom, and Neia frowned inwardly as she listened.

She was prepared to confirm the extent of Jaldabaoth's strength. And the existence of a demon army filled with powerful, scaly demons was something she had known about already, so that was no surprise.

But the news that there were five maids who could hold their own against the Blue Roses in a fight deepened her despair.

I don't recall any reports of maid demons in the Sacred Kingdom. Does Jaldabaoth keep them up his sleeve as a last resort? So there's more to come…?

"What have you estimated his difficult rating as?"

The Blue Roses exchanged glances at Gustav's question. It was their representative, Evileye, who answered. "First, let me say this: The number I'm about to give you is only a guess. Keep in mind that he could be higher or lower.

That demon seems to be around two hundred.”

“Two hundred…” It was Gustav who practically choked the words out.

Neia nearly gasped herself, but she just barely managed to hold it back. Along the wall, some of the knights had failed, exclaiming in the same way Gustav had. Remedios was the only one who maintained her calm completely. Her expression didn’t so much as twitch.

Neia seemed to remember that 100 was the highest a human could hope to defeat.

“Two hundred—so how strong does that make him, specifically?” Remedios asked frankly, and Evileye wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“Something at difficulty two hundred has never appeared in the human world before, but, well, an old dragon is around one hundred.”

“An old dragon…? I’ve never fought one of those… I suppose it’s about the same as the guardian god of the sea?”

The guardian god of the sea was a sea dragon who lived in the water.

Its arms, legs, and wings had atrophied, and instead it had a long tail. It certainly looked more like a dragon than a sea serpent, and it was as or more intelligent than humans. The gentle creature often protected people’s boats if they presented offerings.

Neia had been lucky enough to see it once, albeit from a distance, with her family on a trip to Limun.

Its neck stretched up out of the water with enough majesty to be worthy of the epithet guardian god. She couldn’t believe a human could defeat it.

“Commander Custodio, comparing it to defeating the guardian god of the sea is a bit… If there were any fishermen here, they wouldn’t be very happy. But anyhow, Jaldabaoth is twice as strong as an old dragon…”

“Right. He’s more powerful than the evil spirits the Thirteen Heroes defeated. Anytime he shows up in the human world, a catastrophe is guaranteed; multiple countries will fall into ruin. That’s the kind of strength we’re talking about.”

“But you said when Jaldabaoth was on his rampage in the Kingdom, Sir Momon of Raven Black drove him off. Does that mean he’s equally powerful?” Gustav took a breath. “Or did he have a special item that was able to repel the demon?”

Evileye’s attitude changed.

Naturally, Neia couldn’t see her expression beneath the mask, but from the way she was moving, it seemed like she might have been blushing.

“It didn’t seem like he was using an item. But he was just so gallant! During Sir Momon and Jaldabaoth’s sword fight, I was battling the demon’s underlings, so I wasn’t able to watch the entire time, but what I managed to see was absolutely astounding. It’s just the kind of fight you would expect from a hero of heroes, the bravest of the brave.”

“I-is that right?” That was all Gustav could manage to say, edging away as Evileye leaned forward during her passionate explanation.

“It is! Truly, it was amazing. Sir Momon fought Jaldabaoth while protecting me, after all.”

“He fought Jaldabaoth—that monster—head-on? Really?”

“What are you getting at? I saw it with my own two eyes. Are you saying I’m lying?” Evileye’s voice took on a severe tone when she shot that back at Remedios.

Gustav hurriedly intervened before the atmosphere got any tenser. “Uh, no, she just thought that if perhaps Raven Black took advantage of some weak point, then maybe we would have a chance, too. Apologies that she wasn’t clear.”

“No, I apologize for the childish attitude Evileye is taking with you,” Lakyus responded.

Neia wondered if it was really all right for them to gloss over the tension while almost pretending the two in question weren’t even present.

“Hmph… *If* Jaldabaoth had a weak point, and *if* Sir Momon used it to win, I highly doubt a demon that powerful would leave such an opening unchanged.”

“That’s true… I suppose Jaldabaoth could compensate with magic items or his subordinates.”

The maids were news, but they were aware that Jaldabaoth had a few immensely powerful demons under him.

From what they had gotten out of subhuman prisoners, he had at least three.

The demon controlling the wilderness where the subhumans lived.

The demon controlling the bay city Limun.

And the scaly demon leading the subhuman army.

“Oh, right! Could you give us the details on that scaly demon?”

“Yes, would it be possible for you to tell us what sort of abilities it has?”

“Sure. I can tell you more about the demon that Evileye and I fought.” Lakyus’s story about what abilities it had and how it fought ended with the demon being defeated by Brain Unglaus, a warrior said to be as strong as Gazef Stronoff.

“…That’s strange. After Jaldabaoth took the Sacred Kingdom’s capital, he didn’t make any further moves—the one leading the subhuman army was a scaly demon. Maybe it wasn’t really defeated?”

“Hmm… I’ve met Brain before, though; he doesn’t seem like the type to lie. Maybe it wasn’t a unique monster, but simply an upper-tier type?”

“You mean as long as some condition or another is met, Jaldabaoth could summon an unlimited amount of them? Or multiple copies?”

Neia didn’t use magic, but she had learned about it to some extent.

It was difficult to summon more than one monster at a time.

The issue was that if someone cast a summoning spell while they already had one active, the previous spell would peter out, returning that monster, and summoning a new one in its place.

However, advanced casters were able to summon multiple monsters from lower-tier spells—for example, using tier-four magic to summon multiple monsters that could be summoned with tier-three magic.

“I don’t know. His summoning method is a mystery. Given how powerful he is, I imagine summoning multiple demons would be possible, but…then we’re left with the question of why he didn’t do that in the kingdom. Supposedly, a rare handful of casters specialized in summoning can create monsters of more than one race at a time, but…”

“So if the scaly demon was defeated, maybe Jaldabaoth could have summoned it again right away?”

“That must be it. But that’s if he’s using magic to do the summoning. If it’s a skill, things might work differently.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“No, sorry. We haven’t confirmed much at all.” Evileye’s shoulders slumped in an obvious way.

“…Hmm, I don’t really get it.”

“…Commander, I’ll explain later.”

“No, explain now, even just a little. I can’t keep up.”

This is our leader, the one in charge of us all…

“So then, did he also summon that nasty bug maid?”

“I don’t know. I sure hope not…”

The Blue Roses began discussing among themselves.

“Ummm, may I say something?” Neia spoke up hesitantly. All eyes turned to her, and the pressure was so enormous she nearly regretted it. Maybe she could have just waited for someone else to bring it up. But the die was cast. She steeled her resolve and asked her question. “This might be a very basic question, but where did Jaldabaoth come from? Has a demon named Jaldabaoth been around throughout history?”

“It’s unclear. I looked through all sorts of books, but I didn’t find the name anywhere. I tried searching based on his appearance as well, but there weren’t any clues.”

“Could it be an alias? Like he wanted to go cause trouble under a different

name?”

“That should be impossible. The name of a demon—and the same goes for angels—is an integral part of its existence. In order for a demon to appear, the wedge of its name needs to be driven into the world. Because of that, it’s apparently impossible for them to go by any other name. Some experiments have even shown that they’ll vanish if they even try.”

Neia knew next to nothing about demons and angels, but if a caster from an adamantite adventurer team said so, it must’ve been true.

“If he came from some remote part of the continent, it would make sense that we didn’t know anything about him…but at that point, anything is possible, so we just have no idea.” Evileye shrugged.

“…Hey, what if Jaldabaoth’s appearance was different? You looked him up based on the way he looks in that picture, but what if that’s a disguise?”

“Ohhh?” Evileye leaned toward Remedios. “Tell me more.”

“We had Jaldabaoth in that form in a tight spot, but then he revealed his true nature…” Remedios closed her eyes. “And we were utterly defeated.”

“Can you tell me the details?”

“That much is fine, right, Gustav?”

“No objections here. If by describing him we can gain more information, keeping it to ourselves would be our loss.”

“Really, I’d like to just tell them everything,” Remedios mumbled to herself. Then she began explaining Jaldabaoth’s true form to Evileye. Partway through, her face grew clouded with rage—she must have been recalling a battle no one in the room was present for.

“I see. I’ll try searching again based on that description. I’d like to let you know what I find out, so can you tell me how long you’re planning to be in town?”

“Right now we don’t have specific plans. But so, does that mean the description doesn’t ring any bells?”

“Lakyus, do you recognize it?”

She shook her head.

“What she says. Sorry.”

“Understood. We’ll inform you once we have a plan.”

“But now we have to consider the worst-case scenario. It’s possible that he held back in Re-Estize to spread false intelligence.”

“You mean…his true aim was in our country, and his goal in yours was something different?”

“Maybe. If his main objective was in the Kingdom, then it would have made sense for him to reveal his true nature here. Or maybe he was alarmed by Sir Momon’s strength and decided to save it for later to prevent his scheme from being ruined? I hope that’s not the case, but…”

Evileye’s comments left the room in a gloomy silence. It was so quiet that even faint breathing noises sounded loud. In the tension that followed, with everyone wondering who would speak first, it was Lakyus who proved her courage.

“So to back up a bit, we’d also like to hear some info about Jaldabaoth. What we know is only our own analysis after meeting him. We haven’t figured out his purpose, true form, or abilities.”

“Summoning demons to collect intelligence would have been an option… except it corrupts your soul. And even if you summon lower-tier demons, they often don’t know much about the higher tiers. So we’d need to get in touch with someone capable of summoning more powerful demons.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know anyone who specializes in summoning demons.”

It was Evileye who commented first. Then one of the twins.

Well, you wouldn’t, usually…, thought Neia.

Fortunately, evil casters who specialized in summoning demons never became very powerful—because they usually either ruined themselves or were hunted down.

Of course, there could be individuals who avoided such grisly ends, but they lurked in darkness and were hardly out and about making friends.

“Still, though. Isn’t it aggravating to sit around and do nothing? I wanna be able to make him cry next time he comes to the Kingdom! But for that, we need info—as much info as we can get our hands on.”

“Also, when he came to the Kingdom, he didn’t bring subhumans. If he took subhumans under his wing as a result of failing in the Kingdom, then we need to be even more cautious.”

Gagaran and the other twin voiced their thoughts as well.

“So you want to know what we know?”

The Blue Roses all nodded, and Lakyus finished. “We’ll pay you the same as what you paid us.”

“Commander, can I take over negotiations from here?”

Remedios agreed immediately to Gustav’s suggestion.

“Then we’d like our compensation in a different form, not cash.”

“And that would be? We’ll try to provide what you ask, but I can’t simply promise that anything will go… That said, if you want to be connected to an influential noble, I think we can arrange that.”

“Oh? Thank you for that, but actually we’re after something else. Would you come to our country and fight with us?”

Silence fell over the room once more. After a few seconds—no, probably more—there was finally a sound. Lakyus had leaned back in her chair.

“Apologies, but we can’t compensate you in that way.”

“…We’re after the information in order to *not* die. Doing it that way would defeat the purpose.” Evileye shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *No can do*.

“We’re not saying you have to face Jaldabaoth. You could be on standby in the rear dispensing healing magic.”

“Don’t lie to us. You definitely need more help than that.” Gagaran rolled her eyes.

It was true. The northern part of the Sacred Kingdom had been conquered by Jaldabaoth and could hardly put up any meaningful resistance at this point.

Most of the people had been sent to the camps, and the few remaining paladins were hiding out in caves.

“No, it’s not like that. We’re just barely holding the subhuman invasion back.”

The Southern Sacred Kingdom’s territory was still intact, and the troops guarding the southlands and Jaldabaoth’s army were sizing each other up. If that could be counted as holding back the invaders, then they were.

Lies versus truth. Neia knew the truth, so she felt Gustav’s response was closer to a lie.

“Would it be possible for you to come?”

“Sorry.”

Remedios had straightened up to ask, but Evileye’s reply was a clear no. And the silence of other members must have meant it wasn’t just her opinion but the collective’s decision.

“…Honestly, I said we were just barely holding them back, but…we’re actually in rougher shape. The Northern Sacred Kingdom is lost, but we still have some forces remaining in the south. Still, it’ll be impossible to beat Jaldabaoth with them alone.” Gustav poured some water into his cup and took a drink. Then he spoke again. “The reason the country wasn’t swallowed up in a single gulp was that the naval forces managed to pin Jaldabaoth’s troops along the coast. If he found a way around that and continued advancing south, we wouldn’t stand a chance.”

But that was what the people of the north thought, since they knew Jaldabaoth’s power. The people down south may have had completely different ideas. Maybe they thought they could drive him off on their own.

That was a sign that information wasn’t being shared effectively, but it was partly due to other issues between the two regions.

In the south, a majority of the nobles opposed a woman overriding her elder brother’s claim to take the throne.

Which is why, in order to avoid a split, the Holy Lady had ignored the slanderous rumor in the south that she had attained her position through

collusion with influential shrines and that her aide, Kelart Custodio, had been pulling strings from behind the scenes.

After that, the south never acted, so they managed to avoid an all-out confrontation, but that was because power had been balanced. Now that the north had collapsed, the south didn't need to play nice anymore. The southern powers were only a few steps away from eclipsing the north.

At this juncture, with Jaldabaoth attacking, it seemed absurd that fighting would break out between humans. And catching glimpses of the power struggle surrounding the decision of who would be the next king made Neia, a commoner, uncomfortable.

"That's no good."

"It's not. Our few air units in the naval forces sustained heavy losses battling flying demons. We won't be able to hold Jaldabaoth's army back forever. We need some kind of breakthrough. Please lend us your strength! Even just for a month or two! We'll do our best to provide whatever compensation you ask! Please save the Sacred Kingdom!"

When Gustav lowered his head, Neia and paladins bowed and said, "We beg you!"

Then the quiet room filled with Lakyus's voice. "Please raise your heads. And I'm sorry, but we can't go to the Sacred Kingdom."

"Why not?!"

Neia jerked her head up at Remedios's shout and saw her leaning out of her seat, glaring at Lakyus.

"I doubt he'll stop with defeating the Sacred Kingdom! He'll probably just gather his strength there and then attack you! If we don't defeat him now, things will only get worse!"

"Yes. There is a good chance that's what will happen."

Before Gustav could stop her, Remedios barreled ahead. "So if you understand that, then why won't you help us?! It's not only you! The nobles here and in our own country—they don't get it at all! We should be combining

our powers to fight!”

“…The reason our kingdom’s nobles can’t help you is a bit different from ours. How much do you know about the Nation of Darkness?”

It was a country built upon usurping one of the kingdom’s cities. And it was a horrible place ruled by an undead king. That was what the people of the Sacred Kingdom knew. When Remedios explained as much, Lakyus smiled wryly.

“Right. You have it almost correct, but there’s one part you’re mistaken on… It’s true that undead are in charge, but supposedly the humans living there are safe.”

“……Huh? But undead despise the living.”

“But there are all different kinds of undead, right? And the King of Darkness is an undead ruler. It must be easy for him to get the undead below him to submit and not harm the humans.”

Evileye pouted audibly.

“Come now, Evileye… Anyway, since we have this issue of the Nation of Darkness, we aren’t able to support you. And we sustained terrible losses in the battle against the Nation of Darkness. We’ll be feeling the effects of that for years to come. Even the nobles who appear wealthy don’t actually have assets to spare.”

“Still, though! Shouldn’t Jaldabaoth be handled as soon as possible?! He’s actually out there harming humans as we speak. The Nation of Darkness or whatever isn’t hurting people, right?!”

“…I don’t think I need to explain how dangerous it would be to open another front while a country is already exhausted.”

Remedios faltered.

“And two members of our party were actually killed in our fight with Jaldabaoth. We resurrected them with a spell, but they still haven’t reached their former strength. If we ventured to the land Jaldabaoth is ruling in such a state, we could be wiped out.”

“But it’s like Gustav said—you don’t have to fight him!”

“Is this lady serious…?”

“Tia! Excuse us. Um, I’m sorry, but I just don’t think things will go that smoothly. If there’s even the slightest chance that we would have to face Jaldabaoth, we have to turn down the job. We need to gather our own strength and prepare for the future…in case Jaldabaoth attacks Re-Estize again.”

The faces of the Blue Roses were unwavering; it didn’t seem like it would be possible to convince them.

Eventually Remedios spoke in a choked voice. “Then who will save our country?”

The Blue Roses exchanged glances with one another.

“There’s only one answer.” It was Evileye who replied. “Really, you should have talked to him first.”

“…Who?”

“Sir Momon, of course! The one who repelled Jaldabaoth the first time.”

“Ohhh! That makes sense!”

“Please wait, Commander Custodio… Isn’t he…I mean…?”

“So you’ve heard? Yes, he’s in the Nation of Darkness working for the king. You’ll have to persuade the King of Darkness.”

“Urk!” Remedios exclaimed.

Neia understood how she felt. It was a pretty complicated matter for a subject of the Sacred Kingdom to go to an undead for help.

She sensed that, even as a squire. Remedios, commander of the paladins and bearer of a Holy Sword, was probably even more eager to avoid anything of the sort. But there was power in her eyes as she looked at the Blue Roses.

“…If that’s our best shot at defeating Jaldabaoth, then let’s do it. Or really, it’s our only choice. Would you mind writing us an intro to this Momon g—?”

“*Sir* Momon, Commander.”

“R-right! Do you think you could write us an intro to Sir Momon?”

2

After the meeting with the Blue Roses, Neia and the other members of the paladin delegation were quick to depart the royal capital. Not only was there no longer anyone in Re-Estize who could help them, but they realized it would take months to gather any information about Jaldabaoth's true form. Plus, they now had a lead in the form of Momon, the only person with any chance at defeating the demon leader.

Above all, their wish to do something for the people suffering in Roebel spurred them on.

Giving their horses only minimal rest, sometimes using magic, they proceeded east along the highway at a pace impossible for normal travelers.

After passing one final village, the party entered the buffer zone between Re-Estize and the Nation of Darkness.

Low hills obstructed their view, and there was no telling when a monster might emerge from the occasional patches of virgin forest. It was former Kingdom territory, true, but that only meant the chance of being attacked was slimmer, not zero.

Neia kept her sight, smell, and other senses sharp as they moved through that terrain.

Doesn't seem like there's anything waiting along the highway. And no signs that large carnivores recently passed this way.

The highway was a dirt road. Apparently, they would soon enter an area under royal jurisdiction, which would be better maintained. For most travelers, having a proper road was more convenient, but Neia preferred being able to see tracks in the dirt.

She looked down at her palms.

She wasn't terribly fond of her hands.

They were toughened from training, though it wasn't as if she hated them. She just hated her lack of ability.

She inherited her keen senses from her father, but unfortunately, she didn't get anything similar from her mother.

Neia's mother had been a paladin of some reputation, as well as fairly good with a sword. But her daughter could train all she wanted—she simply didn't have the aptitude. She hadn't even trained with her father's specialty, the bow, but she was rather adept at using one.

Well, she was probably lucky to have inherited even half of their superior skills. But the special powers paladins acquired could only be used with close-quarters weapons. An aptitude for ranged weapons was pointless for someone aiming to join the ranks of paladins.

She returned her hands to the reins and held them tightly.

She lifted her hips a bit and adjusted her position on her saddle. She had spent quite a long time on her horse since departing Roebel, leaving her butt and groin incredibly sore.

If she asked one of the paladins, she could get them to relieve her pain with a lower-tier healing spell, but she was a grown woman. Such a request was too embarrassing. And since her discomfort was so minor that it didn't affect her ability to ride, it was even harder to bring up.

…I can just rub some herbs on it later like always. I owe it to my dad for that one. When he talked to me about what to do if you got a sore butt, I was annoyed, but… Hmm, did I ever apologize for that…? Sigh…

She bit back the tears threatening to form in the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, Commander. We can see the pavement up ahead. We'll be in Nation of Darkness territory soon."

It was a strange sight to see that partway down the highway the road was suddenly paved.

"Right. So should we just go straight there? Or will we camp somewhere on the way?"

Neia looked up at the sky.

"If we don't run into any issues, we can reach our destination before

sundown. But we'll have to move pretty fast. What should we do?"

"Let me talk to Gustav quick." Remedios pulled her reins and slowed down to talk to her second-in-command.

So this is Nation of Darkness territory…? Where are the soldiers? There's not even a fort. The Re-Estize side had one…

Normally, there would at least be a guardhouse on the border, but this country didn't have one. She had heard that the Nation of Darkness only had one city, so she thought maybe all the troops were concentrated there.

Neia looked down at the paved road.

The path ahead wound between gently sloping hills. Far off in the distance, she could see a forest that had lost its leaves for winter.

She remembered camping with her father in the blustery time of year. Nature was the same wherever one went. She had the feeling this scenery was no different than what winter looked like in the Sacred Kingdom.

…What was it he said? That it was a pain to live in the human world?

Her father's words remained like a tiny thorn in her heart.

He said it was for her mother that he went to live in the city. If he hadn't had a family, he would have lived in a little village near the forest, surviving on the bounties of nature.

When she was little, Neia thought living with nature seemed harder, but during this trip it hit her what her father meant. *Is it proof that I've grown up?* At this age she would have been able to have different conversations with both her mother and father.

Those thoughts elicited another twinge from her heart. But the pain only lasted an instant. She was distracted by the scene that came into view beyond the road snaking eastward through the hills.

A fire?!

Neia squinted and took a more careful look.

The milky-white clouds weren't smoke but fog. Still…

“Apologies for interrupting, but there appears to be fog up ahead!”

“What about it?”

When she called behind her, Remedios answered with her face guard up, looking dubious.

“Neia Baraja, what bothers you about it?”

“Ma’am, I just thought that since there aren’t any large lakes or the like in this area, it’s strange for so much fog to be around.”

The creamy fog, growing thicker as they spoke, was spreading more and more, nearly reaching their party.

Neia’s father had taught her a lot about natural phenomena, and according to that knowledge, too, this much fog appearing seemed unusual.

“Squire Baraja. It’s not a special environmental shift, is it?” Gustav, who was quicker to catch on than Remedios, asked.

A special environmental shift meant some sort of phenomenon that wouldn’t normally occur happening over a widespread area. For example, a region covered in rotten poisonous gas due to failed ritual magic, a desert where a huge storm occurred for a week once each year, or a place where rainbow rain fell during a specific season.

He was asking if this fog was one of those totally mysterious phenomena. But Neia hadn’t heard anything about it during her research. She had the feeling she’d get complaints if she admitted it outright like that, but she had no choice but to be honest.

“My apologies. I didn’t read or hear anything about this fog.”

“Do you mean you didn’t do enough research?”

Another question that was difficult to answer. Who was the one who would judge whether she did enough or not?

“Commander Custodio. I think the most important thing right now is what to do next.”

The horses had already stopped.

The fog was too thick; it wouldn't be safe to continue on horseback. According to her research, there weren't any sheer cliffs on the outskirts of E-Rantel, so even if something came up, they should have been able to handle it at a trot. But something about this sudden fog made her hesitate.

Neia sniffed.

It smelled only like water. Nothing stuck out to her in particular. But that made her wonder about it even more.

"Commander. Do you think it could be the work of some monster? My father once told me that some have the power to create fog and that they attack those who wander into it and get lost."

"…Everyone, draw your weapons! It's dangerous to stand still in the middle of the road, so move off to the side!"

That split-second decision was proof that Remedios functioned well in combat.

Neia and the paladins obeyed the order, walking their horses to the side of the road. Then they all formed a defensive circle. By that time, it seemed like the whole world was enshrouded in fog.

Even the person right next to her she could see only hazily. It was impossible to make out anything more than fifteen yards ahead. Anxiety swelled in her chest, and the swirling of the fog seemed almost like a parade of ghosts.

If she could hear better that would help, but she was surrounded by knights in full plate armor. Even their slightest movement caused the metal to rub, which drowned out quieter sounds. Under the circumstances, if something were sneaking up on them, it would be hard to detect. The only person Neia knew who would be able to hear well in this situation would have been her father.

Realizing how great he truly was, she desperately strained her ears.

"This fog really is strange. It's not even usually this thick by the sea."

"Aren't we almost to the Nation of Darkness's city? Could there really be monsters lurking this close? Or is it precisely because we're in the Nation of Darkness that we're in this weird situation?"

“I don’t know, but…maybe it’s some sort of defensive spell the Nation of Darkness keeps active.”

“…Quit talking about magic. It gives me a headache. Just tell me if you notice anything. In the easiest way possible. If it’s a monster, couldn’t we kill it and use that deed as a debt in the negotiations to dispatch Sir Momon?”

“I wonder. It’s up to each country to get rid of the monsters in their territory, but…”

Perhaps because she was focusing her ears so hard, she could hear the conversation between Gustav and their leader quite clearly. But she wasn’t confident she could keep it up from any farther away. What would her father do in this situation?

You can’t be dependent on someone who isn’t here. I have to find my own way from now on!

But it was true that if she stayed here, her abilities couldn’t be used properly. *Then maybe I should ask if I can take up a position somewhere slightly removed from the others.*

Or maybe I shouldn’t.

Her desire to propose something withered.

Remedios wasn’t very fond of her as it was. What kind of punishment would she get if she failed again? She had no interest in any more trouble.

And it’ll be a pain if she won’t accept my guidance on the rest of this trip…

Neia frantically defended herself. But it wasn’t good for her mental state to be in a crisis and feel like she could handle it better if she were in charge but then say nothing.

From somewhere in her head, she also heard the voice telling her that if this party were wiped out, there would be a delay in getting aid to the suffering people in Roebel, but the biting remarks Remedios hurled at her pained her more.

Just then, Neia saw something out of the corner of her eye that she couldn’t possibly miss.

A large, hazy figure had appeared in the fog in the direction leading farther into the Nation of Darkness.

“Hey, can you take a look over there?” Neia poked the paladin on the horse next to her.

“…No, sorry. The fog’s too thick. I can’t make anything out. Do you see something?”

She heard the knight grip his sword harder.

“Oh no, I thought I did, but maybe it’s just my imagination.”

“I see. Well, if you think you see something, it doesn’t matter what it is, let me know.”

“Okay, I will.”

Neia thanked him with a solemn face and then turned her gaze forward again. If there was such a thing as women who look good smiling and women who don’t, Neia was sure she was the latter. She got a better response, even when saying thank you, if she kept her expression serious.

She stared earnestly into the fog once more. The figure was some distance away, so it seemed she was the only one who could see it, but it definitely wasn’t her imagination.

Perhaps she had improved her mood talking with the knight? Neia decided to try talking to Remedios, but she was busy conferring with Gustav.

“What should we do now?”

“It’s dangerous to move in the fog. Let’s stand by a little longer, but then if nothing seems to be happening, we can dismount and take a rest. By the way, there’s a monster in the sea that creates fog, right?”

“There is. But around here there’s no sea or lakes. Just like Squire Baraja said.”

“Do you think she could have been mistaken or missed something?”

“She doesn’t make that kind of mistake. Hasn’t she gotten us this far safely? We didn’t get caught by the subhumans patrolling the broken wall as we were

leaving the Sacred Kingdom, either. That would have been impossible on our own, you know."

"I'm sure we could have brute forced our way."

Neia's mood plummeted.

Does she have any idea how hard I worked paying attention to every little thing as I guided them?

She recalled having the party stand by and scouting ahead on her own in the cold rain, crawling through the mud because she didn't have concealment abilities like a ranger.

If she had been found—alone in that forward position—she would have been as good as dead. Still, if she could help save the people suffering in the Sacred Kingdom, she was prepared to risk her life.

That's right. I'm not out here doing this for compliments. She tried to convince herself. Even if the commander wouldn't recognize her, the people would appreciate her hard work, though they weren't likely to say it aloud.

Only children feel like they need some consideration—a reward—for doing their best. This is what it means to serve as someone's shield. It's a paladin's duty to bite their lip and protect people from the tough stuff. That's what our commander has been doing in her career, too. Just…I wish she would at least talk quieter. Well, they probably think they've lowered their voices enough, but…

Their conversation continued.

Meanwhile Neia was thinking, *Quit chatting and help keep watch already.* Remedios, with her knack for smelling danger and her combat prowess, would be especially good at that.

Suppressing her irritation, Neia focused her attention on the figure in the fog—because she couldn't stand listening to Remedios and Gustav talk anymore, but neither had she recovered enough to interrupt them.

Then perhaps the wind blew the fog? For just an instant she could make out the outline of a distinct form.

But she couldn't believe her eyes. What she saw was something that

shouldn’t have existed there.

Huh? No way. It’s…a ship?

Yes, the shape she spotted was a seafaring ship.

And it seemed quite large, like a galleass. But since it was only a moment before the veil of fog covered it again, she couldn’t be sure.

Of course, common sense said it was impossible.

Both the information she had collected *and* Gustav said there were no lakes in this area. But even if there was a lake, only a crazy person would build a ship as big as a galleass in an inland area like this.

If this were an area near the sea, it was possible that they had brought an old ship up on land to repurpose as a fort or something. That practice actually occurred in Roebel. But this far inland, it just didn’t make sense.

I must have seen it wrong.

That had to be the best answer.

Still, her eyes kept flicking in that direction.

“…So you did see something?” the knight from before asked.

“Huh?!” It caught her off guard.

“In that direction you were looking just now—you saw something, right?”

“Huh? No, I…”

She had seen something that looked just like a ship. But if she said that, he would almost certainly wonder if she had gone mad. Neia would definitely be doubted. So what could she say?

“Even if it was just your imagination. Could you tell me if you think you see something? That way, if it turns out to actually be something, it’ll be easier to handle.”

He was so incredibly sensible.

When she glanced around, she saw that everyone was listening to their conversation. All eyes were on her. Under those circumstances, she couldn’t

just say it was her eyes playing tricks on her.

"…Um, I had the feeling I saw a large shape."

"You mean like the shape of a monster?"

It was the person she wanted to be questioned by the least. *No, don't ask!* she thought, but there was no way she could say that.

She sighed dozens of times in her mind before finally answering. "No, it seemed more like a building."

"…You really saw it?"

"I don't know. I just had the feeling I saw it. It might be a better chance that it was my imagination."

"A building? Like a Nation of Darkness fort or something?"

"I don't know. But it's true that so far we haven't seen a single Nation of Darkness fort along the road. Or a village. You would expect to see those things along the border."

She told herself that it sounded better to say that it seemed like a building rather than just saying she saw a ship.

"I see… What do you think, Gustav?"

"It makes an awful lot of sense. But…we haven't actually confirmed that it's a building, right?"

"Right. I only caught a glimpse of it, so it might be something else."

"Commander Custodio. I think our best bet is to standby in the fog for a little while longer. I doubt a Nation of Darkness fort would easily allow foreigners past anyhow."

"Ahhh. Well, shall we do that, then? Everyone, stay on guard."

The party acknowledged the order. That included Neia.

Though they were supposed to be on guard, everyone's attention ended up focused on one spot. They all wanted to see it with their own eyes.

For a while, the fog was too thick to see anything, but just when they were

starting to lose interest in the possibility of a building, something happened.

"—Ngh!"

Both Neia and the knight next to her gasped at the same time.

They could see something clearly moving through the fog.

"Wh-what is that?!"

Neia couldn't answer the knight's question. If she said that ships were mobile, she would sound insane.

"That's the form you saw…? It's moving! So it wasn't a building?"

The commander's questions were natural. But since Neia hadn't said what she thought it actually looked like, she was forced to insist that it seemed like a building.

"It seemed like one to me…"

"But it's definitely moving! And…it's getting easier to see. I think it's coming this way!"

She was right. If it was really a boat, it was sailing in their direction. So then…it was a boat that sailed across land?

But…that can't be.

Eventually, it came close enough that others could discern its true shape through the thick fog.

There was no longer any doubt it was a ship. It was sailing as if it were on open water. Thick, long oars jutted out from the hull and moved as if they were actually paddling.

"This has to be some kind of joke." Remedios's astounded comment spoke for everyone.

"Do boats in the Nation of Darkness sail on land? Landlocked countries come up with some fascinating inventions…"

No, that can't be it, Neia retorted in her head. She couldn't have been the only one to think that.

“A ship that sails through fog… I feel like I heard about something like that before…”

“Nice, Gustav! C’mon, think! If anyone can do it, you can. You’re always teaching me things. Oh, should I shake your head up?”

“Please don’t. And I’m not some kind of wise man, you know. It’s just that I’ve taken it upon myself to learn the things that you won’t.”

“…Well, it’s ’cause I had you and my sister. Whenever I asked something, you always answered.”

“I guess we spoiled you. Once we do away with Jaldabaoth, I’ll make sure you catch up. Oh, and thanks to that I just remembered! It’s that ghost ship that shows up in thick fog. I heard about it from a sailor. He said it’s a ship that was supposed to have sunk, but instead it’s crewed by undead.”

“Ohhh! I have heard something like that, about thick fog being the sign of a ghost ship’s arrival… Troops, get into a wedge formation! If it’s a ghost ship, we’re up against undead! They’re our enemies!”

Their commander’s order caused even the paladins some consternation.

