Overlord

(オーバーロード)

Volume 13

Volume 13: Paladin of the Holy Kingdom (Second Part)

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(丸山くがね)

Story Description:

The story begins with the last day of Yggdrasil, a popular online game which is being quietly shut down. Our protagonist Momonga decides to stay in his beloved game until the last moment, so waits for the forced logout. Unexpectedly, the server does not shut down and Momonga is stuck in a skeleton avatar in another world. "The powerful Overlord" needs now to discover the new world and face the continuous challenges that arise.

Having no parents, friends, or place in society, this ordinary man decides to take over the new world the game has become.

Original Story can be found here: Link

OVERLORD 13 The paladin of the Holy kingdom Kugane Maruyama

オーバーロード 13 聖王国の聖騎士 下

丸山くがね

The Siege

Part 1

It was a long way off until winter's end, and so the air was very cold. Still, that was not a hardship for him thanks to the fur which coated his body. His body was swathed in a lustrous black pelt, and another layer of clothing on top of that would make for excellent insulation. HE would not shiver from the cold, even if he wore a suit of metallic full plate.

However, he was shuddering for a different reason now.

That reason was anger.

Calling that tremendous anger "wrath" would not be too far off.

A low growl escaped him, like that which a carnivorous beast would make, and then he clicked his tongue in embarrassment.

For members of his race -- the Zoastia -- making animal noises like that was the proof that he could not control his emotions; a shameful display for an adult.

However, that was only within the confines of his species.

Anyone else who heard that growl leak from between his sharp teeth would have either trembled in fear or froze in terror.

He turned his back on the human city that he had been staring at just now, and returned to his camp.

Even if their supreme commander was Jaldabaoth, their ruler who wielded overwhelming might, many pointless feuds still broke out every day between the many races gathered under him.

The forces of the Demihuman Alliance were divided into three main groups.

The first were the 40’000 troops ranged against the Southern Holy Kingdom’s military.

The second were the 50’000 troops responsible for managing and guarding the camps which held prisoners from the Holy Kingdom.

The third were the 10’000 troops responsible for scouting the Northern Holy Kingdom, recovering various resources, and other miscellaneous tasks.

The personnel here comprised 40’000 of the 50’000 troops allocated to managing the prison camps.

It was only natural that their campgrounds would be bustling, with such numbers in attendance. Yet, nobody dared block his path, and so he could not stop or even slow his pace.

Surely there was nobody in the world who would dare stand in the path of a massive, rolling boulder.

Nobody here had the guts or strength of spirit to offend him, given the dominating aura that surrounded him.

He walked as though he were alone in the plains, and soon an especially ornate tent came into view.

There were demihuman soldiers standing before it, but they were not guards. They were standing by to heed the orders of the tent's occupants. In other words, they were servants.

The guards trembled as he passed between them and savagely pulled aside the cloth hanging over its entrance, whereupon the five demihumans within immediately glared sharply at him.

The demihumans within could be counted among the top ten members of the demihuman forces, demons excepted. While he could feel the physical weight of their gazes upon him, his attitude did not change in the slightest.

As a fellow member of those ten beings, he simply laughed and made a show of filling one of the empty seats. That said, his bestial lower body meant that taking a seat was more like lying down.

Although one of the five nodded lightly to him, he paid them no heed, his eyes fixed firmly on the demihuman occupying the highest seat.

Said demihuman was a being that looked like a snake that had grown arms.

The scales on its body gleamed wetly, throwing off a bizarre riot of colors that did justice to its nickname of “Rainbow Scales”. Not only were they beautiful, their hardness was said to rival those of Dragons. In addition, it possessed high-level magic resistance and was equipped with a large shield and a suit of enchanted plate armor. When one factored in its warrior prowess as well, said being might well qualify as the mightiest entity in the Abelion Hills.

This demihuman was Roxu, a Nagaraja. He was the demihuman who had been appointed to commander of this detachment by the Demon Emperor.

Resting beside him was the powerful Trident of Dehydration, which was famous as his primary weapon.

“--Why aren’t we attacking yet?”

He directed the question to Roxu in a very subdued tone.

It had been a full three days since they had reached the city which the pitiful human resistance had taken over. But not even a skirmish had broken out since then.

“...I know the human walls are troublesome, but surely they’re nothing in the face of our numbers, aren’t they?”

This was especially true for those members of the Demihuman Alliance who could completely disregard the existence of such walls. There ought to be no difficulty if said individuals were carefully managed.

“Frightened, are we?”

“Demon Claw-kakka.”

A vicious expression bloomed on his -- Wayja Lajandala’s -- face as he was addressed with the title of “Demon Claw”. He swept his eyes over the other member of his species who was present before turning back towards the Nagaraja.

The title of “Demon Claw” was known far and wide, and had been for almost two centuries now.

This was not because Zoastias were a long-lived race but because the title was passed down through the generations.

To him, this title was something he had inherited from his father. He knew very well that it was inappropriate for him at the moment. That was why he had to build his reputation in the upcoming battles. Yet, he had not been able to prove his strength -- as the inheritor of the title -- to the world so far.

