OVERLORD 「12」 The paladin of the Holy kingdom *Kugane Maruyama*

オーバーロード 12 聖王国の聖騎士 | 上 丸山くがね

Character 49

ネイア・バラハ

Human Race

Neia Baraja

Criminal Eyes

Vocation — Squire in the Holy Kingdom Liberation Army

Residence — Prime estate in Hoburns

Class levels — Squire ——— Lv?
Archer ——— Lv?

Birthday — 1st day of the Upper Wind Month

Interests — Cleaning her own room and other hard work that can be done alone.

{ personal character }

As a girl with a criminal's eyes, she tends to leave a bad first impression on others, hence she has had very few friends since childhood (almost none). For that reason, she's bad at building good interpersonal relationships, which has led to her developing a personality that favors doing everything by herself. Her bow skills lend themselves very well to being a ranger who is one with nature, so it is something of a mystery why she aims to be a Paladin. Perhaps it is a mistake on her part. As an aside, if the right conditions are met, her Squire levels can be converted into other class levels.

Character 50

レメディオス・カストディオ

Human Race

Remedios Custodio

Strongest Paladin of the Holy Kingdom

Vocation — Leader of the Holy Kingdom Liberation Army

Residence — Prime estate in Hoburns (her family home)

Class levels — Paladin (genius) — Lv?
Holy Knight — Lv?
Evil Slayer — Lv?
Etc.

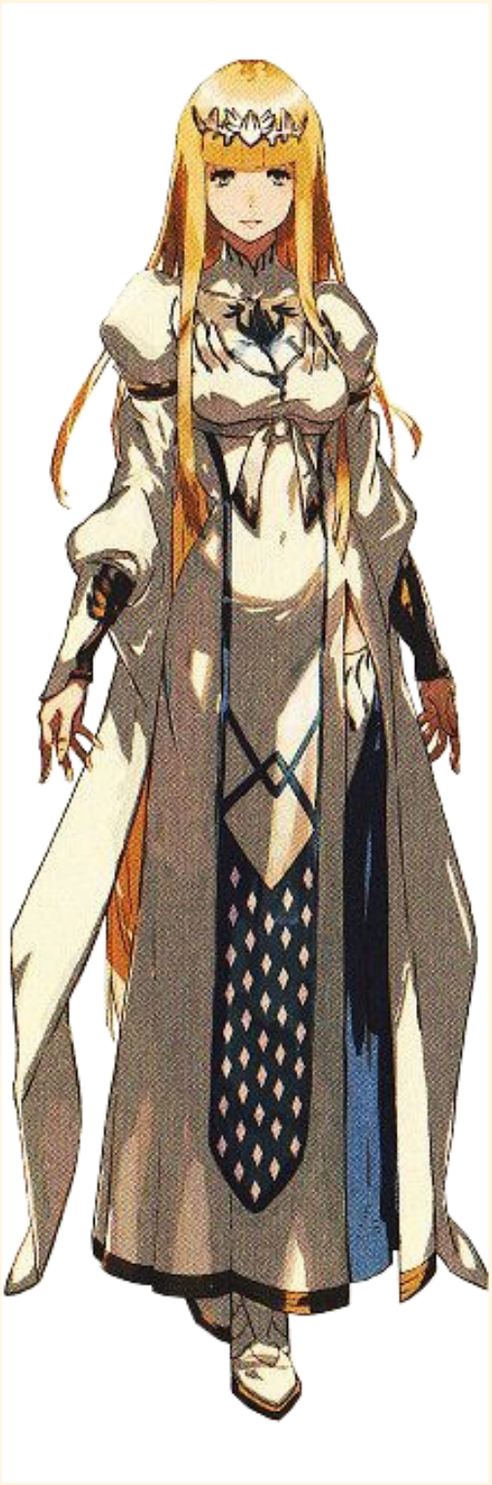
Birthday — 24th day of the Middle Fire Month

Interests — Training in general (also includes her subordinates)

{ personal character }

The strongest paladin of the Holy Kingdom, who has reached the realm of heroes. She does not use her head much and is driven by her emotions, which causes a great deal of inconvenience for others. Frankly speaking, she would be much better suited to an assault role, but she was too good as a paladin and they could not overlook her by picking someone else, and so she ended up as the army's leader. She gets by somehow thanks to the sacrifices of her two vice-captains. Incidentally, her birthday is close to that of the Holy Queen, so they ended up becoming friends.

Character 51



カルカ・ベサーレス

Human Race

Calca Bessarez

Holy Queen of Purity

Vocation — Queen of the Holy Kingdom

Residence — Royal Palace of Hoburns

Class levels — Cleric — Lv?
High Priestess — Lv?
Holy Queen — Lv?
Etc.

Birthday — 26th day of the Middle Fire Month

Interests — All forms of beauty treatments (she calls it a hobby but is very forceful about it)

{ personal character }

She strongly feels the desire to get married and it deeply frustrates her inside. In order to maintain her appearance — keep her skin looking young — she has even gone and developed new divine spells for skin care. She uses herself as a guinea pig and has thus accumulated much knowledge in that field, which makes her the most skilled beautician in the human kingdoms. However, she has never publicly announced it, so nobody knows about it. "I'm not going to be selfish. I just want a husband who loves someone like me me with no strings attached!" she said.

Character 52

バザー

Demihuman Race

Buser

Grand King of Destruction

Vocation——Demihuman King
Residence——Abelion Hills
Class levels——Bafolk Lord (racial)——Lv?
Weapon Master——Lv?
Technical Master——Lv?
Etc.
Birthday——Ten Horns of Gold
Interests——Collecting broken weapons

{ personal character }

A demihuman king who specializes in weapon destruction. He uses skilful sword techniques to break his opponents' claws, fangs, horns and so on, hunting the biggest prey at the head of his troops. For that reason, all the participants in his hunts have returned unharmed, and he commands great respect as an absolute ruler. He has united many tribes and has complete dominion over the Bafolk of the Abelion Hill region. He has four wives and seven children.

9/41

あまのまひとつ

Heteromorphic Species

Amanomahitotsu

Gourmet Blacksmith

{ personal character }

A man who liked Touch Me's henshin hero style and followed him. When their members were few, everyone had to fight, so he abandoned his blacksmith class levels. However, after conquering Nazarick, he ultimately rebuilt his character into a crafting specialist. The NPC he designed, the head blacksmith, had the backstory of being his disciple, and he was very superstitious when crafting. He was often seen eating buff-granting food.

OVERLORD

THE PALADIN OF THE HOLY KINGDOM

PART 1

1章 魔皇ヤルダバオト

Overlord Volume 12

CHAPTER 1

THE DEMON EMPEROR JALDABAOTH

Part 1

The Roble Holy Kingdom was a nation whose territory was the peninsula to the southwest of the Re-Estize Kingdom.

It was led by a Holy Queen who could use divine magic, and the leadership was closely tied to the temple factions. It was a very religious country, though not to the extent of the Slaine Theocracy.

In addition, there were two special features about the Roble Holy Kingdom's geography.

The first was that its land was divided into northern and southern halves by the sea. Of course, the halves were not completely separated. Rather, there was a gigantic bay between them — forty kilometers long and two hundred kilometers wide — which made its geography look like a horizontal U.

Thus, some people called them the Northern and Southern Holy Kingdoms.

Then, there was another feature.

The entrance to the peninsula sported a great wall, over one hundred kilometers long from north to south.

It was built to withstand invasions from the many demihuman tribes which occupied the hills to the east of the Holy Kingdom, between them and the Theocracy.

This grand wall, built through the expenditure of a great deal of time and resources, was a silent testimony to how troubling the existence of the demihumans were to the Holy Kingdom.

There was a vast power gap between demihumans and humans.

Granted, it was true that there were certain demihumans who were weaker than humans, such as Goblins.

Be it in height, physical strength, knowledge, or the rate at which they produced magic casters, they were a race inferior to humans in every way.

Still, even Goblins like that possessed eyes which could see in the dark, and if they took advantage of the fact that their small bodies could be easily concealed — for instance, when launching a nighttime ambush in a forest — they would surely be troublesome foes for humans.

Needless to say, most demihumans had more powerful bodies than humans, and there were also many races who were naturally endowed with magical ability. If they let the demihumans invade as they pleased, they would have to pay an incalculable price in blood to fight them off.

Therefore, the Holy Kingdom chose to solidify its defense.

They did this to keep the demihumans from taking a single step onto their land.

They did this to let the world know that their land did not belong to the demihumans.

They did this so the demihumans would understand that any attempt to set foot on their land would be met by frenzied resistance.

♦ ♦ ♦

Yet, the wall built for that purpose possessed a few problems.

In order to keep it operating at full capacity, they had to keep a great deal of manpower permanently on site. The Holy Kingdom’s leadership had once

calculated how much fighting strength would be required to defeat an invading tribe of demihumans. The answer was that the country would collapse before the demihumans even attacked them.

While they did not have the luxury of raising troops which would go unused, there was a need to station an appropriate amount of manpower there.

In the Holy Kingdom's history — after the construction of the wall — the gravest intrusion into their lands had come during an invasion which took place amidst the Long Rain.

It was a night attack, launched by a race called the Srush, who possessed sucker-cup hands, tongues envenomed with a paralytic toxin which could extend a long way, and advanced members of their species could even change their skin color as though using the 「Camouflage」 spell.

The Srush crossed the wall, and headed west.

Quite a number of villages had been lost to them, and such was the tragedy which had unfolded back then that to this day, there were still rumors about whether or not the Srush were still hiding within the borders of the Holy Kingdom.

They wanted to fully man the wall in order to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again, but stationing troops at every single point along its length would strain the nation. The compromise which the nation came up with was to build small forts at fixed intervals along the walls. These strongpoints would then be overseen by several gigantic fortresses.

They stationed a small number of troops in each of these strongpoints, their purpose being to fight extended battles down to the last man. If they encountered an enemy attack, they would immediately launch skyrockets to request reinforcements from the fortresses. In addition, there were companies of soldiers who would staff and patrol the fortresses, serving as reserve troops during emergencies, to be deployed flexibly as the situation required.

After putting these measures into practice, the demihumans had not managed to penetrate the wall again.

However, the diligent planning of the Holy Kingdom's leadership back then had turned into a form of obsession. Even countermeasures like a defensive line of fortresses could not reassure them.

Indeed, it was an incredibly massive wall — to human beings. Yet, it was no threat whatsoever to races who were several times taller than humans or who possessed the ability of flight. For those reasons, even such a sturdy wall was by no means a guarantee of absolute safety when one considered the many special abilities of demihumans.

The Holy King at the time was a prudent man, and he had even prepared a stratagem for when the wall was breached. His solution was to mobilize the entire nation.

For that reason, the citizens of the Holy Kingdom were conscripted as a form of national service. All adult citizens, male and female, would spend a certain necessary amount of time undergoing military training, after which they would be assigned to sentry duty on the wall. The hope was that they would become the manpower with which to protect their land in case the demihumans crossed over the wall.

All residences above a certain size were also fortified. This gave the local villagers enough fighting power to hold out until the regular army could arrive, and allowed said villages to serve as military outposts. In the end, the villages of the Roble Kingdom were far better protected than those of other countries, and they could also function as military bases.

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The Holy Kingdom's fortress line was composed of three fortresses linked by the wall. Each of them protected one of only three fortified gates along the full length of the wall, which was in excess of one hundred kilometers long, and they also functioned as garrisons to dispatch troops to the surrounding strongholds. If the demihumans invaded and an overall mobilization order was given, they would become staging areas where the troops would gather in order to attack the enemy.

This was one of them, the central fortress.

As the sun slowly sank beneath the horizon, the red-tinted land was slowly soaked with the color of night.

A powerful-looking man stood with one foot on the battlements, looking out over the land — at the western foothills. After that, he put his foot down.

He was a man who bulged with muscle.

His neck was stout, and his chest muscles were impressive enough that one could sense them even through his thick armor. His powerful arms protruded from his rolled-up sleeves. There was no better way to describe him than "athletic," regardless of which part of him one looked at.

His face was like a boulder, weathered by harsh conditions, and his thick brows and unkempt moustache spoke of a savage, wild nature. His mighty body and his stern appearance ought to have matched each other, yet his eyes broke that trend.

They were tiny and round, beady like those of a small animal, and they felt almost comically out of place.

Such a man now looked to the sky.

The wind carried the thin clouds at incredible speeds, but even the starry night beyond their gossamer veil could not produce enough starlight to illuminate the land.

The man's nostrils flared, and he took a deep breath, smelling the breath of night through the early autumn air, which was flavored with a hint of winter chill. The violet night sky was swallowing the faint light of dusk upon the horizon with a speed visible to the naked eye.

The man turned his back to the hills, and looked at the men around him.

They were fierce warriors, who trusted him and who followed him. It was because he was surrounded by such warriors that he permitted himself a moment's laxity.

After all, the day's work was done and nobody could dispute that.

"—Oi, has anyone asked the forecaster about tonight's weather?"

The question was asked in a mighty voice which befitted his powerful body. The soldiers looked at each other, and one of them spoke up on the group's behalf.

"My deepest apologies! Corporal Camparno sir, it seems none of us have heard the report in question!"

This man — Olrand Camparno — was a fairly low ranked man in the Roble Holy Kingdom's military hierarchy.

From bottom to top, the Roble Holy Kingdom's military ranks went from Recruit, Private, Private First Class, Corporal, Sergeant, Platoon Sergeant, and so on. Of course, different ranks existed in different units, and these were simply the ranks for the regular infantry.

Usually speaking, a simple corporal would not need to be addressed as "Sir."

However, the man calling Olrand "Sir" did not do so to mock him. His respect for him was evident in his attitude and tone. Neither was it just that man; every soldier present, each of whom walked and talked like a skilled veteran of many battles, felt the same way about Olrand.

"Really now?"

Olrand slowly stroked his stubbly face.

"Sir, if time permits, will you allow this one to go and ask immediately?"

"Hm? No, no need for that. Our job is over now. What happens next is the business of the people after us."

♦ ♦ ♦

Olrand Camparno.

He was a man of many accomplishments who, through his fighting skill alone, had earned the honor of being named one of the Holy Kingdom's Nine Colors by the previous Holy King.

The reason why such a man remained at such a lowly post stemmed from two problems which Olrand had.

The first was because he was very free-spirited — he hated taking orders.

The second was because he was obsessed with fighting skills.

When these two points came together, they led to a way of life that said, "If you want to tell me what to do, beat the crap out of me first." If he met a worthy foe he would say, "You look pretty strong. How about sparring with me?" and then they would fight until one of them passed out.

This personality of his had led to many violent incidents involving nobles and his superiors, so he had been demoted over ten times already.

There was no need for people who could not obey orders in the military and they were universally loathed as well. Under normal circumstances, it would hardly have been strange if he were disciplined or dishonorably discharged. However, he had not met with such a fate, purely due to his strength. In addition, there were those who admired men like him.

The rough sorts who were unhappy about being ordered about by destitute nobles found Olrand's way of living by the strength of his arm most thrilling.

His unit was a squad of delinquents composed of such violent people — no, they were more of a gang.

They were quite numerous, so calling them a company would not have been out of place. In addition, its members may not have been Olrand's equals, but they were all skilled fighters, which led to him assuming an unofficial post which his superiors could not tolerate, but which they could do nothing about.

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Olrand glanced around, and after verifying the identity of the man approaching them, a smile appeared on his face, like that of a carnivore about to pounce its prey.

That man seemed quite slender in comparison to Olrand's brawny form. However, his was not the scrawniness of a twig. Rather, he had a wiry, steely look about him. If one forged and reforged a man, burning away everything unrelated to his intended function, it would produce a textbook slimness of the kind he embodied.

In addition, his narrow eyes were keen, as though he was about to attack at any moment. Then there were his narrow pupils which did not look like they belonged to anyone engaged in a legitimate enterprise. In polite terms, he was an assassin. In less than polite terms, he was a mass murderer.

"Speak of the devil and here he comes. Fancy meeting you here, Night Shift-san. Nice to see you~"

The other man made no sound as he approached them with silent footsteps. He was dressed very differently from Olrand.

Olrand and the men around him wore suits of heavy leather armor made from the hides of magical beasts called Lanca Cattle. In addition, they carried small round shields and single-edged swords, the standard outfit of the Holy Kingdom's superior troops. Incidentally, Olrand was the only one who had eight of those swords at his waist.

In contrast to that, the other man wore a suit of enchanted light leather armor. There was an owl crest stitched on his right chest, while the emblem of the Holy Kingdom adorned his left.

"...Olrand. I haven't received your shift report yet. Also, is that the attitude you ought to be taking with a superior? That's practically insubordination. How many times do I have to remind you of that?"

"Well, do forgive me, Platoon Sergeant-dono."

As Olrand saluted him sloppily, the men under him saluted as well. It was a proper salute, the kind which they would never give a nobleman or any mere superior officer. It was a salute which showed genuine respect.

The man sighed with a *haaah*. It was a sigh made by one who knew that his conduct was unacceptable, but who also knew that lecturing him about it would be pointless.

Sorry, boss. Old habits die hard, as they say.

The reason why Olrand saluted this man, however reluctantly, was because he had defeated Olrand.

I'd like to beat you once before I leave this place. On your terms. Don't you think, Platoon Sergeant Pavel Baraja?

The man — Pavel Baraja — was nicknamed "The Night Watchman." Like Olrand, he was one of the Nine Colors. The massive, exquisitely-made bow on his back gleamed with the faint light of magic, and the quiver hanging at his waist glowed in the same way. He was an archer, just as his appearance suggested. He was a superb marksman, with a reputation of perfect accuracy.

"I think this all the time, but working at night sure is hard. The demihumans do just fine in the darkness, but it's hard enough just to find their traces, let alone fight them."

"That's why we're here. The only way to gain magic and talents comparable to demihumans — their vision aside — is through training. And we've received that training."

"Yes, yes. Same goes for that daughter you're so proud of, right?"

Pavel's face twitched and Olrand instantly regretted his poor choice of words.

This was a man whose expression remained unchanged even in the midst of a drinking party. The only exception was when the topic of his daughter and wife came up. That was where the problem lay.

"Oh yes. She's an outstanding girl."

—It was happening. It had already begun.

Pavel paid no heed to Olrand's regret and continued speaking.

“That said, I honestly have no idea why she wants to become a paladin. She’s a weak little girl, certainly not the type who thinks of fighting power as everything — honestly, she’s even been scared to tears by caterpillars in the past — and while I did say that might was everything just now, that doesn’t extend to my wife… although my wife *does* seem like that in some ways — and she’s adorable because she grew up like me, no, I should say that it’s a pity she ended up growing up to look like me — but the true shame is that she doesn’t have any talent for using swords. However, she’s adept with the bow. If only she could hone her skills in that respect, but then here she is wanting to be a paladin and whatnot—”

He let the meandering monologue flow in one ear and out the other, making the appropriate noises in response when they were needed, but it would seem he had still been found out.

“Oi, are you listening to me?”

That question was only to be expected.

No, I wasn’t listening. I think I stopped after the third time.

After hearing the same thing about five or six times, under normal circumstances Olrand would have unhappily retorted “Hell no.” However, taking that tone with Pavel would be a terrible mistake. That was because he knew that he would surely reply, “Then I’ll tell you again.”

This was the right answer:

“Of course I did. What a lovely girl she is!”

Pavel’s face changed dramatically. While it was an ugly, fiendish expression that put Olrand on his guard, the fact was that the other man was simply embarrassed.

If he did not overcome Pavel's desire to praise his daughter, he would be plunged into that hell once more.

"Also—"

Only one thing could trump the topic of his daughter. That was work.

"Doesn't night work mess with your biological clock? Won't your body get weird?"

The butcher's expression on Pavel's face returned to his usual killer's expression.

"...How many times have you asked that question already? The answer's the same as always; it's nothing to be concerned about. Still, why do you keep asking that question? What are you really getting at?"

He knew the cause for it, but he still stared at his rapid shift in attitude.

Where did the you from just now go, he wanted to say, but Olrand did not want that hell to return once more.

"...Hah. What I really want to say? Well, that's a surprising question… I was just thinking that it'd cause a lot of trouble for me if the man who beat me ruined his body and ended up having to retire over a trivial thing. Of course, once I win, such minor things won't matter any more."

In the past, Olrand had been full of himself when he was first assigned to this strongpoint, and thinking back to those days embarrassed him. Skilled soldiers gathered around him in admiration, fuelling his ego ever further, and somehow, he had ended up fighting a mock battle with Pavel.

Olrand favored the sword — close combat. In contrast, Pavel favored the bow — ranged combat.

If the two of them clashed, the question of engagement range would be extremely important. However, Pavel declared that he was fine with close combat.

And then, Olrand lost.

Olrand respected Pavel for that reason. At the same time, he harbored the desire to beat him next time. This time, he would fight Pavel in his field of expertise, ranged combat, and emerge the victor there.

“Is that so? You want to fight me, then? While I’m at peak physical condition, with no handicaps on my part.”

A bestial smile crossed Pavel’s face as he said so, and it made Olrand’s chest heat up.

Oh yes, definitely. Isn’t that obvious? I want to fight you. I want to put my life on the line against you. However, that won’t be allowed, will it? Even so, if possible, I’d like us to have a battle where both of us could die at any moment. That’s how I want to fight you.

However, Olrand remained silent. That was because his instincts said there was no telling where the beast before his eyes would go. And in fact, what Pavel said after that confirmed those instincts.

“Still, I have to apologize. You should know why too.There’s very few people who can beat you as you are now in melee combat, and I’m not one of them.”

Then let’s settle it with ranged combat. Those words did not issue from Olrand’s mouth. That was because he knew it would only be an insult to a worthy opponent.

He recalled Pavel’s bow skills. He was still not confident that he could evade his attacks and close the distance at the same time.

—No, not yet.

“Well, if that’s all, time to make your report.”

“No need to rush, boss. It’s not time for the shift change yet, right? Look, the bell hasn’t rung yet.”

Indeed, the chime that signalled a shift change had not yet sounded.

“You still need to prepare to change shifts, right? There’s things to do before the bell goes. You ought to be getting yourself ready so you can change over the moment the bell rings.”

“It’s still too early even for that, right boss? Come talk with us for a bit.”

“Then, may I make a report to the Platoon Sergeant’s second-in-command?”

The person who spoke was one of his men.

“Oh, that’s a great idea. Excellent job, you. How about that, boss?”

“...Hah. You’re being really persistent today. You want to say something, right? Good grief... if you want to say something, come out and say it.”

But of course, he could not.

While he had acknowledged the other man as someone he could talk with because he respected him, Olrand was the type who did not speak to people precisely because he respected them. That was because he wanted to be seen as a man who could stand on his own.

“Well, that’s why you’re the boss. You get it, don’t you?”

“...Hahhh. So, what is it? I won’t let you off lightly if it’s some trivial nonsense.”

“Well, about that...” Olrand took off his helmet and scratched his head. The cool air felt strangely comfortable on his heated scalp.

“The truth is I want to go on a warrior’s pilgrimage. So can I leave this place?”

He could hear the gasps of surprise from all around him. However, the expression on the slender man in front of him remained unmoved.

“Why tell me?”

“That’s because you’re the man I respect the most in this nation, boss. If you won’t stop me either, then I won’t have any more doubts.”

"...Aren't you an NCO? If you've finished your conscription period, I can't possibly stop you."

The Holy Kingdom practiced conscription. Therefore, they sometimes called those people who chose to be career soldiers noncommissioned officers, in order to differentiate them from those people who had been conscripted. Pavel and all his men were NCOs, while Olrand had some NCOs and conscripts under his command.

"In that case, you don't mind if I quit, right?"

Being asked that question marked the first time Pavel's face had changed apart from when the topic of his wife and daughter had come up. Olrand had barely managed to discover it by dint of his extraordinary powers of perception gained from being a warrior. Nobody else around them had noticed it.

He was someone that Olrand acknowledged as a man of steel, but he was actually perturbed by the question of his staying or departure. His heart swirled with a mix of delight and sorrow.

"...Well, legally speaking, I have to accept that. I can't stop you… That said, we'll sorely feel the absence of a strong man like you. You should have gone on your warrior's journey earlier, right? Why now? Is it because there aren't any more demihuman attacks?"

Since that time half a year ago, the demihumans had stopped attacking this fortress. In the past, they had attacked about once or twice a month, in groups of about a few dozen each time.

While they only numbered a few dozen, they were still demihumans, who had superior physical abilities compared to mankind, and many of them possessed special abilities on top of that. Those were numbers which could easily slaughter an entire outpost wholesale.

Both Olrand and Pavel had experienced many situations where they had to send out elite troops for relief operations.

“You know I don’t enjoy slaughtering the demihumans, right? I like fighting strong people and becoming strong.”

“So how about the Grand King, then?”

“Ahhh, that guy…”

“Oh, and then there’s the Demon Claw, the Beast Emperor, the Ashen King, the Iceflame Lightning, and the Spiral Lance.”

Pavel had mentioned the nicknames of several notable demihumans, but none of them moved Olrand’s heart apart from the one he had first mentioned.

The Grand King Buser.

He was the king of a certain demihuman tribe, a being known as the Lord of Destruction.

That nickname came from the fact that he was skilled in martial arts that destroyed weaponry and his fighting style that revolved around such sundering techniques. He was a mortal enemy of the Holy Kingdom who had defeated many famed warriors, and he had fought Olrand in the past. Back then, he had destroyed Olrand’s longsword, his backup weapons of a shortsword and handaxe, and even a billhook used to cut trees for firewood.

Although he had broken all of Olrand’s weapons, the Grand King withdrew after seeing the reinforcements sent from the fortress. In a sense, being able to hold out until help arrived was a win for Olrand, and many people praised him for his valor. To Olrand, however, it simply meant that the Grand King did not think that slaying Olrand was worth the risk, and so all Olrand felt was a hollow sense of defeat.

“I do want to fight him again, but… I guess I still can’t beat him now. You’d probably need one of those people they call heroes to defeat him, otherwise it would be very difficult. Therefore… ah, you’ve also heard of it, right boss? How that great warrior, Gazef Stronoff, died in battle.”

“Ah, yes, I did. The higher-ups are debating hotly about how that’s going to affect the surrounding countries, after all.”

The death of Gazef Stronoff, known as the mightiest warrior of the Re-Estize Kingdom, was a matter of great interest to the soldiers of the Holy Kingdom — particularly the skilled ones.

“Do you know any specifics?”

“I’ve heard some rough details. Apparently, he duelled a magic caster known as the Sorcerer King and was struck down. Frankly speaking, the fact that he would actually challenge a magic caster to a duel is quite hard to take in.”

Olrand agreed as well.

However, the term “magic caster” was quite broad. Divine magic casters could, after using spells which enhanced their physical abilities, end up stronger than a half-baked warrior. In addition, the paladins who were the pride of this nation could use magic too, so to some extent, one could not say they were not magic casters. In that case, he could understand the reasons for the duel.

“...In addition, others say that the Sorcerer King massacred an entire army. Apparently he summoned gigantic goats, or sheep, rather.”

“Well, that’s the first time I’ve heard that. Still, gigantic goats? What a weird magic caster.”

The mention of goats reawakened unhappy memories of Olrand’s defeat. That said, while the rumors said he had summoned goats, they were clearly not ordinary goats.

“Well, it’s also because of that weird magic caster. That’s why I need to do this.”

“...That’s why? I don’t quite get your meaning.”

“This hasn’t changed from when I lost to you, but I’m the sort of person who disregards items that grant flight, spells, and the like. I’ve always thought that all you need to do is beat them with your sword. However, after the Kingdom’s Warrior-Captain-dono — who was stronger than me — lost to those, I began to think that maybe I shouldn’t look down on them.”

“Which means?”

“Which means I need to go on a warrior’s pilgrimage.”

“...Don’t tell me you’re going to challenge those people in our country that you can’t beat?”

“I won’t.”

Some of the opponents which Olrand could not win against were fellow members of the Nine Colors.

The Vice-Captain of the marines, Enrique Belsway, known as “the Blue.”

The Captain of the Paladin Order, Remedios Custodio, known as “the White.”

Pavel Baraja, known as “the Black.”

Ran Tsu An Rin, one of the Mermen who lived in the sea, known as “the Green.”

And then, outside of the Nine Colors, there was the most powerful priest in the nation, Kelart Custodio.

In other words, they were some of the most highly placed people in the land, and challenging them would surely cause great ructions in the country. If it was just a mock battle, then it ought to be all right, so long as it was against a fellow member of the Nine Colors, but an all-out duel would never be allowed.

However, that would not do.

A true clash of blades was completely different from a mock battle. Sometimes, the winner and loser could be completely reversed between them. Many people became much stronger — or weaker — when going from training to a live combat. Naturally, the strong were recognized as such because they showed their power in actual combat. Therefore, one could not consider a warrior pilgrimage complete without fighting a real battle.

“That’s good, then... still, where do you plan to train yourself?”

“I was thinking of visiting the Sorcerous Kingdom you mentioned earlier. It seems there’s powerful undead there.”

The Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.

It would have taken an incredible attention-seeker to actually name a country after themselves, but it was not entirely unthinkable. More to the point, it was a fact that the person who had done so had the power to back it up.

“I’ve heard of it from the merchants who travel between the Kingdom and the Holy Kingdom.”

Thanks to the teachings of the Holy Kingdom’s temples, the common man both hated and despised the undead. Even Pavel was no exception. *No*, Olrand thought. Pavel did not hate them because they were the enemies of the Holy Kingdom, but because they were his wife’s enemies.

However, he could not bring that up. While he did not lose himself in chatting about his wife as he did with his daughter, he still spoke far too much.

“The Holy Kingdom’s stance is to tacitly acknowledge the existence of the Sorcerous Kingdom, right? They say it’s okay for people of the Holy Kingdom to go over there… right?”

There was no way to hide the fact that the Sorcerous Kingdom, with its armies of the undead, was an intolerable foe of the Holy Kingdom. Many people had urged them to send out troops when they thought of how the people in the Sorcerous Kingdom’s Capital of E-Rantel must be suffering. However, the Holy Kingdom presently faced the threat of the demihumans, and they would not be able to conduct military operations in other countries without first pacifying the hill region.

The feelings of the people aside, the leadership's response to the Sorcerous Kingdom did not escalate beyond half-hearted criticism.

“...The Sorcerous Kingdom, hm. Well, if you apply to the brass, you ought to be able to go over there as a member of the army. They view the Sorcerous

Kingdom as a threat second only to the demihumans. It seems they want to ally with the Theocracy against them."

"Really now. It seems there'll be a lot of problems due to religious differences, then."

"Yes, precisely. Well, that aside, if your affiliation doesn't change, you can receive the country's aid and you can skip those annoying immigration checks… I think. If you go over, you'll be a godsend to the people who want to know more about the inner workings of the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"Well, wouldn't that be nice. Still, if I did that, I couldn't just go around picking fights."

"You… the way you say that so seriously is really headache-inducing."

"I guess it'd be hard on you if it became an international incident, huh."

The cold wind blew past them. For a while, Pavel went silent, his expression unchanged, but after that, he began muttering unhappily (as usual).

"I'm going to miss that ugly face of yours."

Olrand smiled wickedly. It was a ferocious, bestial grin, but he was being uncharacteristically shy. Pavel had not said, "don't go," but neither had he said, "go." He decided to make sure that he would have somewhere to return to.

"Sorry about that… Well, I'll come back after I become stronger. Want me to train you up at that time?"

"Fancy you saying that."

As Olrand chuckled, Pavel laughed back at him in turn. Their laughter was every bit as ferocious as two wild beasts growling at each other.

Just then, the bell rang.

It would seem that it was time to change over to the night shift. They had spoken at great length, so they would wrap it up with one more thing. As Olrand thought that, that notion evaporated from his mind as the bell continued to ring.

Pavel, followed closely by Olrand, looked to the hills.

Those bells meant “Demihumans sighted.”

Their visibility was clear up to to over four hundred meters away. In the past, there had once been forests and trees there, but the country had conducted a massive landscaping project as part of the wall’s construction to flatten it out.

However, at the furthest reaches of the expansive plains — where there were hills and other obstructions — they saw sparkles in the darkness and moving black shadows.

“Boss…”

It was impossible for Olrand to discern the true identities of those demihumans at this distance while in the dark. Therefore, he called on the man with the keenest eyesight.

“Yes, they’re demihumans… Snakemen,” Pavel immediately answered.

Snakemen had heads like a cobra and scaly, humanoid bodies, as well as tails. They were demihumans that were considered close relatives to Lizardmen. Their serpentine heads had venomous bites and their spears were coated in powerful toxins. Close combat with them was to be avoided as much as possible.

That said, Olrand and his men were seasoned veterans, and they possessed very high resistance to poisons. While their scales provided some protection, they were not hard enough to deflect metal weapons. They might be skilled with their tails, but one could simply consider them another weapon. In addition, they had the advantage at night due to their ophidian sensory organs, but that was not a problem.

Is leading the charge on them going to be our job? No, by the time they reach here, Boss's unit would have shot them all to death.

Snakemen despised cold objects, so they did not use metal armor and other such items. As a result, it was a simple task for first-rate archers like Pavel and his men to fill them full of arrows.

"So how many of them are there, Boss?"

Usually, there would be less than twenty of them.

"...Boss?"

Olrand was briefly puzzled by the lack of a response. He looked at Pavel, and saw a look of clear vexation on that typically blank face of his.

"What's wrong, Boss?"

"...There's more of them? Could this be — this is bad! I've spotted members of other species! Armatts, Ogres, and are those Cavens?"

"What did you say?"

There were all kinds of demihumans in the hill region, but they did not have good relationships with each other. On the contrary, they often fought over territory, and apart from cases where Ogres took Goblins as slaves and cruelly used them, these races very rarely worked with each other.

There had even been cases where some of them had attacked the Holy Kingdom after being driven from their lands.

Then this ought to be the same thing. Because if it was not—

"A big invasion?"

He did not know who had said that. Perhaps the person saying so might have thought he was speaking to himself, but it sounded clear enough to his ears.

"Olrand, I've got something to ask you."

There was tension in Pavel's voice. No, that was only to be expected.

Race, culture, and religion. Just as how there could be many nations composed of members of the same species, creating a cohesive nation was a very difficult task. It was even more difficult when the species of the members were different. Therefore, uniting the demihuman tribes in the hills was a nigh-impossible task.

If that was what had happened, that would mean the beginning of a battle for the Holy Kingdom's survival.

After that — Olrand's body trembled uncontrollably.

Uniting all these races would require obvious power. Among mankind, wisdom and wealth would qualify as a form of strength, but the demihuman races prized power. In other words—

That means there might be a frighteningly powerful enemy out there, is that it?

"Tell me with your warrior's instincts. Why do you think these guys chose to reveal themselves at a fortress like this — at such a well defended place? One — they're serving as bait to draw out our forces to thin out our defences. Two—"

"They're confident of breaking through in a head-on attack. Twenty percent of the Holy Kingdom's fighting strength is stationed here, and they're going to crush us like cockroaches."

Despite feeling Pavel's keen gaze from beside him, Olrand did not stop talking.

"At the same time, they're going to use this fortress as a bridgehead. Then, they're going to crush the morale of the Holy Kingdom and boost their own morale. Is that it?"

"...They might issue a mass mobilization order."

“Haha! A war like this has only occurred once before in the history of the Holy Kingdom, and now there’s going to be another one like it in our time! What can we say to that!?”

“I’m going to report to the higher-ups. You come with me too.”

“Got it, boss! Oi, you lot! This is going to be one hell of a party! Keep the backup weapons coming!”

If the enemy was an army, they would have to spend a lot of time forming their troops up. This was especially true if they counted numerous races among their number. However, the same applied to the defenders as well. Since they were an army, they would need time to prepare themselves. This held true even on the frontline.

There were a shocking amount of things which needed to be done. There was no more time to idle around.

Olrand ran after Pavel.

♦ ♦ ♦

Part 2

As the enemy troops slowly formed up, Pavel felt a sharp pain in his throat.

The slower the enemy attack, the more forces they could gather to this fortress, and the more time they would have to give the mobilization order. This was the perfect scenario for their commanding officers, but Pavel did not share their opinion.

There were demihumans with intellect that surpassed humanity. Surely the commander of such a vast army was no fool. In that case, he would know that giving their opponent time to prepare was a disadvantageous thing. In addition, it was late at night now, and the coming battle would be to the demihumans’ advantage. It would be the same even if they lit bonfires.

Pavel looked at the enemy lines, four hundred meters away.

While they were organized by species, no consideration seemed to have been given to things like the weapons they wielded, their respective tactics, their various racial characteristics, and so on.

In all likelihood, the demihumans were not marching under the same flag. Otherwise they would have fielded a more logical battle line. Or was this something like an oligarchy, an alliance of demihumans led by a council of equals?

“Can’t quite make it out, Boss. Can you see the enemy commander?”

“...No, I haven’t spotted their leader yet.”

His men had not reported sighting anything like that so far.

However, there had to be a commander. Otherwise, even forming up into units would be very difficult.

“He can’t keep hiding forever. He’ll surely show up on the battlefield.”

Given the nature of demihumans, their leaders were strong, and they would show up to flaunt their strength.

That would be the best time for Pavel to work.

Pavel clutched his bow.

It was a magical composite longbow, infused with enchantments specialized against demihumans. In addition, he also had a Mantle of Shadow, suitable for blending into shadows and conducting ambushes, Boots of Silence, which eliminated the sound of his footsteps, a Vest of Resistance, to improve his resilience against various attacks, a Deflection Ring, to protect him from ranged weapons, and many other such items. These were a sign of how much Pavel’s nation valued him.

“You lot. Prepare to shoot at any time,” he ordered his subordinates, who were hidden beside him as though they had vanished into the night.

If they were humans, they would exchange envoys to read out declarations and pronouncements; that was a characteristic of wars between nobles. However, nobody from the Holy Kingdom who was quartered in this fortress, the generals included, wanted to parley with the demihumans of the hills. At the very most, they would hold talks to deceive them, or something like talks in order to buy time, and once they spotted the enemy commander they would shoot him dead on the spot.

"...You ought to be heading back to your unit now."

"I'll do that. Take care, Boss."

"Ahh, you too."

A wisp of unease wound through Pavel's heart as he watched Olrand leave.

Some demihumans possessed lethal special attacks.

For instance, the mystic eyes of the Giant Biclops.

These demihumans had unbalanced faces and a pair of disproportionately massive eyes. One of these Mystic Eyes contained the ability to 「Charm」 their foes. Its victims would unconsciously approach the opposition. Indeed, they would disregard the fact that they were on walls to take the shortest path towards the demihuman who had enthralled them.

Usually, they would be equipped with magic items to improve their resistance to such special abilities, but Olrand had not been furnished with such items. If his luck was bad, he might be taken out in one shot.

He closed his eyes to clear away his unease, and a woman's figure appeared in Pavel's mind.

She was one of the Nine Colors, the woman known as the White.

She worries me too, but in a different way. She's clueless and often gets the people around her in trouble. That's why Pink has it so hard… why does my daughter want to join her? Wouldn't it be good enough for her to just normally meet a good man, fall in love with him and then marry him — no!

He shook away the worry for his daughter that swelled in his heart.

At the same time, he looked back at the demihuman lines, to change his mood.

He did not know how many demihumans stood at the foothills, but there were many flags waving there. Those flags were not camouflage; the sole third tier magic caster in this fortress had already verified it from the sky.

In other words, there really were that many combat units gathered here today. Things would not end with a simple staring match.

Pavel began his usual ritual.

He took out a carved wooden doll from his breast pocket, and then kissed it.

This was a figurine his daughter had made when she was six. It was a grotesque doll with four sticks coming out of a ball, made to look like her father. He still clearly remembered the day when he had praised her by saying "This is a really cool monster," and how she had burst into tears, and how his wife had kicked him.

The doll was worn out because he had touched it countless times, and the carved eyes and mouth were faded away. She had grown much older since that time, so he wanted her to make a figurine that looked more like him. But perhaps she did not know his heart, because she showed no signs of wanting to remake it.

It was probably because of his long tours of duty stationed here, but he rarely had the chance to see his wife and daughter. He felt himself drawing further and further away from her every day. In the past she would have hugged him immediately, but at some point, she no longer hugged him after he returned home.

She's grown independent of her father, his wife had smiled, but this was a big thing to Pavel.

If I could take two month's leave, I'd like to go camping as a family, like we used to.

His daughter would listen with rapt attention whenever he taught her his ranger knowledge. That was what he was aiming for. That said, he knew it would probably not work out.

He put the doll back into his pocket.

His daughter was rarely home due to her aim of becoming a paladin. When Pavel returned to his home after a long absence, his daughter was often away.

It would be best if she married a neighbor after all… no, someone who lived a little close by, or no, someone who stayed in the vicinity.

A paladin's way of life was the least suitable for his daughter. He had been observing her all this time, so he was sure of it.

His daughter had chosen this path because she admired how her mother looked as a paladin. However, that was not enough to be a paladin.

Only a knight who physically expressed the justice they believed in could be called a paladin.

Therefore, although he did not say it — largely because his wife was very scary — to him, paladins were essentially zealots.

I wonder if my girl knows that…. While I don't want her to know...

"—That really is an incredible number out there."

His adjutant muttered to himself under his breath, which brought Pavel to his senses.

"Ahhh, that's right. Still, there's no need to be scared. All you need to do is support me."

In addition to his adjutant, the mood from the men around him relaxed somewhat.

That's right, that's it. Tension is the archenemy of sniping.

And just as Pavel broke his own blank face — although he did not realize it — with a thin smile, there was movement in the enemy lines.

A lone demihuman slowly stepped forward.

Despite the many demihumans around him, he was unescorted. Did he not need an escort, or was he full of arrogance, or perhaps he was a messenger whose death would not be missed?

“Should we shoot him?”

“Not for now. But move to a place where it’ll be easy to shoot and then wait for my order.”

After quietly giving his orders, his men sped away in droves, like lengthening shadows.

Was he the enemy general, or just a simple messenger? Pavel studied him carefully to find out.

That demihuman… what species does he belong to? Doesn’t feel like I’ve seen him before… and what’s with those clothes? Is it a tribal outfit? Is that mask something like that too?

He was definitely not human. There was a tail coming from behind his waist.

The problem was the demihuman’s clothes. One could think of it as a tribal costume, and indeed, it felt like it might have been something like that. However, even at this distance, one could tell that the clothing was of excellent make, even when compared to that of humans.

Highly civilized demihumans are very troublesome...

It was not just Pavel. All the soldiers waiting on the walls gulped as they watched every move the demihuman made. Amidst the oppressive mood in the air, the demihuman approached to within fifty meters of his location.

“That’s far enough! Any further and you’ll be encroaching on the Holy Kingdom’s territory! This is no place for you demihumans! Leave at once!”

The voice was loud enough that even Pavel, who was some distance away, felt it was loud. It came from the man in command of the fortress, one of just five generals in the Holy Kingdom. He imagined he could feel the voice of the man in unadorned, battle-scarred armor resonating in his gut.

The reason why he only had one staff officer by his side was probably because he did not intend to get the others caught up in it if the enemy launched an attack. In their place were many troops with tower shields hidden behind them, ready to rush out if anything happened.

In contrast, the demihuman’s voice was gentle and pleasing to the ear. It seemed to worm its way into every man’s heart. Even at this distance, it still reached Pavel’s ears.

“That we already know. Now then — may I know who you are?”

“I’m — I’m the general in charge of this fortress! Who are you!?”

There was no need to tell the opposition that, Pavel frowned, but he already knew that the general was not a shrewd man. Therefore, he should have regarded this outcome as inevitable.

“I see, I see. Since you have given your name, I fear it might be rude not to respond in kind. Greetings, ladies and gentlemen of the Holy Kingdom. My name is Jaldabaoth.”

“Could it be!?”

The man who shouted was the staff officer near the general.

“The archfiend Jaldabaoth! Are you the demon who led an army of demons in that disturbance in the Kingdom’s Royal Capital!?”

“Ohh! I am honored that you know my name. Indeed, I was the architect of that magnificent feast in the Re-Estize Kingdom. However… the title of

Archfiend is quite saddening… yes, I was wondering if you could address me as the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth."

Pavel tasted that phrase, "Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth."

It was a truly arrogant title, but given the many demihumans it led, and after thinking back on what he had heard about the disturbance in the Royal Capital, that title might be well-deserved.

"Damn you! Are you laying your designs on us after what you did to the Kingdom!?"

"No, that is not quite right. It is because I met a fearsome warrior in the Kingdom—"

Jaldabaoth shrugged boredly. There was an indescribable sense of style to that movement, and it made Pavel imagine he was looking at a human noble for a moment.

"—Well, do permit me to keep that knowledge to myself."

"Then what business do you have here? Why did you lead these demihumans to this place?"

"I have come here to turn this country into a living hell. I wish to make this country one which echoes with cries, curses, and screams everlasting. However, making sport of millions of human beings individually is impossible, and so I have brought them along. In my place, they will plunge you pitiful humans shoulder-deep into a morass of despair, in order to draw wails of regret and suffering from you all."

Jaldabaoth said so very happily.

At this point, Pavel learned the meaning of evil. What the holy men shouted about the "wicked demihumans" was nothing more than propaganda to raise fighting spirit. It was practically sleeptalking. From a detached point of view, demihuman invasions were nothing more than going to the farm to feed themselves.

Terror filled Pavel's body. At the same time, he made up his mind.

He would not allow that demon to set foot upon the Holy Kingdom's land, where his wife and daughter were.

He tightened his grip on the bow in his hand.

If Jaldabaoth's words were intended to intimidate them, then they had been a complete failure. Humans were not cowardly and weak creatures. They would let him taste the foolishness of underestimating humanity with their vicious counterattack.

The people here possessed the iron will to defend the Holy Kingdom, and even if it had rusted a little in the past few years, they were still fiercely devoted to their home nation.

"—Do you think we'd let you do something like that!? Listen now, Jaldabaoth the fool!" the general barked.

Indeed. He was barking.

"This is the first line of the Holy Kingdom's defense! It is also the last line of its defense! Beyond us lies the peace of the Holy Kingdom's people! Did you think we would let you trample it as you wish!?"

The nearby soldiers shouted, "Uoooohhhh!" in response to the general's bellowing. In that moment, their fighting spirit flared up. Pavel would have cried out as well if he were not hiding himself, and perhaps his subordinates, whose bodies trembled faintly, felt the same way.

However, a round of out-of-place applause threw a damper on that. After clapping for a while, the demon spoke up.

"Watchdogs which guard the cradle, hm? I cannot say I disapprove. It is very important to protect things. —Yes, I approve very much. That being the case, I shall give the people I capture here the finest possible reception."

The way he laughed as he spoke made him sound like he was enjoying himself.

Jaldabaoth did not speak particularly loudly. Therefore, it would have been understandable if his voice did not carry over to where Pavel was. Even so, the words reached him with a mysterious clarity, as though they were coming from behind himself.

—Don't worry about it, that might be the work of magic.

Spells and magic items which amplified sound existed, and it was very likely that Jaldabaoth was using those. However, he could not escape the unpleasant feeling which seemed to adhere to his back.

"I will not accept surrender or anything of the sort. Entertain me to the best of your ability. Now then — let us begin."

Pavel gave his subordinates the order to shoot.

There was no need to wait for the General's commands. They were permitted a degree of independence, because opportunities to snipe the enemy commander were not readily available. Waiting for approval from their superior might result in them missing their chance.

Pavel stood up.

The men around him followed suit.

It took only a moment to lock onto his target. A distance of fifty meters was essentially point blank range to Pavel. He drew his bow, filled with the intent to kill — and Pavel felt Jaldabaoth's eyes meet his through the mask.

We won't give you the time to flee or defend yourself. If you want to blame anything, blame your own arrogance for coming out onto the frontlines alone!

"—Loose!"

Fifty one arrows flew out in time with Pavel's voice.

Their enchanted bows discharged magical arrows.

The flaming arrows left red lines hanging in the air, blue trails lingered behind the ice arrows, the lightning arrows' path was marked in yellow, green streaks followed in the wake of the acid arrows, and Pavel's own holy arrow traced a white trajectory as they all soared through the void.

The arrows loosed from the fully-drawn bows travelled flat paths as they streaked through the air, each one striking Jaldabaoth's body without deviating in the slightest.

Pavel's shots were exceptionally potent, and after being enhanced with his martial arts and his skills, each of them possessed power comparable to a mighty downward slash from a heavy trooper. If he were hit by this, even a man in full plate would be knocked back and sent rolling over the ground.

However — Jaldabaoth did not move in the slightest even after taking fifty one arrows.

And then, something happened which made him doubt his eyes.

The arrows which should have punched through his body fell to the ground.

What!? Is he defended against projectiles!?

Pavel quickly nocked his second arrow as he thought about how Jaldabaoth had defended against those arrow shots.

Some monsters were able to nullify attacks through their special qualities. For instance, lycanthropes and the like were nigh-invulnerable if one did not use silver weapons against them.

He considered that Jaldabaoth might have a similar ability. In that case, what sort of attack could breach Jaldabaoth's defenses?

The arrow he had launched just now was made of steel, and it was enchanted with holy power that was especially effective against those of evil alignment. While it was said that demons could not defend against it, there was no denying that Jaldabaoth had proven immune to it. In that case, it would be best to use other arrows to learn more about the opposition, tearing down his veil of mystery to chart a course for victory.

Pavel readied a silver arrow next. It too was imbued with righteous power.

"...Now then, do permit me to make a move of my own. It is a trifling present, but I would be delighted if you would accept it.
This is a tenth tier spell: 「Meteor Fall」."

Pavel sensed something from above him, approaching with unavoidable speed. Looking up, he saw a mass of light.

It was a gigantic heated rock — no, it was something bigger than that.

Light gradually filled his vision, and for a moment he glimpsed the forms of his wife and daughter amidst the light.

He knew it was an illusion. His daughter was old enough that she could choose her own path in life. Even so, the daughter he saw was still young, and his wife who held her still looked very young.

No, if I don't say she's still young now, she'll probably kill me—

♦ ♦ ♦

The falling meteor slashed through the sky and hit the wall, where it burst into an explosion. A thunderous roar echoed all around. The massive shockwave flattened everything it touched and shattered the wall.

As the sand and dirt thrown up by the shockwave of the explosion began falling back to earth, the dust slowly began to settle.

What it revealed was the remains of the broken wall, blasted to smithereens, and drifting smoke.

After looking at the devastated fortifications, there was no need to think about what had happened to the soldiers stationed there.

Humans could not possibly survive such conditions.

Of course, Demiurge knew that some humans could endure such things. For instance, there were the fools who had stepped into the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, the holy land created by the Supreme Beings. However, he had done thorough research beforehand, and he had verified that no such humans existed here.

"Now then, this ought to be enough for preparations."

Demiurge dusted off his suit with his hands. He had not been showered with sand or dirt, but the dust from the blast had reached him, so there was a slight earthy scent clinging to him. No — he would have done so even if that had not been the case. After all, this was a valuable item from the great being who had made him.

Of course, Demiurge had many other clothes besides this set, but that did not mean that he could treat it carelessly because of that.

As he thought of his mighty creator, he smiled behind his mask, and then looked out at the pitiful humans.

If he followed up with an attack, the enemy's confusion would become that much more apparent, and at that point, the demihuman assault would cause a complete rout. However, he had not used that spell just now for that purpose.

Demiurge could only cast a very small number of spells; there was only one other tenth tier spell available to him. His true power lay in his skills, and while he had used that spell just now to conserve his strength, the scene before his eyes was sufficiently tragic as it was.

There was no sign of a counterattack. It would seem they were desperately trying to collect information and regroup.

Their commander is not dead… and their confusion doesn't seem because they're suspicious of us… are they really all right?

Demiurge turned his back to the humans, walking back to the formation of his slaves.

He was not even on guard against the possibility of being attacked from behind.

He could afford to be this lax because of all the information he had gathered.

Demiurge was very strong.

Indeed, he might be ranked lowly among the Floor Guardians, but he was confident of victory in battle. That was because he knew that battles were fought because one was confident in winning them. That was to say, one should not choose to fight if one was unable to win, unless otherwise ordered.

There was only one person that Demiurge could not defeat — in other words, there was only one opponent against whom Demiurge could not prepare enough to assure his own victory.

That person possessed intellect which surpassed his, schemes which beggared the imagination, a view of the world which seemed to extend out unto eternity, the ultimate pinnacle who held everything in the palm of his hand.

He was the supreme ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick — Ainz Ooal Gown.

That Supreme Being was the one to whom Demiurge owed his loyalty.

Producing a great deal of undead was part of his plan. Once that scheme takes effect, nobody will be able to harm Ainz-sama. How fearsome he is. It seems the others do not yet realise how joyful it is to be ruled by such a Supreme Being—

There was a *thud*. This was the first time something had happened which Demiurge had not expected. He turned to look at the source of the sound.

It would seem someone had jumped down from the wall. The man in question slowly rose to his feet.

“The, the boss is dead. He, he was the man I wanted to defeat!”

The man drew his swords with both hands as he said so.

Demiurge evaluated the man from his appearance. He reached an answer immediately.

Threat Level — E (Worm).

Error Probability — E (None at all).

Importance — E (Guinea pig).

In other words, he was nothing but trash. Still, he was one of the Nine Colors — while not all of them were impressive, he thought that it would be good to capture him and run all sorts of experiments on him.

“Uooooooh!”

The screaming man ran over to him.

Slow. So slow. If this is the extent of his speed, should he not have used his brain more? For instance using 「Silence」 to approach quietly and close the gap between us...

This was a distance his comrades would have been able to close in an instant. The man — slowly — ran over to him.

According to the information Demiurge had collected, this man of inferior ability could apparently use a special attack that was several times more powerful than normal in exchange for breaking his weapons. Therefore, he had a sword in each hand, and several more swords like it at his waist.