“P-please wait, Commander Custodio! We’re entering the Nation of Darkness where an undead is king. Couldn’t it be a Nation of Darkness ship?”

“What?! You mean they brought a ghost ship ashore and are controlling it…? What in the world…?”

It was only natural that Remedios would be lost for words.

Some undead did control other undead. But what kind of undead would be able to take a ship that normally sailed the sea under its power?

Before long, the ship was fully visible.

It really was a ghost ship.

The whole thing was a wreck. There were gaping holes in the hull, and the boards were twisted up in places.

It was huge—definitely bigger than the flagship of the Sacred Kingdom’s navy, *The Holy King’s Hammer*. If it weren’t falling apart, it would have imparted quite

a powerful impression.

The last of the three masts was rigged with a fore-and-aft sail, while the other two had square sails. But they were so ragged, it didn't seem like they would be able to do their job. The ram jutted out to an unusually sharp point and gleamed as if it had been polished. Not only that, it had the dim glow of enchantment, and the entire ship seemed almost proud of it.

But what was most eye-catching of all was the crest raised on the main mast. It definitely belonged to the Nation of Darkness.

The ship was floating about three feet off the ground.

Soon it was passing by, ignoring the party that was frozen stiff staring at it.

As they all stood stock-still, the fog began to dissipate. Was it the ship causing the fog as it sailed along? No, if that were the case, the fog would have been thickest when it approached them, and they wouldn't have even been able to see it. The ship must have been surrounded by the fog at a short distance, like a membrane meant to conceal it.

Or maybe it was a cage to keep its prey from getting away. Neia's own thoughts sent a chill up her spine.

The King of Darkness… An undead ruler. He might actually be terrifying…

When she heard he had summoned weird giant goats, she had imagined adorable barn animals, so maybe she had been underestimating him.

That made her anxious.

Just as undead were the enemies of paladins, might not paladins be the enemies of undead? In that case, their fates were…

Still, in order to get help from Sir Momon, who was supposedly Jaldabaoth's equal in combat, they needed to ask for his cooperation. Neia wiped the sweat off the palms of her hands.

"…It looks like the fog has cleared. Let's go, everyone."

This undead king could reign over something that bizarre.

Neia braced herself.

The King of Darkness may be undead, but he allows humans to live… I wonder what he's like. But I'm sure a squire like me won't get to meet him anyway…

3

In the distance, they could see the outermost rampart of the famous triple-walled city, E-Rantel, the capital of the Nation of Darkness—and its splendid gate.

But what caught Neia's attention wasn't either of those things. What her eyes latched onto were the giant statues on either side of the gate.

It was an undead holding a strange staff—it looked like snakes twisting together. Perhaps they depicted the king, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Neia was still quite a ways away, but she could make out the details. She felt that even if she walked right up to it, she wouldn't be able to find any sloppiness in the workmanship.

There were people-shaped creatures laboring around the statues.

Huh? Wait. Aren't they kind of big? I mean, that's the height of the wall. I get that the statues are big, but… Who are those workers?

The other members of the party seemed to wonder the same thing, and the paladins were discussing the hulking workers among themselves.

"…Surely they're not human."

"Couldn't be. Maybe giants? Although they don't look like hill giants to me…"

"Giants? Will we be all right? I've heard that some are friendly, but…"

Neia was only a squire, so she had never seen a giant before, but she had learned about them in her lectures on monster knowledge.

Giants were essentially a bigger version of humans, but not only were they stronger, they had racial abilities, too. Using those abilities, they were able to tolerate harsher environments than humans, so they were often found in those

areas and didn't have much relationship with the plain dwellers.

Some races knew more magic than humans, and some had more advanced cultures.

Some races were evil, and some were good. One of the Thirteen Heroes was a giant, and there was a sea giant who showed up in Roebel now and then on business.

That said, typical giants were violent and dangerous.

And the race of dangerous giants that often showed up in the human world were hill dwellers. One well-known subspecies of giant was the trolls.

So why were there giants in this undead city?

"…Maybe there were always giants in this region? And he conquered them?"

"You're saying the King of Darkness controls giants? I haven't heard anything like that!"

It was only natural for the paladin to yelp in surprise at such a suggestion.

They had gathered a large amount of information in preparation for their trip to the Nation of Darkness. Of course, there were a heap of unknowns, so it was hard to say whether they had succeeded, but they definitely put in a lot of effort. But first there was the ghost ship and now giants? The mystery only deepened.

Neia wondered if maybe the King of Darkness was an undead giant, but if that were a noticeable characteristic of his, it should have been in the information they had gathered.

Then Gustav called out to her from behind. "Squire Baraja. It's about time to change formation. Head to the rear."

"Yes, sir!"

During their travels, Neia led the way, but once they were near the city, her position switched to the rear. Remedios and Gustav took the lead.

"Commander Custodio, should we send someone ahead to announce us?"

Usually it would be alarming if a party of knights in full plate armor showed up

outside a city. For that reason, when they entered cities and villages in Re-Estize, they had sent a single paladin ahead of time to say they were coming, and only then would the party approach with Roebel's flag displayed. That was proper etiquette.

Remedios agreed and sent a paladin up ahead.

The knight went to the gate of the Nation of Darkness and then came back.

"Commander, I let the guard know. They welcome us."

"Okay, got it. Then let's go! Flag up! Chests out! Don't do anything that would shame the Sacred Kingdom's Paladin Order!"

With that shout to start them off, the party had their horses slowly approach the city.

Soon they were able to clearly see the gate and the giants working around it.

The giants were stabilizing the statues and doing maintenance work, cleaning up the carvings to make them even more beautiful.

The giants had pale-blueish skin and white beards and hair. They wore primitive clothing made from some sort of beast skins along with sophisticated mail shirts.

"What kind of giants are they?"

Neia's superior hearing meant she could listen in on the conversation at the head of the group.

"I imagine they're probably the frost variety."

"Hmm." She heard Remedios's vague reply. "Are they strong? What kind of powers do they have?"

"…Seriously? Give me a break… Frost giants live in frigid regions and have perfect resistance to chill. But they're weak against fire."

"I see. So we should attack with fire if we have to fight them."

"Well, yes. Mythril-rank adventurers should be able to beat them with minimal hassle. But some of them are trained like us and have warrior abilities. So you have to be careful."

That’s what giants were like.

Warrior training, caster training, thief training. Humans weren’t the only ones polishing their skills. Superior races tended not to train in that way, but some did put in the effort to acquire skills, thus becoming extremely challenging adversaries.

Neia’s father always said, *A beast you can tell by looking. Powerful enemies you can’t gauge by sight alone are the toughest.*

“Hmm, I’ve never fought a giant. Well, ogres are a different story, but…”

“You’ll offend them if you lump them in with ogres. According to the sea giant, it’s like thinking humans and monkeys are basically the same—although I heard that secondhand from a bard, so I don’t know how true it is.”

“Hrm. So Roebel wasn’t able to hire the sea giant, but the Nation of Darkness has hired frost giants? Which type of giant is stronger?”

“Mm, I don’t know details like that…”

The commander was probably hoping that the sea giant was superior, but what was important in this case was how the frost giants were treated by the Nation of Darkness.

Were they here on friendly terms? Or had they been forced into submission? Or was it a mutually beneficial exchange of goods, services, and money?

Just looking at the silently laboring giants, it was impossible to tell.

But wow, giants sure look like fantastic workers. The Sacred Kingdom cooperates with subhumans, too, but if we could expand the races we work with, I’m sure we could accomplish all sorts of things. Of course, it’s probably impossible for us…

Roebel had a long-standing cooperative relationship with mermen, but they were an exception. The Sacred Kingdom had also gone to war with subhumans, so they would probably never be widely accepted in human society.

Did the Nation of Darkness only accept giants? Or did they welcome all different kinds of races? If they encountered subhumans like the ones attacking Roebel, would Neia be able to suppress her hostile instincts?

I mean, I'll have to, but…

For instance, what if snakemen showed up? What if snakemen, from lands Roebel had no contact with, were living in harmony with humans in the Nation of Darkness? Raising one's sword against a snakeman just because there happened to be some in a hostile force attacking her homeland was surely a dangerous line of thinking. It would probably be impossible to simply say, *Don't give in to antagonistic feelings*, but in this case, they had to abide by the rules.

Neia looked with some concern at Remedios up ahead.

Would their leader be able to do that?

Neia shook her head internally. *It's disrespectful of me to worry about Remedios like that. She's working to save the Sacred Kingdom as the head of the delegation. Surely she can suppress an emotional response. For someone like me to doubt her is awfully rude.*

"Is it fine for us to keep going like this? Should we head for a different gate?"

The gate was open, but they wondered if the giants would pay enough attention as they worked to not step on them.

"Straight in is fine. They would laugh at us and our country if we switched gates because we were scared of some giants."

"…Understood. Then we'll follow your lead, Commander."

The party continued on toward the gate.

Thankfully, the giants took one look at the humans and paused their work so the smaller beings could pass safely. Neia got the impression that rather than fondness for humans, the giants had some feeling about them as visitors to the Nation of Darkness.

Usually a group would be stopped at the gate, but since they had sent someone ahead, they were led into the magically illuminated city by a human who seemed to be a guard.

The war-trained horses snorted uneasily in the unnatural light.

"Welcome to the Nation of Darkness's city, E-Rantel. Is this your first time here?"

“Yes, it is.”

“I see. Then, if you’ll excuse me asking, could you please come off your horses?”

Are they going to inspect our luggage? wondered Neia. For them to inspect the bags of a group visiting as messengers from another country seemed a bit lacking in courtesy, but it was probably the right move.

Having dismounted from their horses without complaint, the group followed the guard who guided them with a “This way,” to a door off the side of the gate. Common sense told Neia it must have been an observation tower used as barracks for soldiers and a defense base.

“Please go in here for now. Our country is quite different from the kingdom or the Theocracy, etc., so we have first-time visitors receive a lecture here.”

“A lecture?”

“Yes, to avoid any unnecessary trouble. You won’t be permitted to enter the city until the lecture is over. What would you like to do?”

There was no way they would come this far and then not enter. It went without saying that Remedios answered, “We’ll listen.”

“Very well. May I hold on to your weapons for you?”

They probably couldn’t refuse this, either. But as could be expected, Remedios disapproved of the idea.

The sword she carried was one of the Sacred Kingdom’s holy treasures. When she explained that she wore it even before the holy king and that she couldn’t possibly hand it over unless they were meeting the ruler of the country, the soldier nodded.

“I see. Well, I suppose that can’t be helped. Then you may all proceed as you are. I wanted to take them for your own protection. Please promise me that you won’t draw your weapons in this room. If you can’t promise me that, it would be better for you to leave this place.”

“Got it. Since you trust us to wear our swords without incident, we promise not to draw them.”

Remedios put a fist to her chest—where the crest of the Sacred Kingdom was emblazoned—to make the vow. It meant that she swore on her honor as a paladin and her loyalty to the Sacred Kingdom.

“Thank you. First the defender of this area will come to meet you.”

In Roebel, Remedios’s vow would have drawn gasps of awe, but in a foreign country, it was passed right over. The soldier knocked on the door without even commenting on it.

The door slowly opened and what emerged was—

“Eegh!” Neia inadvertently emitted what could have been interpreted as a gasp or a shriek.

What slowly emerged was a being that could be described as thick in the vertical, horizontal, and every other direction.

Sharp spikes jutted from black full plate armor that sported a pattern like blood vessels running across its surface. Its helmet had horns like a demon and an open face that left the rotting features of a person visible. In its vacant eye sockets, its hatred for living things and anticipation of slaughter burned red.

The temperature plunged, and it felt like darkness was closing in on them.

“Please do not draw your weapons!” The soldier’s shout made everyone’s shoulders jump. “Nothing will happen even if you leave your blades where they are! But if you draw them, you’ll be killed in a single blow! And you’ll be doomed to suffer ever after! Please don’t make me watch that happen again!”

The pain in his voice was clearly from experience. He must have seen it happen before.

The undead gazed unhurriedly upon Neia and the others. The creature almost seemed to be waiting for them to draw their weapons.

“…What’s this undead?” Remedios’s voice trembled slightly.

“One of the city’s many guards.”

“…This thing’s a…?” Remedios cried out of shock, fear, unease, or maybe something else. Neia felt the same way. It was unimaginable to them that there could be a country where more than one undead that seemed this strong

existed.

“E-excuse me, but is this undead under the control of the—er, His Majesty the King of Darkness?” Neia asked without thinking, and the soldier nodded.

“Yes, that’s right. He also seems to be controlling even more powerful undead than this.”

“They’re not dangerous?”

The soldier answered Gustav’s question immediately as well. He seemed like he was terribly eager to talk.

“Yes, as long as no one causes any problems in the city, no one will be killed.”

Undead loathed the living. If the King of Darkness controlled them so well he could keep them from harming humans, he had to be an amazingly powerful being. It hit Neia just how immense his power really was.

“I…see. So could you take us to this room, then?”

“Very well. Please follow me.”

The black-armored undead shifted slowly out of the way of the door, and the soldier walked right past. Meanwhile Neia and the others looked around to see which of them would go first.

Supposedly the King of Darkness had the thing under control, but it wasn’t as if there were any visible restraints. It was twice as frightening as passing by an untethered carnivore that supposedly had a full stomach.

Remedios tried to lead the way, but Gustav stopped her. Then he looked at Neia.

So I’m the canary?

If the question was which life wouldn’t matter if lost, he wasn’t wrong. She would have liked to think the weak were to be protected, but apparently squires didn’t count.

Neia steeled her resolve, squeezed her eyes shut, and walked forward.

After a few steps, she slowly opened her eyes. She hadn’t been cut down yet, so she sped up and hurried out of the undead’s range.

Seeing that Neia had passed safely, the paladins followed. Eventually, the entire party made it to the lecture room without being attacked.

The soldier opened the door, and inside were several long tables and quite a large number of simple chairs.

“Have a seat here and wait just a moment, please.”

“Okay. Thank you for showing us in.” When Remedios gestured with her jaw, Gustav took a small pouch from his breast pocket and tried to hand it to the soldier. It was a tip.

“Oh, please don’t!” He practically shrieked a forceful refusal.

The soldier raised both hands over his head so as not to even touch the pouch.

The reaction was a bit shocking to all present, including Neia. She couldn’t figure out why he responded so intensely.

“I receive a salary from the King of Darkness, so I don’t require gratuities, thank you.”

“B-but you assisted us so kindly…and besides, it’s not very much…”

“Still, I’m all right. Now then, I’ll be waiting outside until the lecture is over.”

The soldier made a swift exit. His sensitive reaction made everyone left behind exchange puzzled glances.

“Is it really okay not to tip?”

“If he said he doesn’t want it, then there’s not much we can do about it, is there?”

It was utterly natural to pay a tip. It was fine not to, but people of a certain status usually did. Of course, it came with the ulterior motive of hoping they could be moved through the inspection process quickly, but it wasn’t as if they had asked for anything explicitly. It was more just that their rank and station made a tip appropriate.

If his refusal was on the directive of the King of Darkness, what was its purpose?

“He didn’t say where to sit in particular, huh? Everyone take whatever seat you like.”

Following their commander’s instructions, everyone sat down, and finally a little while later, the door opened.

Neia turned around to look, and her eyes widened.

It was a member of the race that was human from the chest up and snake below—a naga.

There were multiple types of nagas, such as the sea nagas that popped up sometimes along the Sacred Kingdom’s coast, but she didn’t know which variety this was. Regardless, no nagas were friendly with humans, yet she didn’t feel frightened or surprised.

It was thanks to that black-armored undead. It was much easier to keep her head around a naga than that thing.

Oh! Could that be part of the point? That terrifying undead wasn’t just to cow us but also to lessen the shock of other subhumans appearing? They really put a lot of consideration into making it so humans and subhumans can coexist together here…

Apparently, the King of Darkness wasn’t *just* an extremely powerful undead.

Paying no mind to the party’s reaction, the naga entered the silent room. Then it bowed its head slightly.

“Sorry I kept you waiting, humans who wish to enter the city. I am one of our immigration officers, Ryuraryusu Spenia Ai Indaloon. I’m a naga. Well, you won’t be meeting those of my occupation very often, so it’s fine to forget about it. Sorry to be so brisk, but let’s begin. I’m going to be briefly explaining life in this city, how it differs from nearby cities, and things to keep in mind while you’re here… First of all, drawing weapons inside the city is prohibited.”

That’s a perfectly normal warning. Neia relaxed her shoulders somewhat.

“Hmm. It seems many of you thought that sounded like a normal warning.” Ryuraryusu squinted at them. “I can see it on your faces. But remember: In the Nation of Darkness, all manner of races walk the streets. You may even see

undead shuffling along. Even if it's against a being you know as dangerous, drawing your weapon first is a serious crime."

"Wait. Are you saying that if we encounter a dangerous being, we should just run away?"

"No. In this city, dangerous beings shouldn't harm you. I'm just saying not to jump to conclusions if you still feel scared or threatened."

"Can you guarantee that we won't be attacked?"

"I can. The dangerous beings swaggering around here that you are most likely to be afraid of are His Majesty the King of Darkness's servants." Ryuraryusu's lips curved into a slightly tired smile. "I think after a day in the city, your sense of danger will grow numb, but, well, it's that first day that's the issue. Oh, but if you're defending yourself, using your weapons is fine."

"Aha. So for defense, there's no problem."

"Yes, exactly. And in this city, we use mind control to investigate crimes. You'll need to accept that."

Neia's eyes widened. And it wasn't only Neia's. A murmur went through the paladins, and Remedios spoke up as their representative.

"Hold on, please. Is the Nation of Darkness that behind the times? You allow magic like that? What about the courts, then?"

Normally mind control magic would never be used to interrogate criminals.

For example, Dominate could turn anyone into a criminal temporarily, and Charm could probably be used to create a scapegoat. Since criminals could be created at will with such spells, using them was viewed as something only a brutal tyrant would do.

"I hear they use them in court as well. Oh, but the King of Darkness would never make you say anything false. Please don't worry about that."

Anyone could say that, but who would believe it without thinking? Using mind control magic meant that if the country felt someone was a menace, it could frame and dispose of them with ease. There was no way humans could trust an undead they had never even met.

No one said anything, but everyone seemed to have the same opinion.

“Before I continue, perhaps I should ask: Would you rather just leave now?”

“…No, we can’t do that. We’ll go in.”

“Ohhh? That was the fastest answer I’ve ever gotten. Merchants usually take a moment to talk among themselves… Then allow me to continue.”

Most of the things Ryuraryusu said after that sounded crazy—like, “There are undead carriages on the streets”—but the one that stuck out the most was “Don’t be surprised to see dragons flying overhead now and then. Make sure your horses don’t panic.”

If dragons were flying over the city, they would have bigger problems.

A dragon was the kind of opponent that a hero could challenge perfectly prepared, but then still lose and die fighting. That was why warriors dreamed of slaying a dragon. Crushing a monster despite such an overwhelming power gap with trained-up powers, a group of friends, and battle gear earned anyone who succeeded a reputation—a feat attainable only by a select few.

If a dragon appeared in a human realm, what kind of chaos would usually ensue?

I can handle undead after seeing that guard, but dragons…? N-nah, I mean if it’s just one on patrol in the sky, then maybe…? And I’ve heard their powers are really different depending on how old they are.

A newborn dragon whelp was still a dragon. A little one like that would probably be much easier to tame than that undead.

“Well, that’s about it. Thanks for listening. Could you leave this room and follow that soldier up to the gate, then?”

“Sorry, do you mind if I ask some questions?” Remedios raised her hand.

“Hmm? About what?”

“Do you feel like you want to kill us or, like, eat us?”

“The old me probably would have. But now those things are prohibited, and not only that, now that I’ve seen His Majesty, I wonder what the point would

even be of lower life-forms quarreling.”

“His Majesty is that powerful?”

Ryuraryusu smiled in an utterly exhausted way. “The power he possesses is dozens of times greater than what you imagine. The Supreme One and his subordinates all have extraordinary power… Frankly, there’s no safer place than this city His Majesty is protecting.”

Remedios was quiet; she seemed to be thinking.

“I don’t know what you came here to do, but since you listened to my lesson, I’ll teach you something else. A friend I drink tea with—a widow—told me that an utter fool antagonizes the Supreme One, while a wise man throws himself at his feet and begs for mercy.”

The naga’s voice was surprisingly emotional. Maybe the “friend” was a fib and it had really happened to this naga, Ryuraryusu.

“Thank you for your warning.”

Remedios stood, and the rest of the party followed.

Bringing up the rear, Neia bobbed her head at Ryuraryusu and left the room.

4

The delegation walked through the city of E-Rantel. Their destination was perhaps the city’s most luxurious inn—the Golden Glimmer—recommended by the guard.

Neia looked at the people they passed by.

From what Ryuraryusu had told them, she had expected the place to be full of undead and subhumans, with barely a human to be seen, but that wasn’t the case. It was mostly humans.

The only undead she had seen was a group of the same type as that guard, out on patrol, and skeletal horselike figures wrapped in fog that pulled

carriages.

Meanwhile, the subhumans were all strange types.

There were goblins who marched in an orderly fashion down the streets with the dignity of seasoned warriors. That shattered Neia's preconception of goblins. No, not only hers. She heard shocked gasps from the paladins as well.

There was also a maid with a face like a rabbit's and another subhuman that looked like a frog standing upright.

It's more like a normal human country than I thought…well, except not. But I would never guess a horrifying undead king was ruling here.

None of the people they passed by seemed frightened. Neia wasn't sure if that was because they had broadened their worldview and gotten used to it or because they weren't worried about coexisting with undead. Either way, there didn't seem to be any confusion in the streets. She even heard children laughing now and then.

I guess he's way better than Jaldabaoth, then…

Remedios's horse abruptly stopped. The leader of the group had halted, so that meant the rest of the party necessarily stopped as well.

"Excuse me, you dwarves, there. Can I have a word?"

She addressed three dwarves doing maintenance on the road. There were also three skeletons performing construction work on their orders.

The skeletons didn't really faze Neia, but she did feel slightly relieved to finally see something she could win against. That was how surprising everything had been since they had arrived.

"What? Eh? Who are you all? What country are you from?"

"Sorry to talk down at you from my horse. We've come from the Sacred Kingdom, and we're trying to find the Golden Glimmer. Could you give us directions?"

"The Golden…the Golden Glimmer? Oh, you mean that fancy inn?"

The dwarves gave them a rough idea of how to get there. It was slightly

different from the way the guard had mentioned, and it seemed like the destination was a bit off. But Neia was sure that asking directions wasn't the primary objective.

"Aha. I'm grateful for the help. Gustav, a thank-you."

Gustav dismounted and showed them some money.

"Oh, directions we can give for free!"

"That's all right. We interrupted your work, after all."

"Are you sure? Well, thanks."

A dwarf approached to receive the tip. Then he grinned. "With this money, we'll get to eat tasty food, so you have our gratitude."

"No, don't worry about it… So what are you up to here?"

"Hmm? Can't you tell by looking? Road maintenance. Because His Majesty the King of Darkness wishes it. It's mostly people from this city doing the labor, but we were brought on as technical advisers," he said, and then laughed heartily. "Ga-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"I see. And what about those undead?"

"They're skeletons we borrowed from His Majesty the King of Darkness. I have to say, undead really are great for simple manual labor. I see them in a totally new light now."

"You use undead…?"

"What's so surprising about that…? Well, I suppose if you're a traveler, it would be. But in the Nation of Darkness, we take it for granted. I've heard undead are a huge help in the villages—because you can order them to take care of even tough chores like plowing the fields. You know, undead don't get tired, and they don't need to sleep or eat. Plus, they understand spoken language and follow orders—they're the best! There's no way we can go back to the days of horses and oxen. Even my own country has started adopting them little by little."

"You mean not the Nation of Darkness but the dwarf country?"

“Yep. We came from there and are staying at an inn in the subhuman quarter at the moment.”

“The subhuman quarter?”

“That’s right. That’s what the area where races besides humans stay. It used to be the city’s slum district, but they tore all that down. The area was constructed so that people from all sorts of races would be able to have a comfortable stay. Well, I don’t think the area will be finished for a long time, but there’s already a nice house where people like us who are smaller than humans can stay without any struggles.

“We were really brought in to be in charge of that project!” One of the other dwarves shouted.

“I see. But if you tore down the slums, then where did those people go?” The commander’s eyes seemed to flick toward the undead.

“I don’t know the details, but I heard they were dispatched to the villages. There were a lot of abandoned villages near this city, so to restore them, I heard they were just giving away fields. Apparently the way they use undead is even more amazing. I heard they started a massive agricultural project with undead labor. It makes the food prices here pretty cheap.”

“Cheap isn’t the important part. The important part is that there’s lots of tasty food! And drink! If I lived here, I’d get fat in the blink of an eye!”

“If I go back fat, my wife’ll say, ‘You didn’t bring any for me?’ and get grouchy, so I have to go back skinny!”

“Whoo, guess I got lucky.”

The dwarves all laughed in the same hearty way again. “Ga-ha-ha-ha!”

“Lastly, do you know the name of the skeleton horse undead?”

“No. No, but it doesn’t matter. It won’t hurt anybody. The thing’s nothing but bones, but it’s somehow superstrong, so it’s great for transport.”

“I see… Thank you!”

“Thank you, too. Have a good trip!”

Parting from the dwarves, the group continued on toward the inn.

“Commander. Why did you ask the name of the horse undead?”

Neia was wondering the same thing. She had figured that would be the thing Remedios was least interested in.

“…Gustav. I asked because ever since we saw them, you’ve been acting kind of strange.”

“Oh…”

“So do you know what they’re called?”

“…Maybe—I have an idea, but…it’s probably not right. It couldn’t be. I must be misunderstanding something. The undead I’m thinking of would be impossible to control.”

“Hmm. Well, if that’s what you think, it’s probably the truth.”

That was the end of the conversation.

Eventually, after following the direction from the guard, they reached a magnificent inn that must have been the Golden Glimmer. There was a sign with writing on it, but since they couldn’t read the characters used in the kingdom, they could only guess what it said. Re-Estize and the Baharuth Empire had once been part of the same country, so they had many things in common, but Roebel was never part of that dominion.

“Gustav, go on ahead and book our rooms.”

“Understood. Hey, two of you come with me.”

Gustav went toward the inn accompanied by two paladins. A few minutes later, just one of the paladins came back.

“Commander. We were able to get rooms with no problem. The stable is around back, so we’re to take our horses there.”

“I see. Got it. Squire Baraja! Take the horses.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

She tied them to a tree in front of the inn and then transferred them one by one to the stable. Normally, it would be the squire’s job to care for the horses,

but here the inn would do it, so she took advantage of that luxury and went inside.

The inn smelled so nice she thought maybe they did it to counteract the smell of any guests who walked in reeking of the stables.

There was definitely some kind of incense or perfume.

From the outside, it seemed the same class as the place they stayed in Re-Estize, but from the inside, she felt like it might even be a step above. It was enough that she was embarrassed to stand there dirty from her long trip (although at least she had wiped down with water, so hopefully she didn't smell).

Neia went to the room the inn employee directed her to and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Squire Neia Baraja."

Inside the door was one of the paladins, still in his armor. Perhaps E-Rantel was so different from what they imagined during their travels that they were eager to get down to business, loath to even take a moment to recuperate.

"Good timing. We're about to have a meeting."

She wondered if it was really necessary for her to participate, but it wouldn't do to say that aloud. If her superior was telling her to do something, then obeying was the way to get ahead in the world.

"All right, so today we'll request an audience with the King of Darkness as planned. I'm counting on you, Gustav."

"Of course, Commander. What will everyone else do? The idea was to have them meet with influential individuals to request assistance…"

Since Sir Momon was an adventurer, they were planning to go to the Adventurers Guild, but Ryuraryusu had told them the guild was practically on hiatus. The King of Darkness's subordinates were fulfilling requests instead.

"Let's go to the guild anyway. If there are any adventurers with free time on their hands, we can invite them to the Sacred Kingdom."

“Understood. Then…”

Gustav gave orders to two of the knights, and they got started on their tasks immediately.

What kind of job would Neia get?

As a squire, her main tasks were polishing the knights’ armor and swords, doing the laundry, and even mending. Most of those who were currently knights had experience doing such chores.

I guess the commander might be an exception since her unparalleled ability propelled her up to the rank of knight right away…

“So what will the rest of us do? Should we stay at the inn?”

“Well, from the rumors we heard in the kingdom, I expected this to be a much darker place, but it seems like a pretty normal city… Going out in small groups is probably fine?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it doesn’t seem like there are likely to be any sudden dangers.”

“I see. Then maybe we should have some people go to the shrine and see if they can be a go-between for us with Sir Momon.”

“The ruler of the city is an undead. I imagine the shrines don’t have much pull.”

“But we’re paladins—holy knights. It would be strange if we didn’t at least visit the shrine.”

Gustav frowned. Remedios was right.

“Yes…yes, that’s true.”

“Don’t you think it’s important to hear from the people who live here and not simply rely on what the King of Darkness shows us?”

“That makes sense, too…”

But what should we do if we come across something we can’t let stand?

Gustav must have arrived at that question, and that was why he was being evasive.

Neia thought to herself.

Paladins are embodiments of justice. So if we act as we're supposed to, it might result in the King of Darkness criticizing us. If, as a result, he refused to assist the Sacred Kingdom and untold thousands suffered, would it still be the right thing to do?

She remembered her father, how he said he didn't understand the paladins' idea of justice. While she was training and aspiring to be a paladin, Neia hadn't thought much of it, but since Roebel was faced with these troubles, she was feeling less confident and recalled his words often.

If she could have asked her mother, her doubt might have vanished, but her mother was already gone.

I have no choice but to answer for myself.

While Neia was pondering all that, the conversation continued. It was decided that a pair would go to the shrine of the Four Gods, and several other pairs would see the city and gather intel. Remedios and the others would stay behind at the inn so they could be easily contacted in case anything happened.

As expected, Neia was ordered to polish armor.

The meeting ended and Neia began caring for each suit of armor one at a time.

Wetting a cloth with cold water, she wiped the mud off.

Since the armor was enchanted, there were no scratches or dings. If there were any, they would need to be hammered out from the inside, and if the maintenance person wasn't careful, it would end up more uneven than it started. Neia wasn't terribly confident with such delicate work, so she was thankful she got to maintain the enchanted armor of the paladins.

She appreciated having a job she could do with a blank mind. She didn't have to think too hard about anything.

Sweat beading on her forehead, she finished going over everyone's armor.

•

The audience with the King of Darkness came together so quickly Neia

couldn’t hide her surprise. They were able to meet him the day after Gustav went to inquire.

The palace the party of knights arrived at—with Neia bringing up the rear—was awfully shabby. Maybe for the leader of the city it would have been grand, but it wasn’t enough for a king. It had none of the calm of history, none of the solemnity, none of the whimsy of a powerful individual; it was built only in the pursuit of practicality.

Compared to the palaces of Re-Estize and Roebel, it was just so sad. And it was the King of Darkness’s residence. This used to be a frontier city in the kingdom, so he had probably simply occupied an existing building.

In the profiles of the paladins with their helmets removed was a faint condescending air only Neia could detect. They must have been comparing this place to the palace back home.

Who could blame them?

But Neia remembered the ghost ship and the undead they had seen patrolling the streets.

Why was a ruler who could control such powerful undead living in such a shabby palace?

There must be a reason… If he wanted a splendid palace, he could have those dwarven craftsmen and tireless undead workers build one…

Through the gate, two lines of undead she hadn’t seen before stood facing each other. They were slimmer than the ones they had first encountered on the way into the city and held their spears aloft so that they crisscrossed.

The line on the right had the flag of the Nation of Darkness tied to the end, while the left side’s featured the flag of the Sacred Kingdom.

The setup was such that the path led them beneath the flags.

And there was music. It was a song she had never heard before, but she figured it was fine to just accept it as part of the ceremony.

A lecture from a long time ago rose up from the depths of her memory.

Always keep your wits about when faced with magic.

But still, this music couldn't be an attack spell. If this were a trap, they didn't need to be flying Roebel's flag.

Neia put on a brave front as she walked forward, glancing side to side with her eyes only.

An honor guard and the Sacred Kingdom flag. That definitely meant that the Nation of Darkness was welcoming them as state guests. Which meant Neia and the others were being accepted as official messengers from the Sacred Kingdom. Which meant that Neia was representing her country.

Though it made her happy, the pressure gave her a nervous stomachache.

At the end of the path draped with flags was—Neia gasped.

A peerless beauty.

How pretty… She's just so pretty…

Piercing, gorgeous features. A spotless white dress that cost who knew how much.

Her smile was so full of compassion Neia could have mistaken her for an angel. But the proof that she wasn't an angel was the pair of black wings sprouting from her hips.

"Welcome, representatives of the Sacred Kingdom. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Albedo, captain of the floor and domain guardians in the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. To put it in terms you can easily understand, I'm the prime minister."

"Th-thank you for the thorough introduction. I am the leader of the delegation from the Sacred Kingdom, Remedios Custodio. Thank you very much for making time for us today."