Everyone he had beaten so far was weak. There had not been anyone who could stop a blow from his enchanted two-handed axe, ‘Bladed Wing’.

This state of affairs could not be allowed to continue.

He could not allow this war to end while others still knew him as a mere minion of the archdevil Jaldabaoth. He had to find some way to make a name for himself as a warrior, and that time was now.

However, Roxu still did not intend to attack. Wayja's dissatisfaction with that decision was why he spoke to the former in that way.

"They say the Grand King used to hold that city. Don't tell me you're scared just because the enemy has someone who could defeat him?"

The Grand King -- the king who had led the Bafolk to greatness.

He had been one of the top ten demihumans, like himself.

Wayja was confident that he stood on even footing with the Grand King, despite the latter's annoying martial arts which could break weapons. Anyone who could beat the Grand King must surely be a worthy opponent.

'I'll deal with her, so why aren't we attacking yet?"

He could think of only one person who could defeat someone of the Grand King's power.

It must be that female human paladin. If the rumors are true, she might have been able to beat the Grand King.

He sketched a hazy image of a paladin with a glowing sword in his mind.

"Wayja-kakka, the fact that you, a commander, would say such things despite coming in late without a word of apology makes me… don't get so excited, I know, I know."

Roxu waved him off in a relaxed fashion.

“Honestly, ignorant chicks make a lot of noise even when they know nothing.”

The person who was snickering just now had four arms. She was the queen of the Magelos known as “Iceflame Thunder” -- Nasrenia Bert Kiuru.

Wayja wrinkled his brow,

He felt that he could triumph in a melee fight, but Nasrenia was adept at magic, so there was the fear that she might turn the tables on him in some unexpected way if it came to a fight. Even so, he -- as an inheritor of the name “Demon Claw” -- would not be able to face his ancestors if he meekly let someone call him a chick.

“And old hags who like to slack off cause trouble for the rest of us too.”

The Magelos were quite long-lived, but given that Wayja had heard of her throughout the hills while he was still a child, she ought to be more than halfway through her lifespan.

He could not tell the age of her skin when inspecting her face due to all the cosmetics which covered it, but the fact that she was covering it up meant that she had noticed it too. In addition, surely that floral fragrance surrounding her was a sign of using perfume to mask her old folks’ stench, was it not?

“--Ho.”

Nasrenia narrowed her eyes, and an icy chill filled the air in the tent. This was a physical, not psychological phenomenon.

“--I ought to be speaking the truth, no?”

Wayja straightened himself up somewhat as he said that. A Zoastia’s lower body was not a pretty decoration, but something which possessed a beast’s dexterity and explosive power. While his usual fighting style would have involved hunkering down to make full use of his physical abilities, he did not do that now. That was because he wanted to present himself as the one with the advantage, who had simply ceded the initiative to his opposition.

“This isn’t just a matter of lying, is it? I ought to teach you how to address ladies with respect. That’s also my duty as your elder.”

Amidst all this tension, Roxu spoke up:

“Contain yourselves, you two. This is a war council. If the two of you continue making trouble here, I will be compelled to report it to Jaldabaoth-sama.”

Now that Roxu had brought up the name of their absolute superior, the two of them had no choice but to back down. Still, they continued glaring at each other, as though to say “This isn’t over yet” and “Bring it, granny.”

“Hah… I can’t help you with this even though I’m very strong, but you two ought to know what it means to work together.”

“Heeheehee, you don’t have the right to comment on others either.”

A simian demihuman covered in white fur jeered at Roxu's grumbling with a laugh.

"Hm, that's true. Now then, Demon Claw-kakka. About your question earlier, it is not that I am afraid. The Grand King was a valiant individual, but surely everyone present is his equal, am I wrong?"

Roxu looked to Demon Claw and Iceflame Thunder, and then to the remaining three people.

One of them was a demihuman who was covered in long white fur and looked like an ape. He wore enchanted golden armor.

He was the king of the Stone Eaters -- Harisa Ankara.

As a superior specimen of his species, he and others like him could gain various special abilities from eating raw minerals. For instance, by eating diamonds, they could temporarily gain physical damage resistance which could only be bypassed by bludgeoning attacks. Usually, only three such abilities could be active at once, but he could stock far more than that number. That was also a reason why he was called a mutant.

Then, there was the Orthros general who had nodded to him in respect.

He wore a suit of intricately carved armor. His equally ornate helmet and his lance lay beside him. His name was Hectowages Ah Ragara.

His nod to Wayja was not out of respect for Wayja's personal abilities, but towards the Zoastia species as a whole. That was the reason why it displeased

him.

Still, he could not simply challenge Hectowages to a duel to prove his strength. Certainly, Wayja would be the victor in a one-on-one fight. However, Hectowages had not gained fame because of his individual might, but because he was a renowned general who could triumph despite having a tenth of his opponent's forces. The tables would be turned if it came to mass combat, and there was nothing more shameful than crowing about one's personal strength and saying "I'm stronger than you" while knowing this. That was why Wayja had a hard time dealing with that Orthros.