How should I kill him? If I finish him off as cleanly as possible, then when I take him back I can — ah, he’s finally arrived.

After ensuring that he would not be splashed by the man’s spraying blood, Demiurge gave an order.

“『...Stab yourself in the throat with your swords.』”

There was a choked gurgle.

A look of bafflement appeared in the eyes of the man who had just pierced his own throat with the blades he held. His eyes clouded over like marbles as he collapsed to the ground.

Pained cries rose from the wall.

Demiurge turned, walked over to the man's side, and picked him up by the collar with a single hooked index finger before returning to his formation.

After he returned to his lines, the representatives of the various tribes — not their leaders — gathered before him.

Demiurge had mentally divided the demihumans into two groups.

One kind craved fresh blood and viewed humans as food. They would obey the strong, and they gladly obeyed Demiurge's commands. The other kind were those who had been made to kneel before the terror of Demiurge, and they obeyed him due to negative inducements like fear.

Demiurge had selected a group of the latter kind.

"You took your time in assembling."

Saying so, he seized the shoulder of a random demihuman he had selected from the group. Its species was known as Zerns. After doing so, he ripped the skin from its shoulder.

While Demiurge was among the weaker Floor Guardians, he could still do that much.

The demihuman whose skin — and some of its flesh — had been ripped off collapsed to the ground in intense agony, shrieking wordlessly.

"Now then, begin the attack. Take care not to sustain too many losses. The main course begins after we get past this wall," Demiurge said in a gentle tone.

His kindness was genuine when it was directed to his fellow denizens of Nazarick. He was a very gentle person when it came to his friends. However, to everyone else, his kindness was merely the care he gave to his tools.

After receiving his orders, the demihumans ran back to their various tribes. The demihuman rolling around on the ground was no exception.

The message they bore was that those who obeyed Demiurge's orders and achieved good results would meet a happy fate. Naturally, they also carried the message that achieving the opposite results meant that their future would be anything but happy.

Demiurge smiled gently as he watched the receding backs of the beastmen.

"—Then, let us begin the next step of our plan. —Demons."

Demiurge activated one of his skills and summoned a vast quantity of the demons he intended to use as sacrificial pawns.

While these demons were extremely weak compared to Demiurge, summoning stronger demons would mean he could not summon as many. The important thing in this operation was to spread the word that the Holy Kingdom's army had been assaulted by demons, which meant that quantity was the priority here.

"Listen carefully now. Support the demihumans in their efforts. Also, limit your pursuit of the humans. Do not do something as foolish as not allowing a single one to flee the fortress."

The low ranked demons nodded, and soared into the sky as one.

While summoned monsters were supposed to know a portion of what their summoner knew, said information was generally quite vague.. It would be best to regard it as the ability to tell friend from foe. Therefore, it was important to give verbal commands to summoned creatures.

Now then… it would be good if the ball landed on target.

Demiurge's perspicacious mind pondered all manner of situations, and after computing dozens of eventualities, he made the appropriate corrections to achieve his aim. Slight deviations were within his predictions. However, there

were times when utter fools would lead to situations developing beyond their expectations.

Surely someone with Ainz-sama's intellect could even predict the actions of fools… I'm still a long way off. Come to think of it, it would be good if I could share this with Ainz-sama...

As he thought that, Demiurge's heart raced unbidden. He had spent a great deal of time preparing this stage; if he could not even share it with his supreme master, what would Demiurge do?

Ladies and gentlemen of the Holy Kingdom, I have a sincere wish. Please allow Ainz-sama to enjoy himself with your suffering forms. … Although, how will Ainz-sama adjust my plans for a better outcome?

Like a student waiting for a respected teacher to dispense instruction, Demiurge smiled as his heart filled with the fires of anticipation and excitement.

Oh, to learn from Ainz-sama's actions, progress towards a better self, and further deepen my loyalty. How wonderful it is!

To Demiurge, who had been born to serve the Supreme Beings, nothing was more delightful than giving his all for his master.

"Ahhh, this is truly marvellous…"

Part 3

The news of a demihuman alliance — one that comprised a massive army — crushing the strongest central fortress and its vast quantities of soldiers, then subsequently crossing the wall, had already begun spreading throughout the Holy Kingdom.

The leader of the demihuman alliance was called the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth.

He was a demon who had caused great havoc in the Kingdom, and he had used powerful magic to shred the wall like tissue paper.

The demihuman alliance was made up of eighteen species, and their numbers were estimated in excess of one hundred thousand. This army of demihumans was now focused on destroying the walls and fortifications, and their advance had ground to a halt.

After learning this, the leader of the Holy Kingdom — the Holy Queen — issued a general mobilization order to the entire nation.

Since the Holy Kingdom's territory was stretched around the northern and southern edges of a central bay, any mobilized forces would naturally be formed into two armies — the Northern Holy Kingdom Army and the Southern Holy Kingdom Army.

The armies each moved towards their own important locations — the city of Kalinsha in the north, and the city of Debonei in the south — where they spied on the enemy's movements for several days.

The reports they received from the troops observing the wall made the situation even more pressing.

—The demihuman alliance, in all its strength, was moving west—

—They would reach the northern fortress city of Kalinsha in a few days—

"Really now? So this place is going to become a battlefield after all…"

The speaker was the Holy Queen, Calca Bessarez.

Due to her low place in the order of succession — only males had inherited the Holy Kingdom until now — she should never have taken the position of Holy Queen. However, due to two qualities she had, the crown had eventually been placed upon her brow.

The first was her beautiful looks. Her face was as beautiful as a freshly-bloomed flower, filled with cuteness and dignity, and it was praised as "the treasure of Roble," while her radiant, vibrant long hair was like threads of spun gold. Since it resembled an angel's halo, many who saw her gentle smile went on to describe her as a saint.

The other quality was her excellence as a divine magic caster. She was a genius who could use fourth tier spells at the tender age of fifteen, and she had ascended to the throne with the firm backing of the previous Holy King and the temples.

Almost ten years had passed since then, while certain voices disapproved of her excessive kindness, she had not made any mistakes which could be considered critical and thus she had ruled the Holy Kingdom to this day. However, this rule was not solid, and embers smoldered out of sight.

"I understand your sadness, Calca-sama, but the people who live in Kalinsha do so because they have prepared themselves for a day like this. In the past, there was also... ahem, that battle, where this city was the heart of the fighting. That's why the walls here are even taller and sturdier than anywhere else."

The person trying to console her was a woman with brown hair.

While she was as beautiful as the Holy Queen, her eyes contained a cold, razor-sharp look, like the edge of a blade. She was dressed in a suit of silvery full plate armor and a surcoat. These were the traditional vestments of the Paladin Order's Captain, an ancient article of magical masterwork. The most important thing was the sword at her waist, whose name was known to everyone in the Holy Kingdom.

It was renowned as one of the four Holy Swords, the holy sword Safalrisia.

One of the Thirteen Heroes, known as Black Knight, was said to have carried four swords — the evil blade Hyumilis, the demonic blade Kilineyram, the blade of rot Crocdabal, and the fatal blade Sfeiz. This was one of the four swords which existed as a counterpart to them. Incidentally, the other three holy swords were known as the sword of law, the sword of justice, and the sword of life.

Wielding a powerful sword often led to one becoming drunk on its power and neglecting the fundamentals of swordsmanship. Therefore, the fact that she carried that sword which she would normally never carry was a sign of her unshakable determination to join the upcoming battle, and to win it.

Her name was Remedios Custodio.

She was a close friend of Calca, and as the strongest Captain of the order in history, a feat founded upon her fighting prowess. She was “White” of the Nine Colors.

“Yup, yup. And we’ve also sent all the noncombatants off to take shelter so there won’t be casualties among them. Rather, don’t you think the more pressing problem after the war will be the expenses incurred during the fighting?”

The person going *ufufufufu* in an indecent way was a woman.

While the shape of her eyes and mouth varied slightly, her face still bore a close resemblance to that of Remedios. However, those faint differences were enough to change the impression others had of her. She always looked like she was plotting something — or in less polite terms, that she was surrounded by a sinister air.

She was Remedios’s sister, younger than her by two years, Kelart Custodio.

She was the high priestess of the temples, and leader of the priesthood.

It was public knowledge that she could use divine magic of the fourth tier.

However, that was but a deception; those close to her knew that she could cast fifth tier spells.

Incidentally, she was not one of the Nine Colors. While the temples were under the Holy Queen, it was government policy not to bestow a Color title on one of their number in order to avoid problems with the balance of power.

These sisters were known as the genius Custodio sisters, the twin wings of the Holy Queen.

Until now, many nobles had their doubts about Calca's ascension to the throne as a female, and they wondered if she had done something with or to the sisters. Therefore, they often spoke ill of all three of them at the same time.

While many rumors about them had been cleared up, one particular piece of gossip remained. All three of them were unmarried — without so much as a male lover — and so it was said that their relationship was anything but ordinary. However much Calca denied it, she could not shake herself free of that rumor, and it was a major source of frustration for her.

"Just hearing that gives me a headache. It's pretty bad that we won't stand to gain anything even if we win."

"Still, they say that the demihumans this time round are outfitted pretty well. Why not sell their gear?"

"That's right — you know I can't approve of that, nee-sama. Let's say we wanted to sell their armor — where would we sell it? You haven't thought about that, have you? We can only sell them overseas, but demihuman armor isn't going to command anything but bargain basement prices. Besides, we ought to avoid strengthening other countries' arsenals until the destroyed wall is rebuilt. In particular, I hope they don't fall into the hands of the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"Huh? You don't like the Sorcerous Kingdom? I've never heard you say that in court, though."

"No priest would like them. You're the same way too, right, Calca-sama?"

Calca pondered the matter. As part of the clergy and the Holy Queen, she disliked them. However, as a head of state—

“—A king’s duty is to love his nation, love his people, and grant them peace. As long as he does that, it should be fine, right?”

The sisters looked at each other in front of Calca.

“Love? No way. Could an undead being ever think like that?”

“I agree with nee-sama. The undead — I don’t think they could love like you do, Calca-sama.”

“The two of you are harsh. Still, you can’t just badmouth people without even seeing them, right?”

The puzzled looks on their faces looked very similar. Calca mused that they were siblings after all, and after quelling the smile on her face, her voice turned serious.

“What did your adjutants say? Kelart, tell me our plan for dealing with Jaldabaoth.”

The Holy Queen did not take part in strategy meetings. Instead, she went around the soldiers to boost their morale. While the Holy Kingdom’s troops were better trained than those of other nations, they were ultimately conscripts. It was important to motivate them.

“Yes. We’re already discussing how to deal with situations where the demihumans encircle this city, bypass it, advance to the south, split up to accomplish different objectives, and so on.”

It was times like these that reaffirmed her belief that the sisters were similar, but not alike. If she had asked the elder sister that question, the answer she would get would make her want to grab her head in frustration.

“I see… then, which possibility do you think is the most likely?”

“Given the invasion path of the demihumans so far, it’s most likely that they will choose to encircle this city. However, there is a problem with that.”

“Mm, yes.”

“What do you mean?”

Remedios had not participated in the meetings either, given that she was Calca’s bodyguard. However, the fact that she had not grasped the answer which the Holy Queen had instantly realized was due to another problem.

“...Nee-sama. I’m talking about the demon who wrought havoc in the Kingdom, Jaldabaoth. While there’s no telling how smart he is, demons are skilled at schemes and trickery. He might adopt a plan we did not foresee.”

“I see… the adjutants who have to handle strategy and planning sure have it tough…”

While there was much she wanted to say to the leader of the Paladin Order, Calca resisted the urge to do so.

“...This is quite vexing. Then, if the demihumans encircle this city, what will happen after that? While food supplies are ample, fighting a defensive siege is going to wreak horrors on morale. Have you considered that as well?”

“Yes. Normally, all we would have to do is wait for reinforcements from the south to arrive, but we have reports saying that Jaldabaoth used a mysterious power to destroy the wall in a single blow. As long as that tremendous factor of uncertainty is in play…”

The three of them frowned as one.

Anyone would be upset when they thought of what had happened to the wall, but Calca knew what was going on.

Remedios was simply imitating what the other two had done.

Remedios did not like to think, and she was a very stubborn person. That was a flaw, but it was also the reason that she could embody absolute justice.

The nature of justice was difficult to contemplate. For instance, imagine if there were two children, one human and one demihuman. Being pure and

innocent, they became friends. However, if the demihuman child was discovered by adults, he would be locked up, and the human child would plead for his life. However, if they let the demihuman child go, he might grow up to become a threat to humanity. Was killing the demihuman child just or unjust? This was not a question that could be easily answered.

Calca would have spared him without any hesitation.

Remedios, however, would kill him without any doubts. In addition, she would insist that she was righteous, and not feel a shred of guilt about it. In her heart, anything she did for the sake of the nation and people was acceptable.

When she took the throne of the Holy Queen, Calca had declared to her two close friends, “I will grant happiness to the smallfolk, and make a country where nobody will cry.” In response, she had said, “I will support you and uphold your just cause.” With that pledge in her heart, she was more forthright than anyone else, her heart filled with conviction, and the light in her eyes was like that of a fanatic.

Someone like that was clearly dangerous, yet Calca did not distance herself from her friend. The righteous impulses of loving others, loving peace, hating evil, and the desire to aid the weak were all things she ought to welcome.

And it was because of that nature of hers that what she thought and what she did were the same. Because she did not think about her words, everything she said came from her heart.

Any organization — particularly those that had stood for a long time — would become sluggish due to worries and cares. In addition, their original purity of purpose would tarnish and grow dim.

Since power rested in the hand of one person, it was only natural that power struggles would take place. Even if a victor was decided, the battle against suspicion, jealousy, and fear would continue, until one side eventually perished.

Calca had been freed from this curse halfway though. That was because she had attained magical power that ranked highly even when compared to the past generations of Holy Kings. Others had lauded her for it, and her heart was

at ease. Therefore, Calca could put aside her mental preparations to take the throne of the Holy Queen, but her brothers did not feel the same way.

There was only one elder brother among her relatives whom she could trust: Caspond.

Since she lived like this all this time, Remedios was a spiritual oasis for Calca.

“Umu. Such unbelievable power makes me think of the might of the Demon Gods from the stories.”

“Nee-sama, even the Demon Gods weren’t this powerful. For all we know, Jaldabaoth might be a being superior to the Demon Gods.”

“...What a pain. Then how shall we beat him?”

“What are you worrying about, Calca-sama! They say he was defeated by the adamantite ranked adventurers of the Kingdom. Don’t you think we could do the same too?”

“...That is true. If adventurers comparable to us could do it… but the problem now lies in whether or not Jaldabaoth can repeatedly use that power which brought down the wall.”

“On that note, the adjutants feel that given the wall was only struck once, he ought to have problems using it in succession.”

“That’s understandable. If he could use it repeatedly, then he could have just done so. He didn’t because he could only attack once.”

Calca agreed with Remedios’s opinion. If there was a way to do it, there was no reason not to repeatedly use that attack.

It was the same with Calca. She lightly stroked the crown she wore. It was a magic item that was the binding focus for the grand ritual spell that had been passed down through the Holy Kingdom, the 「Last Holy War」.

“...Well, we can conscript high ranking adventurers, the kind who are used to defeating monsters and the like, as part of mobilizing our people. If we muster

up our full fighting power, Jaldabaoth's hardly an unbeatable foe. The fact is, he's already been defeated once before."

The Adventurer's Guild had strongly protested the conscription of adventurers into the army, but Calca had not revoked her order. It was only to be expected — this was a matter of national importance, and splitting their strength was foolish in the extreme. In addition, the Adventurer's Guild was hardly as powerful as the Holy Kingdom itself, so forcing them to obey was a simple task.

"That's true. Though I guess we failed in that we didn't gain detailed intelligence about Jaldabaoth's activities in the Kingdom."

"I apologize for that."

"No, I didn't mean that, Kelart. You're not at fault. The blame lies with me, since I didn't pay attention to news about other countries."

"Certainly not, Calca-sama. It's definitely Kelart's fault."

"Nee-sama…"

"Well, it's certainly not *my* fault. I did my job by protecting Calca-sama and clearing away monsters! I didn't mess up in my job. That's what they call making appropriate use of talent!"

Remedios puffed up her chest and *hmphed* in triumph.

She was correct to say so. That said, it still bothered her.

"...Could it be that Jaldabaoth was behind those incidents where all the people from several villages went missing?"

"That might be the case…"

Some time ago, the residents of quite a few villages had all gone missing. In the end, they had not managed to collect any information pointing to a culprit, but it was possible that Jaldabaoth was pulling the strings behind the scenes.

“In that case, we need to sort this out before we defeat Jaldabaoth. Speaking of which, if only the Kingdom had properly finished him off, we wouldn’t have had trouble like this… did Gazef Stronoff fight him?”

Kelart looked at Calca with a puzzled look on her face.

Her eyes seemed to be asking, *Didn’t you tell Nee-sama about it?* Therefore, Calca gave her an answer which laid those doubts to rest, and then she smiled tiredly.

Translated, it meant, *Of course I told her. I told her about how Jaldabaoth attacked the Royal Capital, how the adventurers defeated Jaldabaoth, the other demons that appeared, and how the Warrior-Captain defeated them all. I told her everything… so it must have been squeezed out by other things and gone in one ear and out the other.*

“...I really feel sorry for Nee-sama’s Vice-Captains.”

“Hm? Why are you talking about them all of a sudden?”

Kelart did not answer that question, instead curling a lock of hair around her finger.

Since Remedios did not do any thinking, then there had to be someone to cover her ass. That would be them.

She could keenly appreciate the suffering they went through. However, Remedios’s innocence — or stupidity, if one were not inclined to be polite — also had a healing effect on the soul, so the positives and negatives cancelled each other out.

“...Hah. I only know the rough details, but apparently, he fought with another demon, which was covered in scales.”

“Really now. Well, if he had defeated Jaldabaoth, things wouldn’t have ended up like this. Or don’t tell me those adamantite ranked adventurers are stronger than him?”

“I’m not too sure about that, but I think that might be the case.”

Remedios frowned in distaste.

She was probably unhappy because someone whose strength she had acknowledged was being slighted by someone else.

“Well, all he knows is how to use a sword. If he had anti-demon attacks like we do, things would probably have been different.

In pure fighting power, paladins were a notch below warriors. However, that was not the case when fighting evil beings. Remedios was right, but Kelart still sighed quietly.

Just then, Calca imagined that she had heard the sound of bells.

Remedios immediately sprang into action. At times like this, she was still the first to act.

She flung open the windows.

The early autumn air flowed in, and the air warmed by their three bodies flowed out.

The bracing, cool air brought with it the sound of ringing bells. That was proof that what she had heard earlier was not a ghost sound caused by her ears ringing. No, it would have been much better if she had just misheard things.

At the same time, she heard the sound of several footsteps from the hallway.

“Calca-sama, please stand behind me.”

Remedios quickly drew the holy sword Safalrisia and moved up, putting herself between Calca and the door.

The door opened with a *pon*.

“Your Majesty!”

She recognized the first man to enter the room as he shouted at the top of his voice — he was the chief of staff.

“What happened? Why are you in such a rush?”

Remedios’s voice carried a hint of rebuke, and the chief of staff replied in a clearly disconcerted tone.

“There was no time to slowly walk over! Your Majesty! It’s Jaldabaoth! Jaldabaoth’s appeared inside the city! He’s begun destroying the city with many demons in tow! Also, the demihumans have made their move! It looks like they’re advancing on this place!”

“What did you say!?”

“We’ve sighted the demihuman army in the vicinity. We don’t know how they deceived our sentries, but we were fed false information! The fighting’s going to start any moment now!”

While the sudden excess of information confused her, that lasted for only a second. Calca immediately resumed her queenly demeanor and gave orders.

“While this is a great departure from our plans, we will begin combat with Jaldabaoth now. While we stall him, prepare to engage the demihuman army. Convey my orders to the adventurers!”

As she heard her subordinate’s words, the doubts in Calca’s heart flooded back again.

Had she underestimated Jaldabaoth?

Of course, she had no intention of underestimating the demon who could easily destroy the wall. But was the feeling that she could beat him a mistake in itself? Would it not have been better to fall back until they had finished learning about their enemy?

No. Calca waved away the budding weakness in her heart.

If they did not fight now, then when would they fight? While it was important to know the enemy, now was the only chance they had to strike with all their might. After this, the attrition of battle would deplete their resources, and it would become more and more difficult to muster the power they could command now.

In addition, continuously retreating until they had completed their intelligence-gathering operations was essentially permitting their country to be trampled underfoot.

If that were the case, an unimaginable number of her citizens would end up suffering.

"...I will let the smallfolk live their days in happiness, and make this a country where nobody will be hurt."

"Indeed, Calca-sama!"

All smiles, Remedios followed up on Calca's self-directed mutterings.

However, those were words she had spoken in the past, before she knew the truth of the world. Things being what they were now, it seemed a nigh-impossible aim to achieve.

"Hmph! He's gotten cocky now that he's crossed the wall, but to think he didn't bring his demihuman army with him!" Remedios fumed angrily.

Was it really like that? No, it ought to have been that way. Yet, she could not peel away the undeniable sense that something was wrong which coiled around her heart.

"...Don't lower your guard, okay? Is this the way you ought to be treating an opponent of such power?"

"Of course, Calca-sama! I don't intend to be careless at all! With this holy sword, I shall relieve the demon of his head and present it to you!"

No good. I can't calm her down any more.

That was what Calca thought, but she was not worried about her. That was because Remedios was a different person when she stepped onto the battlefield.

“Ahh~ there’s no need to bother with the head, but your loyalty makes me very happy. In that case, regarding the plan to defeat Jaldabaoth… can you buy us some time?”

“But of course. Your servant has already dispatched an advance force to carry out our plans.”

At that moment, Calca felt a dull ache in her heart. That was because carrying out that order was actually sending them out to die. The soldiers would be going out to fight Jaldabaoth, despite having no chance of victory.

One of her duties as a monarch was to trade the lives of the few for the survival of the many. Therefore, she could not weep or wail here. The soldiers were giving their lives for her, so she would need to put on a show to convince them that this was a glorious assignment.

She would have to play the part of the supreme queen, the Holy Queen who was respected above all others.

“In that case, let’s head out!”

The ringing clap of her hands was the signal for everyone to make their move.

Part 4

Remedios gripped her holy sword and slashed a demon — her Vice-Captains had told her its name, but she had completely forgotten it — in half. Imbued with holy power, the blade could inflict grievous wounds upon evil beings, and it was doing so to great effect. She had cut down the demons rampaging through the city one after the other. The fallen demons vanished as thick white smoke steamed from their wounds. Within seconds, there was no trace that the demons had ever been there.

However, the signs of how the demons had ravaged the city remained.

“How could this be!?”

She looked at a fallen soldier — not one of the vanguard troopers, but a local patrolman — and Remedios bellowed in rage.

His leather armor had been cleanly severed, and the hands clutching his abdomen were stained a deep red. She could even see the pink of his innards. His face was well past the point of paleness, now a bloodless white.

While she had almost no medical knowledge, her own experiences supplied enough information for her to make a judgement. There was no time to send the wounded soldiers back to a casualty collection point. She would need to treat them on the spot with magic.

The soldiers were not yet dead, but it was neither a miraculous survival, nor was it because the soldiers were simply that good, so was this the demons’ aim? That said, she had no idea what the demons were planning.

Still, the option to simply let the soldiers die did not exist in Remedios’s heart. Nobody would ever discard the brave soldiers who had chosen to become a shield for their nation in order to buy their country time. And the most important thing was that she was a paladin of righteousness.

“Begin healing him!”

Remedios was accompanied not just by the elite paladins behind her, but also by several priests. Her order was directed at them.

In response, one of her Vice-Captains stepped up and whispered in her ear:

“Would it not be better to let the medics in the rear aid him? If we use the priests’ mana here, we might run out when fighting Jaldabaoth, which might be the demons’ aim—”

“—Ahhhh, you talk too much! This is an order! Heal him to the point where he can move on his own! Also—”

At this point, Remedios glanced at the adjutant beside her and said:

“—I can’t hear you muttering through your helmet, so speak up!”

“Ah, no, it’s fine…”

“Very good!”

The healing magic mended the soldiers’ wounds swiftly. Of course, the recovery was not complete. After all, this was only a first tier spell, and it could not fully restore a soldier on the verge of death. Even so, it was enough to heal the soldiers to the point where they could stagger around. Since the soldiers were no longer in danger of dying, there was no need to heal them any further. Remedios still remembered her sister’s incessant nagging to wisely use limited resources.

“You brave gentlemen, stay that way and listen. We’ve performed first aid on your wounds, so fall back. After that, let the medics at the rear tend to you.”

The pain of walking was probably enough to drive the soldiers to tears. However, she no longer had the time to hear them out. She had to reach her destination before Jaldabaoth arrived.

The soldiers also sensed the meaning in Remedios’s powerful gaze. None of them spoke up or protested; they simply agreed with each other.

“All right! Then let’s meet again later!”

Remedios broke into a sprint at the head of her troops. Her metal armor was lighter and easier to move in than it appeared, and given her physical abilities, she could reach her destination faster than anyone else. However, her sister, Calca and her adjutants often told her, “Don’t charge in by yourself all the time!” so Remedios throttled back the desire to sprint with all her might and quashed the desire to make up for lost time.

Soon, Remedios reached her destination, which was a corner of the city.

The streets spread out before them. The evacuation had been completed long ago, and so there was nobody there.

“Captain, if we follow this avenue and turn right, then turn right again, we’ll be at the plaza where we’ll be awaiting Jaldabaoth. Do you want us to scout ahead?”

“No, wait for Calca-sama and my sister — and the adventurers. After that, make your final checks and then hoist the banner high!”

Obeying Remedios’s orders, her subordinates tied a flag to a distant building. This was to inform the other units that the elite paladins led by Remedios had arrived.

Their operation would involve Calca and her personal guard, Kelart and the pick of the temples, high ranking adventurers, and a squad of Remedios’s elite paladins. The four units had split up and then headed to Jaldabaoth’s location.

There were roughly five hundred paladins in the order. Most of them were comparable to difficulty twenty monsters, and among them were great warriors capable of slaying a difficulty sixty monster one on one. All in all, there were twenty five of these ultra-elite warriors, who formed the core of Remedios’s forces.

Incidentally, the remaining three hundred-odd paladins were currently standing watch on the city walls against the advancing demihumans.

Originally, they should have formed up into a single group and moved out as one. However, Jaldabaoth possessed an area-attack ability that could bring down the wall, so they had chosen to split up in order to avoid being

destroyed when their forces were concentrated. The reason why they had hung the flag in the distance was so that even if Jaldabaoth saw the flag and attacked it, it would not hamper the rest of the group.

“Can Jaldabaoth’s wall-breaking attack be used more than once, Isandro?”

There were two Vice-Captains in the Paladin Order.

One of them was an average swordsman, but excelled in other areas, and his name was Gustavo Montanjes. Right now, he was directing the paladins who were reinforcing the city walls, so he was not here.

There was another, who currently stood by Remedios’s side. The person to whom Remedios addressed her question was one of the Nine Colors as well, Isandro Sanchez, called “the Pink.”

“If he could use it multiple times, then I have no idea why he has not done so already. It might make more sense to consider that there might be some condition or some kind of delay until he can use it again.”

“Pretty much. I guess splitting up was being too paranoid.”

“No, it’s nothing of the sort. Perhaps he’s conserving his strength in order to bring forth some great power. We mustn’t be careless.”

“Yes yes, I know.”

Remedios broke off their conversation. She was not suited to thinking, after all.

Politics in particular made her head ache. She was completely baffled by the reason why the nobles frowned upon the fact that a woman had ascended to the throne of the Holy Queen.

They felt the same about Calca’s title, which was the combination of Holy King and Woman. They protested both the fact that they had a woman leading them and that a new term had to be coined for her.

On that note, it would be simpler to understand if it was just a matter of who was stronger or weaker.

“—Captain Custodio, the priest contingent and the adventurers have raised their flags.”

“How about Calca-sama?”

“Not yet.”

“Is that so… well, it’s about time to start casting longer-duration defensive spells. Once Calca-sama arrives, we’ll advance on Jaldabaoth first and act as bait to draw his attention. Keep your will strong and beware any special attacks the enemy has.”

“No movement from the plaza.”

They had confirmed that the advance force had been wiped out, and if their target had shifted location, the adventurers responsible for reconnaissance would have told them. If there was no news from them, that meant Jaldabaoth had not moved from the plaza where he had appeared.

“He’s looking down on us, that miserable little demon. Probably thinks that if he can kill us all here, he can conquer the country easily.”

“No, Captain. It’s also likely that he’s trying to stall for time. If we’re pinned down here fighting Jaldabaoth, the demihuman army will be able to win elsewhere.”

“...I see. So that’s possible too… this Jaldabaoth is pretty smart, huh.”

“I think he’s good at scheming because he’s a demon.”

“...Hmph. He’s just a demon who’s gotten full of himself, I’ll beat him like a dog and make him weep bitterly.”

Just as Remedios swore that to the gods, the final flag went up, as though it were waiting for that moment.

“Vice-Captain!”

“Yes ma’am! Everyone, we’re moving out!”

“All right! Follow me!”

Remedios began to run, determined to bury her sword in that demon’s face.

She turned a corner, ran again, then turned a corner once more.

She saw a suspicious-looking person, standing in the middle of a plaza painted bright red and strewn with the bodies of the fallen. A tail protruded from that person’s waist.

His description was almost identical to the one provided by the fleeing soldiers.

He did not have bat-like wings or curled horns, and the only sign that he was inhuman was his tail. From that point of view, he was little more than a man in a mask.

However—

“Are you Jaldabaoth!?”

“Red ca — whoa!”

An acrid stench filled the air as they entered the plaza, that of blood and burst innards. There was a sound of squelching meat as she stepped in, but she was no longer concerned about such things. All that remained was charging with all her might and swinging her sword.

Her irritation built as Jaldabaoth effortlessly avoided her, and she swung again.

That too was evaded.

Remedios knew that however much time she put into her studies, she would never be able to excel in academics. For that reason, she spent all her time on

improving her fighting skills instead, because she understood that she was more talented in that field. Thus, she had become known as the greatest warrior of this nation.

And now, the instincts of the paladin Remedios Custodio were screaming to her.

Jaldabaoth's evasion was not a coincidence. He put on a show of conceit because he had the strength to back it up. Few human beings could keep up with the battle that was about to take place, and she would need to further enhance herself with magic.

Remedios's instincts had never failed her at times like these.

"Fall back! All of you fall back! —No, form a cordon! This demon's strong!"

Saying so, she backed away with her men. Her subordinates retreated further than her, but she could not go too far away. At most, she could move four meters back, at a range where she could take a single step and then cut him down.

Jaldabaoth rounded his shoulders.

"Haaa… what a bullish girl you are. What is it? Could it be you've seen something red?"

Remedios ignored the demon's playful words, and the troops led by Kelart and Calca appeared in her field of vision. Shocked by the sight of Remedios engaged with Jaldabaoth, they made haste.

Jaldabaoth turned to face Calca, exposing his defenseless back to Remedios. However — her instincts told her that Jaldabaoth might just be waiting for her to attack him from behind, and so she froze.

"You two! He's very strong! If you don't pull your men back, they'll only die for nothing!"

The two of them immediately responded to Remedios's shout, and they were the only ones to step forward.

Remedios kept her distance from Jaldabaoth while circling around him until she stood in front of the two of them.

“Remedios, please don’t push yourself.”

“She’s right, nee-sama. Shouldn’t you take him on with everyone at once?”

Her eyes had not moved from Jaldabaoth even as she listened to their quiet words from behind her. Perhaps he was planning to unleash that wall-breaking power of his; if he made a move, she would dash up and hack him down.

However, Jaldabaoth showed no sign of doing so.

His relaxed attitude made Remedios unhappy.

I must, I have to strike him down!

“So you are Jaldabaoth?”

Jaldabaoth’s shrug in response to Calca’s question only intensified her displeasure. Every little thing that demon did only served to make her mad.

“Indeed. ...Your slave charged right at me without saying a word. What would she have done if it was a case of mistaken identity? Well, it does interest me that there are savages in the Holy Kingdom who are incapable of speech. Ah, just to be sure, may I ask if you are the reigning Holy King?”

“Indeed.”

“There’s no need to tell him your name, Calca-sama.”

Remedios levelled the point of her sword at Jaldabaoth.

“All you need to know is that he’s Jaldabaoth, and all we need to do after that is kill him and send him back to hell. Talking with him is just going to taint your tongue—”

“A-Ah, Remedios. We’re talking…”

Calca’s puzzled words made Remedios tilt her head. Had she said something about this earlier?

Kelart seemed to have a spell from the rear, because a surge of heat blazed up within her body, accompanied by incredible strength. Her attack from just now had been evaded, but now she was confident that she could strike him in this state. At this point, Remedios thought, *So that’s it*, because talking to him was meant to buy them time.

“—Still, I am magnanimous, so I shall chat with you for a while. Do you have any questions?”

Jaldabaoth pressed at the eye region of his mask, a motion Remedios had seen Calca, Kelart, and her Vice-Captains perform many times in the past.

“...Also, please, prepare yourselves until you are satisfied. The sight of you — who are desperately preparing yourselves to defeat me — being trampled and your lives taken by a power which surpasses even that; truly it is a sight to evoke ever greater despair in those who witness it with their own eyes. — What a wonderful sight it will be.”

“I won’t let that happen!”

“Sorry, Remedios, but could you quiet down for a bit?”

There was a hint of steel in Calca’s voice, and Remedios shut up. It was merely a slight change of tone, but from experience, Remedios knew that Calca was angry.

“Remedios, step back for a bit.”

“But, but if I move back, I won’t be able to cut him down if he does anything weird…”

“Ah, that is fine. I will not attack until we finish speaking, or until you launch an attack of your own.”

“As if we could believe what a demon say—”

“Remedios!”

“—Understood.”

Remedios fell back as ordered, and her sister whispered to her through her helmet.

“Calca-sama is trying to learn more from the opposition. You need to ignore what that demon says and bear with it.”

Muu, Remedios grimaced, her face seemingly saying, *I’m not happy with this*.

Their opponent was a demon. That being the case, they ought to consider that everything he said was probably a lie. Rushing in and cutting him up would save effort and brain cells. However, impeding her mistress was a betrayal of her loyalty. Thus, she had to grit her teeth and endure this.

“Now then, Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth. I have some things to ask you. Why have you come here? If you wish to trample this country, why not move with the demihuman army from the fortress? Or could it be—”

“...Ah, you need say no more. I can imagine what you wish to say. It would seem you are mistaken. The reason I have come here alone is not to parley with you.”

A quiet “I see,” came from Calca, who was standing behind Remedios. She sounded clearly disappointed.

“There are two reasons why I have come here alone. The first is because crushing you by myself will deepen your despair that much more compared to if you were slain in a chaotic battle with the demihuman forces. The other reason is — in order to avoid making the same mistakes as in the Kingdom. I had not expected to meet a warrior there who was as powerful as myself. Therefore, the fact that I have come here alone is to see if there is a being comparable to me.”

“There might be, you know?”

“Of this I am certain — there are none. That is why I have given you all this time. If anyone like that did exist, they would be in this city — by the side of you, the most important person in this nation. Yet, I have not found anyone like that. That includes those snivelling rats hiding themselves away.”

“You bastard! Are you saying we’re weaker than that warrior!?”

Remedios could not pretend she had not heard those words, and they made her forget her forbearance and shout in anger. Calca and her sister’s words were already halfway out of her head, but the order not to cut him down just barely held on.

“That is exactly what I am saying. Did you not hear me? Is that all you wish to know, Holy Queen-sama?”

“While there’s one more thing — Angels, advance!”

Calca’s powerful voice filled the plaza, and the angels in the perimeter and hidden among the priests spread their wings and took flight.

There were five angels who held swords of fire, summoned through third tier spells — Archangel Flames. There were twenty more summoned through second tier spells, Angel Guardians. And then, there was a single angel which Calca had summoned before arriving here — a Principality of Peace.

While she did not remember what powers the angels possessed, she remembered that the Principality of Peace which Calca summoned could use low tier divine spells and could use abilities such as the ability to grant protection from evil, smite evil, and cause mass silence, among others. That was because she had often seen Calca summon it.

Sensing the murderous intent around her, Remedios understood that she no longer needed to hold back, and so she charged. Normally, the priests would have supported her with attack spells, but there were none. Perhaps they were conserving mana to summon angels.

Remedios activated a skill from one of her job classes, Evil Slayer. The divine power within her holy sword intensified.

In that moment, five adventurers suddenly appeared behind Jaldabaoth. They must have used invisibility magic to close in on him. She did not know why they had suddenly become visible. While she knew that there was a spell called 「Invisibility」, she had no idea what sort of spell it was or how it could be negated.

Jaldabaoth did not respond to the adventurers who had suddenly appeared. No — it did not seem like he had even noticed them.

At that moment, she wondered if she had been mistaken about the aura of intimidation from Jaldabaoth. Or rather, was this just an illusion or a copy, and the original was not here?

No — she denied the latter deduction. That could not be. Her instincts — her ability to sniff out evil — told her that Jaldabaoth was right there.

The adventurers looked shocked, and slashed at Jaldabaoth in a panic. Just as she thought that their weapons would be able to reach him, Jaldabaoth sprouted a set of strange wings behind him. They impaled the adventurers who had tried to attack him from behind.

Perhaps the frothy blood he was coughing up was because he had been stabbed in the chest and blood was flowing into his lungs, but with his last trace of life, a single adventurer swung his weapon down on Jaldabaoth.

However, Jaldabaoth let the strikes rain down on him, with no sign he had been harmed.

Since they were here, those adventurers ought to have been quite skilled. It was only reasonable to assume that they would be wielding holy-elemental weapons as part of their preparations. Even so, they could not leave a mark on him, showing that this demon was quite a highly ranked being.

In the few moments that it took the battle conditions to change, the charging Remedios screamed *Yeeart!* and slashed down diagonally with her holy sword.

Jaldabaoth hopped one step back, and those tentacle-like — no, they probably were tentacles — wings threw the perforated adventurers at her.

She had no intention of taking it head-on.

She took her left hand off her sword's hilt, beating them all aside —

"「—Flow Acceleration」."

—then activated a martial art, stepped forward, and thrust.

The holy sword stabbing in at Jaldabaoth's throat was blocked by a set of suddenly-sprouted claws—

"「Holy Strike」!"

She infused the holy power within her sword into the claws in the instant they made contact.

This was an elementary technique for paladins, and it was originally intended to be used in the moment one's blade bit into a foe's flesh, but that did not mean it could not be used as a touch attack. Since most of the divine power simply exploded on the surface, it would not do much harm, but she had still used it anyway. That was because in the moment that the adventurers had been killed, her instincts as a paladin — which her little sister called an animal instinct — screamed that she needed to show that they could still resist Jaldabaoth, and prevent the morale of the surrounding soldiers from falling.

"I see…"

The Angels jammed themselves in between Remedios and Jaldabaoth as the latter was backing off. They launched their attack while floating at roughly head height.

"Tch," Remedios clicked her tongue.

The metallic sound that rang out as her holy sword made contact with Jaldabaoth's claws showed how hard those claws were. In addition, the fact that he could easily evade a blow from her magically-enhanced self — although in a somewhat clumsy fashion — showed how high his physical abilities were.

There were only a few people who could contend with such a mighty being. While the angels summoned through third and second tier spells usually excelled at slaying monsters, they only served to get in the way during this battle. In particular, the greaves of the angels floating back and forth were an eyesore.

“「Penetrate Magic - Holy Ray」.”

Her sister cast a spell. However, it vanished before Jaldabaoth’s face like it had been deflected.

“「Twin Penetrate Magic - Holy Ray」.”

Calca emitted two rays of light. She was probably thinking that it would be fine as long as one of them could pierce Jaldabaoth’s spell immunity, but unfortunately her attack was ultimately as ineffective as her sister’s.

That meant he possessed very high magic resistance. In other words—

I need to give it my all!

She shouted a battle cry to fire herself up.

“Use your head and let the angels fight! There’s no point in this!”

The fact was that even though the angels had the advantage of height and surrounded him on all sides, Jaldabaoth was still quite composed. But that was only natural. Even after being surrounded by so many people, not a single attack had hit Jaldabaoth.

The adventurers ran over to collect their comrades who had fallen by Remedios’s feet. While their immobile bodies were clearly dead, they still believed in the faint probability of their survival.

“...How bothersome. Even if they are nothing more than insects, a swarm of them is still unpleasant.”

Jaldabaoth sounded perfectly composed.

Indeed, being able to negate the spells cast on him from the rear and perfectly evade physical attacks made him seem overwhelmingly superior. However—

Do you think we've never fought enemies like this before?

Unless their summoners were specialists, summoned monsters were generally weaker than the ones who called them forth. Therefore, there were cases where angels' attacks ended up being useless.

Against a powerful foe, the best way to use angels was—

The airborne angels rushed Jaldabaoth as one. They did not use their swords, but tackled him.

—To hinder their opponents' movements in this fashion.

It was quite effective.

Perhaps he was starting to grow tense, but Jaldabaoth went on the offensive, and a single swipe of his claws caused several angels to vanish into nothingness.

However, the angels from behind filled the gap, continuing the attack in place of their absent fellows.

This was the frightening thing about summoned monsters. Since they were beings that did not die even when they were killed, they could be fully utilized in this fashion.

The angels came like a ferocious waterfall, without rest or respite, and Jaldabaoth's flowing counterattacks left Remedios staring in awe. However—

That's carelessness on your part!

Remedios had moved subtly to step into an opening in Jaldabaoth's defense, a fatal flaw that was exposed when he was on guard against the angels coming from above.

“—What!?”

“Yeeart!”

She activated a skill, and then her martial arts, using her holy sword to strike a blow with all her might.

She had chosen to conserve the greatest power of her holy sword because her instincts told her that then was not the time for that powerful move, which could only be used once a day.

Stricken by the mightiest blow she could muster apart from that move, Jaldabaoth flew back as though he was being smashed to the horizon, until he crashed into a store on the other side of the plaza.

Remedios looked down at the hands which held her blade.

“—Oh crap.”

“Nee-sama! You did it!”

She shouted angrily in response to her little sister’s excited exclamation.

“It’s not over yet! How could he have flown so far!?”

“Given your brute strength, I think it’s possible, Nee-sama...”

“He flew out by himself!”

Indeed, not only had she allowed Jaldabaoth to escape the encirclement, she had even given him the chance to hide in a house.

The reason why they could take on enemies like Jaldabaoth was because they could encircle their opponent and force them to face many people at once. Allowing him to hide in a cramped home was too dangerous.

In addition, Jaldabaoth’s actions would change now. It was possible he would stop playing around now.

“Remedios! What should we do?” Calca shouted.

Usually, Remedios would ask and then Calca would answer, but now the opposite was the case. During battle, she was better able to make the right choice than the other two.

“Demolish the house without going near it!”

After hearing that, the priests cast attack spells one after the other.

They collapsed the house in short order. However, it was hard to believe Jaldabaoth had been crushed under the falling debris. Even Remedios in her enchanted armor could survive that much unless she was very unlucky. Also—

Remedios looked down at her blade, which was unstained by blood.

Could he have rolled with that blow just by flying away? Had he used a martial art like 「Fortress」 or something? Or was it a demon-only skill? There were many possibilities for that, but things would become troublesome if she could not see through it.

Amidst the sounds of destruction, the neighboring houses crumbled under the area-effect spells. Dirt and dust filled the air, and she could not help coughing.

“Say, Remedios, why hasn’t Jaldabaoth come out yet?”

“...Nee-sama, could it be he’s already escaped by teleportation?”

That demon, who spoke so arrogantly? I can’t imagine he’d escape without being hurt...

“...We ought to use fire. Pour on the oil and ignite it. May I ask you to bless it, Calca-sama?”

“Nee-sama, are we going to conduct the ritual of Holy Fire? Doing so to harm an opponent… is that really what a paladin ought to be doing?”

“That’s fine, if Remedios thinks that’s the best way, then we’ll go with it. No, we should do it. Since he’s a demon, there’s no reason he won’t be hurt.”

Many demons were resistant to fire, but the Holy Fire was of the holy element, and fire resistance was only half as effective against it.

“Then, Calca-sama, the preparations for the ritual—”

“We don’t have time for that. Please use the simplified version.”

Calca looked straight ahead as she said that, and from the corner of Remedios’s eye, she saw her little sister wondering if she should go *“But that—”*

Simplifying the Holy Fire ritual spell would place a great deal of strain on the user’s body. This was not something which she, as one of Calca’s subordinates charged with keeping her safe, ought to recommend. However, it would be even worse if they gave Jaldabaoth time.

“If you think this is the best way, then we’ll do it. However, if I perform it by myself, I won’t be able to help you after that. Please keep that in mind… Then, can you light the fire right away?”

“Understo—”

“—Kukuku. My, this is quite vexing.”

Suddenly, Jaldabaoth’s voice issued from the pile of debris.

“Nee-sama!”

“I know!”

Remedios immediately stood in front of Calca and readied her sword.

Jaldabaoth had been buried under the house after all. Therefore, bringing up the Holy Fire attack just then was the right choice. They had not thought that he might have lost consciousness because of the shock of being buried under the fallen house.

“It would seem that it is time for me to get serious.”

“Oh? Then you should have done it earlier. I’ll wait, so why don’t you show me your power? ...Calca-sama, Kelart, get back.”

Remedios whispered her directions to the other two. At the same time, Remedios fell back as well, allowing the resummoned angels to form a wall along the path between themselves and Jaldabaoth.

“Oh yes. In that case, please get back. It would be quite disappointing if you were to die from my shockwave.”

The collapsed pile of timbers and bricks swelled up. As they collapsed to the ground, something massive slowly stood up from among them.

“...Jaldabaoth?” Remedios could not help muttering under her breath.

That was because he looked completely different from the previous Jaldabaoth. It made her wonder if he had changed places with another demon. However, there could not be many demons who looked like that.

Indeed, that was Jaldabaoth. That was Jaldabaoth’s true form.

It flapped its fiery wings, and flames burned at the end of its long tail. Its brawny, frightening arms were also on fire. Its wicked face bore a wrathful expression.

“Priests, order the angels to charge!”

Obeying Calca’s order, the priests commanded their summoned angels to rush in. Jaldabaoth did not strike back at the angels as they swung down with their weapons, it simply endured the blows in silence. Even though it was surrounded and pounded, it did not seem hurt in the slightest. It looked just like a horde of children trying to hit a fully armored paladin with sticks.

“This is my true nature.”

Jaldabaoth spoke in a coarse, basso profundo voice that seemed to shake the pits of their stomachs. It took a step forward, and the mass of angels pressing against it were forced back.

It ignored every single attack the angels made as it slowly raised its flame-wreathed hands, and then clenched them into fists. Its fiery form resembled a red-hot volcanic bomb.

"Now, you foolish and bothersome insects — *disappear*."

With a *bang*, the angels which should have been in front of Remedios vanished.

Jaldabaoth had punched with extraordinary speed, and even Remedios's trained motion vision could not capture a single frame of its movement. Just that single hit was enough to exterminate all the angels that were forming a wall for Remedios.

This was Jaldabaoth's true form.

Remedios gulped as she witnessed that overwhelming power which could easily slaughter multiple angels in a single blow, and then she gripped her holy sword tighter. Her sweat gushed forth and it seemed like it was making her clothes change color under her armor.

Could — could she win this? No—

"—Yeeeeeeeaaart!"

Remedios shouted to banish her fear. While it was a thoughtless move, if she did not charge right now, she would be essentially admitting defeat to him in her heart. She gripped her holy sword tightly, and leapt forward.

She used the full might of her body in a massive downwards chop.

Jaldabaoth did not block or dodge it.

And then — it bounced off with laughable ease.

"...Eh?"

The sword, made of an unknown metal that was harder than adamantite, bounced off Jaldabaoth's skin.

She looked up and saw that Jaldabaoth was not looking at her. It was similar to how a human being would not care about a worm writhing around on the ground.

"Dealing with you empty-handed is a little troublesome… no, there is an excellent weapon here."

Jaldabaoth stepped forward, paying no heed to Remedios. His massive body shoved her aside.

"Wha—? D-Dammit!"

Remedios and the freshly-summoned angels chopped at Jaldabaoth's back. However, his metallic-gleaming skin remained untouched beneath their blades.

They hit him with attack spells. However, all of them bounced off.

This bastard's not stopping at all, what's he looking at—

Remedios's face turned pale as she looked in the direction Jaldabaoth was headed. Calca and Kelart were there.

"You lot, do something! Stop him! Hurry up and stop him!"

Remedios barked her orders at the paladins behind them. She could not think of what use they could be, but she could not let Jaldabaoth reach Calca and Kelart.

"Let Calca and Kelart pull back! He's going for the two of them!"

The paladins and priests closed ranks in front of the two of them, forming a wall. What a pathetically weak wall.

“Stop! Stop!! STOP!!!” Remedios screamed as she swung her sword over and over again.

However, nothing she did managed to pierce Jaldabaoth’s skin.

The paladins swung their swords, the priests cast their spells, but even so, they could not impede Jaldabaoth in the slightest. He walked on nonchalantly, without saying a word.

The people who touched the flames coiling around him wailed and collapsed to the ground, but Jaldabaoth did not look like he intended to attack.

“The two of you, run! We can’t stop him as we are now!!” Remedios shouted, her head in a state of total confusion.

Jaldabaoth should have been driven off by the adventurers of the Kingdom. She was in the same league as adamantite ranked adventurers, perhaps even stronger. In that case, why could she do nothing about Jaldabaoth?

There’s got to be something I can do! I have to find it! I have to find something I can do to harm him!

There must have been some reason for Jaldabaoth’s invincibility. Just like how some monsters were highly resistant to all metals besides silver, there must be some kind of racial defensive ability protecting his body.

But what kind of ability is it!!!!!?????

Her ever reliable instincts told her nothing.

Until this point, it had always been her Vice-Captains or Kelart or Calca giving orders. All she had to do was carry them out. However, all three of them had nothing to say now.

Frustration began to build in Remedios, but she was clear about one thing.

As long as the two of them escaped, they would prevent Jaldabaoth from achieving his aims.

The two of them seemed to understand that too, because they turned and ran without looking back.

That was good. There was no time for people to lollygag around like idiots on a real battlefield. Even if Remedios died, so long as the Holy Queen, the head of state, survived, there would still be hope, And even if the worst-case scenario unfolded and the Holy Queen died, so long as her sister was still alive and they managed to recover her body, they could bring her back to life.

Several priests — probably capable of third tier spells — stood guard by Calca's side. With them serving as walls, that ought to be able to buy the two of them more time to flee.

"Hmph. 「Greater Teleportation」."

Suddenly, Jaldabaoth vanished, and the sword in her hand struck nothing but air.

"What!?"

Remedios panicked and looked around, and then a piteous wail reached her ears. Remedios's heart lurched. The sound had come from the direction where the two of them had run.

However, the wall of paladins kept her from seeing what was going on.

The power of the magic items she possessed suppressed her terror, but her anxiety continued welling up. If her sister and their guards were killed, then only Calca could stand against Jaldabaoth. She was the pinnacle of the Holy Kingdom; if she was lost, then the country would fall with her.

"Out of my wayyyyy!" Remedios shouted as she broke into a sprint. The paladins hurriedly parted their ranks for her.

She was too far from Calca.

How slow her body was.

Remedios had always thought her strength of arm and fleetness of foot were at the zenith of human ability, and it was a silent source of pride for her. However, this moment was the first time she learned that it was nothing but false vanity.

All she needed to do was survive a single hit. However badly hurt she was, there were many priests here. There was a way, so long as she did not die.

While Remedios told herself that as she ran, she saw that Jaldabaoth had taken hold of Calca. She did not have the luxury of verifying Kelart's safety.

Jaldabaoth's massive hand was closed around Calca's legs. Those hands were wreathed in flame. She heard something like her flesh sizzling under the heated armor, and her helmeted face seemed to have gone mad with pain as she clenched her neat rows of teeth.

The despicable bastard! He's taken a hostage!

Was Jaldabaoth going to make some kind of demand — having taken a fighting stance, Remedios found herself doubting the words he said next.

"An excellent weapon."

"—Huh?"

Remedios glanced at the holy sword she was holding.

Did he want that?

"From the moment I first saw it, I felt that it would make an excellent weapon."

He raised his arm, lifting Calca to his line of sight. Jaldabaoth flexed his arms. It looked just like he was making practice swings.

There was a *crack*, and Calca whimpered in barely-suppressed agony.

Unable to bear the force of Jaldabaoth's overwhelming power and the weight of her own body, the joint of her knee now bent in a direction it was never intended to face.

It was then that Remedios realised Jaldabaoth's meaning.

He meant to use the Holy Queen, Calca Bessarez, as a weapon.

"You, what are you…"

She could not understand it.

However, she had no choice but to understand it.

"All right, is it my turn now?"

A wicked smile appeared on that furious face, and Jaldabaoth approached her.

What should she do?

Remedios backed off, and the paladins behind her retreated as well.

What, what can I do at a time like this? What should I do?

Remedios looked around for help, and behind Jaldabaoth, she saw the priests protecting Calca and Kelart collapsed on the ground.

While the priests were motionless, her sister was still moving faintly. Perhaps she had secretly cast a spell.

Kelart's still alive! But who should I save first — I have to ask Isandro.

"Isandro! What should we do!?"

"Retreat!"

"Understood! Everyone, retreat! Fall back! Fall back!"

"—What? Not fighting? And after I went to all this effort to obtain a weapon with which to crush you… 「Fireball」."