"There's no need for thanks. His Majesty the great King of Darkness, is very concerned about the situation in the Sacred Kingdom. He said it was only natural that he would take time to meet with you."

"W-we appreciate that very much…"

Remedios seemed overwhelmed by Albedo with her smile. Despite her being the same sex—or perhaps because of it—she was swallowed up by her beauty.

Albedo's gaze quickly surveyed the rest of the group, including Neia.

"Well, His Majesty is waiting, so I'll show you to the audience chamber. Would you please follow me?"

"Y-yes. What should we do with our swords?"

"Oh yes, there's that, isn't there?" Albedo smiled, seeming amused.

Neia wondered why. Surely they couldn't take their weapons in to meet the king. Normally, they would surrender them. It also indicated their trust.

"Usually, we would hold them for you, but there's no need in this case. Please wear them as you are now."

Neia didn't quite know what that meant.

That went for Remedios as well, and she asked, "Why?" She must have been more confused than anyone, having spent so much time serving alongside the Holy Lady.

In response to the natural question, Albedo smiled again. "Because we trust you. And we thought you might feel safer carrying your weapons. Of course, we don't consider you a threat. If you'd rather we hold on to them for you, we can…?"

"In that case, we'll respond in kind to His Majesty the King of Darkness's goodwill… Would everyone besides me turn in your swords? Apologies, but mine is a national treasure. I hope you'll understand that I can't turn it over."

"Yes, of course."

Albedo signaled with her eyes, and the undead who came out took everyone's swords.

Probably some of them felt uncomfortable as paladins, having to hand over their personal blades to undead, but they couldn't refuse their commander's orders.

Neia turned her sword in, too, and observed Albedo.

Her pretty smile remained on her face, so it was impossible to tell what she was thinking. Or rather, all Neia could gather from her expression was

amiability. She seemed to genuinely want to be as kind as possible to them. But was Neia's interpretation correct? If not…

We were allowed to enter with our swords to meet her master. Was that his order? Or was it because they knew we wouldn't be able to hurt him anyway?

The King of Darkness was an immensely powerful caster. Maybe he was boasting that he would be victorious no matter how many of the Sacred Kingdom's paladins came at him.

Or maybe he has undead guarding him. Lady Albedo doesn't appear to have any combat skills…

The beautiful prime minister who seemed the furthest of anyone from fighting in this world smiled gently.

"Come, everyone. His Majesty is waiting. Shall we go?"

•

As expected from the building itself, the throne room wasn't anything special. This was undoubtedly being used without any changes from the way it was before the takeover as well.

But the throne itself was gorgeous. That is, it had a conspicuous golden sparkle. It couldn't have been solid gold, but given its size, even coating it with gold leaf would have been a considerable expense.

And the flag behind the throne was splendid as well. She wasn't sure what kind of thread it was woven with, but the color was deeper than black alone could achieve. In the low light, it seemed like it might have been dark purple.

"His Majesty will see you now."

"Let's bow our heads, everyone," Remedios instructed.

Neia, taking a knee, was mildly surprised that Remedios would choose to have the paladins bow to an undead, but she had no objections. As a squire she was well-drilled in the etiquette. That said, she'd only ever had occasion to attend an audience with the holy king. With her head lowered, she moved only her eyes and stole desperate glances at the paladins around her.

Seems like…I'm okay…

Of course, she could only see them from the back, so it was possible that from the front there was something strange about her posture, but…

It's fine! No one said anything to me the time with the holy king! My dad even told me I did a great job!

"Presenting His Majesty the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown."

Albedo, standing slightly ahead of the throne to one side, spoke, and there was an extremely small *ksh* of crumpling paper that surely only Neia could hear and then footsteps accompanied by the *clack, clack* of something hard tapping on the floor. Eventually, she sensed someone sit on the throne.

"You've been granted permission to raise your heads."

Getting the timing right on that was rather difficult. Being either too fast or too slow would be rude. She counted a couple seconds silently and then raised her head.

She couldn't believe what she saw in front of her.

Th-that's the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.

The face of bare skull. Red flames burning in vacant orbits. An appropriate appearance for an undead. But this one was different from any Neia had ever known.

The first thing that surprised her was his clothing.

He was wearing more expensive-looking garments than any noble she'd seen since beginning her service as a squire.

His costume was long and loose with extremely wide sleeves. The fabric was pure, immaculate white, and both the cuffs and the hem were embroidered with gold and purple accents. He seemed to be closing it at the waist with a belt, but it didn't strike Neia as strange. It was weird, but it had the air of foreign customs, and she could only rate his outfit magnificent.

And his gloves, the same color as his clothing, had plates that shimmered in the colors of the rainbow set in them. He held a staff made up of a rainbow of snakes intertwined. That was what produced the hard clacking she had heard.

But what was most surprising was the halo of darkness behind him.

…This is an undead? No way…

Neia's idea of undead were skeletons, zombies, ghasts, and the like.

She didn't feel like the King of Darkness could be described with the same word *undead*. Bizarrely, she wasn't repulsed by his skull face and even felt that he was pure and sublime.

He was more immensely strong—terrible—and didn't exist in the range of power humans could imagine; he transcended it all.

Forgetting Albedo, next to the throne, Neia inadvertently stared at the King of Darkness.

What brought her back to senses was the "Now then" he uttered.

"What a long way you've come from the far-off Sacred Kingdom, Lady Custodio. The other paladins in your party, as well."

"Not at all, Your Majesty, King of Darkness."

"I would have held a state feast to welcome you, but I figured you don't have the leisure to be entertained. I carved out a slot in my schedule for you instead. Let's not waste any time—we can cut out lengthy euphemisms, flattery, and the like, wouldn't you say? Let's speak our minds. Any objections?"

"None, Your Majesty."

"Good. Then I'd like you to tell me how things are currently in the Sacred Kingdom. If you speak truthfully, and without omission, I think the Nation of Darkness may be able to offer you something in the way of assistance."

Remedios indicated she understood and spoke eloquently on the country's status.

What instinct made her want to volunteer that information, Neia didn't know. It seemed most likely that she had simply gotten fed up with thinking.

Her explanation ended with what they had told the Blue Roses—that they were just barely holding off the invasion. She probably wasn't very happy to be telling another country, especially one ruled by an undead, that the Sacred Kingdom was on the verge of collapse.

“I see, I see. So what is the plan now?”

“Well, we have a favor to ask of you, Your Majesty. We heard that the adventurer called Momon is serving your country. If we could borrow that warrior who fought on equal footing against Jaldabaoth, we would have nothing to fear. We humbly request that you dispatch the warrior, Momon, to the Sacred Kingdom.”

The red flames in the King of Darkness’s eyes went out for a moment and then came back.

“Just as I thought. I’ll give you the answer I prepared ahead of time: impossible.”

“Why do you say that, Your Majesty?”

“I’m afraid it’s to do with my nation’s shame… He plays a critical role in keeping the peace here. It’s thanks to him that my people are able to live here without fear.”

“But, Your Majesty, don’t you have an undead army?”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh,” the king chuckled softly. “You from the Sacred Kingdom seem to find my undead army trustworthy. Then shall I lend you my troops instead of Momon? I believe you saw the undead I control—they’re all hardy warriors. I’m sure they could easily annihilate the subhumans.”

Remedios wasn’t sure what to say.

Could she imagine herself leading an undead army back to the Sacred Kingdom? No, she would never imagine that. Leading an undead army was the last thing a paladin would do.

Certainly, an undead army came with lots of benefits. Undead didn’t require food or much of anything at all—you could even have them stand by in the middle of a primeval forest indefinitely without having to worry about resupply. They were truly the ideal soldiers.

But the idea of accepting an army of life-hating enemies of all living things was, above all, frightening. Calling a foreign nation’s army to one’s own country was anxiety inducing to begin with. It was eminently possible that they could

just stick around and occupy the place once all the original problems were solved.

“Th-that would be…”

The King of Darkness chuckled at how shaken Remedios was. “Exactly, Lady Custodio. We have people who think like you do in our nation as well. People involved in growing crops, cultivating the land, and security are gradually learning to accept undead, but unfortunately, the city people aren’t keen on getting too close to them, so I haven’t managed to get the populace to accept them yet. Of course, they seem more open to the idea than when I first took power here, but it’ll probably require a little more time. Momon lends an ear to their insecurities and takes care of a lot of issues for me. If I sent him away now, there’s no telling how the people’s dissatisfaction would explode.”

“Then what if we paladins stayed behind instead of Momon to encourage people to trust the undead? It’s widely known that undead are the enemy of paladins. So I imagine it would be effective for us to announce that we trust those beneath Your Majesty.”

“Mmph… That’s a proposal worth considering.”

After some intense thought, the King of Darkness’s face moved slightly to look at his hand that wasn’t holding his staff. “…Hmm. The part that doesn’t work is that you’re from a foreign country. If someone has been through good times and bad with you, you can trust them, but if some strangers showed up suddenly and said undead could be trusted, would you believe them? I don’t think you would work as a substitute for that adamantite adventurer who has made such a name for himself in our city.”

He was exactly right.

They couldn’t argue with logic. It was especially impossible for Remedios, who was the emotional type to begin with.

She had fallen silent when the King of Darkness suddenly said, “Okay. By the way, this is a change of subject, but I wanted to ask about some people who didn’t appear in your report, Lady Custodio. I heard from Momon that Jaldabaoth had quite powerful maids with him. You haven’t seen them in the Sacred Kingdom, have you?”

“No, we haven’t. We heard about them for the first time from the Blue Roses in Re-Estize.”

“I see… So perhaps that means he uses them as his last resort? Or are they lurking in some other location?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“…You said the south of your country was still all right, but have you been in close contact with them?”

“To some extent.”

“So none of his subordinates have infiltrated there yet? Maybe I’m being paranoid, but…”

The King of Darkness looked up at the ceiling.

“You think someone under Jaldabaoth may have already snuck into the south, Your Majesty?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I just wonder why, if he has such powerful pawns, he doesn’t put them into play… You remember how I said at the beginning of this conversation that we should speak our minds? So I’ll ask you straight: What is the Sacred Kingdom able to reward us for our assistance?”

It was a natural question to ask. Utterly normal. But it was extremely difficult to answer.

“Our country’s friendship, trust, and respect.”

The King of Darkness smirked at Remedios’s reply.

But if asked if Remedios was in the wrong, Neia couldn’t say that was the case. At times, paladins went into battle risking their lives for that much. For example, taking on a request from a poor village that couldn’t afford to compensate and fighting off a mob of subhumans was something a model paladin would do.

“That’s a very paladin thing to say. I had a friend who may have been called to action by those words, but not me, unfortunately. I said no flowery speeches. Can you offer me any actual benefit?”

Does the King of Darkness consider Sir Momon his friend? Is that why he talks about him so casually without any titles and not because Sir Momon works beneath him?

Remedios remained silent, while Neia thought those things.

No.

How could she say anything? There was nothing Remedios Custodio could promise.

What would happen if they did manage to drive Jaldabaoth off?

Naturally, the next holy king would ascend to the throne, but there wasn't much chance that person would treat the paladins with much respect. If it was one of the nobles from the south they didn't get along with, there was a chance members of their order might even be locked up.

If that happened, then Remedios wouldn't be able to keep whatever promise she made here. In the end, this delegation was a group of regular people of unstable standing in society who came to beg for any kindness they could find.

She couldn't guarantee anything. It was nearly impossible for a single person to bear the weight of an entire state. Only a monarch could do that.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, King of Darkness. My name is Gustav Montagnés; I serve as Commander Custodio's deputy. Please permit me to speak in her place."

The King of Darkness gestured with his jaw that Gustav should continue.

"Thank you. We are unable to promise the sort of thing Your Majesty desires. Even if we manage to retake the Sacred Kingdom's territory, rebuilding after Jaldabaoth ravaged our country will take an awfully long time, so I doubt we would be able to turn over anything we might offer you here in a timely manner. But I would like to make one appeal to you, and that is regarding how dangerous Jaldabaoth is."

"Hmm… Go on."

"Your Majesty. He appeared this time with a subhuman army that he didn't bring with him to the Re-Estize Kingdom. If we don't slay him now, there's no

telling what he'll prepare by the next time he reappears."

"So what you're saying is that now, while he's in front of us, is our chance to kill him—that we should nip this trouble in the bud—right?"

"As you so wisely perceive, Your Majesty. With that in mind, could you not please send Sir Momon?"

"I see. That makes sense. Certainly, Jaldabaoth should be destroyed."

"Then—"

When a look of joy was about to come over Gustav's face, the King of Darkness began to thrust a fist out, but then stopped and clacked his staff.

"But I can't send Momon. Even if we manage to exterminate Jaldabaoth, I can't have our domestic politics destabilized in his absence. So how about this? If you can buy a little more time, we can stabilize our situation. Then I can send Momon over—if he agrees, of course. You mentioned before that you could still put up a fight, right?"

"Th-that's true, but…how much later would he come?"

"Hmm… Albedo, what do you think?" The ruler turned to the prime minister, who had been standing by at his side the whole time.

"The fact that the number of subhumans in our nation is likely to increase may delay any estimate we could make. To allow for that, a few years. Hmm, yes… I think after five years our problems will be solved."

"There you have it. So will that work for you?"

Five years, Gustav rolled the number around in his mouth and shook his head slightly. "It's a bit long…"

"I see… I suppose we need to think of your country's needs. This is a favor being asked by a friendly nation after all." He emphasized the word *friendly*. "We'll do everything we can to cut that time down. So, Albedo, how long would it take if we stripped it down as far as we can go?"

"In that case, perhaps we could make do with three years. But we may risk some turmoil in the Nation of Darkness."

“Well, that can’t be helped, I suppose. It’s to save our friends. We should spill a little blood here, too…metaphorically speaking.”

He said it as a joke, but no one laughed.

“…Ahem. Now then, how does that sound? We’ve shortened the time by two years.”

The Nation of Darkness had compromised by shaving two years, but three was still far too long. There was no telling how much damage would be done during that time or if the Sacred Kingdom would even be able to maintain itself as a country. It wasn’t tenable. But if they said that outright, even the offer of sending Sir Momon after three years could be taken off the table.

Still, the chance to save the Sacred Kingdom was right in front of them.

This was the moment they had come all this way for. It was worth risking their lives.

Prepared to die if necessary, Neia inhaled and said, “My humble apologies, Your Majesty, King of Darkness.”

“…Who are you?”

“I’m a squire in the Sacred Kingdom’s Paladin Order. My name is Neia Baraja. I realize it’s rude of me to ask this, but couldn’t you send Sir Momon any sooner?”

The King of Darkness seemed to think it over.

“Neia! What’s a squire doing petitioning a king?!”

Neia thought only one thing when Remedios scolded her like that.

Please wait a little longer to cut down your insolent squire.

“Okay, sure. Neia, you said, right? Then when should I send him?”

“If you could send him as soon as possible, that would be much appreciated.”

“You’re asking me to send him, knowing it will cause damage to the Nation of Darkness, yes?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Neia bowed.

She had already resigned herself. If this upset the King of Darkness, she would simply pay for her mistake by having the commander execute her.

She closed her eyes so the sword could come down at any time.

“Your Majesty! Please forgive my squire’s impudence! We have absolutely no intention of causing damage to the Nation of Darkness!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s natural for someone from one country to not mind what harm may come to another if it means saving their own… Hmm. Albedo. Do you think we could manage it in two years?”

“I think that would be very difficult.”

“I see. Still…make it happen.”

Neia’s eyes had been downcast, but she looked up at the king in spite of herself.

“Yes, Your Majesty! Understood!”

The slight tremble of Albedo’s shoulders after she received an order uttered in that powerful voice fitting for an absolute ruler must have been anxiety about this guest’s reckless challenge.

“Neia…Baraja. How about two years, then? You may still think it’s too long, but if the army in the south still stands, you can hold out, can’t you?”

Two years was still too long. But she could hardly take any more advantage of his kindness than she already had.

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Her gratitude came out earnestly because she felt that their chances of being saved were better than before.

Remedios bowed after her. “Thank you, Your Majesty! You have my deepest gratitude for granting my squire’s wish!”

“It’s fine. Commander Custodio, you have a valuable subordinate, there. A squire can’t petition a foreign king unless they truly love their country… And I’m not being sarcastic.”

“No, I’m sure she’s happy to hear you say that.”

“I see. Very well, I think we’re finished here? It was a fruitful meeting.”

“The King of Darkness will leave you now.”

At the sound of Albedo’s voice, Neia lowered her head.

She heard the same footsteps and clacking as when he had come in, but receding this time. Eventually there came the sound of a door closing. The King of Darkness must have left the room.

“His Majesty has gone.” When Neia looked up, Albedo was smiling, her cheeks slightly flushed. “All right, I’ll see you all out now.”

•

Neia had braced herself, and sure enough, when they arrived at the inn, the dressing down from Remedios began.

“What were you thinking, talking out of turn like that?!”

When she tried to come closer, red in the face, Gustav stood between them and spread his arms.

“Commander Custodio! Please wait! It’s true that Squire Bajara acted without permission, but as a result, the wait time was shortened by a year. Shouldn’t you be praising her?!”

“What are you saying?! The negotiations could have broken down entirely! And in the first place, how could we praise acting without permission?!”

“My humble apologies.” Neia bowed sincerely.

“Are you really conscious that what you did was wrong?! This time things turned out fine, but if they don’t next time, are you prepared to be held accountable?!”

“My humble apologies.”

“I’m asking you! Answer me! Could you have told the suffering people of the Sacred Kingdom that reinforcements didn’t come because of you?!”

“No, I wouldn’t have been able to take that responsibility.”

“Then why would you do something like that?! What were you thinking?!”

Neia raised her head and looked the commander in the eye. “I thought that if things went badly, you would take my life and offer it to the King of Darkness as an apology.”

Remedios’s eyes went wide. But immediately after, they narrowed in displeasure. Gustav next to her looked impressed.

“You think I’d allow that?! You think your little life would be enough to make things right?!”

“I don’t know. But I thought that you and Gustav would figure something out.”

“And what would you do if we couldn’t?!”

She had a point. It was definitely possible that the King of Darkness wouldn’t have been appeased by her death. But the reason she had spoken up anyway was because three years was simply too long.

Did she think three years was fine? Why should I have to be criticized by someone who did nothing? I understand it was a gamble. But I did it because one side of the balance is the lives of all the people in the Sacred Kingdom. I’m sure saying something there was the right thing to do…

Were the results all that mattered? Or was the method just as important? Probably no one could answer that conundrum.

Either way, she didn’t enjoy being condemned by someone who had taken no action.

But Neia had an idea what would happen to someone who voiced an opinion like that. So she said nothing and bowed her head.

“Commander, please leave it at that. Thanks to her, our wait will be one year shorter. I think we should balance our response between reward and punishment. Or at least praise her as much as we scold her.”

“……Tch.”

Remedios seemed like she had more to say, but instead she turned on her heel and walked away.

Phew, Gustav exhaled. Then he turned to Neia.

“Your resolve was magnificent. The commander may be harsh with you, but she recognizes what you’ve done.”

That’s definitely a lie. No one can hide a lie that big.

Maybe her thoughts showed on her face? Gustav winced. “Anyhow, I’ll talk to her. If you see her now, it’ll just be more trouble, so could you go out for a bit?”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Neia left the inn and set off for a stroll in the brisk air.

“Man…”

Sure, she could “go out,” but in this country, where to?

Neia dug in her breast pocket for a small pouch. Inside was what little money she possessed. It wasn’t much, but there were bronze and silver coins from the Sacred Kingdom. And if she couldn’t use that, she did have one gold trade coin. It would be enough to get a meal.

But can I really use the last allowance from my parents on this?

Neia gazed at the foreign land she was in.

“This is such a pain. Ugh…”

“That was an awfully heavy sigh.”

The voice came from so nearby, Neia jumped.

“Turn down that street. We stand out too much here.”

There was no way she would forget that voice so soon. She nearly called for help, but managed to stop herself. When she walked as directed, she sensed something following behind her. It wasn’t just a voice being projected—apparently its owner was there, but invisible to Neia.

Once they were on the other street, the voice said, “Turn left into that narrow alley.” Neia silently obeyed. It was cleaner than she expected, but there weren’t many people around.

After walking a few paces in, Neia turned around and addressed the voice.

“Your Majesty, why are you here? And are you using magic to make yourself

invisible?”

“I see. I wondered why you were doing everything I said so trustingly, but you realized who it was, huh?” With that, the King of Darkness showed himself.

He had changed into a dark-black robe so as not to attract attention. But the robe had a velvet sheen, and she could tell it was valuable.

Neia immediately fell to one knee.

“Yes, it is as you say, Your Majesty. Where…is your escort?”

“Oh, I didn’t bring one. Having someone along would only be a bother.”

“Wh-what do you mean?!”

“Mm. I want to speak with your leader in secret. I want you to call her for me… No, I should go to her room. Could you open the window? I can go in that way.”

That was a bizarre request. She wouldn’t normally open her commander’s window, but it was a king—the king who had promised to assist Roebel—who was asking. She couldn’t be so foolish as to displease him.

The word *assassination* crossed her mind, but if he wanted to kill Remedios, he could have done it when they met him earlier.

There was also the possibility that someone was impersonating the king. But this presence before her that exuded overwhelming sovereignty was undoubtedly the King of Darkness. Each and every move he made could only have been performed by someone born as royalty.

Should I believe him or not?

Neia thought for a moment and chose the former.

“Understood. I’ll go right away.”

“Indeed. By the way, were you sent on an errand or something? If so, I should apologize to your leader.”

“Huh?”

“—Huh?”

Neia inadvertently exchanged glances with the king.

“…You mean you’re not out on work? It’s like free time? If so, I’ll apologize for interrupting your precious—yes, truly precious—off time with my request.”

“N-no, it’s not really…like that… I-I’ll go open the window.”

She slipped past the King of Darkness in hurry.

What had startled her was the kindness in his words, as if someone had gently spread a rich medicine blended with oil on her cracked, dry hands.

She sprinted and reached the inn almost immediately.

Of course, she couldn’t go thudding around at full speed inside such a high-class establishment. That said, she couldn’t take her time, either, so she proceeded at a speed that wouldn’t be uncouth—although she had the feeling she got some cold looks from the staff—and arrived at the commander’s room.

She knocked right away and went to open the door, but it was locked. For a moment, she had the lonesome feeling she’d been the only one left out, but this wasn’t the time.

“It’s Squire Neia Baraja. Please open the door.”

There was a click, and a paladin peeked his face out.

“Excuse me.” She didn’t have time for manners. She spoke to Remedios, who was there, “It’s His Majesty the King of Darkness. He wants to speak to you in secret.”

Neia sensed everyone’s eyes look behind her in surprise.

“No, he’s not there.”

She walked swiftly over to the window and opened it.

As one would expect from a high-class inn, there was no creaking, and it opened smoothly.

“What are you—?!”

From a third party’s perspective, it seemed like an almost dangerous act. It was only natural that one of the paladins would shout, especially since it was one of the ones who had been guarding the Holy Lady.

But Neia took no notice. She leaned out the window and waved to the King of Darkness who was out there somewhere.

Someone yanked her collar back.

“What are you doing, Squire Baraja, indiscreetly opening the window? And where exactly is the King of Darkness supposed to be?”

She turned around to find a paladin red in the face. Well, it made sense to be angry, but—

“That’s enough. She has only broken your rules to grant my wish. If you’re going to blame someone, blame me.”

A soft voice reverberated in the room.

With his foot on the windowsill, the King of Darkness leisurely revealed himself.

The paladins reached instinctively for their swords, but Neia rushed to stop them.

“Hmm… I seem to have startled you. Sorry for that. I came because I wanted to meet in secret. I realize coming through the window is ill-mannered, but I hope you’ll understand that I had no choice… I put her in a difficult situation…” Having set his feet on the floor, he surveyed with room with a kingly air. “…I am the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

When he announced himself, Neia was the first to take a knee. Behind her, she heard the rest of the knights follow.

“It’s all right… You should stand. We don’t have much time. Lady Custodio. Can we talk?”

“I have no objections. This way, please.”

Neia sighed as she stood—*phew*—and her eyes met the King of Darkness’s when he turned around. Of course, he didn’t have eyeballs, so maybe she was the only one who felt like they exchanged a glance.

“That squire won’t be participating?”

“She’s only a squire.”

“She was at the audience earlier, though, right?”

He sounded genuinely puzzled and expressed himself in an utterly normal way, but the sarcasm was biting.

“Squire Baraja, you come, too.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

She didn’t really want to attend the meeting, but for some reason, she was curious to see why the King of Darkness could possibly have come.

Remedios, Gustav, and the King of Darkness sat at a table, while Neia and the others stood against the wall. It was the same setup as when they had met the Blue Roses.

“All right, Your Majesty. Please forgive me, but I’ll be direct. Why have you suddenly shown up at our inn?” Gustav asked, and Remedios nodded.

“Sure. I said back there that I’m not fond of indirectness. I don’t want people to understand me in a warped or mistaken way.”

His way of speaking was so substantial somehow, so indescribably intimate.

“We decided on sending Momon in two years, but if you agree to one condition, I’m not averse to sending someone else as strong as him right away.”

“As strong as him?” Remedios yelped.

“…What sort of condition is it? We may not be able to comply immediately,” continued Gustav, and the King of Darkness smiled at him.

“Yes, I figured. I have a pretty good idea of the situation you’re in… It sounds good when you call yourselves a resistance force, but actually you’re a small group of armed individuals living in a cave, right?”

Everyone in the room seemed to gasp at the same time.

Neia included.

How was he able to guess their true condition? How had he seen through their story? It was especially impressive that he got the detail about the cave right.

The commander and Gustav looked at Neia. They had to be wondering if she

had told him about their situation. So she shook her head slightly to say, *I didn't*.

The King of Darkness ignored their surprise and continued.

"Even if the southern forces are still around, they aren't cooperating with you due to the deep-rooted issues that exist with the nobles. Since you weren't able to protect the holy lady, it will be difficult for you to serve in the same positions under the new Holy King. So of course you can't offer me privileges such as land, title, or trade. If you did that, depending on what the new holy king thought, a war could break out with the Nation of Darkness."

He recited the future of their situation so accurately it was as if he had learned it by heart.

"And of course, national treasures are also impossible to part with. Like your sword, Lady Custodio. One possible option would be to say that Jaldabaoth stole everything and turn over the country's assets to me, but that's dangerous. If I told the new holy king you did that, no one would trust paladins anymore. So your only choice was to do as you did and appeal to my emotions… Hmm, it seems like I guessed right. I can see from your faces that I scored a bull's-eye."

Having said that much, the King of Darkness leaned back in his chair.

Silence reigned in the room.

It was perfect, just so perfect.

Neia was astounded by his accurate reading of their circumstances.

So this is the King of Darkness, she thought.

She had seen royalty alongside the Holy Lady but only ever received a perfunctory greeting from them; she never really got the chance to interact. This was her first time meeting a perfect being with superior discernment, the appropriate dignity, and even more power. The impact was so great she would never forget it.

"That said, anyone can figure out that much. I'm a bit embarrassed that I sounded like I'm boasting… I'm sure you guys didn't think I wouldn't see it, right?"

“O-of course not, Your Majesty!” Gustav replied, forcing a twitching smile.

“Good. If people thought I was an idiot who couldn’t read a situation so simple, I don’t know how I could face my hardworking subordinates… Now then, I’ll explain what I’m after: maids. I want maids.”

The completely unexpected word that burst out of the king’s mouth stunned them all, including Neia.

“…Oh, sorry. I should explain better. Uhhh, so during our audience, I told you how Jaldabaoth has strong maids, right? I want those. How much do you guys know about magic?”

“Nothing at all,” Remedios admitted openly, and the king’s eyes swam.

“I—I see. Then I’m not sure where to start this explanation but, hmm, I guess… Uhhh, Jaldabaoth’s maids must be bound to him by some sort of contract. So if I defeat him and make his method my own, I can take control of those maids. Thus, my country will gain some powerful servants.”

“B-but we haven’t seen Jaldabaoth’s maids in our country…”

The King of Darkness snickered at Gustav’s reply. “They were seen in the Re-Estize Kingdom. It’s hard to imagine they’re not around somewhere. Maybe they’ll show themselves if we corner Jaldabaoth.”

“Just to reemphasize…we don’t know for sure if the maids are there or not. What will you do if there are no maids?”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it, but I won’t make additional demands. I’ll have worked for nothing. But they may not look like typical maids, so let’s call them Jaldabaoth’s subordinates. Oh, right. Since he might be controlling them with a specific item, I’d like anything in his possession that doesn’t clearly belong to the Sacred Kingdom to be turned over to me. If things turn out badly and the maids rampage through your kingdom before I seize control, I’d like you to forget your hatred of them once they’re mine.”

“You’re saying we should forgive people who’ve torn apart our country?” Remedios said, sounding somewhat offended, and the King of Darkness shrugged.

“It’s not like I’d be getting anything else from the Sacred Kingdom. Unless you have something to offer?”

Unable to say anything, Remedios bit her lip.

“Your Majesty, I think what she wanted to say is that it would be difficult for us, who aren’t currently there, to get the people who are suffering to forget their ill will.”

“Well, you’ll just have to work hard to convince them,” the King of Darkness said in an icy tone. “…Er, you can explain that I put them under magic control and took them away. That might make them feel a little better.”

I wonder, thought Neia as she listened. Still, refusing after he had made this much of a compromise would likely cause everything to fall apart. Frankly, this offer was an extraordinarily valuable one for the Sacred Kingdom. Wasting it would be foolish.

“That’s a problem. If they rampaged—”

“Your Majesty!” Gustav cut Remedios off. “We’d like to discuss this among ourselves. May we have some time?”

I’ve compromised this much, and you still need to talk about it? Neia was worried he might reproach them like that, but…

“Sure. I can’t imagine it would take too long, and it’s troublesome to go somewhere else, so I’d like to wait here if that’s okay.”

The king’s generosity surprised Neia.

“Thank you. Then we’ll go discuss things and come right back. Excuse us for just a moment, please.”

“That’s fine. Talk as much as you need.”

The two of them left and came back awfully fast. Well, the answer had been decided from the beginning, surely.

“We apologize for keeping you waiting, Your Majesty.”

“Not at all. You could have talked a little longer. So what do you think?”

“We’ve decided that we’ll do whatever you say, Your Majesty.”

“It’s not as if I was trying to get you to submit to me; I just wanted to strike a deal, but that’s fine. Now then, we should really get this in writing, but I don’t have any stationery or my seal on me. We’ll do that later… Does the Re-Estize language work for you?”

“There are people who can read it, so that’s no problem. Then, Your Majesty, who is this person as strong as Sir Momon?”

“You’re looking at him. It’s me.”

Silence reigned again, and everyone’s eyes nearly popped out of their heads.

After blinking a few times, their brains started to work again.

“Your Majesty is as strong as Sir Momon?” Neia froze solid when she heard Remedios say that, but one man had already leaped into action.

“H-hold on, please. Commander, there’s something else we need to ask him first.” Gustav turned to the King of Darkness. “Is it really all right for you to leave the Nation of Darkness and come to Roebel? We don’t know how long this will take.”

“That’s a nonissue. Unlike Momon, I can use teleportation magic. Once we reach your base, I’ll be able to go back and forth.”

“B-but still, a king coming personally to help us seems—”

“Did you listen to what I said and think I wouldn’t come? I’m going to defeat Jaldabaoth and take possession of his maids! I highly doubt I could manage that from all the way over here. And to answer your question, Commander Custodio, I’m more powerful than Momon.”

“Then there’s no issue, right, Gustav?”

“There’s nothing *but* issues! Your Majesty, we can’t handle jokes right now!” the deputy barked, holding his stomach.

“I’m not joking. There’s no one else who can fight Jaldabaoth and win. And I will go alone. I have no intention of bringing an army. That’s why I came to talk to you in secret.”

“If you were to sustain an injury that couldn’t be healed, the relationship between our two countries would be ruined!”

“—is what Gustav thinks, but do you foresee any problems like that, Your Majesty?”

“Not at all.”

“B—”

“Gustav! I’m talking. Stay out of my way!” Reeling back in the hand she had thrust out at him, Remedios bowed. “Then please do assist us, Your Majesty.”

•

In the room with an atmosphere like a storm had passed—well, in a sense, one certainly had—Gustav exploded.

“What are you thinking?! He’s a king! How could you ask him to come fight Jaldabaoth?!”

Neia agreed.

This went so far against common sense.

But Remedios murmured, “Hey, do you actually care what happens to an undead?”

Everyone fell silent.

“…It’s a demon versus an undead. No matter which one is destroyed, we don’t lose anything. Am I wrong?”

Gustav’s eyes widened. Not because he accepted her position, but because he was shocked.

“They’re both enemies of humanity. The best would be if they were both annihilated…not that I’d actively aim for that. Just, if the King of Darkness happens to sustain a life-threatening injury in the fight, we won’t help him. Simple as that.”

Remedios’s words sound strangely loud in the quiet room.