The last person was the fellow member of his species, who had remained silent all this while: Muar Praksha.

Also known as "Blacksteel", he was known as a guerilla often seen flitting from shadow to shadow.

He was a rarity among the Zoastia, who often capitalized on their physical abilities and fought with brute force. Stealth and surprise were the hallmarks of the fearsome assassination techniques qhich he used to surreptitiously dispose of the opposition. His nickname came from his unshakable will and his determination to eliminate the quarry he had marked.

While he did not think he would lose to them, every person seated here would be a troublesome opponent for him in straight-up combat.

"Then let's go back to the topic of why we're not attacking them. That would be because I received orders from Jaldabaoth-sama in the city of Rimun."

“Say what? Was that how it was?”

Wayja’s question was due to the fact that Roxu was the only person in this army of 40’000 who had had direct contact with Jaldabaoth. By the time the others had been summoned to this city of Kalinsha, his men were already in fighting order and waiting to be deployed.

Jaldabaoth teleported constantly between multiple cities, so there were few opportunities to receive directions from him in person.

“Jaldabaoth-sama said to give the humans occupying the city several days’ time.”

“Give them time? Whatever for?”

“He said it was to frighten them. There are fewer than 10’000 people in that city. There are fewer still people among them who can fight. In contrast, all of us here can fight… how afraid do you think the humans holed up in that city will be?”

“I see… so that’s it. Jaldabaoth-sama is truly fearsome.”

“Hehehe. Indeed, That said, I do understand how you feel, Wayja-kakka. The question now is how much more time we should give them?”

“No, we can decide exactly how many more days to give them. That said, we might have two months’ of rations stored up, but it would not be good to actually give them that long.”

“Is it because we still need to deal with the prisoners?”

There were only 10’000 demihumans left to manage an overwhelming number of human captives. While demihumans were stronger than humans, quantity was a quality all of its own. It was very likely that they would not be able to deal with any riots or uprisings.

“Precisely. That’s why I have gathered all of you, in order to hash out our plans for the future. Personally, I think we can move in after another couple of days and finish things. Does anyone disagree?”

None of the demihumans present -- Wayja included -- objected to him.

“Alright. We attack in two days. Until then, we will continue observing them.”

There was the possibility the enemy might launch a counterattack, though he did not think it very likely.

“That would mean it’s about time to deal with the humans we’ve brought along, then.”

Some demihumans ate human beings. Species like those preferred fresh food. The Zoastia had no particular preference for manflesh. To them, beef and horse meat were better. However, most of them would prefer fresh human meat to beef jerky.

In contrast, Iceflame Thunder had a look of revulsion on her face. Perhaps it

was because the Magelos did not eat humans, given that they were visually similar to human beings.

“Hehehe. How about killing and eating them in front of their city tomorrow. That ought to terrorize them, no?”

“An excellent idea. After that, we’ll declare that we’re attacking the next day…”

“There’s no need to press them that hard. What’ll happen if they surrender? Fighting is only fun because they have hope, and thus struggle with all their might. Nothing’s more boring than killing people who have lost the will to live.”

Ultimately, Wayja wanted to fight strong foes. There was no point in facing weaklings.

“Indeed. Also, there is another important point. It’s an order from Jaldabaoth-sama. We mustn’t kill them all, but let a few escape. Therefore, my plan is to kill everyone guarding the western gate -- our side -- and chase away the ones manning the eastern gate.”

“In other words,whoever’s attacking the eastern gate needs to be able to keep firm control over their men, am I right? Otherwise, it feels like it’ll end in a complete slaughter.”

After Nasrenia said that, everyone’s eyes went to a single individual.

“I see… Then you won’t mind if I bring all my kin with me, then?”

“Can you leave a few as messengers?”

“Certainly, Roxu-kakka. In that case, Hectowage Ah Ragara and myself will be responsible for the eastern gate.”

“After that, we need some people on the north and south to give them some pressure. While there’s no need to actually take those points, we ought to kill off an appropriate number of defenders there. I’d like to send some ranged fighters there…”

There were three people present who were adept at long-range combat. The person Roxu chose from among them was the silent Zoastia.

“Muar Praksha-kakka.”

“--Acknowledged.”

That was all “Blacksteel” said in reply.

“Everyone else will be on the western gate. While I don’t think there’ll be a chance for you to show your stuff, I’ll leave any strong opponents which show up there to you. After all, I need to command the entire army, so I won’t be able to make it to the frontline.”

The remaining three demihumans -- Wayja included -- all nodded their heads.

“Since we are all in agreement, we shall attack that city in two days. I hope

you will all get your rest and gather your strength before the humans wail in despair.

Part 2

Neia swallowed the gastric juices rising inside her as she walked towards the Sorcerer King's room. As she did, an intense sourness spread through her mouth.

She took up the pouch tied to her belt and drank the water within,

The water was hardly delicious, flavored as it was by leather, but it helped quell the burning sensation in her throat and the stench in her mouth. However, the anger still remained in Neia's chest, and her face was still pale.

She recalled the stomach-churning scene that she could not forget, even if she wanted to.

The demihuman army had encircled this city for a full three days now.