Jaldabaoth extended the hand that was not holding Calca and discharged a third tier attack spell. The fireball flew over and burst, immolating the paladins within its area of effect.

Protected by fire resistance spells, the paladins barely managed to avoid being fatally wounded. However, it was simply that they had not died.

Calca squirmed and struggled desperately, but she could not escape Jaldabaoth's hold.

"What an annoying woman. You are a weapon now. *Act like one*."

Jaldabaoth's body flexed slightly as he raised the arm that held Calca.

"STOP!" Remedios cried out in mournful agony as she realized what Jaldabaoth intended. And then, Jaldabaoth swung down, ignoring her wails.

Splat.

Calca could not protect herself in time, and her face smashed viciously into the ground.

After that, Jaldabaoth slowly raised his arm again, and Calca dangled limply from his hand, having lost the will to resist him.

Her helmet was open-faced. That was to raise the troops' morale with her beauty.

However, that beautiful face was now a mass of fresh blood. It would seem the bridge of her nose had been crushed flat, because that part of her face was a smooth expanse now.

"You son of a bitch!"

"You idiot! Stop!"

One of her men — a paladin — could not stop himself from drawing his sword and charging out. She wanted to stop him, but it was too late.

Jaldabaoth swung his weapon at the paladin, with a speed that did not seem like he was holding a human body.

The two of them collided, and the paladin was sent flying with a thunderous crash of metal.

His armor was staved in like he had been hit by a giant, showing how intense the collision with Calca had been.

Remedios's eyes could not leave Calca's body.

Humans might have softer skins than other species, but strong humans could enfold their bodies in ki or magic, and if they were still conscious, they might be able to be endure a slash without being hurt.

Indeed. If they were conscious.

Perhaps it had been knocked loose by the impact, because her helmet had flown off and her long hair played wildly in the wind. Her inverted face was a bloody mess, her nose smashed and her front teeth shattered, her eyes rolled up and a faint moan leaking from her throat. Her beauty, regarded as a national treasure, had vanished without a trace. Her present state was too tragic for words.

"What should we do, Isandro!? How can we save Calca!?"

"I, I don't know!"

"What the hell are you good for, then!? Doesn't that brain of yours exist for times like these!?"

"I never imagined something like this could happen! There's nothing we can do but pull back!"

"So you want me to abandon my sister and Calca here!?"

“What else can we do!?”

And Remedios had nothing to say.

“Good grief. The sight of humans squabbling before their enemy is a fearsome sight. Well, it is about time. Playtime is over.”

“What?”

Jaldabaoth slowly looked to the sky.

“It is about time that my army arrived at this city. I need to smash the gates and usher in a storm of slaughter and carnage.”

“Do, do you think we’ll let you do that?”

“*Allow* me? I do not need you to allow me anything. All you need to do is accept it. Like say, the gift of a star.”

Jaldabaoth raised the hand that was not holding Calca, and then, like he was searching for something — he pointed to the sky.

“—STOP!!!” Remedios shouted because she did not know what he was going to do.

However, everyone was frozen in place, their hands tied. That was because they could not attack Jaldabaoth, who held the Holy Queen hostage.

No, everyone was afraid that if they attacked him, he would block it with Calca’s body. What would they do if Calca died from their blows?

Heedless to the confusion of Remedios and the others — the star fell.

2章　救いを求めて

Overlord Volume 12

CHAPTER 2

SEEKING SALVATION

Part 1

A lone girl walked the Kingdom's streets.

There was nothing adorable about her face. There was nothing about her looks that made observers want to do a double take. However, she still drew attention, albeit in a negative sense.

Her beady black eyes slanted upwards, giving the impression that she was constantly glaring at others, while the dark circles around her eyes made people think that she was the kind of person who hung around with criminals in seedy back alleys.

It was useful for walking among crowds, but once she reached city gates and other such places, she would receive intensive scrutiny and searches from the local authorities.

That girl, Neia Baraja, looked to the sky.

Above her, the sky was covered in dark clouds, giving observers the wrong impression that it was close to dusk when it was still daytime.

The heart of winter had passed, but spring was still a long way off.

Neia sighed tiredly, then marshalled the keen senses she had inherited from her parents and walked toward the street which led to the inn where she was staying.

The reason why she had to be so wary even in a city was because she felt a powerful sense of exclusion towards herself, an outsider, ever since she had entered this city.

Naturally, it was nothing more than the girl's imagination.

After all, when she wore a cloak with the hood drawn up over her head, there was no way to tell whether she was a foreigner. However, she had not been mistaken about the heaviness in the air. She peeked at the passers-by and saw that their faces were downcast and their footsteps were heavy. It was as though they wore the gloominess of winter around themselves.

Under normal circumstances, she might have thought it was because of the overcast weather. However, she felt that the sense of entrapment — or perhaps a nameless melancholy — which she felt here, in the capital of the Re-Estize Kingdom, ought to have stemmed from some other source.

Maybe it's because they were defeated in battle not long ago. Still, compared to the people of the Holy Kingdom, they're practically jumping for joy.

Although the southern bay region of the Holy Kingdom was still relatively safe, the northern reaches were essentially hell now.

To the Liberation Army — formed from the remnants of the Northern Holy Kingdom's army — and to her, who had come here as a member of an ambassadorial delegation, such news was of little comfort.

The more she thought about it, the more depressed she became, and Neia reached to her waist in search of salvation. The cool sensation of steel travelled up her hand.

It was the sword she carried, emblazoned with the crest of the Holy Kingdom's knight order, which served as proof of her identity.

Usually, a paladin's sword would be imbued with minor enchantments, but hers was not. That was because this was a sword of the sort issued to trainee soldiers.

Only after completing her training and being officially ordained as a paladin would her trusty blade be enchanted with magic. That was one of the rituals involved in donning the mantle of a paladin. While it was little more than a sharpened slab of steel until she officially became a paladin, it was still a personal weapon which had accompanied her through long years of training and practice. One could not fault her developing the habit of caressing it when she felt uneasy.

The sensation of steel calmed Neia down slightly, and she sighed a cloud of white vapor. Then she opened her cape and quickened her pace.

Her feet dragged every time she thought that she had to report bad news. However, it was because she disliked such things that she had to move quickly, to get this over with as soon as possible.

Finally, the inn where their delegation resided came into view.

It was a high class inn, with prices as lofty as its reputation. It was said to be among the top five in the Kingdom.

As she thought about the tragic state of her homeland, the northern Holy Kingdom, she could not help but feel guilty over how she was basking in such luxury while her countrymen were suffering. The truth was, the female leader of the ambassadorial delegation had opposed staying here precisely due to its decadence. She felt that they ought to reduce their expenses on this journey and use the leftover money elsewhere.

However, her opinion had been rejected, thanks to the suggestion of the male assistant leader.

“As representatives of the Holy Kingdom, if we do not lodge in an appropriate inn, people who see us might think that the Holy Kingdom is not long for this world. Therefore, we need to stay in a superior inn to show that our nation is still strong.”

The assistant leader’s logic was irrefutable. Nobody else in the group could deny him. However, their leader was driven by emotion and could not accept that proposal, and she stubbornly refused to go along with it. After a long

deadlock, she was finally persuaded by all the other members of the delegation to reluctantly choose this inn.

However, everyone understood that they could not rack up any unnecessary expenses. In order to accomplish their tasks as soon as possible, even Neia, a squire, had been roped in to carry out missions.

The aim of the delegation's visit to the Kingdom was none other than to secure aid for the Holy Kingdom. Therefore, Neia and the other members of the delegation were running around trying to arrange appointments with the movers and shakers of the Kingdom.

Anyone could make an appointment, even a squire. There was no problem with that part of the leader's thinking.

However, Neia was the sole squire among the delegation. The others were proper paladins. Even if she made an appointment, what would the other party think in the future when they found out that others had been visited by paladins, but they had only merited a mere squire?

Surely they would be unhappy. Even Neia knew that much. However, despite her roundabout protests, the orders handed down to her had not changed. As a squire, there was little she could say about it. That said, Neia had not given up because of that.

If it was a personal failure, she could gladly accept it. However, doing so might lead to the ailing Holy Kingdom losing more aid from the Kingdom. Neia could not simply write off the possibility that her failures might lead to more of her countrymen dying with a simple, "Yes, I understand."

However, the fact that a mere squire had immediately rushed into action without waiting for orders had only made the leader even more unhappy. She seemed to think that everything was Neia's fault. Fortunately, the assistant leader had managed to smooth things over, but the delegation's leader had a poor impression of Neia now.

Neia had been selected for this ambassadorial party solely because of her keen senses, which had ensured their safety on the road here. Asking her to contribute in other ways would be a tall order.

But it's not like I can say that...

Neia looked to the sky and sighed *Haaah*. Then, she watched as the white mist she exhaled drifted slowly in the air and vanished. As she thought about the uncomfortable reception awaiting her at the inn, her gut began to cramp up.

The noble Neia was supposed to meet was not a very important person — he was not highly ranked in the Kingdom — so not being able to make an appointment with him was not a great setback, but even so her leader would gripe at her.

...Usually, even if you wanted to meet someone important right away, they'd still need some time to research your history and learn more about you. So the earliest you could have a meeting was in a week's time.

Well, at least that did not sound like she was just complaining about the other party's refusal.

According to our leader's instructions, we'll be leaving the Royal Capital in a few days… our leader, huh...

Their leader was now constantly on edge. She did not look like she could properly control her emotions.

In the past, she had not been that way. Neia knew that much. She had been an easygoing… or clueless person, if one were not inclined to be polite. However, ever since the battle where they had lost the Holy Queen, there had been a dramatic shift in her personality.

"…An unsatisfactory performance, huh."

As a squire, the only thing she could do about her leader's unreasonable scoldings was to bow her head and silently accept them.

Even so, this was nothing compared to how the surviving people in the Holy Kingdom were struggling. All she had to do was keep her head down and weather the storm.

After steeling herself for the worst — or perhaps she had given up — Neia reached the front of the inn.

She took a deep breath, pulled back her hood, and then pushed open the inn's fancy doors.

As one would expect of a high-class inn, she did not step into a lounge right away, but a small room. It would seem it had been designed for guests to clean the dirt off their footwear.

That said, the place she had just visited was in a high-end district, much like this inn, and it had been paved with stone. Neither had it rained, so there was nothing she needed to shake off.

Therefore, Neia went on to open the door before her.

A gust of warm air flowed out and washed over her.

The concierge lay straight ahead of where she had entered the room, while the bar was to her right, and the stairs were on her left. There were sofas used for receiving guests near them.

There were no heating stoves inside the room. However, the fact that there was still a temperature difference despite their absence was probably because of a magic item.

Magic casters in the Holy Kingdom were generally priests, and while they could make some magic items, precious few of them were useful in daily life. In that respect, the Kingdom was technologically superior to the Holy Kingdom. That being the case, how much more advanced was the Empire, which her father had once mentioned?

Although she might never have the chance to visit it in her life, Neia still harbored a vague sense of admiration for the Empire.

Typically speaking, a village girl would only be able to see her village throughout the course of her life. Since Neia lacked any distinguishing qualities as a warrior, she might spend her entire life serving her nation and never get the chance to visit other countries.

In that case, perhaps the chance to travel abroad which this trip afforded her might be a faint silver lining on a grim, dark cloud.

These thoughts ran through Neia's head as she climbed the stairs, toward the room on the second floor where the delegation was staying. The people in the inn seemed to have remembered Neia's face, as none of them shouted for her to stop.

Considering the matter of expenses, only the leader and the assistant leader ought to be staying here; the other members should have stayed in cheaper inns. However, pinching pennies like that might make the other side think that there was no future for the Holy Kingdom. In the end, the assistant leader had managed to convince their leader of the wisdom of his words.

Neia reached the door of her superiors' room and knocked on the door, whereupon it opened slightly. Within the room were the paladins stationed for protection.

The person they were guarding was the strongest paladin in the Holy Kingdom, who was the leader of their delegation. In that case, they would be more of followers than protectors. Going by that logic, would it not have been wiser for herself to stay behind? Of course, Neia knew the meaning of the phrase "the nail which sticks out gets hammered down," so she did not comment on that.

"Neia Baraja, reporting back."

The door opened, and she entered the room.

Before her was a large room. There was a long table in the middle, where her Captain sat.

Captain Remedios Custodio and Vice-Captain Gustavo Montanjes were both seated there. And of the seventeen members of their delegation, more than half of them stood at attention along the walls.

She snuck a peek at the documents piled on the table before them. Most of them had been crossed out.

“Captain. Neia Baraja has returned.”

She puffed up her chest, adjusted her posture, and stated her name.

“—How did it go?”

“My deepest apologies. They declined because of a lack of time. They said they would like at least two weeks.”

“Tch,” Remedios clicked her tongue.

Neia’s gut cramped. Was she expressing her displeasure at Neia, or rather, at the nobles who had rejected them? While both the former or latter seemed likely, she dared not clarify such a frightening matter.

“Really now. Thank you for heading out amidst the cold. Go back to your room and rest, then.”

“Yes!”

Neia suppressed her sigh of relief at Gustavo’s words. While she wanted to leave right away, Remedios called out and stopped her in her tracks.

“...I wanted to ask you before, but did you really tell them that we wanted to open negotiations as soon as possible?”

“—Huh? Ah! Yes! Of course I tried to ask them, but unfortunately they said no…”

“So it wasn’t because of your poor negotiation skills, then?”

“Ah, that, that’s—”

That’s not true, she wanted to say, but who would dare say it? In addition, she already knew that she would not be able to escape this reprimand no matter how she answered.

"...Captain. It is not just the nobles she asked who refused. Other nobles have rejected the request for a meeting in the same way. Among them were some nobles who indicated they could not lend aid to the Holy Kingdom, but who wished to speak nonetheless."

Remedios glared at Gustavo, who seemed to have spoken up in order to interrupt their conversation. No words passed between them, but the tension built in the air.

"—Neia Baraja."

"Yes!"

So she was still gunning for her, after all. While Neia had mentally rounded her shoulders in defeat, she did not express it externally, instead responding in a timid tone.

Gustavo had now moved to stand between the two of them, but Remedios paid him no heed and continued glaring at Neia.

"While we are wasting time here, many of our people are being slaughtered by the demihumans led by Jaldabaoth. In addition, four major cities have already fallen, in addition to many more smaller cities and villages."

The four cities in question were, respectively: the capital Hoburns, which housed the Great Cathedral that was regarded as the high temple of the Holy Kingdom's faith.

The port city of Rimun, which lay to the west of the capital.

The fortress city of Kalinsha, which was the closest to the wall, and the first to be attacked by the demihumans.

And then there was Prart, the city between Kalinsha and Hoburns.

In other words, most of the major cities of the north were now under the control of Jaldabaoth's demihuman hordes.

“In addition, they’ve captured many of the survivors, who they have imprisoned in camps made from captured villages and cities. Just the mention of being sent there is enough to chill one’s blood.”

“Yes!”

Those camps were surrounded by walls, and nobody had personally witnessed what was happening inside because nobody had managed to infiltrate the interior. However, the rumors said they were guarded by demihumans. Those people who had probed as closely as they dared said they could hear groans and screams of agony from within.

In addition, what was more convincing was the fact that nobody felt Jaldabaoth, as a demonic ruler, would grant any form of humane treatment to his human prisoners.

“So knowing all that, you still came back with results like this? Did you really try your best? Normally you’d have something to show for it if you did, no?”

“Yes! My sincerest apologies!”

Indeed, she was right. Remedios was correct. However—

The thought that welled up in Neia’s heart refused to fade away.

In that case, what good is the Captain of the Holy Kingdom’s paladin order if she failed to rescue those prisoners?

She dearly wanted to retort with those words. However, as a squire of the Holy Kingdom, she could not possibly say such a thing.

“Since you feel sorry, what do you plan to do? What can you do to show concrete results?”

Neia was at a loss for words.

At the heart of it, Neia was just an ordinary citizen of the Holy Kingdom. She had neither a noble peerage, power, or wealth. She was not even a paladin,

just a squire. There was nothing which Neia, as she was, could offer a noble of the Kingdom which could appeal to them. In that case, all she could do was—

"I'll work harder."

—Psychology. However, it would seem that answer did not meet with Remedios's approval.

"I'm asking you how you intend to work harder. Futile effort is—"

"—Captain."

Gustavo interrupted Remedios as she was about to say something.

"Why not leave things as they are for now? After all, it's about time we began our preparations, no? The esteemed members of Blue Rose will be arriving soon. If we take too long welcoming them, we will upset them, won't we?"

"Indeed. Squire Baraja, work harder and do better next time."

"Understood!"

Remedios made a shooing motion with her hand. In other words, she was saying *Hurry up and get lost*.

"My apologies, Captain Remedios!"

Even though she was tired, Neia was shouting *All right!* in her heart and trembling with joy as she made to leave the room. However, her ally from just now transformed into her most dire adversary in an instant.

"Captain, may she be present when Blue Rose arrives?"

Gustavo's words made Neia's vision black out for a moment. However, this was a topic that involved her, since she was a squire.

Remedios looked at her adjutant. It was completely unlike the way she had looked at Neia. Her eyes were so caring that it seemed like she had changed personalities at some point, and it confused Neia.

“Really? Well, if you say so… but why?”

“The main reason for bringing her along as a squire was because she has exceptional senses. Perhaps there might be things which only she can notice.”

Many paladins and squires had died during the battles with Jaldabaoth. However, quite a few of them had survived. Even so, the reason she had been chosen to accompany their group was precisely because of her senses.

While paladins were excellent fighters, they were little different from the average commoner in other respects. On this mission, there might be a need for someone to pass unseen, spot the enemy at a great distance, pass through encirclements, and perform other such tasks, which meant that they would need someone who possessed such reconnaissance skills.

Under normal circumstances, one would call on an adventurer or hunter, but most of them were already dead, and the remainder had already fled to the south or to other countries. Therefore, with no more experienced candidates to choose from, Neia had been selected.

While she was far inferior compared to her father, she harbored some pride in the fact that her senses were sharper than those who had only been trained as paladins. She was very happy that her talents could serve her nation, but that feeling was steadily being worn away. Now, she was starting to resent the fact that she had been chosen.

“Really? ...Well, if you think so, then that’s fine. I’ll allow it.”

“Thank you very much, Captain.”

“...Squire Baraja. Like we just said, you will remain in the corner of the room and listen to our conversation. If anything happens, inform us. ...Now go back to your room and freshen up before coming back.”

“Understood!”

Finally, I’m free, Neia thought, but then Gustavo followed behind her just as she made to leave. After they left the room, he spoke quietly to her.

“Sorry about the Captain.”

Neia halted in her tracks, turned around, and then she voiced the doubts she had been harboring in her heart all this while.

“...Did I do something to upset the Captain? I mean, I’ve heard that the battle where we lost that city changed her completely, so what happened?”

“...Many paladins died in the battle with Jaldabaoth, including the Holy Queen-sama and the Captain’s sister.”

I know that. But so what?

The same thing had happened to Neia.

Both her father and mother were dead. People like this were hardly uncommon throughout the Holy Kingdom. Of course, she could not actually say that.

“Without a place to vent the grief and anger she felt from that, the Captain chose to take it out on you. I think the reason why she did not do so with us paladins was because we fought and suffered with her.”

What the hell, Neia grumbled in her heart.

In other words, all this was because Neia had not taken part in that battle.

This was just unfair.

Half of Neia’s fellow squires had travelled to the same city and many of them had ended up dying. The reason why Neia had not been in that half was due to her luck, and not because of any choice Neia had made.

“Let me also say this: please bear with it. Right now, the Captain is irreplaceable to the Holy Kingdom.”

“...Even if she takes her anger out on others and gives them a hard time, then?”

“Indeed.“

Gustavo looked at her with a pained look in his eyes.

Anger raced through her body. She wanted to shout at him. Neia knew that woman was strong, but still, Neia had also done her part in getting them safely to the Kingdom. She had spotted the demihumans’ lookouts and she had been more careful than anyone else when they pitched camp at night. Neia had a role in getting the ambassadorial party to their destination. That being the case, Neia did not feel she was any less valuable than that woman.

However, Neia quashed her feelings as they boiled up.

She had to bear with this for the sake of the people suffering in the Holy Kingdom. Allowing any of them to be lost, and thus prolonging the plight of countless people, was the most foolish course of action imaginable.

In addition, she would be free of this duty once she returned to the country. Thus, all she would have to do was bear with it for a while longer.

Neia smiled and nodded.

“Understood. If it is for the sake of the Holy Kingdom, I will endure it with a smile.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Blue Rose arrived at the inn not long after Neia returned to the room.

Neia waited, among the paladins who stood motionless by the walls.

Soon, the door opened, and a group of people entered.

She was not a fangirl of theirs, but their reputation still shone brightly in the Holy Kingdom, and it made Neia’s heart flutter. These were great people of her gender who had ascended to heights which she herself could not reach. Personally, she would have liked to ask them all kinds of questions. That said, she could not do such a thing.

They're… one of the three adamantite ranked adventurer teams in the Kingdom. Blue Rose… they're awesome...

While she had heard their descriptions and names from rumors, this was the first time she had seen them in the flesh. There was quite a big discrepancy between how she had imagined them from their stories and how they actually were.

Standing at their head was Blue Rose's leader. She was a priestess who bore the holy symbol of the Water God, the wielder of the demonic blade, Kilineyram — Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra.

Her beautiful features were such that even her fellow females might fall in love with her, and it was hard to believe she was a top-class adventurer of the like which only fighting geniuses could be. If she wore a dress, she would be the very picture of a princess from the dreams of a commoner like Neia.

That beautiful woman spoke with a gentle voice that matched Neia's image of her.

"Thank you for your invitation. We are Blue Rose."

Remedios, who had stood up to welcome them, nodded slightly to express her gratitude.

"I cannot thank you enough for accepting our invitation, honored members of Blue Rose."

"We are the ones who are grateful to receive an invitation from the paladin who bears a holy sword and who has skills to match, Remedios Custodio-sama."

Their exchange contrasted Remedios's formulaic greeting and somewhat stiff tone against Lakyus's natural way of speaking. It would seem she really was a noble heiress.

"Ah, I'm the one who should be happy to meet the wielder of a demonic blade like yourself. Ahem. Please take a seat. The people around us are all paladins

of the Holy Kingdom. It would be good if we could all listen in. Erm, if there's time after that, I would like very much to see the demonic blade."

"Gladly, and the chance to behold your holy sword would delight me as well. Then, let us do as our host bids and take a seat, everyone."

The members of Blue Rose each sat down in their own way. Some of them had already folded their arms and grasped their elbows. It made one wonder if their bold attitude came from knowing their strength or if they were simply acting in a manner that best fitted it.

"Shall we start by introducing ourselves?"

The Vice-Captain answered, probably to help Remedios out.

"No, there's no need for that. News of your exploits has made its way around the Holy Kingdom. Ah, and while it's a little late for this, I'm the Vice-Captain of the Paladin Order, Gustavo Montanjes."

Lakyus smiled gently at Gustavo's answer.

"Really now. It would be good if that news was flattering."

"Ah—"

"—Yes. We've heard nothing but good things about you. In truth, your heroic exploits make my heart beat faster in excitement."

It would seem Remedios wanted to say something, but Gustavo had interrupted her. After that, he smiled to Lakyus like nothing was the matter.

"That is quite pleasing. While I wish to ask about the details of those things you've heard, we are here today to fulfill a request. It is not our intention to waste our client's valuable time. That being the case, let us discuss the particulars of this request."

"Hmm~ Before that, I'd like to ask the name of that girl—"

Neia jumped in fright as she realized one of the twin thieves was pointing at her. The other one was also looking at her in interest.

The two of them ought to be the twin thieves known as Tia and Tina. Despite being members of Blue Rose, which was famed even in the Holy Kingdom, there were no rumors or tales of their deeds. They were a pair of mysterious individuals.

And now those individuals were pointing at her.

She felt like she had suddenly been shoved into the limelight from the shadows of an audience seat. Thoughts like *why, what is this, what's happening* and other such phrases bounced around inside her mind.

"That girl doesn't have a warrior's body. Different from our musclehead's."

"Oi! What was that supposed to mean!?"

The person who had spoken up was Gagaran, the lady warrior who was built like a brick shithouse.

"Exactly what I said. ...She's not a warrior, no matter how you look at it. Now *this* is a warrior."

"Oi oi, you can train your body with experience, you know."

"So you're going to evolve then, Gagaran?"

The thieves' faces quietly hardened.

"Don't be mean, I feel sorry for that girl."

"Hey! Is it me or have you gotten full of yourself since you went training with me? Oi!"

"Nothing's changed. It's just that my sides hurt when you grab me with your ridiculous strength when I'm sleeping—"

"—That's enough out of the two of you… I'm sorry, that's just how we are."

“Please pay it no heed. Her name is Neia Baraja. She has keen senses, and she’s made a lot of contributions during our journey here.”

“I understand.”

The reply was flat and emotionless, not cute in the slightest.

“...Mm. Well, while that was our fault, we haven’t made any progress at all. If nobody minds, shall we begin discussing the matter? Also, there’s no point talking like fancy nobles, is there? Let’s get right to it, shall we?”

“Evileye,” Lakyus said in a reproachful tone.

That was the arcane magic caster Evileye. Clad in her mask, she could use powerful spells, but she never removed it under any circumstances. She had a very petite frame — some rumors said she might be from a small-bodied species.

“No, that’s fine. I’m not good at all this plotting stuff myself.”

“Captain…”

“...Fufu. Well, the other side’s boss has given their approval — how about ours? Besides, once they’ve paid the appropriate fee for the information, they’ll be our clients. Let’s not bother with feeling each other up and get to the question of money. Won’t it be better to seal the deal sooner rather than later?”

“Haaah,” Lakyus sighed, and Evileye continued, seemingly sneering at them.

“Well, our boss has given her okay too, so shall we firm up the details before we talk about payment? I take it you want to talk about the one who’s been running wild in your country. Jaldabaoth?”

“You knew?”

“OI oi, do you think we wouldn’t know something the nobles did? The Kingdom has traders who use sea routes too, you know. Plus, the Adventurer’s

Guilds do exchange information as well. That said, how about it? Want to share what you know, too? Frankly speaking, we'd be happier to obtain information than money."

"Mm… may, may I have a moment to discuss this with Gustavo?"

Evileye waved to indicate that they should proceed, and then Remedios and Gustavo rose and entered the adjoining room — the bedroom.

"Then, can we use this flask?"

Gagaran pointed to the flask of water and the glasses around it as she addressed Neia.

Why me, Neia fretted as she replied, "Please do." She wanted to praise herself for her perfect tone and not letting her voice tremble.

After Gagaran had poured water for everyone, Remedios and Gustavo returned.

"We'll pay your fee, so can you tell us what you know?"

Huh, Neia thought. For some reason, she had the feeling that Remedios, who had complained about the expense of staying in an inn, would not approve. While Gustavo had probably said something, Neia had no idea what reasons he had used to convince her.

"That's fine too, although I think we'd be able to tell you what you need to know if you told us about the state of the Holy Kingdom now."

"Please let us pay the appointed fee."

Gustavo promptly placed a small pouch on the table.

"Mm. Oi."

Evileye jerked her chin at one of the thieves. In response, she swiftly reached out and snatched up the pouch, lightly bouncing it up and down in her hand. Then she caught it and nodded to Evileye.

She was probably trying to see if it contained the expected amount by the sensation from throwing it up and catching it.

“All right. Then I, Evileye, shall explain on their behalf… Although, like I said just now, asking for all the information we have about Jaldabaoth is a bit like trying to seize a cloud. Let’s start by talking about what happened in our country. But before that, I want to verify something with you. Your Jaldabaoth looks like this, right?”

Evileye took a pen and paper from beside the table and began drawing with fluid strokes. However, the picture she produced could only be regarded as childish scribblings as best.

Remedios was about to say, “No, that’s not…” before one of the twins snatched back the paper and tore it in half.

“What the hell are you doing!?”

While Evileye was furious, the other twin snatched away the pen in the meantime and drew swiftly on the new piece of paper, then showed Evileye the finished product. The masked magic caster muttered, *Uguu…* in a disgruntled tone. The truth was, it was of far greater quality than the picture just now.

His appearance was very difficult to describe with words. He was dressed in foreign clothing and wore a strange mask. After seeing the picture, Remedios angrily clenched her fists and growled like a wild beast.

“That’s the bastard.”

After seeing this, the twins and Evileye ceased their feuding and turned back towards Remedios.

“Then we’ve verified one thing, that this is the same per— the same demon. Well, if demons like that could appear one after the other, we’d be in trouble. Thank heavens for small mercies, as they say. Now—”

Evileye then proceeded to narrate the events that had transpired in the Royal Capital, and Neia winced in her heart.

She knew Jaldabaoth was strong. And she knew that the demon army and that scaly demon existed, so she was not shocked by them. But the fact that there were five maid demons who could each take on an entire adamantite ranked adventurer team by themselves deepened her sense of utter despair.

I don't think anyone spotted those maid demons in the Holy Kingdom. So they're Jaldabaoth's trump card? To think he had something like that...

"—Then, what would you estimate Jaldabaoth's difficulty rating to be?"

Gustavo's question caused Blue Rose to look at each other, but in the end it was still Evileye who spoke on everyone's behalf.

"Let me get this out of the way first; this value is just a conjecture. It might be higher, it might be lower, so I hope you'll keep that in mind. We estimate that demon's difficulty to be around two hundred."

"Two hundred…"

Gustavo gasped. Neia very nearly gasped as well, but she managed to resist that impulse. Some of the paladins lining the walls were not so successful. Remedios was the only one to remain calm, her expression unchanged.

If Neia recalled correctly, difficulty one hundred monsters were not something which humans could defeat.

"Exactly how powerful is a rating of two hundred?"

Evileye seemed to have a bit of trouble answering Remedios's direct question.

"While difficulty two hundred beings have never appeared in the human world before… well, old Dragons would be roughly around one hundred."

"An old dragon… while I've never fought those before, would that be around the same as the Guardian Deity of the oceans?"

The Guardian Deity of the ocean referred to a Sea Dragon which dwelled in the ocean.

It had two arms and feet and a long, thick tail that replaced its atrophied wings. It resembled a Sea Serpent more than a Dragon, and its intellect was on par with or surpassed mankind. It was quite a benevolent being that would protect ships if it was properly venerated.

Neia had the very good fortune of seeing it once, from a distance, when they had gone to Rimun on holiday.

It had raised its head high above the surface of the seas, and it was a sight majestic enough to earn it the title of Guardian Deity. It was hard to imagine a human being could defeat such a being.

“Captain Remedios. If we use defeating the Guardian Deity as a baseline… hm, if there were a fisherman here he’d be giving us the stink-eye. Still, that means he’s twice as strong as an old Dragon.”

“Indeed. We’ve determined that he’s stronger than the legendary Demon Gods who were defeated by the Thirteen Heroes. That is to say, his appearance in the human world would be a great tragedy and multiple nations will be destroyed. That’s how powerful he is.”

“Although, I hear that when Jaldabaoth was wreaking havoc in the Kingdom, he was driven off by Momon-dono. That would mean Momon-dono must be just as powerful, right?”

Remedios swallowed, and then continued.

“Or does that mean — he used some kind of special item when defeating Jaldabaoth?”

That was when Evileye’s attitude changed.

Neia could not see her face, but she had the feeling that her face was flushing under that mask of hers.

“I don’t think he used any such item. However, Momon-sama fought magnificently when he duelled Jaldabaoth. I was fighting Jaldabaoth’s subordinates back then, so I did not see the full fight, but it was a terrifying battle. It was a battle fought by a hero among heroes, a champion among champions.”

“Is, is that so?”

It was all Gustavo could do to squeeze those words out after being crushed by Evileye’s presence as she leaned herself out.

“Precisely! Ah, what an amazing battle. Momon-sama defended me while he was fighting Jaldabaoth, you know.”

“So he fought Jaldabaoth — that monster — and drove him off? Is that true?”

“What? Are you saying what I saw with my own two eyes was a lie?”

Evileye countered Remedios’s question with a vicious retort. Gustavo struggled to clear the uneasy mood in the air.

“Ah, no, what our Captain meant was that if Darkness could attack some weak point of Jaldabaoth’s, perhaps we could do something too. I apologize for not clarifying.”

“No, we should be apologizing for the immature tone our Evileye is taking with a client.”

That reply came from Lakyus. What was this, when the two main players were sidelined and their supporting cast went on to smooth things out between themselves.

“Hm… well, assuming Jaldabaoth really does have some weak point, Momon-sama must have won by attacking it. Still, it’s hard to imagine a demon like that would leave his weaknesses unguarded.”

“Indeed… perhaps he used an item or a subordinate to make up for it.”

While this was the first time she had heard of the maid demons, Jaldabaoth had several powerful demon minions.

After questioning demihuman captives, they knew there were at least three of them.

There was the demon who ruled the wilderness where the demihumans lived.

There was the demon who ruled the port city of Rimun.

And then, there was the scaly demon who commanded the demihuman army.

“So, can you tell us in detail about that scaly demon you mentioned earlier?”

“That’s right, can you tell us what abilities it has?”

“Yes I fought it before, so I’ll take Evileye’s place and describe it in detail.”

She described its abilities and how they fought it. Lakyus’s tale ended with Brain Unglaus — a man on Gazef’s level — slaying that demon.

“...That’s strange. Jaldabaoth hasn’t made any movements after conquering the Holy Kingdom’s capital, but that scaly demon’s been commanding the demihuman armies in his place. Wasn’t it already defeated?”

“I see… however, we’ve met this Brain fellow before, and I don’t think he was lying. It’s probably not a unique demon, just a high level one.”

“In other words, Jaldabaoth can conjure that demon any number of times as long as certain conditions are met? Or perhaps he can summon the same demon multiple times?”

Neia could not cast spells, but she had heard this during her lectures.

It was difficult to summon multiple beings with summon magic.

In other words, when a summon spell was active, casting another summon spell would cause the previous summon spell to end. The currently-

summoned monsters would go back from whence they came and new monsters would be summoned in their place.

However, people capable of high tier summoning spells could simultaneously conjure several weaker monsters at once, of the sort that one would evoke with a low tier summon spell. For instance, one could use a fourth tier spell to summon multiple monsters that could be invoked by a third tier spell.

“I don’t understand at all. His method of summoning demons is still a mystery. While it felt like he was summoning them with spells, he couldn’t have summoned multiple demons of such power… but if he could, that would beg the question of why he did not do so in the Kingdom. Perhaps if he were a magic caster who specializes in summoning, he could simultaneously summon multiple copies of such a creature…”

“So even if we defeated the scaly demons, Jaldabaoth could immediately resummon it?”

“Just so. However, that refers to the situation where Jaldabaoth conjures them with magic. If he used some kind of special ability to do it, that would be another matter entirely.”

“So you don’t know much about that side of things?”

“Sorry, but I don’t. We know very little about him.”

Evileye sounded clearly disheartened.

“...Erm, I didn’t get any of that at all, you know?”

“...I’ll explain it to you later, Captain.”

“No, start clarifying now. I haven’t been able to keep up since just now.”

This is our Captain… the person in charge of all of us...

“That being the case, was that disgusting insect maid one of Jaldabaoth’s summons too?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think that way…”

Blue Rose’s members began discussing among themselves.

“Erm, may I ask a question?”

Everyone turned to look at Neia after she nervously spoke up, and the tremendous pressure made her regret doing so. Perhaps it might be better for someone other than her to bring this up. However, the die had been cast, and after firming up her resolve, she asked:

“This might be a very basic question, but where did Jaldabaoth come from? Was the name of Jaldabaoth passed down from earlier days?”

“That is unclear. We’ve studied all sorts of literature, but we haven’t been able to find that name in any of them. We’ve also tried looking for clues based on his appearance, but similarly, we haven’t been able to make any headway either.”

“Could it be an alias? Maybe he caused trouble under a different name in the past?”

“I doubt that. To demons — this applies to angels as well — their names are a very important part of their very being. If a demon wants to show up, it has to engrave its name into the world. Therefore, they can’t use false names. Experiments show that using a false name might even cause them to disappear on the spot.”

Neia knew next to nothing about demons and angels, but if an adamantite ranked magic caster said so, then that ought to be the case.

“As for his origins, if he came from the other side of the continent, then it’s only natural that there’d be no information about him… but after thinking so much, every possibility seems equally likely, and so there’s no telling where to begin.”

Evileye shrugged.

"...Say. What if you got Jaldabaoth's appearance wrong? Was the Jaldabaoth you looked into the Jaldabaoth in the picture? What if that appearance of his was a deception?"

"Ho," Evileye leaned over the table towards Remedios. "Can you go into more detail?"

"We managed to press Jaldabaoth in that form quite badly, and then he revealed his true form…"

Remedios closed her eyes.

"It was an utter defeat for us."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Telling them that much should be fine, right, Gustavo?"

"Yes, no objections here. If we can learn more about him from his appearance, hiding that information would be harmful instead."

"While I feel a full disclosure would be better…."

Remedios began muttering and grumbling, and then she told Evileye about Jaldabaoth's appearance.

Halfway through, Remedios's face twisted in anger. She had probably recalled the battle that nobody here knew anything about.

"I see, then we'll continue our investigations based on what we have just learned. We'll keep you informed with our findings, so could you tell us if you wish to stay in the city?"

"We haven't decided that yet. In any case, does that mean you do not know anything about that form of his?"

"—Lakyus, do you remember?"

Lakyus shook her head.

“That’s how it is. Sorry.”

“I understand. Then, after we make our decision, we will contact you immediately.”

“But in that case, we’ll have to consider the worst-case scenario — the possibility that his appearance in the Kingdom was intended to create a false impression, so he deliberately refrained from showing his true power.”

“In other words, our country was Jaldabaoth’s true objective, and that he had some other plan for the Kingdom?”

“Perhaps. If the Kingdom was his main priority, he would have shown his true form like he did in the Holy Kingdom, no? Or was it because he was startled by Momon-sama’s strength, and chose to protect his true identity rather than let his plan be ruined? I really don’t want to think that’s the case.”

Evileye’s words left the room in a gloomy silence, so profound that even the faint sounds of breathing seemed very loud. Who would speak first? In this tense atmosphere, Lakyus proved her bravery.

“Now then, let me say again — we’re in the same boat as you. We want to know more about Jaldabaoth. Frankly speaking, everything we’ve learned is basically analysis from our encounter with him. We have no inkling of Jaldabaoth’s aims, true identity, or abilities.”

“Maybe we could summon demons to learn about Jaldabaoth… But that will stain the soul… And even if we summon low ranking demons, it’s quite likely that they won’t know anything about high ranking demons. In that case, we’ll need to contact a summoning adept…”

“Unfortunately, we don’t know anyone who’s good at summoning demons.”

Evileye had been the first one to supplement Lakyus’s words, followed by one of the twins.

Surely nobody would, at least not under usual circumstances, Neia mused.

Diabolists were typically evil beings, and fortunately very few of them were powerful in their own right. That was because most of the time, they either destroyed themselves or they were slain by death squads.

Of course, there might be some experts in the field who had submersed themselves into the darkness, but they typically hid themselves and did not make friends.

“Still, just waiting there to die is very frustrating. The next time that monster comes to the Kingdom, I want to make him weep with my own two hands. In order to do that, I need to learn as much as I can about him.”

“Also, he was not leading any demihumans in the Kingdom. If he recruited the demihumans due to his failure in the Kingdom, then we’ll need to be even more wary of him.”

Those words were spoken by Gagaran, and then the other twin.

“Is that why you wanted to know what we knew?”

Everyone in Blue Rose nodded. Lakyus summed up for them.

“We'll pay a sum equal to the fees we'd receive for a similar request..”

“Captain. May I handle the upcoming negotiations?”

Remedios immediately agreed with Gustavo’s question.

“—In place of money, we would like some other form of payment.”

“What is it? While we would like to meet your wishes, we can’t do everything… However, if you want to make contact with powerful nobles, that could be arranged.”

“Is that so? Thank you very much. However, we were not thinking of that — could you come to our country and fight alongside us?”

The room was silent once more. It lasted several seconds — no, perhaps it was longer. The next sound they heard was that of Lakyus leaning on her chair.

“I am very sorry, but we cannot offer that form of payment.”

“...We’re gathering intelligence because we don’t want to die. Doing that would be counter to our purposes.”

Evileye shrugged, as if to say there was nothing that could be done about it.

“We won’t ask you to fight Jaldabaoth. All you need to do is wait in the rear and help with healing magic.”

“Bullshit, you don’t have the luxury of doing that.”

Gagaran’s words left them speechless.

She was correct. The northern half of the Holy Kingdom was now subjugated by Jaldabaoth’s beastmen, and all they could do was mount a feeble resistance. Many of the people had been incarcerated in camps, and the surviving paladins were hidden in caves as defeated soldiers.

“No, that’s not the case. We stopped the demihuman advance in the nick of time.”

They still held the south, where the Army and Jaldabaoth’s forces were staring each other down, so saying that they were at the edge of extinction might be accurate.

To Neia, who knew what was going on, Gustavo’s words sounded more like lies than the truth.

“Can you come, in that case?”

“I refuse.”

Remedios sat up to ask her question, and Evileye flatly rejected it. Given the way everyone in Blue Rose remained silent, she was most definitely not alone in her opinion. They must have all felt the same way.

"...Frankly speaking… we might have stopped them in the nick of time, but we're also at the end of our rope. The Holy Kingdom is in ruins, but the southern troops are still intact. However, they alone won't be enough to beat Jaldabaoth."

Gustavo poured a glass of water for himself, drank from it, and then continued.

"The reason why we haven't been completely conquered yet is because the navy has been pinning down Jaldabaoth's army on the northern coastline and holding them off. If Jaldabaoth manages to figure out some way to deal with that and advances his troops to the south, they won't be able to offer the slightest bit of resistance."

However, that was the thinking of a man from the north, who knew Jaldabaoth's power. The people of the south would probably have different plans. For instance, driving off Jaldabaoth with their own might.

While part of the reason for that was because they had not shared their intelligence, it was also due to the long-standing feud between the north and the south.

From the start, many of the nobles in the south had always protested the fact that a woman — skipping ahead of her elder brother — was to be crowned as Holy Queen for the first time in history.

For that reason, in order to avoid a rift between the north and the south, the former Holy Queen ignored even such baseless allegations as "The Holy Queen assumed her position because she had something going on with the temples, and she was secretly assisted by Kelart Custodio."

After that, the south did not escalate matters any further and thus a full-scale confrontation was averted, but that was only because the north and south had been in a balance of power. Now that the north was in ruins, the south no longer had any reason to hold themselves back any more. Thus, the south began snubbing the north now.

Even in the face of Jaldabaoth's invasion, the humans still bore grudges against each other. Neia simply found that laughable. In addition, there were

whispers of a power struggle for the position of the next Holy King, and it only served to make Neia, a commoner, even more unhappy.

“That’s quite bad.”

“Indeed. The navy has very few assets which can do battle against flying demons, and their battles have taken a terrible toll on them. If this keeps up, they won’t be able to hold off Jaldabaoth’s army forever. We need strength to overcome this situation! Please, I beg you, lend your strength to us! All we need is a month or two! We can pay anything you want! I beg you, please save the Holy Kingdom.”

As Gustavo bowed his head to them, Neia and the other paladins went “Please!” and bowed as well.

The room was silent once more, and then Lakyus’s voice spread through it.

“Please, raise your heads. And — I am very sorry, but we cannot go to the Holy Kingdom.”

“Why!?”

Neia jerked her head up at the sudden shout from Remedios. She saw Remedios had risen from her seat and was glaring at Lakyus.

“There’s no way Jaldabaoth will stop at conquering the Holy Kingdom! He’ll gather his strength there and then invade the Kingdom, you know! If you don’t beat him now, he’ll become even stronger in future!”

“You are correct. The possibility of that is very high.”

“Since you understand, why aren’t you helping us!? And it’s not just you, it’s also the nobles of this country, of our country! None of you get it! Isn’t now the time to come together and fight as one!?”

“...The reason why this country’s nobles won’t lend you their strength is slightly different from our own. What do you know about the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

It was a frightening place ruled by the undead, a city taken from the Kingdom and used as the heart of a nation. That was all the average citizen of the Holy Kingdom knew about it. As Remedios said as much, Lakyus smiled bitterly to her.

“That’s true, and it’s largely accurate… but it’s wrong in some places… While the undead are everywhere, the humans there live safe and peaceful lives.”

“...Eh? In a country founded by the undead, who hate the living?”

“There are many kinds of undead, and the Sorcerer King is a ruler of the undead. Ordering the undead under his command not to harm human beings and enforcing that order is a simple matter for him.”

Evileye made a noise of disapproval.

“Evileye… Mm, anyway, we still have the Sorcerous Kingdom before our eyes to deal with, so it’s hard for them to aid your country. Also, a lot of people perished during the battle with the Sorcerous Kingdom, which will have grave consequences in the future. The nobles who appear so well-off are hardly as well-to-do as you might think.”

“Even so, isn’t Jaldabaoth a problem that should be taken care of as soon as possible? The fact is, countless people are suffering because of Jaldabaoth. And the Sorcerous Whatever hasn’t harmed anyone, has he?”

“...Fighting on two fronts at once while you’re exhausted is very dangerous. I trust I don’t need to tell you that, right?”

Remedios shut her mouth.

“Also, it’s the same with us. Two of us were killed in combat with Jaldabaoth and while they were resurrected from the dead, they still have not regained their full strength yet. If we invade Jaldabaoth’s territory in this state, we might all end up being killed.”

“Didn’t Gustavo say that you wouldn’t need to fight Jaldabaoth?”

“What the heck, she actually believed that…”

“Tia! Excuse me. Ahem. I’m very sorry, but I don’t think things will turn out as you imagine. So long as it involves the risk of facing Jaldabaoth, we will refuse this job. We need to become stronger than we are now in order to prepare for the future. ...This is just a hypothesis, but we need to get ready in case Jaldabaoth decides to attack the Kingdom once more.”

The faces of every member of Blue Rose were unmoved. It would seem they could not be swayed.

Soon, Remedios managed to squeeze a few words out.

“Then, who else is there who can save our country?”

Blue Rose’s members looked at each other.

“There’s only one person,” Evileye replied. “Or rather, he’s the person you should have gone to in the first place, no?”

“...Who’s that?”

“Momon-sama, of course. The Momon-sama who beat off Jaldabaoth.”

“Ohhh! Did he!?”

“A moment, Captain Custodio… If I’m not wrong, he’s…?”

“You’ve heard, haven’t you? Yes, Momon-sama is now in the Sorcerous Kingdom and is one of the Sorcerer King’s subordinates. Therefore, you will most likely have to convince the Sorcerer King to help you.”

“Geh!” Remedios grunted bitterly.

Neia understood how she felt. Any citizen of the Holy Kingdom would have very complex feelings about asking anything of the undead.

Considering she, as a squire, felt that way, how much worse would it be for the captain of an order of paladins who bore a holy sword? However — Remedios looked forcefully at the members of Blue Rose.

"...If that is the best way to defeat Jaldabaoth, then let's do it. No, that's all we can do. If we can, we'll pin our hopes to that Momon—"

"—I believe it's Momon-sama, Captain."

"Er, yes! Can you please write a letter introducing us to Momon-sama?"

Part 2

After the talks with Blue Rose ended, the diplomatic delegation from the Holy Kingdom to which Neia belonged made an early departure from the Royal Capital. This was because they had already seen that nobody in the Kingdom was willing to aid the Holy Kingdom, researching Jaldabaoth's true form would need several month's time, and also because they knew that the only one capable of beating Jaldabaoth was Momon.

In addition, the thought of the Holy Kingdom's citizens suffering made them anxious to do something for them.

They rested their horses as little as possible, sometimes even casting spells on them, and they travelled east along the roads at speeds that normal travellers could not match.

They passed the final village of the Kingdom, and now they were at the buffer zone between the Kingdom and the Sorcerous Kingdom.

The gently-swelling hills blocked the travellers' lines of sight, and they could catch the occasional glimpse of a densely-packed primeval forest. It felt like a monster might leap out at them at any time. This might have originally been the Kingdom's territory, but that was all. The chance of being attacked by monsters had only decreased. It was by no means gone.

On terrain like this, Neia's sense of vision and smell sharpened, and she forged ahead.

There's no sign of creatures waiting in ambush nearby. No tracks of large carnivores near the road either.

There were many patches of bare earth exposed on the road. If they continued onwards, they would be entering territory which had formerly been controlled by the Crown, whose roads seemed to have been paved. Paved roads were more convenient for travellers, but to Neia, the bare earth from just now would make it easier to best spot tracks.

Neia looked at her hands.

She did not like these hands.

It was not that she resented the hardening of her hands from her training. It was simply distaste for her lack of talent.

She might have inherited her father's keen senses, but sadly, she had not received anything from her mother.

Neia's mother had been a famous paladin in her time, and she had excellent sword skills. However, as her daughter, Neia had no talent for the sword, no matter how much she practiced. Strictly speaking, the bow techniques passed down from her father meant that she could use bows skillfully even without any training.

No, the fact was, Neia was fortunate just to inherit that half of her heritage. However, the skills used by the paladins which Neia so admired could only be used with melee weapons. For Neia, who wanted to become a paladin, being talented with ranged weapons was a waste.

Once more, she gripped the reins tightly.

She straightened her waist and adjusted her position on the saddle. She had spent a long time on horseback after leaving the Royal Capital, and her butt and thighs were quite sore now.

She could have asked the Paladins to use low tier healing spells to get rid of the pain. However, she was a girl, and she was a little embarrassed to ask that of them. Also, it was still not yet at a level where it would affect her ability to work the reins, so that made it even more difficult to ask.

...I'll just apply the herbs afterwards, as usual. I need to thank Dad for that. In the past, when I said my butt hurt, he'd run over with an annoyed look on his face… Did I thank him back then? ...Hah.

Neia forced herself to stop before her tears spilled out.

"—Ah, Captain, I can see paved roads. We're about to enter the Sorcerous Kingdom's domain."

The dirt road suddenly turned to cobblestones halfway through its course. It felt strange.

Neia looked to the sky.

"So, will we ride all the way to the Sorcerous Kingdom? Or will we set up camp at night?"

"I think we ought to be able to make it before sunset if nothing else happens. However, we might be taken for an invading force. What should we do?"

"Let me discuss this."

Remedios tugged on her reins and her horse slowed down, and then she began speaking to Gustavo.

However, this ought to be the Sorcerous Kingdom's domain from here on in… but where are their troops? There aren't any fortresses either. There were forts on the Kingdom's side…

Usually, there would be forts at a country's borders, but there were none here. Since the Sorcerous Kingdom was just one city, had they concentrated all their forces into the city?

Neia's gaze travelled along the paved road.

The gentle slope ran between the hills. In the distance, she could see a patch of leafless winter forest.

She recalled how she had gone camping in the winter with her father. That did not change, no matter where she went. The scenery here felt just like that of the Holy Kingdom.

...Living in the human world's a pain, huh.

The words her father had casually mumbled pricked her heart like a thorn.

Her father had chosen to live in a city because of her mother. If her mother was not around, he would have chosen to stay in a little village near the forest, living off the bounty of nature.

When she had still been a child, she felt that living in a natural setting was a pain. However, after going on this journey, she could understand what her father had meant by his words. Was that a sign of maturity? She ought to be able to talk about different things with her parents now.

Pain flashed through her heart as she thought about these things. However, it was only for a moment. That was because ahead of them — due east along the road — she could see something blurry along the snaking path that passed between the hills.

—Could it be a fire!?

Neia squinted her eyes, and then looked carefully again.

There was a milky-white, smoke-like object there. No, it was not smoke, but fog. And—

"Sorry to interrupt you while you're speaking! There's something like fog ahead!"

"So what?"

After Neia reported to the rear, Remedios took off her helmet. There was a puzzled look on her face.

"Neia Baraja. Is there anything about it that bothers you?"

“Yes. According to this map, there are no large lakes around, yet there’s a large bank of fog ahead. I’m sure it must be an abnormal occurrence.”

The bank of thick, milky fog seemed to be spreading wider and wider, and it looked like it would reach Neia and the others any time now.

Her father had taught her about all sorts of natural phenomena, and when she pondered the situation based on that knowledge, the appearance of this fog really was quite strange.

“Squire Baraja. Could it be some sort of abnormal climate change?”

That question came from Gustavo, who had picked up on what was going on before Remedios.

These abnormal climate changes referred to usually impossible phenomena occurring in a large area. For instance, there might be a place where a large scale ritual spell gone wrong filled an area with toxic rot-gases, or a place where once a year, a desert might rage with sandstorms for a week, or perhaps a place where multi-colored rain fell at certain times.

In other words, he was asking if this fog was one of those mysterious occurrences. However, Neia had not gathered any information on such things. She sensed that she would probably be scolded if she answered as much, but she had no choice but to answer honestly.

“My sincerest apologies, but I have no information about the fog that has appeared before us.”

“In other words, you didn’t gather enough intelligence, did you?”

Yet another difficult question. Who could say that they had collected enough information?

“Captain Remedios. Deciding what to do now is more important.”

Their horses had come to a halt.

The fog was getting thick enough that horses could not advance through it. Given what they had learned earlier, there were no cliffs near E-Rantel. If they advanced slowly, they ought to be able to deal with whatever came up. However, this rapidly brewing fog made them hesitant to move through it, however slowly they travelled.

Neia sniffed the fog.

It smelled of water vapor and nothing more. There was nothing about it that would have bothered her. However, that was exactly what bothered her.

“Captain, could this fog have been generated by a monster? My father once said that some monsters had the magical ability to generate fog, and they would hide in it to stalk their prey.”

“...Everyone, draw your blades! Anyone still on the road, clear off right away!”

This quick decision-making was a sign of Remedios’s excellence in battle.