“…Commander. Don’t you think that if the King of Darkness were to perish, all the undead he commands would go free and create an unholy uproar?”

“When that time comes, it’ll be the Kingdom, the Empire, and the Theocracy that will bear the brunt of it. We would support them, I’m sure, but the damage

we've sustained from fighting Jaldabaoth is too much. I'd like our neighbors to tough it out until we recover some of our strength… When you think of it that way, we stand to gain a lot if they kill each oth—"

"Commander!" Gustav shouted with a stern look. "Is there any justice in that?"

"There is. For our country. It's to save the people who are suffering the most. It's not as if I want to sow misfortune in foreign lands. I do actually want this king who supports us to win."

Watching Remedios say that softly, Neia thought, *Who* are *you?*

Was this really Remedios Custodio, commander of the paladins of the Sacred Kingdom?

Neia didn't know her that well. Mostly she had only seen her from a distance. But from what she had heard of the commander, she felt this was someone different.

"Gustav. Are you done objecting? If you're on board, then we need to move on."

"To?"

"…We need to think about how to milk the King of Darkness for all he's worth."

A chill ran up Neia's spine.

Why am I hearing this conversation? she wondered. No, she couldn't have been the only one. Glancing around, she saw all the paladins wearing the same expression. Neia probably had the same look on her face.

"Any ideas, Gustav?"

"N-no, ma'am. First, though, what should we do once we've brought the King of Darkness back?"

"If he's not all talk and really is as powerful as Jaldabaoth, how about retaking the capital? Then we can have him take out the demon right then."

"…No, that's the worst idea. The King of Darkness said he would defeat

Jaldabaoth, take his maids, and return to his nation, so in order to gain the most out of this, we should save killing Jaldabaoth for the very end… If we do what you propose, we have no way of defeating the subhuman army that will be left over."

"Then what should our strategy be?"

Gustav thought for a moment and then made a suggestion. "First, let's gather lots of allies. We should free the people imprisoned in the camps."

"Aha! That's a good idea. There are some people I want to rescue."

"The royal family?"

"That's right," replied Remedios.

The Holy Lady had been killed, but there were no reports that the rest of the royal family had died. If they could save even one of them, that person could be raised as a symbol to gain the full support of the southern nobles.

"And I'd likes to save whatever nobles we can, too."

Most of the nobles hadn't been very friendly to the Holy Lady, so Remedios didn't care for them. But there had to be some northern noble with family ties to the south. If they put those families in their debt, they could openly request more active assistance from southern nobles.

Remedios gave Neia a piercing look. "Squire Neia Baraja, I appoint you as His Majesty's aide. Influence him so he works to our benefit."

"Huh? What?? P-please wait a minute! I'm just a squire—I can't serve a king!"

"Work hard enough that you can."

"It's not an issue of working hard!"

Normally she would just give in, but this time she desperately resisted. This wasn't the kind of thing she could accept so simply. *Has Remedios gone insane?*

"Sh-she's right, Commander!" Gustav backed her up. "If we don't assign him a lady-in-waiting of some standing, His Majesty might be insulted."

"…Are there any other women in the liberation army?"

Most of the women without combat skills had been evacuated to the south.

But it wasn't as if there were no women at all. The liberation army had a handful. Gustav was opening his mouth to suggest one of them, but Remedios spoke sooner.

"A woman in the Paladin Order. If I gave orders to a woman of the shrines, what would they think? My sister is gone! And besides, this sort of role should probably go to someone who was here to hear my thoughts. You would have me shove the job off on some third party?"

You're already shoving it off on me, thought Neia, but she didn't say anything.

"In that case…" Gustav looked at Remedios.

"I'm going to be fighting on the front line! You want me to keep the King of Darkness company on top of that?! Or you think we should leave everything to him?"

"Even if you intend to use him, we can't do it so blatantly. And there are issues of trust involved. Plus, if it looks like the Sacred Kingdom can't put up a fight, he may decide to conquer it outright…"

When Gustav trailed off, Neia realized her reinforcements had been defeated.

"Understood. I may be powerless, but I'll do my utmost."

"Yes, and just to reiterate. Your job is to make the King of Darkness easy for us to take advantage of. Say whatever will put him in a good mood."

This was more than a challenge; it was absurd. Neia hardly thought she could pull it off. But she gave up and bowed her head. *Nothing I say will change her mind.*

"Yes, ma'am! I'll do everything I can, so I hope you'll all support me."

"Sure. If you need anything, ask this guy." She indicated Gustav.

Though rather deep in despair, Neia was surprised to find herself feeling somewhat excited as well.

His Majesty the King of Darkness, huh…?



Chapter 3 Initiating the Counterattack

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1

The carriage swayed along.

It belonged to the King of Darkness. Contrary to its plain exterior, the inside was luxurious and sophisticated, as well as superbly functional. Neia was especially impressed by the cushions that prevented sore bottoms even during long journeys.

She stole a glance at the King of Darkness as he sat across from her, his eyes gazing out the window.

He was a terrifying undead, but his presence wasn't as overwhelming as when she had first met him during the audience.

Perhaps that was because they had more time to talk together during this journey.

One thing she had learned was that he was very generous.

The King of Darkness had the dignity of a king. Even the slightest movements he made exuded a royal gravitas.

But sometimes in this carriage, he acted like any normal person. And especially of late, those moments had grown more frequent.

How generous of him to assume a folksier attitude out of consideration for Neia, who was so nervous to be riding with him. Surely the reason those moments had increased was that he had gotten used to the act.

The reason he didn't operate in that mode with anyone else had to be because the others were paladins, people of rank.

It's so kind of him to go to such trouble for a foreign commoner…

What was he looking at? He probably wasn't watching the paladins riding alongside them. He must have been looking at something else—something that

had nothing to do with Neia—

“Hmm? Did something that fascinating land on my face?”

“What?! No, Your Majesty, excuse me. There’s nothing on your face…”

Apparently, she had spaced out and ended up staring at him. He seemed puzzled and rubbed his cheek with a bony hand.

“It certainly is awkward to ride together like this with no conversation. Hmm. Shall we talk?”

She had gotten used to it somewhat, but the idea of being his conversation partner still made her stomach hurt.

“We don’t know each other very well, so I’ve been avoiding topics that might be private, but now we’ve been riding together for a few days. Maybe we can open up a bit. Will you tell me your story, Neia Baraja?”

“My story?”

Her “story” was such a vague topic; she had no idea what the King of Darkness would find entertaining.

“Right. Well, for example, why did you become a squire? What does your job entail? Would you tell me about that?”

“If that’s what you’d like to hear, Your Majesty.”

She bowed her head and began talking as requested. That said, it wasn’t a very exciting story. There wasn’t anything interesting about her family or her work as a squire.

They told me not to leak any information about the Sacred Kingdom, but I’m sure this sort of thing is all right.

Or rather, if she hid even those things, she wouldn’t be allowed to say much at all.

Eventually, her uneventful tale lacking the usual four-part structure came to a close, and the King of Darkness nodded deeply.

“I see, I see. So, Miss Baraja, you’re a rare bowman squire.”

“Not to the point that I can say it so proudly, Your Majesty. I’m just better

with a bow than a sword; actually, I constantly get told to put more effort into my swordsmanship."

To Neia, a bowman was someone with great skill, like her father. She was only a little more capable than the average person.

"…Or rather, you're an aspiring paladin who is skilled with a ranged weapon. That's extremely rare. I'd recommend that you work on your archery skills. If you have people who specialize in swordsmanship, you can leave the swords to them."

"Thank you."

The King of Darkness was speaking sincerely, and Neia could tell that he really believed what he said deep down. She did wonder what he meant when he murmured to himself, "Weird combinations are the path to rare classes." It seemed significant, like some sort of metaphor.

"I'm sorry you were forced to do the tricky job of looking after me. I feel bad not only for you but for the others. They could better utilize your skills by positioning you outside, no?"

Neia's eyes widened at his kind remarks.

This was the part of talking to this king that was bad for her heart.

Not only was he the head of his nation, he was an overwhelmingly powerful individual. Yet, instead of speaking to her from on high, he did her the favor of interacting with her as an equal.

No! I can't let his kindness spoil me! I have to take a step back!

Neia composed herself.

"Everyone knows I've been ordered to accompany you. You needn't worry. And in the first place, there's nothing more important than accompanying you."

"I see… I'd really like to offer you some sort of compensation."

He had offered to pay her something previously. Of course, she had refused, but it seemed like he was bringing it up again. Neia immediately began selecting words she could use to politely turn him down, but the King of Darkness hadn't finished.

“That said, accepting something from a foreign king would probably be bad for someone in your position. So please accept my verbal thanks. I’m sure I’ll cause lots of trouble for you, but I appreciate your assistance.”

Then the King of Darkness bowed his head.

A king was bowing to her, a mere squire.

The weight of a country rested on a ruler’s shoulders, of course. Just as it was said that making light of a king meant making light of a country, it was normal to think that a country existed through its king.

In other words, a king bowing his head meant his country bowing its head. Of course, it surely wasn’t unheard of for a king to bow to someone of high standing.

But Neia was a commoner from another country. He didn’t even need to thank her.

I can’t believe it. He’s a wise king—it’s not as if he doesn’t understand the implications of bowing to me. So is he bowing like any normal person because he thinks I’m so—no! I can’t get full of myself. I couldn’t be that valuable. This is just proof of how broad-minded he is; he even thanks regular people… Oh crud!

“Please stop, You Majesty! Please raise your head!”

Right, saying that should have been my first priority.

The King of Darkness looked up, and Neia breathed a little sigh. Frankly, if anyone had seen what just happened, there would have been an uproar.

“Your Majesty.” She took a knee on the narrow bit of floor. “I’m no one special, but I vow to work loyally and wholeheartedly until your business is concluded.”

It was only natural that she return the king’s gesture of respect.

She ignored the voice that said he wasn’t the king of the Sacred Kingdom and bowed her head.

“Oh, come on; raise your head… Now, would you sit back down and finish your story? We’re not there yet, are we?”

“No.” She sat down and looked out the window. “Yesterday, thanks to Your Majesty, we were able to pass through the broken wall. We’re traveling roads no one is likely to spot us on, so it might take a while. Still, I think we’ll arrive at our base by tomorrow or the day after.”

They called it a base, but it was really just a cave.

“I see. So we still have quite some time, then. Tell me the rest of your story. I haven’t heard why you decided to make attaining holy knighthood your goal yet. If you’re good with a bow, couldn’t you have gone that route? Why did you choose to be a paladin? To uphold justice? Or because they’re the pride of your kingdom?”

“No.” She smiled and remembered her childhood like it was yesterday. “Because my mother was a paladin.”

And one who was reliable with a sword at that, a totally different sort of knight compared to her daughter, Neia.

“I seeeee. So she told you to? Or you looked up to her?”

“Oh no. She always told me *not* to be a paladin. And she wasn’t very good at being a parent. She could do laundry and mending, but when it came to making meals, she was hopeless. It was all so sloppy. Meat coming out underdone was never a surprise.”

It was her father who always cooked, and when she was a kid, she thought that’s how it was at everyone’s house.

“…I see. Even though she was against you becoming a paladin, she didn’t stop you when the time came—she was a good mother.”

“Oh no. When I told her I was going to become a squire, she brought out a sword and said, ‘If you can defeat me, I’ll allow it!’ The reason she finally let me was that my father hopped in to shield me. I would never have won in a fair fight.”

The first time she experienced the intent to kill was in that moment.

“……Ahhh, that’s a nice, uh, a nice family you had, then…”

“Yes. The neighbors gave us strange looks, but I think I had a good family.”

"……I see. That's good… S-so why did you end up aiming to be a paladin? You never thought to follow in your father's footsteps…? Or was he a stay-at-home dad?"

"No, he served the country as a regular soldier. But, hmm…I wonder why I never thought to do what he did. I got these sinister-looking eyes from him; maybe I resented him for that."

Neia put her pointer fingers to the corners of her eyes and wobbled them.

When she was little, her friends would often say, *Why are you glaring at me? Are you mad?* She always complained to her father about it. And whenever her mom overheard, Neia would end up getting clocked across the head.

Thinking back nostalgically, she said, "But maybe because I've expanded my worldview as a squire, I've realized these eyes are also a gift. Well, not that I needed the permanent scowl."

"So what are your parents up to now?"

"My father died on the wall in battle with Jaldabaoth. I lost contact with my mother, so I don't know what happened to her, but I imagine she died protecting the city. I'm sure she would have resisted to the end."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

The King of Darkness bowed his head again. The second time it wasn't such a shock, but it was still enough to get her flustered.

"Please look up! You don't need to bow to a regular person like me!"

"It was inconsiderate of me to go into such depth on the topic of your deceased family. I didn't realize, but apologizing is still the right thing to do." He looked up and cocked his head.

N-no, that's only when you're someone's equal. A king and a commoner from another country are not equals. And you're also coming to our rescue…

"What? I can think of lots of reasons why it wouldn't be. You know, if someone saw you bowing to me, they might, uh, look down on you. Since I'm just a squire."

"…Mm. I see. Yes, you're right. That's what it means to be a king." Then he

mumbled, “This is hard.”

He must have meant that even though they had grown closer, it was difficult to be open with someone from a foreign country.

“Okay. Then, I don’t mean this as an apology—I’d just like to lend you this, Miss Baraja.”

He put a hand in his robe and pulled out a bow.

Huh?!

It was way too big to hide under his clothing. Neia blinked a few times, but reality didn’t change.

“It’s an enchanted weapon. Use it to protect me.”

The bow was made in part from animal parts used as is, but rather than giving it a feral feel, it imparted a sense of sanctity.

She could tell just from looking at it. Frankly, it was such a valuable item, she could call it *super*-valuable.

“This is Ultimate Shooting Star: Super. It was made with ancient rune technology. I’ve actually been carrying it around to lend to someone. Oh, and there were actually runes carved in here, but I guess they’ve been worn down so you can’t see them anymore. That’s unfortunate.”

Neia wanted to scream, but she suppressed the feeling with all her might.

Thinking sensibly, she absolutely had to refuse it. There was a good chance this item was a national treasure. Could he really lend it to a foreigner so casually?

Maybe it only looks…? No, that can’t be! It’s definitely an amazing weapon!

“What’s wrong? You won’t accept it? You’re my bodyguard, right? I just thought that you should have some decent gear.”

“Urk!”

That made sense.

She found her head spinning.

“Ohhh, sorry. Is it because it looks so flashy? If that’s the case, then I have another that’s more subdued called Great Bow: Special. This one’s also made with fantastic rune technology.” He reached into his robe as he spoke—

“P-please stop! I’m very satisfied with this one! Please don’t trouble yourself with the other one on my account!” She practically shrieked to keep him from pulling out another weapon. If she saw whatever he brought out next, she felt like she might go insane, and if he lent it to her, she could very well end up spending the entire day just polishing it.

“Your Majesty! I’d be honored to borrow Ultimate Shooting Star: Super!”

She accepted the bow with shaking hands.

It was more ornate than most bows, and it looked awfully heavy but surprised her by being light in her hands. The moment she grasped it, she felt energy flow into her, strengthening her muscles, but she was also sure that even without those effects, it was surprisingly easy to carry.

Oh, this is nuts. I was hoping that maybe it would be an item that looked fancy but turned out to be nothing special inside, but this is definitely a wild one. It could even…be better than the Holy Swords…? Huh? Hold on… Th-that shouldn’t be possible, right?

“Oh? Just so you know, that’s not even a very fancy bow. If you want something else—with better performance—let me know.”

This was bad. If she continued this conversation for much longer, she would be in trouble. If a mere squire had better gear than the leader of the Sacred Kingdom, there would be issues.

“Thank you. I appreciate your concern for someone as lowly as me…”

I can’t let anyone else lay a hand on this, she thought, gripping it tightly.

The King of Darkness was nodding to acknowledge her gratitude, and she smiled at him. She felt like her face was going to spasm, but she hid the fact as skillfully as she could.

“When you show it to the others, please tell them I lent it to you.”

Do I have to show them?! Really, I wanted to wrap it up and tuck it away

somewhere…but I guess I can't do that with a weapon he lent to me for his protection, huh…? Ahhh, this is giving me a headache. And he said this isn't a fancy one…? His Majesty's standards are too high… Will he demand compensation if I accidentally scratch it? From who?! Ugh, my stomach hurts… I don't want to think about the bow… Ah!

Neia remembered she had a perfect conversation topic that she hadn't brought up yet. "Your Majesty! I saw the giant, majestic statues of you in your country!"

"Oh?"

His voice was abruptly much softer, so she wondered if she had said something wrong.

This king had made his name the name of his country. She figured that he loved being the center of attention and had commissioned the statues in order to make his power known throughout the region.

Maybe I didn't compliment them enough?

"The statues not only portray your greatness but also make your power known more widely. The Sacred Kingdom has none that can match them."

That wasn't a lie. Besides being huge, they were also the height of artistic construction and so lifelike it seemed like they could start walking around at any moment.

The sea dragon statue at a place called Lighthouse Point was comparable in size, but it wasn't as well crafted, and the elements had worn away at it until it started looking pretty sad.

"My subordinates often say the same."

Oh, I see! He gets praise from his subordinates, so he means that he takes that much for granted!

"They seem to be making plans to build similar statues at various places throughout the nation."

"I see. That might be a good way to spread word of Your Majesty's greatness."

He looked at her in surprise. “Uh, mm-hm. But I’m not sure how I feel about putting statues of myself around my country. Yet, my subordinates say they want to build one over three hundred feet tall in the center of town to tell the world how great I am. The idea that bigger is better is simplistic, though.”

“Why is that?”

“Ahem.” The King of Darkness cleared his throat. For a moment, the question of if he got a sticky throat even as an undead occupied the back of Neia’s mind, but he was about to speak, so she didn’t want to interrupt. “It’s not material things that indicate a king’s greatness.”

“Ohhh.”

Neia was awfully shocked. Of course she was.

In the moment, she forgot that he was an undead and began to truly respect him.

This guy is a real king.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of him clenching his fists.

“Of course, it’s a different story if plentiful ‘things’ allow my subjects to live their lives in freedom and comfort. But you know, even if I show people my greatness with a statue, what does that mean? I want to be known for a peaceful reign.”

“You’re quite right!” Neia swallowed. Then she asked, “Your Majesty, as an undead, why is it you put so much thought into caring for your people?”

The King of Darkness’s compassion for his subjects was no act. She began to wonder if he was really even an undead.

“…I don’t really think about it a ton. This much is normal, isn’t it?”

Neia was shaken.

Is this the true greatness of a king?

Is this the sort of thing the Holy Lady and the high-ranking nobles thought about as they ruled the people?

Or is it because he’s undead? Does his immortality give him that perspective?

Neia didn't have the answer.

"And what the heck. If it's over three hundred feet tall, people will complain about it blocking the sun."

When the great king continued with that jokey comment, Neia was once again astonished by his humility. *He's a king among kings.*

•

The Sacred Kingdom Liberation Army's base was, as the King of Darkness had noted, a natural cave nestled in the side of a rocky mountain.

In one corner was a groundwater spring. The ceiling wasn't very high, but space was plentiful, and they could fit their horses inside. Additionally, mushrooms nearly half the height of a human provided a pale-blue glow, so they didn't need additional lighting.

The reason they were familiar with this location was that a party of paladins had been sent to exterminate the monsters who once used it as their lair.

After deciding to use the place as a shelter, the refugee knights had put some effort into splitting the space into different areas. In the sleeping zone, there were even room-like partitions. They had gone to the trouble of cutting down trees in the forest that spread out at the foot of the mountain a hundred yards below and building simple furniture with the lumber.

Even so, it was still a cave.

The total number of evacuees was 347: 189 paladins; 71 priests, apprentices, and associated staff; and 87 regular folk with nowhere to go. There was no hoping for a private room.

Naturally, they didn't have a suite to offer a foreign king.

The undead King of Darkness and the people of Roebel didn't need to spend much time face-to-face, and the Sacred Kingdom wasn't keen on him coming into contact with the classified intelligence floating around in the cave.

Yet, they couldn't very well say they preferred that he make liberal use of Teleport and spend most of his time in the Nation of Darkness.

In the end, they were forced to move around some baggage and create a

room for him.

Normally, a messenger would be sent ahead to allow for ample preparation time, but the Sacred Kingdom was currently under subhuman rule. They couldn't risk sending a paladin ahead of the group if they couldn't scout for enemies, and Neia was waiting with the King of Darkness in his carriage outside. They must have been frantically moving bags, carrying over a bed, a chest of drawers, and so on. They were also supposed to be hanging up a Nation of Darkness flag they had borrowed.

"…Hrm."

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?"

"…I don't mean to offend you guys, but I have a few questions. If you can answer, please do. We don't seem to be covering our tracks. Is that okay? Will someone go out later to hide them?"

The King of Darkness spoke evenly as if he were reading, and Neia's eyes went wide.

He was exactly right.

Climbing up this uninhabited mountain would definitely leave tracks.

And on top of that, the hoofprints of the horses the paladins had with them would be spotted instantly by someone who knew what to look for. So was it only coincidence that they hadn't been discovered until now? Or—

"Y-Your Majesty. We haven't been covering our tracks. Do you think they let us go on purpose? …But why?" she asked, her voice quivering.

On their journey together, she had learned that the king before her was incredibly wise. She was correct to think that he might tell her the answer right then and there.

"…Well, there are a range of possible explanations, but the most likely is…"

For a moment, Neia thought it would be better to have him explain to their leader and not just her, but she couldn't hold back her fearful curiosity.

"…that they don't want to lose track of the liberation army, don't you think?"

“Lose track of us?”

“Yes. Maybe this isn’t a very good metaphor, but say they found a nest of naughty mice. If the mice scattered, wouldn’t that be a pain? They must be waiting till all the mice gather to get rid of them all at once.”

Oh! He’s exactly right. I can’t imagine any other reason. I’m amazed he could analyze the situation so well after only being here for a few minutes… He seems to even understand how our adversaries think… Wow.

“As long as the circumstances don’t change, I doubt we have anything to fear. But I guess the tricky thing is that it’s not only our circumstances that could affect the timing of their attack. Naturally, theirs are a factor, too…”

Neia could only marvel at the king’s intelligence, how he could point out all these things so precisely.

“Thank you, Your Majesty! I’ll go report that to the commander right away.”

“Then I’ll come along.”

“Huh? But you must be exhausted from the long trip. They’re preparing a room for you, so wouldn’t you rather rest?”

“Did you forget? I’m an undead! I never need a break.”

That was true. She had completely forgotten.

Undead were beings who never tired. She remembered learning, for that very reason, that it would be hard to escape from an undead that could move as fast as she could. That utterly ordinary knowledge and her entire preconception of the undead had been shattered thanks to the King of Darkness. He was so different from what she had been taught to expect that she wondered sometimes if he wasn’t a human caster wearing a skull mask.

“Oh, I appreciate that. Then would you come with me?”

“Of course. And you don’t need to thank me. We’re in this fight to defeat Jaldabaoth together.”

She knew that by “we” he meant the Nation of Darkness and the Roebel Sacred Kingdom, but she heard it as him and her, which was a bit of a thrill.

Eventually someone knocked on the carriage door.

“Your Majesty, your room is ready.”

Neia was the one to open the door.

When the paladin standing outside saw the bow Neia was holding, his eyes nearly popped out of his head in shock.

She had never taken the bow out of the carriage before—because it happened that the King of Darkness hadn’t left the carriage since lending it to her. As a result, she had come this far without showing it to anyone.

…He’s surprised. Yeah, I know exactly how he feels. It’s definitely not the kind of weapon a squire would have…

Feeling the eyes on her, she turned back to the carriage and bowed her head.

Looking down at the ground, she didn’t raise her head until she had confirmed that the King of Darkness’s feet were settled. Then she turned to the paladin and asked, “Excuse me, but there’s something I’d like to talk to Commander Custodio about. Could you take me to her? His Majesty has said he would like to come along.”

“U-uh, yes. Understood. Then please follow me.”

The order they entered the cave was paladin, King of Darkness, Neia.

The pale-blue light from the tall mushrooms was pretty creepy. In some places where multiple mushrooms clustered together, they cast monstrous shadows on the wall. And since the humans’ skin was illuminated pale and blue, they looked almost like the dead, but strangely, that didn’t bother Neia now.

As they walked through the cave, they sometimes saw paladins on guard, as well as priests and commoners.

They had probably heard from the others, but they still couldn’t conceal their shocked stares at the King of Darkness.

They’re being so rude…

The King of Darkness probably wouldn’t get angry. He was extremely warmhearted, but that was exactly the sort of person who was terrifying when

they did finally get mad.

With that in mind, she probably should have told them not to be rude, but telling every single individual would have taken all day, and it wasn't really the sort of issue that could be solved by a quick warning like that. To the people of the Sacred Kingdom, and to living things in general, undead were naturally the enemy.

I could tell the commander…but, well, they aren't drawing their weapons, so that's halfway decent at least…

She suddenly noticed the King of Darkness take out a piece of paper and stare at it. She wondered what it said, but he was shielding it with a hand, so she couldn't read it.

Eventually, they reached their destination, where voices overlapping in vigorous debate could be heard behind a curtain.

"Commander Custodio. His Majesty the King of Darkness has come with Squire Baraja."

The room instantly fell silent.

At that point, the paper that had been in the king's hand was nowhere to be seen.

"Have them come in."

At their commander's voice, the paladin raised the curtain.

The eyes of the paladins and priests—people who hadn't been part of the delegation—contained a multitude of emotions as they stood to greet the king.

Even Neia could tell. So she was sure the King of Darkness could as well. But she didn't detect any change in his mood from behind.

He can't not have noticed what the atmosphere is like in here. Maybe kings just don't sweat the small stuff…

"Listen, everyone. This is His Majesty the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. Unable to watch our country continue to suffer, he came personally to aid us. Take care to mind your manners!"

Hearing Remedios's comments, everyone in the room immediately bowed to the king.

When they raised their heads, he began to speak with a stately air. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I am the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. I'm coming to your aid not as a nation but as an individual. And I'm sorry to visit you so suddenly, but there's something I realized since arriving, and I wanted to ask what you all think about it. I'll have the aide you provided for me, Squire Baraja, explain."

The king stepped to the side, so Neia slipped past him to come forward.

"Hello, everyone. Allow me to explain what His Majesty noticed."

She told everyone what he had told her. After her short explanation, a heavy silence ruled the room.

"…So what do you think we should do?" Remedios asked the being next to Neia.

"No, first I want to know what you think. I came to fight Jaldabaoth, not take command. If I do too much leading, won't there be trouble after I defeat Jaldabaoth?"

A murmur unsettled the room.

"…Or would you rather I took charge? If so, I'll save this country in the optimal way."

That would probably be best, wouldn't it? His Majesty may be an undead, but everything he says is right, and he keeps his promises. At this moment when so many of our people are suffering, maybe the right thing to do is accept another country's king.

"The only one above us is Her Majesty the Holy Lady. Sorry, but we can't have another country's king command us." Remedios refused immediately.

"Ngh!"

We should do whatever it takes to save the suffering people. Isn't that why you decided to use another country and its wonderful king?!

Neia hung her head. She couldn't let the complicated feelings inside her

show.

“For our reference, would you tell us what you would do, Your Majesty?”

“If it were me? Once I made any move, I would look for a new base right away, I think.”

“A new base…?”

Everyone in the room subordinate to Remedios frowned. They didn’t have any other places to hide.

“You don’t seem to have any ideas. In that case, your only choice is to plan an operation on the assumption that the more moves you make, the sooner Jaldabaoth’s army will attack… Okay, that’s enough from me, I think. I’ll go to my room now.”

Neia started to go with him, but he stopped her.

“Sorry, Miss Baraja, but I’d like you to stay here and listen as my representative.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

He can’t be thinking of me as one of his people, but he accepts me as a representative. Then he would be disappointed if she didn’t do her best to fulfill the role. The thought of the King of Darkness being disappointed in her made her heart uneasy somehow.

“Okay, I’m counting on you. You’re fine with that, right, Lady Custodio?”

“I have no objections if it’s what Your Majesty wants.”

Having received that reply, the King of Darkness turned to go along with the paladin who had guided them.

Once they were around a corner and out of sight, a priest spoke up. “So that’s the King of Darkness… Commander Custodio, are you sure we can trust him? I’m not sure anything good will come of chasing off one monster by inviting an even more terrible one in…”

“Exactly. Escaping our current suffering by doing something that will poison us in the long run… Well, that’s the typical pattern of someone ruining

themselves.”

“We already discussed that. Let’s not rehash it. The poison is already coursing through us.”

So they don’t even call him His Majesty?

Neia was irritated by the way everyone was acting since the king left.

She understood how they felt about undead as subjects of the Sacred Kingdom; their attitude was utterly natural. Actually, it was stranger that Neia took issue with it. *Why am I annoyed?*

“We see the value in using him… You’ve explained it to us quite clearly. I’m just not sure even we priests will be able to provide an antidote.”

What did they mean “value in using him”? Why try to decide if they could take advantage of someone who noticed their mistake and even offered them a plan to fix it instead of thanking him?

Ohhh, I see. There’s something I sense from His Majesty that the Sacred Kingdom is lacking right now: nobility. That’s why my heart is so…

How lucky she was.

She had been given the opportunity to ride in the same carriage and decide that the King of Darkness was a ruler worthy of respect despite being an undead.

So maybe the correct thing to feel toward these people was pity.

“By the way, Squire Baraja. What’s that bow you have there?”

“Oh, it’s a weapon His Majesty told me to use; he lent it to me just for the duration of this mission.”

“…Can I see it for a minute, Squire Baraja? We should examine it to make sure it isn’t enchanted with any harmful magic.” A priest reached out a hand.

She probably should have handed it over, but—

“No, sorry.”

The priest went slack-jawed. His face said he never expected to be refused.

“This is a weapon I received from His Majesty to be used to protect him. I can’t allow anyone else to touch it.” She spoke with her eyes downcast, so the anger inside her wouldn’t show. *He’s cooperating with us, yet you only want to use him! Why would I hand it over for even a second?*

“Commander Custodio, what is the meaning of this?”

“My thoughts exactly. Squire Neia Baraja, you need to—”

“So then, I can tell His Majesty?”

The atmosphere in the room froze.

“Fine, whatever. Let’s move on.”

Hmm, so she’s aware that they’re saying things that would be problematic if His Majesty were to find out.

“Before we do that, Commander Custodio, shouldn’t we send Squire Baraja back to the king?”

Neia saw the priest’s eyes flick toward her bow momentarily.

She understood what he was getting at, and she responded with a look that showed none of the disgust rising within her. “My apologies, but His Majesty ordered me to stay and listen. I’d appreciate it if you would allow me to be here.”

“Hmm… Gustav, what do you think?”

“His Majesty told her that in front of us. If we sent her away now, it could cause trouble.”

“I see. Then let’s have her stay.”

You really said all that right in front of me, huh? thought Neia as she bowed and expressed her gratitude.

“So what should we do about what the King of Darkness said? It’s easy to say we should move, but… Does anyone have an idea of somewhere safe we could go?”

If there were someone like her father, Pabel, here, who had ranger skills, they would have been able to make or find a space where this amount of people

could camp long-term. But there was no one like that in this group.

“The King of Darkness—His Majesty was saying that he thought Jaldabaoth wouldn’t make a move as long as we didn’t. So we just need to find somewhere to shelter before he does anything, right?”

The paladin’s suggestion gathered supporters. But Neia knew that nothing good would come of putting off the issue. They would only end up panicking.

“It’s not only an issue of location but also of food. Right now, our supplies are keeping well because it’s winter, but we’ll still only barely make it through. It seems like you weren’t able to get assistance in Re-Estize, but shouldn’t you at least have bought some food?”

“Unfortunately, the food in the Kingdom was more expensive than we could have imagined. And even if we could have bought it, how would we transport enough to feed all these people for several months?”

“Deputy Gustav, I understand what you’re saying, but without food we’re doomed. Maybe we really should try to obtain some from the south? Or we could move our base closer to the coast and transport food from Re-Estize by water?”

“We don’t have the money for that. We tried getting support from the wealthy merchants there, but we didn’t get a good response. And from the south…” Gustav winced. “They don’t realize how close the danger is to them, that our navy being worn down means the same as going to the guillotine.”

“We need something to motivate the south to cooperate.”

“A base, food. We have heaps of problems.”

“…Is Her Majesty the Holy Lady’s resurrection likely?”

“Unfortunately, according to the Blue Roses, tier-five magic probably won’t work when there is no body or the damage is too severe.”

“…Could His Majesty the King of Darkness do it?”

“You’d borrow the power of an undead?”

“We have no choice. Once Her Majesty is resurrected, then our main problem is Jaldabaoth.”

Everyone looked to Remedios, who was scowling.

“…We’re shelving that issue for later. I considered our options while we were traveling—the first thing we’ll do is free the people imprisoned in the camps.”

A few people nodded in agreement.

“Aha. All the people of the Sacred Kingdom have combat training. Each village liberated is another military force…if they’ll fight. But if we do that, our food issues will be even more dire.”