The enemy had not attacked or attempted to parley, simply letting time pass. But today, the demihumans had brought out their captives from the Holy Kingdom to the outer walls of the Loys district, where Neia and the others were. If they had skilled archers or slingers present, they might have been able to attack them. Unfortunately, they had nobody like that on hand.

Neia was confident of hitting the demihumans if she used the Sorcerer King's bow. However, launching a rash strike might have triggered an all-out attack. That would have led to a battle of 10'000 against 40'000, and they would have

to open the city gates if they wanted to save those captives.

Once the gates were opened, the demihuman forces would surely pour in like an avalanche. Such a thing could not be allowed to happen, and so all they could do was stand aside and watch.

There were less than 20 captives. They were made up of males and females, adults and children, but there were no old people among them. All the prisoners were naked and covered in scars and bruises.

Just as the gathered people of the Holy Kingdom began to think they had been brought out as collateral for some kind of negotiations, a tragedy had unfolded.

The demihumans began to massacre the captives.

A demihuman who seemed to be about three meters tall had decapitated a prisoner and then held up the severed head in an inverted position. Neia had clearly seen how the earth had drunk the vast quantities of fresh red blood spilled upon it.

After that, the demihumans began to butcher the prisoners' corpses.

Neia had seen her father process animal carcasses before. However, the sight of such a thing happening to human beings had dealt a mighty blow to Neia's psyche.

After that, the demihumans ate the captives one after the other, while they were still fresh.

The most cruel part was watching how some people had been eaten alive.

Even now, Neia's ears still rang with the wailing of a child and the sound of his innards being torn out as a demihuman chewed his belly open.

Fortunately, Gustavo had been wise enough to keep Remedios from showing up, under the pretext of protecting the prince. Surely they would be fighting by now if she had seen something like that.

Neia inhaled deeply, then took another mouthful of water and forced herself to swallow it.

She had heard someone say that it would feel better to throw up if one was nauseous, but given that she was heading to the Sorcerer King's room, it would be disrespectful to arrive with the stench of vomit clinging to her.

After sniffing herself several times, Neia stood before the door to the Sorcerer King's room.

There was nobody on either side of the door.

Now that the city had been encircled by the demihumans, there was nobody to spare on protecting -- in truth, keeping an eye on -- the Sorcerer King.

Neia knocked on the door to indicate her presence to the person within.

"Your Majesty, I am Squire Neia Baraja. May I enter?"

“Come in.”

After receiving permission to do so through the room door, Neia quietly entered.

The interior was simply furnished since the demihumans had wrecked most of it. Even so, it was still more than what anyone else in the city had.

The Sorcerer King stood with his back to Neia as he looked outside the window.

“It seems quite chaotic outside, given how I’ve seen so many people running around from up here. We’ve been encircled for four days, but this is the noisiest it’s been since the first day. That would mean… is it a sign that the enemy is preparing to attack?”

The Sorcerer King had shown no intention of participating in this battle, simply staying in his room without incident. He had not even shown up for the strategic meeting when the demihuman army began fanning out around the city.

Naturally, the Liberation Army’s leadership had not been happy about this, but they found it very hard to ask anything of the Sorcerer King after he had said, “Would it not be bad in future if the king of another nation stuck his nose into your business?”

Neia had been ordered to attend various meetings in his place. This was the Liberation Army’s plan to share what they knew with the Sorcerer King, and

Neia approved of it. However, that had led to Neia witnessing the tragedy which had unfolded earlier.

"...No, the demihumans haven't made any big moves like that. But… the demihumans, ah… how shall I put this, maybe they were trying to make a show of force, so their positions have shifted a little."

"In that case, this standoff will only continue for a while more, no? The demihumans are trying to shake our troops and weaken their morale… come to think of it, can we win this battle?"

No. Neia longed to say as much.

In the first place, there was a vast difference in the respective strength of their forces.

10'000 humans versus 40'000 demihumans.

Even that figure of 10'000 included the elderly and children, and then there were also the wounds -- both physical and mental -- and the fatigue they had incurred at the prison camps, which they had not yet fully recovered from.

While the defenders typically had the advantage during a siege, that only applied when both forces were evenly matched

When one compared the average demihuman to a human commoner, the latter was so weak that even comparing them seemed like a foolish act.

At the very most, the only people who could stand on equal footing with demihumans were the paladins, the priests, and professional soldiers, but they did not have many of those, and compared to the army of 40’000 strong army they were now facing, it was like trying to put out a dragon’s fiery breath with a bucket of water.

Still, one could not say this was an entirely unwinnable battle.

There was one person who could beat back the demihuman hordes by themselves, even without counting the Sorcerer King.

Assuming physical exhaustion and lucky hits from the enemy were not a factor, the strongest paladin in the Holy Kingdom -- Remedios -- could take on 40’000 average demihumans and kill them all.

However, one could not say there were no powerful individuals in the demihuman army who could stand toe-to-toe with Remedios. In fact, it was very likely that they were out there.