Neia and the Paladins moved their horses as directed and left the road, whereupon they circled up. By this time, the thick fog looked like it was going to swallow up the entire world.

It was thick enough that she could barely make out her companions next to her, and visibility was zero beyond fifteen meters. Her unease boiled in her chest, and she imagined she saw wraiths in the movement of the fog’s currents.

It would be good if she could determine what was approaching them by sound, but she was surrounded by fully armored knights. Every move they made caused metal to scrape against metal, and it hampered Neia’s sense of hearing. Under these conditions, it would be very difficult to detect anything that was closing in on them. By Neia’s reckoning, the only one who could still discern objects by sound in these conditions was her father.

As she realized her father’s greatness once more, she desperately pricked up her ears to listen.

“This is a really weird fog; it doesn’t get this thick even on the sea.”

“Aren’t we about to reach the Sorcerous Kingdom’s city? Are there still monsters this close to the city limits? Or are these strange things par for the course because it’s the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“I don’t know… could it be some sort of defensive spell used by the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“...Let’s leave magic out of it, just talking about it makes my head hurt. If you see anything, let me know, and make it easy to understand. If it’s a monster, we’ll kill it so we can have the Sorcerer King owe us a favor when asking him to send out Momon. How about that?”

“How do you think that will turn out? While they say clearing out monsters within a country’s borders is the responsibility of that country…”

Perhaps it was because she had focused all her energies on listening intently, but she could clearly make out the contents of the conversation between the Captain and Gustavo. However, if she moved away, she was no longer confident that she could hear them. What would her father do at a time like this?

I can’t keep relying on someone who isn’t here! I need to stand on my own two feet!

However, the fact remained that staying here would only impede her abilities. In that case, should she ask if she could be allowed to move away by herself in order to verify the situation?

—*It would be better not to*.

Neia quelled her desire to speak up.

Even if she did not do so, the Captain was hardly close to her. If she asked for that and failed, there was no telling how she would be punished. It would be best to avoid causing more problems for herself.

Also, it would be bad if the Captain stopped trusting my guidance as a result.

Neia struggled to make excuses in her heart. However, it would be very bad for her mental health if they ran into danger and she thought, *I could have handled this better*.

Although part of her mind thought, *If we all die here, the people suffering in the Holy Kingdom will have to wait even longer for salvation*, Remedios's barbs had already punched countless holes in Neia's heart, and she could not bring herself to care any more.

Just then, Neia saw something from the corner of her eye that she could not possibly miss.

Amidst the dense fog, she glimpsed the murky outline of something huge coming from the Sorcerous Kingdom.

"Say, can you take a look over there?" Neia poked one of the mounted paladins beside her.

"...I don't see anything. Sorry, but the fog's too thick and I can't see anything. Is something there?"

She heard the paladin reaching to his waist and fluidly drawing his sword, then the sound of him tightly gripping its hilt.

"Ah, it's nothing. I thought I saw something, but maybe I was mistaken."

"Really? Well, if you think there's something there, just tell us, no matter what it is."

"All right, I'll be counting on you when the time comes, then."

After thanking him with an earnest look on her face, Neia turned back to the front. If one divided the women in the world into those who were suited for smiling and those who were not meant to smile at all, Neia would fall into the latter category. Even a word of thanks from her was better delivered with a serious expression than with a smile.

Neia continued studying the fog bank intently. It was possible that only Neia could see it because it was too far away, but she was sure she had not been mistaken.

Perhaps her interaction with the paladin had restored her spirits, but Neia decided to say something to the Captain. However, she was still talking to Gustavo.

“What should we do next?”

“It’s very dangerous to move around in this fog. Let’s wait a bit more, and if there’s nothing we’ll dismount and rest. Come to think of it, are there fog-emitting monsters in the sea?”

“Of course. However, there aren’t any seas or lakes nearby. It’s just like Squire Baraja said.”

“Is it possible that she made a mistake or overlooked some piece of information?”

“She wouldn’t screw up like that. Frankly speaking, she’s brought us safely all the way here, hasn’t she? When we were leaving the Holy Kingdom, the demihumans patrolling near the broken wall didn’t spot us either. We couldn’t have done it by ourselves, could we?”

“We could have broken through by force.”

Once again, the health gauge for Neia’s heart plummeted.

How much frustration had she gone through to bring them all the way here?

Memories awoke in her mind, of how she had asked them to stay behind while she scouted by herself in the freezing rain, crawling around on the ground and getting all muddy in order to prevent herself from being spotted by ranger-type ambush skills.

If she were spotted, Neia, as the sole vanguard would most assuredly die. Even so, Neia had carried on with the determination to die, clinging to the belief that she was doing this to save her suffering countrymen.

That's right, I'm not working hard because I want someone to praise me or anything.

She tried her best to talk herself round. Even if the Captain refused to acknowledge her contributions, the others would surely approve of her efforts, even if they did not say so.

Wanting to be praised or rewarded for working hard is just a child's selfishness. This is what it means to be a shield of humanity. Biting your lip, making yourself a shield, all in order to keep pain and suffering from the people is the duty of a paladin. Surely the Captain must be the same way. Still… could she lower her volume? No, maybe the two of them think they're speaking quietly enough.

The two of them were still talking.

Neia personally thought that they should not focus on talking and instead keep an eye on their surroundings. Especially Remedios, whose beast-like danger sense and fighting ability meant that she ought to be able to respond better than anyone else.

She quashed the frustration in her heart, and focused on the shadow in the fog. That was also because she had not yet regained the strength needed to call out to them again, and also because she did not want to continue listening in on their conversation.

And then — perhaps the fog had been parted by the currents of the wind — for a moment, just a moment, Neia clearly glimpsed a shadowy wheelhouse.

Eh? No way… is that… a ship?

Indeed, Neia had discerned the true nature of the shadow; a ship which floated upon the sea.

In addition, it was a large ship, similar to a galleass. It was a momentary thing, and it was promptly veiled again by the heavy fog, so even she was not sure that she had actually spotted a ship.

Of course, such a thing was not possible by common sense.

The information she possessed notwithstanding, Gustavo himself had already said there were no lakes in the vicinity. No, even if there were, only a madman would float a galleass in a lake.

If this were a coastal region, it might be possible that they had used an old ship as a fortress or moved it onto dry land for some other purpose. In fact, there were several examples of such things in the Holy Kingdom. However, doing so this far inland was impossible.

I was seeing things, right?

That was the best way to think of it.

Still, her eyes refused to leave that direction, scanning over and over again.

"...So you did see something after all, huh?"

Neia squeaked out an *Eh!?* in response to the question from the knight she had spoken to earlier.

"You were looking in the direction from just now, which means you did see something over there, right?"

"Ah? No, that…"

I saw a shadow that looked like a ship. If she actually said that, they would probably think she was insane. Certainly Neia would. In that case, what should she say?

"Doesn't matter if you were mistaken, but could you tell me if you saw something? It'll help if something's happening over there."

It was a perfect argument.

She peeked around from side to side. Everyone was listening in to Neia's exchange with the paladin, and all eyes were on Neia. Things being what they were, she could not simply bluff her way through this by saying "Oh, I was just mistaken."

"...Ah, I just felt that there was a big shadow out there."

"Is that big shadow a monster?"

The person Neia least wanted to hear fired a question her way. *Dammit, don't ask me*, she thought, but obviously she could not actually say that.

Neia sighed several dozen times in her heart before answering:

"No, it's not like that. I had the feeling I saw a building or something similar."

"...Did you really see it?"

"I'm not too sure. It just felt that way. It's quite likely that I was mistaken."

"A building? A fort of the Sorcerous Kingdom or something like that?"

"I don't know. However, the fact is that we haven't seen anything that looks like a fort of the Sorcerous Kingdom near the roads, or near the villages. Those wouldn't be out of place on the borderlands."

While she had felt that it was a ship, it would go across better if she said that she had seen a building which looked like a ship rather than a ship itself.

"I see… what do you think, Gustavo?"

"I believe her. Although — you didn't verify that it was a building, did you?"

"Yes, it was just for a moment. It might have been something else entirely."

"Captain Custodio, in any event, I think waiting in the fog is the best option. I don't think the Sorcerous Kingdom's forts will permit foreigners to enter."

"Makes sense. Let's do it, then. Everyone, stay alert."

She was answered by a chorus of voices, as well as Neia.

While they were ostensibly keeping watch, everyone's attention was focused on a single point. That was because everybody wanted to verify what Neia had seen.

The thick fog continued to obscure all vision, and just as everyone was starting to lose interest in the building, something happened.

"—What!?"

Neia and the knight to her right both gasped in surprise.

A shadow was moving in the thick fog.

"W-What? What was that?"

Neia could not answer the paladin's question. Saying it was a ship was crazy talk.

"Is that shadow… moving? Isn't that a building?"

The Captain's question was very reasonable. However, since Neia had not told her what it actually was, all she could say until the end was that it looked like a building.

"When I saw it, it looked like one…"

"But it's moving now, isn't it? Also… the shadow looks like it's getting darker; is it headed our way?"

Indeed, if that was really a ship, then it could move towards them. In other words — that ship was one which could sail on land.

How could that… it's impossible...

In the end, the shadow approached close enough through the fog until even the people other than Neia could see what it really was.

It was indisputably a ship, and it was moving as though it were sailing upon the waves. Rows of long, thick oars protruded from its sides, rowing like they were actually pushing through the water.

“Are you kidding me?”

The shocked words which escaped Remedios’s mouth spoke for everyone in the group.

“Do the ships of the Sorcerous Kingdom travel on land? The inland countries have all sorts of surprising toys…”

No, no, not like this, Neia said in her heart. She was probably not the only one to think that way.

“A ship that travels through fog… I seem to recall hearing about something like that before…”

“I expected nothing less of you, Gustavo! Come, try and recall it, I’m sure you can do it. You taught me all kinds of things in the past, I’m sure you can do it. Right, want me to shake your head for you?”

“Please don’t do that. Besides, I’m not a sage or anything. It’s just because our Captain has no head for such facts which requires me to remember them on her behalf.”

“...That’s because all I needed to do was ask you or Kelart.”

“It seems we’ve been spoiling you too much. Once we send Jaldabaoth back to hell, I’m going to make sure you make up for all your years of lost learning. Ah, thanks to that, I remember now. It’s a Ghost Ship. I heard some sailors talk about it, a ship that appears out of the fog. It’s a ship that should have sunk, but which sails once more, and it is helmed by the undead.”

“Oh! Yes, I’ve heard that Ghost Ships are preceded by thick fog. ...Everyone, form up! If it’s a Ghost Ship, then we’ll be facing the undead! It’s the enemy!”

Even the paladins could not help but be shaken by their Captain’s order.

“Wait! Please wait, Captain Custodio! The Sorcerous Kingdom which is our destination is ruled by an undead king, so what if this is one of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s ships?”

“What!? He brought a Ghost Ship onto dry land and then used it? ...What the hell is this?”

It was only natural that Remedios would be dumbfounded.

The undead could control other undead. However, what kind of undead being could put a Ghost Ship, that would originally have sailed the seas, under their command?

Soon, the ship revealed itself in its entirety.

Indeed, it was truly a Ghost Ship.

It was broken down all over. There was a huge hole in the side of the hull, and the deck planks were curled upwards in many places.

It was gigantic, even bigger than the Holy Kingdom Navy’s flagship “Iron Hammer of the Holy King.” If it were not so dilapidated, it would give off an impression of tremendous power.

The last of its three masts flew aft sails, while the others had regular square sails. However, they were all torn and tattered, and they did not look like they could accomplish their mission of propelling a vessel.

There was an abnormal sharpness to the way its prow protruded forth. It looked very impressive, like it had been polished. In addition, it glowed with a dim, mystical light, and it gave the feeling that the ship was proud of itself.

After that, the most eye-catching feature was the ensign it flew on top of the main mast. It bore the symbol of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

The ship floated a meter off the ground as it moved forward.

Soon, the ship passed by the group — who were frozen in place by the bizarre sight — from the side.

Nobody was able to move, and then the fog began to thin. Did that ship spew fog as it sailed? No, if that were the case, then the fog would have been thickest when one was near the ship, so they should not have been able to even see the hull itself. It was probably like some sort of concealing layer that shrouded the area around the ship with fog.

Or perhaps it was a cage to keep its prey from escaping. Neia was scared stiff by that thought of hers.

The Sorcerer King… an undead king. He might turn out to be a very scary person.

When she heard he had summoned gigantic goats of uncertain origin, she had imagined them as adorable sheep, so perhaps Neia might have underestimated the Sorcerer King in some small way.

It made her uneasy.

Just like how paladins viewed the undead as enemies, the undead might consider paladins to be their enemies too. If that were the case, the fate of their group would be—

Even so, they had no choice but to beg him for aid, in order to meet Momon, the man who had once fought on par with Jaldabaoth. Neia wiped her sweat away with her palm.

"...The fog's cleared. Everyone, let's go."

The undead king who ruled these bizarre beings.

Neia gathered up her resolve.

The Sorcerer King is undead, yet he permits humans to live… What sort of person is he, really? Well, I won't be able to see that side of him, being a squire and all.

Part 3

In the distance, she could see the outermost of E-Rantel's — the capital of the Sorcerous Kingdom — three walls, and the imposing gate set into it.

However, neither of them could draw Neia's attention away from the two gigantic statues which flanked the gate.

They depicted an undead creature which held a bizarre staff that resembled snakes coiling around each other. Those statues were probably made in the image of the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Despite being a good distance away from them, Neia could make out the intricate detailing of the statues. In all likelihood, she would not be able to find a flaw in them even at the statues' feet.

Then, she saw several human-shaped creatures working near the statues.

Eh? Ah… aren't they too big? Aren't they as high as those walls? While I know the statues are large… who are those people working down there, anyway?

The others seemed to have the same questions as Neia, and the paladins began discussing the identities of those human-like creatures.

"…Those aren't humans, are they?"

"Yeah. Are they Giants? Although, they don't seem to be the same as Hill Giants…"

Neia, a mere squire, had never seen a Giant in the flesh before, but she had heard about these beings during her monster knowledge class.

Giants were essentially enlarged humans, but in addition to their powerful bodies, they also possessed racial abilities. Thanks to these abilities, they could endure environments which humans would be hard-pressed to survive, so they typically made their homes in such places. They were a demihuman species which had little to do with humans, who could only live on the plains.

Some races which were skilled in magic were more advanced than humanity.

Race alone did not determine the goodness or wickedness of a being. One of the Thirteen Heroes was a Giant. In the Holy Kingdom, the Giants known as Sea Giants sometimes showed up to trade.

That said, Giants were generally a violent and dangerous race.

On the subject of dangerous Giants in the human world, one would have to mention Hill Giants, who lived in the hills. Giant-kin such as trolls and the like were also quite (in)famous.

In that case, what were these Giants doing in a city of the undead?

"...Were there Giants here in the past? Did he conquer them?"

"Does that Sorcerer King command Giants? I've never heard of something like that before."

That surprised exclamation from one of the paladins was only to be expected.

They had gathered a great deal of intelligence in preparation for their journey to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Of course, a lot of that information was incomprehensible, so they could not be said to have succeeded in their objective, but that still counted as doing their due diligence. Both the Ghost Ship and Giants were matters of mystery.

Was the Sorcerer King an undead Giant? Neia thought. But such a distinguishing characteristic ought to have showed up in their intelligence reports.

Just then, Gustavo addressed her from behind.

"Squire Baraja, it's about time we changed formation. Move to the rear."

"Understood!"

During their journey, Neia had been at the head of the formation, but now that they were near the city, Neia would occupy the rearmost position. In turn, Remedios and Gustavo would take Neia's place at the front.

“Captain Custodio, shall we send an envoy out to announce us?”

Surely anyone would be wary of a group of people showing up near a city in full plate armor and bearing arms. Therefore, when they entered a city or village of the Kingdom, they would typically send out a paladin to inform them that they were coming, and then the group would approach, bearing the flag of the Holy Kingdom. This was etiquette.

After receiving Remedios’s permission, they sent a paladin out before them.

After reaching the gates to the Sorcerous Kingdom, he turned and came back.

“Captain, I’ve informed the watchmen of the Sorcerous Kingdom. They extend a welcome to us.”

“Is that so, got it. Then let’s go! Raise the flags! Hold your chests high! Do not disgrace the name of paladins of the Holy Kingdom!”

With that, the group slowly guided their horses towards the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Finally, they reached the stately-looking gates, as well as the Giants working there.

The Giants seemed to be cleaning the statues, as though to make the beautiful statues even more beautiful.

They glanced at the Giants’ appearance, and their skin was bluish white, while their hair and moustaches were white. They seemed to be dressed in primitive clothing made from the hide of some kind of beast, as well as exquisitely made chain mail armor.

“What kind of Giants are those?”

Neia’s keen senses picked up the conversation from the front row.

“This is just a guess, but I think they should be Frost Giants, right?”

“H-mm~” Remedios replied vaguely. “Are they strong? What powers do they have?”

“...Honestly, give me a break… Frost Giants are Giants who live in cold climates, and they are immune to cold. In contrast, they are weak to fire.”

“I see. So if we have to fight one, we should use fire, is that right?”

“Well, pretty much. Mithril ranked adventurers should be able to beat them with ease. However, they can train and learn like us, and sometimes you might encounter a Giant with warrior skills. Therefore, you must be careful.”

Those were Giants.

One could train to be a warrior, a magic caster, or a thief. It was not just humans who could train themselves in such techniques. While creatures with racial advantages generally were not inclined towards such training, some of them would put in the effort to pick up such skills, and that made them very difficult opponents.

Neia’s father had repeatedly told her, “Beasts intimidate you with their appearance. But a powerful foe who does not appear to be one is very frightening.”

“H-mm~ Well, I’ve never fought a Giant before. Still, Ogres are a different matter.”

“Take care you don’t upset them by mentioning Ogres in the same breath as them. To the Sea Giants, at least, it would be like comparing a monkey to a human. Of course, that’s a rumor from a bard, so there’s no telling how much of that is true.”

“H-mm~ The Holy Kingdom can’t hire Sea Giants, but the Sorcerous Kingdom can employ Frost Giants. Which of them is stronger?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to that…”

While the Captain obviously wanted Sea Giants to be stronger, the important thing now was the sort of treatment these Frost Giants faced in the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Were they treated as friends, enslaved with force, or were they paid for their services in a mutually beneficial relationship?

There was no way to tell from the forms of the silently laboring Giants.

Still, it would seem these Giants are excellent laborers. The Holy Kingdom has worked with demihumans in the past, but if they expanded the scope of that, it could do many more things. Of course, the Holy Kingdom would never do that.

While there were races such as the Mermen, with whom the Holy Kingdom had a long history of mutual cooperation, the memories of war with demihumans still remained, so such a thing would never be accepted.

Had the Sorcerous Kingdom only accepted Giants? Or did it also take in other strange races? If she encountered demihumans here similar to the ones who had attacked the Holy Kingdom, could she rein in the anger within her heart?

No, if I don't control myself…

For instance, what would happen if she met a Snakeman here? It would be a Snakeman who came from a land far removed from the Holy Kingdom, living in peace with humans in this nation. Perhaps it might not be possible to use an emotional appeal to dissuade the others from showing hostility, but given the present circumstances, they would have to do just that.

Neia looked uneasily at Remedios's back.

Could she do it?

She mentally shook her head. Worrying about Remedios like that was very rude. She was the leader of this diplomatic party, and she was working to save the country. She could certainly do that much. Such concerns were being disrespectful to her.

"Can we just enter like that? How about going in through another gate?"

The gates might be open, but the Giants were working. She was worried about whether they would mind the passing of the humans at their feet.

“We’ll go in like this. If word gets out that the Hoy Kingdom’s emissaries went in through another door because they were afraid of Giants, everyone who knows will laugh at us.”

“...Understood. Then we shall obey your instructions, Captain.”

And so, the group advanced toward the gates.

Fortunately, the Giants took a look at them and then stopped their work for a while, allowing them to pass without incident. Neia felt that this was less goodwill towards humans than a mysterious sentiment towards visitors to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Normally, they would have been stopped outside the gates, but since they had sent someone to announce them, they were ushered in by human soldiers who looked like street guards, and the group passed through the gates, under the light of magical lanterns. Their illumination was distinctly different from that of the sun, and the trained warhorse harrumphed uneasily under their radiance.

“Welcome to E-Rantel, city of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Is this your first time visiting here, honored paladins?”

“Ahh, yes.”

“I see. Then, I beg your pardon, but can you please dismount?”

This was probably a luggage check, Neia thought. While it was somewhat inconsiderate to conduct one on people calling themselves emissaries from another nation, they were justified in doing so.

There was no protest as the group got off their horses and obeyed the instructions to “Walk this way please,” which brought them to a huge door beside the gates.

Going by common sense, this ought to be a side tower, a combination of troop barracks and a defense base.

“Please enter here. This city is different from the cities of the Kingdom and the Empire in that it possesses all manner of different locations within, so first time visitors will have to attend a workshop in the room ahead.”

“A workshop?”

“Yes. This is to minimize unnecessary disturbances. Only people who have attended this lecture may enter the city. What say you?”

They had come all this way, so obviously they could not refuse the request to attend. While it was to be expected, Remedios’s answer was a definite “Yes.”

“Then, may I request that you give your weapons into our safekeeping?”

Naturally, they could not refuse that, but just as naturally, Remedios had a put-upon look on her face.

Remedios’s sword was a divine treasure of the Holy Kingdom. Just by bearing it, she would not even need to kneel before the Holy King. She could not surrender such a treasure before even meeting the king of the realm, and after hearing that much, the soldier nodded in understanding.

“Is that so? Then it can’t be helped. Then please remain as you are and enter, everyone. The truth is, holding onto your swords was intended to ensure your safety. In that case, please promise me that you will not draw your weapons no matter what once you’re inside. If you can’t do that, I’d advise you to leave this city instead.”

“Understood. We shall return the trust you have shown in allowing us to bear our swords, and so we shall not draw our weapons while we are inside.”

Remedios touched her hand to her chest — to the emblem of the Holy Kingdom there — as she made that declaration. She swore to do so on her honor as a paladin and that of the Holy Kingdom.

“Then I’ll trust you to do that. First, I shall ask the guard for this area to step outside.“

Within the Holy Kingdom, this was an absolute oath that might even draw gasps of surprise from those who saw it, but it was much more mildly received in other countries. After that bland response, the guard knocked on the door.

After that, the door slowly opened, and what suddenly appeared before their eyes was—

Neia went *Aiiiieeee,* in a voice that was somewhere between a gasp and a wail.

The being that slowly emerged was excessively large in every dimension.

Its black colored full plate armor was covered in red tracery that resembled blood vessels, and it was covered in spikes. Demonic horns protruded from its helmet, and its open-faced helmet revealed a rotted human visage. Its empty eye-sockets contained points of red light filled with hatred and the anticipation of carnage.

The temperature in the room plunged in an instant, as though the darkness was chilling them.

“Please do not draw your weapons!”

Everyone’s shoulders shuddered from the guard’s shout.

“Nothing will happen if you do not draw your swords! But if you do, you will be slain instantly! After that, you will be bound to eternal suffering! Please don’t make me have to witness something like that again!”

His mournful cry sounded like he had experienced this sort of thing before. Had he personally witnessed such an event in the past?

The undead being slowly glared at Neia and the others. There was the feeling that it was waiting for them to draw their blades.

“...And this undead being is…?”

Remedios's voice trembled faintly as she spoke.

"They are guards who are stationed throughout this city in large numbers."

"...Really?"

Remedios's quaking voice was somewhere between surprise, fear, and consternation. Neia felt the same way as her. It was unthinkable that a nation would possess so many undead of such extraordinary power.

"A-Ah, excuse me. Is this undead creature under the control of His Majesty — the Sorcerer King?"

The guard nodded in response to Neia's reflexive question.

"Indeed, that is so. Also, he rules over undead who are more powerful than this one over here."

"Is it not dangerous?"

The soldier responded immediately to Gustavo's question. He sounded like he was dying to inform them of this.

"Yes, to date, there have been no incidents in this city where people were killed without provocation."

The undead were beings who hated the living. As someone who could utterly dominate them and keep them from harming living creatures, the Sorcerer King must be a truly incredible person. Neia was deeply impressed by the might of the Sorcerer King.

"...I see. Ah. Then, can you take us inside the room?"

"Please follow me."

The black undead creature slowly stepped away from the door, and the soldier boldly walked past him. In contrast, Neia and the others seemed to be looking at each other to see who would make the first move.

While he said that this undead creature was ruled by the Sorcerer King, those bonds were not visible to the naked eye. This made walking in front of it several times more frightening to them than going before, say, a carnivore who was unchained, but which would not attack because its belly was full.

Remedios planned to go forward first, but Gustavo stopped her. After that, he looked to Neia.

I'm the canary, huh.

There was nothing wrong with that logic when one considered whose life would matter least if it was lost. Even so, despite their determination to protect the weak, their own squire was a different matter.

Neia steeled herself for what lay ahead, squeezed her eyes shut, and then strode forward.

After taking several steps forward, she slowly opened her eyes. She had not been cut down. She quickened her pace, and hastily moved past the undead being.

After seeing Neia had crossed safely, the other paladins followed behind her. In the end, nobody was attacked, and they reached their destination.

The soldier opened the door, revealing a long table and many plain chairs.

"Please wait in this room for a while."

"Understood. Thank you for leading us here."

Remedios jerked her chin, and Gustavo produced a small pouch from safekeeping and handed it to the soldier who had brought them here. It was a tip.

"Please don't!"

His rejection was so fierce that it was almost like a cry of despair.

The soldier raised his hands above his head, utterly unwilling to touch that pouch.

Everyone was shocked by his reaction, as was Neia. She could not think of any reason for the soldier's reaction.

"We are all paid by His Majesty, so please allow me to refuse your show of consideration."

"But, but since you did us a service… and it's not a very big sum, no?"

"No, there's no need for that. I'll wait outside until the seminar is over."

The soldier swiftly retreated from the room. The remaining people looked at each other, mystified by the soldier's overwrought reaction.

"Is that really all right?"

"He said no, so there's nothing we can do about it."

Tipping was a natural thing. While not tipping was not a problem, most people of stature did practice tipping. Of course, some people did so to minimize the time needed for luggage inspections and ask people to take care of various small matters, but they had not made any such requests. Frankly speaking, they were simply doing what would be expected of people in their station.

If that was an instruction from the Sorcerer King, then what was his aim in doing so?

"We weren't told where to sit. So it's free seating, then."

After everyone sat as the Captain had directed, a short time passed before the door opened once more.

Neia turned back, and then her eyes went wide.

The entity who had entered was not human.

It was a creature whose species had a human's upper body and a snake's lower body, a Naga.

There were several offshoots of the Naga race — for instance, the Sea Nagas which occasionally appeared along the Holy Kingdom's coasts — but which subspecies this one belonged to was unclear. However, all of them were demihumans who held no goodwill for humanity, yet Neia did not feel terribly afraid.

All this was thanks to that black undead. Compared to that, she could at least muster up a rational response to this.

Ah! Was that what it was all about? That frightening undead creature was not just intended to frighten people, but to numb people to the shock of seeing demihumans? They really did put a lot of thought into letting demihumans coexist with humans...

It would seem the Sorcerer King was not just a powerful undead being.

The Naga slithered through the silent room, paying no heed to the group's response as he moved in front of them, whereupon he bowed slightly.

"Thank you for waiting, dear humans who wish to enter this city. This one is an immigration official for the Sorcerous Kingdom, Ryurarius Spenia Ai Indarun. Well, it is hardly a vocation which will bring this one into contact with you, so there is no need to remember that name. Then, without further ado, let us begin. This one will briefly explain the differences between living in this city and the surrounding cities, as well as things one should be aware of… firstly, drawing weapons within the city is strictly forbidden."

That was a very reasonable admonition, and Neia let the tension flow out of her shoulders.

"Mm, many would think of it as an ordinary reminder," Ryurarius pointed to his face with a slender finger. "It's written all over your faces. However, I would like you to remember that many races walk the streets of the Sorcerous Kingdom. You have already seen the undead holding their heads up high and walking proudly through the streets. Even if they strike you as dangerous

beings, drawing your weapon on them without provocation would be a serious crime, no?"

"A moment please. Does that mean we must flee if a dangerous being appears?"

"That is not the case. Even if there are dangerous entities in the city, none of them will harm you. Even so, there are cases where people feel afraid, or they feel they might be attacked, and thus they draw their weapons anyway. That is what this one was talking about."

"Can you be sure we won't be attacked?"

"Oh yes… of the many dangerous creatures who walk through this place, those who will most alarm you are probably His Majesty's subordinates."

Ryurarius smiled tiredly.

"Once you stay here for more than a day, your wariness will wane and you will no longer mind them. Well, the first day is the biggest problem. And of course, drawing your weapons in self-defense is perfectly fine."

"I see. So it's all right as long as it's done in self-defense."

"Mm, yes. Also, mind control magic will be used in the course of investigating crimes in this city. Please keep that in mind."

Neia's eyes went wide. Nor was she the only one to do so. A commotion erupted from the paladins. As their representative, Remedios stated her opinion.

"A moment please. Is the Sorcerous Kingdom such a crude nation? Do they allow the use of such spells? Are the courts also that way?"

In general, mind control magic was not used when questioning people about crimes.

For instance, by using 「Dominate」, one could make anyone a criminal for a brief period of time. By using 「Charm」, one could find a patsy for any crime.

The fact that mind control magic could be used to manufacture offenders to one's liking caused it to be viewed as a crude act practiced only by tyrants.

"The courts also use similar means. Oh, but I can confidently say that His Majesty will not compel you to speak untruths. On that point you need not worry."

How could anyone believe that? The use of mind control magic meant that once a nation decided that someone was a dangerous individual, they could paint them as a criminal and then deal with them. No human being would trust an undead being they had never met before.

Nobody said that, but they probably all felt the same way.

"Also, I wish to ask… if you will not enter, will you be returning right away?"

"...No, we can't do that. Please allow us entry."

"Ho. That was the quickest answer yet. Traders would usually ask for time and then discuss among themselves. Then, let us continue."

After that, Ryurarius touched on how "Undead horses drew carriages along the roads," and other weird things that seemed to mess with her mind. However, when he said, "Sometimes Dragons will fly overhead, so do not be alarmed or let your horses run amok," her face twitched.

Having Dragons fly above a city was not something that could be summarized as a "big incident."

Dragons were creatures against whom even fully armed and prepared heroes might fall in combat. That was why all warriors dreamed of slaying a Dragon. Slaying an overwhelmingly superior creature with the strength they had honed, their comrades, and their weapons was a glorious deed and a deed that only the most superlative of warriors could perform.

Surely it would cause a great disturbance if such a Dragon were to appear in a dwelling place for humans.

The undead are fine, because we've already seen them as guards, but Dragons… no, still, having one fly overhead as a sentry ought to be fine, right? Also, they have many age categories, and their strength varies greatly depending on their age…

Freshly hatched Dragons were still Dragons. However, such a tiny Dragon was more easily controlled than the undead creature from just now.

"Then, that is about it. Thank you for listening. Now, can you follow the soldier back to the gate after you leave this room?"

"Forgive me, but may I ask a question?"

Remedios raised a hand.

"Hm? And what might that be?"

"You don't intend to kill or eat us, do you?"

"Perhaps this one might have thought of doing so in the past. However, that is strictly forbidden now. In addition, after seeing His Majesty, I feel that there is no point in feuding with my fellow inferior lifeforms."

"Is His Majesty really that powerful?"

Ryurarius smiled tiredly.

"He is ten times more powerful than you can imagine. Him aside, even his subordinates are extraordinarily potent… simply put, there is no safer city than one which His Majesty defends."

Perhaps she was thinking of something, but Remedios fell silent.

"This one does not know why you have come here. However, let me give you some sage advice, that an old friend — a certain late contemporary of mine — learned with his own body. Declaring your opposition to His Majesty would be extremely foolish. A wise man would immediately throw himself at his feet and beg for mercy."

There was a shocking sense of reality to those words. While he said he had heard it from a friend, it was more like that the Naga called Ryurarius was speaking from personal experience.

“Thank you for your advice.”

Remedios stood, followed closely by everyone else.

Neia bowed to Ryurarius from where she stood at the rear of the group before leaving the room.

Part 4

They walked along the streets of E-Rantel. The group’s destination was the inn which the gate guards had told them was the highest class establishment in this city, the Shining Gold Pavilion.

Neia looked at the assorted people along the streets.

Ryurarius’s words had given her the impression that this nation was filled with demihumans and the undead. However, the reality was different — most of the pedestrians were human.

The only undead she saw were groups of the same undead being they had seen near the city gates, as well as horse-shaped undead with bodies of bones and fog who pulled carriages. There were no other kinds besides them.

On the other hand, there were all kinds of demihumans.

A group of Goblins marched down the streets in neat formation, each of them radiating the aura of a seasoned veteran. That immediately shattered the impression Neia had of Goblins. No, it was not just Neia who was that way. Gasps of surprise came from the paladin contingent.

There were also a demihuman with a rabbit’s face wearing a maid’s uniform, as well as a bipedal, frog-like demihuman, but she had only seen one example of each in the city.

It seems more normal than I imagined… well, not that normal, but still, it's quite similar to a human nation. You can hardly tell that it's under the thumb of a terrifying undead king.

There were no looks of fear on the faces of the citizens walking along the streets. Neia was not sure if this was because they had resigned themselves, they had grown used to it, or they had decided that there was no need to worry about living with the undead. However, there were no signs of chaos on the streets. At times, she even heard the sound of children laughing.

This is much better compared to Jaldabaoth, I guess.

Just then, Remedios suddenly halted her horse. Since their leader, who was travelling at the group's head, had stopped, the rest of them had no choice but to follow suit.

"Excuse me, Dwarf-san. May I ask you a few questions?"

Remedios was addressing three Dwarves who were working by the side of the road. There were also three Skeletons performing earthworks under the Dwarves' orders.

The culture shock she had received after entering the city had been so great that she now thought little of seeing Skeletons. There was even a hint of relief in her mind which came from seeing an opponent which even she could win against.

"What? Who are you guys? Which country do you hail from."

"I apologize for speaking from horseback. However, we are from the Holy Kingdom and we are looking for the inn known as the Shining Gold Pavilion. May we ask how to get there?"

"Shining… Shining Gold Pavilion? Ahhh, that's a classy place."

The Dwarves gave them rough directions. However, it differed slightly from what the gate guards had told them and it felt like they were being sent slightly off-course. However, her real objective was not asking directions.

“I see. Thank you very much. Gustavo, give them a token of appreciation.”

Gustavo dismounted from his horse and produced a small pouch of coins.

“You do know all we did was give directions, right?”

“It’s fine. After all, we’ve interrupted your work.”

“Really? Well, sorry about that.”

The Dwarves accepted Gustavo’s gift, and smiled.

“Well, when we get some good grub with this, we’ll thank the men and women of the Holy Kingdom for it.”

“No, there’s no need… speaking of which, what are you doing here?”

“Hm? You can’t tell? We’re laying roads. His Majesty himself requested it of us. While it’s mainly the residents who are doing the work, we’re here to serve as technical advisors.”

Gahahahaha, the Dwarves laughed heartily.

“I see. And the undead over there are…?”

“They’re Skeletons that His Majesty lent us, can’t you tell? Ahhh, honestly, you can’t beat the undead when it comes to pure manual labor. It’s certainly changed my view of them.”

“Controlling the undead, huh…”

“It’s not like there’s anything surprising about it… Well, I guess it can’t be helped because you’re travellers. Still, it’s only to be expected in the Sorcerous Kingdom, no? I’ve heard that the undead are showing their stuff in the nearby villages. After all, they can complete tedious chores like planting and so on with just an order. I mean, look, the undead don’t tire, they don’t sleep, and they don’t eat. In addition, they also understand what we want to say, so they do fantastically when given a task within their means. Things being what they

are, you don't even need to work like a dog any more. Even our country's starting to make use of them too."

"By your country, you mean a nation of Dwarves separate from the Sorcerous Kingdom?"

"Oh yes. That's where we come from, but now we stay in the Sorcerous Kingdom's demihuman district."

"Demihuman district?"

"Yup. It's where all the races who aren't human live. They say it used to be the pauper's district of this city, but it was torn down. Then, it was rebuilt in order to let races of all kinds live comfortable lives. Well, it might be a while before it's complete, but work on the dwellings for races smaller than you humans — like we dwarves, for instance — has already begun."

"Originally, we came here to take charge of that building work!"

The Dwarf's colleague jumped into the conversation.

"I see. But if the pauper's district was torn down, where did the original residents go?"

Remedios's eyes went to the undead.

"We're not too sure, but I think they were sent to villages or something. There's a lot of ruined, abandoned villages around this city, and I heard they were sent there to rebuild them and work the fields. That's where being able to command the undead comes in handy. If I'm not wrong, they've begun large-scale farming with the undead, or something. That's why food prices in this country are pretty cheap."

"It doesn't matter that it's cheap! The important thing is that it's *good*! And the wine! Ohhh, I fattened right up after moving to this city!"

"If I go back all plump like this, my wife's going to yell 'Where's my share!?' at me. I'd better slim down before returning home!"

“Ahhhh, we really lucked out in the lottery!”

Gahahahaha, the dwarves laughed again.

“Finally, there’s those horse-shaped undead. Do you know their names?”

“Beats me. Still, doesn’t matter if we don’t know, right? They’re not harming anyone. They’re a bag of bones, yet they’re so damn strong, makes them perfect for moving goods, right?”

“I see… Thank you!”

“Same here. Best of luck to all of you!”

After bidding the Dwarves farewell, the group continued toward the inn once more.

“Captain, why did you ask the name of that horse-shaped undead creature?”

Neia was mystified. She had thought that was what would have interested the Captain least.

“...Gustavo. That was because you were acting strangely when you saw that thing.”

“Really…?”

“Say, do you know the name of that undead being?”

“...Well, a name does come to mind… but I think I must have made a mistake. It can’t be, I was probably mistaken. I can’t imagine an undead creature like that could ever be controlled.”

“H-mm~ Well, if you say so, then so be it.”

And that was the end of that.

Before long, the instructions they had followed brought them before a luxurious inn, probably the Shining Gold Pavilion which the gate guards had

recommended to them. While its name was written on the signboard, the Kingdom's script was different from that of the Holy Kingdom, so they could only make a rough guess at what it said. The Kingdom and the Empire had once been the same country, so there were many similarities between them, but the Holy Kingdom had never been tied to either of those countries, so they differed greatly.

"Gustavo, go ahead before us and book our rooms."

"Understood. Oi, you two, with me."

Gustavo brought two paladins with him to the inn. Several minutes later, one of them returned.

"Captain, we've successfully booked the rooms. The stables are behind the inn, so they'd like us to bring the horses there."

"All right, I understand. Squire Baraja, bring the horses over."

"Understood!"

She tied the horses' reins to a tree in front of the inn, and then she led them to the stables one at a time. Taking care of horses was a squire's job, but the inn was also obliged to help out as well, and so Neia accepted their goodwill and entered the inn.

She smelled a fragrance in the air and thought, *Maybe this is to prevent the stink of the stables from getting in.*

Was it from some kind of fragrant wood or perfume?

From the outside, it seemed to be of the same grade as the inn from the Kingdom, but after seeing the interior, it might have well been a rank above the latter. She even felt a little embarrassed walking around inside it with her body that was dirty — bathing for them was essentially just rinsing with water until they thought they did not stink — from their long travels.

Neia stepped forward to the room which the inn staff had told her about, and knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Squire Neia Baraja.”

In front of the door stood a paladin, still in armor. The discrepancy between the E-Rantel they imagined and what they had actually seen made them feel that resting would be a waste of time, and so they had decided to take action without delay.

“You’ve come just in time. We’re about to start the meeting.”

While she wondered if she needed to take part, it did no good to ask too much. The people on top had spoken, and obeying them was the proper course of action.

“Then let’s go seek an audience with the Sorcerer King as we planned. Gustavo, I’m counting on you.”

“Of course, Captain. But what else should we do apart from that? The original plan was to meet people in power and ask for their aid…”

Since Momon was an adventurer, they had originally planned to head to the Adventurer’s Guild. However, according to Ryurarius, the Adventurer’s Guild now was essentially closed down, and requests were handled by the Sorcerer King’s underlings.

“Let’s drop by the Guild anyway. Let’s see if we can’t entice some idle adventurers who can come to the Holy Kingdom.”

“I understand. In that case—”

Gustavo gave orders to two paladins, and they immediately sprang into motion.

Neia wondered what kind of tasks she would be given.

Usually, it was a squire’s job to polish the paladins’ armor and swords, do their laundry, among other sundry tasks. Ironing and arranging their rumpled

clothes was also part of that. Most paladins now should have gone through such experiences.

Although, that might not be the case for our incredibly talented captain, who directly became a paladin...

"Then how about the others? Will they wait within the inn?"

"Ahh, when I was gathering rumors in the Kingdom, I was led to believe that this would be a grim and dark city. However, it's far more ordinary than I expected… I trust letting a few people outside would not pose a problem?"

"While it's hard to tell at this stage, I believe there should be no sudden danger in that."

"Is that so? Then have several people go to the temples and see if they can help introduce us to Momon."

"The ruler of this city is the Sorcerer King, an undead being. It won't be too good to have ties to the temples, no?"

"Still, we're paladins. Where should we go if not to the temples?"

Gustavo had a sour look on his face. Remedios had a point.

"That's… also true."

"Also, it would also be good to see and hear about life in the city from its people in addition to what the Sorcerer King has allowed us to see, right?"

"You have a point there…"

But what should they do if they saw something which they, as paladins, could not tolerate?

Gustavo was having trouble responding because he was thinking about that question.

Neia answered her own question.

Paladins were beings who embodied justice, so perhaps the right thing for a paladin to do would be to censure the Sorcerer King. However, if the result of doing so meant that the Sorcerer King would not help the Holy Kingdom, meaning that they could not save the masses from their suffering, would that still be the right thing to do?

She remembered that her father had once said he did not understand the justice of a paladin. She had not given much thought to it during her days of training with the goal of becoming a paladin in mind. But perhaps her heart had become soft and weak because of the Holy Kingdom's present state, since she had started thinking more and more about that subject recently.

Perhaps her doubts might be cleared up if she could ask her mother, but her mother was no longer among the living.

In the end, she could only rely on herself to find the answer.

As Neia continued pondering these things, the dialogue continued. A pair of paladins would go to the temples of the Four Gods, while two more groups of two would collect information in town. Remedios and the others would stay behind to take care of anything that might happen.

As expected, Neia was ordered to polish their armor.

After the meeting ended, Neia began working on everyone's armor.

She wetted a cloth with cold water and then wiped the mud from the armor.

As one might expect of magic armor, there was no damage on its surface. If there were any dents, one would have to hammer them out from the inside, but if one's fingers were clumsy, that would make the surface uneven and ugly. Since Neia had very little confidence in that field, the enchanted armor which the paladins wore was ideal for her.

She was very happy to bury her heart and mind in work. That way, she did not need to think of unnecessary things.

And so, her forehead beaded with sweat, Neia finished cleaning everyone's armor.

♦ ♦ ♦

Their audience with the Sorcerer King came earlier than expected. Neia could not hide her surprise. That was because it was set to take place the day after Gustavo had gone to plead his case.

The paladins of the Holy Kingdom — trailed by Neia — found that the residence of the Sorcerer King which they arrived at was quite shabby. Perhaps it might have been quite ostentatious for someone ruling a city of this grade, but it was entirely unfitting of someone who called himself a king. There was no sense of tranquility born of a rich history, no aura of stateliness, and it did not reflect the whims of one who held power. It seemed like a building constructed for practical purposes.

It was quite pitiful compared to the royal palaces of the Kingdom or the Holy Kingdom. Yet, this was the domicile of the Sorcerer King. Since this had once been a regional city of the Kingdom, he had probably decided to make use of the existing small palace after taking control of it.

As the paladins removed their helmets and surveyed the palace, faint traces of disdain appeared on their faces, which only Neia could pick up. Perhaps they were comparing their surroundings with the royal palace of their home country

Who could blame them for that?

And then, Neia recalled the Ghost Ship that they had previously encountered, as well as the undead walking along the streets.

Why would a king who held dominion over so many undead of that level choose to stay in such a shabby old palace?

I have the feeling that there's some reason for it… if he wanted a luxurious palace, all he'd have to do is order craftsmen like those Dwarves to direct the untiring undead to build one…

As they passed through the gates of the palace, there were two facing rows of undead creatures, similar to the one they had first encountered upon coming to the city. Unlike the undead they had seen at the gate, they were slimmer and crossed their lances high in the air between them.

Flags hung from the tips of the crossed lances. On the right were the flags of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and on the left were the flags of the Holy Kingdom.

Below the flags was a passage that they could move through.

After that, music played. While it was a tune she had not heard before, it was probably best to accept this as part of the ceremony of the whole thing.

From the depths of her brain, Neia recalled a lecture she had received once.

The most important factor of resisting spells is to have a clear mind.

No, there was no way this music could be a magical attack. If this was a trap, there would be no need to raise the Holy Kingdom's flag.

Neia walked in what she hoped was a proud and bold way, as she scanned her surroundings.

There was an honor guard and the flags of the Holy Kingdom. This was a clear sign that the Sorcerer King was welcoming their delegation as honored guests; in other words, he acknowledged Neia and the others as official ambassadors to the Sorcerous Kingdom, which meant Neia also had to uphold the reputation of the Holy Kingdom.

It delighted her, but at the same time it filled her with gut-cramping stress.

She walked along the path below the hanging flags, and at the end of the passage was — Neia sucked in a surprised breath.

A world-class beauty stood there.

She's beautiful… she's incredibly beautiful...

Her face was elegant and attractive.. Her incalculably expensive white dress was free of stains.

Her compassionate smile was enough to make her a woman who might have been mistaken for an angel. However, she was no angel. The proof lay in the pair of jet-black wings sprouting from her waist.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen of the Holy Kingdom. While this might be arrogance on my part, I am Albedo, and I have the honor of being the Guardian Overseer of the various Floor Guardians and Area Guardians throughout the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown. To use a term that is more familiar to you, I hold the position of Prime Minister.”

“I, I am grateful for your warm welcome. I am the leader of the Holy Kingdom’s diplomatic party, Remedios Custodio, and I am very grateful that you have arranged to make arrangements to meet with us.”

“There is no need for thanks. His Majesty the Sorcerer King is deeply concerned over the developments within the Holy Kingdom. His Majesty has said that it is only proper that he make time for you.”

“We, we are very thankful for that.”

Albedo was all smiles, and her presence crushed Remedios’s words underfoot. Her preternatural beauty was such that even a member of the same sex — no, it was precisely because they were of the same sex — would be swallowed up by it. Albedo’s line of sight swiftly flickered over everyone, Neia included.

“Now then, His Majesty is waiting for you, so I shall guide you to the audience hall. Can I trouble you to follow behind me?”

“Y-Yes, of course. T-Then, how about our swords?”

“Ah, yes, there is the matter of those.”

Albedo smiled in amusement.

Why would she smile like that? Neia wondered. They could not possibly carry weapons into the presence of a king, so normally they would be asked to surrender their weapons. This was also a show of trust in the other party.

"Normally, we would hold onto them for safekeeping, but there is no need for that. You may bear your arms."

Albedo said something which Neia could not comprehend.

Remedios was also going *Why?* Surely someone who had spent all her time by the Holy Queen's side would have even more reason to question this.

Faced with their justified questions, Albedo smiled once more.

"Naturally, this is because we trust our honored guests from the Holy Kingdom, and also because we, as a nation that contains many undead, must seem like quite a bizarre country to you. Therefore, I feel that permitting you to keep your blades will place you at ease. Of course, we have no intention of harming any of you. But if you wish to leave them with us, we can certainly accommodate that request."

"Then, our country shall graciously accept His Majesty's goodwill… May I ask you to hold onto the swords of everyone apart from myself. I apologize, but I carry a national treasure of my country, so I hope you understand when I say I cannot leave it in your hands."

"I understand."

Albedo glanced to the side, and the undead creature that appeared took their swords for safekeeping.

Perhaps some of the paladins were unhappy about giving their swords to the undead, but since their Captain had ordered it, there was no way they could refuse.

Neia looked at Albedo as she handed over her weapon.

There was no telling what she was thinking as she continued smiling that beautiful smile of hers. Rather, one could say that she had looked upon them

with pure goodwill, as though she were lavishing heartfelt kindness on Neia and the others. However, was Neia's assessment correct? For instance, if that were not the case—

—She permitted armed people to stand before her master. Was it due to the Sorcerer King's orders? Or… was it because she knew there was no way we could harm him?

The Sorcerer King was a powerful magic caster. Was this due to his arrogance that no amount of paladins from the Holy Kingdom could defeat him?

Or perhaps he has undead guards stationed nearby. Albedo-sama doesn't look like she has any fighting ability...

The Prime Minister whose beauty was as far removed from violence as possible smiled gently.

"Now then, everyone. The Sorcerer King awaits. Please go forth and meet him."

♦ ♦ ♦

The throne room was also not as lavish as she had imagined. It would seem it had also been pressed into service directly after being taken.

However, the throne itself glittered brightly; one could say it shone with a golden radiance. Surely it was not forged of solid gold; it must have been gilded with gold foil. But even so, one could see how much effort and expense it must have taken to do so, given the size of the throne.

In addition, the flag behind the throne was just as impressive. There was no telling what had been used to weave it, but there was a depth to its hue that its simple black color could not properly express. A slight alteration to the light levels might make one think that it was a deep purple.

"Please enter, Your Majesty."

"Everyone, bow," Remedios commanded.

Paladins are bowing to the undead, while Neia was surprised by how Remedios could make a decision like that, she offered no resistance as she fell to one knee and lowered her head. She had learned this ceremonial practice because she was a squire. That said, her experience with meeting kings was limited to when she had glimpsed the Holy King once, as a squire. She lowered her head as she moved her eyes, frantically stealing glances at the paladins around her.

It seems… everything's fine.

Of course, that was a decision made based on looking at their backs. Perhaps if she looked at them head-on, they might differ slightly from herself.

It'll be fine! I wasn't scolded by anyone even in front of the Holy King-sama. Dad said I did well too, and he even praised me.

"Announcing the arrival of His Majesty, Ainz Ooal Gown."

As Albedo spoke from where she stood ahead of and to the side of their group, Neia heard a very faint sound that only she could pick up, like that of tearing paper, followed by the sound of footsteps and a *gatsun* sound of something hard striking the ground. Soon, she sensed someone sitting upon the throne.

"His Majesty grants you leave to raise your heads."

It was very difficult to breathe during this time. Looking up too early or too late would be a breach of etiquette. After a delay of a few seconds, she silently raised her head.

And then, the being in front of Neia captured her attention.

He, he's the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown...

His face was that of a bare skull. Points of red light blazed within his eye-sockets. Truly, his appearance fitted one of the undead. However, Neia knew he was something else entirely.

The first thing which surprised her was his clothes.

He was dressed more richly than a noble would be at the feast to celebrate the inheritance of his title.

The length of his vestments and the spread of their hem seemed very comfortable, and his sleeves were surprisingly loose. The hem and sleeves were made of spotless white fabric and they were lightly decorated with gold and purple. It was bound up at the waist with a sash, but it did not seem strange at all. Bizarre as it might be, it exuded an exotic flavor, and "beautiful" was the only word she could use to describe it.

After that, he wore gloves that were colored the same as his garments, fitted with metal plates that sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow. One of his hands held a mystic staff which looked like seven serpents coiling around each other. That must have been the source of the hard sound from earlier.

However, it was the halo of obsidian radiance from behind him that was truly surprising.

...Is he really one of the undead? No way...

In Neia's mind, the undead were creatures like Zombies, Skeletons, Ghasts, and other such creatures.

In that case, the Sorcerer King could not possibly be described as one of the undead in Neia's eyes. Mysteriously enough, his skeletal face did not frighten her. In fact, one could even say he had an air of purity and divinity about him.

He was a powerful being, a fearsome being, a being whose power exceeded the capacity of the human mind to grasp — in other words, he was a Supreme Being.

Neia forgot Albedo, who stood beside the throne, and looked repeatedly upon the Sorcerer King.

What brought her back to her senses was the Sorcerer King's voice, which said "Well then."

"You have come a long way from the Holy Kingdom, Custodio-dono, and you ladies and gentlemen of the paladin order."

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

"While we could have organized a banquet of welcome for you, I trust none of you are in the mood for such a thing. Therefore, I have taken the time out of my busy schedule to arrange an audience with you. That being the case, rather than wasting time to no use — by beating around the bush and bandying insincere flattery — let us be frank with each other. I trust there are no objections?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty."

"Very well. Then, tell me the present state of the Holy Kingdom. Speaking without deception or omission will allow we in the Sorcerous Kingdom to better aid you."

After Remedios indicated her understanding, she poured her heart out regarding the state of the Holy Kingdom.

Neia did not understand the reasoning that Remedios followed which led her to be so forthcoming. Although, it was very likely that Remedios felt thinking itself was troublesome.

The contents of her spiel were just like what Gustavo had told Blue Rose, and she ended by saying that the situation on the frontlines was in a tense state. She probably did not want to say something like the Holy Kingdom was on the eve of destruction to another country, much less to an undead king.

“I see, I see. Therefore, what is your aim in coming to my country?”

“We wish to submit a request to Your Majesty; they say the adventurer called Momon has sworn himself to your nation, and if we could borrow that warrior who could fight on par with Jaldabaoth, there would be nothing for our country to fear. Thus, I beg you to dispatch the warrior Momon to our country.”

The crimson glow in the Sorcerer King’s eyes suddenly vanished, and then it reignited a moment later.