“That’s why we attack the camps. They must have food there.”

“Oh! Good thinking as always, Commander Custodio.”

The paladin’s comment made Remedios grin.

Neia looked at her smug face with icy eyes—because she knew whose idea it had been.

“And we’ll have those people help us to liberate more camps. At some point, we’ll be sure to find a noble who could put us in touch with the south. Before Jaldabaoth can mobilize his army against us, we’ll build our own and launch an attack of our own. That should throw off their plans.”

“Aha!”

Now there were more voices chiming in.

“That should be our plan. Squire Baraja, inform the King of—”

“One moment, Commander. I think it would be better to have me talk to him. We should follow all the etiquette when explaining an operation to a king.”

Gustav was right. But Neia had the feeling that wasn’t the only reason for his proposal.

Still, since she didn’t know what Gustav was up to, she couldn’t object.

“I see. Well then, let’s do that. I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

•

Neia went with Gustav back to the King of Darkness’s room. A paladin stood

before the door, which was only a sheet of cloth. It wasn't clear if he was on guard against those who would harm the person inside or the person himself.

Gustav directed him to leave, so he went away.

Neia furrowed her brow.

If he had the guard leave, there had to be some other reason he had come besides explaining their plan. She didn't think he would attempt an assassination, but if it came to that, she would have to take up her weapon to defend the King of Darkness.

"Your Majesty, King of Darkness, it's Gustav Montagnés and Squire Neia Baraja."

Having received permission to enter, Gustav went in first.

It was such a dreary room that the memories of the inns they'd stayed at in the Re-Estize Kingdom and the Nation of Darkness were depressing. Or rather, this wasn't the sort of room a king should have to stay in.

There was no helping that the walls were the bare rock of the cave, but the furnishings were also so shabby.

Paladins learned to sew during their service as squires, but they never learned to build furniture.

That said, the bed the king was sitting on was splendid. Its dark gleam made it seem like it had to be made of obsidian. White bedding was spread over the top.

Normally anyone would be flabbergasted and wonder where such a fine bed had come from, but Neia knew this was nothing for the King of Darkness, so she wasn't terribly surprised. And he could have teleported back to his country and brought it over.

But Gustav didn't know the King of Darkness as well as Neia did, so his reaction was different. "Y-Your Majesty, where did that come from?"

"This?" The King of Darkness pointed at his bed. "I created it with my magic. And the bedding is pretty much the same. I'm pretty sure it's one hundred percent cotton from somewhere or other; it's comfortable to lie on. If I could

sleep, I'm sure it would be quite pleasant."

Gustav had received the answer to his question, but all he could do was murmur, "O-oh…" Well, Neia couldn't blame him. Even her eyes glazed over as she thought, *You can really do anything with magic…*

"Anyhow, I see that Miss Baraja has returned, but what can I do for you, Deputy Commander?"

"Oh, uh, right! I don't mean to underestimate Squire Baraja's abilities, but I thought it might be better if I came to explain things."

"Hmm… If that's what you decided, then an outsider like me can't really talk. But I would like to say one thing." Something dark mixed into the red flame of his eyes. "I sent her because I believed she could do the job. For you to show up, even if you're her boss, says to me that you doubt my ability to judge people—I'm a bit offended."

No matter how people looked at him or how they acted toward him, the King of Darkness had never appeared angry, but now Neia saw him slightly upset for the first time. The fact that it was anger because he trusted her warmed Neia's heart. No one else valued her that much.

"Do excuse me!"

"If you're going to apologize, it should be to her, not me, but whatever. How about that explanation, then?"

Gustav said what he had to say, and the King of Darkness made a vague noise—"Hmm"—in reply. "I see. So what do you want from me? Or did you really just come to share that with me?"

"Ah, I just wonder what you think of the plan."

So that's what it was about.

He wanted to pick the king's brain and had used Neia as an excuse in order to come. He must have had the guard leave because it would be problematic if the consultation was overheard and word got out that he was subordinating himself to a foreign—not to mention undead—king.

What's the point of hiding it now…?

It was already clear they couldn't get by without borrowing the King of Darkness's strength. Sooner or later, everyone would know.

Wouldn't the best course of action for the Sacred Kingdom be to inform as many people as possible of the king's compassion and maintain an attitude of gratitude?

I can understand not trusting undead or being on guard, but His Majesty isn't like them…

But they probably wouldn't believe it if Neia said that. They might think she was under the influence of a spell like Charm.

How can I get everyone to trust His Majesty? Ultimately, we have to overcome their preconceptions, but I can't be so impertinent as to say something like, "Please go mingle with the people."

As Neia was thinking, the other two continued their discussion.

"…Mm, I'm pretty sure I said I wasn't going to give you any input on your plans."

"I know, but I'm begging you. We only have one shot. If there's anything, even something small, we can do to avoid failure…"

"That's the issue right there. What if I gave you advice and the plan still failed? I couldn't be held responsible for that."

"Yes. That's why I was thinking we could keep this between Your Majesty, me, and Squire Baraja."

"And Miss Baraja? You don't think it would be better to leave her out of it?"

"No, I thought it would be good to have a third party present. And someone with her special abilities might be able to point out some different possibilities."

"…Hmm. Then let's talk a bit. You're fine with that, right, Miss Baraja?"

"Oh! Yes, it's fine with me."

"Then, from what I heard of your plan, there are a few things that concern me. First is food. I agree that the camps might have some, but I doubt it's very much. We don't even know if they are feeding the prisoners properly. If it were

me, I'd be reducing the amount of nutrition they get to weaken them so they would be incapable of revolting. And you mentioned using them as soldiers, but what will they use as weapons? Do you have a stockpile in this cave?"

"No, we don't. We thought we would have to get them from the camps."

"Do you understand how dangerous this plan is if it relies on the camps for everything?"

"Yes, but it's very important to rescue the suffering prisoners."

"I agree with you there. They may be losing their love for this country as time goes by. But I do think you should at least have a plan for food. Honestly, I think getting the south to cooperate would be best. What can we do to make that happen?"

"We need the royal family. The Holy Lady passed away, but it can't be that the entire royal family is dead. If we can rescue a member of the royal family that the south supports, we could request assistance through that person. That would also obtain us a place to evacuate to… By the way, Your Majesty, the Holy Lady did die, but do you think you could do something with your powers?"

"Do something?"

"Bring her back?"

"Ah. It's not impossible."

He said it so simply that for just a moment Neia couldn't believe her ears. Resurrection was said to be the essence of faith magic. Only a handful of a handful of people could cast it. How many people in the world could speak of it so casually?

"Of course, I'd want compensation. And where is the body? What condition is it in?"

"At present, we don't know where the body is or what condition it's in. We'd like to pay whatever amount Your Majesty requests."

The King of Darkness waved him off. "It's hard if there's no body. Even the extent of the wounds changes things. It's possible that if I resurrect her without a proper corpse, she'll end up undead."

“W-we can’t have that.”

More than not having it, if the Holy Lady were turned into an undead, the entire kingdom would probably go to war.

“You don’t have anyone in the Sacred Kingdom who can use tier-five spells?”

“My apologies, but I don’t know.”

“Oh…? So where are the other members of the royal family?”

“We believe they’re probably in one of the prison camps. Given the amount of time that has passed, they surely aren’t hiding out in the city somewhere.”

“P-prison…? You have no idea where they are?”

Gustav said they did not. The King of Darkness looked up at the ceiling.

“Hmm…I guess we just have to play it by ear.”

“Yes. We don’t have any paladins who are skilled at reconnaissance…”

“I see…” The king nodded. “Building a robust organization with talent that can handle all sorts of information is paramount… But even with multiple intelligence agencies…”

“Th-that’s why I’d like to request Your Majesty’s help. Would you be able to do something with magic?”

“Magic isn’t as omnipotent as you think… First, I need more information about these prison camps. Show me a map with details.”

“My apolo—”

“I don’t think we have one here, so why don’t I go get one?” Neia interrupted.

Maps were national treasures. The more detailed they were, the easier it was to attack or defend as necessary. Allowing a neighboring country that could be an enemy in the future to know the geography of your entire region could only bring harm. That must have been why Gustav tried to refuse.

But.

Neia couldn’t allow it.

She couldn’t allow the King of Darkness to be merely used.

If they were going to borrow his wisdom, they owed him.

Gustav gave her a sharp look, but Neia pretended not to notice.

“Oh, in that case, I’ll take a look at it later. Okay, Miss Baraja, sorry to put you on the spot, but tell me everything you know about this region’s geography.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

They both acknowledged, and then Gustav raised the cloth and left.

Once they could no longer hear his footsteps, the King of Darkness murmured, “You don’t have to worry. I came here for my own benefit, too. Jaldabaoth’s maids are worth a lot.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

He must have been talking about the map situation.

Neia’s chest felt warm. How happy she was to have her efforts actually appreciated.

“But. This is a really a tough spot. I don’t know how you all managed to get this far with an organization that can be divided so easily.”

“My humble apologies.”

“Ah, I didn’t mean to have you apologize… It’s just a pain that your organization isn’t a monolith. Haven’t you ever voted when opinions clashed and let the majority rule? With a condition that no one was allowed to complain after the fact?”

“It would be wonderful to have an organization that worked like that. It sounds like a dream.”

“Hmm…wonderful, huh?” The King of Darkness gazed up at the ceiling. But his eyes seemed to be looking much further away. “Yeah. It does sound like a dream.”

“Is there an organization like that in your country, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, uh, nope. Unfortunately, we don’t. But you know…hoh-hoh…” He chuckled softly. “It would be interesting if we did.”

“Interesting?”

“Now then, you were going to tell me about the surrounding region.”

2

The party approached the prison camp under cover of night.

Following the King of Darkness’s suggestion, they had decided to attack a camp that was as far away from their camp as possible and also by the sea. Traveling by boat meant it would be easier to hide their tracks, and if they attacked somewhere away from their base, it would be harder for the enemy to confirm it was the liberation army’s doing.

But there was one problem.

If they went too far, there was a good chance an enemy scouting party would spot them en route.

As a result, they would attack a prison camp only as far away as was manageable.

Neia turned to the King of Darkness on his horse next to her and asked, “Your Majesty, we’re going to ride all the way to the village. Are you ready?”

“Yes, of course. The only thing is…no one has told me what the plan for the operation is. I wonder what strategy they’ve chosen. I’m looking forward to finding out.”

“Looking forward to it?”

“Heh-heh. I can get a peek at how the Sacred Kingdom strategizes. What abilities will they use to bust down the gate? Or will they fly over the wall to launch their assault? I imagine they won’t be holding anything back, so I’ll be able to see it all. It’s exciting to think that someone might have a skill I’ve never seen before.”

He’s definitely going to be disappointed, thought Neia sadly.

The Sacred Kingdom’s basic strategy for attacking an enemy fort was to have angels attack from overhead while sending the infantry charging in. She figured

this time would be no different. Put another way, they didn't have the forces to do anything else.

Neia looked at Remedios and the others.

Almost the entire liberation army force was up ahead.

When the commander raised her spear, the Sacred Kingdom flag affixed to it fluttered.

"We ride!"

"Ooragh!"

The commander kicked her horse and was off. The other knights followed behind her. The village was still quite far, so they were moving at a canter rather than a full gallop.

"The paladins are carrying a big log over from the forest. Is that going to be a battering ram?"

"Yes. Since the liberation army is only made up of paladins and priests, we don't have anyone who can open the gate or sneak in. Our only option is to break it down. No matter how adept our commander is with a sword, having a tool like that makes it easier to destroy a gate."

"So you're not breaking it with magic but with physical blows from a battering ram… Do you use ladders? Are there spells that you could use to get over the wall?"

There were different types of magic—arcane, faith, psychic—but the kind that paladins used was different and was cast via an energy called providence. Fallen paladins such as dark knights also used providence magic.

Neia had never seen or heard of a spell that could create ladders.

"My apologies, I'm afraid I don't know."

"I'm the same. I know there's a spell for flight that paladins can use, but I think it's in a rather high tier."

"Oh, really? I'm impressed that you even know about paladin magic…"

The king was truly brilliant. He had deep knowledge about types of magic he

didn’t even use.

“Well, because an enemy might use it. I worked hard to learn about as many types of magic as possible. I didn’t have much natural ability, so I had to make up for it with effort. My friend always said the more you know, the closer you are to victory. Hmm.”

She couldn’t really believe that he had no natural ability, but there were other things they had to discuss.

“Your Majesty, if you have a plan, I can relay it to the commander.”

The clever King of Darkness might have already come up with a better strategy than the one the liberation army had. Maybe that was why he was being modest.

“Huh? N-nah, let’s not. Well, mm-hm, hrm. Freeing the prisoners is the Sacred Kingdom’s job, not mine. As you raid more of them, you’ll begin to get a feel for what works. That’s the first step. You’ve got to notice these things yourselves!”

He was right. Or rather, everything he said was always right.

But Neia was hoping that, just for today, he would give them advice. This was a fight to rescue the innocent who were suffering. She wanted to make sure they chose the method that would save the most people the fastest.

“I know you’re right, Your Majesty. But I beg you to lend us your wisdom.”

She knew it was rude to ask while they were riding. But she still bowed her head to plead with him.

The King of Darkness looked straight ahead for a moment and then said, “Hmm… Neia Baraja, don’t make me repeat myself. Success is born of failure. Even if the plan you come up with without my help doesn’t work, you need to accept that without fear. Such an outcome would be a necessary failure on the way to success.”

His words sent a stabbing pain through Neia’s heart. He couldn’t always be there to help them. The King of Darkness was telling her that in order to rebuild their country independently, there would be sacrifices made as a result of thinking on their own, but that they would be needed nonetheless.

And it was exactly as he said.

But with his power, they might be able to save more people.

Is accepting sacrifices to maintain our independence…just?

What is justice?

Was saving more people just? Or…?

Her thoughts spiraled, and it seemed like she would never find an answer.

“Let’s believe in their abilities.”

All Neia could do now was pray that it wouldn’t end in a huge sacrifice and a sorrowful spilling of blood.

The party headed directly for the prison camp.

There were some hills along the way to the village, but something like a watchtower had apparently been constructed, so if they went from the front, they would undoubtedly be spotted. But it was also true that they were only capable of frontal attacks.

Eventually, the village came into sight.

It seemed like they had a proper night guard in the watchtower atop the gate. The alarm bell rang immediately, and the village erupted in a flurry of activity.

Neia squinted at the watchtower.

The subhumans resembled two-legged goats with long hair. They wore mail shirts and were armed with large spears.

If she remembered correctly, they were called bufolk.

Their race lived in mountainous regions, and their sturdy legs performed like a goat’s, allowing the fearsome warriors to get a foothold on even the slightest ledges and climb right up fortress walls. Neia also remembered her father explaining that their long hair tangled around swords, so after killing one, it was necessary to clean the blade or the cutting edge would be dulled.

The spears the bufolk carried were long enough that they could attack people on the ground from the top of the gate.

She had been worried that they would tighten up their defenses at once, but apparently they weren't that well trained, because they panicked a bit, which gave the liberation army time to prepare.

The priests got off their horses and got right to work summoning angels.

The paladins also dismounted and held up their shields—probably to protect the ones holding the battering ram from attacks from above. But that wasn't all the knights. About ten of them remained on their horses and headed for the village's flank.

"Miss Baraja. Was that small group of soldiers sent around to make sure that no subhumans flee from the camp and bring word to their allies? If any did escape, you would lose the war even if we won this battle."

"Th-that's right! It's exactly as you say!"

How easily he saw through all their tactics. All Neia could say was that she expected nothing less.

But she did wonder where the King of Darkness had learned such tactics.

Beings with tough skin, like subhumans, didn't usually wear armor. Beings with sharp claws probably didn't carry swords. The reason humans wore armor and wielded swords was that their flesh was vulnerable.

If there was no need to rely on clever adaptations, then there was no need for them at all. Then why in the world would the King of Darkness, said to possess such overwhelming power, be familiar with the tactics for attacking a castle?

"Where did you acquire such detailed knowledge, Your Majesty?"

"Hmm? Knowledge? Ohhh, you mean my guess from before? Right. Tactics like that, the friend I mentioned before taught me, and I tested them in battle—well, I learned in all sorts of ways, I suppose. But I never thought I'd be applying those lessons here."

"Was the friend you had very strong as well?"

"Hmm. Well, his strength wasn't in fistfights or magic battles but elsewhere. In that sense, I'm still probably not as strong as him."

He laughed an amused "hoh-hoh" with that smile particular to fond

memories.

She felt almost as if she were with another human.

Maybe the King of Darkness used to be human…

Neia was never fooled by stories of turning undead through the power of magic. She knew they couldn't be true. She had been taught that undead weren't born voluntarily. But…

The world is such a big place…

During her journey with the delegation, she had learned how small her world had been.

What was across the sea, over the mountains, or deep in the forest? Was there someone wise who would chuckle at her hesitation and tell her the answer?

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, uh, sorry."

"No, I wasn't scolding you. I was just a little worried because it seemed like you were spacing out while riding your horse… We're headed into combat. I know you must be anxious."

"Th-thank you, Your Majesty."

Just then, Remedios, having thrust the flag shaft into the ground, drew her Holy Sword.

"Everyone, our first battle to free this land from Jaldabaoth begins now! For justice!"

In reply to her shout came a roar of "For justice!" Then they all charged as one.

"There they go. If you're planning on participating in the attack, shouldn't you be closer to the front, Miss Baraja?"

"No, I have my duties as Your Majesty's squire. Leaving you here to go off to battle would be…" *Unthinkable—I could never.* She shook her head.

"O-oh, I see.. Th-then to change the subject…you haven't lent that weapon to

anyone, have you?”

“No, not even once! Your Majesty lent this to me. I would never allow anyone else to touch it.”

“Ah… I see. Uh, hmm. I appreciate that.”

She had the feeling the pitch of his voice had dropped, but she wasn’t sure why.

Did I disrespect His Majesty somehow…? I don’t know. Should I apologize?

As she was wavering, he changed the topic.

“Well, we’re here, after all. I looked around and made sure there are no subhumans concealing themselves with magic. Why don’t we go up close enough that we can keep an eye on the battlefield? I’m sure we can let the priests handle things here… What do you think?”

“As you wish.”

It would have been rude to tell someone as powerful as the King of Darkness that it was dangerous to go closer.

Just as she and the king approached the camp, where the alarm bell was clanging harshly, the fighting began.

Angels assaulted the watchtower above the gate, and the bufolk met them with their spears. Arrows were loosed from a turret. They were aimed not at the angels but at Remedios, charging at the head of the knight group. Since there was no chance of hitting their own, and she wasn’t carrying a shield, it made sense to try to hit her.

But she had skills unlike any other.

She sliced down any arrows that flew her way, all the while maintaining her speed.

Several of the angels attacking the watchtower descended on the turret in a counterattack. Three bufolk corpses fell out of it in moments.

At that point, the paladins had reached the gate and were starting their assault with the battering ram.

The wooden gate swayed once and emitted faint splintering sounds. “Again!” cried a knight.

The gate swayed again, more this time.

Another hit.

One of the gate’s logs went crooked. Neia could hear the cheers of the paladins even at a distance. There wasn’t enough room to get in yet, but a few more blows, and the gate would be completely destroyed.

A few of the angels went inside. Neia couldn’t see them, of course, but they must have been stopping the bufolk who had come to protect the gate.

“Get back!”

The sudden shout drew everyone’s attention.

It had come from the watchtower over the gate. How he had gotten up there was unclear, since the angels were supposed to be occupying it, but there was a single bufolk.

The problem was what he held in his hand.

“Get back!!” he repeated.

In the bufolk’s right hand was a girl—only six or seven years old—and he was holding a knife up to her throat.

“If you don’t get back, I’ll kill this human!”

The girl wore a soiled dress, and her face seemed dirty as well. Though she was still alive, her body dangled lifelessly side to side—as if to inform them of how the humans were being treated in the camps.

“You coward!” one of the paladins screamed.

“Get back—now! Look!”

A commotion ran through the knights. What happened? From their distance, and at night, Neia couldn’t make out every detail. But the King of Darkness was different.

“…It seems the child is bleeding from her neck.”

“No!”

“He can’t have killed her; her value as a hostage would—”

“All units, fall back!”

The paladins followed Remedios’s order and withdrew.

The priests in the rear had a hard time grasping the situation, but they gathered that something unexpected was happening, so they pulled the angels back as well. At the same time, they ran up to where Neia and the King of Darkness were. They must have wanted to see what was going on.

“More! Move farther back!”

The paladins responded to the bufolk’s shout by beginning to creep back even more.

Neia could see the bufolk guard changing in the watchtower. Those who had been injured in the fight with the angels were replaced by fresh personnel.

“This is bad.”

“Yes, it is.”

Neia slowly reached for the bow she had borrowed. The bufolk was using the girl as a shield. For that reason, there weren’t many places she could aim, so killing him in one shot would be quite a challenge.

Still, if she didn’t do it, who would?

I wish I had trained more with my bow, she thought as she pulled an arrow from her quiver.

Just then, the King of Darkness put a hand out to obstruct her line of fire.

“That’s not what I meant. They’d better cut it out. This is already pointless.”

Before she could ask what he did mean, he was walking toward the group of paladins.

They were all unsure how to save the girl.

Priests had a spell that could bind someone’s movement, so many were in favor of using that, but magic required a certain range to be effective. Could

they approach that close? If the enemy disapproved, would the girl be killed? Everyone had different opinions, and they didn't seem to be reaching any kind of conclusion.

That was when the King of Darkness and Neia showed up.

"How long are you going to spend debating? This is a bad scene."

When the King of Darkness spoke, all eyes gathered on him.

"We know, but—"

"Commander. Please calm down… The enemy is over there."

Gustav checked Remedios, who had raised her voice in frustration.

"No, Lady Custodio, you don't know. Once he learns a hostage is effective, he'll show you he wasn't only bluff—"

As if those words were the signal, the bufolk slit the girl's throat. Even from a distance, the spurt of bright-red blood was visible. When he let go of her body, it crumpled to the ground.

Silence.

As if everyone's brains were refusing to accept what had just happened.

Remedios returned to her senses first, and her shout roused Neia.

"How could you do that to a hostage?! We did as you asked!"

"Hmph!" Next the bufolk held up a boy. "That's why I brought another one! Now stay back!"

"You cowardly bastard!"

"Heh. You're such a fool. You didn't think I'd have another one waiting?!"

Remedios's clenched fists shook violently. Then she spat an order. "Everyone, pull back!"

"Order the ones who circled around on horses to gather up, too! Now!"

Neia could hear Remedios's teeth grind. The noise was so loud it was a wonder they didn't crumble and fall out of her mouth.

"Gustav, order them to come back…"

“B-but!”

“If we don’t, that boy will die! Hurry!”

“That’s a bad move. Now that he knows hostages get results, giving him any more time will only reduce our morale and end in more losses.”

Remedios, red in the face, glared at the King of Darkness the way she would an enemy.

“If we keep this up, there will have been no point to the sneak attack. And I can hear them carrying something to the gate. If they create a barricade, it’ll take longer to break through—”

“Shut up!” Remedios roared, and the King of Darkness closed his mouth. “Does anyone have a good idea?! A way to do this where nobody dies?!”

No one said anything.

There couldn’t possibly be such a convenient way out of this. Maybe things would be different if they had someone with stealth skills, but they didn’t.

And Remedios surely knew that. If it didn’t occur to her, with her animal instincts in combat, then it didn’t exist.

So why can’t she accept that?

Why is she so hung up on no one dying?

The King of Darkness’s words crossed Neia’s mind—*Is this a necessary sacrifice?* Without a huge power gap and a lot of luck, there was no way no one would die.

“Commander Custodio.” Neia’s voice sounded unnaturally loud. “Can’t we finish this now with fewer sacrifices?”

Remedios’s fierce eyes turned on Neia.

The strong warrior’s passionate gaze nearly had Neia trembling, but she knew she wasn’t wrong.

“There’s no justice in that!” Remedios yelled.

Justice? What even…?

All the paladins in the area had clammed up; they apparently didn't intend to comment. She suddenly felt surrounded by hostile forces, but when she began to back up, a hand wrapped around her shoulder.

When she looked, it was—as she thought—the King of Darkness.

"I support Miss Baraja."

He agreed with her in a low voice. But to Neia, it was like having billions of allies.

"Shut up!" Remedios yelled again. That was no way to talk to a king who had come from far away to aid them. There was forgivable behavior, and then there was unforgivable behavior.

Fury welled up inside Neia.

"What we need here is to break through the situation, not get irritated with one another… Well, since we have no other choice, I'll change things," the King of Darkness murmured. Then he strode away from the group—toward the gate. It was so sudden that before anyone could stop him, the bufolk shouted a warning.

"You in the mask! I told you to stay back!"

"Nonsense! How much value do you really think a single human life has?!" he shouted back in a voice just as loud.

"Wh-what?!"

"Our objective is to kill all the bufolk here! We don't care what happens to the humans! Widen Magic: Fireball!" With that shout, he thrust out an arm and sent the ball of fire that appeared in his hand flying toward the bufolk atop the gate and the boy.

The watchtower was engulfed in a massive explosion of flames centered on the two figures.

Everyone there crumpled from that single attack. The bufolk and the boy he had grabbed fell in a headfirst tangle toward the ground.

"Max Magic: Shock Wave."

In the follow-up attack, the half-destroyed gate was blown away. The barricade the bufolk behind it must have been putting up was also busted through, so it was as if a gaping hole had opened up.

“All right! Paladins, charge! Kill every last bufolk you find inside!”

His voice seemed to shake Remedios out of it.

“What do you think you’re—?!”

“Commander!”

“Nnnngh… Charge!”

At Remedios’s command, the paladins began to move. Or more accurately, they gave up on thinking and simply did as ordered.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Gustav said before racing off.

The other paladins and priests—those who were reasonable—sent the king looks of gratitude. Only Remedios was upset.

The King of Darkness spoke to Neia in a low voice. “Miss Baraja. Did you think I was going to save that boy with a spell you people could never have imagined?”

She did, a little. But she was sure there was a reason he did what he did.

“Oh y-yes, I did.”

“Hmm. I’m sure you did.” He shook his head.

Neia simply listened in silence.

“Sure, it was possible. It would have been easy to save this single boy with all the various spells I’ve acquired. But I couldn’t. Saving the boy in front of the bufolk would have been disastrous.”

For the first time, Neia looked puzzled by something the king said, and he kindly explained.

“If they had learned hostages were useful, they would have employed all the prisoners inside as cover. They would probably have been literally used as shields in combat when they felt threatened. That would have made the paladins hesitate, which could have resulted in many of them getting injured or

worse. We don't have a huge force, so losing even one paladin would be painful. That's what Lanchester's laws say…"

The King of Darkness walked toward the gate, and Neia followed.

"If, on the contrary, the bufolk learn there's no point to hostages, then the prisoners are only in their way. But do you think they have time to leisurely kill prisoners when they're under attack and the wall is being breached? Killing unresisting people is probably low on their list of priorities."

"I see what you mean."

"Then there you go. Rather than waste time killing people, they'll spend it preparing to stem the assault. So we had to kill him in a way that would demonstrate that hostages had no value."

He was right.

If they had done things Remedios's way, it was possible they wouldn't have been able to save anyone at all.

The King of Darkness gently picked up the corpse of the fallen boy.

"Your Majesty, I—"

"This is my job."

Holding the boy, he and Neia returned to where Remedios had stuck the flag into the earth.

After he laid the boy on the ground, Neia wet a cloth using the water from her leather drinking pouch and wiped the dirt off the boy's face.

His cheeks were hollow, and his arms and legs were shockingly thin.

It was clear what a horrible environment he had been in.

"Argh, those bufolk…"

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I will anyway. I'm the king of the Nation of Darkness, not of these people. That's why I can make a levelheaded judgment—like saving a thousand instead of just one. If this boy were from my country, I probably would have prioritized saving him. If you don't agree with that—"

"No, thank you, Your Majesty. I understand what you were thinking… You're

very just.”

“…Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Sorry. I mean, you were upholding justice.”

What am *I saying?* She herself wondered.

She thought perhaps he was stunned speechless, but in his deep compassion, he answered her.

“…Um? Er, no, I don’t think I’m terribly just. In the first place, it’s for someone else to judge whether justice is served or not. What I do is very simple. I want to make my name known far and wide…”

Neia flashed back to the statues. *If he wants to make his name known, does that mean he wants to be the center of attention after all?*

“That said, I’ve decided I don’t have to force it… Ah, sorry, I’m rambling. My only goal is for me and the children to live in happiness; that’s all—and that is everything.”

She doubted that an undead had children. Maybe he didn’t mean his children by blood but children in a wider sense? Or did he think of the people of his nation as his children?

Either way, he’s very kind. A world where children, the most vulnerable, can live in happiness must be a wonderful place. I can’t imagine what it must have felt like to take that boy’s life if this is how he thinks…

It seemed as though there was sorrow on the skeleton’s face in profile as he gazed at the gate.

“Sorry for the boring conversation. That’s enough chatting. Miss Baraja, I’m in no position to talk like I know anything, but I hope you’re able to find your own sense of justice.”

“…May I ask you one more thing? Would you have done what you did if it was one of your subordinates who had been taken hostage?”

“…This is just me complaining, but I have enough other problems with my subordinates.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“A long time ago I asked them something out of curiosity: If you were taken hostage and used as a bargaining chip in negotiations with me, what would you do? Every one of them said they would kill themselves so as not to be a bother. So I said, couldn’t you wait for me to send someone to rescue you? I’m happy they’re devoted to me, but I just wish they were a bit more…how can I put it? My subordinates are rather extreme.” He flexed his fingers in frustration as he grumbled wearily.

That’s a pretty luxurious worry to have for someone in charge of a whole country, Neia was thinking when Remedios, armored, blood on her sword, appeared at the gate. She had her helmet off, but her hair was plastered to her head with sweat; she looked completely worn out.

She gave some sort of instruction to Gustav standing by behind her, and then Neia felt their eyes meet for a moment. No, it was more accurate to say that when she looked at the King of Darkness, Neia happened to be standing in her line of sight.

Remedios went back inside without saying anything, her face emotionless.

Instead, Gustav came jogging toward Neia and the king.

“Your Majesty, you have our gratitude. Some damage was done, but we’re confident it was kept to the minimum thanks to Your Majesty’s powers. Normally our commander would thank you herself, but she’s upset by the people’s tragic circumstances. I hope you’ll allow me to say it in her place.”

Gustav glanced at the boy and then lowered his eyes.

“It doesn’t bother me. Be a comfort to your commander.”

“I will, thank you.”

“By the way, what sort of tragic circumstances?”

“We heard from some that we rescued that the prisoners were getting their skin torn off. It wasn’t subhumans skinning them but demons that Jaldabaoth had sent over.”

Neia thought Remedios being upset was just an excuse for her rudeness but

apparently not.

As Neia stood there in shock, the King of Darkness cocked his head. “Why were they being skinned? What was the reason? Were they eating it? Like chicken skin?”

“I have no idea… It doesn’t seem as though the subhumans were involved… Do you have any ideas, Your Majesty? Could it have been for some kind of demonic ritual?”

“No, sorry. I don’t have a clue, either. Really just no idea. Why would Jaldabaoth do that?” The King of Darkness answered with genuine puzzlement, and they all exchanged glances, cocking their heads. But anyhow, it was the act of a demon. It was entirely possible the purpose was simply a desire to torment humans.

“…Let’s ask the priests later. And then, Your Majesty, we’re searching around to make sure no subhumans are hiding so we can finish them off. I think it’ll take a little longer.” With that, Gustav set off back toward the gate.

Then after some time had passed, people started to appear at the gate.

The prisoners. Like the hostage boy, they were wearing clothes unthinkably threadbare, considering it was winter. The paladin who must have escorted them was visible for a moment at the gate opening and then disappeared back inside. Either there were so few people that they were shuttling them, or they hadn’t finished taking control of the village. Perhaps both.

With joy expressed in every movement of their bodies, the liberated prisoners walked toward Neia.

But once they were within a certain distance, they stopped in their tracks.

They must have spotted the King of Darkness. After a few moments, they started walking again. Maybe they thought he was wearing a mask.

One of the men rushed forward.

Running up to them, out of breath, he kneeled before the boy on the ground. No, perhaps it would be better to say that he fell to his knees.

Then he caressed the boy’s cheek, and when he confirmed there was no life in

him anymore, his sobs were practically screams.

It had to be the boy's father.

Neia bit her lip.

The father cried, calling his boy's name, and the King of Darkness addressed him gently. "I'm the one who killed him."

Neia stared at the king in shock. *You're really bringing that up now?!*

But the wise King of Darkness wouldn't suddenly broach the topic without some sort of objective in mind.

"Wh-why would you do that?!" The father looked up with hatred blazing in his eyes.

And in response, the King of Darkness smiled wryly. "To save the rest of you, of course."

"Wh-what?!"

For just a moment, the father's eyes brimmed with fear. He must have realized that the king's face was no mask or illusion. And when his eyes cast around for help, they landed on Neia.