Neia recalled the demihuman king who had ruled this city previously, the Grand King Buser. While the Sorcerer King had killed him like he was nothing more than a pile of rubbish, that was simply because the Sorcerer King was incredibly powerful -- Buser was overwhelmingly strong in his own right. Neia could not have beaten him, no matter how hard she tried.

Demihuman kings like that might be Remedios’ equals, or perhaps even her superiors. They were all very strong in Neia’s estimation, so she could not accurately judge the outcome of a showdown between two such powerful beings.

In addition, from a practical point of view, one had to take physical exhaustion into consideration. No matter how strong they were, nobody could escape the spectre of fatigue. Magic could briefly ease it, but fatigue would continue to accumulate.

Even after killing an army of 10'000, Remedios could still be attacked in a moment of exhaustion and weakness and be killed by an average demihuman. Quantity had a quality of its own, after all.

However, if there was some being who could overturn that logic -- Neia's eyes went to the great ruler before her, who still stood with his back to her.

That person would be an absolute force.

An entity who surpassed this world (Overlord).

He was none other than the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown.

As Neia gazed upon his regal back, she suddenly realized that she had not yet answered the Sorcerer King's question, and she hurriedly spoke.

"I, I'm not sure!" Panic caused her to exclaim louder than usual and she blushed before continuing in a normal tone: "--But I'll do my best to find out."

The Sorcerer King seemed entirely unmoved by this, and continued asking another question.

"I see. Then, have you learned anything new about the enemy? Have you

verified Jaldabaoth's presence?"

"The situation on that front has not changed in the past few days. We have not yet sighted Jaldabaoth among the demihuman forces."

"Hm, that makes things difficult. It may be very hard for me to help you in this defense. I need to replenish the mana I've used up. After all, his plan might be to deprive me of mana. I must think on this point before deciding how to act."

"But of course. Everyone is fully aware of Your Majesty's opinion."

During a strategy meeting, someone had once said they had spotted a demon who looked like Jaldabaoth, but when Neia said they had to make sure, that person had immediately said they had probably been mistaken. Given the mood in the air, it was clear that everyone present -- with the exception of Neia -- was planning to involve the Sorcerer King in the fighting by spreading false reports of Jaldabaoth's presence.

They might despise the undead, but lying to the king of a nation means they have no integrity to to speak of. Even if forced into dire straits, wouldn't it be right to display their resolve to someone who ought to be respected?

"In that case, what do you make of the demihumans' movements?"

"Ah, yes, the demihumans had been previously massing at the west gate, but now they've split their forces and are sending some of their troops to the other -- eastern -- gate. We believe they're about to make their move or preparing for a siege."

“That is to say, enough time has passed for them to finish building siege weapons, then? Hm, that’s probably a good thing. After all, the enemy isn’t trying to starve you out.”

Neia could not tell if it was a good or a bad thing, but they would have no solution if the demihumans did try to starve them out.

If the demihumans attacked, then they would be promptly annihilated due to the opposition’s overwhelming advantage in military strength. However, if they were fighting from behind the protection of the city walls, it would not be such a lopsided battle. Of course, it was merely going from “incredibly bad odds” to “not so bad odds”.

“Of course, that might also be due to the fact that the demihumans aren’t aware of our supply situation. Then again, it’s more likely that they simply don’t care about a small city like this.”

“Well, the demihumans did conquer the fortress line we saw when we entered the Holy Kingdom, so it would be reasonable for them to hold a small city like this in low regard… if you give them a hard time during the defense and make them feel that a siege is to their disadvantage, that’ll draw the battle out. After that, you’ll have a very hard fight ahead of you.”

It would seem the Sorcerer King believed that they would have to win this unwinnable battle before the true fight began.

“Your Majesty, may I ask your opinion of how you think the situation will develop?”

“Future developments, hm. I don’t honestly know either. In truth, one could say that you’ve lost by being forced into a siege like this. Sieges are typically carried out under the pretext that reinforcements will arrive. Either that, or the enemy is operating under some disadvantageous condition, like a time limit. However, we are simply defending a city in enemy territory, so our chances of victory are despairingly small.”

“Still, we managed to send the nobles we released to the south before this, so we can’t say for certain that no help will arrive.”

Neia might have said those words, but she knew in her heart that she should not be counting on reinforcements.

The southern armies would need to break through the demihuman army blocking their path to reach Neia’s location, and even if they did that, there was still an army of 40’000 demihumans to contend with.

Fighting repeated battles would be a huge drain on their combat strength. Abandoning the 10’000 people in this city would be a wiser decision.

“That would be good…”

It would seem the Sorcerer King did not believe it for a moment either.

But that was only to be expected. Given the circumstances, who could turn things around without sacrificing anyone--

Neia dispelled the notion rising in her head.

“His Majesty is here to fight Jaldabaoth, so depleting his mana on other matters and thus diminishing his chances for victory cannot be allowed.”

“...It will take me a while to cast the teleportation spell which I used on the Orcs again, but I can still cast the spell which I occasionally use to return to the Sorcerous Kingdom several more times. Taking a few dozen people with me would not be a problem… but I guess you can’t decide who to send, and you won’t.”