“As I thought. I have also prepared an answer for this eventuality — which would be no.”

“May I ask the reason for that answer?”

“While this is something of a black mark on my nation, Momon is, for the time being, vital for the peace of my country. It is precisely because he is around that the people can live with their hearts at ease.”

“But do you not command legions of the undead, Your Majesty?”

“Huhuhu,” the Sorcerer King laughed quietly. “It would seem you ladies and gentlemen of the Holy Kingdom have seen my undead forces and deemed them quite satisfactory. Then, will you not accept a loan of these undead troops in place of Momon? I trust you have all seen that all the undead I command are quite potent. They ought to be able to eliminate mere demihumans.”

Remedios was left speechless.

She was probably imagining the sight of herself leading an undead army back to the Holy Kingdom. No, it was unimaginable. Commanding the undead was utterly antithetical to being a paladin.

It was true that the undead boasted many advantages as troops. They did not need to eat, they could lie in wait in the middle of primeval forest, and one could call them an ideal army.

However, enlisting the undead — the enemies of all living creatures — into their forces was more frightening than anything else. For starters, bringing another nation's troops into one's own country was a source of unease. After solving the Holy Kingdom's problems, they might then proceed to conquer the Holy Kingdom.

"In, in that case…"

The Sorcerer King chuckled at Remedios's perturbation.

"Indeed, Custodio-dono. There are those in my country who think the same way as you. Using the undead for agriculture, clearing land, and security are all applications which the people are growing to accept. But unfortunately, those among my citizens who have little contact with these activities have not come to fully accept them yet. Of course, the situation is much better than when I was just establishing my rule, but more time will be needed for that. Momon can listen to their concerns and allay them in many ways. If I send him out now, there is no telling how the discontent of the people might erupt."

"In that case, surely we paladins can stay behind and complete the work of building trust in the undead, could we not? Many people know that paladins are the foes of the undead. Therefore, would it not be very effective to have us stay behind and declare that Your Majesty's undead are trustworthy?"

"Muu… That is a proposal which is worthy of consideration."

After a brief period of cogitation, the Sorcerer King turned his face to the hand which did not carry his staff.

"…Hm. It would seem having foreigners handle that is not quite appropriate, no. One can trust someone who has gone through the same joys and sorrows as themselves; surely there is no way for them to believe someone who appeared out of nowhere and said the undead were their friends, is there? As I thought, you will not be able to take the place of an adamantite ranked adventurer, who is already renowned throughout this city."

His logic was faultless.

Therefore, she could not refute him with logic. This was particularly true for Remedios, who was the type that was driven by her emotions.

The Sorcerer King then asked the speechless Remedios:

"—Very well. Then let us change the topic. I wish to ask about some people you did not mention, Custodio-dono. In the past, Momon told me that Jaldabaoth commanded maids of considerable power. May I ask if you ladies and gentlemen have encountered people dressed like that in the Holy Kingdom?"

"We have not found anyone dressed so in the Holy Kingdom. In fact, we only learned about them for the first time when we engaged Blue Rose of the Kingdom in conversation."

"I see… which means it is possible that the maids might be Jaldabaoth's trump card, is it not? Or does that mean they are active in other locations?"

"We cannot be sure."

"...I believe you mentioned that the south is still holding out. Are you maintaining secret communications with them?"

"To a certain extent, yes."

"...So they have not yet infiltrated the south, then? Perhaps I was being too worried. Umu…"

The Sorcerer King suddenly looked up to the ceiling.

"Does Your Majesty feel that Jaldabaoth's henchmen have infiltrated the south?"

"I did not say that. But I was thinking that if he possessed such powerful pawns, why has he not used them yet… and I believe I asked for full disclosure at the beginning, did I not? Therefore, let me get right to the point — what kind of remuneration can the Holy Kingdom offer me in exchange for the provision of my nation's aid?"

This was a perfectly normal question and entirely to be expected. However, answering it was very difficult.

“We can offer my country’s friendship, trust, and respect.”

The Sorcerer King snorted at Remedios’s answer.

However, one could not conclude that Remedios’s answer had been wrong. There were times when that was all a paladin would need to rush into a life or death battle. For example, one who championed a poor village that could not afford to pay proper compensation and challenged a demihuman horde would be held up as an exemplar of paladinhood.

“That is very much what a paladin would say. Perhaps one of my past friends might well have been willing to take action based on that alone. But unfortunately, such words cannot move me. I have said before to dispense with meaningless flattery. Can you offer me any tangible benefits?”

Is he saying that Momon-dono is a friend of the Sorcerer King? Is he addressing him so familiarly because he is not just a subordinate?

As Neia pondered that question, Remedios remained silent.

No.

She could not speak. The truth was that Remedios Custodio was in no position to make any promises.

What would happen after they beat off Jaldabaoth?

Of course, they would need to name the next Holy King. However, the likelihood of such a person heeding the words of a paladin would be very low. If he was chosen from the southern nobles, who were unfriendly to her, Remedios and the others would probably be placed under house arrest for their inability to protect the Holy Queen.

In that case, even if they forged a pact with the Sorcerer King, there was no guarantee that said pact would actually be honored. No, before that, it was very dubious that this group even had the right to represent their nation.

Ultimately, the true purpose of this ambassadorial delegation had been to build sympathy among the commoners who did not understand the situation.

For that reason, they had no ability to make any promises. No one person could represent an entire country by themselves; the only one who could do that was its king.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. I am Vice-Captain Gustavo Montanjes, serving under Captain Custodio. Please permit me to speak on her behalf.”

The Sorcerer King lightly raised his chin, to indicate that the man should continue.

“Thank you very much. What Your Majesty asks for is something that we cannot guarantee. Even if we reclaim the Holy Kingdom’s territory, restoring the land that has been ravaged by Jaldabaoth will take a very long time. I do not believe we can offer you anything we promise here with any degree of haste. However, there is one thing I wish to tell Your Majesty, which is the danger of Jaldabaoth.”

“Hm… do go on.”

“Yes. The disorganized demihumans who threatened the Kingdom in the past are now under the thumb of Jaldabaoth. If he is not stopped now, and he is allowed to hide himself, there is no telling what sorts of preparations he can make and where he will show himself again.”

“In other words, you are saying that now is the best time to kill him, given that he has shown his face. Therefore, one should eradicate the seeds of any potential discord as soon as possible. Is that what you mean?”

“It is as you say. I expected nothing less of Your Majesty. Therefore, may we plead with you to dispatch Momon-dono?”

“I see. It is a perfectly understandable reason. Indeed, it is high time this Jaldabaoth was exterminated.”

“In that case—”

Just as Gustavo's face was lighting up with joy, the Sorcerer King extended a hand to stop him before rapping his staff on the ground.

"However, dispatching Momon is still very difficult. Even if he dispatches Jaldabaoth, Momon's absence will lead to uneasiness in our political situation and alarm the people. In that case, what should be done? If I had more time to stabilize my nation's internal politics, I would then send out Momon — with his approval, of course. Given what you have just said, you ought to be able to hold on for a little longer, no?"

"But, but of course… may I know how long will that take?"

"Umu… Albedo, what do you think?"

The Prime Minister who had been standing by the side all this while reported to her master for the first time.

"After considering the gradual induction of demihumans into our nation, it will delay the process more than anticipated. It might take a period of several years. Yes… if we had five years, it would not be a problem."

"Just so. I trust you have no questions?"

Five years. Gustavo tasted the words in his mouth before gently shaking his head.

"That might present some problems with respect to the time…"

"I see… indeed. I ought to have considered your country's situation. After all, it is a request from a *friendly nation*."

The Sorcerer King placed particular emphasis on the words "friendly nation."

"Our country will do our best to accelerate the process. Albedo, what is the minimum time needed to carry this out?"

"In that case, how about three years? However, that might lead to unrest in our country."

“That cannot be helped. We’re saving a *friendly country*, after all. I suppose there will be some loss of life on our part… well, metaphorically speaking.”

The Sorcerer King seemed to be making a joke, but nobody was laughing.

“...Ahem. Now then, how about that? We’ve sped it up by two years.”

He had already made a concession of two years, but even three years was too long. How much damage could occur during that time? And then, there was the question of whether the Holy Kingdom could even survive as a nation during that time — no, there was no way they could. However, if they came out and said that, perhaps even the promise of sending out Momon after three years might be rendered moot as well.

However, the possibility of the Holy Kingdom’s salvation lay before their eyes.

Perhaps she had come here for this moment. She ought to bet her life on it.

After preparing herself for death, Neia took a deep breath, and spoke.

“My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty the Sorcerer King.”

“...And you are?”

“I am Neia Baraja, a squire of the paladin order of the Holy Kingdom. I understand this is exceedingly rude, but please permit me to request your early dispatch of Momon-dono.”

The Sorcerer King appeared to be deep in thought.

“Neia! How dare a mere squire like you beg a favor of the Sorcerer King!?”

There was only one thing which came to mind when Neia heard Remedios’s rebuke.

If you must slay your squire for her disrespectful conduct, please wait a little bit longer.

“Ahh, don’t worry about it. Your name is Neia, is it not? In that case, how much earlier would you like me to send out Momon?”

“I feel that he should be sent as soon as possible, even if it only hastens his arrival by just one day.”

“And you insist on your request, even though knowing that sending out Momon will damage the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“Yes!”

Neia bowed her head.

She had long since prepared herself to request that her Captain take her head if her words displeased the Sorcerer King, in order to pay for her sins with her life.

She closed her eyes, because she knew she might be cut down at any moment.

“Your Majesty! I sincerely apologize for my squire’s disrespect! We have never once harbored any intention of harming the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“No, pay it no mind. As a resident of the Holy Kingdom, it is only natural to want to save one’s homeland even at the expense of others… Umu. Albedo, can we cut it down to two years?”

“I believe it would be very difficult.”

“Really now. Still — do it.”

Neia reflexively looked up at the Sorcerer KIng.

“Yes! I understand, Your Majesty!”

As she was bathed in the voice of that powerful, absolute ruler, the faint trembling in Albedo’s shoulders must have been because she was uneasy about the reckless challenge she had just been given.

“Neia… Baraja. How about two years? Perhaps it might still be too long for you, but you ought to be able to hold out so long as the southern armies remain, no?”

Indeed, two years was too long. However, she could not prevail on the Sorcerer King’s generosity any further.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty!”

The gratitude in her voice was genuine, because she felt that the probability of her nation’s salvation had risen from just now.

After that, Remedios bowed her head.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty! We are deeply grateful that you have acceded to our squire’s request.”

“It is fine. —Captain Custodio, you have a good woman under you. If she did not love her country so deeply, how would a mere squire dare plead in such a way with the king of another nation? ...I am not mocking her, of course.”

“No, I am certain she must be overjoyed by Your Majesty’s words.”

“Is that so. Then that will be all. This has been a beneficial dialogue.”

“—Announcing the departure of His Majesty, the Sorcerer King.”

Neia bowed her head in response to Albedo’s words.

Once again, the staff rapped along the ground in time with his footsteps, the same way it had when he had entered. Those sounds drew further away, and soon they heard the sound of the door closing. The Sorcerer King had probably left the room.

“He has departed.”

When Neia raised her head, she saw a slightly red-cheeked Albedo smiling and saying, “Then, please allow me to escort you outside.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Neia had prepared herself to be scolded by Remedios, and sure enough, after they returned to the inn, it came.

“You! Do you know what you’ve done!?”

Remedios’s face was red as she closed in on Neia. Vice-Captain Gustavo hurriedly held out his arms and stepped between Neia and the Captain.

“Captain Custodio! A moment please! There is no denying the Squire Baraja’s actions were those of a rogue, but ultimately, she saved us a year of waiting. Is that not something worthy of praise?”

“What nonsense are you talking about!? The whole thing might go up in smoke because of her! Also, you want me to praise her for acting on her own? Are you kidding me!?”

“I sincerely apologize.”

Neia bowed her head as she apologized with heartfelt sincerity.

“—Are you really sorry for this? Maybe you were lucky this time, but can you take responsibility if things end up turning bad for us?”

“...The blame rests on your servant.”

“I know that already! Answer me! Can you face all the suffering people of the Holy Kingdom and tell them that help won’t be coming because of you!?”

“No, your servant cannot bear that responsibility.”

“In that case, why did you just jump in and do that? What on earth were you thinking!?”

Neia raised her head and looked straight at the Captain.

“Should the need arise, I feel you should take my life and offer it to the Sorcerer King as an apology for my actions.”

Remedios's eyes went wide as she heard that. However, they quickly narrowed in displeasure once more. Beside her, Vice-Captain Gustavo nodded vigorously in what seemed like respect.

"Do you think that's enough to earn forgiveness? Do you think a life like yours will be enough of an apology?"

"I do not not know, but I am certain you and the others will be able to think of something, Captain."

"And what will you do if we can't think of anything!?"

It was as the Captain said. It was likely that even executing Neia would not be enough to earn the Sorcerer King's forgiveness. However, Neia had still said what she had in the audience chamber because three years was far too long to wait.

Could it be the Captain was willing to accept waiting for three years? Why am I being scolded by someone who didn't do anything? I know that the lives of the Holy Kingdom's people hang in the balance, so I shouldn't act of my own accord. Even so, someone should have done something back then…

Was it not all right as long as there was a good outcome, or was the process more important? She probably could not give an answer like that.

Even so, it was hard for someone who had stepped forward to do something to endure a lecture from someone who had done nothing.

Of course, Neia had a pretty good idea of what would happen if she actually said that. Therefore, she remained quiet and simply lowered her head.

"Captain, that should be enough. Thanks to her efforts, we've saved a year of waiting. Rewards and punishment need to be used in balance. Perhaps you ought to be praising her to a similar extent."

"...Cheh."

The Captain looked like she had not yet said her fill as she turned and left.

Gustavo sighed, and then turned to face Neia.

“Your resolve is truly admirable. The Captain might look that way, but the truth is, she respects your contributions.”

That was most definitely a lie. That was a lie which nobody could cover up.

Perhaps Gustavo had sensed her thoughts from her expression, but he looked her in the eye and then smiled bitterly.

“In any case, I’ll go talk to the Captain about this. However, if you run into her now, things might get a bit prickly. Could I trouble you to take a walk outside for a bit?”

“I understand. Thank you, Vice-Captain.”

Once outside the inn, Neia wandered aimlessly through the chill of winter.

“I just feel… hahhh…”

While she had been told to go outside, where should she go in this country?

Neia felt around in her pockets and produced a small leather pouch. There was little money inside, just a few copper and silver coins from the Holy Kingdom. If those could not be used, Neia still had a trading gold coin. It would be more than enough to get a meal.

However, this gold coin was the very last piece of pocket money Neia’s parents had given her. Where should she spend this valuable piece of pocket money?

Neia looked at the foreign land before her.

“What a pain… hahh…”

“You seem to be sighing quite heavily.”

The sudden voice from close by made Neia’s shoulders shudder.

“Hurry up and go down that road over there. This place is too obvious,”

The owner of this voice was not someone she would forget in a hurry. Neia managed to stop herself from exclaiming reflexively. After that, she walked as directed, and then she heard something moving from behind her. It would seem that it was not just a voice she was hearing, but that there was someone actually behind Neia, although said person had made themselves invisible so Neia could not see them.

After turning down the road as directed, she heard the voice say, “Take the alley on the left.” Neia obeyed silently.

The alley was surprisingly clean, with no passers-by .

After walking several steps, Neia turned and spoke the name of the voice’s owner.

“Your Majesty, dare I ask why you have come here? Am I unable to see you because of magic?”

“I see, so that’s why you were so obedient. You already knew who I was, hm?”

Saying so, the Sorcerer King revealed himself.

He had changed into an unassuming black robe, but even that gleamed like velvet. It would seem it was a very well-made piece of clothing.

Neia immediately genuflected before him.

“Yes, it is as Your Majesty says. Also… may I ask where Your Majesty’s followers are?”

“No, there are none. After all, having followers around would make things troublesome.”

“W-Why is that?”

“Hm, I want to speak with your Captain in private, so please go and get her… no, it would be better to do so in a room… Can you help me open the window of her room? I will enter through there.”

That was a bizarre request. Normally, she would not open the window just like that. However, she was dealing with the king of this country, and a king who had agreed to aid the Holy Kingdom. She could not do anything to ruin his mood.

The word “assassination” flashed through Neia’s mind, but if the Sorcerer King had wanted to do that, he could have done so in the audience chamber.

Of course, this might be someone masquerading as the Sorcerer King. However, the person before her had the form of an imposing ruler, so he was unmistakably the Sorcerer King from back then. Every move he made was something that was only possible by someone who was a born ruler.

Should she trust him? Or not?

Neia pondered this, and chose the former.

“Understood. I shall do so immediately.”

“Umu… come to think of it, were you sent out on a mission? If that was the case, I ought to apologize to your Captain.”

“Eh?”

“...Eh?”

Neia’s eyes met those of the Sorcerer King.

“...If it was not a mission, then this must be your own free time, no? In that case, it is very valuable — mm, I should apologize to you for taking up your precious rest time by making you do things.”

“No, no, it’s not, it’s nothing of the sort in any case, I will go and open the window to the Captain’s room now.”

Neia immediately ran from the Sorcerer King's side.

Those kind words from a third party were like someone carefully applying a soothing liniment to a palm covered in scrapes and bruises. They seeped into Neia's heart, and they surprised her.

Neia ran with all her might, and swiftly returned to the inn.

Of course, running was not permitted inside a high end establishment like this, but that was no reason for Neia to slowly walk around. All she could do was move as quickly as she could without causing any offense, but despite all that, she could feel icy glares directed at her by the inn's staff. In the end, however, Neia finally reached the Captain's room.

Neia immediately knocked on the door, and then found it was locked when she tried the handle. A chill ran through Neia's heart as she realized she had been ostracized, but now was not the time to worry about that sort of thing.

"I am Squire Neia Baraja, please open the door."

The door clicked, and a paladin showed his face from behind it.

"Forgive me," she said; now was not the time to observe each and every point of etiquette. Neia then turned to Remedios, who was within the room, and said, "The Sorcerer King wishes to speak to you in private, Captain."

Neia could sense everyone's eyes looking behind her back.

"No, that's not it. He's not there."

Saying so, Neia strode over to the window and opened it.

As expected of a high class establishment, the windows slid smoothly open, without any trace of jamming.

"What the hell?"

From a third party's perspective, this was a sudden, rash outburst. It was only natural that a paladin would bellow at her. It was even less tolerable for a paladin who had once been placed in charge of the Holy Queen's security.

However, Neia ignored them as she leaned her upper body out of the window and waved to the Sorcerer King, who ought to be outside.

After that, Neia was dragged back in by her collar.

"What are you doing, Squire Baraja? Don't just open the windows like that, and more importantly, there's no sign of the Sorcerer King."

Looking back, she saw a red-faced paladin. His anger was understandable. However—

"That will do, I think. She broke your rules at my behest. If blame must be assigned, then let it fall upon me."

A quiet voice echoed through the room.

The Sorcerer King slowly revealed himself from where he stood upon the window frame.

Neia saw a paladin reaching for the longsword at his waist, and frantically made to stop him.

"Mm… I apologize for alarming you. I chose to come by myself because I wished to speak with you in private. While it might be somewhat rude to enter via a window, it cannot be helped for the sake of going incognito. I hope you can understand that… And I must apologize to her as well."

After descending from the windowsill, the Sorcerer King surveyed the interior of the room with the regal poise of a king.

"....I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown."

Upon the mention of his name, Neia fell to one knee before anybody else. A moment later, she heard the paladins behind her simultaneously genuflecting.

“Very well… You may rise, Since there is no time, is it convenient to have a word with you, Captain Custodio?”

“We have no objections, Your Majesty. Then, please come this way.”

As Neia rose, she let her breath out — just in time to meet the eyes of the Sorcerer King, who had turned around. Of course, there were no eyeballs in the Sorcerer King’s eye sockets, so saying she gazed into his eyes was purely Neia’s imagination.

“Will that squire not be taking part?”

“She is but a squire, Your Majesty.”

“Was she not present at the audience chamber just now?”

The Sorcerer King’s natural tone made him sound like he genuinely did not know. However, his words contained a powerful sense of sarcasm.

“Squire Baraja, come join us.”

“Yes!”

Although Neia was not very keen on taking part, for some reason she dearly wanted to know why the Sorcerer King had chosen to pay them a visit.

Remedios and Gustavo faced the Sorcerer King over a table, while Neia and the others stood by the walls. This was the same way in which they had received Blue Rose.

“Now then, Your Majesty, please permit me to ask a direct question. May I inquire as to why you have graced our humble lodgings?”

Remedios nodded after Gustavo spoke.

“But of course. Like I said earlier, I dislike beating around the bush. After all, doing so makes it easy for one’s words to be misinterpreted or have their meanings twisted.”

There was a sense of reality to the Sorcerer King's words which could not quite be articulated.

"While I have decided to send Momon over in two years, if you will accede to a request of mine, it would not be impossible for me to dispatch someone on par with Momon from the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"On par with Momon?" Remedios could not help but exclaim.

"...May I know the nature of the request which Your Majesty wishes to make? Depending on the nature of the request, I pray you will forgive us if we cannot immediately give Your Majesty an answer."

The Sorcerer King chuckled in response to Gustavo's words, and then he spoke.

"But of course. Given your present state, I can roughly imagine… now, calling you a resistance movement would be a pretty spin on things, but the fact is that you are most likely a band of guerillas hiding in caves, am I wrong?"

Everyone present held their breath.

Neia was no exception.

Why could the Sorcerer King speak about the true nature of their circumstances? How had he divined this? Pinpointing the cave issue was particularly impressive.

The Captain and Gustavo's faces were stony masks, only their eyes turning to look at Neia. They must have thought she had leaked the truth to the Sorcerer King. Therefore, Neia shook her head, to indicate *It wasn't me.*

The Sorcerer King ignored Neia and the others' shock, and continued speaking.

"The strength of the south is untouched, but yet you did not seek to cooperate with them and conduct joint operations. That is because a rift exists between yourselves and the southern nobles. That being the case, once you — who failed to protect the Holy Queen — fall under the command of the new Holy

King, it will probably be very difficult for you to hold on to your previous positions. Therefore, you cannot offer me land, titles, trade concessions, and other such privileges. If you actually kept your words on this matter, the possibility of war with my Sorcerous Kingdom exists, depending on what the next Holy King decides."

The Sorcerer King clearly highlighted the key points of the war with the demihumans, as well as the decisions they had made about their future.

"Similarly, you cannot use your nation's treasures as bargaining capital. For instance, the holy sword which you bear, Captain Remedios. If you actually did try to trade them, the most you could do was treat the country's treasures as having been plundered by Jaldabaoth and then turn them over to me. However, doing so is very dangerous. Should someone inform the next Holy King that said wealth was actually obtained from you, trust in you paladins will most likely sink like a stone. Worthless, in other words. Therefore, all you ladies and gentlemen can do is what you did at the audience chamber, informing me of your plight — mm, I imagine that I have hit the nail on its head, given the expressions on your faces."

After saying all this, the Sorcerer King leaned back against the back of the chair.

Silence filled the room.

Perfect. He was just too perfect.

Neia felt nothing but respect at the Sorcerer King's reading of the situation.

Was this the man they called the Sorcerer King? Neia thought.

Neia had once met the Holy Queen close up, but the Holy Queen had simply greeted her, and Neia had not had the chance to truly interact with a true monarch. To Neia, now was her first time meeting an absolute ruler — one possessed of a dignity and insight that surpassed all others, in addition to incredible might — or in other words, a perfect being. This powerful impact left an indelible impression on Neia's heart.

“That said, anybody could have imagined that. In truth, I am somewhat ashamed of coming in here and smugly spouting all that… I trust you all did not think I had not even considered that much?”

“O-Of course, Your Majesty!” Gustavo replied with a stiff smile on his face.

“Wonderful. If I had been regarded as an idiot who could not even think of that much, I would not be able to face my subordinates who labor for my sake… now then, based on all that, let me be clear about what I want — which would be maids. I want maids.”

Everyone — Neia included — could only stare dumbfounded at the utterly ridiculous words which had just left the Sorcerer King’s mouth.

“…Ah, my apologies. I was being unclear. Mm, how shall I say this? I believe that during our previous meeting, the topic of Jaldabaoth possessing powerful maids came up. Those are what I want. What degree of magical knowledge do you have?”

“None at all.”

After Remedios said so, the Sorcerer King looked around, as though seeking help.

“Is, is that so… well, in that case, I wonder where I should start explaining from… ah, well, that too… Ah — you can imagine that Jaldabaoth has bound the maids to him by some mechanism. Therefore, my plan is to defeat Jaldabaoth, take that formula for my own, and then place the maids under my control. In this way, my country will gain powerful minions.”

“But, but we have not sighted those maids of Jaldabaoth’s…”

Gustavo’s answer made the Sorcerer King chuckle.

“They were sighted in the Kingdom, after all. I find it hard to imagine they were not there. Or perhaps they will not appear until Jaldabaoth is forced into dire straits?”

“Let me repeat myself… we are not sure if the maids actually exist. What will Your Majesty do in the event that the maids do not exist?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I am not asking you to produce something that could substitute for it, in any case. At the very most, I will just write it off as a wasted effort. However, there is the possibility that they might have appeared outside of a maid’s guise, so my request will probably include Jaldabaoth’s subordinates as well. Ahh, that’s right. He might have used some kind of special item to dominate them, so I intend to add a condition that any of Jaldabaoth’s magic items which cannot be determined to be the property of the Holy Kingdom will be mine. It may turn out that the maids which ravaged your Holy Kingdom might end up becoming part of my Sorcerous Kingdom, and in that event I hope I can count on you forgetting your grudges against them since they will then fall under my rule.”

“You mean you want us to forgive people who might devastate our country?”

After Remedios retorted unhappily, the Sorcerer King shrugged.

“That is because I stand to gain nothing else from the Holy Kingdom. Or do you mean to say you have something else to offer me?”

Remedios bit her lip, unable to answer.

“Your Majesty, the Captain means to say that as outsiders, it will be very difficult for us to convince the victims to forget their grudges.”

“Then you will simply have to work hard to convince them,” the Sorcerer King said in a cold voice. “...No, then, just say that the maids were dominated by the Sorcerer King’s magic and taken away. That ought to quell their hatred somewhat, no?”

What would they do? Neia thought as she heard the Sorcerer King speak. If they still refused to accept the Sorcerer King’s terms after he had made this many concessions to them, it was very likely that they would end up with nothing to show for it. It was plain that these were extraordinarily favorable terms for the Holy Kingdom. If they did not seize this chance, then the only word to describe them would be “foolish.”

“That would be quite vexing. Allowing those who ravage—”

“—Your Majesty!” Gustavo shouted over Remedios’s words. “Please allow us to discuss this for a moment! Please give us some time!”

Do you still *need to discuss matters after he’s compromised this much?* Even Neia felt that it would not be strange for the Sorcerer King to rebuke them. But—

“Very well. However, taking too long will cause me problems, and moving around is troublesome. You don’t mind if I wait here, do you?”

Neia could not help but be surprised by the Sorcerer King’s largesse.

“Thank you very much. Then, we shall quickly discuss things. I pray you will be patient, despite the disservice we do you.”

“That’s fine. Go talk it out.”

The two of them rose to leave, and then they returned with surprising swiftness. No, they had already reached the conclusion from the beginning.

“Forgive the delay, Your Majesty.”

“Oh no, go ahead and discuss more, it’s fine. Well then, how goes it?”

“Yes, our conclusion is that we will abide by all of Your Majesty’s terms.”

“I am not asking you to obey me. I am simply making a trade. Well, that doesn’t matter. Now then, while we should put it in writing, I lack the necessary equipment and stamps. Let us discuss this later… You don’t mind if I use the Kingdom’s writing, no?”

“There are people here who can read it, so it is fine. Then, may I trouble you to introduce us to the person who is on par with Momon?”

“Ahh, he is standing before you right now — in other words, myself.”

Silence filled the room once more, and Neia and the others were unable to speak as they stared.

After blinking several times, their brains finally regained the ability to function.

“Your Majesty is as strong as Momon?”

Remedios’s words made Neia freeze in place, but there was a man who had made a move because of these words.

“Please, please wait a moment, Captain. There’s something else we need to ask His Majesty before this.”

Gustavo turned to the Sorcerer King. “Ah, will it really be all right if Your Majesty leaves your nation and goes to the Holy Kingdom? I do not know how much time that will take.”

“That will not be a problem. Unlike Momon, I can use teleportation magic, So long as I can find your base, I can move between it and the Sorcerous Kingdom at any time.”

“B-But, even so, surely having the ruler of a nation come in person is just too—!”

“After listening to me, did you not think that I would be coming in person? I did say I intended to defeat Jaldabaoth and bring the maids under my control, have I not? It would be too much of a stretch to do all that from the Sorcerous Kingdom. In addition, with regards to Captain Custodio’s question, I am stronger than Momon.”

“Then, there should be no problems with that, Gustavo.”

“Of course there’s problems with that! Your Majesty! This jest of yours is really quite vexing for us!”

The Vice-Captain clutched his gut as he shouted that.

“This is no jest. Nobody other than me can defeat Jaldabaoth. In addition, I will be going by myself. I will not bring an army with me. Therefore, I came alone in order to discuss the matter in private with you.”

“But if Your Majesty sustains an irrecoverable injury from Jaldabaoth, that would be very bad for the relationship between our country and the Sorcerous Kingdom!”

“It, it is as Gustavo says. Your Majesty, are there truly no problems in that respect?”

“None at all.”

“But—”

“—Gustavo! I’m still talking. Don’t interrupt me!” After holding out her hand to stop Gustavo, Remedios bowed deeply.

“Then, we will be in Your Majesty’s care.”

♦ ♦ ♦

The air in the room calmed, as if a storm had just passed — and indeed, it had — but Gustavo’s shout echoed off the walls.

“What are you thinking!? Recruiting a king! The king of a country! To fight Jaldabaoth and whatnot!”

Neia agreed with him.

He might not operate by common sensibilities, but this was simply senseless.

Amidst all this, Remedios spoke quietly.

“Say, don’t you think that it doesn’t matter what happens to the undead?”

The room fell silent once more.

"...You have a demon, and you have an undead being. We won't be harmed regardless of who gets wiped out. Don't you think?"

Gustavo's eyes went wide. This was not acceptance of his Captain's opinion, but shock at what his Captain had just said.

"Both of them are enemies of mankind. Then ideally, it would be best if both sides destroyed each other… that said, we won't just sit back and reap the profits. Even if the Sorcerer King is wounded unto death by Jaldabaoth, we will not take advantage of his plight. However, that is all."

Remedios's voice grew louder.

"...Captain. If the Sorcerer King, who controls so many undead, is destroyed, then when these undead are freed, will it not cause an incredible amount of havoc?"

"When the time comes, the Kingdom, the Empire, and the Theocracy will cushion the blow. Of course, we will do our best to aid them as well, but the Holy Kingdom has been too badly ravaged by Jaldabaoth. Until our country recovers its strength, all we can do is cheer them on… From that point of view, our country stands to gain the most from a clash between Jaldabaoth and the Sorcerer King…"

"—Captain!" Gustavo's face was stone as he spoke. "How is this justice?"

"It is. It's all for the sake of our nation. It is to save the people who suffer the most. It isn't like I hope that the seeds of suffering will spread to other countries. I also wish for the victory of the Sorcerous Kingdom as it assists the Holy Kingdom."

Who is this? Neia thought as she looked at Remedios, who was saying all this in a calm, even tone.

Was this really the captain of the paladins of the Holy Kingdom, Remedios Custodio?

Neia was not too clear about her situation. After all, she had always been looking at her from afar. However, she felt that this was a completely different person from the Captain she had heard of.

“Gustavo, you don’t object, right? If you can accept this, then we ought to consider our next move.”

“Our next move, you say?”

“...We have to think about how to properly make use of the Sorcerer King.”

A chill ran down Neia’s spine.

Why am I hearing a conversation like this? Neia thought. No, she was not alone. Peering around, she saw that the paladins standing near her all had the same expression on their faces. Neia must have looked the same way too.

“Gustavo, do you have any ideas?”

“No, no, not at all. Shouldn’t we think about what we should do after bringing the Sorcerer King back with us?”

“Well, if the Sorcerer King isn’t all talk, and he really can fight Jaldabaoth, how about retaking the capital? And then we can ask him to defeat Jaldabaoth right after that.”

“...That would be bad. His Majesty has said that he intends to defeat Jaldabaoth, claim the maids for himself, and then return to his country. Therefore, we ought to leave defeating Jaldabaoth for last in order to reap the greatest benefits… If we follow your suggestion, Captain, we won’t have the strength to defeat the leftover demihumans.”

“Then what do you propose?”

Gustavo paused to think, and then he made a suggestion.

“Let’s increase our numbers first. In other words, we need to rescue our captured comrades from the camps.”

“I see! An excellent idea. After all, there are important people we need to rescue.”

“You mean the members of the royal family, right?”

Remedios agreed with an *Ah*.

Although the Holy Queen had already perished, they had not received news that the entire royal family was dead. If one of them was still alive, perhaps they could use them as a figurehead, and perhaps gain the full cooperation of the southern nobles.

“Also, the nobles we can rescue will surely appreciate their liberators.”

Most nobles had not expressed their approval of the Holy Queen, and by the Captain’s reckoning, there was nobody there who liked her. However, there ought to be some northern nobles with blood ties to the southern nobles. If they did them a favor, they ought to be able to better make a formal request to the southern nobles.

Remedios looked at Neia.

“Squire Neia. Go accompany the Sorcerer King. Make sure you sway him to our side for our sakes.”

“Hah? Haaaahh!?? Please, please wait! I can’t possibly serve a king or something as a squire!”

“All you need to do is work hard on it, no?”

“This isn’t a matter of working hard!”

Usually, she would have agreed immediately, but now she was desperately trying to refuse. This was not something she could casually accept. There must be something wrong with Remedios’s head.

“Th-That’s right! Captain,” Gustavo chipped in. “If we don’t have someone of appropriate status to serve as his handmaiden, it’ll be taken as an insult to His Majesty.”

"...How many other women are there in the Liberation Army?"

Those women who could not fight had long since fled to the south. However, that was not to say that they did not exist. The Liberation Army still had a few women among them. Gustavo was about to name some of them when the Captain cut him off.

"We need a woman from the paladins. If I gave orders to a woman from the priesthood, what do you think the temples would do? My sister's no longer around, you know? Also, the person for this duty should be chosen from people who are present and who have heard my thoughts. Can we force this onto a third party?"

So instead you're pushing it onto me, right, Neia thought, but did not say.

"In that case…"

Gustavo looked at the Captain.

"I need to be fighting on the frontlines, you know? Also, do you want me to go accompany the Sorcerer King? Or should we yield all authority to the Sorcerer King?"

"Even if we're using him, we can't just go out and do that, right? There'll be problems with trust, and if the Sorcerer King sees that we have no fighting power and decides to conquer the Holy Kingdom while he's at it…"

After seeing the tongue-tied Gustavo, Neia realised the fact that their allies might end up turning on them.

"—Understood. While I might not be sufficient for the task, I will work hard and do my best."

"Ahh. I'll tell you this first. Your mission is make the Sorcerer King more easily usable. Flatter him and keep him in a good mood."

This was no longer just an impossible request. It was just plain absurd. She had no confidence that she could do such a thing at all. However, no matter

what she said, Remedios would not change her mind. Neia hung her head in resignation.

“Understood! I will do my best to achieve that aim, and I hope I can count on the aid of everyone here.”

“Good. If there’s anything, just look for me or him (Gustavo).”

Even as despair filled her heart, Neia was surprised that she was actually feeling a little elated.

His Majesty, huh...

3章 反攻作戦開始

Overlord Volume 12

CHAPTER 3

BEGINNING THE COUNTERATTACK

Part 1

The carriage was shaking.

This carriage was the property of the Sorcerer King, and in contrast to its plain appearance on the outside, its interior was classy, refined, and functional to boot. Neia was particularly grateful for the soft cushions that did not hurt her butt no matter how long she sat on them.

Neia peeked at the Sorcerer King, who was seated opposite her and gazing outside.

He may be a fearsome undead king, but she did not feel the oppressive grandeur he had shown when he had met them in the audience chamber.

This was probably because she had spent more time conversing with the Sorcerer King during their journey.

During all this, one thing which Neia had learned was that the Sorcerer King was extremely magnanimous.

It was true that the Sorcerer King acted with the dignity of a sovereign, his every action reflecting his quality as a monarch.

However, when Neia sat in the carriage with him, he would act like an ordinary person from time to time. In addition, these occurrences had been getting more and more frequent recently.

In all likelihood, the Sorcerer King had considered that Neia would be nervous while sharing the same carriage as him, and in his generosity, he had chosen to act more like a commoner. The reason why such incidents were recurring more and more were surely because his skills were improving.

The reason why he did not act that way around the others was probably because they were still playing the role of paladins.

To think he would treat another country's citizens this way… what a compassionate man he is...

What was he looking at? Was he looking at the paladins riding alongside the carriage? Or perhaps something else, something that Neia did not see—

"Hm? Is there something interesting on my face?"

"Eh! —No, my apologies, Your Majesty! There's nothing on your face…"

It would seem she had been staring too intensely at the Sorcerer King. Puzzled, the Sorcerer King touched his face with those bony hands of his.

"I suppose it must be quite awkward to sit in a carriage and not say anything. Yes, in that case, let us speak."

Although she had gotten slightly used to it, conversing with the Sorcerer King always made her stomach ache.

"We are not entirely familiar with each other, so previously I did not ask questions which might have intruded on your privacy, but we have shared the same carriage for several days now. I suppose we can be honest with each other now. Neia Baraja. Can you tell me about yourself?"

"About me?"

Even talking about herself was too vague a topic. She had no idea what she could say to please the Sorcerer King.

"Yes, indeed. For instance, why you wanted to become a squire. What sort of work a squire does. Could you tell me about that?"

“If it pleases you, Your Majesty.”

After bowing her head, Neia began talking about what had been asked of her, but it was hardly an exciting topic. Talking about family and the work of a squire was not particularly interesting.

Besides, I was told not to reveal anything to the Sorcerer King about matters within the country, but this much ought to do.

Rather, if she had to cover up even those details, then there would really be nothing to talk about.

Soon, the drab exposition with no structure ended, and the Sorcerer King nodded deeply.

“I see, I see. So you’re an archer, a rarity among squires, Miss Baraja.”

“My skills aren’t good enough for me to proudly call myself an archer, Your Majesty. I am simply better at archery than swordsmanship, and the truth is that people have scolded me and told me I ought to focus more on training up my sword skills.”

To Neia, an archer was someone like her great father, and she was only a little more talented than a commoner.

“...No, I should say that a paladin candidate who has an affinity for ranged weapons is quite a rare thing. If it were me, I would advise you to hone your bow skills. Since there are others better suited to swordplay, you should let those people handle swordsmanship.”

“—Thank you very much.”

The Sorcerer King’s words were sincere, and it made Neia feel that he was earnestly thinking, *What an odd combination; she must be travelling a path towards a rare vocation*. However, she had no idea what to make of what the Sorcerer King said next, and his mutterings bothered Neia.

“I feel embarrassed about dumping the work of minding me onto you. Nor is it just you; the same goes for the rest of you paladins. The best way to make use of your skills would be to station you outside.”

His gentle words made Neia stare at him.

This was why talking to this king was so bad for her heart.

Not only did he stand at the peak of his country, he was also an individual of overwhelming might. Yet he had not chosen to talk down to her from above, but he had lowered himself until he could see eye to eye with her before engaging her in a conversation.

No! I can’t let His Majesty spoil me like this! If I don’t lower myself a little more—

Neia pulled herself together.

“Everyone knows I have been designated as Your Majesty’s follower, so please do not take it to heart. In addition, there is no job more important than accompanying Your Majesty.”

“Really now… Still, I would like to offer you some form of recompense.”

In the past, the Sorcerer King had mentioned the topic of payment. She had declined, of course, but it would seem he was bringing up that topic again. Neia immediately began to think about how to reject his offer without causing offense, but the Sorcerer King was not finished yet.

“That said, it might not be good to receive a gift from the king of another country. So at the very least, allow me to verbally express my thanks. I believe I have inconvenienced you in many ways, and I hope I will continue to be in your care.”

And then, the Sorcerer King bowed to her.

A king was actually bowing to someone like herself, who was nothing more than a squire.

It was only natural for a king to carry the weight of his nation upon his shoulders. Slighting a king would be the same as slighting the entire country. The idea that a country lived through its king was a very common notion.

In other words, the fact that a king was bowing was the same as a nation bowing. Of course, it was hardly unthinkable when a king did so to someone of high station.

However, Neia was little more than a citizen of another country, and frankly speaking, there was no need for him to apologize to someone of Neia's stature.

I can't believe it. His Majesty is wise and sagacious, and surely he must know the meaning of bowing. Even so, he still bowed to me like an ordinary person— No. Don't get full of yourself. I can't possibly be that valuable. This simply shows how magnanimous the Sorcerer King is; he even treats a commoner politely. —Ah! He mustn't!

"Please do not do that! Your Majesty! Please raise your head!"

Yes. That was what she should have said before anything else.

The Sorcerer King looked up, and Neia sighed quietly. Frankly speaking, if anyone else had seen what had happened just now, something terrible would have happened.

"Your Majesty—"

Neia took a knee within the cramped confines of the carriage's floor.

"Your servant is of humble origins, but I swear that until Your Majesty's work is complete, I will loyally and faithfully serve you."

Since a king had given her his respect, it was only natural that she return it.

Neia ignored the voice in her head which said that he was not the king of the Holy Kingdom, and bowed.

"No, no. Raise your head… Come now, could you take a seat and continue your previous topic? We haven't reached our destination yet, have we?"

“No, not yet.”

She sat back onto the cushion, and looked outside.

“Yesterday, we passed safely through the ruins of the wall by the grace of Your Majesty’s power. We have chosen a route that will make us harder to discover, so it may take a little more time, but I believe we will arrive at our base tomorrow, or the day after.”

Although, said base was just a cave.

“Is that so? Even then, we still have some time, do we not? Tell me about the topic from just now. Also, I have not yet heard why you have your sights set on becoming a paladin. Given your talent for the bow, surely there must have been some other path you could have taken. Why aim to be a paladin? For the sake of justice? Or perhaps to be the pride of your nation?”

“No—” When she narrowed her eyes, what came to mind was her personal experiences. “—My mother was a paladin.”

She was a paladin who was skilled with the sword, completely unlike Neia.

“I see, so you heard something from your mother, or you admired her, hm.”

“Ah, no. My mother often said I shouldn’t aim to be a paladin. And my mother couldn’t do the work of being a mother, and while she could do the laundry and sew, she was completely inept at cooking and that sort of thing. She did everything sloppily, the roast meat was always undercooked, that sort of thing was common.”

Therefore, it was only natural that her father had been the one who cooked in their household. When she was young, she even thought that it was true for all families.

“...Is that so? Well, she still didn’t stop her daughter from becoming a paladin, so I guess she was still a good mother.”

“Ah, no. When I told my mother I wanted to be a squire, she went and took out her sword and said, ‘I’ll let you if you can defeat me!’ and so on. The only reason why I was allowed to become one was because my dad desperately blocked for me. If I had fought her normally I could never have beaten her.”

That was the first time she had understood the meaning of killing intent.

“...Ahhhh, mm, good, how shall I say this… it was a good family… mm.”

“Yes. While the neighbors often looked strangely at us, I thought it was a good family.”

“...Really, how nice… th-then, why, why become a paladin? Did you not think to follow your father’s path— Hm. Was your father a househusband?”

“No, my father was also a soldier who served his country. However, I never really thought of following in my father’s footsteps… why was that. Maybe it’s because dad gave me these eyes, so I sort of ended up resenting him for it…”

Neia pressed her index fingers to the corners of her eyes and tugged them around in circles.

When she was young, her friends often said, *Why are you glaring at me? Are you angry with me?* and the like, and she had often complained to her father for it. After that, Neia had been beaten by her mother, who had overheard her saying so.

Thinking of them was quite nostalgic, Neia thought.

“But perhaps after becoming a squire, I became more open-minded. At some point, I started to think that this was a gift from my father. Well, I could do without the fierce glare, though.”

“How are your parents now?”

“My father fought Jaldabaoth’s army at the wall and died. I lost contact with my mom, and I don’t know what happened with her, but I think she must have died during the defense of the city. After all, she was the sort who would have struggled to the bitter end.”

“It seems I have inquired about a painful topic.”

The Sorcerer King bowed to her once more. Since this was the second time, the impact was not so great. However, it was enough to make Neia feel anxious.

“Please, please raise your head! How could you bow to someone like me!?”

“I thoughtlessly inquired about your dead kin. Although I was not aware of that beforehand, now that I know the facts, an apology is still in order.”

The Sorcerer King tilted his head after he raised it.

No, that’s not right, that’s how it should be between equals. A king is not the equal of a citizen from another country. Moreover, we’re the ones requesting his help...

“Erm— well, such exceptions are everywhere. Er, if someone sees Your Majesty bowing to me — ah — they might look down on Your Majesty, because I’m just a squire, after all.”

“...Umu, I see, you do have a point. That’s how kings are.”

These things are complicated, the Sorcerer King muttered.

He must have meant that it was difficult to mix with people from other nations even if he wanted to show his sincerity, probably.

“Yes. While this cannot begin to count as an apology, I shall lend this to you, Miss Baraja.”

The Sorcerer King swiftly reached into his robe and produced a bow.

—Hah?

It was bigger than what could have been hidden inside his robes. Neia blinked several times, but reality refused to change.

“This is a magic weapon. Use it to protect me.”

Portions of the bow were made with animal parts, but it did not feel raw or gory; instead, she felt an air of holiness around it.

She could tell at a glance. In other words, this bow was a masterwork which needed to be described with the word “super.”

“This is the Ultimate Shootingstar Super, made with the ancient art of runecrafting. For various reasons, I was carrying it on me to lend it out to someone else. Ahh, normally there would be runes carved here, but you can’t see them now because of wear and tear. What do you think?”

Neia used all her strength to suppress the urge to cry out.

Typically speaking, she ought to refuse it. This was very likely to be a national treasure of the Sorcerous Kingdom. However, would anyone lend such a treasure to a follower from another country?

Maybe it just looks *amazing — as if! This, it’s definitely a very powerful weapon!*

“What do you think? Will you not accept it? Your job is to keep me company and protect me, is it not? In that case, it would be good to equip you with a better weapon, am I wrong?”

“Ngh!”

He was right.

Neia felt her head spinning around.

“Ahh, my apologies. Is it because it looks too showy? In that case, I have something more sedate, the Great Bow Special, which is also a product of runecraft.”

Saying so, he reached into his robe again—

“P-Please do not trouble yourself! I am more than satisfied with this one! Please allow me to politely decline!”

Neia's words came out as a mournful cry as she begged the Sorcerer King to stop producing any more weapons. If he took out another weapon in front of her, Neia did not think she would be able to retain her senses, and lending it to her would probably entail that she had to spend the whole day on maintaining it.

"Your Majesty! I humbly accept this Ultimate Shootingstar Super which you have bestowed upon me!"

She took the bow with trembling hands.

Given its accessories and decorations, it looked to be very heavy, yet it felt surprisingly light in the hand. In the moment she took hold of it, she felt her body strengthening, as though power were coursing into it, or was that just due to the shocking lightness of the bow?

Ah, this is bad. I wanted to reassure myself with the thought that this was nothing more than a fancy-looking magic item. This… this is definitely a bad thing. For all I know… This might be better than the holy sword… eh? Wait, wait a minute… no, surely it can't...

"Do you? To me, that's hardly worth being proud of, you know? If you'd like some other — if you'd like a better weapon, please let me know."

This was bad. If this sort of thing continued, if she kept hearing about it, things would become extremely bad. She could not begin to imagine what would happen if a squire ended up with better gear than the top ranking person in the Holy Kingdom.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I am very grateful that you have spent so much time considering someone like myself…"

Letting someone else hold this would be very dangerous, so Neia clutched it tightly to herself.

She smiled to the Sorcerer King while she nodded. While the smile was a little stiff, she had managed to skillfully conceal her thoughts.

“If others see this, tell them I lent it to you.”

Can’t I not let them see it? If possible, I’d rather wrap it up or something — but I can’t do that with a weapon His Majesty lent me to protect him… Ahh… wait, my head’s starting to hurt. So something like this is nothing to be proud of… His Majesty’s standards are just too high… Will I have to pay him back if I damage this bow? Me? Ahhh, my tummy hurts… I wish I didn’t have to think about this bow… Ah!

Neia thought of a wonderful topic she had not yet mentioned.

“Your Majesty! I saw those huge and grand statues of yourself in Your Majesty’s country!”

“—Hoh.”

He responded in a quiet voice that was tremendously different from the one he had used in the past. It made Neia uneasy about whether she had made some sort of mistake.

He had named his country after himself. Thus, Neia guessed that the Sorcerer King was eager to show himself off, which was probably why he had built those huge statues of himself to proclaim his might to those around him.

Did I not praise him enough?

“Those statues not only showed off Your Majesty’s greatness, but they also demonstrated your power as well! We don’t have any statues like that in the Holy Kingdom!”

That was most definitely not a lie. Size notwithstanding, one would need engineering techniques that had been refined down to an art in order to produce such a life-like product. There was a similarly-sized statue of a Sea Dragon at a place called Lighthouse Cape, but it was cruder, and it looked quite pathetic after being worn away by the elements.

“My subordinates often say that.”

Ahhhh, is that it? He's heard praise like that from his subordinates, so this much is only to be expected, is that what he means?"

"My subordinates are now planning to raise statues like these in various places of my nation."

"I see. Indeed, it would be a good way to declare the glory of Your Majesty!"

The Sorcerer King looked at Neia in what seemed like surprise.

"...Uh, mm. Still, I feel that placing statues of myself within my country is a little… how shall I put this? Even so, my subordinates built statues of myself that are over a hundred meters tall in the middle of the city in order to show me off to the world… I think they've gotten carried away with the concept of bigger is better."

"But why is that?"

The Sorcerer King coughed to clear his throat, and that was when a question arose in Neia's mind, *Did the undead still have throats to clear?* However, the Sorcerer King was speaking as that question echoed in her head, and she could not interrupt him.

"A king's greatness cannot be shown with physical objects."

"Ahhh!"

Neia was shocked, but that was only to be expected.

Neia had not only forgotten that the Sorcerer King was undead, but had come to harbor feelings of genuine respect for him.

This man was truly a King.

Suddenly, she saw the Sorcerer King clenching his fist out of the corner of her eye.

“Of course, declaring my greatness to the world by allowing my people to live without impediment is a different matter. But showing it off with statues of myself is… well. I wish to be known by the peace of my rule.”

“It is as you say!”

Neia gulped, and then asked a question.

“Your Majesty is one of the undead, but why do you spend so much time thinking of the people?”

Neia did not think the Sorcerer King’s compassion for the masses was an act. She even began to wonder if he was even undead.

“...I have not spent much time pondering that. But doing that much should be par for the course, no?”

Neia was shocked.

Were all kings such amazing people?

Could the Holy Queen and the nobles rule the people with these thoughts in their heart?

Or — was it because he was undead? Did he have this perspective because he was undead?

Neia could not answer that question.

“Also, if it really was one hundred meters high, there’d be complaints about things like not getting enough sunlight and so on.”

The Sorcerer King followed up with what sounded like a joke, which only served to drill the humility of this incredible monarch into Neia’s heart once more. This man was truly a King of Kings.

♦ ♦ ♦

As the Sorcerer King had pointed out earlier, the Holy Kingdom Liberation Army's base was a natural cave in a mountain.

There was an underground spring in one corner of the cave, and while the ceiling was not very high, it was very spacious, enough for a horse and carriage to enter. In addition, mushrooms, which emitted bluish-white light sprouted all around — around half the height of a man — so they did not need other sources of light.

The reason why they knew of this place was because the paladins had once been sent here to exterminate a monster which had made this location its lair.

After they fled here, they refurbished the place and divided it into several sectors, each serving a different purpose. They had even managed to make their sleeping quarters look like proper rooms. They cut down the trees around the mountain — each of them around one hundred meters tall, and made simple furnishings and furniture from them.

But ultimately, it was just a cave.

There were a total of 347 people here: 189 paladins, 71 priests — including trainees and other such personnel — as well as 87 commoners with nowhere else to go. Naturally, hoping for a private room was out of the question.

Even so, they could not let the king of another country stay with everyone else.

Of course, there was the wish to minimize contact between the undead Sorcerer King and the citizenry of the Holy Kingdom, as well as the desire to keep him from coming into contact with the secret information within their base, and other considerations on the part of the Holy Kingdom.

However, they could not say that they would like him to use teleportation magic so he could take his rest in the Sorcerous Kingdom instead.

In the end, they had to forcibly move others' things away and create a private room for the Sorcerer King.

Under normal circumstances, they would have sent messengers to report the Sorcerer King's arrival and have the others make preparations to receive him, but the Holy Kingdom was now in the thrall of demihumans. They could not send out paladins, who had poor enemy detection abilities, as outriders. In addition, Neia was now in the Sorcerer King's carriage and waiting outside the cave. The people in the cave were frantically moving personal effects and transferring beds and cabinets and the like. In addition, they had already hung up a borrowed flag of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

"...Hm."

"What is the matter, Your Majesty?"

"...While I do not intend to insult you, I have a few questions about all of this which I hope you can answer to the best of your ability. It would seem you are not hiding your tracks; is that not a problem? Or will someone else take care of that?"

The Sorcerer King delivered his question in a flat — as though he was reading off something — tone of voice, and then Neia's eyes went wide.

He was correct.

They would leave tracks in the process of climbing this mountain, which was untouched by human hands.