But before she could say anything, the King of Darkness asked a question. "So let me ask you: Why didn't you protect your son? He was hauled out before us as a hostage!"

"I did, but they took him! They're stronger than me—there was nothing I could do!"

The King of Darkness put on that wry smile again. "Then I have another question. Why are you alive?"

That caught the man off guard.

"I'm asking you why you didn't die protecting your boy. Lives don't all have equal worth. I would have thought you valued your son's life above all from the attitude you showed just now, so why didn't you put yours on the line for him?"

The others were watching the conversation unfold from a distance.

He must have been anxious and frightened and angry at the one who had

killed his son.

“Wh-what are you saying…?”

“You failed to protect him. Don’t blame someone else for that. It’s your fault for being weak. And it seems like you might be misunderstanding something… I’m stronger than the bufolk, who you said were stronger than you, you know… Given that you’re mourning your son, I’ll tolerate a little mouthing off, but if you go too far, I’ll kill you.” He extended a bony finger and pointed at the man’s face.

“B-but you’re powerful—you’re powerful and that’s why you can say that! We’re not all strong like you!”

“No, you’re right. I can say it because I’m one of the strong ones. And you—you’re weak, so of course things are taken from you. It’s utterly natural for the strong to take from the weak.” He surveyed the other people around them. “You all experienced it in there, didn’t you? At the hands of the powerful bufolk?”

“So if you’re strong, you can just do whatever you want?!”

“Yes. If you’re strong, anything goes. That’s the law of this world. And it applies to me, too. If I encountered someone stronger than me, I would lose everything in just the same way. That’s why I seek power.”

Neia understood why the King of Darkness wanted Jaldabaoth’s maids.

He wants power to protect his country, to protect the children of his country. So it’s really…all about power…

“Well, but that’s why you weaklings were sheltering under the supposedly powerful Sacred Kingdom… I do pity you, being under the protection of a nation so weak. If it were my country, the Nation of Darkness, protecting you, this sort of tragedy would never have happened. Why? Because I would have done everything in my power to defend my people and driven the bufolk off.”

No one said a word.

The King of Darkness’s perspective was hard-boiled and cruel, but he was explaining this world like it was.

The only way to refute it would be to appeal to emotions instead of reason. But the greatest emotion they felt toward him—fear—wouldn't allow it.

"Th-this guy's an undead, isn't he? What is an undead doing here?!" Too frightened of the King of Darkness to say anything, the father turned on Neia.

But before she could say anything, the king spoke up.

"That's obvious. I'm here to save your country. And in reality, you were just saved by this undead. If you don't like that, then how about trying to rescue your kingdom on your own?"

At that pronouncement, the man turned to look at Neia, but she couldn't say anything—because the King of Darkness was speaking the truth again.

If the humans could have defeated Jaldabaoth alone, the King of Darkness wouldn't have been there.

Terrified, the man scooped up his boy's body and ran away. The people in the direction he fled looked fearful.

Whether the king was talking to the man's back or to himself, Neia didn't know, but she heard him murmur, "If I were weak, I would lose everything, too. That's why I can never stop seeking power. I have to remember that there must be someone out there as strong as me."

3

After attacking one prison camp and freeing the people there, the liberation army moved on to another camp the next day.

It wasn't due to momentum, but rather the pressure of several concerns. One of the biggest problems was, as feared, that there wasn't actually much food stockpiled at the camp.

The subhumans weren't feeding the humans very well, and they had a system of transporting food over from a small nearby city on a regular basis, which meant very little was stored locally.

The group of subhumans delivering food from this city were surely functioning as a sort of lookout to check if anything abnormal was happening at the camps. Even if they killed all of them and stole their food, when that group didn't return to the city, word would get around that something had happened at that camp.

Naturally, Jaldabaoth would find out right away. And there was a good chance that if that happened, he would come at Neia and the paladins with an army too huge for them to defeat.

At the end of the post-raid meeting, where she stood behind the King of Darkness and listened without saying a word, waiting through such a long period of disarray that her feet hurt, two plans had been suggested.

One was to take the achievement of liberating a single camp, evacuate south, and let the army that was supposed to be down there decide what to do next.

The second was to be more assertive and head to the small city to capture it.

Both of these conflicting opinions had their issues, but Remedios shouted enough that they went with the latter.

She had a top secret reason for choosing to storm the city.

According to a subhuman they had interrogated—and then killed, of course—someone who was perhaps a member of the royal family was possibly being held prisoner there.

If they really did find some royalty, things could take a turn for the better. Even if the person wasn't royal, someone with high standing and connections would be plenty good news. They would be able to leverage the debt of their rescue to get the person to put pressure on the Southern Army and request support.

But there was one question Neia couldn't get out of her mind.

"Your Majesty, do you think there's really a member of the royal family or an influential noble in this city?" she asked as they rode side by side.

Neia was allowed to ride in order to match the King of Darkness's pace. Otherwise, her horse would have been taken and put to work carrying luggage.

“You know, I think it’s a trap. Even if it’s not, there’ll be a proportionally large force guarding the place; there could even be demons. It seems like Commander Custodio and the others understand that. They’re willing to fight the battle anyway. Sometimes you just have to gamble.”

It was clear that if they didn’t ask for help from the south soon, people would start to die of starvation. Even Neia could see that they wouldn’t be able to maintain the liberation army.

Eventually the little city came into view up ahead.

Riding at the tail end of the party, she watched the people walking in front of her.

They were subjects of the Sacred Kingdom they had rescued from the prison camp. The reason they were armed and marching even though they really needed a rest was that estimates said there were more subhumans in this city than at the previous camp.

Many of the people were weaker than anticipated, so it was impossible to expect much of them as soldiers, but every little bit helped, so they were mobilized.

Since it was difficult with Neia’s abilities to keep this many troops safe from the subhuman scouting patrols, they prioritized time and hurried onward.

But as a result, the army’s exhaustion mounted, and as more time went by, more adults ended up riding uncovered wagons. They were nodding off on that wagon that was bumping around enough to make regular passengers sick, so they must have been unspeakably tired. Meanwhile anyone with the energy to walk was made to do so, including children.

Priests weren’t accustomed to this much walking and sometimes eyed the wagon enviously.

Even if we make it there, we’ll have to go straight into combat. Can we really pull it off in this condition?

In their strategy meeting on the road, it had been decided that they would launch the fight to take the city immediately. There was neither time nor food to lose.

While it was still bright out, it was too dangerous to attack inside the walls the enemies were manning.

It was better to approach the enemy at night, but humans were at a disadvantage since they couldn't see in the dark. Especially for citizen draftees who had only received basic combat training, night fights were very dangerous.

Considering that and other factors, the plan was to attack while it was still daylight.

Up ahead, ranks began to form. The forward-most line was composed of the paladins, and behind them came regular subjects carrying a wooden barrier they'd built from broken-up prison camp houses. Last were the priests.

The operation was the same as the previous raid: Angels would keep the soldiers on the wall busy while the paladins brute forced their way through the gate. The role of the common people was to add numbers and mass, mainly to show the enemy how many they were as a show of force. They were instructed to avoid combat, but that if necessary, they were to fight in teams to outnumber their opponents.

"Now then, let's see what they can do…," the King of Darkness murmured idly.

He would be observing, not participating.

Really, they wanted his help taking the city, but no one had been able to bring it up in the meeting. He must have felt their imploring eyes and ignored them. Now he was at the farthest point in the rear.

The battle began just like the previous one.

Though the city was small, it was still the biggest one in the area, so the gate had a grate reinforced with iron that could come down, as well as a brattice. Not only that, but the walls were made of stone instead of wood, which meant its gate and walls were sturdier than the previous village had been able to build for its camp. Still, the little city's population was less than ten thousand, so the walls weren't tall or thick enough to be considered truly formidable.

One could say it was a pain for the attackers and a worry for the defenders.

Remedios led the paladins in a charge, and the angels attacked the subhumans up on the city wall.

But here and there, angels took hits from the subhumans, turned to particles of light, and vanished.

They were up against the bufolk like at the previous prison camp, but as they were defending a city instead of a simple village, they posed a greater threat here.

One with a splendid spear stood out in particular, though he concealed himself behind a parapet. He seemed to be the one slaying many of the angels.

Then he howled a battle cry.

It was probably some sort of skill, but it didn't affect the angels or the paladins trying to bash through the gate. It was unclear whether the area of effect was just small or if it was a power that affected allies only. But it was probably a good idea to remember that he had a skill.

Below, the two sides were clashing fiercely at the gate.

Behind the grate—from inside the city—the bufolk were thrusting their spears, but knights blocked those attacks with shields that had spikes on the bottom, defending their allies working the battering ram. Remedios was even slicing the protruding spears apart.

Boiling water poured down from the brattice, and the steam rose back up. But the paladins had anticipated this sort of attack, so they had preemptively cast Fire Energy Protection. It bothered them about as much as a splash of water.

Of course, it was winter, so once the temperature of the water dropped, it would present a different issue, but for the time being, they were fine.

If it had been boiling oil instead of water, they might have had trouble keeping a grip on their swords, but perhaps oil was too valuable to the subhumans; they didn't use that type of attack.

The slowly advancing commoners put down the wooden barrier they had brought from the previous camp and used it as a shield. Really, something

metal would have been better, but they hadn't been able to procure those materials, so this was the best they could do. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Behind their barrier, they began hurling slings. They aimed at the subhumans the angels were fighting. Granted, they weren't used to combat, so they hit the angels just as often.

That amounted to friendly fire, but the angels had resistance against physical attacks, so it wasn't an issue. Of course, the damage was only reduced—they weren't completely immune—but the rocks the people were slinging didn't cause that much damage to begin with. Ultimately, the subhumans they were aiming at were hurt more.

Each time an angel was defeated, the priests summoned a new one and sent it to the front line. Though there weren't large numbers of them, since fresh, uninjured fighters kept being added, the gradual decline of subhuman resistance was visible even from where Neia was watching.

"…Huh. I guess assuming the enemy has cast a defensive spell and pouring cold water instead would be more useful. In the winter cold, their body temperatures would plummet in no time… And usually they'd have protection against fire, not chill." The King of Darkness seemed to be matter-of-factly analyzing the battle in a low voice.

Neia had no idea how to reply. No one had died yet, but some had sustained serious injuries in this fight; how could she just say, *Yeah…*?

"So you don't want to fight? With the bow I lent you, you could probably do pretty well."

Neia's role was to attend the King of Darkness and be his shield, so she wasn't ordered to participate in combat.

But—and she had this feeling last time as well—he seemed to want her to use the bow.

He wants me to use the weapon he lent me? I could try shooting from here, but I would hate to miss the first shot I take with it…

As Neia was about to answer after mulling it over, a roar went up from the gate. It appeared the grate had gotten bent out of shape.

The roar must have been cheers from the paladins and shrieks from the subhumans.

When the gate broke, the paladins flooded in.

With Remedios showing off her skills, the stunned bufolk would only become more panicked.

But then the paladins fell back as a murmur went through the group.

With her sharp vision, Neia could see what was happening between the gaps in the crowd of knights.

It was the same scene as before.

A bufolk holding a smaller child than last time was giving orders to the paladins from the other side of the gate.

She couldn't hear what he was saying from where she was, but she could imagine well enough.

The paladins pulled back, with Remedios and Gustav leading the way. They ordered the priests, "Have the angels retreat. If we don't, he'll kill the kid."

"This again? We can't hear the conversation from back here. I'd like to go over there and join in. Would that be okay with you?"

"You don't need to ask my permission, Your Majesty."

Gathering nervous looks from the people between the gate and their original position, Neia and the King of Darkness advanced to where Remedios was debating what to do.

"We should negotiate with them, like I thought." It was Remedios who said that. Everyone else had their helmets off and their brows furrowed. Their faces said that, knowing what had happened at the first prison camp, they couldn't agree with her.

When the king arrived, they still hadn't come up with an answer.

No, it seemed that everyone was trying to convince Remedios that it was impossible to save the child.

A pointless exchange of opinions ensued, generating no concrete plan, and a

few people were trading glances when eventually Gustav focused his eyes and raised his voice. “Commander! Didn’t we debate all this already?! No matter how much time we could have taken, no matter how much we could have thought, there was no way to save those kids!”

Neia knew that they had remained in the tent after the King of Darkness left the operation meeting going over the arguments again. And she understood it was impossible to do what they were doing without shedding paladin blood.

Remedios bit her lip, saying nothing. But—

“Commander! We cannot be victorious without sacrifices! We need to let one go to save many more!”

Neia saw Remedios’s eyes blaze crimson. “That’s not how someone under Her Majesty the Holy Lady fights! I am Her Majesty’s sword! She wishes for all her subjects to live in peace!”

“But the Holy Lady is…”

Before Gustav could say *dead*, Remedios screamed. “The next holy king hasn’t stepped up yet! So shouldn’t we uphold the beliefs of the holy ruler we swore loyalty to?! Would you break your vow of allegiance?”

Oh, I see, thought Neia.

Remedios was bound by the wishes entrusted to her by the object of her devotion.

The holy knights who served the Holy Lady, who loved her subjects, wouldn’t be forgiven for leaving any of them behind.

The only one who would be able to break those bonds was whoever the next person Remedios swore allegiance to ended up being.

“Am I wrong?! Who did you all devote your swords to?! What was the ceremony you participated in to become paladins?! Who do you think this order of paladins serves?!”



The ceremony to become a squire involved an audience where one's sword was dedicated to the holy king. And when someone else ascended to the throne, the same ceremony was held again, and the paladins swore allegiance to their new king. So all the paladins in the order had dedicated their swords to the Holy Lady.

"Or what?" The tone of her voice abruptly changed—to an icy one devoid of all warmth. "Do you think her wish to bring joy to the weak and make this a country where no one cries was wrong?"

"She wasn't wrong! But given the circumstances…it needs to be changed!"

"By who? Who's going to change it?! Tell me that. What greater justice is there than striving to not let a single person die?!"

Gustav fell silent.

Neia realized her earlier idea was mistaken.

Remedios wasn't ruled by her devotion to the Holy Lady's ideas.

She thought she should serve justice. That meant no matter how hard the road was, no matter how impossible it seemed, she had to stay the path and forge ahead.

Which was more just: saving the many at the expense of the few or wanting to save both the many *and* the few?

It went without saying.

The latter, of course. But it was too idealistic, and any normal person would give up on it right away. Remedios must have been aware of that, but still argued that they should save everyone.

She held up an ideal that normal people would abandon.

That was why she was such an elite paladin, as well as the commander of the Sacred Kingdom's order.

Being unable to comprehend that Remedios was after that lofty justice made Neia feel like the pitiful one.

Perhaps some of the paladins felt the same way; a few hung their heads in

shame.

The King of Darkness's justice of abandoning one to rescue a thousand was a king's justice, while Remedios's justice of wanting to save both was the shining ideal.

They were both just. Neither was wrong. Still—

Unless you have power, your actions won't achieve justice.

If there were some being Neia couldn't even imagine, like a god, far more powerful than Remedios, who would help them, they would probably be able to save the child and the city's people. Then there wouldn't be a single issue.

But that wasn't reality. They were stuck here precisely because no one could come up with a way to avoid losing lives.

You need power in order to serve justice. Ahhh, I wish I were strong… Then Jaldabaoth never could have sullied this land…

"…Sorry to interrupt while you're duking it out with your opinions, but at this rate, you're not going to reach a conclusion."

The extremely levelheaded comment made all the heat in the atmosphere dissipate.

"Your Majesty…"

"Lady Custodio. At this rate, word will spread, just like last time, that hostages are effective. I don't think there's a way to take this city without anyone dying."

"I disagree. There must be a better way—a way where no one dies or has to grieve!"

Remedios's voice was pained, but the King of Darkness answered in an even tone. "I really doubt there is… This is taking too long, though. It's just going to be a repeat of last time."

Remedios bit her lip hard. It seemed like she drew blood.

"…So…Commander. That child will have to be a sacrifice."

"But—!!"

"Right. I'll handle the rest. With all the time that's passed, even if you all

attacked with the resolve to die if necessary, this won't end with a mere few casualties."

"Are you sure?!" Neia blurted instinctively. "Your Majesty's mana is for fighting Jaldabaoth. Won't you be at a disadvantage if you use some now?!"

"That's true, Miss Baraja. But I have no choice if we're trying to save as many people as we can… I can't do it with no sacrifices, but there will be fewer than if you guys did it. So how about it? Shall I make the move?"

"There will be…sacrifices…?"

"Unfortunately, yes, Lady Custodio."

Remedios hung her head and walked away—toward the city and where the anxious subjects looked on.

"Excuse us, Your Majesty. Allow me to ask for your help in her place," said Gustav.

"Sure… This is a petty question, but…will you be grateful?"

The king's question puzzled them for a moment, but they agreed immediately. Neia didn't overlook her momentary worry about why he was asking something so obvious, though.

"Okay. Then I'll take this city on my own. If you see anyone fleeing, kill or imprison them as you see fit. Personally, I'd like to get some information out of them, so I'd appreciate it if you could take prisoners. And I'm going to use undead—don't let that get you too worked up."

Without waiting for their reply, he set off walking toward the gate.

"Greater Magic Seal. Mass Hold Species."

Without pausing on his way, he began to cast some spells.

After two or so, he waved his hand, and figures wavered into being.

There were ten of them.

Their presence was particular to undead and difficult for the living to abide. The transparent beings bore expressions of anguish.

They were wraiths. Neia had learned in her monster lectures that they

appeared as the same race as the viewer. But the way three shadowy figures were mixed together in one was something she hadn't heard of.

"High wraiths."

The grotesque forms followed behind the King of Darkness. The grass withered beneath their feet. Since it was winter, it was already brown, but the blades rapidly shriveled as their moisture left them.

"Go and wait for my instructions."

With motions that seemed unbound by gravity, the undead floated into the air in perfect formation. In just a few seconds, they faded into the blue of the sky, and even Neia with her keen eyes couldn't pick them out.

She wondered if he didn't need to explain to them what was going on but figured that if he could come up with such a perfect plan, he wouldn't forget something like that.

"Wh-what are…?"

"High wraiths. Since they're incorporeal, they can go through walls and whatnot… Not that they can pass through *any*thing, but… I suppose that's not what you're asking, though. They're one move toward taking the city. Now then, Miss Baraja, I'll have you stay he—"

"I'm coming with you."

"Hmm… Then wear this item around your neck."

"Wh-what is it?"

The King of Darkness took a necklace featuring a large carnelian set in a pentagram.

"It'll give you perfect resistance to fear. High wraiths scatter it everywhere they go… I'll give you one warning, and that is not to go rushing into the confusion. Sometimes those ruled by fear become capable of terribly powerful attacks. I may not be able to protect you completely, but if you still—"

"I'm going with you."

"R-right. O-okay, then. Got it."

Neia put on the necklace.

“Still, though… They’re fighting a war. There’s no way to do battle without *anyone* dying.”

Neia winced at his joking tone.

Of course that wasn’t what Remedios meant. It couldn’t be that the King of Darkness didn’t understand her intention, so it must have just been his idea of a joke, but that said…

His sense of humor is a bit…

As she was thinking that perhaps it was his single weak point, they arrived at the gate.

“Fall back, paladins. I’m going to attack the city now. You can all head to the rear. Yes, that’s right. All the way back there.”

The King of Darkness instructed the knights farthest from the front line to move away and then strode toward the gate as if he were walking through an empty field.

“Hey, get back or this brat is—”

Eventually he was face-to-face with the bufolk holding the child hostage.

It was extremely difficult to read the expressions of subhumans, but he seemed surprised. The others nearby had the same look on their faces. Well, Neia would be just as surprised if the King of Darkness suddenly showed up.

“…A-an undead?”

The single voice triggered a wave of that word—*undead*—through the subhumans.

“That’s right. And you’re ‘the living’, I think? I seem to remember learning the word for that in another language a long time ago, but I’m not confident I can get the pronunciation right.”

“Wh-what? Why are you—? Seriously…wh… Wait, a human?” His eyes flicked to Neia. “You! Are you controlling this undead? You creeps!”

She thought of all sorts of things she could say, like, *I’m not a necromancer*, or

Show the King of Darkness some respect, but she stayed silent.

“Sorry to interrupt while you’re confused, but—”

“Get back, undead! I’ll kill this brat!”

The bufolk clenched his hand around the boy’s neck.

The boy was alive, but there was no life in his face. The King of Darkness seemed to be reflecting in his leaden eyes, yet he didn’t react at all. But Neia still heard a little gasp when the bufolk squeezed his throat.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’d use a human as a hostage against me, an undead? That’s rich.”

The bufolk’s eyes widened. *What a creepy expression.* That Neia had the wherewithal to calmly observe must have been because she was standing behind the immensely powerful King of Darkness.

“Human! Make this undead leave!”

But I’m not controlling him…

“Hmm. Shall we begin, then?”

“Eh? Get back! Back, I say!”

Perhaps the bufolk sensed something? Still clutching the hostage, he retreated a step.

Neia could see other children who must have also been brought along as hostages. But the bufolk didn’t move to kill them as a warning. They must have begun to question whether live humans would work as hostages with an undead, an enemy of the living.

Neia sensed something like a dark wind blow by. That moment, the bufolk froze. Ever since the King of Darkness had appeared, their eyes had followed his every movement so as not to miss anything, but this was an extreme change. Their eyes and mouths gaped, their faces twisting. And it wasn’t only the bufolk. Even the children who seemed hardly conscious of being alive reacted dramatically.

Neia didn’t understand the subhuman expressions, but she did the human’s.

The emotion the children exhibited was fear—an unimaginably overpowering fear.

“Hegh-heeaaaagh!” The bufolk let out strange cries.

“Hmph. Release Mass Hold Species.”

There was a magic circle, and a spell went flying from the King of Darkness. All at once, a large number of bufolk, plus the hostage children, all froze with their faces still twisted up, like horrifying statues. But they didn’t seem dead. She could hear faint—and rather labored—breathing noises.

From above—up on the wall—came a number of shrieks. And behind her, she heard the thuds of flesh being pounded.

“Okay, let’s go.”

She was distracted by the sounds for a moment, but when she looked ahead, there was the grate—

“Greater Break Item.”

—and a clamorous noise echoed. It was what used to be the grate, now scraps of broken wood and metal, falling to the ground like rain.

“…Yeah, when you use this to break down a building, it takes a lot of mana… And it didn’t even reach over there… I guess I just have to accept that the lesser can’t take the place of the greater.” Grumbling to himself, the King of Darkness climbed over the little mountain of grate fragments and stepped through the gate with no one to stop him.

Neia was so frazzled by the rapidly changing situation she couldn’t move. Once she regained her composure, she found herself smiling.

The paladins had worked so hard to dent that grate, and the King of Darkness took mere seconds to demolish it.

Being strong is like cheating.

She jogged after the king. When he reached the frozen bufolk, he turned to look at her.

“Okay, these guys”—he indicted the stiff subhumans and imprisoned children

—“are only frozen temporarily. Do me a favor and tie them all up.”

“Why don’t I call the paladins, then?”

“That would be a great help, but I’m currently giving off an aura of fear. Anyone who comes within range will fall victim to its control, so they’ll need some sort of resistance. Priests should be able to use Lion’s Heart, but I think paladins have…Banner of the Divine?”

“Wow, your depth of knowledge is…”

The King of Darkness chuckled and wove his way between the bufolk. Just then—

“Rrrrrrooooaargh!”

With a roar, that strong bufolk with the spear landed in front of them. He must have jumped off the wall.

His eyes had gone red, and he was foaming at the mouth. He wasn’t in his right mind. It was almost as if he had gone insane.

“Aha. So he’s gone berserk…? Or mad? That could be a side effect of fear—Oops.”

The King of Darkness dodged a spear thrust with a superb motion. It had that lack of excess movement only those with training were capable of. And as a result of him dodging, a frozen bufolk was impaled on the friendly spear. He dropped to the floor as his red blood sprayed.

It seemed the mad bufolk had lost even a sense of who was on his side.

“*Sheesh*…”

The bufolk raised his spear. Was he going to sweep? In that case, the children the King of Darkness had saved could be caught up in the attack.

Neia hurried to ready her bow. But she couldn’t shoot.

The King of Darkness had advanced toward the bufolk right in her line of fire.

Certainly considering the length of the spear, the King of Darkness’s decision to close the distance was correct. But the next thing he did made no sense.

He quickly sandwiched the bufolk’s head between his hands.

The King of Darkness must have been awfully strong, because no matter how the bufolk struggled, he couldn't escape. Giving up on that, he gripped his spear farther up the shaft to stab the king. Well, it looked to Neia like it pierced him.

But the King of Darkness didn't so much as flinch. Had he blocked the attack with defensive magic?

"You're different from that troll."

With a nasty spurting noise, the bufolk's eyes popped out.

One look was enough to tell it was a lethal wound. No, it would be worse if that hadn't killed him.

When the king let go, the bufolk fell to the ground. His arms and legs were flailing, but Neia had trouble sensing any will behind the movements.

"Wh-what did you do to him?" she asked timidly from behind, and he answered nonchalantly as he shook his hands out.

"Crushed his skull. When someone's in a frenzy like that, you could deal a lethal blow and they still might not go down. But if you completely destroy their brain, it appears to be a different story… But wow, he was so fragile. Only a little thicker than an eggshell—I'm joking, you know!"

Neia face twitched as she laughed.

Yeah, he really has no sense for humor…

"Now then, Miss Baraja. Call the paladins. We'll have them secure this area, and then I—we can go on ahead."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Neia raced back to where the paladins were to find several bufolk collapsed at their feet. They couldn't have come through the gate, so they must have been trying to escape the source of their fear—the King of Darkness—and jumped.

When she reached the knights, she quickly relayed the king's instructions. Then she raced back to him.

And when she arrived, he said, "Okay, let's go, then," and set off down the street.

Neia's question of why no more bufolk had rushed over after they broke down the gate was immediately resolved.

She could hear multiple screams. It was almost as if the city itself, inorganic though it was, was shrieking.

"Wh-what's…?"

"The result of having the undead I sent in spreading fear. It's possible that hostages will get trampled in the panic, but…we'll just have to let that go as a tragic accident."

She saw several frantic—probably, judging by the expression—bufolk running toward them. They looked like a collection of little animals being chased, and she almost felt sorry for them.

They must have been awfully frightened to come running toward a being even more powerful than those undead without realizing it.

"Hmm… No humans around? In that case, Max Widen Magic: Fireball."

The shot of fire that flew from the king's hand landed right in the middle of all the bufolk, creating a huge, fiery explosion for just an instant. When it disappeared, bufolk corpses littered the ground.

"It might be best to wait here, but…it seems the enemy ringleader is nearby. Apparently, he's holed up in the central square of this city resisting the high wraiths' fear, so I'd like to go on ahead… What do you think?"

"I think it's best to do whatever you think, Your Majesty."

"You do, huh? Then let's go."

As they walked, she could hear screams coming from all around as if people were being tortured. And it seemed like the subhumans weren't concerned with sanitation—there was rotting garbage and excrement everywhere. Neia frowned instinctively.

"…By the way, Miss Baraja. What do you want to do about that?"

When she looked in the direction he was pointing, she saw naked humans.

Their hands, men and women alike, had been nailed to trees. They seemed to

have frantically tried to escape the fear, which left their arms covered in blood.

The subhumans must have tried to make a barricade out of humans.

They were slumped and exhausted, as well as emaciated, but there didn't seem to be any immediate threat to their lives.

The point of this raid was to save people. Even if Neia followed the king, she couldn't *do* anything. So staying back to help these people and get them to a safe place seemed like the right course of action. But one thing worried her.

What would she do if they were attacked by subhumans during the evacuation?

Ha. Why am I hesitating? Our commander would just save them. If I can't do that… It really all comes down to…power, doesn't it?

"You're unsure. Then let's just leave them for now. There don't seem to be any subhumans around here. They'll probably be safer here. Let's go!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Though slightly reluctant, Neia followed the king to the square. She didn't understand how he knew the way, but she figured he must have been using some magic or something.

Soon they came upon the square, which was like a marketplace at the heart of intersecting roads.

"Mm. So we weren't able to get through this without any sacrifices."

When she turned toward where he was looking, she saw that there were human corpses mixed in with the subhuman dead. They must have been trampled in the panic caused by the fear.

"…It couldn't have been helped." Neia figured he was joking, but if they had brute forced their way into the city, there would have been far more losses. All things considered, the taking of the city with the king's overwhelming power had probably kept sacrifices to a minimum.

He shrugged slightly without saying anything and then gestured with his chin toward the center of the square.

The subhuman there was larger than all the others.

He had the curled horns of a goat and silver body hair. His impressive physique made him look like someone it would be wise not to mess with.

The ends of his horns were encased in ornate golden caps set with jewels, and he wore a green breastplate with a turtle-shell-esque pattern. Wrapped in a rust-red cape that seemed to be made out of processed animal fur, he carried a large shield set with two large yellow jewels in the center with his left hand and a bastard sword with a faintly yellow blade with his right. He was the embodiment of an imposing warrior's brave spirit.

He was one of those most fearsome subhumans—one with training. And he was probably a king or had some other sort of comparable standing.

If Neia had been alone, she would have definitely run away.

"Hmm, hmm, I'm exceedingly curious which item is suppressing his fear."

The King of Darkness's amused remark must have referred to not only the subhuman's armor and weapons but also the rings on his fingers, the necklace that covered everything from his neck down to his chest, and maybe the accessories hanging from each hip that were made from what seemed to be three human baby skulls each.

The subhuman, watching the King of Darkness with his green eyes, glared at Neia once they approached.

"A new undead challenger and behind him…a necromancer?" Partially concealed behind his large shield, he was most likely on guard against eye-based attacks that monsters like medusas had. "You're no slouch, coming into this city and driving my tribe this far into a corner… Wielder of horrifying magic and manipulator of the enemies of all living things, let's hear your name." The bufolk pointed his sword at Neia.

"N-no, hold on. You're wrong. It's not me!"

"…What?"

When she looked to the King of Darkness for help, he put a hand to his chest and looked back at her.

“I’m impressed you could tell. Yes, this is my master.”

“N-no! P-please wait a second! Your Majesty!”

What is he talking about? He really has no sense for jokes.

As Neia flailed around in a panic, he smiled at her.

“Hmm. Feeling better?”

“Huh?”

“Okay, that was a stupid joke.” With a motion befitting a king, he flapped his cape and faced the subhuman. “I’m the one who sent the undead after you. I’m an undead ruler, Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness, from the country northeast of here, the Nation of Darkness. What’s your name?”

“I’m Buser, Mighty King Buser… Tell me, King of Darkness, what is that girl for?”

“She’s my servant. So what’s your deal? Do you want to be killed? Or do you want to throw yourself at my feet? I’ll let you choose whichever you like better.”

“On my honor as a king, I say bending the knee one time is plenty.”

Buser held his sword across the front of his shield. He slowly curled his body into a stance that pointed his horns forward like a goat’s.

“Hmm… Then I’ll play with you a bit. Miss Baraja, you can just watch. By the way, you goat. You seem to have a lot of enchanted items equipped, but I don’t sense any magic from those accessories at your hips. Are they special in some way?”

“Hoh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It’s called fashion, you bag of bones.”

“Hmm… You remind me of a subordinate of mine.”

Listening to their conversation from behind him, Neia was shocked to think he had a subordinate like that.

“They’re nicely shaped, don’t you think? I selected these exquisite pieces with utmost care from my pickings in this city.”

“…Ah. I see. I understand how you feel. Fashion is apparently quite important.

My maids drove that point home for me… Now then, let's begin. Create Greater Item."

When the King of Darkness cast the spell, a black sword appeared in his hands.

Why is His Majesty using a weapon?

He was an arcane caster—and a supremely adept one at that.

That meant normally he would only use a weapon if he was stuck in a fight without enough mana. Some arcane casters didn't even carry a weapon simply because they were heavy.

Why had the King of Darkness chosen to fight with a sword?

Is it because he used up so much mana on his way here? That's really bad… The whole point of him coming was to fight Jaldabaoth…

He had cast Fireball several times, plus frozen a lot of enemies in their tracks using magic, not to mention summoned a ton of undead; that all took mana, so it was possible he was running low.

It must cost a lot to summon those undead…

She had no idea how strong high wraiths were, but they had to be much stronger than regular wraiths. Summoning a bunch of them had to require an awful lot of mana.

For example, when a priest summoned an angel, one spell summoned a single being. Or several weaker ones. With that in mind, he must have been using quite the high-tier spell—maybe a six.

A tier-six spell…

Neia swallowed hard.

Tier six was an unprecedented realm. The Holy Lady could use up to only tier four. This was two levels up from that.

It was simply unthinkable, but for the King of Darkness, perhaps it was possible.

If he used a tier-six spell to summon high wraiths, I get why it would use up so

much mana. But if that's the case, shouldn't I be helping him?

Neia looked at the king from behind as he confronted the subhuman. His opponent, whom she could see over his shoulder, looked strong; Neia didn't feel like she or any number of people like her could help at all. But the King of Darkness exuded a proud sovereign attitude; it was clear he had no intention of starting a fight he couldn't win.