“I am grateful for your understanding, Your Majesty.”

Perhaps it would have been a better idea to ask the Sorcerer King to take Prince Caspond and flee, but that move had demerits of its own.

When a king from another nation was willing to commit himself to a fight in order to face a fearsome demon, having a member of one’s own royal family shamelessly beg someone else to take them away from the battlefield was utterly disgraceful.

Just as Neia was pondering this information, the Sorcerer King turned to face her for the first time since she had entered the room.

The red points of light in his empty eye-sockets looked straight at Neia. While they had once frightened her, Neia had grown used to them, and she had come to feel that they were quite charming.

“This is what I think, Miss Baraja. We have ended up in a confrontation with the enemy forces because of the stupidity of the Liberation Army’s leadership.

Such a situation cannot be changed by the efforts of a single squire. How about focusing on your personal safety rather than the big picture? You do understand that my nation will accept your allegiance, if you are willing to give it? Given that you have been trained as a paladin, I am certain you will be able to fully exercise your talents in my country.

Neia was confused, and did not know how to answer.

While she was grateful that the Sorcerer King was worrying about her, she trembled in fear as she considered what she might lose if she accepted the Sorcerer King's proposal.

The spirit of devotion which her parents had demonstrated.

Her love for her hometown.

She might never be able to return to the nation of her birth.

There were memories of several friends she had.

Many things circled in front of Neia's eyes, and they disappeared one after the other with a poof, but among them was something that refused to shatter, that remained to the end -- in other words, the most important thing.

She was a member of the paladin corps.

While she did not yet know what was justice, it was the only thing Neia could say with her chest puffed out and her head held high.

“I am deeply grateful for Your Majesty’s indulgence, but as a citizen of the Holy Kingdom, I feel I am bound to save as many of the people as I am able. That is because saving the helpless -- saving those in suffering is common sense.”

The Sorcerer King suddenly stopped moving, as though he had been frozen in place.

“...Hm.”

The Sorcerer King murmured to himself, and then he stroked his chin.

It would seem Neia’s words had struck a chord with him, because he studied Neia once more.

It was just a throwaway remark, and Neia found herself fidgeting uncomfortably.

“Am I correct to say that when the demihumans attack, you will be posted to the walls near the western gate, on the left side of the city? It is a very dangerous place, and counting on me to save you will be a mistake, you know?”

I know that very well.”

Neia was skilled in archery, and given that she had been assigned to the thick of the action, there was no doubt that she would be killed in action. However, she had steeled herself for death, since she would be going onto the battlefield.

She drew her lips thin, and Neia looked the Sorcerer King in the eye.

“Ahh, those are his eyes. I liked the look in his eyes.”

The Sorcerer King’s self-directed mutterings made Neia blush. While the Sorcerer King did not mean anything else by his words, it made quite the impact to hear someone she respected say that he liked her.

“In that case, I’ll lend you several things, Miss Baraja. Please make good use of them.”

There was a don, and something huge suddenly appeared out of thin air. She had thought the same thing when the Sorcerer King had produced the bow in the carriage, but magic truly was a surprising thing.

Neia had seen the magic item -- the suit of armor -- which had sprung forth from nothing. It was a suit of armor which looked like a green shell-- it was the armor which the late Grand King Buser had worn.

“This, this is--”

“This armor ought to be useful, by which I mean it will ensure your safety.”

The armor was too large for Neia -- and its dimensions would be quite sizable for just about any human being. However, given what Neia knew about enchanted armor, it would not be an issue if she tried it on.

Ordinary armor would need to be altered by a blacksmith in order to suit its wearer's frame. However, there was a limit to how far such alterations could go. Such a large suit of armor simply could not be resized enough to fit.

However, it was different for magical armor. Anyone could wear it regardless of gender or race, provided there were no special restrictions on its use. While the changes would not be too drastic, the armor would automatically adjust its shape to fit its wearer.

One could even have a giant wear a suit of armor no bigger than a thumbnail, but the durability of magic armor varied with the materials it was made with and their quality. A ring-sized suit of armor would be easily damaged if it was subjected to spells, acid or equipment-sundering attacks, and that would greatly reduce the potency of the enchantments upon it.

There was no such thing as a free lunch, and the easy road rarely was. Even so, Buser's armor was probably quite tough, given that it was this size even without anyone wearing it.

"In addition, I will lend you three more things." The Sorcerer King personally handed those items to Neia. "A crown, gauntlets, and a necklace. Are any of them redundant with your personal gear?"

"No, not at all. I did not have any magic items to begin with."

"That is good to hear. Now, I will briefly explain the usage of these items."

As the name implied, the Crown of Iron Will defended the mind against charm, fear and other such mental attacks. Still, while the crown rendered one

immune to magical attacks, it could only strengthen the wearer's resistance against attacks derived from special abilities. Another thing she had to note was that the crown would also negate positive magical effects.

The gauntlets were Gauntlets of Archery. Out of all the spells in the world, there were some which could only be used if their caster possessed shooting skills, which was why the Sorcerer King had made that item. However, the Sorcerer King had abandoned those spells after making that item, and so the gauntlets were useless to him. They had languished in storage until now.