When one added the hoofprints of the paladins' mounts to them, it would be immediately obvious. In that case, the fact that they had not yet been discovered was pure coincidence. Or was it?

"Your, Your Majesty. We have not performed any concealment work until today; could it be they've deliberately let us off? ...But why?"

Neia's voice trembled as she asked the Sorcerer King her question.

Along this journey, Neia had become fully aware that the Sorcerer King before her was an extremely wise individual. Therefore, she thought that he might immediately supply her the answer, and her thoughts were not mistaken.

"...There are many possibilities for that, but under normal circumstances, that would be the most likely one…"

For a moment, Neia thought that she should not be listening to the Sorcerer King's answer alone, but in the presence of the Captain. However, she could not control the curiosity welling up inside her.

"Could it be because they do not wish to lose track of you — or rather, the Liberation Army?"

"Lose track of the Liberation Army?"

"Hm— well, I apologize for this comparison, but say you've found a nest of rats causing trouble, letting them run hither and yon would be very troublesome, no? The best thing to do would be to wait for all the rats to gather and then eliminate them all in one fell swoop."

He's right! It's just as His Majesty says. I find it hard to imagine any other possibility. He's already thought this much in just a few minutes after coming to this place… it's as though he knows exactly what the enemy is thinking, he's amazing...

"Well, as long as the situation stays the same, there will be nothing to worry about. However, I'm not just talking about the situation here. Changes on the enemy's side might lead to a very high chance of being attacked, which would be troublesome."

Neia felt nothing but awed respect for the Sorcerer King's intelligence as he highlighted the finer points of their circumstances.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty! I shall report this to the Captain right away!"

"Then I shall go too."

"Eh? But surely you must be tired from the long journey. We have prepared a room for you, would it not be better to rest there for a while?"

"Have you forgotten? I am undead, you know? I do not need to rest."

He was right. Neia had completely forgotten that.

The undead were beings who did not feel fatigue. That was why trying to flee an undead being of comparable speed was very difficult, according to her lessons. While that was common knowledge, Neia's experiences with the Sorcerer King had completely shattered her perception of the undead. At times, she even found herself thinking that he was just a human magic caster in a skeletal mask.

"Thank you very much. Then, may I trouble you to come with me?"

"But of course. And there is no need to thank me. Since we are here to defeat Jaldabaoth, we ought to be helping each other out."

While she knew that "we" in this case referred to the Holy Kingdom and the Sorcerer King, it could also be interpreted as talking about Neia and the Sorcerer King. That made Neia feel a little excited.

Eventually, someone knocked on the carriage door from the outside.

"Your Majesty, we have prepared a room for you."

Neia opened the door.

When the paladin outside saw the bow Neia was holding, his eyes went wide in surprise.

This was the first time she had brought the bow she had received from the Sorcerer King outside the carriage. That was because the Sorcerer King had not left his carriage ever since he had lent her the bow. In the end, nobody else had seen it until now.

...You must be surprised, huh? Mm. I understand how you feel. This isn't a weapon you'd let a squire carry...

While the paladin bathed her in his gaze, Neia turned to face the carriage and bowed.

Though she was simply looking at the ground, after sensing that the Sorcerer King had dismounted, Neia raised her head and asked the paladin:

“Sorry, but we need to speak with Captain Custodio, so can you lead us to her? His Majesty says he will be going as well.”

“Ah, ah, yes. Understood. Then, please follow me.”

The paladin — followed by the Sorcerer King, and then Neia — entered the cave.

The bluish-white illumination from the mushrooms was creepy. In places where the mushrooms were particularly prolific, monstrous shadows danced on the walls in the spaces between the mushrooms. In addition, their bluish-white light made her look like a corpse, but mysteriously enough, she did not mind it now.

As they walked through the cave, they occasionally saw commoners and priests, as well paladins standing watch.

They should have heard all about him from the Captain and the others who had gone ahead of them, but they still could not help gawking at the Sorcerer King.

It’s kind of rude, though...

The Sorcerer King would not get angry, right? He was a very kind ruler. However, the kinder people were, the more frightening they tended to be when they did get angry.

Should she tell them they were being very rude, in order to avoid such an event? However, she could not go and tell each and every one of them in person, and it was not a problem that could be resolved by words alone anyway. After all, to the citizens of the Holy Kingdom — to all of the living — the undead were fundamentally the enemy.

I’ll tell the Captain about this later… well, it’s good that they haven’t drawn their weapons.

Suddenly, Neia sensed that the Sorcerer King had produced a piece of paper, and that he was looking at the letters written on it. Although Neia was interested in what was written there, she could not see the letters owing to the way it was concealed within his hand.

Finally, they were brought to a room that was partitioned off by a hanging curtain, and the sounds of a noisy exchange of opinions came from inside.

“Captain Custodio. The Sorcerer King and Squire Baraja have arrived.”

The interior fell silent.

The paper in the Sorcerer King’s hand had vanished to places unknown.

“Let them in.”

After hearing the Captain’s voice, the paladin pulled away the curtain.

The paladins and the priests who rose to welcome the Sorcerer King — the ones who had not been part of the delegation — had a complex blend of emotions in their eyes. Even Neia could sense this. Naturally, the Sorcerer King must have felt it too. However, there was no way to tell how he had reacted to it just by looking at his back.

There’s no way His Majesty can’t feel the mood in the air… perhaps he simply doesn’t care about the petty fumblings of tiny men. Is this the bearing of a king?

“Everyone, listen up. Before us stands His Majesty, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. Unable to ignore the plight of our nation, he has specially come here on his own to aid us. You will accord him all due respect!”

After Remedios said so, everyone in the room bowed to the Sorcerer King.

Once everyone had raised their heads, the Sorcerer King spoke in a grand tone.

“Greetings. I am the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown. I have come to this land in order to help you, not on the behalf of my nation, but in a personal capacity. Therefore, while this might be a little sudden, I have noticed a few things on

my way here, so I wish to seek your opinions on the matter. Please allow my follower to explain."

The Sorcerer King stepped aside, allowing Neia to walk past and in front of him.

"Excuse me, everyone. Allow me to explain what His Majesty said earlier."

Neia relayed the Sorcerer King's questions to everyone present. After the short speech, a heavy silence filled the room.

"...Then what does His Majesty propose we do?"

Remedios addressed her question to Neia, who stood by his side.

"No, before that, what do you think? I have only come to do battle with Jaldabaoth, not to lead you all. If I end up participating too heavily in your strategic planning sessions, do you not think things will become very troublesome after defeating Jaldabaoth?"

Murmurs spread through the room.

"...Or do you mean to say you will subordinate yourself to my command? In that case, I will also use the most appropriate means to save this nation."

That ought to be the best way to do it, right? His Majesty might be undead, but everything he says makes perfect sense. He will surely abide by any agreements he makes too. Right now, at this very moment, if you want to save the suffering people, bending the knee to another country's king for a time ought to be the right choice to make, no?

"The only one who may stand above us is Her Majesty, the Holy Queen. Regretfully, we cannot accept commands from the king of another nation."

However, Remedios promptly rejected the offer.

"—!"

You should be willing to do anything to save the people! Wasn't that the reason why we're using the king of another nation, and such an incredible king at that!?

Neia hung her head. That was to hide the dark, muddy emotions which stuck to the interior of her chest.

"May we inquire as to what course of action Your Majesty would take in our position?"

"If it were me, hm? Well, the logical thing would be to immediately move your base to a new location, no?"

"A new location…"

Everyone in the room, Remedios included, had a distressed look upon their face. That was because they did not know of any other place which was suitable as a hideout.

"Judging by your response, I guess you do not know. In that case, you need to plan your future operations under the assumption that the quicker you move, the sooner Jaldabaoth's army will attack you. ...Then, since that is all, I will retire to my room."

Just as Neia was about to follow him, the Sorcerer King held out his hand to stop her.

"Forgive me, but I would like you to stay here and listen to the others' opinion on my behalf, Miss Baraja."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

While he had not acknowledged her as one of his people, it would seem the Sorcerer King was treating her as a substitute for himself. In that case, if she did not properly complete this task, he would be disappointed. Just imagining the Sorcerer King being disappointed made her heart flutter for some reason.

"I can count on you, then? You don't mind, do you, Captain Custodio?"

"If Your Majesty permits it, we will not object."

After hearing that, the Sorcerer King turned to leave with the paladin assigned to be his guide.

Once he vanished around a corner, a priest spoke up.

“So that’s the Sorcerer King… Captain Custodio. Will it really be all right? I hope the cure is not worse than the disease. That would be very troublesome.”

“Indeed. Taking future poison to escape present agony… is that not what paupers do?”

“We’ve talked about this before, haven’t we? Don’t make me repeat myself. The poison’s already in us now.”

Not His Majesty, huh. They aren’t going to address him with respect?

Neia was irritated by the dramatic change in attitude they had shown the moment the Sorcerer King was gone.

If one understood the attitude of the citizens of the Holy Kingdom towards the undead, then their attitude was only to be expected. Rather, it was Neia’s displeasure which was abnormal. Why did she feel unhappy about this?

“Well, he’s still useful now, so it can’t be helped… and we’ve concretely seen how he can help us… but as priests, we might have trouble neutralizing that poison, no?”

What do you mean, useful? Someone notices a mistake we made and even goes on to supply a solution, but not only are they ungrateful, they’re still thinking about how to use him— Ah, so that’s it. That’s what I sensed from His Majesty, something which the Holy Kingdom now lacks… a sense of integrity. That’s why I feel like this...

How much of his grace had she received?

After sharing a carriage with him, she had been given the chance to realize the fact that despite being one of the undead, the Sorcerer King was a king that was worthy of respect.

Therefore, what she felt for these people would be more accurately termed "pity."

"Speaking of which, Squire Baraja. What's that bow you're carrying?"

"Ah, yes. His Majesty said that he would lend me this weapon for the duration of my assignment."

"...May I take a look at it, Squire Baraja? I wish to see if the bow is enchanted with any sinister magic."

The priest extended his hand to her.

Normally, she would have handed it to him. However—

"Please permit me to refuse."

The priest was stunned. It was a face that said he had not expected to be denied.

"This is a weapon I have received from His Majesty in order to protect his person. I will not allow it to leave my hands."

She would not allow someone who was only thinking of using an ally to touch it for even a single moment. Neia lowered her head as she replied to keep the anger in her heart from showing in her eyes.

"—Captain Custodio, what's the meaning of this?"

"Ahhh, Squire Baraja, hand that bow—"

"In other words, you don't mind if I report this to His Majesty, then?"

The air in the room froze over.

"Enough. I understand. Let's continue talking."

Hmm~ so at least they still know that things will go poorly for them if His Majesty finds out.

"Before that, Captain Custodio, would it not be better to let Squire Baraja return to the Sorcerer King—dono's side?"

Neia noticed one of the priests glancing at the bow for just a moment.

Neia understood the meaning he was trying to convey, but despite the anger boiling in her heart, she did not let it spill over to her words or actions.

"I apologize, but I am here to listen to everyone's words by order of His Majesty. I would be very grateful if you would let me continue to remain here and listen to your words from the side."

"True enough… Gustavo. What do you think we should do?"

"His Majesty said so in front of all of us. If we have her leave now, it will probably cause more problems in the future."

"That's true. So we'll let her remain, then?"

Is this something you should be saying in front of the person in question? As Neia thought this, she bowed in silent gratitude.

"Now then, following on what the Sorcerer King has said, what should we do? Does anyone have any ideas about leaving this place and looking for a new refuge?"

Perhaps someone with her father Pavel's ranger skills might be able to find a place for this many people to stay for extended periods. However, there was nobody like that here.

"The Sorcerer King — His Majesty said earlier that if we do not do anything, Jaldabaoth will not make a move either. In that case, why not search for a new place before they take action?"

That suggestion, made by one of the paladins, met with scattered approval. However, Neia knew very well that putting the matter off would not solve

anything. In the end, all it would do was cause a pileup of problems in the future.

“The problem isn’t just finding a new place, but also the matter of provisions. While this is winter so food is easy to preserve, finding enough to tide us through the entire season is not easy. Even if we have not secured the Kingdom’s cooperation, shouldn’t we at least buy some food from them? Wouldn’t that help things?”

“Unfortunately, prices are unbelievably high on the Kingdom’s side. Also, even if we did manage to buy the food, we’d need a massive amount to sustain this many people for several months, so transporting it would be very difficult.”

“Vice-Captain-dono, I understand what you’re trying to say. However, there won’t even be anything to discuss without that food. In the end, we need some way to get rations from the south, no? Or perhaps shift our base closer to the coastline, so we can ship it in from the Kingdom.”

“Unfortunately, we lack the funds for that, and we didn’t get a good response from the Kingdom’s traders. As for getting it from the south…”

Gustavo smiled bitterly as he replied:

“They probably haven’t realised that danger is drawing near for them. Our navy is being slowly worn down. It’s like they’re taking a step closer to the chopping block with each day that passes.”

“So we need something to make the south want to help us, is that it?”

“The base, the food, our problems are piling up.”

“...As for resurrecting the Holy Queen-sama… can it be done? After all, once we can get that settled, everything else will be moot.”

“Unfortunately, according to what we learned from Blue Rose, even that fifth tier spell will have a hard time working without a corpse, or if it’s badly-damaged.”

“...Can we count on His Majesty’s power?”

“You want to borrow the power of the undead?”

“Things being what they are, what else can we do? If the Holy Queen-sama were to be resurrected, then only the main problem (Jaldabaoth) would remain.”

Everyone’s eyes turned to the sour-faced Remedios.

“—Let’s set that aside for the moment. We discussed this while travelling through the other countries, but our main objective will be to attack the camps and liberate the people.”

Many people nodded in agreement.

“I see. All of the Holy Kingdom’s people are combat-trained. In that case, just freeing a single village will grant us a certain amount of fighting strength… assuming they’re willing to help, of course. However, in that case, wouldn’t that make the food problem worse?”

“That’s why I’m saying we should attack the camps. There ought to be food there.”

“I see! That’s Captain Custodio for you!”

Remedios smiled as she heard one of the paladins say so.

However, Neia’s eyes were cold as she looked at the smug Remedios. After all, she knew who that suggestion had come from.

“Also, with the help of the people, we’ll continue attacking and liberating the camps in various locations. That way, we’ll be able to find nobles with ties to the south. We’ll gather their troops before Jaldabaoth can destroy us and strike him a crushing blow. That ought to keep them from doing anything too.”

“I see!”

This time, there were more voices of agreement.

“We’ll go with that. In that case, Squire Baraja, go relay this to the Sorcerer King—”

“—Please wait, Captain. I feel it would be better if I told him myself. It would be the basic courtesy to show a nation’s king when informing a king about our operations.”

Gustavo was correct, but for some reason, something seemed off.

However, Neia could not object to this without knowing what that was.

“Very well. Do so, then. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Understood!”

♦ ♦ ♦

Neia and Gustavo returned to the Sorcerer King’s room together. Its door was little more than a piece of cloth, but a paladin still stood in front of it. Was he there to look out for people who might harm the guest within, or watch over the guest himself?

After being ordered to stand down by Gustavo, the paladin left.

Neia mentally furrowed her brow.

Since he had sent away the guard, coming here definitely meant he had something else in mind besides telling him about the plan. It was hard to imagine that they would want to assassinate him. However, should that really come to pass, then she would need to wield her weapon as the Sorcerer King’s shield.

“Your Majesty, this one is Gustavo Montanjes; I and Squire Neia Baraja seek your permission to enter.”

After it was granted, Gustavo took a step into the room.

When one recalled the inns they had seen in the Kingdom and the Sorcerous Kingdom, this place seemed terribly austere. This was no place for a nation's king to rest.

There was nothing to be done about the fact that the cave walls were bare rock, but even the furniture was in in a sad state.

While paladins learned to sew during their squire days, it was not enough for them to make furniture.

However, the bed where the Sorcerer King sat was extremely beautiful. It gleamed with black radiance, like it was made of onyx. In addition, there were pure white sheets upon it.

Anyone else would have been scared senseless by the sight of this beautiful bed which had been produced from places unknown. However, to Neia, she had long since come to think that such matters were nothing to to be hung up about when it came to the Sorcerer King. Besides, it was possible that he had simply teleported home and came back with a bed.

Still, it was a different matter for Gustavo, who did not know the Sorcerer King like Neia did.

"Your, Your Majesty. What, what is that?"

"Oh, this?" The Sorcerer King indicated his bed. "I made it with magic. As for this blanket, well, I also made it with magic. That said, I have no idea where this one hundred percent wool came from, but it feels good to lie down on. I'm sure you could have a comfortable rest on it."

Even after receiving that answer, all Gustavo could do was stiffly reply, *Ah, ahh*. However, Neia did not have an intention to criticize him for it. After all, she too was looking into the distance and thinking, *Magic really can do anything~*

"Now then, I understand why Miss Baraja has returned. But why have you come as well, Vice-Captain-dono?"

“Ah, ah, yes! While I have no intention of slighting Squire Baraja, I felt that it would be more appropriate, as the Vice-Captain, to conduct the upcoming briefing myself; hence my presence here.”

“Hm… if that is what you all think, then I as an outsider have no room to disapprove. However, I would like to say something.”

Just then, something black seemed to blend with the crimson points of light which served as the Sorcerer King’s eyes.

“I gave her those orders because I felt she could carry them out. Interfering in the matter by weight of your position as a superior is comparable to slighting my judgement. I trust you understand how that would displease me, no?”

Until now, no matter how he had looked at her, no matter how he had treated her, the Sorcerer King had never once shown Neia his unhappiness. However, for the first time, he was showing his anger before Neia. This anger was born from his trust in Neia, and it caused a current of heat to course through her chest. He was the only one who held that opinion of her.

“I sincerely apologize!”

“That apology should be directed at her. Still, well, nevermind. Go ahead and brief me.”

Gustavo briefly summarized the details of what had been said, but his only answer was a vague *Hmm.*

“I see. Then — what do you expect me to do? Or are you saying you have truly come just to inform me of this?”

“Of course not; I wished to ask if Your Majesty had any opinions about this operation.”

So that was it.

He wanted to borrow the intellect of the Sorcerer King. That was what had worried Neia about his insistence on coming along. Ordering that paladin away was also for that reason. If he overheard what Gustavo said, if he learned

that the Vice-Captain had bowed his head to the king of another country, who was also one of the undead, things would go very badly indeed.

At this point, what's the use of covering things up...

It was plain to see that they were helpless without the might of the Sorcerer King. That being the case, news of this would certainly circulate throughout the people. It was only a matter of whether it took place sooner or later.

What the people of the Holy Kingdom should have done was to spread the word of the Sorcerer King's mercy and compassion throughout the land, and then treated him with gratitude.

While I understand they're wary of him because he's one of the undead, I don't think the Sorcerer King's that kind of man...

Still, even if Neia told everyone, it was likely that no-one would believe her. They might even think she was the subject of a 「Charm」 spell or similar magic.

What can I do to make everyone trust the Sorcerer King? In the end, it seems I'll need to do something to change the first impression of him. However, I can't possibly say something rude like, "Please let more people accompany you…"

While Neia pondered the matter, the Sorcerer King was still speaking to Gustavo.

"…No, I've already said this. I will not comment on your battle plans."

"I pray you will furnish us with a solution on this point, because we have nowhere left to go. We would like to avoid the possibility of failure, however slight."

"And that is the reason why I will not. If you heed my suggestions and the operation ends in a failure, what shall be done? I do not intend to shoulder that responsibility, you know?"

"Yes. Therefore, I feel that what we discuss here should remain with my heart, that of Your Majesty's, and Squire Baraja's."

“Miss Baraja too? Would it not be better not to let her hear this?”

“No, for various reasons, it would be better if there was a third party other than ourselves present. Also, with someone of her skills around, we might be able to come up with more ideas.”

“...Hm, then we may briefly discuss the matter. Miss Baraja, I trust you are fine with this?”

“Ah! Yes, I don’t mind.”

“In that case… there were several points in the operation you suggested just now which bothered me. The first is the question of rations. I agree that there might be food stocks in the prison camps, but I do not feel there will be much there. When you think about it, do you think they would feed their captives properly? If it were up to me, I would decrease their daily food intake and weaken them so they would have no chance to revolt. Also, there is the matter of pressing them into service as soldiers after rescuing them. What about their weapons? Have you transported them to this cave?”

“No, we have not. I would like to think we could obtain those from the camps.”

“Your plan of wagering everything on these camps is very dangerous. You do understand this, right?”

“Yes. However, saving the people suffering in there is very important.”

“On that point I concur. The more time passes, the less they will love this country. However, it would be best to do something about the food situation. In truth, I feel that seeking the aid of the south is the best choice in many ways. What can be done to accomplish that more easily?”

“The royal family will help. While the Holy Queen-sama has already passed away, I do not think all the royals have been wiped out. We could aid the members of the royal family supported by the southern nobles, and then have them ask the southern nobles to cooperate with us. If we did that, we would also have a safe refuge… speaking of which, Your Majesty. The Holy Queen is dead, but perhaps Your Majesty could do something about it?”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Resurrection.”

“I see. That is not impossible.”

He said so in such a casual tone that Neia doubted her ears for a moment. Resurrection magic could be considered the ultimate secret of divine magic. Very few humans could use it. How many people in this world could speak those words so easily?

“Naturally, I will expect some form of compensation for this. Then where is the body? In what state is it?”

“The body’s location is currently unknown, as is its status. On the subject of compensation, we will gladly pay as much money as Your Majesty desires.”

The Sorcerer King waved his hand before his face.

“The lack of a body will make things very difficult. Even with one, damage to the body might complicate matters. Without an intact corpse, there is a chance that if I used resurrection magic, it might become one of the undead.”

“That, that would be very problematic for us.”

The Holy Queen becoming an undead being would not just be problematic, it might plunge the entire Holy Kingdom into war.

“Are there no magic casters in the *Holy* Kingdom which can use resurrection magic of the fifth tier?”

“I apologize, but I have not heard of any.”

“Hoh… and what about the remaining members of the royal family?”

“They are probably in one of the internment camps. After so long, I doubt any of them are still hidden within the cities.”

“Ho, prisoners, then? ...Do you have any information on where they might be?”

“None at all,” Gustavo replied with a shake of his head. The Sorcerer King looked at the ceiling.

“Umu. You really are making this up as you go along, aren’t you?”

“Indeed, it is so. Nobody among the paladins is skilled at collecting information…”

“Is that so…” The Sorcerer King hmmed to himself. “As I thought, a solid organization to allow every subordinate to deal with all kinds of situations is essential. In addition, one needs multiple intelligence-gathering apparatuses.”

“There-therefore, we were hoping to draw on Your Majesty’s might. May I know if you could help us with your magic?”

“Well, magic is not that omnipotent… for starters, we need detailed information on the prison camps. I trust you have a detailed map for me to peruse?”

“My sincerest apologies—”

“I do not think there is one here; shall I fetch one?” Neia interrupted halfway.

Maps were the treasure of a kingdom. The more accurate they were, the more useful they were in battle. Allowing a possible enemy nation to know so much about one’s geography did far more harm than good. Therefore, Gustavo must have been planning to refuse him.

However.

Neia could not concede on this point.

She could not tolerate their one-sided usage of the Sorcerer King.

If they wanted to draw on his wisdom, they would have to pay that price.

Although Gustavo stared daggers at her, Neia pretended that she had not noticed.

“Ah, in that case, let me take a look at it afterwards. Also, I apologize, but do tell me everything you know about the terrain, Miss Baraja.”

“Understood!”

After the two of them spoke to each other, Gustavo pulled aside the curtain and left. Once the sounds of his footsteps faded away, the Sorcerer King muttered:

“You don’t have to worry about it. I came here for my own gain, that’s how valuable Jaldabaoth’s demon maids are.”

“Yes.”

He must have been talking about the maps.

Neia’s chest burned. Truly, it was a joyful thing to have everything you did validated by others.

“Still, this really is pushing it. I’m surprised an organization that splinters so easily has held out for so long.”

“—My deepest apologies.”

“No, there’s no need to apologize to me… however, it’s quite troublesome when an organization isn’t united. Do you not use majority vote when a difference of opinion occurs? And of course, a rule to not hold grudges whatever the outcome.”

“How wonderful it would be if we could unite the group in that way. It sounds like a dream organization.”

“Mm… wonderful, you say?”

The Sorcerer King suddenly looked at the ceiling, but his eyes seemed to be gazing at something further away.

“Yes, that truly was the organization of my dreams.”

“Could it be that Your Majesty’s nation is organized along those lines?”

“Ah, ahhh. No, not like that. Unfortunately, my country is not such a group. Still… kuku.”

The Sorcerer King went quiet, and then he laughed warmly,

“It would be interesting if it was.”

“Interesting, you say?”

“—Now then, can you tell me about the surrounding area?”

Part 2

A group of people forged through the night towards a prison camp.

They had decided to adopt the Sorcerer King’s suggestion of attacking the prison camp by the shore which was as far from their base as possible. It would be easier to hide their tracks by the sea, and given the distance, they would be able to buy some time before the enemy verified the location of the Liberation Army after the attack.

However, there was a problem.

If it was too far, the chances of being spotted by enemy scouts was very high.

Therefore, they decided to attack the furthest prison camp within their travel range.

Neia asked a question of the Sorcerer King, who was riding a horse beside her.

“Your Majesty, we will be making our approach on horseback until we reach the village. Are your preparations complete?

“Ah, but of course. However… I did not hear much about the operation details. What sort of tactics will they use? I do look forward to it.”

“You look forward to it?”

“Kuku, I’ll be able to see some of the Holy Kingdom’s tactics at work. What abilities will they use to break down the camp gates? Or will they fly over the walls and infiltrate through the air? I doubt they will be so unwilling to let me see that… The thought that they might have an ability I have not encountered excites me.”

The Sorcerer King will surely be disappointed, Neia thought uneasily.

The Holy Kingdom’s basic siege tactic was to launch a two-pronged attack with angels from the air and infantry from the ground. They would probably do the same thing this time round. Or rather, they did not have the manpower to do anything else.

Neia looked at Remedios.

Practically all of the Liberation Army’s fighting power was now advancing.

The Captain raised her lance, from which the Holy Kingdom’s flag fluttered in the wind.

“Let’s go!”

“Ohhh!”

The Captain spurred her horse, which began to move, and the paladins followed behind her. They were still some distance from the village, so they could not go at a full gallop, but a trot.

“The paladins are carrying freshly-cut logs; are they battering rams?”

“Yes. Our Liberation Army only has paladins and priests. Nobody is skilled at opening doors or other infiltration skills. Therefore, all we can do is mount a frontal assault. Our Captain is a skilled swordswoman, but for breaking down gates, tools like that would be faster.”

“So they’re not using magic, but seek to physically break it down with a battering ram? Aren’t they going to use ladders or the like? Can the magic of paladins carry them over walls?”

There were several broad types of spells, like arcane, divine, and spiritual. The magic that the paladins used fell into the “other” category, and they typically cast spells in the form of blessings. Dark knights, who were fallen paladins, also used blessing spells.

From what Neia had seen and heard, there were no spells which let them make ladders.

“I apologize, but I have never heard of such magic before.”

“Neither have I. That said, I have heard that there are some paladin spells which allow them to fly, although those are of quite a high tier.”

“Is that so? You even know about paladin spells…”

Truly, he was the Sorcerer King. He possessed great knowledge even about spells he could not cast.

“That’s because the enemy might use them. It took a lot of effort to memorize every spell there was. Since I was not talented, I had to make up for it with hard work. The more you know, the closer you are to victory, although that was what a friend told me, hm.”

She could not believe what he said about having no talent. However, there was something more important that she had to say.

“Your Majesty, if you have any strategies to recommend, I will relay them to our Captain.”

It was quite likely that someone as capable as the Sorcerer King had already come up with a more effective plan than what the Liberation Army had. That was why he was acting this way.

“Eh? No, no, I shouldn’t. Ah, well— about that. Liberating this prison camp is not my job, but yours. Attacking these prison camps is the first step in finding a better way to do things. They need to realize that themselves, which is why it must be done this way.”

The Sorcerer King was right. Or rather, everything he said was right.

However, just for today, Neia wanted to borrow the Sorcerer King’s strength. That was because their war was fought to save the suffering masses, and she wanted to choose a path which was faster and which could save more people.

“I fully agree that what Your Majesty said is correct. However, I pray you will still lend us a hand.”

She immediately knew she was being very rude. However, Neia still bowed her head and pleaded with the Sorcerer King anyway,

The Sorcerer King looked forward for a while before speaking again.

“Umu… Neia Baraja. Don’t make me repeat myself so many times. Failure is the mother of success. The consequences of not relying on me and instead thinking for yourself, even if they should end up being failure, should not be feared, but embraced. This is because they are the failures necessary for success.”

The Sorcerer King’s words stabbed at Neia’s heart. She could not keep asking the Sorcerer King to help. The Sorcerer King was saying that the consequences of planning on their own were a necessary sacrifice for the recovery of their nation.

Indeed, it was as His Majesty said.

But with the power of the Sorcerer King, they might be able to save more lives.

Would sacrificing them for the sake of self-reliance be justice?

What was justice, anyway?

Was saving more lives justice? Or—

Her thoughts went around in circles, and she could not find an answer.

“Now then, let us look forward to their skills.”

Right now, Neia was simply praying that the many sacrifices they would make would not be wasted.

The group advanced towards the prison camp in a straight line.

The terrain around the village was uneven, but there were watchtowers. If they made a direct approach, they would definitely be spotted. However, it was also a fact that this was the only way they could attack.

Soon, they spotted the village.

There seemed to be sentries on the watchtower above the gate. They banged on the alarm bells, and a commotion arose from within the village.

Neia narrowed her eyes, and stared at the watchtower.

The demihumans there looked like bipedal goats, wearing chain shirts and carrying large spears.

If Neia recalled them correctly, those demihumans were known as Bafolk.

They were a demihuman species who lived in mountainous regions, and their legs were every bit as capable as a mountain goat, making them fearsome warriors who could scale even city walls if they had so much as the slightest bump or depression on their surface. In addition, their fur tangled on slashing swords and steadily blunted their edges, so after killing one, it was important to clear the fur off the blade, or so her father had taught her.

The Bafolk’s spears were long enough that they could stab people passing underneath from above.

She mused that things would be troublesome if they immediately strengthened their defense. However, they did not seem that well drilled,

given how they were running around wildly and giving their side a lot of time to prepare.

The priests dismounted, and immediately summoned angels.

The paladins also dismounted, and raised their shields. This was probably to protect the people carrying the battering rams from attacks.

However, not all the paladins were like that. About ten or so people remained mounted and began circling around the village.

“Miss Baraja, I trust dispersing some troops around the area is meant to intercept any demihumans from the camp who are trying to flee with intelligence about this battle? If anyone gets away, then even if you win the battle, you will lose in the long run.”

“That, that’s it! It’s just as you say!”

He had seen through the paladins’ tactics with such ease. The only thing Neia could say about him was that he was amazing.

Still, that raised a question. Where had the Sorcerer King learned such tactics from?

A being with a demihuman’s tough skin would not wear armor on top of it. With sharp claws, one would not need swords. Humans wore armor and carried swords because of their fragile bodies.

If there was no need to rely on one’s wits, then tactics would naturally be unnecessary too. Why did the overwhelmingly powerful Sorcerer King know of siege tactics?

“Your Majesty, may I know where you acquired such knowledge?”

“Hm? By knowledge you mean— ah! My predictions just now? Umu.Those tactics were taught to me by one of the friends I mentioned before. After that, I tested them out in live combat. Well, I learned a lot of things, but I didn’t expect them to be put to practical use here.”

"...Since he was Your Majesty's friend, surely he must have been very strong too?"

"Oh yes. Well, his strength was not in melee or magic, but in another field. In that sense, I have not yet attained his level of strength yet."

Huhu, the Sorcerer King laughed happily. It was the kind of laugh one had when reminiscing about the past.

Right now, he seemed just like a human being.

Could it be that the Sorcerer King was once human...?

Perhaps he had transformed himself into one of the undead with the power of magic, but that would be a perplexing matter. That should not have been possible. To Neia's knowledge, the undead were naturally occurring things. However—

The world is large, after all.

Neia's journey with the ambassadorial delegation had let her realise how tiny the world she once knew had been.

Across the ocean, beyond the mountain, and in the depths of the forests — there ought to be something out there. The sages who could scoff at Neia's problems and tell her the answers ought to be out there too.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Ah, my, my apologies."

"No, I am not blaming you. I was a little worried when I saw you spacing out on horseback… the battle is about to begin, and I understand if you're uneasy."

"Th-Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

Just then, Remedios planted her banner in the ground and drew her holy sword.

“Everyone! The first battle to save this land from Jaldabaoth is about to begin! Justice shall triumph!”

There was a heated response of “Justice shall triumph!” to Remedios’s shout. Once they gathered, they began their charge.

“So it’s begun. Miss Baraja, would it not be better to move up if you wish to fight?”

“No, my duty is to accompany you, Your Majesty. Abandoning Your Majesty to fight—”

Is something I cannot do, Neia shook her head.

“Hm, mm, is that so? Then, then let’s talk about something else… You haven’t lent that weapon to anyone else, have you?”

“Not even once! This is a weapon I borrowed from Your Majesty! I would not dare allow anyone other than myself to touch it!”

“Ah… really now. Umu, I suppose. I thank you.”

His tone sounded a little depressed, but there was no way to divine his intentions from it.

Have I done something to offend His Majesty? ...I’m not too sure what’s going on, but perhaps I should apologize?

While Neia was waffling, the Sorcerer King changed the topic.

“Ah — this is a rare opportunity. I looked around our surroundings, but I did not discover any demihumans hiding with invisibility magic. Perhaps we should move forward a little to observe the battlefield conditions. I doubt there’ll be any problems with leaving the priests here… What do you think?”

“Understood.”

It would be very disrespectful to tell the Sorcerer King — who possessed might which far exceeded her own — that moving to the front would be dangerous.

As the sound of bells rang through the prison camp, she stayed close to the Sorcerer King as he moved up. That was when the fighting began.

The angels attacked the watchtowers on top of the gate, and the Bafolk there met them with their spears.

The archer towers launched arrows. They were not aiming at the angels, but at Remedios as she led the charge. It was only natural to aim for her, given that she was not carrying a shield and there was no chance of hitting friendlies.

However, her strength was far removed from the others.

She easily cut down all the arrows coming at her with her sword, maintaining her speed as she ran.

As if to counterattack, several angels rushed the archer tower. Shortly after that, three Bafolk corpses fell from the tower.

This was when the paladins reached the gate and began pounding on it with the battering ram.

The log doors began to shake, and there was a faint sound of cracking from inside, along with the cries of the paladins going, “One more time!”

The gate shook again, more violently than before.

And then the battering ram struck again.

One of the logs making up the gate bent heavily, and they could hear the paladins’ cries of triumph even from here. While the gap was not yet big enough to let people in, they ought to be able to break the gate down completely after several more tries.

Several angels flew past the gate. Neia could not see what they were doing from here, but they were probably trying to hold off the Bafolk defenders.

“—Get back, all of you!”

All eyes went to the source of that shout.

It came from a watchtower above the gate. The angels should have taken that place. Yet, a single Bafolk appeared there. However, the problem lay in what the Bafolk was carrying.

“Get back!” the Bafolk shouted again.

The Bafolk was holding a girl, aged around six or seven, and he had a sharp blade to her throat.

“If you don’t back off, I’ll kill this human!”

The girl was dressed in filthy clothing — her face looked dirty too — and her body shook from side to side. Was she still alive? They could not detect any signs of life from her. It seemed to speak for how everyone inside the camp had been treated.

“You’re despicable!” one of the paladins shouted.

“Hurry up and back off! Look!”

There was a commotion among the paladins. What had happened? Even Neia could not see what was happening at this range and at night. However, it was different for the Sorcerer King.

“...The child’s throat seems to be bleeding.”

“Could it be!?”

“It was just a nick; she is not dead yet. Otherwise her value as a hostage would—”

“—Everyone, fall back!”

The paladins obeyed Remedios's command and moved back.

Although the priests in the rear had a hard time grasping the situation, they still understood what was going on, and they pulled the angels back. At the same time, the priests ran up to Neia and the Sorcerer King. They had probably come closer to see what was going on.

"Further! Go further back!"

After the Bafolk said so, the paladins began retreating slowly.

They could see the Bafolk hurriedly swapping positions atop the watchtower. They swapped the people who had been wounded in the earlier battle with the angels for fresh fighters.

"This is bad."

"Yes, very bad."

Neia slowly raised the bow she had been lent. The Bafolk seemed to be using the girl as a shield. Therefore she had a very small space in which to aim for. Killing it in one hit would be very difficult.

Even so, if she did not do it, who would?

I wish I'd practiced my bow skills more, Neia thought as she drew an arrow from her quiver.

Just then, the Sorcerer King swiftly held out a hand, as if to block her shot.

"I don't intend to insult you, but you should stop. There's no longer any point to it."

Just as she was about to ask what he meant, the Sorcerer King walked over to where the paladins were gathered.

There was an argument raging there about how to save the girl.

Priestly magic could freeze the enemy in their tracks. Many people approved of that, but spells had an effective range. Could they get into that range? Would the hostage be killed? All these questions and more flew back and forth, but there was no sign that an answer had been reached.

Just then, the Sorcerer King and Neia arrived.

“How long are you going to twiddle your thumbs about this? The situation looks bad.”

After he spoke, the others turned to look at the Sorcerer King as one.

“Of *course* we know that—”

“—Captain… please calm down. The enemy is over there.”

Remedios was at the end of her tether, and Gustavo spoke to her.

“No, Captain Custodio. You know nothing. Since the enemy knows that hostages are effective, they’ll show that this is not a threat, and they’ll use her as an ex—”

As though waiting for those words, the girl hostage’s head was hacked off. They could see her bright red blood spurting even from here. The Bafolk let go of the girl’s body, and it crumpled weakly to the ground.

Everyone was silent.

Their minds refused to accept what had just happened.

Remedios was the first to recover, and as she shouted, Neia came to her senses as well

“You bastard! How dare you kill the hostage!? Even after we obeyed your demands!”

“Hmph!” The Bafolk dragged a boy in front of him this time. “That’s why I’ve got another one, see? Now back off!”

“You shameless scumbag!”

“Hmph. You really are an idiot, aren’t you? Perhaps you’ll understand after I bring another over?”

Remedios’s clenched fist trembled mightily. Then, as though to vent her feelings, she ordered:

“Everyone, fall back!”

“Also, gather up the people on horses around the sides! Move it!”

She could hear the sound of grinding teeth from Remedios. It was loud enough that one might think she was crushing her teeth.

“Vice-Captain. Order them to gather here.”

“B-But—”

“If you don’t do it, the child will die. Move!”

“Everyone fall back!”

“A very bad move. You’ve shown the enemy that hostages are effective and given them so much time to prepare. If the enemy does something to break your will to fight again, won’t that cause even more damage?”

A red-faced Remedios glared at the Sorcerer King like she was looking at the enemy.

“If this goes on, your surprise attack will be pointless. Also, I can hear the sounds of something moving over there. If they set up barricades, breaking them down will take more time, and things will be more troublesome—”

“—Shut up!” Remedios interrupted the Sorcerer King.

“Who’s got an idea? A way to solve this without anyone dying!?”

Nobody said anything.

Of course nobody had such a convenient solution. For instance, if they had someone adept at infiltration skills, this situation might not have arisen. However, there was nobody like that around.

Even Remedios should have understood this. If her animal-like instincts analyzed the battle situation and told her there was no way, then such a method did not exist.

Even so, why did she refuse to admit it?

Why was she hung up on not letting a single person die?

The Sorcerer King's words flashed through her mind — was this not one of those necessary sacrifices which he mentioned? There was no way to come out of this without losing a single person unless one had an overwhelming advantage in strength or a great deal of luck.

"Captain Custodio,"

Neia's voice sounded abnormally loud.

"Right now, can we not finish the fight with only a few casualties?"

Remedios's furious gaze shifted to Neia.

The powerful emotions boiling off that mighty warrior's body made her own body tremble, but Neia was sure that she was right.

"There's no justice in that!" Remedios shouted.

Justice? That justice—

The surrounding paladins remained silent. It would seem nobody was prepared to say anything. Neia felt like she was surrounded by enemies and she unconsciously backed off, and then she felt someone's hand supporting her from behind.

Looking back, she saw the Sorcerer King, as she had expected.

“—I support Miss Baraja’s opinion.”

He had affirmed her in a quiet voice. But to Neia, it was like a hundred-million strong ovation.

“Shut up!”

Remedios barked again. However, this was not something she should be saying to a king from another country who had come all this way to save her. There were actions which were acceptable, and actions which were unacceptable.

Anger welled up in Neia’s heart.

“What you need right now is to change the situation, not sit around and butt heads in frustration… Ah, it can’t be helped. I shall turn things around, then.”

After muttering to himself, the Sorcerer King turned away from them — towards the gate — and began walking. Due to his sudden movement, nobody managed to call out to him before the Bafolk shouted a warning.

“You there, in the mask! I told you to back off, didn’t I?”

“I will not back down! What do you think a single human life means to me!?”

“W-What!?”

“Our aim is to kill every single one of the Bafolk here! It doesn’t matter what happens to the humans! 「Widen Magic — Fireball」!”

The Sorcerer King extended his hand with a shout, and the fireball that flew forth blew away the Bafolk and the boy he was holding.

The enormous burst of flame also consumed the watchtower.

Everyone on top had been slain by that attack. The Bafolk and his hostage fell onto the Sorcerer King’s side of the wall.

“「Maximize Magic — Shockwave」”

The spell which followed blasted away the half-ruined gates. In addition, it scattered the Bafolk who were erecting barricades behind it, blowing a huge hole into their defenses.

“Come, you paladins! Attack! Kill the Bafolk inside to the very last man!”

As though awakened by his voice, Remedios came to and replied:

“You son of a bitch—!”

“—Captain!”

“Grrrrgh! —Charge!”

The paladins moved forward in response to Remedios’s words. Or rather, it might be more accurate to say that they had abandoned all attempts at thinking and fully subordinated themselves to her orders.

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Gustavo left those words behind and moved on. After that, there the paladins and priests — the more sensible ones, at least — directed grateful looks at him. Remedios was the only one who was staring at the Sorcerer King with open displeasure.

The Sorcerer King addressed Neia in a quiet voice.

“—Miss Baraja. Did you think I would save the boy with a spell beyond your imagination?”

Indeed, the thought had crossed her mind. However, the Sorcerer King must have had some reason for his actions.

“Ah, yes, I did. It is as you say.”

“Hm, perhaps that might be so.”

The Sorcerer King nodded, and Neia listened in silence.

“Indeed, I could have done so. By using the various spells I have learned, saving a single boy would be a trivial task. However, I could not do that. That was because I could not allow the Bafolk to see me rescue a boy.”

Doubt crossed Neia’s face for the first time, and the Sorcerer King gently explained to her.

“If I allowed them to know that hostages were effective against us, the prisoners inside would be used as meat-shields to block our attacks in battle. The paladins would be at a loss, and they might end up being wounded or killed. Due to our dire lack of manpower, even one fewer paladin would constitute a great disadvantage… at least, according to Lanchester’s laws.” (TL Note: Lanchester’s laws are mathematical formulae designed to calculate the relative strength over time of a predator and prey pair. They’re usually used for military modelling. In this case, even one loss can lead to more losses over time.)

The Sorcerer King walked to the gate, and Neia hurried after him.

“On the other hand, once they know the hostages are useless, they will simply become hindrances to the Bafolk. Now, when they are being attacked and the enemy is about to come through the walls, do you think they have the time to leisurely kill off their prisoners? Murdering people who can’t resist ought to be a very low priority then.”

“It is as you say.”

“Indeed. Rather than waste time killing people, they would prepare to stop the enemy incursion instead. Therefore, it was necessary to use a method that would clearly illustrate the pointlessness of taking hostages.”

He was right.

If Remedios had her way, they might end up being unable to save anyone in the end.

The Sorcerer King slowly lifted up the body of the boy by his feet.

“Your Majesty, let me—”

“—This is a job for me.”

Neia accompanied the Sorcerer King as he carried the boy to the place where Remedios had planted her banner.

The Sorcerer King laid the boy on the ground. Neia wetted a cloth with water from a waterskin, and wiped away the grime on the boy’s face.

His cheeks, his wrists and his thighs were all shockingly thin.

It clearly illustrated the harsh conditions under which they lived.

“Those Bafolk bastards…”

“Perhaps this should not be said, but do allow me to say it anyway. I am the king of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and not the king of the people who reside in this country. Thus, I can calmly make this decision. I would choose to save a thousand people’s lives over a single life. But if this boy alone were a citizen of my nation, I would prioritize saving him instead. If you cannot accept that—”

“—No, thank you very much. I can understand how you feel… Your Majesty is just.”

“...Hm? What do you mean?”

“My apologies. Ah, maybe it should be, Your Majesty is righteous?”

What on earth am I saying? She could not help but wonder.

While she felt that this left him with nothing to reply with, the merciful and compassionate Sorcerer King still answered her.

“...Eh? Ah, no, I do not feel that I am just. And frankly speaking, justice ought to be determined by others. The motives for everything I do are very simple. Well, I have thought of spreading my reputation too…”

Neia recalled the matter of the statues.

Does wanting to spread his reputation mean the Sorcerer King is a show-off after all?

"That said, I now feel there's no need to try so hard with that… I ended up talking about pointless things. All I desire is to live in happiness with my children. That is all there is to it, but at the same time, it is also everything to me."

She did not think the undead Sorcerer King could have children. Therefore, he probably did not mean children in the sense of carrying on his bloodline, but children in a broader sense. It felt like he regarded the citizens of his nation as his children.

He is a kind man in every sense of the word… indeed, what a wonderful world it would be if even the frailest child could live in happiness. What was he thinking when he took this boy's life...

As she looked at the profile of his face, she saw something like grief for killing a child.

"Well, that was pointless. In that case, let's drop the topic here. Miss Baraja, while I am not qualified to speak pretty words, I hope you find the justice that belongs to you."

"...May I ask one more question? If your own subordinates had been taken hostage like that, would you have done the same thing?"

"...Well, this might be grumbling on my part, but it would be troublesome in another sense."

"What exactly do you mean?"

"In the past, I asked them out of curiosity, 'What would you do if you were taken hostage to force me to negotiate?' At that time, every single one of them promptly said they would rather kill themselves than inconvenience me in any way. 'No,' I told them. 'Can't you say you'd wait for me to rescue you?' and

things like that… While it pleases me to see their loyalty, this is still, how shall I put it? My subordinates are all a little too fanatical."

As he rotated his wrist, the Sorcerer King continued in a tired voice.

Just as Neia began to think, *Weren't these unnecessary worries for someone in his position?* Remedios appeared at the gate, carrying a bloodstained longsword, her armor similarly splattered in blood. Though she had removed her helmet, her bangs were stuck to her forehead by sweat. She looked utterly exhausted.

After saying something to Gustavo, Neia sensed that for a moment, Remedios's eyes had met hers. No, it was less that she had locked gazes with Neia, but rather, she had been looking at the Sorcerer King and Neia was in the way.

Remedios said nothing, simply going back inside with a blank look on her face.

In her place, Gustavo approached the two of them.

"Your Majesty, I wish to express my thanks. While there were some slight losses, we were able to minimize them thanks to Your Majesty's power. Normally, the Captain would be thanking you in person, but she is somewhat distraught at the moment due to the tragic condition in which we found the people, so I pray you will forgive me for taking her place."

Gustavo sneaked a peek at the boy, and then he looked back at the ground.

"It is fine. Go tend to the Captain."

"Thank you very much."

"Come to think of it, what were those tragic conditions?"

"Yes. We questioned several of the people we rescued, and they said that 'They were skinning the prisoners.' It would seem 'they' were not demihumans, but demons sent by Jaldabaoth…"

While she felt that the Captain was using her emotions as an excuse for her rudeness, that did not seem to be the case.

Just as Neia was starting to feel surprised, the Sorcerer King beside her tilted his head in bafflement.

“Why the skin? Why that? Are they going to eat it? Like chicken skin?”

“No, we have no idea either… although, the demihumans did not seem to have taken part in those activities… Does Your Majesty know anything about this? Could this be for some kind of demonic ritual?”

“No, I apologize. I have no clue either. Why would Jaldabaoth do such a thing?”

The Sorcerer King’s puzzlement seemed to stem from the bottom of his heart, and after that everyone looked at each other, but they still could not unravel the mystery. Even so, since it was the work of demons, they might have done so just to make the humans suffer.

“...I’ll ask the priests later. Then, Your Majesty, we are now trying to figure out the demihumans’ hiding places in order to clear them out, so I would like to monopolize a bit of your precious time afterwards.”

After saying so, Gustavo went back inside the gate.

About ten minutes after that, they could start seeing scattered human forms through the gate.

They were the captives. Just like the boy who had been taken hostage, they were dressed in tattered, threadbare clothing that did not look like it could resist the winter chill. The paladins who should have escorted them to the door simply went back past them and vanished behind the gate. Had they done this because they had too few people to handle the prisoners, or was it because the suppression work was still ongoing, or both of them?

The prisoners had looks of delight on their faces as they rushed toward Neia.

However, they suddenly stopped in their tracks.

That was probably because they had seen the form of the Sorcerer King. And then, some people continued to approach them. Perhaps they felt that the Sorcerer King was just wearing a mask or something.

A man ran over from amidst the walking people.

The man panted heavily, and then knelt down beside the boy which Ainz had laid at Neia's feet. No, it would be more accurate to say he had collapsed there.

The man caressed the boy's cheek, and after seeing for himself that the boy was dead, he burst into mournful tears.

Clearly, he was the boy's father.

Neia bit her lip.

As the father cried his son's name while he wept, the Sorcerer King calmly said:

"I was the one who killed that boy."

Neia looked at the Sorcerer King in surprise. Was now the time to say this sort of thing?

However, surely the wise Sorcerer King would not have suddenly said so for no reason.

"Why, why did you kill him!?"

The fires of hatred burned in the father's eyes. Faced with that—

The Sorcerer King replied with a mocking laugh.

"To save you, of course."

"What, what did you say!?"

For just a moment, the father's eyes filled with fear. That was because he realized that the Sorcerer King's face was not artificial. Then, his eyes roved to the sides in search of help, and they settled on Neia.

However, before Neia could say something, the Sorcerer King spoke first.

"Then may I ask you something? Why did you not protect your son? Your son was brought before me as a hostage."

"I protected him! But he was snatched away! Those bastards were stronger than me, so I couldn't do anything!"

The Sorcerer King laughed again.

"Then let me ask you — why are you still alive?"

The father did not know how to answer, and froze up.

"I am asking you why you did not die to protect your child. It is said that not all lives are equally important. You should have been the one who valued that child's life the most of all. So why did you not struggle wildly to protect him to your last breath?"

The other people were peeking at the situation here from a distance.

They must have felt unease, fear, and anger at the Sorcerer King who had taken the boy's life.

"What, what are you saying…"

"You are the one who failed to protect him. Do not push the blame onto others. You, who were weak, are at fault. Also, you seem to be mistaken about something… you do realize that I am much more powerful than the Bafolk you claim to be stronger than you, no? ...Although I can forgive some insults because I pity you for the loss of your child, I will slay you if they get out of hand."

The Sorcerer King reached out a bony index finger and rested it on the father's face.

“That, that’s because you’re strong — that’s why you can say that! Not everyone can be as powerful as you!”

“Well said. I can say this precisely because I am powerful. Then, it is precisely because you are weak that being taken from is your lot in life, no? The strong preying on the weak is a very natural sequence of events.”

The Sorcerer King turned his eyes to the people around him.

“Have you not also experienced suffering because the Bafolk are strong?”

“Are you saying the strong can do what they want!?”

“Exactly. The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must. This is the way of the world. The same rule applies to me. Even I would become the victim in the face of someone stronger than me. That is why I seek strength.”

Neia understood why the Sorcerer King sought Jaldabaoth’s maids.

His Majesty must be seeking strength because he wants to protect his nation, to protect the children of his country. So strength is the most important thing after all...

“Well, originally, the weak like yourselves should have been defended by the Holy Kingdom, those who should have been strong… I really do pity you. If you were under my protection — under the protection of my country, the Sorcerous Kingdom, something like this could not possibly happen. That is because I would have used all my strength to protect the people and strike down the Bafolk.”

Everyone around them was silent.

The Sorcerer King’s arguments were cold and heartless, but at the same time they expressed the truth of the world.

If they could not oppose his words with reason, would they choose to protest with their emotions? However, their fear of the Sorcerer King stopped them from doing so.

“You, isn’t he one of the undead? What are the undead doing in a place like this?”

The father could not say anything to the Sorcerer King because he feared the latter, and so he directed his wrath at Neia instead.

However, before Neia could answer, the Sorcerer King stole a march on her, as expected.

“To help your country, of course. And the fact is, you were all rescued by the undead of which you speak. If you are unhappy with that, why not save this nation by yourselves?”

As he heard that, the father questioned Neia with his eyes. However, she could say nothing.

That was because it was the truth.

If the people of this country were enough to defeat Jaldabaoth, the Sorcerer King would not be here.

The man hugged the boy’s corpse in fear, and then he turned and ran. The people to which the man ran had frightened looks on their faces as well.

Neia heard the Sorcerer King say something, but she did not know if he was addressing the fleeing man or himself.

“Even I would be oppressed if I were weak. Therefore one cannot forget to seek strength. I need to engrave into my heart the fact that beings of comparable power to myself most definitely do exist.”

Part 3

After attacking the first prison camp and freeing the Liberation Army troops imprisoned within, they went after their next prison camp on the next day.