Maybe he's a magic swordsman–type arcane caster?

There were pros and cons to raising one's skills in both sword fighting and casting. The main pro was the diversity of tactics that became available, while the main con was the risk of failing to be truly proficient at either skill set.

So what was the King of Darkness's case?

The two combatants watched each other closely as they slowly began to move.

The distance between them closed until their weapons were within clashing distance. Buser was the first to attack.

"Shield Rush." Holding his shield out in front of him, he charged.

The King of Darkness blocked it head-on with his sword.

It appeared that absorbing the entire impact of someone so large charging at full speed was impossible—the king was knocked quite a ways back. Well, it was hard to tell since he landed so neatly on both feet, but it seemed like he had been sent flying.

It was surprising to see the King of Darkness, who had crushed a bufolk's skull with his bare hands, get knocked back, but being made of bones must have rendered a full block impossible. Neia had heard of the advanced martial art called Fortress, which could completely neutralize all impacts, but only especially strong warriors could acquire it.

Both of them charged at once, and their swords clashed.

The pace of their exchange was so furious, even Neia couldn't follow it. Her vision could only register the slight pause as the blades collided.

If she joined the fight, she had no doubt she would be cut down with a single

blow.

The rapid clashing of steel on steel created a metallic racket.

Their skills were well matched, and with each collision of blades, they were performing both offense and defense.

Should she be astounded at Buser swinging his mighty sword with a single hand? Or should she be in awe of the King of Darkness swinging a huge sword with two hands despite being a caster?

She had never seen a fight at this high of a level, and she was sure there was no opening for her to get involved.

She slowly moved behind some cover, so as not to be in the way. She had to at least avoid being taken hostage.

They're swinging like crazy, but neither of them are injured… And like, the King of Darkness is just…too amazing…

The idea that a caster could be this skilled with a sword blew her mind.

Is he using some kind of awesome spell?

All she could think was that he was using some incredible spell she had never heard of.

But still—

At this rate, His Majesty will definitely win. Or is that his plan? To prolong the fight?

Undead didn't get tired. And being in combat probably didn't stress them out. Everything worked to Buser's disadvantage.

Buser seemed to realize that, too, and his expression gradually twisted.

If he has an ace move, he'd better—

Neia was stunned. The King of Darkness had suddenly hurled his giant sword at Buser.

Then a dome of light encircled Buser as a countermeasure.

The barrier of light subsided immediately, but the flying sword only grazed

Buser's body as a result.

Oh no!

Neia was about to leap out from behind her cover. The king was unarmed, and—

"Huh?"

Before she knew it, he was gripping a black halberd.

Buser must have felt the same way as Neia. His eyes were huge.

"You didn't even cast a spell, so how…? And where did the sword you threw go…?"

"It was merely a silent cast. Don't worry about it… Now then, my subordinate taught me how to use this thing, but I'm not very confident. Sorry in advance for sucking."

The king shifted nimbly into a fighting stance with the halberd, creating indescribable tension.

Warriors usually specialized in a single type of weapon, such as swords, axes, or hammers.

The king employed centrifugal force to swing the halberd. He slipped his hand down the shaft to aim for Buser's feet, which would be hard to defend. It was an attack he could have only pulled off with a long-handled weapon.

Just as Buser lowered his sword to block it, the halberd jerked up.

It was a feint.

He had put quite a lot of strength behind it, but Buser managed to raise his sword instantaneously to defend.

It seemed the King of Darkness really was better with a sword than a halberd. That is, his attacks flowed with the beauty of martial art, but the motions were slightly awkward, and even Neia could follow them with her eyes.

After blocking the centrifugal force of the halberd's arc, Buser jumped back.

"Sandstorm!"

The sand spurting from his sword spread into a wall and attacked the King of Darkness. The king must not have been able to see a thing.

She had her doubts whether he had eyeballs but regardless, having his vision obstructed was an overwhelming disadvantage.

“Kind Affection, Bundled Seal! Sturdy Arm, Strong Blow!”

Using a martial art Neia didn’t know, plus a high-level one for increasing the damage of a mighty blow, Buser came charging at double the speed he displayed before.

His horn caps started to glow in a strange way; they looked almost like shooting stars.

“Khaaaaa!”

“Hnf!”

The King of Darkness received the blow that came down with his halberd and —

“Ha-ha!”

—Buser’s jeering laugh echoed out.

Then came the sound of breaking steel.

Neia’s eyes grew large.

“No way! Weapon breaking?!”

Weapon breaking caused damage directly to weapons, but its effects varied considerably depending on the material the target was made with and how much damage it could withstand. Buser must have used the earlier martial arts to fortify the attack.

Neia was anxious to help, but when she saw notice Buser’s eyes go large in the next moment, she froze.

“It’s not even chipped!” Buser shrieked in shock. “What is that thing?!”

Buser retreated in a reversal of his previous confidence, rather than attack again, while the King of Darkness brandished his halberd, tracing beautiful arcs through the air.

“…I created this with my magic. You really think it would break so easily?”

“Weapons made with magic should be fragile!”

“Oh? You seem to have some experience, but stereotyping is dangerous. Sometimes you’ll fight people whose magic weapons you can’t break.”

The king let go of the halberd, and it vanished. It must have been the same move he had used earlier with the sword.

Then after he made grasping motions in the air, he was suddenly holding a black longsword in each hand.

“…Okay, what are you going to do next? That couldn’t have been your fail-safe plan, right?” The King of Darkness took a step forward. “…If you have something up your sleeve, now’s the time for it. I’m not a nice enough guy to let useless enemies live.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! What are you talking about, undead? Bravo for blocking all my attacks, yes. You were truly magnificent. But weren’t you only able to do that because you were focused on defense…? I know you never get tired. So you think that if you just keep fighting, you’ll eventually win.”

He saw through the king’s plan!

Neia was worried. Even she had realized. There was no way Buser, a superior warrior, wouldn’t notice.

“Ah, I see. That’s one idea. A good one actually. But unfortunately, mine is different.” The King of Darkness spread his arms and approached unguarded. The swords in his hands disappeared like smoke.

“Watch ou—!”

But faster than Neia could shout, Buser brought his sword down.

And then…

“What?!”

Buser frantically swung his sword again and again.

“What the—?! What?! What’s going on?!”

He screamed with each blow—because the king, despite taking each and

every hit, was perfectly fine.

“In that case—!” Buser held up his shield and used a martial art. The king took the full brunt of his shield charge but didn’t stagger backward a single step.

On the contrary, Buser ended up retreating slightly.

“Wh…why…?”

It was hard for humans to understand subhuman facial expressions. But this one was clear.

It was fear and despair.

“…Martial arts are foreign to me. I don’t know if skills became arts or if arts are warriors’ magic spells, but it made me think that if I encountered someone at my level, the experience and knowledge of martial arts could be what decides the fight, you know? That’s why I took your attacks head-on, but…it seems like you’ve already shown me everything you’ve got.”

The king gave a jocular shrug and then took off one of his nine rings.

He didn’t do anything else. The only action was removing the ring. Nevertheless, an extraordinarily terrible, cold atmosphere enveloped them.

Neia gasped and looked up. She thought the sun might have frozen and shattered, but it was in its proper place, shining as always.

Then were this chill and this dark presence being emitted by the king? Could this atmosphere even *be* created by a single being?

S-so this is the King of Darkness…the caster who killed an army of over ten thousand…

“Then I don’t need to fight you anymore.”

He took a step toward Buser.

Meanwhile Buser, trembling, took a step back—as if pushed back by the invisible pressure the king exerted.

Buser must have been sensing the abnormal presence more strongly than Neia. It seemed to have hit him that he couldn’t hope to challenge the King of Darkness. The way all his hairs stood on end was proof of that.

“W-wait. Please wait. Just wait a minute.” Buser raised his right hand and dropped the sword he had been holding. “I—I surrender.”

“Hmm.”

“I have information about Jaldabaoth’s army. See? I’m extremely useful. I’ll definitely be a boon to you.”

“I see.”

“…A-and besides that, you’re planning on fighting Jaldabaoth, right? I’m way more powerful than humans. If you allow me to command my tribe, I vow to be your vanguard in the fight against Jaldabaoth—that piece of shit, Jaldabaoth.”

“Oh?”

“……P-please wait. That’s not all! If you want, I’ll give—er, present you with all the treasure I’ve collected. It should be enough to pay for my life.”

“Is that it? Are you done with the sales pitch?”

“I—I, uh…” Buser looked around restlessly and then turned back to the King of Darkness. “O-oh, yeah. I mean no. Th-there’s still a whole lot more. If there’s anything you want, I could go get it for you—no, I *will*! I’m sure I will! Really. Trust me!”

“Hmph. What I really want isn’t something you’ll be able to go fetch for me.”

Neia sensed irritation in the King of Darkness’s voice. And Buser, confronting him, must have felt it more strongly.

“W-wait—wait. Honestly, just wait. Please? Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

It was a servile laugh. The attitude he’d had when they challenged him and he’d called himself a king was nowhere to be found anymore.

“I’m sorry for misspeaking. No, I mean, I apologize. Truly, I do. I was wrong. Really.”

“Hmm…”

“S-so what do you say? I—I—I think I can be useful to you. Heh-heh. What a fool I was to make an enemy out of an undead king. So I was hoping I could get a chance to make up for that mistake… Heh-heh. You won’t regret it!” Buser got

down on his knees, clasped his hands together, and begged for mercy.

Neia didn't feel sorry for him at all. No, it made perfect sense to her; that was the posture an enemy should take before the King of Darkness's true form. And she also had a vivid recollection of what the naga she met in the Nation of Darkness said: *A wise man throws himself at his feet and begs for mercy.*

What would happen to someone who didn't immediately throw himself at his feet?

"I see… I like people who recognize their mistakes and try to fix them."

"S-so then?!" Buser beamed. But his joy was taken away a moment later.

"But I think Pestonia and Nigredo would object to making you my subordinate. Don't worry, I won't do anything as wasteful as only taking your skull. I'll do my best to find a use for every part.

"Now die," he said, lifting a bony finger.

"Ngh! N-n-noooo! I don't wanna die yet! Wait! Please! I beg you! Don't kill me! I-I'm pretty valuable! I'm valuable enough to make you happy! Really! Believe me!"

"All living things die. The only difference is whether it happens sooner or later."

"No! Don't look at me with those eyes! D-don't kill me!"

Buser stood, turned tail, and began to run.

So a living thing can run this fast when death is near? Neia thought in an unconcerned way with wide eyes.

But the King of Darkness's magic was faster.

"How stupid. Death."

Nothing happened. There was no huge explosion, no fantastical lightning.

But Buser dropped to the ground with a thud. That was all.

"It's too bad we couldn't get any useful intel, but oh well… I guess we're finished here. Any objections, Miss Baraja?"

“N-n-no, Your Majesty, you’re not mistaken.”

“No? Then…let’s call the paladins and tell them we killed this subhuman leader. But, hmm…this is actually kind of bad…”

4

Taking the city and freeing the people was accomplished easily with the King of Darkness’s powers.

The attacking paladins and subjects hardly took any damage, and although some of the prisoners sadly lost their lives in the confusion, that number was surprisingly small.

Surely the King of Darkness was the only one who could have achieved these results. To the point that it even occurred to them that if they would have entrusted the job to him from the start, not a single person would have died.

People were thrilled to be liberated; some shed tears at receiving a bowl of soup. The streets were filled with smiles as Neia and the king walked along.

Though they had heard their liberator was the King of Darkness, it probably couldn’t be helped that when they actually saw him, there was surprise, confusion, and an urge to avoid looking at him.

That said, it wasn’t about whether Neia could accept it or not. If the king was offended, she probably would have done something, but he didn’t seem to care. On the contrary, Neia felt that doing something might be disrespectful.

She called after him as he walked ahead of her.

“Your Majesty, where are you going?”

The king was looking was down at his hands, so he answered without turning around. “To that large building at the center of town. If that’s the enemy HQ, we need to investigate right away. The paladins are busy liberating the captured people, distributing food, healing wounds, imprisoning subhumans, and so on.”

Neia cocked her head. “It’s such a huge building. You don’t think they’ve

searched it already?”

The one who took the city was definitely the King of Darkness, but the detail work after the fact was being done by knights and militia members. She figured they would have already checked the building he was headed for.

The king stopped in his tracks and stared at Neia. Then he shrugged and set off walking again. “Oh, right. I actually have a subordinate standing by warning them not to approach. So I don’t think they’ve examined it.”

“Huh? But that’s not what you said—”

“Miss Baraja. I’ve told you a lot of things so far, but once in a while, you need to try thinking on your own. For instance, what do *you* suppose is the reason I should investigate as our representative?”

“Ah—yes, Your Majesty!”

He looked back down at his hands. He was carrying the items that Buser had been equipped with. As they walked, he was appraising them to see how enchanted they were.

From what he had gathered, the sword was Sand Shooter; the armor, Turtle Shell; the shield, Lanza’s Merits; the horn caps, Unhesitating Charge; the rings, Ring of Second Eye and Ring of Sprinting; and the cape, Cape of Protection.

His necklace, among other items, also appeared to be enchanted, and though the king said their powers weren’t much, he seemed happy.

Lowering her eyes from his back to the ground, Neia did as told and tried thinking about why he would insist on searching the building himself. But no compelling reasons jumped out at her.

But she figured if she bothered him now for the answer, he would get annoyed. She respected the king and was scared of getting cast aside for being useless.

As she was racking her brain, the building in question came into view.

Two undead—high wraiths—stood before the entrance.

When the King of Darkness approached, the pair opened the way to let him and Neia through.

“This…appears to be the residence of this city’s ruler.”

Neia didn’t know which noble was in charge, but she could guess it was someone who was at least a baron but not higher than count.

“Yes. I haven’t let any undead inside, either. We are the first. There might be subhumans who haven’t been incapacitated yet, so be careful.”

“What?! But Your Majesty, that’s—!”

She wasn’t sure if she should tell him to stop or not. Because another side of her whispered in her head, *Well, it’s the King of Darkness; he’ll be fine*.

“I have to go. This could be the enemy’s base, the lair of the subhuman boss. I mean, it’s just so big—someone as strong as Buser might be in there. I want to get this liberation over with neatly.”

“Oh!” Hearing the answer to her earlier question, it made perfect sense, and she smacked her forehead. She was simultaneously grateful for the King of Darkness’s deep compassion.

So he didn’t want the paladins to go near the place because a powerful being might be hiding out there? Was he saying weird stuff before because he felt bashful about it being known that he was fighting to protect other people and didn’t want to admit it outright?

Though she knew it was irreverent to have such a feeling, she thought the King of Darkness was awfully precious.

“…So, uh, does that make sense?” he asked, peering over at her. When she nodded, he cheerfully replied, “Oh, good.”

He’s that happy because I understood something…? What a kind person…

“I understand that you don’t want to be the center of attention!”

“…Hmm? Ah…yes. You…you get it? That I don’t want to stand out?”

“I do, Your Majesty!”

The king seemed to be mulling something over. That was somehow adorable, too.

“……Okay, then, shall we go?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

As a squire, she felt it was entirely inappropriate that the king be the vanguard, but when she tried to move ahead of him, he wouldn’t allow it. She gazed admiringly at the back of this courageous being. From the point of view of someone ranking lower, there was definitely something thrilling about a king who led the way.

Upon passing through the broad entryway, Neia asked, “Where should we start? I don’t sense anyone around, but…”

“Hmm… Miss Baraja, you seem to have excellent vision and hearing, but how about smell?”

“To be honest, I’m not as confident about my sense of smell. Even so, I think it’s better than the average human’s. And taste is about the same level, although I’ve never tasted poison, so I couldn’t serve as a taste tester…”

“I see. So can you smell the death and loathing in this room?” He said the words *death and loathing* with the supreme spirit of a king.

“Death and loathing?”

“Over here.”

The King of Darkness strode off. There was no hesitation in his gait. He was walking as if he knew this place and knew what was coming.

Death and loathing….? Those things don’t smell… Or is it something His Majesty can detect because he’s undead? That would mean we’re heading for something giving off those…!

Neia gripped her borrowed bow tightly. It was possible that she would need to shield the king and step ahead of him to shoot. She hadn’t been able to do a thing during the fight with Buser. If she didn’t make herself at least a little useful, there would be no point to her being there.

They advanced without seeing any subhumans and eventually reached a door that seemed different somehow from all the others. It was made of iron, and it looked terribly thick.

This door that looked like it belonged on a prison cell appeared in an

otherwise typical noble residence. It felt so out of place that it made Neia extremely uneasy. The feeling was so strong that it was almost like she had been hurled into some other mysterious location.

"What…?"

"In here… You don't have to come with me, you know."

To Neia, that wasn't an option. Seeing her shake her head, the King of Darkness shrugged and pushed the door open.

Perhaps because the king was so strong, the door swung easily open. It really was thick, though; it had to have been special order.

The King of Darkness entered the room.

Crap! I shouldn't have let him go first into unknown territory! I'm such an idiot!

Neia hurried in after him.

She had expected something out of the ordinary, given the thick door, and the atmosphere was unusual. She wondered if this was what a torture chamber was like; she'd never seen one, only heard rumors.

For starters, there were no windows.

Bars embedded in the walls glowed red, but this was magic light, not natural.

There was one wooden desk and two wooden chairs. The one other door was also made of iron like the one they had entered through.

The King of Darkness stood in the center of the room and looked around. Then Neia realized something was on the desk.

"…Your Majesty, there's a paper here, but what's this?"

Written on the paper were characters Neia had never seen before. She could guarantee that it wasn't Sacred Kingdom language.

"Hmm… Does it look like demon language?" The King of Darkness produced a monocle. Perhaps noticing Neia's confused look, he explained. "It's a magic item that will allow me to read this. I only have one. And it also takes up a lot of mana. Miss Baraja, do you know anyone with a similar power to read unfamiliar

writing?”

“A power to read unfamiliar writing?”

“Yeah. Or if you know someone who might know how to read this, that’s fine, too. For example, someone with talent that allows them to read other languages…”

“Sorry, I don’t really…”

Neia was a mere squire. She had no occasion to come into contact with information about people like that.

True, she had heard stories from other squires, things like, *I have a friend who has a talent; he can tell you what temperature your bath is*, or, *One of my relatives is a sailor with a talent that lets him walk on water for five seconds. Any longer and he sinks, though…* They were always these minor abilities that left her scratching her head, nothing of the sort the king was looking for.

“I see. That’s too bad. Do you think Lady Custodio would know someone?”

As the commander of the knight order, it seemed like she would have opportunities to hear all sorts of news. But Remedios’s reputation gave Neia pause. *Would she really use her brain for remembering things like that?*

“…I’m not sure. It would be better to ask her directly.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Or maybe the other fellow…” The vague reply must have meant he felt the same way as Neia.

“But if there isn’t anyone, what will you do?”

“Hmm? Oh, I don’t need to do anything about it. If we could read information left behind by Jaldabaoth’s side, it might affect how we plan, right?”

When he explained something that anyone could have realized with a little thought, Neia felt embarrassed for asking such a foolish question.

“If there’s no one who can translate, then I guess we have no choice but for me to use my magic, but then we’ll have to really be on the lookout for Jaldabaoth—because if we encountered him while I was low on mana, we’d have to run away… But this does make me curious. It’s only one page; maybe we should read it.”

“It’s really all right?”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure I save enough mana.”

The king put on the monocle and looked over the document. It wasn’t as if there were any visible indications, but the magic must have been working. He seemed like he was able to read it. That said, he didn’t have any eyeballs, so all she could think was that he was probably reading.

After a short time, he took off the monocle.

“It really does use a ton of mana.”

To Neia, who had seen a priest grow unsteady on their feet after using too much mana, the king didn’t seem to have overexerted himself, but it was probably discourteous to compare him to normal casters. *He must have a huge amount of mana.*

As Neia was thinking those things, the king approached the other door, opened it slightly, and peered inside through the crack.

Neia picked up multiple faint breathing sounds and the smell of blood.

Clenching her bow, she tried to get between him and the door, but before she could, he thrust out a hand.

It meant *Stay back.*

“Hm…mm… Miss Baraja, this place was being used by the demons, not the subhumans. That document was about some experiments they were performing.”

“…Experiments the demons were performing?” Even before she asked, she knew it couldn’t be anything good.

“Yes. Things like cutting off one creature’s arm and attaching it to another or cutting them open and trading their organs. Starting from the precedent of these exchanges between blood relatives, they were observing what happened between humans and other creatures—not only subhumans, animals, too—if they did those things and then cast healing magic.”

“That’s horrifying! Sticking parts of a relative to someone sounds especially insane!”

"……So when they do those experiments, they need to keep the victims alive, at least long enough to discern the cause of death." With that, he turned around and jerked a thumb at the door behind him. It was enough that Neia could guess what he was going to say next. "The victims are in there, alive but still sliced open."

Even though she had anticipated it, the reality made Neia's mind go black for a moment. Next came rage at the demons who had performed such inhumane experiments.

"Miss Baraja! Have the priests come on the double! And Commander Custodio and the other knights! Hurry!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

In a corner of her mind, a voice asked if it was really okay to leave him alone, but it was an order from someone trustworthy, wise, and powerful. Surely, she didn't have to worry. The voice died down instantaneously.

•

The priests opened the door and went inside. The way their shoulders jumped at that moment said more than words about how appalling and ghastly the scene was.

Neia was watching as the King of Darkness turned over the paper they had found to Remedios and Gustav.

"I want you to look at this. It tells the names of the people in there and what was done to them. There are these other documents as well, but it's unclear if they are more of the same or something else, like part of Jaldabaoth's plans. Can you read them?"

Remedios took one glance, frowned, and handed the paper to Gustav.

Gustav shook his head. "I can't make head or tail of it. But you were able to read this one page, right, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, using a magic item. The issue is that the item requires a lot of mana—critical mana I need to conserve for the fight with Jaldabaoth. So I wonder if either of you know anyone who can read this. It could be someone with a

literacy ability or even someone you think *might* be able to do it."

"No, I can't think of anyone. The southern nobles could be hiding someone who can, but I highly doubt it."

"Oh… Then what should we do? I'd like for you guys to figure out how to read the rest of these."

"Would it be possible to borrow your item, Your Majesty?"

"No. It's one of my nation's treasures, so it's the same as how you can't lend the sword at your hip so easily. To a caster like me, this sort of item is more precious than a sword."

Remedios and Gustav looked at each other.

"Understood. Then we'll do our best. Also, we have another issue. Apparently these orcs were imprisoned here. What should we do with them?"

The orcs didn't come to attack the Sacred Kingdom; they were brought here by Jaldabaoth as captives. Questioning them wasn't yielding any useful intelligence, so they weren't sure how to handle them.

"Hmm…got it. Can you tell me where they are? You're fine letting me take care of them?"

"Yes, thank you."

Gustav gave simple directions. The city wasn't that big to begin with, so it didn't seem like they would get lost.

By the time Neia had memorized the general route, an exhausted-looking priest opened the door.

"Ohhh! How'd it go?! How are the people doing?!"

"We've at least cast healing magic on those who were alive. It was our first time treating people who had been so horribly abused, so we'll stay a little longer and keep an eye on them. Then, if nothing is wrong, we'd like to bring them out of here."

"Got it. Then we'll send over some paladins and militia members to help."

"Understood, Lady Custodio. Then if you'll excuse me, Your Majesty." The

priest opened the door and went back inside.

Watching the priest go, the other four realized they had nothing else to do here, and moved on to their next destination.

For Neia and the King of Darkness, that meant to the orcs.

“If there are demons around, it’d be handy to have someone who can see through transformations,” the king mentioned to Neia as they were walking.

No demons had been spotted in the city, but given the presence of demon writing, he must have surmised that demons were or could be around.

“Demons transform?”

“Yes, some of them—into men, woman, or sometimes animals.”

“Oh… So you’re hoping for someone with a talent for seeing through transformations? My apologies. I’ve never heard of one like that. Oh no, I have heard a *legend* like that. I remember reading it in some book, but I have no idea if anyone currently can…”

“…I guess I should ask Lady Custodio about that, too.”

“Are transformations like illusions? I tend to think of illusions as tricky magic spells, but…”

“First of all, there’s a big difference between a transformation and an illusion, but it’ll take too long to explain, so allow me to omit the finer details. In any case, you shouldn’t underestimate illusions! How terrifying the magic gets depends on how quick the illusionist’s wits are. And particularly if they’ve truly specialized instead of just putzing around.”

“Specialized?”

“That’s right. For example, Perfect Illusion can deceive all five senses. And someone who has reached the ultimate powers of illusion can acquire a move that can only be used once every few days but allows them to deceive the world.”

Deceiving the world was an act on a level Neia couldn’t even imagine.

“How amazing a feat is that, deceiving the world?”

“From what I’ve heard, it can do anything any other tree of magic can do. To put it simply, you could even use it to resurrect the dead.”

“What?! But it would be an illusion, right?”

“Yes, causing the world to be under an illusion is the illusionist’s ultimate power—because if you can deceive the world, then your deception becomes the truth.”

“Whoa” was the only way she could react. Hearing that if someone mastered illusion, they could do something so powerful, it was so awesome that she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around it.

“So does anyone in this country keep track of talents?”

“No, I’ve never heard of anything like that. Does the Nation of Darkness track talents?”

“We don’t yet. I’d like to in the future, but it seems like it will take quite a bit of work… It might still be a decade or so off.”

Apparently, the King of Darkness was thinking about things even ten years in the future. Maybe that was the difference—a big one—between kings and commoners.

•

The orcs were in a building that had its windows boarded up from the outside. It was fairly large, probably the second or third largest in the city.

A number of paladins clustered at the gate and seemed to be wary of what was inside.

When they saw the King of Darkness approaching, they all dropped to one knee in a show of respect.

“I heard from Lady Custodio that there were orcs in this building. Can I go inside?”

“Yes, of course, Your Majesty!”

“Then you can all leave and do whatever other work you have to do.”

The paladins looked up. “But the commander ordered us to guard this

location. We can't leave."

"…I see. Then I take back what I said."

With that, the King of Darkness passed between the knights and pushed the door open. Neia followed him, of course.

A potent acidic smell wafted out and into Neia's nose. It wasn't poison; it reminded her of the smell of a prison cell she had visited a long time ago with one of the paladins. There were other stomach-turning odors mixed in.

"What in the world…?"

She had wondered when the commander had brought it up: *Why were the orcs brought here?*

Though she knew she would find out soon, the wings of her imagination spread. *If this isn't a problem that only affects the orcs, if it could be a rallying point in the fight against Jaldabaoth, maybe some subhumans will resist, too.*

While she was thinking, the king continued opening doors. It already felt normal to have him leading the way.

They left a room and entered a hallway.

Walking in it for a moment was enough to tell that this building was dirtier than a prison.

It was filthy with blood, vomit, and excrement. She couldn't begin to imagine what had happened here, but it was a terrible environment.

Orcs were subhumans about as tall as humans with piglike faces; they were said to be a tidy race. There was no way they would stay somewhere like this by choice.

Neia looked at the long hem of the King of Darkness's robe and worried that his splendid clothing would get dirty, but there was no way she could ask him to wait outside. There was no one with the wisdom to stand in for him.

Eventually, Neia's sharp ears began to hear things that indicated the presence of a large number of living things, including a child crying and a voice that sounded like the mother trying to calm it.

They're orcs…? Not humans…?

Neia was at a loss. She had never considered that they would have families and raise children. The orcs that came to Roebel were invaders, enemies to be hated; she had never thought anything about them past that.

Neia was still confused when the king opened the door.

The awful smell grew worse, and shrieks went up.

"An undead!"

"It's a skeleton! What's he doing here?!"

"Those humans! They sold us to undead! Shit!"

"Controlling undead? Those grimy humans."

"Mama! Help!"

"My boy!"

The king stopped in the doorway. He must have been confused, too.

"Ju— Ahem. Shut up!"

His order caused the room to fall silent. But it only lasted a moment.

In the next, the shouting echoed twice as loud as before. What they were saying was hardly any different. No, it seemed like voices lamenting their fate and saying they didn't care what happened to them as long as their children were spared had increased.

"……Sighhh." The king let out a tired sigh. Then he punched the door with all his might. He was incredibly strong despite being all bones; the hinge busted and the door went flying. When it hit the wall, it made a startlingly loud noise. The subhumans quieted all at once.

"Shut up. The next one of you to talk had better brace yourself."

In that silent, frozen atmosphere—where some mothers frantically covered their children's mouths—the king took a step into the room, and the subhumans all edged away.

"It's not as if I came here to kill you. Quite the opposite—I'm here to set you

free.”

It was hard for a human like Neia to grasp the emotions of the orcs’ piglike faces. But this one time, she was extremely confident.

The look was *That’s a lie!*

“It’s a pain if you all talk at once. Have a representative come forward.”

After a moment, an orc went to step forward, but the one next to him held him back. Then he came to the fore instead.

It was a thin orc, but he looked like he must have been quite built at one point.

“…So you’re the representative?”

The orc nodded without saying anything.

“…What? Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Um, could it be because you told them to shut up, Your Majesty?”

“…I thought I allowed him to, but I guess it didn’t get through? I permit the orc who stepped forward to speak. First, let’s hear your name.”

“I’m Diell of the Gan Zuu tribe—Diell Gan Zuu.”

“Diell, okay. First question: Is there anyone here you don’t know or whose personality has changed as if they were someone else?”

“N-no, there’s no one like that here.”

“Then next, tell me why you’re all imprisoned here.”

“…Do you know about the demon Jaldabaoth?”

“Of course. He’s my enemy. Or rather, I came here—to the Sacred Kingdom—to kill him.”

Their faces said, *Definitely a lie.* Certainly before Neia knew him, she might have thought the same thing. But not anymore.

She showed herself beside him and spoke. “His Majesty is telling the truth. I’m a citizen of this country, so please listen. Jaldabaoth brought you along with the allied subhuman army to invade this land.”

Diell's expression changed slightly.

"Wait, a human… I think a female?"

You think*?* Neia wondered what that was supposed to mean, but she couldn't tell the orcs' sexes by face; it must have been the same for them.

"We aren't attacking this country. There shouldn't be a single orc tribe that cooperated with Jaldabaoth. Which is to say, we resisted, so we were brought here as punishment."

"Hmm… What did he do to you once you were here?"

The question seemed to shock all the orcs, not only Diell. The ones who seemed to be mothers held children close. Neia could also hear retching and other vomiting noises.

"…Honestly, what is he doing?" the king mumbled to himself. "Um, I seem to have asked a bad question. Should I bring some water? Or is there something else you want?"

His attitude changed completely. He seemed extremely flustered. Perhaps he felt guilty for causing the orcs to relive painful memories. It was probably less than respectful for her to think such things, but he seemed almost like a parent trying to comfort a kid that one of his children made cry.

This must be how a king thinks when he views both humans and orcs as subjects of his country…

To the inhabitants of the Sacred Kingdom, subhumans were enemies. If they were in the same position, they probably wouldn't have anything kind to say to them.

"We don't want anything special. Just please don't make us talk about what happened. It wouldn't be fun to hear, and for us, it was hell. If you ordered us to talk, we would have no choice, but please at least let us do it where no one else can hear."

Hearing a female orc softly crying, Neia was terrified. *What in the world was done to them?*

"…This is a problem," the King of Darkness mumbled, but there was so much

going on that Neia didn't know what he was referring to. "Also, um, yeah. If you're against Jaldabaoth, then we're also here to ask if you'd like to cooperate with us, since we have a common enemy."

Diell lowered his eyes. "Once, we wanted to fight, but not anymore. After everything the demons put us through, our spirits are broken. We have no courage left."

"Then what will you do if I liberate you?"

"If possible, we'd like to go back to our village, and if there are any of us remaining there in safety, we'd like to take them and move far away to somewhere Jaldabaoth can never reach us."

The king nodded.

"Then how about the domain I ru—?"

"We refuse! We know how dangerous it is to displease you. It would be smarter to agree now and then flee with all our might at a point where it seems like we can escape. But nothing is worse than betrayal. So if we refuse now, at least we can hopefully die less painful deaths."

"What…?"

Their refusal was so firm, the King of Darkness seemed confused. But Neia understood Diell's feelings so well it hurt. Until she met the king, she thought undead were the enemy of all living things, too.

"…Uh, my domain isn't a horrible place or anything. We even have a diverse population of subhumans!"

"Lies! You must be lying! You can't fool me or any of the rest of us! They must be undead subhumans!"

Half-crazed Diell was Neia's former self. That's why it was her duty as someone with more experience to explain what she had learned about the true nature of this king.

"His Majesty is telling the truth. He may be an undead, but he manages to show kindness to the living as well. He loves children and governs subhumans equally, and his subordinates respect him. As proof of that, they built huge

statu—”

“Miss Baraja! That’s really enough, so if you could just…”

“But Your Majesty!”

“Please… Really, just please…”

If he was saying please, she really did have to stop.

“Human, are you being mind controlled?!”