Finally, the necklace was an item consumed mana to cast the 3rd tier spell 「Heavy Recover」. While one could use it indefinitely as long as one possessed sufficient mana, it consumed more magical power than casting it directly. Given Neia's meager reserves of mana, it was best for her to consider it a one-use item. Therefore, she would have to think carefully about when to best use it. This item had not been made by the Sorcerer King or his peers; he had simply been taken with its appearance and had purchased it from somewhere.

Indeed, a closer look revealed that the necklace was of very fine workmanship. It looked like a goddess holding up an emerald. Indeed, it was a very attractive work of art.

Neia looked at these valuable items, and then shook her head in refusal.

"I, I'm very sorry, Your Majesty, but I cannot accept these."

The magic items that the Sorcerer King offered were most definitely top-notch gear. However, what would happen if Neia died while wearing them? These items would fall into the hands of the demihumans, and they would end up strengthening the demihumans instead. Even if they did not fall into the

hands of the demihumans, what would happen if her corpse went missing during the chaos of battle and her equipment vanished with her? More to the point, Neia already had the bow which the Sorcerer King had bestowed upon her, so how could she be discontent with that and borrow more things from him?

Speaking of which, she ought to return that bow to the Sorcerer King before going to battle.

“Why is that? These items will be useful to you in the fighting to come, will it not? After all, you are a warrior-type, and you lack mana, so you might not even be able to use that necklace’s ability. Why don’t you take it and give it a try?”

Neia confessed her uneasiness in response to the Sorcerer King’s question. The Sorcerer King heard her words and simply smiled.

“How about this. Go onto the battlefield with the determination to bring these items back to me, no matter the cost.”

Neia had been resolved to do just that all along, but resolve alone could not break through her uneasiness. After hearing her answer, the Sorcerer King waved his hand in a grand fashion.

“Oh, just take it. I have spells that can locate magic items, and I’ve already marked those items. I can find them even if they’re lost.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is… alright, no need to stand on ceremony. Take them, use them.”

If the Sorcerer King could make facial expressions, he would probably be smiling -- those thoughts ran through Neia's mind as she heard his words.

Now that he had offered them with such sincerity, rejecting them would be an act of rudeness. The notion of accepting his goodwill warred with the desire to apologize for incurring a loss to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Those thoughts swirled in Neia's mind--

"Well? Can you not make me a promise? A promise to return them all to me afterwards?"

"!"

Come back alive. That was the meaning behind those words, and they moistened the corners of her eyes with tears. Only her parents had ever treated her with such kindness before.

The Sorcerous Kingdom is blessed to have such a merciful sovereign. As Neia thought that, she bit her lip and lowered her head.

"Thank you very much! I swear I will return them!"

"...Hm."

She lifted her head, and wiped away the tears

She could not wear her armor here after all. However, putting on the

gauntlets, necklace and crown should not be an issue. She began by fastening the necklace around her neck.

In the moment that she put it on, she immediately understood the abilities of the magic item and how to use them. It was as though the item was a part of her, and making use of it was as natural and effortless as using her own limbs

Next was the crown. However, she did not feel anything special when she put it on. Still, according to the previous explanation, she would probably understand when the time came.

The last item was the gauntlets.

They were a different matter. She could clearly and vividly feel the change.

Power coursed into her.

It felt very much like the time she had strengthening magic cast upon her. Her muscles felt like they had suddenly multiplied and her movements were both swifter and more precise. In addition, she could make out tiny details, and even her cardiovascular fitness had improved. She felt full of energy.

It felt like every aspect of her physical abilities had improved.

“This is amazing…”

Strength gained through training accumulated slowly, so it was hard to perceive. However, she could clearly feel the intense augmentation of her

physical capabilities. More surprising was the fact that she did not feel any awkwardness in controlling her body given the differences between her previous and present self.

“Magic really is amazing…”

The Sorcerer King shrugged as he heard Neia react in awe.

“That’s true. In fact, I’ve been quite surprised by utility spells myself.”

“By that, do you mean those?”

“Spells which can create sugar and pepper and ice. Then there are spells which can even create ores, though they’re not very mana-efficient. Some cities also depend on utility spells to supplement their water supply… It would seem utility spells are closely linked to the development of this world’s culture.

“Is… that so?”

Why would a great magic caster like the Sorcerer King be surprised by such trivial spells? Still, it must make sense, given that the Sorcerer King had said it. And indeed, utility spells had come to be of great use in many places; daily life might not be possible without such magic.

“Also, there are those drains which use slimes… or rather, coexist with them… ah, I’m straying from the point. Miss Baraja, pay me no heed and return to your work.”

In truth, there was no task more important than keeping the Sorcerer King company. However, it was true that they lacked manpower, and Neia had a surprising number of things to do, While said tasks were largely related to standing guard, which anyone could do, they were still very important.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I will most certainly return alive.”

“Ah, if things get really bad, then flee to the east. In all likelihood, that’s the only place where you might have a chance to survive.”

Neia put away Buser’s armor and bowed before leaving the room.