They were not riding on the momentum of victory. Rather, there were several reasons why they could not do anything else. The most pressing one was because the food stocks in the prison camps were less than they had estimated.

This, in turn, was the result of the twin policies of the demihumans not feeding their captives enough, and regularly shipping food in from a small city nearby.

In addition, the demihumans who accompanied the food shipments were also responsible for inspecting the prison camps for any abnormalities.

Even if they killed all these demihumans and took all their food, the opposition would definitely conclude that something had gone wrong at the prison camps.

Of course, Jaldabaoth would learn of that as well. That being the case, it was very likely that he would dispatch a huge force which Neia and the others would not be able to defeat.

After standing behind the Sorcerer King and participating — but obviously not speaking — in meetings, after a long argument that made Neia's legs hurt to stand on, they had finally arrived at two possible courses of action.

The first was to flee to the south after liberating one prison camp and throwing in their lot with the armies that ought to be stationed there.

The second was to strike first and conquer the aforementioned small city.

While both of these opposed courses of action had their own merits and flaws, they eventually went with the latter, after the Captain of the Paladin Order, Remedios, shouted for it.

Remedios had a top secret reason for choosing to assault the city.

After questioning the demihumans — and of course, killing them afterwards — the town which was their target apparently contained someone with royal blood in their veins.

If they were truly of the royal bloodline, it was very likely that the situation would improve. Even if they were not royalty, it would be a godsend if they were a great noble with a certain degree of status and connections. They could bank on the fact that they had saved his life to ask the southern armies to apply pressure, and possibly ask for reinforcements.

However, Neia had her doubts.

"Your Majesty, do you really think there will be a member of the royal family or a powerful noble there?"

Neia had been allowed to ride a horse out of deference to the Sorcerer King's status. Otherwise, the sort of horse which a low-ranking squire like Neia would have been allowed to ride would have been taken for use as a pack animal long ago.

"I think it's a trap. Even if it isn't, the city will be garrisoned with many troops, and depending on the situation there might be demons present. Captain Custodio ought to be very aware of that. Even so, she has decided to fight an uphill battle like this. Sometimes, you need to wager everything on one bet."

If they did not seek the aid of the south, people would begin to starve soon. If that happened, Neia knew that the Liberation Army would not be able to carry on.

Soon, they saw their objective, the small city, in the distance.

From her horse at the tail end of the column, Neia looked at the militiamen marching ahead of herself.

They were citizens of the Holy Kingdom who had been rescued from the prison camps. The reason why the paladins had pressed them into military service when they should have been resting was because they discovered that there were far more demihumans in the town than in the earlier prison camps.

There were many more weakened people than expected, so they were not expected to make good foot soldiers. Even so, it was better than nothing, and so they were mobilized.

Neia's level of skill would be hard-pressed to hide such a large force from the eyes of the demihuman scouts, so they needed to move as quickly as possible.

And the result of doing so was that the people only became more and more exhausted, and the number of adults sitting on cargo wagons only grew. The fact that they could actually sleep on the shaking and rattling wagons only served to show how tired they were. In contrast, the children were cheerfully running along.

The priests were probably not used to long journeys on foot either, given how they would look enviously at the cargo wagons from time to time.

Even in this state, they're going to be thrown straight into a battle once they arrive. Are they really going to be all right?

During their strategy meetings en route, they had decided to immediately attack the city upon reaching it. That was because they lacked both provisions and time.

Attacking a city with enemies lying in wait during daytime was extremely dangerous.

It would be easier to approach at night, but it would be very disadvantageous to humans, who did not have night vision abilities. In particular, night battles were very dangerous for the citizens, who only had what combat training they had received as conscripts.

With that in mind, they had decided to attack during the day.

The battle lines had already been formed up ahead of them. At their head were the paladins. Behind them were militiamen holding wooden walls they had made after wrecking the prison camps, and at the back were the priests.

The plan was the same as last time, using the angels to suppress the enemies on the walls while the paladins broke down the gates; a tactic which relied on brute strength for everything. The citizen-soldiers' job was largely limited to frightening the enemy through weight of numbers. Therefore, they had ordered the civilians to avoid fighting, and if they had to fight, to gang up on their opponents, among other things.

"...Now then, show me how you will do this."

The Sorcerer King muttered to himself.

As an observer, the Sorcerer King would not be involved with the battle.

While they wanted to draw on his strength for a siege like this, nobody opened their mouth to ask him during their meetings. The Sorcerer King paid no heed to the pleading gazes directed at him, and he was now positioned in the rear echelon.

The battle began like it had the last time.

It may have been a small city, but it was very large for the region. Its portcullises were reinforced with iron, and there were murder holes above it. The walls were not built of wood, but stone. The walls and gates were also much better made than those of the prison camps, which had largely been scavenged from materials taken from the villagers. However, because this city had less than ten thousand residents, one could not say it was impregnable.

The attackers found it troublesome, while it left the defenders uneasy. That was probably a more appropriate evaluation of the situation.

Remedios led the paladins in a charge, while the angels attacked the demihumans on the walls.

However — the angels occasionally vanished into motes of light after being hit by enemy attacks.

It would seem the demihumans were the same Bafolk they had encountered previously in the camps, but as expected, the ones defending this city were very skilled troops.

The most obvious of them was a Bafolk on the walls — hiding among the battlements — and holding a well-made longspear. He had already impaled many angels.

That Bafolk gave a mighty cry.

Perhaps it was some kind of skill, but it did not affect the angels or the paladins breaking down the gates beneath him. Was it because of a narrow area of effect, or was it only effective on allies? The details were unclear. However, it would be good to remember that he possessed some sort of special ability.

Looking down, both sides were fighting fiercely outside the gates

The Bafolk thrust their long spears from the other side of the portcullis — from inside the city — at the paladins, who blocked them with spiked shields. Thus, they prevented the enemy from attacking the paladins with the battering rams. Remedios, on the other hand, directly cut apart the longspears they stabbed at her.

The demihumans dumped boiling water on them through the murder holes. However, the paladins already had 「Protection Energy Fire」 cast on them in anticipation of this, and so no matter how much water got on them, the paladins were unscathed.

Of course, since this was winter, things would be troublesome if they were drenched and then the temperature fell, but it was fine for the moment.

If they had used boiling oil instead of water, their swords would have slipped easily from their hands. Perhaps oil was precious to the demihumans, but they did not make such preparations.

The slowly-advancing civilians carried the wooden walls which they had brought along to use as shields. While it would have been better if they were made out of metal, it could not be helped given their lack of proper arms. The shields might not have been terribly sturdy, but it was better than nothing, and the citizen-soldiers hidden behind them began spinning up their slings. They were aiming at the demihumans fighting with the angels. Of course since

they were not used to combat, the stones they threw struck the angels more often that not.

Even though they were taking friendly fire, the angels were resistant to unenchanted attacks, so it was not a problem for them. Of course, it was merely damage reduction and not immunity, but still, the citizen-soldiers did not do that much damage to the angels. It was simply because the sling stones would hurt the demihumans more if they hit them.

Every time an angel fell, the priests would summon a new angel and throw it into the fray. While there were very few of them, this inexhaustible and untiring supply of fresh troops kept pouring on, and the demihuman resistance began to falter.

"…Mm. After considering the opposition might use defensive magic, they ought to have splashed cold water on them. Combined with the cold of winter, it would make their opponent's body temperature plunge… after all, most people would cast spells to protect against fire."

As the Sorcerer King looked at the battlefield, he muttered to himself, as though he were conducting a calm analysis of the fighting.

It was hard to respond to those words. While nobody had died yet, there were those who were already wounded, so she could not bring herself to speak.

"Speaking of which, is it really all right if you don't participate in the battle, Miss Baraja? You ought to be able to make a good accounting of yourself with the bow I gave you."

Neia was assigned to stand watch by the Sorcerer King's side. Using her own body as a shield for him was her duty. Therefore, she had not been ordered to fight.

However, just like before, the Sorcerer King seemed very eager for her to use that bow of hers.

Does he want me to use the weapon he lent me? I could try taking a shot from here, but missing the first shot with a borrowed weapon would be a little too—

Just as Neia was hesitating over how to answer, a mighty noise came from the vicinity of the city gate. Looking over, it would seem the portcullis had been broken down. The noise was a combination of the paladins' rejoicings and the demihumans' anxious cries.

Once the city gate went down, the paladins would flood into the city like an avalanche.

After seeing Remedios's superb skills, the shaken beastmen grew more and more frantic.

After that — the paladins retreated amidst a great clamour.

Neia's keen vision saw within what was inside the narrow aperture of the gates before the paladins had made it there.

It was the same as before.

A Bafolk was clutching a child, even younger than before, and issuing orders to the paladins on the other side of the city gate. While his voice did not carry over to them, one could imagine the orders which had been given.

The paladins began falling back and leading the retreat were Remedios and Gustavo. After that, they told the priests to "Have the angels fall back, otherwise they'll kill the child."

"Here we go again. I can't listen in from over here, I want to go over there and take part in their conversation. How about it?"

"You have no need to seek my opinion, Your Majesty."

Neia and the Sorcerer King walked towards Remedios, who was stationed some distance — between the Sorcerer King and the city gates — and discussing something under the eyes of the uneasy citizen-soldiers.

"We should negotiate with them, after all," Remedios said, but the one who was frowning after taking off their helmet was someone else. Perhaps it was because they knew what had happened at the first prison camp, but all of them had *How can we approve of this?* written on their faces.

Even after the Sorcerer King came, they still had not found an answer.

No, everyone was trying to think of how to talk Remedios down from her position of "In any case, we need to save that child," but that seemed unlikely.

After proposing a few vague compromise plans that were ultimately a waste of time, several people exchanged looks, and soon Gustavo raised his voice to shout, "Captain!" as he poured strength into his eyes.

"We've gone over this countless times already! Even if we had the time, even if we discussed this more, there wouldn't be a way to do it! We can't save that child!"

After hearing what Gustavo said, Neia knew that the Captain had continued the strategy meeting even after the Sorcerer King had left the command tent. At the same time, she knew that the paladins would not be able to solve this problem without spilling blood.

Remedios bit her lip and remained silent. However—

"Captain! We can't win this battle without sacrifice! Right now, we ought to sacrifice the few to save the many!"

Neia saw Remedios's eyes flare crimson at those words.

"—That is not the kind of war Her Majesty would wage! We are Her Majesty's swords! We serve the Holy Queen, she who wants the people of this nation to live in peace!"

"But the Holy Queen-sama is…"

Is dead, but before Gustavo could say that, Remedios shouted to interrupt him.

"The next Holy King hasn't been appointed yet! Shouldn't we protect the ideals of the Holy Queen-sama to whom we pledged our swords until then? What does a vow of loyalty we made mean when we break it ourselves!?"

Ah, I see. Neia understood.

Remedios was bound, bound by the wishes of the person to whom she had pledged her loyalty.

Since they were knights of the Holy Queen who loved the people, they could not do anything which would harm the people.

The only one who could break her bonds was the next person to whom she offered her loyalty.

“Is that wrong? Who did you pledge your swords to? You all went through the ceremony to be ordained as paladins! Who do you think the paladin order serves!?”

When a squire became a paladin, they would meet with the Holy King and ritually offer the sword they held to him. Similarly, when there was a change of Holy King, the paladins would meet with him and offer their swords to the reigning Holy King while swearing their loyalty. Therefore, everyone in this band of paladins had pledged their swords to the Holy Queen.

“Or did you not?” Her tone changed in an instant. After heating up, she cooled down right away, and her voice was filled with a freezing chill. “Was the Holy Queen-sama wrong to wish for the smallfolk’s happiness and a nation where nobody would need to cry?”

“She wasn’t wrong! But.. depending on the situation… we might need to change.”

“Who? Who needs to change? Tell me, then. Is there a higher form of justice than ‘Not having to sacrifice anyone!?’”

Gustavo shut his mouth.

Neia realised that she had made a mistake just now.

She was not ruled by her loyalty to the will of the Holy Queen whom she had pledged to serve.

Remedios said that one ought to carry out justice. However thorny the path, however difficult it was to walk, one ought to trudge through all the difficulties in one’s way and continue forward without heed for what was around oneself.

Sacrificing the few to save the many, and saving everyone no matter how great or small; which of these was truly just?

That much was obvious.

Clearly, it was the latter. However, it was far too idealistic, and a normal person would immediately give up on it. However, even after knowing this, Remedios still insisted on saving everyone.

She held firmly to an ideal that a normal person would abandon immediately.

That was why she was the Captain of the paladins, the highest ranked paladin of them all.

Remedios was the only one seeking her lofty definition of justice, and those who could not understand this were the pitiful ones.

Several paladins lowered their heads in shame. Perhaps they felt the same way.

If one considered the Sorcerer King's justice of "killing one to save a thousand" to be a king's justice, then Remedios's justice of "one or a thousand, they are all the same" was an ideal — a shining form of justice.

Both sides were just. Neither was wrong. Even so—

Is there no justice without strength?

For instance, if Remedios were stronger — if she possessed a godlike power which Neia could not imagine, she could save the child, and save the inhabitants of the city. In that case, there would not have been any problems.

However, that was not the case.

She was stalled here because there was no way to carry on without sacrifice.

Carrying out justice requires strength. Ahhh, I want to become strong… that way, I can wipe away Jaldabaoth's taint from this country...

"...Forgive me for interjecting while you are at a deadlock, but you will not reach a conclusion this way."

That exceptionally cold voice blew away the building heat in the air.

"Your Majesty…"

"Captain Custodio. If this goes on, you will only serve to make the enemies know about the effectiveness of hostages. In my view, you will not be able to conquer this city without sacrificing anyone."

"Certainly not. There ought to be a better way to do this. A way where nobody needs to be sacrificed and where nobody needs to be sad!"

In response to that voice, which sounded like it was being bled out of her, the Sorcerer King gave a flat reply.

“I don’t think such a way exists… we’ve wasted too much time. If this goes on, the past is only going to repeat itself.”

Remedios bit her lip tightly. A tiny rill of blood flowed down it.

“…Then… Captain. Just sacrifice that child.”

“That—!!”

“Hm. Leave the rest to me. Since so much time has passed, I doubt you will be able to resolve this with a tiny sacrifice, even if you charge in with the will to die.”

“Is that really all right!?” It was Neia who could not help crying out. “Your Majesty has been conserving his mana to fight Jaldabaoth; won’t using that mana make the fight against Jaldabaoth unfavorable?”

“It is as you say, Ms. Baraja. However, there is no other way in order to save more people… while I cannot possibly guarantee that there will be no losses, at the very least, there will be far fewer than if you try. How about it? Will you leave it to me?”

“So there will still… be sacrifices…”

“Unfortunately so, Captain Custodio.”

Remedios bowed her head and left without a word. She walked toward the city — where the citizen-soldiers were looking with uneasy eyes.

“My apologies, Your Majesty. In the Captain’s place, please allow me, Gustavo, to beseech you to aid us.”

“Umu… Well, it’s a pointless question, but you will thank me for it, right?”

Everyone present was puzzled by the Sorcerer King’s question, but they immediately responded in agreement. Neia did not miss the uneasiness in their hearts over why he had asked such a reasonable question.

“Really now? Then I will pacify the city by myself. You gentlemen should keep an eye out for any fish that slip the net and kill them or take them prisoner. Personally, I would rather take them captive in order to question them for information. Also, I will be using the undead, so don’t get too excited.”

Saying so, the Sorcerer King set out for the city gates without waiting for an answer.

“「Greater Magic Seal」, 「Mass Hold Species」.”

The Sorcerer King did not stop walking as he cast his spells.

After incanting those two spells, he waved a hand and conjured several flickering shadows.

There were ten of them in total.

They radiated an aura unique to the undead, one which the living could not abide. Their translucent forms displayed expressions of misery.

They were Wraiths. Neia had once heard that they would take the shape of the species who saw them from her monster lore lectures. However, their bizarre appearances looked like three people’s shadows blended together, unlike what the lectures had said.

“You, High Wraiths.”

The monstrous-looking shadows followed the Sorcerer King as he walked. The grass by their feet crackled as it withered. Already brown from winter, they shrivelled up rapidly as they lost their water content.

“Go over there and wait for my instructions.”

The undead moved in perfect unison, unconstrained by gravity, and they floated swiftly into the air. In seconds, the undead melted into the azure sky overhead, and the fact that she could not see them with those eyes of which she was so proud only intensified her shock.

While she wondered if it was really all right not to explain in detail to those summoned undead, the Sorcerer King who could make such perfect battle plans would surely not have overlooked that point.

“Those, those were…”

“High Wraiths. Since they are incorporeal beings, they can pass through walls and other obstacles… of course, they can’t pass through things without limit… you probably don’t want to know the specifics, do you? Well, they’re part of my preparations for taking the city. Now then, please wait here, Ms. Baraja…”

“—Please allow me to accompany you.”

“Mm… in that case, please wear this item around your neck.”

“This, this is?”

The Sorcerer King produced a necklace with a five-pointed star pendant, set with a large carnelian in the center.

“This item grants immunity to fear. High Wraiths have the ability to emanate terror. ...Let me get this out of the way first. Afterwards, you will be walking into complete chaos. People driven by fear can sometimes show fearsome strength. Even I might not be able to protect you, so if you still wish to follow…”

“—Please allow me to accompany you.”

“U-Umu. Is, is that so? I understand.”

Neia fastened the necklace around her neck.

“Even so… good grief, they *are* at war, you know. How could there be a war without casualties?”

Neia smiled bitterly in response to the Sorcerer King’s slight jest.

Of course, that was not what Remedios had meant. The Sorcerer King could not possibly have missed the meaning of her words. This was probably the Sorcerer King's way of cracking a joke, but even so...

His Majesty does not seem particularly talented at cracking jokes.

Perhaps this might be the Sorcerer King's sole weakness. Just as that thought came to Neia's mind, they had reached the vicinity of the city gates.

"Fall back, paladins. I am going to conquer this city now. Move to the rear… I believe you ought to get at least that far back, no?"

The Sorcerer King indicated the rearmost paladins and then, he walked into the city gates, like he was strolling into an empty field.

"Get back! If you don't move quickly, this brat will—"

Soon enough, the Sorcerer King ran into the Bafolk who was holding the child hostage.

It was hard to tell what kind of expression the demihuman was making. It was probably shock. The other demihumans around the Bafolk probably had the same looks on their faces. No, even Neia would be shocked if she suddenly saw the Sorcerer King.

"…The, the undead!?"

With that, the word "undead" rippled through the demihuman ranks.

"Indeed. Ah, I believe they are called 'The Living?' I heard that once, but I do not quite trust my recollection."

"Wha-what? Why are you? What on earth… are you really... no, a human?" The Bafolk's eyes turned to Neia. "You! You control that undead creature, right? What a creepy guy he is!"

Thoughts like, *I'm not a necromancer,* or *You're being rude to the Sorcerer King,* ran through Neia's mind, but she remained silent.

“Sorry to intrude while you’re in chaos, but—”

“—Get back, undead! Or else this kid gets it!”

The Bafolk tightened his grip around the boy’s throat.

All signs of life fled the boy’s face. His glazed-over eyes reflected the Sorcerer King’s visage, but he did not react. Even so, he still gasped softly when his captor grabbed his throat.

“Fuhaha! You’re actually trying to use the living as a hostage against me, one of the undead? My, my.”

The Bafolk’s eyes went wide. *His expression’s kind of disgusting*, and Neia mused that the reason she had the room to calmly think like this was because she was backed by the mountain that was the Sorcerer King.

“Human! Call this undead off!”

It’s not like I’m controlling him...

“Hm. Now then, shall we begin?”

“What? Stay back! Get back right now!”

Perhaps it had sensed something, but the Bafolk took a step to the rear while still holding its hostage.

When she looked around closely, she could see the forms of other children. Had they been brought here as hostages as well? Even so, they did not seem to want to kill their hostages to teach them a lesson. They probably thought, *Would living hostages really work on the undead, who were the enemy of the living?*

Neia sensed something like a black wind curling past her. In that moment, all the Bafolk froze in place. Ever since the Sorcerer King had shown up, everyone present had remained still, studying him so as not to miss a single move he made, but this change was far too extreme. Their eyes and mouths gaped

open, and their faces twisted in an ugly manner. Also — it was not just the Bafolk. Even the near-lifeless children showed a dramatic response to this.

While she could not read the demihumans' faces, Neia understood human expressions. Fear was written on the children's faces. It was an absolute, unimaginable, and overpowering fear.

"Aiiiieeeee!"

The Bafolk screamed in a strange way—

"—Hmph. Release, 「Mass Hold Species」."

A magic circle appeared, and some kind of spell flew forth from the Sorcerer King. In the next moment, the numerous demihumans and their child hostages froze in place like hideous statues, their faces still twisted. However, they did not look like they were dead. She could hear the faint sounds of breathing — quite ragged, it would seem.

And then, above them — countless cries rang out from near the city wall. After that, the *thump, thump* sounds of meat being bludgeoned came from behind Neia.

"All right, let's go."

She was briefly distracted by that sound, so when she looked forward again, at the portcullis—

"「Greater Break Item」."

—A shrill noise rang out. It was the sound of the pieces of pulverized gate falling like rain.

"As I thought, destroying buildings with this drains a lot of mana… although I didn't use it like that over there… I guess all I can do is accept the fact that I need to pick my targets for best effect. You can't look down on small things, after all."

The Sorcerer King muttered to himself as he walked over the hill of the gate's debris and passed through the city gate, with nobody to block his path.

The rapidly changing situation left Neia confused and unable to move. Once she regained her calm, she smiled to herself.

The Sorcerer King had destroyed in seconds the portcullis which the paladins had worked so hard to just dent.

The strong really are unfair...

Neia jogged after the Sorcerer King, and he turned around in front of the immobile Bafolk.

"So, how about them?" he said, while indicating the motionless demihumans and the children they were holding. "It's only temporary, you know. Go tie up everyone here."

"Then I'll call the paladins over."

"That would be a great help. Unfortunately, I am still radiating a fear aura. Everyone who steps into it will be terrified. Therefore, please ask them to take the appropriate measures. I believe priests ought to have 「Lion's Heart」 while paladins have… hm, ask them to use 「Under Divine Flag」, how about that?"

"You actually knew about that…"

The Sorcerer King chuckled, and then walked through the Bafolk, as if to fill the gaps between them.

"Goooooohhh!!"

A strong-looking Bafolk fell from above with a growl, holding a spear. It had probably jumped down from the city wall.

Its eyes were red and he was foaming at the mouth. It was clearly not in a normal state of mind. It looked like he had gone mad.

“I see. Savagery… no, berserking? Certainly, that would negate fear and other mental effects — oops.”

The Sorcerer King skillfully evaded the stabbing spear. It was a crisp, efficient movement, one unique to trained individuals. However, the Sorcerer King’s evasion meant that a Bafolk who had become a statue ended up being stabbed by its compatriot’s spear instead. The spear pierced straight through its body, and it collapsed to the ground, spraying blood everywhere.

The berserk Bafolk no longer seemed able to tell friend from foe.

“Give me a break.”

The Bafolk raised its spear. Was he going to sweep with it? However, Neia could not launch an arrow.

The Sorcerer King approached the Bafolk, like he wanted to block her shot.

Certainly, it was wise to close the distance given the spear’s length. However, the Sorcerer King’s next move deviated from common sense.

With a swift movement, he pressed down on the Bafolk’s head from left and right.

Perhaps it was because the Sorcerer King was surprisingly strong, but the Bafolk could not escape the Sorcerer King’s grasp no matter how it thrashed. Having given up on that, the Bafolk thought of something else; it gripped the front portion of the spear and drove it through the Sorcerer King. No, to be precise, it looked to Neia like it had driven the spear through him.

However, the Sorcerer King did not flinch. Perhaps a defensive spell had stopped it.

“You’re not like that Troll, after all.”

With a sickening *squitch*, the Bafolk’s eyes popped out of its skull.

This was clearly a lethal injury. No, one could say that this was even worse than a fatal wound.

The Sorcerer King let go, and the Bafolk collapsed to the ground. Its limbs twitched around on the ground, but it was hard to say that those movements were consciously driven.

“May, may I know what you did?” Neia nervously asked from behind, and the Sorcerer King dusted his hands off as he nonchalantly replied:

“I crushed its skull. Sometimes, berserk individuals don’t go down even when they’re fatally injured. Still, if you destroy the brain, it should be fine… Still, it really was weak. Barely harder than an eggshell… are you kidding me?”

Neia’s face twitched.

His Majesty really doesn’t have any gift for making jokes...

“All right, Ms. Baraja, call the paladins. Tell them to secure this area so I — *we* can continue forward together.”

“Yes!”

Neia ran back outside at top speed, to where the paladins were. When she looked there she saw several Bafolk lying at the paladins’ feet.

Since they could not have run out from the gate, they had probably been Bafolk who, in their attempt to flee the Sorcerer King who was the source of their fear, had chosen to jump off the walls, and this was the result.

After reaching the paladins, Neia hurriedly relayed the Sorcerer King’s instructions. After that, she rushed back at top speed to the Sorcerer King’s side.

After Neia returned, the Sorcerer King said, “Then let’s go,” and entered the city streets.

The question of why no new Bafolk had come after the city gates had been breached immediately faded away.

Neia heard groan after groan. It made her think that this unliving city was moaning.

“This, this is…”

“I ordered the undead I released to spread fear. This is the result. Some hostages might have been trampled in the confusion… well, all you can do is treat it as a sad accident. Give up on them.”

She cast her eyes outward, and a horde of Bafolk was running towards them, with desperate — probably — looks on their faces. They looked just like harried prey animals, and Neia even found them a little pitiful.

They must have been exposed to extraordinary fear. Otherwise, why would they run towards a being who was even more powerful than the undead creature from which they were fleeing?

“Hm… no signs of humans then? In that case — 「Maximize Widen Magic — Fireball」”

The Sorcerer King discharged a fireball into the center of the Bafolk horde, and it erupted into a massive blaze. After that vanished, demihuman bodies rained down everywhere.

“While waiting here might be the best thing to do… the enemy seems to have a leader. He’s waiting in a plaza near the center of the city, and he’s resisted the fear of the High Wraiths, so let’s move on… what do you think?”

“I believe all will go well if we do as Your Majesty wishes.”

“Really now? Then let’s go.”

Every time they took a step forward, soul-chilling cries seemed to echo from everywhere, as though a great massacre was taking place. Also, due to the demihumans’ lack of hygiene, their raw waste, feces, and urine were everywhere, which made Neia wrinkle her nose.

“...Speaking of which, Ms. Baraja, what should be done about those?”

She looked in the direction where the Sorcerer King was pointing at. There was a group of naked human beings there.

Regardless of gender, their hands had been nailed to wooden stakes that had been driven into the ground. In their efforts to flee their fear, they had struggled violently, and their arms were coated with fresh blood.

In all likelihood, those were probably fences made out of human beings.

They were exhausted, bone thin, but their lives did not seem to be in danger.

She had attacked this city in order to free the people. Even if she continued following the Sorcerer King, Neia would not be of any use. In that case, helping them now and taking them to a safe place was the right thing to do. However, there was one thing which made her uneasy.

What should she do if the people were attacked by demihumans while they were evacuating?

What a joke. What am I hesitating for? The Captain would have chosen to help them without any hesitation. And the reason why I can't is… is it because of strength… after all?

"You're confused, hm. Then, just leave them be for now. There shouldn't be any demihumans nearby. Leaving them here should be safer. Let's go."

"Yes!"

While she still had her doubts, Neia continued following the Sorcerer King to the city's plaza. Why was it that the Sorcerer King could advance without the slightest delay? Though she had her doubts, she convinced herself by saying, "He must have cast a spell."

Soon, the two of them came to a plaza which looked like a market with streets everywhere.

"Hm… as I thought, there was no way this could have been resolved without sacrificing people."

She followed the Sorcerer King's eyes, and there were human corpses mixed with demihuman corpses. They were probably people who had been trampled to death in the fear-induced chaos.

"...It can't be helped."

While the Sorcerer King was joking, attacking this city by brute force would probably have caused a matching number of casualties. Going by that, letting the Sorcerer King use his overwhelming might to conquer the city minimized the number of lives that were lost.

The Sorcerer King shrugged silently, and then he indicated the center of the plaza with his chin.

There was a demihuman there who was larger than all his peers.

His curled horns resembled those of a mountain goat, and he was covered in silver fur. His excellent physique clearly showed that he was not an average demihuman.

The tips of his horns were encased in a shell of gold which was socketed with jewels, and he wore a green breastplate that had turtle-shell patterns on it. He wore a reddish-brown cape made from worked animal hide. His left hand held a large shield with a topaz socketed into it, while his right hand held a bastard sword whose blade was light yellow. His panoply vividly illustrated the courage and ferocity of a gallant warrior.

He was the most fearsome and well-trained of the demihumans. He was probably a Lord or some kind of similarly ranked special being.

If Neia were alone, she would have fled this opponent with all her might.

"Wonderful. I wonder which one of your items stopped the fear."

The Sorcerer King's delighted words referred to the magic items adorning the demihuman. He had rings on both hands and jewelry hanging from his neck that covered his entire chest. There were things dangling from both sides of its waist, things which might have been a set of three human baby skulls strung together.

The green-eyed demihuman studied the Sorcerer King as he approached, and then his gaze shifted to Neia.

“A newly-appeared undead… and is that a necromancer in the back?”

The demihuman obscured itself behind its large shield, as though wary of a gaze attack like the kind a Medusa would launch.

“Not bad. You managed to push this city, my tribe to this point… You, who controls the enemy of all life, the user of fearsome magic. State your name.”

The Bafolk pointed his sword at Neia.

“—No, wait, hang on. You’ve gotten it wrong. It’s not me!”

“...What?”

She looked to the Sorcerer King for help, and he folded his arms and looked to Neia.

“So you *do* understand. That’s right, it’s her. She’s my master.”

“No, no! Wait, wait!! Your Majesty!!!”

What on earth was he saying? Truly, he had no talent for making jokes at all.

As he saw how Neia flapped her hands around in panic, the Sorcerer King chuckled.

“Mm. Feeling better now?”

“Eh?”

“Ah — it was just a dumb joke.”

Flaring his cape with the regal motions of a king, the Sorcerer King turned to regard the demihuman before him.

“I am the entity who set the undead upon you. I am the undying king who rules a country to the northeast, the ruler of the Sorcerous Kingdom, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. And what is your name?”

“My name is Buser — the Grand King Buser… O Sorcerer King, how about the woman by your side?”

“She is my follower. Well then, what do you want to do? Would you rather be killed by me? Or kneel in servitude? Choose as you wish.”

“With my name as Lord at stake, kneeling once in subservience will be enough!”

Buser raised his shield and advanced, raising his sword into a horizontal position. He looked like a goat about to charge.

“Mm… Then I shall play with you for a while. —Ms. Baraja, you just sit back and watch. Speaking of which, goat. You’re equipped with all kinds of magic items, but I detect no magic from that thing at your waist. Is that some kind of special item?”

“Fuhahaha. It’s the latest fashion. They’re just bones.”

“Mm… that does remind me of my subordinates.”

Neia shuddered from behind as she heard that. *So he has such subordinates...*

“They’re well-shaped, no? They’re the best this city has to offer.”

“...I see. I understand. I sympathize with your feelings. It seems this fashion thing is quite important. The maids have taught me that very well… all right, let’s begin. 「Create Greater Item」.”

After casting his spell, a jet-black sword appeared in the Sorcerer King’s hand.

Why is His Majesty using a weapon?

The Sorcerer King should have been an arcane magic caster. And a top rate one to boot.

In that case, weapons were to be used only after he ran out of mana and options. Arcane magic casters knew that well, which was why they did not touch any weapons.

The Sorcerer King must have chosen to fight with a sword for some reason.

—Could it be that he's expended a great deal of mana? That would be bad… His Majesty came here to do battle with Jaldabaoth...

After the repeated casts of 「Fireball」, the spell which had immobilized a large group of the enemy, and then — his mass summonings of the undead — she could understand if his mana had been heavily depleted.

The spell to summon those undead must have been of quite a high tier...

While she did not know how powerful High Wraiths were, they were most definitely stronger than Wraiths. Therefore, summoning so many High Wraiths would have required a great deal of power.

Under normal circumstances, every time a priest cast a spell to summon angels, he would only be able to summon one at once. If they were willing to summon weaker angels, they could call forth multiple entities. By that logic, he must have used a very high tier spell — possibly an unimaginably potent spell of the sixth tier.

...The sixth tier...

Neia gulped.

The sixth tier was a realm where none had explored before. According to legend, the Holy Queen could use spells of the fourth tier. This was two tiers above her.

It might have been a realm beyond common knowledge, but the Sorcerer King might have been able to make it a reality.

Maybe, if he used a sixth tier spell for his summons, I could understand how he used a vast quantity of mana. But in that case, wouldn't it be better for me to help the Sorcerer King?

Neia looked at the Sorcerer King's back as he squared off against the demihuman. The demihuman she could see over the Sorcerer King's shoulder was very strong, and no amount of Neias would help against him. However, the Sorcerer King carried himself with a sovereign's forthright bearing, with no sign that he was picking a fight he could not win.

Could it be that His Majesty is a magic swordsman-type arcane magic caster?

There were benefits and drawbacks to improving one's swordsmanship and spellcasting at the same time. The benefits included being able to use many fighting methods, but the drawbacks were that one would be mediocre in both fields.

In that case, what was the Sorcerer King like?

The two of them studied each other, and then they slowly began to move.

They closed the gap between them, until they were in melee range. Buser launched the first strike.

"「Shield Bash」."

It was a sudden charge, made with a shield held in front of himself. And the Sorcerer King took it head on with his sword.

As expected, there was no way to take the force of that massive body as it suddenly charged forward. The Sorcerer King was sent flying. No, his feet were still firmly planted on the ground when he landed, so that did not quite fit. Rather, he had been knocked back.

While the fact that the Sorcerer King — who could crush a Bafolk's skull with his bare hands — had been knocked back was quite surprising, surely a body of bones would not be able to completely defend against that attack. From what Neia knew, there was an advanced martial art called 「Fortress」 that

could completely nullify the force of an impact, but that was a technique only a veteran warrior could use.

The two of them stepped forward, and their swords collided with each other.

Their back and forth was too fast for Neia's eyes to follow. The only things she could clearly see were the brief moments when their blades hit each other and froze in place.

If Neia joined this battle, she would surely be hacked to death.

Steel clashed with steel at high speeds, and the ear-piercing sound of metal echoed all around.

Both of them had equivalent arm-strength, so when they crossed blades, their attacks and defenses took place simultaneously.

Should she be impressed by how Buser could swing such a heavy blade with one hand, or show respect to the Sorcerer King for wielding a two-handed sword while being a magic caster?

This was a super high level battle of the sort she had never seen before, and Neia was certain that she could not possibly interfere.

In order not to get in the way of their fight, Neia slowly shifted behind a piece of cover and hid herself.

They're swinging at each other like that, but neither of them is hurt… speaking of which, the Sorcerer King seems a little too strong...

Neia's brain could no longer keep up with a magic caster who could fight with a sword to this extent.

Did he use some kind of amazing spell?

All Neia could do was attribute it to some form of incredible magic she had never heard of before.

Even so—

If this keeps up, there's no doubt that the Sorcerer King will win. No, was he planning to draw out the battle because of that?

The undead did not feel fatigue and they would not be shaken in combat. All of these were unfavorable to Buser.

Buser seemed to realise this, because his face started to contort.

If he has some sort of trump card—

Neia was shocked. The Sorcerer King had suddenly thrown his huge sword at Buser.

After that, a hemisphere of light appeared around Buser and blocked the thrown sword.

The bubble of light vanished, and the thrown sword had only slightly scratched Buser.

This is bad!

Neia prepared to rush out from behind her cover. The Sorcerer King was unarmed now—

"—Huh?"

At some point, a jet-black halberd had ended up in the Sorcerer King's hands.

Buser must have felt the same way as Neia. His eyes were as wide as saucers.

“You didn’t incant a spell, how did you do it… And where did that sword you threw go to…”

“I simply cast a silent spell. Don’t worry about it… All right, my subordinate taught me this, but I’m not very confident in my skills. I apologize in advance if I end up fumbling around.”

The Sorcerer King readied his halberd. He radiated a strange sense of oppression.

Warriors often favored weapons within the same broad classes. Swords, axes, maces, that sort of thing.

The Sorcerer King used momentum to swing his halberd. He attacked Buser’s feet — which were hard to defend — with a sweeping motion. This was a technique one could only perform with a long-shafted weapon.

Just as Buser brought his sword low to try and block the attack, the halberd suddenly jumped up.

It was a feint.

This was a move that would require considerable arm-strength to perform, but Buser raised his sword to block it in an instant.

As expected, the Sorcerer King favored the sword, and he did not seem very skilled with the halberd. While he could elegantly execute textbook attacks, there seemed to be something strangely off about his attacks, and even Neia could spot it with her eyes.

After blocking the halberd’s momentum, Buser leapt back.

“「Sandstorm」!”

The sand particles from within the sword spread out like a wall, rushing towards the Sorcerer King. It had probably obscured the Sorcerer King’s vision completely.

While she doubted the Sorcerer King had eyeballs, having one's vision completely obscured was a tremendous disadvantage.

"「Essence Seal」!「Grand Power Strike」!"

One was a martial art Neia had not heard of before, while the other was an advanced technique, a powerful strike that would inflict additional damage. After using both of them, Buser charged out, faster than before.

Buser's horn decorations glowed with a bizarre light, and he looked like a shooting star.

"Yeeeeeeaaart!"

"Hmph!"

The Sorcerer King caught the blow on his halberd—

"Haha!"

—And Buser laughed.

The sound of metal being ground away rang forth.

Neia's eyes went wide.

"Could it be! A sunder attack!"

Sunder attacks directly damaged a foe's weapons, but the amount of damage done was greatly affected by the composition of both weapons and their damage potential. Buser's martial arts were probably intended to strengthen these two attributes.

Neia began to panic, but in the next moment, she froze as she saw Buser staring with wide eyes.

"It's unharmed!"

Buser cried out in shock.

“What the hell *is* that weapon!?”

As Buser scrambled back, his expression completely changed and with no intention of pressing the attack, the Sorcerer King spun his halberd, tracing a beautiful arc in the air.

“... Well. I did make this weapon with my magic, you know? How could it be so easily broken?”

“But weapons made by magic are fragile, right?”

“Oh, it seems you’ve had experience fighting opponents with magically-created weapons, but it’s dangerous to be bound by such a fixed worldview, no? In other words, there might be opponents who can make weapons which you can’t break.”

The Sorcerer King let go of his halberd. The halberd then vanished, as though it had melted into the air. The same thing must have happened with the greatsword from just now.

After that, the Sorcerer King made a grasping motion, and now he had a black longsword in each of his hands.

“...Now then, what will you do? Don’t tell me that attack was your winning strategy? Can you help me gain more experience?”

The Sorcerer King took a step forward, shortening the distance between them,

“...If you’ve got any more trump cards, it’d be better if you hurried up and used them, no? I’m not kind enough to let a useless enemy live.”

“Fu, fufu! What are you saying, undead one!? Indeed, I’m very impressed by how you managed to fully defend against my attack. Very well done. However, wasn’t that because you were focused on defense? ...I know you won’t get tired, so you feel that you can beat me if you grind me down.”

He saw through it!

Neia felt nervous again. Even she had noticed it. Buser, a far better warrior than herself, could not have failed to notice that.

“I see. So that was what you thought. Indeed, you would be correct to think so. But unfortunately, that was not the case.”

The Sorcerer King spread his arms and approached. The swords in his hands vanished like smoke.

“Watch—”

Buser had already stabbed that unprotected body faster than Neia could shout.

And then—

“...What?”

Buser frantically, repeatedly swung his sword.

“Why! Why!! What is this!?”

He shouted with every swing he took. That was because the Sorcerer King was unharmed despite taking every blow.

“In that case—”

Buser braced his shield and used a martial art. Yet, the Sorcerer King remained unmoved despite taking a shield bash.

Instead, it was Buser who stumbled back.

“Why… wh-why…”

Humans had a hard time reading demihuman expressions, but right now it was very easy.

His face now showed terror and despair.

"...Martial arts are an unknown technique to me. Did martial arts derive from skills, or are they a warrior's magic? Even until now, I still don't know. Still, don't you feel that when fighting an opponent of equal ability, victory might be decided by experience and knowledge of martial arts? That's why I will take your attacks head-on. However… You've shown them all to me, haven't you?"

The Sorcerer King shrugged in an exaggerated fashion, and at the same time he plucked one of the nine rings he wore from its finger.

He did nothing else. That was the only move the Sorcerer King had made. However — a wave of unnaturally frightening and cold air filled the surroundings.

Neia hurriedly looked to the sky. She had almost thought that the sun in the sky had frozen and shattered. However, the sun was still there, shedding its radiance.

—Then could this frigid and jet-black emanation be something released by the Sorcerer King? Could a single individual do something like this?

This, this is the Sorcerer King. This is the true form of the magic caster who slew an army of tens of thousands...

"And now it seems — there is no longer any need to fight you."

He stepped leisurely towards Buser.

Buser, on the other hand, took a trembling step back. It was like he was being pushed away by an invisible pressure radiating from the Sorcerer King.

Buser could feel that abnormal presence more keenly than Neia. He clearly understood the fact that the Sorcerer King was not an opponent he could fight. The way his fur stood on end proved that.

"Wait, hang on. No, wait a second. I'm begging you, just wait a bit!"

Buser raised his right hand and let the sword he was holding fall to the ground.

“Sur-Surrender. I surrender.”

“Hm.”

“I have news about Jaldabaoth. How about it? That should be very useful, right? It’ll definitely be useful.”

“I see.”

“...Also, there’s more. You want to fight Jaldabaoth, right? I’m much stronger than human beings. I can arrange to bring my tribe along to help you fight Jaldabaoth — that piece of shit Jaldabaoth. We’ll go in first. How about that?”

“Oh.”

“...Wait, please wait! That’s not all! If you want, I can give you part — no, *all* of my collected treasure! That ought to be enough for my life, right?”

“Is that all? Are you done making your pitch?”

“Oh, wah, eh,” Buser frantically looked around, and then looked at the Sorcerer King once more. “Yes, yes. No, that’s not it. I, I have more, much more besides that. I can help you get whatever you want — no. I’ll definitely get it for you! Really! Please believe me!”

“Mm. What I really want is something you will *never* be able to obtain.”

Neia sensed the irritation in the Sorcerer King’s tone. Naturally, Buser, as the one confronting him, must have felt it even more strongly.

“Wait, wait-wait, wait a minute. Seriously, wait a bit. Aw, heh, heheheh.”

He was laughing like a servile minion. The kingly attitude he had demonstrated when he had faced them at the plaza was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m sorry if I said the wrong thing. No, I apologize. Really. It was my fault. Really.”

“Hm…”

“Then, then, how, about it? I, I, this one feels, this one can be useful to you. Hehe. Ah, how stupid I was to make an enemy of the great undead king. Therefore, if you would give me a chance to make up for that mistake, I would.. hehe, you won’t regret it!”

Buser got on both knees and clasped his hands as he was begging for mercy.

What a pathetic pose that was. Yet Neia did not think that way at all. No, she had already accepted that this was the proper action an enemy ought to be taking when faced with the true form of the Sorcerer King. At the same time, she vividly recalled the words of that Naga they had met in the Sorcerous Kingdom: “A wise man would immediately throw himself at his feet and beg for mercy.”

In that case, the fate of those who did not kneel right away was—

“I see… well, I like those who understand they were wrong and work hard to correct their mistakes.”

“That, that means!”

Buser’s face lit up with joy. However, that joy was snatched away in an instant.

“—However, if I let you become one of my subordinates — Pestonya and Nigredo would not be happy. Also, be at ease. I will not do anything wasteful like only using the skull. I’ll make full use of every part of you.”

Now die, the Sorcerer King said as he erected a slender fingerbone.

“Aiiiieee! No, no, nooooo! I don’t want to die!! Wait!! I’m begging you!!! Please, I’m begging you!!! I, I still, I still have some value!!!! — I’m useful enough to make you happy!!!! Really!!!!! Believe me!!!!!”

“All things which live must die. The difference is in how soon or late they meet their fate.”

“No!!!!! Don’t look at me that way!!!!! Don’t, don’t kill me!!!!!”

Buser rose to his feet, then turned around and ran.

Neia stared, dumbfounded at how fast a living creature could run when its demise was at hand.

However, the Sorcerer King's spell was faster still.

"How boring. — 「Death」."

Nothing happened. There was no big explosion, no cataract of roaring lightning.

Buser simply fell to his knees and keeled over.

That was all.

"Well, it's a shame about the information… well, that's how it is. Do you object, Ms. Baraja?"

"Eh, no, not at all, Your Majesty's decisions are flawless."

"Really? Well then… go find the paladins. Tell them I've taken care of the demihumans' leader. Although… this is kind of bad…"

Part 4

Both retaking the city and freeing its citizens were trivial before the power of the Sorcerer King.

The attacking paladins and militiamen were virtually unhurt, and while some of the imprisoned residents had lost their lives in the chaos, it was a shockingly small amount.

This outcome was only possible due to the Sorcerer King's presence, to the point where some people thought, *If only we had handed everything to him from the start, we might not have needed to lose anyone*.

Everyone was smiling as Neia and the Sorcerer King walked down the street, whether they were rejoicing over being freed or shedding tears over a bowl of hot soup.

Although they had been told that their freedom was thanks to the Sorcerer King's aid, once they saw the Sorcerer King moving around in person, the residents' eyes were filled with shock, confusion and aversion, but that could not be helped either.

Of course, whether Neia could accept this state of affairs was a different matter entirely. While she wanted to do something in case the Sorcerer King was displeased, it would seem the man himself did not seem to mind. That being the case, it would be very rude of Neia to do something on her own.

Neia addressed the back of the Sorcerer King, who was walking in front of her.

"Your Majesty, where are you going now?"

The Sorcerer King was looking at his palm, and he did not look back at Neia.

"Umu. I'm heading for this big building in the center of town. If that's an enemy base, I'll need to investigate it as soon as possible. The paladins are all tied up with tasks like freeing the captured residents, distributing food, treating the wounded, imprisoning the captured demihumans, and other things."

Neia nodded slightly.

“That building is quite large. If the paladins judged it to be a base, shouldn’t they have already investigated it?”

While the Sorcerer King was the one who had conquered the city, the minor assorted tasks after that had been given to the citizen-soldiers and the paladins to complete. In that case, surely they would have inspected the building that was the Sorcerer King’s objective.

The Sorcerer King stopped walking for a moment and then looked intently at Neia. Then he shrugged and continued walking.

“Ah, umu. Actually, I posted my subordinates outside to make sure the paladins did not draw near. So I doubt they’ve checked it yet.”

“Eh? Then what you said earlier—”

“—Ms. Baraja. I have told you many things until now, but it would be best if you considered matters on your own from time to time. For instance, the reason why we are the ones who are going to investigate the building.”

“Ah! Yes, Your Majesty!”

The Sorcerer King looked at his palm again. Within it was an item once worn by that demihuman — the late Buser. The Sorcerer King was appraising the item as he walked, using the power of magic to carefully examine it.

From what the Sorcerer King said, the sword was called Sand Shooter, the armor was known as Turtle Shell, the shield was named Lancer’s Merit, the horn coverings were called Charge Without Hesitation, the rings were Ring of Second Eye and Ring of Running, while the cape was called the Mantle of Protection.

There also seemed to be other magic items like the necklace and such. Although he said none of them possessed any impressive enchantments, the Sorcerer King still seemed quite happy about them.

Neia shifted her eyes from the Sorcerer King's back to the ground, and then she did as the Sorcerer King said, which was to ponder the reason why the Sorcerer King had to personally investigate that building. However, she did not reach any answer which made her think, *That's it!*

However, if she asked the Sorcerer King for the answer because of that, surely he would be speechless. The thought of the Sorcerer King she so respected thinking of her as useless and casting her aside was terrifying.

While she desperately tried to find the answer, the aforementioned building had already appeared before her eyes.

Two undead beings — High Wraiths — stood at the entrance to the building.

As the Sorcerer King approached, they stepped aside to allow the Sorcerer King and Neia to pass.

"This… seems to be the residence of the city's former lord."

Neia was not too sure which noble had ruled this city. However, given the size of the city, he must have been more than a baron, but less than a count.

"Yes. Not even the undead have entered this place. We are the first to do so. Be careful. There might be more demihumans who have not yet been subdued."

"Eh!? Your Majesty! Then—"

She hesitated over whether she should say "You should stop," but the other Neia in her quietly said that it ought to be fine if it were the Sorcerer King.

"I have to go here. This is the enemy headquarters, and it might be the lair of the demihumans' leader. While the only reason for that conclusion is because this building is very large — there might be a powerful being on par with Buser ahead of us. I want to neatly tie off all the loose ends in this city."

"Ah!"

After learning the answer to the question from just now, Neia suddenly pressed her head in realization. At the same time, gratitude flowed forth in her heart for the Sorcerer King's compassion.

He didn't let the paladins get close because there might be powerful foes within! Unlike what he said just now, could it be that he wasn't willing to tell me about this because he felt embarrassed about fighting as someone else's shield?"

While Neia knew that thinking this way about the Sorcerer King was very rude, for some reason she felt the Sorcerer King was a little cute.

"...Well? Do you understand?"

The Sorcerer King looked at Neia's face as he asked that question. Neia nodded, and the Sorcerer King seemed happy as he replied, "Ah, that's good."

He's actually happy that I can understand him... what a gentle and kind person he is.

"Your servant understands why Your Majesty does not wish to draw attention from others!"

"...Hm? Ah… exactly. Then… you understand, right? I don't wish to stand out too much."

"Understood!"

The Sorcerer King looked like he was pondering something. For some reason that also looked very adorable.

"...Ah— let's go then."

"Yes!"

As a squire, she felt it was wrong to let the Sorcerer King walk out in front, but the Sorcerer King would not allow Neia to walk ahead of him. Neia looked with admiration at the back of the generous and magnanimous person before her. As his subordinate, watching a king lead from the front was truly a heart-warming sight.

After passing through the wide entrance, Neia asked a question.

“Where shall we begin our search? There doesn’t seem to be any sign of others around…”

“Mm… your eyesight and hearing are both quite keen, Ms. Baraja, but how about your sense of smell?”

“Frankly speaking, I’m not too confident in my sense of smell. However, I think I’m better than most in that field. As for taste, I think mine is just average. However, I’ve never tasted poison before, so I can’t be a poison-taster or anything…”

“Really now? Then, can you detect the smell of death and hatred?”

As he said “death and hatred,” his kingly aura of dominion coiled up around him.

“Death and hatred?”

“—This way.”

The Sorcerer King set off. There was no trace of hesitation in his footsteps. He walked as though he was familiar with this place and what lay ahead of him.

Death and hatred… these things shouldn’t have a smell… or could it be that His Majesty, who is undead, can make out such smells? That means whoever’s making that smell is waiting here!

Neia clutched the bow she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King. Depending on the circumstances, she would have to serve as the Sorcerer King’s shield and step forward to fire her bow. Yet she had not been able to do anything during the battle with Buser. If she did not make herself more useful, there would be no reason for her to be here.

They did not encounter any demihumans along the way, and before long, they came to a door that was about the same size as the one they had passed through earlier. It was made of steel, and iron, and thus looked very sturdy.

This was what looked like a prison door, in the middle of a regular noble's residence. The juxtaposition filled Neia with a powerful sense of foreboding. It felt like she had been thrown into an unfamiliar and spine-chilling place.

"This is…"

"It's inside here… you can stay outside if you want, you know?"

It was impossible for Neia to make that choice. After seeing Neia shake her head, the Sorcerer King shrugged and opened the door.

The Sorcerer King's strength opened the iron door with ease. However, it was surprisingly thick, so it must have been specially made.

The Sorcerer King entered the room.

Oh no! I can't believe I actually let His Majesty walk into this unknown place first! I'm an idiot!

Neia hurriedly entered the room as well.

While the heavy door had given her some inkling of what to expect, the interior of the room felt strange. It gave her the impression of being a torture chamber — although she had only heard descriptions of those.

For starters, there were no windows.

There were sticks set into the wall which glowed with a faint red light. This was not a natural light, but created by magic.

There was a table made of wood and two wooden chairs. Further inside was another door, also made of iron.

The Sorcerer King stood in the center of the room, carefully surveying every corner of it. This was when Neia noticed something on the table.

"...Your Majesty. This looks like a piece of paper, but what's that written on it?"

The piece of paper Neia picked up was covered in illegible characters. They were certainly not written in Holy Kingdom script.

“Hm… they seem to be written in words from the demonic language.”

The Sorcerer King took out a monocle from a pocket. Perhaps he had noticed the surprised look on Neia’s face, because he then proceeded to explain it.

“This is a magic item that can decipher written languages. That said, it drains a vast amount of mana. —Ms. Baraja, do you know of any humans who can decipher these characters?”

“With the ability to comprehend languages?”

“Indeed. Or at least, someone who knows what these letters are. Also… any humans who have a talent which lets them decipher languages.”

“My deepest apologies, I don’t know about…”

Neia was simply a squire for the Paladin Order. She had not had the chance to come into contact with news about people like those.

Granted, she had heard some rumors from her squire friends. For instance, “My friend has a talent that lets him know how many degrees hot water is. Of course, nobody knows the exact temperature,” or “My relative’s a boat pilot who can walk five steps on water, but more than that and he’ll sink,” and so on. Most of them were abilities which would make people sigh and fall silent. There was no information about people who possessed abilities which the Sorcerer King wanted to know about.

“Really now? What a shame. Do you think Captain Custodio would know?”