“No. I’ve seen his nation with my own eyes. The first subhuman I ever met was a naga.”

A murmur went through the subhumans as they exchanged glances with one another. Some voices asked, “What’s a naga?” but she ignored them.

“There was also a subhuman with a face like a rabbit’s. I’m not a resident of the Nation of Darkness, and it’s true that the time I spent there was short, but I still know that the people who live there aren’t wearing the expressions of pain and fear you were a minute ago. And of course, they weren’t wounded like you are now.”

The subhumans looked down at their emaciated bodies. They had lost so much weight they were like sticks.

“It’s as she—Miss Baraja—says. Still, I’m sure you can’t believe us. But I promise on my honor as Ainz Ooal Gown that you would never be treated so unreasonably if I were ruling over you. That’s because everything I rule belongs to me. If one of my subjects gets hurt, that means one of my belongings is damaged. And don’t worry; if you say you don’t want to live under my rule, I won’t force you to. You should live how you like. For now, I’ll arrange things so you can return to your village.”

“…Why are you being so kind?”

It seemed to Neia that Diell had set aside his preconceptions and faced the true King of Darkness for the first time.

“Hoh-hoh… I want to defeat Jaldabaoth. That means the subhumans he brought here are in my way. So sending you back to your village is one way to chip away at his power.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you spread word that I’m kind, unlike Jaldabaoth, it might cause unrest within his army, or even some defections.”

“Ah, I see.”

It was hard to believe someone when the deal only seemed to benefit one’s own side, but it seemed that subhumans, like humans, were more likely to trust someone if a deal showed benefits for both sides.

“But I don’t think it’ll be that easy. Most of Jaldabaoth’s subordinates are thirsty for blood. Even if we go back to our village and spread word, I doubt it will have much effect.”

“That’s fine. I just want to make every sort of move I can. And if Jaldabaoth is ruling through fear, there might be subhumans who are willing to rebel against him. So I’m repeating myself, but you’re sure you don’t want to cooperate with me in the fight against him?”

“…We can’t. I told you: We just don’t have the will right now.”

“I see. That’s too bad. And you don’t feel like coming to the Nation of Darkness, either?”

“It’s not a bad idea to enter under the protection of someone as immensely powerful as you. But we can’t decide that on our own. Maybe we’ll take you up on the offer after discussing with the others.”

“Diell!”

“Dombas, I know what you want to say. But we won’t be able to defend our village on our own with this demon around. This would have been our fate either way.”

The orc called Dombas must have understood that. He bit his lip and lowered his eyes.

“I see. If you intend to come to the Nation of Darkness, you will have my full support as its king. There are many kinds of people living in my lands. I’d like for you to work together with them and live as subjects of my country.” The king’s tone had softened.

In the Sacred Kingdom, subhumans were enemies, but in the Nation of Darkness, subhumans were fellow citizens. *Where does that huge difference come from?* Neia realized the answer right away.

From His Majesty, huh…? Because of his immense power… It really does all come down to power…I guess…?

“All right, I’ll provide enough food to see you home. And soldiers as escorts. I imagine it’ll take a lot of time and effort to get home in your condition.”

“You’re willing to do that much for us?”

“Certainly. Sob at the generosity of the Nation of Darkness’s king and tell everyone you meet. So, Miss Baraja, could you leave the room? I’m going to perform a secret ritual that people from outside the nation shouldn’t see.”

“Understood,” said Neia, but as she was leaving, she couldn’t help but feel a bit lonely. What he said made perfect sense, but even though she understood, she found herself struggling to accept it.

From the other side of the broken door they’d propped up, the number of orc breathing noises she could hear rapidly decreased. It was as if they were leaving the room, and maybe they were.

The king had been saying that he could teleport once he knew a place, so he was probably using that power on them.

Eventually she could hardly hear anything, and when, after a little while, she heard the clacking of a single pair of footsteps, it was the King of Darkness alone who appeared before the door.

“Sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Not at all.”

The room was an empty shell. He must have used a spell that Neia couldn’t even imagine in order to teleport them all. Or maybe he had some other way, like a magic item.

“Now then, let’s meet up with Lady Custodio and find out what the plan is.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

•

After leaving the orc camp, the two asked a paladin they encountered where Remedios was. At the entrance of the building they were directed to, they found not her but Gustav.

“Oh, Your Majesty! I was just about to call you.”

Gustav was different from when they had met him last. There was life in his voice, and he was so cheerful it was as if the light of hope was overflowing from inside him. Maybe he’d come across a way to break through some part of their difficult situation? Perhaps wondering the same thing, the King of Darkness inquired.

“Did something happen? It seems like you have some good news.”

“Yes! There’s someone we’d love you to meet. Come this way, please.”

Maybe it was an influential noble or a member of the royal family?

Gustav led the King of Darkness—and Neia, for some reason—into a room.

Sitting on two of the simple wooden chairs inside were Remedios and an emaciated man.

They both rose to greet the king.

Gustav introduced the man. “This is Master Caspond, elder brother of the Holy Lady.”

Certainly, once it was pointed out, the man did resemble the profile of the second holy king engraved on the kingdom’s gold pieces. Neia’s eyes widened to learn that he had actually been imprisoned here.

“Master Caspond, this is the king of the Nation of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, His Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown. He’s assisting us.”

“Ohhh, I don’t know how to thank you, Your Majesty. Very pleased to meet you. Just as he said, I’m the brother whose clever little sister got ahead of me.”

Remedios frowned at what she perceived to be nasty remark. But it seemed she couldn’t behave normally before someone in line to succeed the Holy Lady, so all she did was lower her eyes.

“Ahhh, I see. Pleased to meet you, Master Caspond.”

The two of them looked at each other for a time.

Neia wondered what they were doing, but eventually the King of Darkness held out a hand, and Caspond took it.

Usually the superior person was the one to offer a handshake.

Common sense would say that compared to someone who was in line to be a king, an actual king, albeit of a small country, would be superior. And it would be natural to be humble before someone providing one with assistance. Neia figured the king had waited to offer his hand for a moment out of respect.

He’s so modest and broad-minded.

Neia was impressed. She saw Gustav nodding in admiration out of the corner of her eye.

“Your Majesty, apologies for meeting you in such a sorry state. I would have much rather appeared in dress appropriate to our stations…”

“You have nothing to be ashamed about. A noble’s elegance isn’t a matter of clothing. You must be exhausted after being imprisoned for so long; let’s continue the conversation sitting down.”

“That’s very considerate of you. I’ll take you up on that.”

When they released their hands, the king sat first, followed by Caspond.

“I’m just so glad you’re all right. Why did they have you locked up in this area?”

“Because I had managed to run this far! Baron Bagunen was a great help. How is he doing, Commander Custodio? After we talked last, you took him away.”

“Yes. Baron Bagunen’s wounds weren’t terribly serious, and they weren’t life-threatening. But the poor environment left him physically drained, so he’s in a deep sleep.”

“The priests can’t do anything with their magic? I’d love to have him lend us his wisdom.”

“The priests used up what mana they had healing the wounded, so they’re

resting now. My apologies, but unless it's urgent, we should conserve mana."

"Well, I suppose I can't argue with that, Commander. But he did everything he could to get me here safely, so if at all possible… You see what I mean to say, I'm sure…"

It wasn't Remedios but Gustav who understood and bowed low.

"Now then, there's one pressing matter I'd like to get confirmation on. Is there anyone in this region who can see through transformations or illusions?"

"Why do you ask that, Your Majesty?"

"To be on guard in case a demon is lurking among the prisoners in disguise."

Caspond looked at Remedios. "Commander, can you answer His Majesty's question?"

"Ah, apologies, but I'll go ahead and answer as second-in-command. I've never heard of anyone with abilities like that."

As the king was thinking with a "Hmm," Caspond pressed Remedios.

"If His Majesty is this worried about it, it must be important. You swear to the gods you don't know?"

The two paladins nodded, and Caspond turned to Neia. *There's no way a squire like me would know someone like that*, she thought but hurried to nod as well.

"Squire Baraja, you don't know, either, huh…? What? Don't look so surprised—the commander told me your name. I appreciate your work attending to His Majesty."

"Thank you!" Neia bowed, flustered.

"That's right. She's an excellent assistant—I wish I had a squire like this."

"Y-you must be joking…" Her voice trembled.

Seeing that, Caspond and the king chuckled, but their faces reassumed their solemn expressions immediately after (though the king was expressionless).

"I hate to reveal my ignorance like this, but demons have the ability to transform into other people?"

“Demons are able to transform in order to corrupt people, but it’s not as if they turn into someone specific. They just change into a human. They don’t use someone’s face as a model. So if…mixed in with the prisoners…there’s someone nobody recognizes, we need to keep an eye on them.”

“So then we need the prisoners themselves to check on one another…”

“An illusion would make it a bit more complicated. With an illusion, they could change into someone specific. Right, like…” The king cast a spell, and his skull head turned into Caspond’s. “This is an illusion. But it’s a low-level one. As you can see, neither my clothes nor my voice has changed. And it’s not as if it copies your memories or thoughts. So if we have people talk to someone who knows them well, it’ll be clear right away.” The king’s white skull face returned. “There are several ways to handle clothing and voice, so the best is to have conversations and see.”

Neia realized with a start that the question he had asked the orcs earlier was a precaution against this issue.

He’s always so brilliant. It’s amazing how he manages to consider all these different things…

“I see… Well, you heard him. Get to work.”

“Please wait. We can also anticipate the appearance of a demon showing its true nature. I think you should stay near someone strong like Commander Custodio.”

“Ah, understood. I’ll make sure to operate with her around.”

Gustav bowed his head.

“Master Caspond, that was everything I wanted to confirm. If you have anything else…”

“Very well. Your Majesty, my plan is to head back south. I feel like I need to meet up with the army and bring it up here to the north to attack. I was held captive with several other nobles, so I want to hear from them and create a plan that takes into account which of them might be able to help.”

“Hmm. I don’t know the nobles of this country, so if you think that’s what we

should do, then that's probably fine… You're not going to raid other camps to liberate more prisoners?"

"Not now. Moving through territory under Jaldabaoth's control, we'll stick out with too many people. Plus, it'll slow us down. I want to avoid losing more lives as a result of trying to save people."

"…Then what about letting the people escape to the south, and we raid the camps on our own?"

"Commander Custodio, you're the one allowing me to sit in, but we haven't heard your opinion." Caspond's voice was completely different from when he was speaking to the king.

Remedios bit back her annoyance and said, "I agree with you, brother of Her Majesty—mm, Sir Caspond. But we've already taken out two, including this one. There might be reprisals. What do we do about that?"

"Nothing." Caspond shrugged. "I don't think we can retake this territory without any deaths. There could be tens, hundreds, or even thousands dead. But we have other priorities."

Neia saw that both Remedios and Gustav were shocked at the way he was talking about abandoning the people. Neia could only coldly feel that this was about what she expected from royalty.

"Master Caspond, you've changed, huh? You used to be so kindhearted when it came to the people."

"What's that about, Commander Custodio? Are you disappointed? Feh!" Caspond's expression warped. His lips twisted to bare his teeth. His gaze had sharpened and filled with ridicule. "If you had experienced that hell, your personality would have changed, too. You wouldn't be able to say such pretty things anymore. I feel sick… It seems you…haven't heard what they did to us. You should ask someone. You'll understand what unholy evil the demons are."

He seemed like another person. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that something dark and murky was seeping through the expression he had forced himself to wear.

"If possible, I'd like to kill all the subhumans…" He glanced at the King of

Darkness, and the king shrugged.

“After we interrogate them, you can do what you like. Although I already freed the orcs.”

“Well, that can’t be helped, though it is terribly unfortunate. Then again, the orcs went through the same horrors we did… Would you have turned them over to me in exchange for a Holy Sword?”

“I’m a caster, so a sword doesn’t really do much for me…”

Caspond laughed weakly in response to the king’s joke.

Remedios’s emotionless face was in stark contrast to his pale countenance.

It had sounded so much like a joke, but Caspond must have been serious.

Neia shivered. What could possibly have been done to him that he would hate even imprisoned subhumans enough to give away a royal treasure?

“So are you going to abandon this city?”

“If possible. Still, we need to heal the liberated prisoners and send a messenger to the south first. If you could stay here for at least a week, that would be much appreciated. Once we retake this land, I’ll add what reward I can to whatever Commander Custodio promised you.”

“Wonderful. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

•

One minute after the King of Darkness left the room accompanied by Neia…

“Okay,” said Caspond. “Now that he’s gone we can move on to the main topic.”

“Yes. It will be quite a challenge to protect so many people while we travel. It would be great if we could get some sort of reinforcements from the south or some wagons or something to use.”

Caspond smiled faintly at Gustav’s suggestion. “Don’t be ridiculous. Who said we were going to talk about that?”

“The main topic isn’t how to travel south?”

“I’ll be frank. I have no intention of escaping south right away. We’re going to clash with Jaldabaoth’s army here.”

“That’s too reckless!”

Remedios continued after Gustav’s exclamation. “We may have the city walls, but if we were surrounded and ran out of food, that would be the end. Only a fool would fight a siege battle without reinforcements.”

Remedios didn’t use her head much, but she could be trusted when it came to combat. Gustav nodded in agreement with her confident assertion.

“Still, we need to fight here.”

The pair’s puzzled looks made Caspond smile even more coldly as he explained.

“I heard that the King of Darkness is conserving his mana for the fight with Jaldabaoth…” Seeing Gustav nod, Caspond continued. “But that will cause problems. He’ll defeat Jaldabaoth, take the maids, and go back to his nation. But we need him to get rid of the subhumans that have flowed into our kingdom. We need to put him in a situation that forces him to help us.”

“But that would break our promise with him…”

“If he uses his magic to kill a few subhumans, fewer Sacred Kingdom subjects will have to be sacrificed. So which are you choosing, a promise to an undead or the lives of innocent subjects?”

An agonized look appeared on Gustav’s face, while Remedios replied without changing her expression at all. “The innocent subjects of the Sacred Kingdom, of course.”

“Then there you go, Commander. So we have to get him to fight. But since we made a promise, we’ll need a good reason to break it.”

“That’s why you’re going to clash with Jaldabaoth’s army?”

“Yes. More specifically, we’ll start preparing to head south, but it’ll take too long, so the army will surround us. We’ll have no choice but to ask the King of Darkness for help. What do you think?”

Remedios and Gustav exchanged a glance that said, *It’s not bad*, but…

“There’s one problem. Won’t having him use his magic put us at a disadvantage when it comes time for him to fight against Jaldabaoth?”

“I’ve heard it doesn’t take that long to recover mana.”

“My sister said the same thing.” Remedios’s sister had been a priest. If it was something she said, no one could really object.

“We’ll purposely let a few subhumans escape. Then we’ll lure Jaldabaoth’s army here—before our food runs out.”

“…How many troops will show up, I wonder.”

The three of them had already exchanged information; they estimated Jaldabaoth’s troops after the earlier battle to number slightly less than a hundred thousand.

There were armies of twelve races and then another six races that weren’t as numerous for a total of eighteen.

The twelve races were…

Snakemen. A type of subhuman that had the head of a snake. Said to be a relative of lizardmen.

Armats. A race reminiscent of bipedal rats with fur like steel. Said to be a relative of kuagoa.

Caven. Like apes slightly larger than humans. Eyeless due to atrophy.

Zerun. A slimy race with upper bodies like eels that sprouted arms and lower bodies like indigo maggots. Though they seemed like grotesques, the fact that spells targeting subhumans were effective against them indicated they were actually subhumans.

Bladers. An insect-like race with swordlike blades jutting out of the backs of their hands and covered in exoskeletons like armor. Similar to the zerun, they were classified as subhumans because they were susceptible to magic targeting subhumans.

Horrunners. Subhumans with horse legs who excelled at sprinting. They had astonishing endurance and hardly required any breaks while running.

Spidan. Subhumans reminiscent of spiders with four long, thin arms and slender legs. They could make clothing out of the thread they spat up. The garments made with those threads were hard as steel.

Stone eaters. Possessed primitive weapons. Terrifyingly, they had the ability to spit rocks they ate. Those rocks could easily fly a hundred yards and had no trouble denting iron armor. But since they couldn't launch them indefinitely, they were less formidable if one could ride out the initial attacks.

Orthrouses. Like kentauroses, only half carnivorous beast instead of half horse. Stronger in combat than kentauroses but can't run as fast.

Magiroses. Innate magic ability allowed them to use up to tier-four spells. The magic type they could wield apparently manifested visibly on their bodies as tattoos. The stronger ones were covered in them head to toe. Some of them were also casters, and in those cases it was rumored they could use up to tier five. Perhaps those were lord-tier individuals.

Pteroposes. A race of cliff dwellers that excelled at gliding. They could also fly, but it took quite a bit of energy, so they could only do it for a certain amount of time per day. And after that, they wouldn't even be able to glide. As long as they didn't fly, they could whip out cutting gusts of wind that were difficult to protect against even in armor, so they were stronger when they weren't flying.

Then there were the bufolk.

The other six consisted of races that either had members who were very strong individually or didn't have a tendency to live in close proximity or cooperate.

Ogres.

Pri-um, a race similar to ogres that possess control over the earth and were considered by some to be a powerful species. Their special powers were deeply associated with dirt and soil.

Va-um, similar to pri-um but with water powers instead of earth.

Nagarajas. A race of people with scaly snake bodies equipped with arms. Though their name was similar to naga, the two were actually completely different races and didn't get along. Born with the ability to cast several spells,

they sometimes also used weapons and armor.

Spriggans. A race with the ability to change size at will. Essentially good; evil spriggans were exceedingly rare. But whether good or bad, if they got out of control, they were impossible to handle.

Zooostias. With upper bodies of beastmen and lower bodies of carnivorous beasts, this was a race similar to kentauroses and orthrouses. They wore lamellar armor and carried oval shields. They didn't have any special abilities, but they served well as heavy cavalry possessing the power and ferocity of wild animals. Since zooostias were individually quite strong, orthrouses often relied on them; it could be said that their relationship resembled that between goblins and hobgoblins. But given the zooostias lack special abilities, they weren't terribly difficult foes for adventurers who could use Fly or the like; still, in a head-on clash, an orichalcum team would have a tough fight ahead of them.

"According to the King of Darkness, the enemy could be staking out your base, right? In that case, they probably know about the troops here, so it's best to assume the enemy knows what kind of numbers we have, too. That means he won't send too many, which will work in our favor. But there's one problem."

"Food."

"Yeah. The priests should be able to make some with their magic, but even if we had them use up all their mana, it wouldn't be anywhere near enough. And we can't just eat subhumans like they eat us."

Remedios and Gustav looked disgusted, but all three of them were aware that some subhumans ate humans.

And it was why they knew that if they made it a battle to see whose supplies would hold out the longest, they would lose. Every prison camp doubled as a storehouse packed with food for subhumans.

"How long will our food last? We should f—"

"The orders to calculate it have already been given. And I'm also checking if we have a blacksmith who could adapt some of the subhumans' equipment so we could use it."

“Nice going, Commander.”

The trio’s meeting in preparation for a siege battle scenario continued for a while. After a little over an hour, they must have reached a conclusion they all agreed on; they exchanged smiles.

“Okay. Get us prepped for a siege.”

A week later, when they had less food and they really needed to start heading south, the subhuman army appeared far off on the horizon.

But it was a far greater force than any of them had expected.

5

Watching the city begin to panic as the enormous host of subhuman soldiers drew closer, Ainz slowly crumpled to the ground.

This was not a metaphor.

The extreme strain that had built up in his mind mentally exhausted him despite being undead, and his knees hit the ground. He covered his face with his hands.

What do I do…? What am I supposed to do now…?

Ainz had been basically following the script that Demiurge prepared.

Naturally, it wasn’t as if he had written out every word and gesture—there was a lot of ad-libbing—but even so, Ainz felt he had adhered to Demiurge’s plan.

Or rather, the problem was that there had been too much ad-libbing.

Frankly, most of what Demiurge’s manual said was *Go with the flow*.

This is extremely unhelpful. That’s what Ainz thought the first time he laid eyes on it.

If Ainz were a brilliant person, perhaps he could have perfectly played the role of the King of Darkness. But unfortunately, Ainz only had average, or possibly

even slightly below-average, abilities.

And so a fierce fight broke out between the two of them.

To summarize, Ainz pleaded, *I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this. Write a more detailed plan*, and Demiurge humbly answered, *I couldn't possibly insult your intelligence in such a way, my lord.* Ainz was disadvantaged from the start, but then Albedo joined in, cementing his defeat.

Which is how the operation manual that left everything up to him remained in use.

If Demiurge was picking on him, he might have been able to find another way to fight back, but the present situation was the result of the trust and respect his subordinates had for him.

Especially when he could tell they were thinking, *You're sure to get better results than us, Lord Ainz, so it wouldn't do for us to limit you*, there was simply nothing he could do.

Using a little common sense, would a king really go off to another country on his own…?! This is so forced… But I've made it this far. I bent over backward a few times and nearly failed, but I've made it this far.

He didn't believe in any gods, but he sure wanted to pray to one now.

I wish Demiurge and Albedo would at least take into account my strengths when they tell me what to do…

When they gave him impossible tasks, it sucked all the motivation right out of him.

……Okay, c'mon. Hang in there, me. If you can get past this, the rest'll be comparatively easy.

Ainz tensed his legs and stood up.

The plan was reaching the middle stage, the climax, and it was The Worst.

Demiurge had told him that if they were to build a defensive line at this city, he would attack until 85 percent casualties were reached.

Ainz didn't feel anything about that.

If that was what Demiurge thought, it was surely better than whatever he would have come up with. If that many dying was good for Nazarick, then that was what should happen. Actually, it made him wonder if killing more would be even better.

The problem was that Demiurge wanted a list of the people he shouldn't kill.

If that were all, Ainz could have listed some random names and been done, but there was a condition: It had to be people who either worshipped Ainz or seemed likely to join his side.

When Demiurge got in touch to say, *Knowing you, Lord Ainz, I'm sure you've already mesmerized a number of humans like you did that dwarf, so please tell me their names. I'll take care not to kill them*, Ainz wondered if he was being sarcastic.

"…There's no one…" Ainz moaned in spite of himself.

There wasn't anyone who worshipped him.

On the contrary, he could feel—tangibly—the intense hatred for undead the Sacred Kingdom had.

How was he supposed to overcome that adversity to get someone to adore him?

But there was no way he could tell Demiurge there wasn't a single person.

Demiurge was utterly convinced that Ainz was capable of captivating people. So what would he think if he told him that getting even one was impossible?

My stomach hurts…

The dwarf Demiurge mentioned was probably Gondo Firebeard, but that had been pure luck. He just happened to land a critical hit on a weak point; there was no way such good fortune would repeat itself.

And it was thanks to having Gondo as a source of information that he had been able to strike so effectively at the rune crafters. But he didn't have someone that close to him in the Sacred Kingdom.

He had succeeded in getting on friendly terms with the squire Neia Baraja, but that was as far as their relationship went.

And he had lent her a magic item to deepen their friendship—not that that was the only reason—but he wasn't sure how effective it had been. She was always looking at him with the eyes of a murderer, so he didn't think he should expect much.

If I told him there was only one, what would he say? Ainz asked himself.

Would Demiurge's image of him shatter into a zillion pieces if he did that?

And then what would happen?

I told him back in the dwarf country that I wasn't as smart as he thought, but he doesn't seem to have believed me… This is bad. How high has he built me up in his mind? Or, like, is the feeling that he keeps building me up bigger and bigger just in my head? Doesn't this usually happen in the opposite way?

The expectations were painful. Not burdensome—painful.

The old him never knew what a heavy, stifling thing loyalty was. What hurt the most was how great his subordinates thought he was.

Maybe this is just the right time to let him know that I'm not as awesome as he thinks. But if the plan he's been working on for so long fails because of me, then what? If I worked for several years on a deal and then one dumb remark from my boss ruined the whole thing…

Ahhh, he thought, and would have been pulling his hair out except he didn't have any.

What should I do?

What's the optimal answer?

No matter how many times he simulated the outcome in his head, Demiurge looked at him with disappointment in his eyes. He couldn't reach a satisfying conclusion.

It's because they expect too much—it's because I've climbed too high that I'll take so much damage when I fall. That's the whole reason I keep telling them I'm not so great…

Ainz's own plans failed pretty often.

Ainz reached into space and took out a sword.

It was a normal sword with runes carved in it.

But it contained as much power as the bow he had lent to Neia.

Of course, this wasn't a rune weapon crafted by the dwarves. The runes had no power at all; this had been made with *Yggdrasil* technology.

Sigh… Ainz had a number of these weapons prepared. His original plan was to lend them to people on the Sacred Kingdom side. The point was to talk up the rune gear made in the Nation of Darkness by telling the people of the Sacred Kingdom wowed by the items' power that they were finished products.

That was the other reason he had lent Neia the bow.

He thought the people who saw it would all want to borrow gear from him.

Alas…

Ainz cradled his head. *Why doesn't anyone ask me to borrow gear…? That bow is so flashy. I was sure it would catch people's attention… Should I have forced her to go fight on the front lines with it…?*

Just then, Ainz jumped. There had been a knock on his door that caught him off guard.

He swiftly checked for wrinkles in his clothes. After putting the sword away in extra-dimensional space, he clasped his hands behind his back in a ruler-like pose and called loudly toward the door. "Who is it?"

"Your Majesty, may I come in?"

From the other side of the door, it was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman. Normally, he would ask for a name, but Demiurge had let him know ahead of time to expect someone, so he allowed the person to come in. "Sure, come on in."

Once the person entered the room, they shape-shifted.

They had a head like an egg, and their eyes and mouth were like cutout holes. Three slender, inchworm-like fingers extended from each hand.

It was a doppelgänger.

Demiurge had asked to borrow one.

As monsters go, doppelgängers weren't very strong.

Even when transforming, they could only copy powers up to around level 40, so they ended up weaker than they were in their natural forms. Their most impressive power was probably their ability to use weapons with lots of conditions, such as those that required karma points. Still, they couldn't use legacy-tier or higher gear.

The creature looked at Ainz with wide eyes and then bowed.

"I'm terribly sorry for the disrespect, Lord Ainz. I hope you'll have mercy on me."

"Don't worry about it. You only did your job. I have no complaints about that."

"I'm not worthy of your grace."

Ainz glanced toward the door. "Aren't you extremely busy right now? Being in charge of a lot of different things must be tough. And is there someone outside the door? If so, we need to lower our voices."

"It's all right. When I told everyone I was going alone because I was going to see you, no one objected."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," said the doppelgänger. But they probably still needed to exercise some caution. "So, Lord Ainz, what should I do?"

"About what?" he said, but actually, he knew why the doppelgänger had come.

In fact, he was supposed to tell the doppelgänger—yes, about the people who worshipped him.

"Do excuse me. I've come regarding the matter of who should be spared, of who is loyal to you."

"Hmm…" Ainz nodded benevolently and began walking.

Naturally, he didn't leave the room. He merely paced around it. He was sure

that the eyes of the doppelgänger were following him, though it was impossible to tell by looking at what they were focused on. That said, it would be frightening if they weren't looking at him.

There wasn't much time. Thinking frantically, Ainz froze.

He wasn't sure if he had arrived at the right answer. But he had no clue about how he could fudge this.

If he were human, his heart probably would have been obnoxiously loud, but in this body, he didn't have any pounding organs.

As intense emotions welled up and were automatically suppressed, leaving only smaller waves to press in on him, Ainz finally answered the doppelgänger.

"Right. I'll be honest. There's no one we need to save. Thin them out as needed."

OVERLORD
Character Profiles

Character 49



Neia Baraja

Humanoid

The eyes of a criminal

Position — Squire in the Sacred Kingdom Liberation Army

Residence — A nice area in Jobans (lives with her family)

Class Levels — Servant — ? lv

Archer — ? lv

Birthday — 1 Early Wind Moon

Hobby — Anything she can work away at on her own bit by bit, like cleaning her room.

{ personal character }

As a girl with the eyes of a criminal, people tend to avoid her, so she doesn't have many friends (or any, really). As a result, she's not great at forging relationships with people, so she has ended up enjoying doing things alone. With her archery skills, she's suited to the life of a ranger, always staying close to nature, but for some reason, she aspired to be a paladin; perhaps that was a mistake. This is a tangent, but once certain servant-class conditions are met, the levels can be converted to another class.

Remedios Custodio

Humanoid

The Sacred Kingdom's strongest paladin



Position — Leader of the Sacred Kingdom Liberation Army

Residence — A nice area in Jobans (lives with her family)

Race Levels — Paladin (Genius) — ? lv

Holy Knight — ? lv

Class Levels — Evil Slayer — ? lv

Etc.

Birthday — 24 Mid-Fire Moon

Hobby — All types of training (including that of her subordinates)

{ personal character }

A paladin of the Sacred Kingdom who has entered the ranks of heroes. Because she has a habit of acting on impulse rather than thinking things through, she tends to cause lots of trouble. Honestly, it would be better to have her as a warrior than a commander, but it was impossible to disregard her exceptional skills as a paladin, so she was put in charge. Things work out somehow thanks to the sacrifice of her two deputies, who will likely always suffer from stomach pain. Fun fact: She apparently became friends with the Holy Lady because their birthdays are quite close.

Character 51



Calca Bessarez

Humanoid

The upright and pure Holy Lady

Position — Ruler of the Sacred Kingdom

Residence — The palace in Jobans

Race Levels — Cleric — ? lv

High Priestess — ? lv

Class Levels — Holy Queen — ? lv

Etc.

Birthday — 26 Mid-Fire Moon

Hobby — Anything to do with beauty (though it's a bit intense to be called a hobby)

{ personal character }

Extremely ready to be married and feels rather panicked about it on the inside. In order to improve her looks—for example, keeping her complexion youthful—she even created faith magic spells for skin care. Thanks to using herself as a guinea pig, the Sacred Kingdom has attained the most advanced beauty techniques of any human nation, but since she doesn't talk about it publicly, no one is aware. "I'm not asking for much. I just want a man who will love me as a person unconditionally!" is something she said once, apparently.

Buser

Subhuman

The Mighty Breaker King



Position —— King of a subhuman tribe

Residence —— Abellion Hills

Race Levels —— Bufolklord (race) —— ? lv

Class Levels —— Weapon Master —— ? lv

Technique Master —— ? lv

Etc.

Birthday —— 10 Golden Horns

Hobby —— Collecting weapons he's broken

{ personal character }

A subhuman king who specializes in weapon breaking. Known for using precise aim and sword techniques to break his opponents' claws, fangs, and horns, as well as always fighting at the head of the group when hunting large prey. By doing that, he makes sure everyone always gets home unharmed and earns the absolute respect of his tribe as their leader. He united multiple tribes and thus rules all the bufolk of the Abellion Hills. Has four wives and seven children.

OVERLORD
Character Profiles

The Forty-One Supreme Beings

Compilation

Amanomahitotsu

Grotesque

Gourmet smithy



personal character

One of the First Nine, he took an interest in Touch Me's thoughts on transforming heroes and decided to join him. Back when there weren't many guild members, everyone had to fight, so his blacksmithing fell by the wayside, but once they had Nazarick as a base, he respecced to be a productive artisan. The chief blacksmith NPC is said to be his apprentice. When he was working, he would carry a sword and eat lots of food that would give him buffs.

Afterword

As a child getting scolded by your parents to finish your summer vacation homework or when it's time to flip the calendar to August, I'm sure lots of you have wished August had sixty days.

I certainly did, raising my hand in class on the first day of September to say I forgot my homework.

And this year, it actually happened to me! I always wanted to be the kind of adult whose childhood dream comes true, and now I am! How wonderful!

You—okay that's about enough of that. Buying time with pseudo-excuses won't solve anything.

So this ran a little later than I anticipated, but I managed to get it out. Well, I think it's within the acceptable range of error. I mean, so much happened. Truly. Both good and bad things.

Still, while in the hospital I've read a lot of digital books, and I thought, *Hey, ebooks are handy!* I didn't realize they were so convenient. I thought it would be good for *Overlord* to have a digital version, too, so I decided to do that. There are so many things we don't get until we try them ourselves. And so many situations we can't understand until we are in them ourselves.

By the way, this is a tangent, but most of the digital books I read are manga, especially romcoms.

Last but not least, allow me to express my gratitude to so many people. Especially to you who picked up this book. And to this hospital.

Well, I hope to see you again for the next book. Thank you.

September 2017

KUGANE MARUYAMA


Afterword by so-bin
HEALTH FIRST
so-bin


NEXT
TIME—
AINZ
DIES.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE DECISIVE BATTLE BETWEEN EVIL EMPEROR JALDABAOTH AND KING OF DARKNESS AINZ. CRISIS CLOSES IN ON THE UNDEAD KING IN VOLUME 13

Volume Thirteen

But really, my plans keep going haywire, so I kind of feel like we should just stop having these previews! If they're gone next time, please know that I won! –Kugane Maruyama

OVERLORD

Volume 13: The Paladin of the Sacred Kingdom Part II

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

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