Surely the Captain of the Paladin Order would have come into contact with all sorts of intelligence. However, Neia did not know what to think of Remedios. Would the Captain really allocate her headspace to information?

“...I am not sure about that either. However, I feel it would be better to ask the Vice-Captain.”

‘Well, that’s true. If I ask him…”

The Sorcerer King was probably stumbling over his words for the same reason Neia had.

“However, what do you intend to do if such a person does not exist?’

“Hm? Ah, I did not intend anything. But if there was someone who could decipher the intelligence Jaldabaoth left behind, our future plans would change, no?”

This was an obvious question which she could have answered on her own if she had just thought a little, yet she needed the Sorcerer King to explain it to her. Neia was ashamed about asking such a foolish question without giving it any thought.

“If there’s nobody who can translate this, then I’ll just have to expend mana to decipher it. However, doing so would lead to a disadvantageous state where I would have to be more wary of Jaldabaoth. If I encountered Jaldabaoth after expending a great deal of mana, my only option would be to flee… although, this makes me quite curious. If it’s just one piece of paper, then I shall read it.”

“Will it be all right?”

“Yes. I just need to pay more attention to my mana reserves.”

The Sorcerer King put on his monocle and looked at the paper. Although there were no visible signs of activation, it ought to have taken effect. The Sorcerer King looked like he was deciphering it now. That said, the Sorcerer King had no eyes, so it simply looked like he was reading it.

After a short while, he took off the monocle.

“It was a lot of mana after all.”

Neia had seen priests wobble around shakily after using a great deal of mana, but she saw no signs of that in the Sorcerer King. However, comparing the Sorcerer King to an average magic caster was the height of rudeness. It was probably because he had enormous stores of mana.

As Neia contemplated this, the Sorcerer King approached the door further within and gently slid open the vision slit.

Neia heard many weak breathing sounds from inside, and her nose picked up the scent of blood.

She gripped her bow tightly, thinking to squeeze between the Sorcerer King and the door, but the Sorcerer King stopped her with his hand.

It meant *Don't come here*.

"Mm… Ms. Baraja. The people using this room were not demihumans, but demons. The reason why I say that is because this paper contains details on the experiments the demons were performing."

"...The demons' experiments?"

Even without further explanation, she was sure that these experiments were not decent or proper by any means.

"Yes. They seemed to have done things like chopping arms off and then reattaching them to other creatures, or cutting open the subjects' abdomens and exchanging the internal organs within. They started with blood relatives as a control group, and they branched out to combinations of humans and other lifeforms — not just demihumans, but animals too — and then they healed them with magic to see what changes occurred."

"What dreadful experiments! Especially that blood relatives and body swapping stuff, how could any sane person think of such things?"

"...All right. After conducting these experiments, it's natural that they'd want their test subjects to live. In particular, they want to keep them alive as long as possible until they find out why they die."

Saying so, the Sorcerer King turned around, his back to the door. Then, he indicated the door behind him over his shoulder with his thumb. For some reason, Neia knew what was coming next.

“Some of those test subjects are in there. They’re still alive despite having their bellies cut open.”

She had anticipated this, but the cruel reality still dyed Neia’s mind stark white for an instant. After that, she burned with hatred for the demons who had conducted such inhumane experiments.

“Ms. Baraja! Get the priests right away! Fetch Captain Custodio too! Hurry!”

“Understood!”

There was no need to question the reason why they had to be called over. Neia ran with all her might.

In the corner of her mind, she heard a voice ask, *Is it really all right to leave His Majesty here by himself?* but this was an order from a powerful man who was both trustworthy and wise. There was no need to worry. He would not be wrong. The voice vanished in an instant.

♦ ♦ ♦

The priests opened the door and entered the room. The way their shoulders trembled for an instant illustrated the hideous conditions inside the cells better than words ever could.

In front of her, the Sorcerer King showed the paper to Remedios and Gustavo.

“Have a look at this. This paper contains the names of the people in there and what happened to them. In addition, there are other papers with similar things written on them, or perhaps other things — Jaldabaoth’s plans, for instance. I’m not too sure about that. Can you understand what’s written on this paper?”

Remedios looked at the paper and wrinkled her brows, then immediately handed it to Gustavo.

Gustavo shook his head too.

“I have no idea. But you understand it, don’t you, Your Majesty?”

“Ah, yes, by using the power of this magic item. However, that item drains a tremendous amount of mana. That mana must be conserved for the sake of doing battle with Jaldabaoth. And what I want to know is, do any of you know anyone who can read these characters? Anyone who might have the chance of understanding it will do.”

“No, I have no leads at all. While I feel there might be someone like them among the southern nobles… I think the possibility of that is very low.”

“I see… then how will you deal with this? On my part, I would hope you would put more effort into trying to decipher their script.”

“Can we not borrow Your Majesty’s magic item?”

“I refuse. This is a treasure of my nation. It is just as how you would not easily loan out the holy sword at your waist. And to magic casters like myself, magic items like these are more valuable than swords.”

Remedios and Gustavo looked at each other once more.

“I understand. Then let us work hard together. Also — we have a new problem. It would seem there are Orc captives. How shall they be dealt with?”

It would seem the Orcs had not attacked the Holy Kingdom out of their own will, but they were brought over by Jaldabaoth. They had not yielded any useful information when questioned, and the Paladin Order was at a loss as to how to deal with them.

“Mm… I understand. Can you tell me where they are? Can you leave them to me?”

“Yes. Thank you for your trouble.”

Gustavo supplied a rough location. Since the city was not very big, they would probably not get lost.

After sketching a rough map in her mind, the cell door opened and an utterly exhausted-looking priest showed up.

“Ohhh! What happened!? What about the condition of the people inside?”

“We started by using healing magic on the survivors. This is the first time we’ve tried to heal the subjects of such inhumane experiments, so we’ll stay here and observe them. If they’re fine, we’ll move them outside. At least, that’s what I think.”

“I see. Then, we’ll send some paladins and militiamen over to help you move these people out.”

“Understood, Captain Custodio. Then, I’ll take my leave, Your Majesty.”

The priest opened the door again and went back into the cell.

After watching the priest leave and concluding that there was nothing left to do, the four of them each went to their respective destinations.

Naturally, the Sorcerer King and Neia parted ways with the other two and headed for the location of the Orcs.

“That said, since there are demons around, it would be good if we had someone who could see the original forms of shapeshifters,” the Sorcerer King said as he walked.

While they could not verify the presence of demons in this city, the piece of paper with demonic characters on it suggested the possibility that there might be demons about, or that there might have been demons here recently.

“Can demons transform themselves?”

“Ahh, demons like that do exist. They can shapeshift into men, women, or even animals.”

“I see… Someone with the ability to see through shapeshifting — or a similar talent. My deepest apologies. I have not heard of anyone with these abilities. Ah, no, I’ve heard legends about such things. I remember reading about them in a book. However, if you asked me if there were any of them around now…”

"...It seems I would be best served discussing this matter again with Captain Custodio, then."

"Is shapeshifting a form of illusion? I'm more familiar with petty tricks like illusions."

"For starters, shapeshifting is vastly different from illusions, but explaining that will take a long time so I'll skip it for now. However, looking down on illusions is very dangerous, you know? Illusions are a fearsome type of spell that become scarier the more skilled the caster is. Also, there are those illusionists who aren't satisfied with a surface understanding and choose to specialize along that path."

"So it's when they specialize?"

"Ahh, yes. For example, there are spells like 「Perfect Illusion」 which can defy all five senses. And beyond that, there are those who have refined their illusions to the utmost limit, who can use a certain skill once every few days to deceive the world itself."

An illusion that could deceive a world was beyond her capacity to imagine.

"Ah, how exactly does that worldly illusion work?"

"From what I know, it's a spell that lets you rewrite any aspect of the world, I think. Well, simply put, using an illusion like that could even bring the dead back to life?"

"Eh!? You're talking about an illusion, right?"

"Oh yes. An illusion which tricks the world — the ultimate secret of illusions. By deceiving the world itself, an illusion can be made real."

All she could think was *Wahhh*~ Even if one said that the pinnacle of illusion could do such a thing, it was so incredible that she did not quite understand what he was saying.

"So, does nobody manage the inborn talents of this country?"

“No, I’ve never heard of it before. Does the Sorcerous Kingdom do such things?”

“My country does not have that practice either. I plan to do so in the future, but that will require considerable effort… it might end up being a matter of ten or more years in the future.”

The Sorcerer King had already envisioned the events of the next ten years in his mind. This was the difference between a king and a commoner.

In other words, a tremendous difference.

♦ ♦ ♦

The Orcs were held in a building whose windows were boarded up from the outside. This was quite a big structure, probably the second or third largest in this city.

There were many paladins gathered at the entrance. It would seem they were on guard against what was inside.

After seeing the Sorcerer King approach, the paladins genuflected before him to express their respect.

“I’ve heard from Captain Custodio that the Orcs are in this building. May I enter?”

“Yes! Of course you may, Your Majesty!”

“Then you should go from this place and return to what you should be doing.”

The paladins looked up.

“But the Captain ordered us to be stationed here. We may not leave our posts.”

“…Did she now? Then I take back my previous words.”

Saying so, the Sorcerer King passed between the paladins and pushed open the door. Naturally, Neia was following him.

There was a sour odor in the air which seared Neia's nose. This was not poison gas, but the smell reminded Neia of when she had once followed a paladin to a jail. In addition, there were other smells mixed into it — smells that made her want to throw up.

"This is…"

When she heard the Captain mention it earlier, she had thought about why the Orcs had been specially brought along.

Neia knew that she was about to learn the truth, but at the same time she deployed the wings of her imagination. If this was not just a problem that the Orcs faced, if there was a grand alliance against Jaldabaoth, would the demihumans who wanted to fight back against him rally to their banner?

As Neia thought all this, the Sorcerer King kept pushing doors open as he advanced. One could say that letting the Sorcerer King go first was a matter of fact now.

They crossed rooms and passed through corridors.

Just by walking, she realized that this place was filthier than a jail.

The place was filthy with blood, vomit, and other detritus. The conditions here were so terrible that there was no way to imagine what had happened here.

Orcs were demihumans around the height of a man, with porcine facial features. They were said to be a species that loved cleanliness. They would not be happy to live in such a place.
(TL Note: The pigman depiction of orcs apparently derives from Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, where they had piggish features. Other depictions include the original corrupted-elf Uruks by Tolkien and the Warhammer greenskins. It seems Maruyama has decided to make them full-on pig beastmen.)

Neia watched the hem of the Sorcerer King's cloak. While she was worried about how his magnificent garments might be stained, she could not tell him

to wait outside either. After all, nobody could possibly speak for the wise Sorcerer King.

Soon, Neia's keen senses picked up traces of many creatures breathing and moving ahead of them. There was also what sounded like crying children and mothers trying to comfort them.

Orcs…? Not humans?

Neia was confused. She had never considered the possibility that Orcs might have families and raised children. The Orcs who came to the Holy Kingdom were invaders. They were hated enemies. Therefore, she had stopped thinking about them in any other sense.

As Neia sank into confusion, the Sorcerer King opened the door.

The vile odor intensified, and there were several screams.

"The undead!"

"It's a Skeleton! Why!?"

"Those bastard humans! They sold us to the undead!"

"They're actually using the undead! Those filthy humans!"

"Mama—! Save me—!"

"My boy—!!!"

The Sorcerer King stopped at the entrance. As expected, even the Sorcerer King was puzzled by this.

"Ah — ahem! Silence!"

After the Sorcerer King bellowed his order, the noisy room fell silent. Of course, that was only for a moment. It immediately filled back up with a racket that was several times louder than before. They were wailing about roughly the same things. No, there seemed to be more voices bemoaning their fate and

begging for mercy for their children, regardless of what happened to themselves.

"...Haaah."

The Sorcerer King sighed, as though he were tired. After that — he slammed on the door. His bony white hands possessed incredible power, and the door bounced away, swinging out until it struck the wall with an incredible sound. The demihumans fell silent immediately.

"Shut up. The next one of you who speaks without permission had better be ready to die."

The Sorcerer King took a step into a room that seemed to have been frozen in silence — with some parents trying desperately to cover their children's mouths — and the demihumans all retreated from him.

"I did not come here to kill you. On the contrary, I am here to save you."

Usually, Neia the human would have a lot of difficulty trying to read the face of a demihuman such as an Orc. However, just this once, Neia was absolutely confident in herself.

Every single one of them was going *No way.*

"Explaining to everyone at once is troublesome. Send out a representative."

A moment later, an Orc looked like he was about to rise, but the Orc beside him stopped him. However, he still took a step forward.

He may have been a skinny Orc, but he had clearly possessed a strong body once.

"...May I assume that you are the representative?"

The Orc said nothing and simply nodded.

"...What's wrong? Why do you not speak?"

“Ah, perhaps it is because Your Majesty ordered them to shut up just now?”

“While I felt that I had given my permission, it would seem nobody understood it that way. You, the Orc who has stepped forward, I permit you to speak. Begin by stating your name.”

“I am Dyel of the Gan Zu tribe — Dyel Gan Zu.”

“Dyel, then. Here is my first question. Are there people here you do not know, or whose personalities have changed drastically?”

“No, no, there’s nobody like that.”

“Next, tell me why you were imprisoned here.”

“...You know that demon called Jaldabaoth, right?”

“Of course I do. He is my enemy. Rather, you could say I came here — to the Holy Kingdom — in order to kill him.”

Their faces still said *No way,* as expected. Indeed, Neia might have thought the same way before she had come to understand the Sorcerer King. However, Neia was different now.

Neia looked at the Sorcerer King’s profile, and then she spoke.

“It is as His Majesty says. I am a person of this country. In that case, you should be able to understand, right? Jaldabaoth led an allied army of demihumans to invade the Holy Kingdom.”

Dyel’s face changed slightly.

“Wait, a human — probably, a female.”

What did they mean by “probably?” she thought, but to Neia, judging the sex of an Orc would be very difficult. It would probably be the same way for them as well.

“We did not attack this country. Nobody from the Orc tribes should have helped Jaldabaoth. Because of that, he brought us — who defied him — along to this place as punishment.”

“Hm… and what did Jaldabaoth do after he brought you here?”

The Sorcerer King’s question seemed to given Dyel and the other Orcs a powerful shock. The Orcs who looked like mothers clutched their children tightly. After that, there were sounds of moaning and vomiting.

“...What happened here, seriously?” the Sorcerer King could not help but ask.

“Ah, it seems I’ve asked a question I shouldn’t have asked. Shall I bring some water? Or do you want something else?”

The Sorcerer King’s attitude seemed to have changed. For some reason, he seemed very nervous. Perhaps he felt guilty about asking the Orcs questions that had dredged up bad memories. While it might be somewhat rude to think of him that way, the Sorcerer King looked like a parent trying to comfort another child which their own offspring had driven to tears.

This is something only a king who counts both humans and demihumans as his subjects would do...

To the people of the Holy Kingdom, demihumans were the enemy. Therefore, under identical circumstances, they would not say anything kind or comforting.

“We do not want anything else. But we beg you not to ask us what happened. You would not enjoy hearing it, and it was a hellish experience for us. If you order us to speak of it we will do so, but I pray you will do it away from others. Please.”

After hearing the sobs and weeping of the female Orcs, Neia began to feel a little afraid of what had happened to them.

“...How vexing,” the Sorcerer King muttered to himself, but so much had happened that Neia did not know what he was referring to.

“Ah, erm, well. Since you seem to be enemies of Jaldabaoth, why not discuss the matter of joining forces with us, since we have a common foe?”

Dyel shifted his gaze downwards.

“We had thought of fighting once, but now we no longer think of such things. We`ve been broken by the fiendish things which happened here. We no longer have the courage to fight.”

“Then if I free you, what will you do?”

“If possible, we would like to return to our villages. If there are still people who are safe there, we would like to take them and run far, far away, until we find a place where Jaldabaoth cannot reach us.”

The Sorcerer King nodded.

“Then, come to the domain which I rule—”

“—Please allow us to refuse! I am keenly aware of the dangers of upsetting you, but even if we agree here, we will surely flee once we reach a place where we can escape. However, betrayal is the vilest act imaginable. Then, we should refuse here, since what awaits us is a death that will not be so agonizing.”

“What…”

The Sorcerer King was probably a little baffled by this staunch refusal. However, Neia keenly understood what Dyel was thinking. That was because until she had met the Sorcerer King, Neia had felt that the undead were the enemy of all that lived.

“...No, but my domain is not a fearsome place, you see? There are many demihumans who live there, you know?”

“You’re lying! It sounds like a lie! We, we won’t be tricked! You’re talking about demihuman undead, aren’t you?”

Dyel seemed to have gone half-mad, but he was just like how she had been in the past. Then, as one who had some experience in these matters, she ought to tell him about the true face of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“His Majesty is telling the truth. He is a great man who, while being undead, also possesses a heart filled with compassion for all living things. He loves children, he rules demihumans fairly, and he receives the respect of his subordinates. As proof of that, they have even built enormous statues of him which astound all who see them—”

“—Ms. Baraja! Really, that, that’s enough…”

“But, Your Majesty!”

“Please… say no more…”

Since he had said “please,” she had no choice but to keep quiet.

“Human, have you been brainwashed!?”

“I have not. I have seen His Majesty’s kingdom with my own eyes. The first demihuman I saw was a Naga.”

There was a commotion as the demihumans looked at each other. There were voices asking, “What’s a Naga?” but they were ignored.

“Also, I saw a rabbit-like demihuman. I am not a citizen of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Therefore, my time there was short. Even so, it was enough for me to understand what was going on. The people living there did not have pained and frightened looks on their faces like you do. And of course, none of them were covered in cuts and bruises like you.”

The demihumans looked down at their stick-thin bodies. Their muscles had shrivelled up, and they were little more than skin and bone.

“It is as she — as Ms. Baraja says. That said, you will probably not believe me. However, once you become my vassals, I will never allow you to suffer such cruelty again. I can swear that to you upon my name, Ainz Ooal Gown. The reason for that is because all that I rule belongs to me. Should it be damaged, it

is the same as damaging my property. Therefore, you may be at ease. If you do not wish to accept my rule, I will not force you to do so. Live as you please. In any case, I shall prepare to send you back to your homes."

"...Why are you being so kind to us?"

This was the first time Dyel had cast aside his preconceived notions. Neia could feel him looking at the Sorcerer King himself.

"Fufu… I wish to defeat Jaldabaoth. Therefore, the demihumans under him are quite troublesome. Having you go back to your villages is also a way of eroding his power."

"What do you mean?"

"Unlike Jaldabaoth, I am a merciful king. If you spread the word for me, that will surely cause unrest throughout his forces, and there might even be those who decide to turn coat and support us, don't you think?"

"I see, so that's how it is."

It was difficult for people to put their faith in benefits offered to them with no strings attached, but a mutually beneficial transaction was more trustworthy. It would seem the same logic applied to demihumans.

"However, don't you think that'll be difficult? Many of Jaldabaoth's vassals are bloodthirsty maniacs. Even if we spread the word in our villages, it would not have much effect."

"That's fine too. I intend to use everything I can use. And if Jaldabaoth carries out a reign of terror, there might be demihumans who will betray him too. Mm, speaking of which, will you not help me fight Jaldabaoth?"

"...We can't. We've told you before, right? We don't have the will for that now."

"Huh. What a shame. And you still do not wish to come to the Sorcerous Kingdom?"

“Indeed, it would be a good thing to live under the protection of a mighty being like yourself. However, this is not a decision we can make by ourselves. Depending on the result of our discussion with the others, we might end up relying on you.”

“Dyel!”

“Donbass. I know what you want to say. However, with the appearance of Jaldabaoth, a fiend against whom we are helpless, we cannot protect our villages by ourselves. Sooner or later, this will be our fate.”

The Orc called Donbass bit his lip and looked down. He understood that point as well.

“Is that so? If you come to my country, then I, the Sorcerer King will offer you my full support. Many species live upon my land. At that time, I hope you will work together with them — live with them as people of my country.”

The Sorcerer King’s tone softened.

Demihumans were viewed as the enemy in the Holy Kingdom, yet in the Sorcerous Kingdom they were seen as beings with whom one could coexist. From where did this enormous difference spring? As Neia thought about it, she immediately found the answer.

It’s because of His Majesty, huh… Because His Majesty possesses such incredible power. As I thought… power is what’s important....

“Now then, after this, I will provide the rations you will need until you return to your villages. In addition, I will supply soldiers to defend you. Returning home safely with those bodies of yours will require much time and effort.”

“You would go this far for us?”

“Of course I would. Do weep and wail at great length about the generosity and magnanimity of the Sorcerous Kingdom and spread my name. After this, Ms. Baraja, could I trouble you to leave the room? I am about to use a national secret of the Sorcerous Kingdom which I do not wish to allow anyone from another country to see.”

“Understood.”

Neia stepped out of the room after answering, and she felt a little lonely. The Sorcerer King’s words made perfect sense, and while she could understand them, she could not accept them.

As she stood outside the broken door, the breathing sounds of Orcs from within the room began to dwindle. It was as though they were vanishing from the room, and in truth, that was probably the case.

The Sorcerer King had once said that as long as he remembered a location, he could teleport to it. He must have used such a spell on them.

Soon, the room was silent. A moment later, the sound of footsteps approached Neia. As her mind registered that fact, she saw that the only person on the other side of the door was the Sorcerer King.

“Forgive the long wait.”

“No, it was not long at all.”

The room was empty. He must have used magic potent beyond the ability of Neia to imagine to teleport all the Orcs away. Or perhaps he had used some other means — he had teleported them with an item.

“Then, let’s meet with Captain Custodio and hear about our future plans from her.”

“Yes! Your servant understands!”

♦ ♦ ♦

After exiting the Orc internment camp, the two of them asked a paladin they met along the way about Remedios’s location. There was no sign of her at the building they were directed to, but Gustavo was there.

“Ohhhh! Your Majesty! We were just about to invite you over!”

Gustavo seemed completely different from when they had met him earlier. He was lively, as though the light of hope was spilling out from him, and his voice had perked up too. Had something appeared which had changed the currently-dire situation? Perhaps the Sorcerer King had the same question in his heart, and so he asked:

"What happened? Did you receive some good news?"

"Yes! There's a very important person you must see. Come, this way."

If they wanted to show him somebody, he must be a powerful noble, or someone related to the royal family.

The Sorcerer King — trailed by Neia for some reason — was guided to a certain room by Gustavo.

It contained several simple wooden chairs. Remedios was seated there, as was a skinny man.

The two of them turned to look at the Sorcerer King as he entered, and they both rose in welcome.

"This is the royal brother in whose veins flows the blood of our Holy King, Caspond-sama."

Indeed, his face resembled the profile of the second Holy King which adorned the Holy Kingdom's gold coins. Neia blinked at the fact that someone like this had actually been imprisoned here.

"Caspond-sama. This is the king of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown, His Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown, who has come to aid our nation."

"Ohhh! Words cannot express my gratitude, Your Majesty. I am honored to meet you. As others have said, I am the brother who was eclipsed by my outstanding little sister."

As the royal brother said something that was very difficult to respond to, Remedios had an annoyed look on her face which seemed to say, *Are you making fun of her*? Still, he was the next successor for the late Holy Queen's

position, so she could not put on the same attitude she had held all this time. Thus, Remedios simply cast her eyes downward without saying anything.

“Ahhh, is that so? An honor to meet you, Royal Brother-dono.”

Then, their eyes met again.

Neia watched and wondered what they were doing, and a moment later the Sorcerer King extended his hand, which Caspond took.

Shaking hands was a practice that arose among those of higher status.

When one compared a man who was simply in the line of succession to the throne to someone who ruled a country of his own, however small it was, the latter would be of higher status. The fact that the latter was also aiding the country of the former only served to heighten his importance. The fact that the Sorcerer King had not immediately extended his hand was probably a sign of respect to the other side.

Truly, he is a thoughtful and generous man.

That convinced Neia. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Caspond was also nodding and making noises of approval.

“Your Majesty, I apologize for greeting you in this shabby attire. It would have been well if I could have changed before your arrival, but…”

“There is nothing to be ashamed about. Mere clothes cannot degrade a man of class. You must be exhausted from your long imprisonment. Will you not take a seat before speaking?”

“I am grateful for your kindness. Then please allow me to avail myself of your goodwill.”

The Sorcerer King was the first to release their handshake, and Caspond sat down after he did.

“In any event, I am glad to see Your Highness is safe and sound. Still, how did you come to be imprisoned here?”

“That was because I happened to flee here. Baron Bagnen took very good care of me. —How is he? Captain Custodio. I believe you took him away after he spoke to me.”

“Baron Bagnen’s wounds are not severe, and his life is not in danger. However, due to his poor physical condition and great exhaustion, he is still sound asleep.”

“Can the priests not use their magic to aid him? Now would be the time to draw on his intellect, no?”

“The priests have exhausted their remaining mana on healing the wounded, and they are currently resting. I sincerely apologize, but if the situation is not critical, I feel it is better to let them conserve their mana.”

“If that’s the case, then it can’t be helped, Captain. However, he was the one who brought me here and fought desperately to protect me. If possible, please— you understand what I’m saying, right?”

It was not Remedios, but Gustavo who nodded deeply.

“All right, then there is one thing I must verify first. Is there anyone in this country who can see through shapeshifting or illusions?”

“Why do you ask, Your Majesty?”

“That is because I am wary of demons using magic to hide themselves among the imprisoned people.”

Caspond looked at Remedios.

“Captain, can you answer His Majesty’s question?”

“Ah, my apologies. Please answer on my behalf, Vice-Captain. I do not recall anyone like that.”

The Sorcerer King went “Mm—” and sank into contemplation. Caspond then asked Remedios another question.

“If it troubles the Sorcerer King so, that clearly indicates that this must be a vital question. I shall ask you again. Can you swear to the gods that you do not know?”

The two paladins nodded, and then Caspond’s gaze turned to Neia. Surely he would not know a squire like herself, right? As Neia thought that, she hurriedly nodded as well.

“So even Squire Baraja does not know… what’s wrong? You look puzzled. I’ve heard your name from the Captain. I’m very grateful that you can serve by His Majesty’s side.”

“My deepest thanks!”

Neia hurriedly bowed to Caspond.

“Just so. She is exceptional. I would like a follower like that.”

“What, surely, you must jest…”

Neia’s voice was trembling. As he saw her in that state, the Sorcerer King and Caspond laughed happily. Then, they resumed their — although the Sorcerer King had no facial expressions, of course — serious looks.

“While it shames me to admit my ignorance, do demons possess the power to transform into other people?”

“Demons can take human form to make people fall, but that does not mean they can transform into others. It is simply that they can take human form, not that they can imitate anyone’s looks. Therefore... if there is anyone unfamiliar among the people imprisoned here… there will be a need to be careful.”

“In that case, we will need to have the people who were captured vouch for each other…”

“Now, illusions are more troublesome. With illusions, one can take the faces of others. For instance…”

The Sorcerer King cast a spell, and his skeletal face transformed into that of Caspond.

“This is an illusion. However, low level illusions like this one might be able to change one’s attire, but not one’s voice. Also, they cannot imitate memories and thoughts. Therefore, they will be immediately exposed if someone close to the subject speaks to them.”

The Sorcerer King’s face resumed its skeletal form.

“There are many ways to disguise one’s clothes and voice. Therefore, the best way is to speak to them and check for a sense of wrongness.”

His questions to the Orcs must have been intended to guard against that, Neia mused.

As expected of His Majesty. His considerations are surprisingly thorough.

“I see… well, you heard that, no? Go check it out immediately.”

“A moment please. You should also consider the possibility of a demon running amok once it is exposed. Do you not think that letting a powerful person like Captain Custodio stay by your side to protect you would be better?”

“I see. I understand. I will perform investigations with the Captain as a witness.”

Gustavo bowed his head.

“Royal Brother-dono. That is all I wished to verify. If you have more to say, then by all means.”

“Then — Your Majesty. As for our future plans, I feel it is necessary for us to head south, link up with the local forces and then launch a full-scale attack. That is because there were several nobles imprisoned with me, and I wish to ask them to see who can lend their strength to us. That is the plan I intend to adopt.”

“Mm. I do not understand this country’s nobles, so if you feel that is best, then by all means… Will you not attack the other prison camps and rescue the prisoners there?”

“It is not yet time for that. Leading many people to areas controlled by Jaldabaoth is very obvious, and our rate of advance will become very slow. I wish to avoid an outcome where we lose more than we gain by helping others.”

“…Then why not let the civilians flee south while we alone attack the prison camps?”

“Captain Custodio. You were allowed to be present, but I did not seek your opinion.”

Caspond spoke in a tone that was completely different from how he addressed the Sorcerer King.

Remedios clenched her teeth as she bit back her anger.

“I also approve of Royal Brother — no, Caspond-dono’s opinion. However, you have already taken two prison camps, including this place. I imagine you can continue to skillfully apply the experience gained here, can you not?”

“We shall do nothing,” Caspond shrugged. “I do not feel we can take this land back without deaths or wounded. The number of casualties will grow from the tens, to the hundreds, to the thousands. There is something else which is more important than this.”

As they heard his words, which cast the people aside, Neia saw looks of shock cross Remedios’s and Gustavo’s faces. As for Neia herself, she calmly thought, *This is all ordinary royals amount to.*

“Caspond-sama, you’ve changed. In the past, you were a great man who was as kind to the masses as Her Majesty.”

“What’s this, Captain Custodio? Are you disappointed? Hmph!”

Caspond's face twisted. His lips curled, baring his teeth. His razor-sharp gaze was full of mockery.

"Your heart would be as twisted as mine if you had tasted the same hell I did. I can't spout pretty words any more, huh. They make me sick… As for what they did to us… I guess you haven't heard yet. In that case, go find someone and ask them. That way, you'll know exactly how evil and blasphemous demons are."

He was like a completely different person, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the inky black substance under his forcibly-repaired personality had emerged again.

"If possible, I'd like to kill all those demihumans…"

He glanced at the Sorcerer King, who shrugged and answered:

"You may do as you please after you've questioned them. I've already liberated the Orcs."

"That can't be helped, then. What a shame. Well, the Orcs tasted misery alongside me… although, could you hand them over to me in exchange for the holy sword?"

"I am a magic caster. What would I do with a sword even if you gave it to me?"

Caspond chuckled at the Sorcerer King's playful reply.

On the other hand, Remedios's blank face stood as a contrast to Gustavo's pale features.

It sounded like a joke, but Caspond was probably serious.

Neia's body trembled. To think he hated those imprisoned demihumans enough that he was willing to hand over a national treasure just to get them back in his hands… *What on earth had happened to him?*

"So you will abandon this city?"

“I would like to if I could. But before that, I want to interview some of the prisoners and send messengers to the south. I think that will take a week at the earliest. When we take this land back, I shall offer you a gratuity corresponding to your kindness in addition to what Captain Custodio has already arranged.”

“I do look forward to that.”

♦ ♦ ♦

The Sorcerer King left with Neia a minute later. Caspond went, “All right. Since the Sorcerer King is already gone, let’s get to the main event.”

“Yes. Protecting this many people at once will be very difficult. If possible, I believe we will need to borrow reinforcements from the south, or perhaps obtain some sort of transport like horses and carriages.”

Caspond smiled thinly as he heard Gustavo’s suggestion.

“What nonsense are you spouting? Who said we’re talking about that?”

“Were we not supposed to consider how to move ourselves south?”

“Let me speak plainly. We will not flee south right away. We will do battle with Jaldabaoth’s army here.”

“That’s far too rash!”

As she heard Gustavo’s words, Remedios continued speaking.

“While we have city walls, we’ll be finished once we’re surrounded and the food runs out. A siege would be foolish without reinforcements to count on.”

While Remedios may not have been good at thinking, she was very reliable when it came to battle. Gustavo nodded as he heard his Captain’s confident words.

“Even so, we must fight here.”

As the two of them turned questioning gazes on him, Caspond smiled cruelly and explained himself.

“You heard it too, right? The Sorcerer King is conserving his mana for the battle with Jaldabaoth…”

After seeing Gustavo nod, Caspond continued.

“That would be troublesome. After he defeats Jaldabaoth and takes the maid demons, the Sorcerer King will return to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Before that, we need to have him decrease the amount of demihumans who have invaded this nation. Therefore, we must place ourselves in dire straits.”

“But our agreement with the Sorcerer King…”

“Every time the Sorcerer King slays several demihumans with his magic, fewer people of the Holy Kingdom will be lost, no? Which will you choose? Your pact with the undead, or the lives of the Holy Kingdom’s innocent civilians?”

Gustavo had a bitter look on his face, while the blank-faced Remedios promptly answered:

“The innocents of the Holy Kingdom, of course.”

“That’s how it is, Captain. Therefore, you must make the Sorcerer King fight. Since we have made an agreement, there must be a good reason to break it.”

“And so we must fight Jaldabaoth’s army for that?”

“Correct. Or rather — we began our work to flee to the south, but since we took more time than we expected, we were surrounded by Jaldabaoth’s army. With no options left, we had no choice but to seek the Sorcerer King’s strength. What do you think?”

He’s right, Remedios and Gustavo’s eyes seemed to say to each other. However—

“I have a question. What if the mana that the Sorcerer King expends becomes a disadvantage during the battle with Jaldabaoth?”

“I hear mana can be recovered quickly, no?”

“My sister said so too.”

Remedios’s little sister was a priestess. If she said, “I heard it from her,” nobody could refute it.

“We’ll release a few demihumans on purpose and lure Jaldabaoth’s army here. We need to do it before we run out of rations, remember.”

“...But how many of Jaldabaoth’s men will come?”

The three of them had already shared what they knew. After a series of battles, Jaldabaoth’s army was less than one hundred thousand strong.

The army was formed of twelve species, as well as six other species who were not numerous enough to qualify as armies in their own right, for a total of eighteen species.

The twelve races were:

Snakemen — serpent-headed demihumans, considered close relatives of Lizardmen.

Armatts — a bipedal rat-like species with iron-like fur. They were considered close relatives of the Quagoa.

Cabens — they resembled apes that were slightly larger than human beings, whose eyes had atrophied.

Zerns — a slimy species whose upper bodies were like eels with arms and whose slimy lower bodies were like blue-colored maggots. Some people wondered *Are you sure they aren’t heteromorphs?* but they were affected by spells that worked on demihumans, so they were classed as demihumans.

Bladers — an insectile species whose fingernails sprouted knife-like blades and whose bodies were protected by an armor-like exoskeleton. Much like the

Zerns, they were also affected by spells that worked on demihumans, so they were classed as demihumans

Horuners — demihumans with horse-like legs who were adept at sprinting. They could run for long periods without rest and possessed shocking mobility.

Spidans — Spider-like demihumans with four long and slender arms and legs who resembled spiders. They could spit all sorts of silk from their mouths and make all manner of clothes and items with that silk. The silk clothing they made in this way was as hard as steel.

Stone Eaters — armed with crude weapons, their most frightening feature was their ability to spit the rocks they ate. They could spit stone fragments that could easily dent metal armor, and do so at ranges in excess of one hundred meters. However, they could only do that a limited number of times, so if one could weather their onslaught, they were nothing to fear.

Orthrous — they were a version of Centaurs whose lower bodies were replaced by those of carnivorous beasts. They had better fighting power than Centaurs, but conversely they were less mobile.

Magilos — born with the ability to use spells of up to the fourth tier. The spells they could use apparently appeared on their bodies like tattoos. Their more powerful members were covered in tattoos. Sometimes there were individuals who could develop skills as magic casters, and those were rumored to be able to cast spells of up to the fifth tier. They might be Lord level entities.

Pteropos — a species which lived on cliffsides, they were very adept at long distance gliding. While they could fly, it seemed to require a lot of strength, so they could only fly for a while every day, and after that they could not even glide. If they did not fly, they could rend armor with the wind, so defending against it was very difficult. They were a species which was stronger when they could not fly.

And then, there were the Bafolk.

The remaining six races were not particularly numerous, but each of them was quite powerful.

Ogres.

Buri Uns — an Ogre-like race with the power to control the earth, who could be considered a superior species. They possessed special abilities associated with the earth.

Vah Uns — Similar to Buri Uns, they were water-controlling beings. They had water-linked special abilities.

Nagarajas — they looked like snakes with scaly bodies and arms. They were a completely different species from the similarly-named Nagas, and they did not get along well with the latter. They were born with the ability to cast many spells, and sometimes they would even equip themselves with swords and armor.

Spriggans — a species that could freely change their size from small to large. They were fundamentally a good species and evil Spriggans were very rare. That said, both good and bad Spriggans were unmanageable when they went berserk.

Zoastia — carnivores with the upper bodies of beastmen. They were relatives of Centaurs and Orthrous. They wore plate armor and carried round shields. They had no special abilities, but they were heavy cavalry with the savagery and strength of wild beasts. Just one of them was very powerful, and the Orthrous often relied on them. It was apparently a relationship like the one between Goblins and Hobgoblins. However, due to their lack of special abilities, they were not very strong foes against adventurers who could cast the 「Fly」 spell. Still, in a head to head clash, even orichalcum ranked adventurers would have a hard time.

♦ ♦ ♦

“According to the Sorcerer King, your base might be under surveillance, right? Then if they know how many troops we have, they might not send too many troops over. That works to our advantage. However, there’s a problem.”

“Food.”

“Yes. While the priests can make food, they can only make very little even after exhausting their mana. They also can’t feed like demihumans.”

Remedios and Gustavo had looks of distaste on their faces. All three of them knew that demihumans preyed on humans.

Therefore, even if they tried to starve the invading demihumans, they all knew they would lose in the end. That was because the demihumans’ prison camps could be considered larders for them.

“Go check how long our food can hold—”

“We’re checking already. We’re also looking for any blacksmiths who might be able to modify the demihuman gear for use by humans.”

“I expected nothing less of you, Captain.”

The three of them continued discussing their preparations for the siege. After another hour, they reached a conclusion which all of them could accept, and the three of them smiled.

“All right, then let’s prepare for the siege.”

♦ ♦ ♦

One week later, as their food supplies dwindled and it was about time for them to move, the demihuman army appeared from over the horizon.

However, it was a massive army whose scale far exceeded their expectations.

Part 5

Ainz looked out over the city, which was in a panic over the appearance of the demihuman army, and he slowly collapsed.

This was not a figure of speech.

Ainz's heart and soul were stretched to their limits by fatigue, and despite his undead nature, he fell to his knees from mental exhaustion and grabbed his face.

What should I do… what should I do after this...

Fundamentally, Ainz had been following Demiurge's script.

Of course, not every word and action was planned, so he had improvised a fair bit, but even so, Ainz was counting on following the developments of Demiurge's plan.

Or rather, the problem was that he had improvised too much.

Frankly speaking, the operational directives he had gotten from Demiurge basically said: "Please adapt to the situation," and other things like that.

This was too much. That was what Ainz had thought when he first looked at the instructions.

If Ainz was an excellent person, perhaps he could follow those directions and play the role of a perfect Sorcerer King. However, much to his regret, Ainz's abilities were perfectly normal, or perhaps even worse than that.

Therefore, Ainz had gotten into a spirited debate with Demiurge over the matter.

He recalled things going like this: Ainz had pleaded, "I don't understand, write in more detail," whereupon Demiurge had humbly replied with "How could I possibly do something that rude to the sagacious Ainz-sama?" and this had led to an intense back and forth. He had roped Albedo into this battle halfway, and

Ainz — who had begun at a great disadvantage — had finished at a complete loss.

And so, the operational directives granting him complete discretion ended up in Ainz's hands.

If this was a prank on Demiurge's part, he might be able to deal with it in some other way, but this was the fruit of his subordinate's trust and respect.

In particular, that was made very clear by such pronouncements as "You will surely be able to reach a better conclusion, Ainz-sama — how could one as insignificant as myself bind you with my words and deeds?"

If you went by common sense, why would the king of another country come over alone… what an unreasonable argument… still, I've come all this way. Although I stirred up some problems along the way and got careless a few times, I still came all this way...

He did not believe in the gods, but he wanted to pray to them with all his heart.

Couldn't Demiurge and Albedo consider my abilities before dumping missions onto me...

Being asked to do the impossible made his motivation shrivel up.

...All right, pull it together, me. It'll be easier after I get through this.

Ainz poured his strength into his legs, and then he stood up.

The plan had come to the vital middle stages, and that was the worst part.

According to Demiurge, if they formed a defensive line at this city, they would attack until there were eighty five percent casualties.

Ainz had no idea what he was talking about.

Since Demiurge felt it ought to be this way, then it should be a better answer than anything Ainz came up with. If all those deaths brought benefits to

Nazarick, then let them die. Rather, Ainz would think about whether killing more would bring even more benefits to Nazarick and such things.

However, the problem lay in the fact that Demiurge had asked Ainz for humans here which could not be killed.

Frankly speaking, if that was all, then he would randomly select a few and be done with it, but there was one more thing to note.

That was humans who were devoted to Ainz, or who might be persuaded to join Ainz's side.

『I feel that there must be several humans who are as devoted to you as those Dwarves, so please tell me their names, and when I make my move, I will take care not to kill them off.』

When he received that message from Demiurge, he had even thought, *Are you kidding me?* as he doubted Demiurge's thinking.

"...There's nobody like that."

Those despondent words escaped Ainz.

There were no humans here who were devoted to Ainz.

Rather, he had keenly experienced how much the undead were hated in the Holy Kingdom.

Under these dire circumstances, how many people would be devoted to his undead self?

However, he could not tell Demiurge that there were none.

Demiurge sincerely believed that Ainz could fascinate several humans. So what would happen if he told Demiurge that he had not managed to do so with anyone?

My stomach hurts...

The Dwarf Demiurge was speaking of must have been Gondo Firebeard, but that had simply been lucky. He had scored a critical hit on a weakness in his heart by pure chance, and such luck would not repeat itself.

And it was precisely because he had the font of information which was Gondo that he had managed to strike a chord in the hearts of the runesmiths. However, there was nobody like that in the Holy Kingdom.

There was one person with whom he had formed a friendly relationship, Neia Baraja, but that was all.

Besides, he had given her a magic item to improve their relationship, as well as for another reason, but how effective it had been was still unclear. She kept glaring at him with murderous eyes, so he probably should not expect anything good to come of it.

What would Demiurge think if I told him there was only one person? Ainz asked himself.

Would the image of Ainz which Demiurge held in his heart not crumble completely?

And then, what would happen in the future?

In the Dwarven Kingdom, I told Demiurge that I wasn't that smart, but at that time it didn't seem like he believed me completely… this is bad. How great a person am I in his eyes? Or rather, it seems I'm getting greater and greater; am I imagining things? Normally, wouldn't it be the other way around?

The expectations placed on him hurt. They were not weighty; they just hurt.

In the past, he had pondered how heavy and painful the word "loyalty" could be. In particular, the part where his subordinates viewed Ainz as a great being was the most painful of all.

I guess I should take this opportunity to tell Demiurge that I'm not really that amazing, but what would happen if I did? What should I do if it caused the plan that Demiurge labored for so long over to end in failure? If I spent several years

courting a big client, only to have it fall through because of a stupid comment from my boss...

Ahhh, Ainz said as he scratched his hairless head.

What should he do?

What was the best answer he could give?

No matter what simulations he ran, they all ended in Demiurge looking at him in disappointment. He could not reach a conclusion that he could accept.

He's expecting too much of me — the higher the climb, the longer the fall. That's why I said I'm nobody amazing...

And then, Ainz's own plan had been quite the failure.

Ainz reached into his pocket space and drew a sword.

It was an ordinary sword inscribed with runes.

However, it contained power comparable to the bow he had lent to Neia.

Of course, these were not Dwarven runes. The runes carved on it had no power at all. This was a piece of equipment made with YGGDRASIL techniques.

"Haaaa…"

Ainz sighed. He had several weapons like this. The original plan was to lend these weapons to the Holy Kingdom.

The people of the Holy Kingdom would be awed by the overwhelming power of the sword and think, S*o this is the power of runic weaponry,* which would in turn improve the reputation of the Sorcerous Kingdom's rune weapons.

This was the other reason why he had lent Neia the weapon.

He felt that the people of the Holy Kingdom would see that weapon and secretly borrow them from Ainz.

However—

Ainz grabbed his head.

Why didn't anyone borrow them? I even thought people would talk about it because it was so flashy… I guess I should have forced her onto the frontlines and made her fight, huh...

Just then, there was a *tok tok tok* as someone knocked on the door.

He quickly checked his robe and other messy places before putting the sword back into his pocket dimension. Then he put his hands behind his back, looked at the door like a sovereign, and spoke loudly:

"Who is it?"

"Your Majesty, may I enter?"

There was no way to tell if it was a male or female voice through the door. Normally, he should have asked the visitor's name, but Demiurge had already told him that someone was coming, and so Ainz granted his permission without any hesitation.

"Ahh, it's fine. Come in."

The person who entered Ainz's room closed the door behind himself, and its body changed as well.

It had an egg-shaped head with a mouth and two eyes that looked like sunken holes. Its three-fingered hands were as slender as stick insects.

It was a Doppelganger.

It was a Doppelganger he had lent Demiurge at his request.

Since it was a monster Doppelganger, it was not very strong.

Even when transformed, it could only copy level forty abilities, and it was even weaker without transformation. Its more potent abilities was how it could freely make use of karma-restricted gear. That said, it could not use magic items above legacy class.

Its vacuous hole-like eyes turned to Ainz, and then it bowed deeply.

“I sincerely apologize for the many offenses I have caused you during the course of my duties. I pray you will forgive me.”

“Don’t worry about it. You were just doing your job. I have nothing to say about that.”

“Your servant is grateful for your generous words.”

Ainz looked at the room’s door.

“Aren’t you very busy now? There ought to be many things you need to direct, no? And is there anyone outside? If there’s anyone, we’ll be in trouble if we don’t keep our voices down.”

“It is fine. Nobody will object to your servant going alone to see you, Ainz-sama.”

“Is that so…”

Oh yes, the Doppelganger replied. However, it was still important to be careful.

“Then, Ainz-sama, please inform your servant of your decision.”

“Inform you of what?”

That said, Ainz knew very well why the Doppelganger had come here.

Or rather, it was time to tell this Doppelganger.

Yes, the question of who he had enthralled.

“Forgive me. This one speaks of the matter from earlier — the matter of those humans who are devoted to you and whose lives must be spared, Ainz-sama.”

“Hm…”

Ainz nodded forcefully, and began to walk.

Of course, he could not leave the room. Ultimately, he could only pace around inside this room. There was no telling where the Doppelganger’s eyes were looking, but Ainz was certain that they were following his movements, Ainz was certain. In truth, it would be quite scary if they did not look his way.

Time was running out. As Ainz thought with all his might, he suddenly stopped in place.

—He could not find the right answer. However, he did not have any ideas about how to continue covering things up any more.

If he were human, his heart would be pounding now, but his body lacked any organs which could move in that way.

A powerful emotion welled up, causing his emotion override to take effect, and as the small ripples bounced around inside his heart, Ainz told the Doppelganger the answer.

“Umu. I’ll be frank. There are no human beings who need to be saved. Leave a few alive as needed.”

Postscript by So-bin
Take care of
your health
So-bin

Overlord Volume 12

Afterword

I'm sure that as children, many people must have wished for August to be sixty days long when they were doing their holiday homework while their parents scolded them, or when they flipped through the calendar in August.

Maruyama has always been that way. He thought that way when he forgot to do his homework and had to raise his hand up on the first day of school in September.

However, this time, I made it real!

My childhood dream came true! Maruyama wanted to become an adult like this in the past, and now it's become reality! Oh what a wonderful thing!

Everyone's — I guess I should stop here. Spouting these pointless excuses to drag things out won't help things.

Therefore, while it was slightly delayed, we managed to publish the book at last. Well, this ought to be within the margin of error. No, the truth is that it was because a lot of things happened. Seriously, there were a lot of them both good and bad.

Speaking of which, Maruyama bought several ebooks while in hospital, ebooks are really great! I didn't expect them to be handy. I think it would be good for Overlord to have an ebook version. Therefore, I have decided to convert Overlord into a digital format. As I thought, there are many things that humans won't understand if they don't try them out. Similarly, if you are not involved in a situation, there's many things you won't understand about it.

Incidentally, while this is offtopic, the ebooks I read were manga, specifically love comedies.

Now then, last of all, I need to thank a lot of people. In particular, the people holding this book, as well as a certain hospital.

I'll be glad if I can meet you again in the next volume. Thank you very much, everyone.

September 2017
Maruyama Kugane

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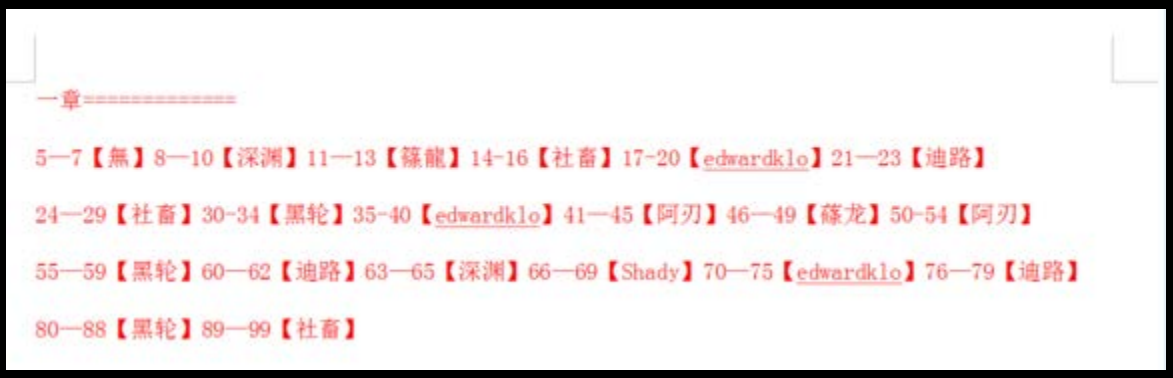
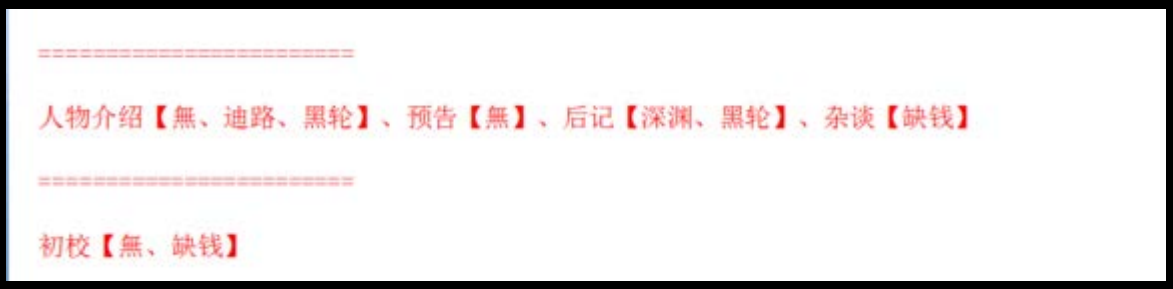

一章==========

5—7【無】8—10【深渊】11—13【篠龍】14-16【社畜】17-20【edwardklo】21—23【迪路】

24—29【社畜】30-34【黑轮】35-40【edwardklo】41—45【阿刃】46—49【篠龙】50-54【阿刃】

55—59【黑轮】60—62【迪路】63—65【深渊】66—69【Shady】70—75【edwardklo】76—79【迪路】

80—88【黑轮】89—99【社畜】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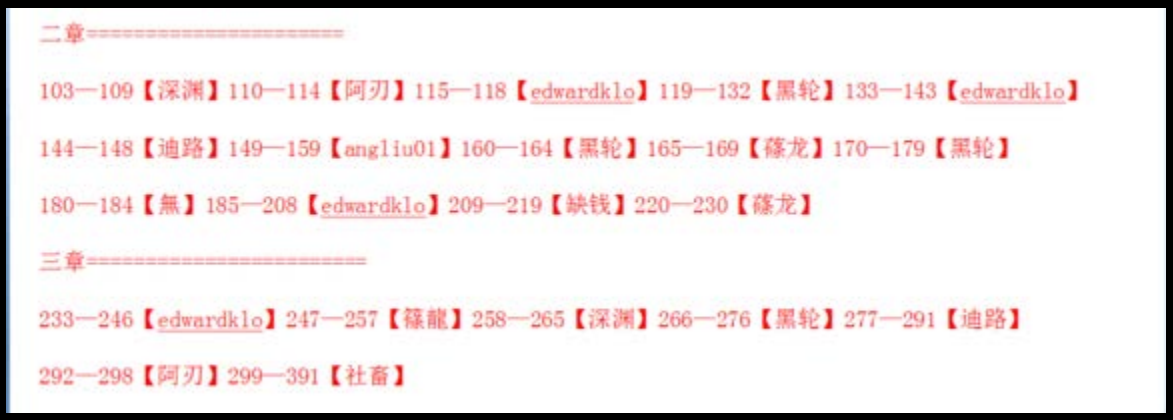
二章==========

103—109【深渊】110—114【阿刃】115—118【edwardklo】119—132【黑轮】133—143【edwardklo】

144—148【迪路】149—159【angliu01】160—164【黑轮】165—169【篠龙】170—179【黑轮】

180—184【無】185—208【edwardklo】209—219【缺钱】220—230【篠龙】

三章==========

233—246【edwardklo】247—257【篠龍】258—265【深渊】266—276【黑轮】277—291【迪路】

292—298【阿刃】299—391【社畜】

CN > EN Translator:

Nigel

CN > EN Editors:

Aadvark, John Doe, CEOBrainz, JcqC, Rain Storm, Perditor, Deus Ex Machina

EN Editors:

Zaltera, Kenzu8

EN Character Sheet Typesetting and General Image Manipulation:

Yuisins

PDF Compiled by:

Psychic Kitten

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