Inside the operations room, Remedios Custodio and three paladins studied a force distribution chart.

Remedios’ thought process was nimble and clear when it came to battle, in contrast to how she would make people sigh in exasperation most of the time. While her younger sister would say, “You’ve got a great body there, all you need now is to study a little more”, she could not have gained her present fighting skill if she had heeded that advice.

That was because she was different from her sister, who had been blessed with three gifts -- wisdom, talent and looks.

Our fighting strength is 10’000. Theirs is estimated at 40’000. Our win conditions are to hold on until reinforcements from the south arrive, or the enemy retreats… we might actually be able to do it if there were ten of me around...

If the members of the Nine Colors who had been chosen for their fighting strength were present, they might be able to put up a good fight, but the fact remained that the present situation was a tremendous challenge.

If we want to buy time, we need to counterattack the enemy hard during their first offensive. That'll put them on the back foot and give us the time we need. After all, the enemy doesn't fully know what forces we possess, right?

She had also seriously considered the proposal of launching a first strike.

They could gather their forces at the east gate and crush the enemy there in one mighty blow before wheeling around to head for the west gate.

However, she had quickly reached a conclusion -- all would be lost if they failed. It was very likely that the west gate would be lost to the enemy's main force before they defeated the small detachment positioned at the east gate, and thus the city would fall.

And of course, there was the disparity between their forces. They had to compensate for that gap if they wanted to win.

But that's impossible.

Remedios wrinkled her brow and looked at the tokens placed on the map.

She hoped for a flash of inspiration to descend from on high. However, no such thing happened.

“Do you lot have any ideas?”

“Yes. Personally speaking--”

She listened to the paladin’s proposal, struck it down, then asked for more ideas, and the process repeated until none of them could come up with anything. Just then, a knocking rang through the weighty silence of the room.

“Captain, you’re here.”

The person who entered was the deputy commander -- Gustav Montagnes. It felt like she had been saved by the bell. It would seem the other paladins in the room also felt that way, as one could see a faint glimmer of hope on their crestfallen faces.

“Ahh, you came just in time. I wanted to ask if you had any ideas.”

Remedios gestured to the map sprawled across the table with her chin. It would seem Gustav had gotten her meaning, because he nodded.

“I can supply a suggestion or two, but can I discuss a few things with you beforehand?”

“Hm? What is it? Go ahead and tell me.”

“Ah…” Gustav continued in a more subdued tone. “Actually, things have gotten quite bad. Some of the people want to know if the Sorcerer King will be taking part in the fighting.”

The Sorcerer King would not be fighting in this battle. This was both to recover the mana he had expended until now, and in case Jaldabaoth's plan was to make him expend mana here.

Remedios had difficulty accepting the first reason, since her little sister Kelart could restore her mana within a day. However, everybody else felt that the Sorcerer King could not be held to the same standards as human beings, given that he had taken back the city single-handedly, and so Remedios said nothing more. Come to think of it, there had been priests present as well, and so the others had accepted it as the way things were.

However, even Remedios could accept the second reason.

Who could tell if Jaldabaoth was hiding within the enemy ranks?

They had brought the Sorcerer King here to fight Jaldabaoth. While it would be best if both of them ended up bloodying the other, she had no wish to see the Sorcerer King defeated. Therefore, it was only natural for her to back the Sorcerer King up so he could fight to the fullest of his ability, even if she intensely despised the undead.

Even so, there had still been some who wanted the Sorcerer King to take the field. Some of the nobles who had remained in the city had offered huge sums of money -- which had made even Remedios' eyes go so wide that they looked like they might fall out of her empty head -- to induce him to fight, but the Sorcerer King had not accepted their offers.

"What's wrong with that? The Sorcerer King won't be fighting in this battle. You should know that too, right? Just tell them and be done with it."

“Captain. We can’t tell them about this. If things go badly -- no, even if all goes well, it’ll cause a huge uproar.”

“Why is that?”

She could not understand it. What was wrong with the Sorcerer King not fighting?

After seeing the questions written all over Remedios’ face, Gustav frowned and replied:

“That’s because the people who watched us take back the city know that there are things which we paladins can’t do, but which the Sorcerer King can accomplish with only two people.”

She still could not understand what Gustav was trying to say.

“That may upset some people, but that’s how things are. What’s wrong with that?”

“No, what I’m trying to say is, they think of the Sorcerer King as being more trustworthy than we paladins. If the people of this city learn that the Sorcerer King -- the most reliable and powerful asset we have -- is not fighting, morale will plunge to rock bottom.”

“Trustworthy? ...You do realize the Sorcerer King is undead, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s undead. The Sorcerer King freed the city and rescued the people in bondage. So to them, the Sorcerer King is a hero.

“A hero?”

Remedios repeated Gustav’s words back to him, unable to comprehend their meaning.

“The people think he’s a hero? But he’s undead, no? They hate the living and love death. He abandoned the hostages -- no, he killed them off without so much as blinking, didn’t he?”

“It’s all the same to them. Also… it would be one thing if they simply regarded him as a hero. If this goes on, people will start thinking of the Sorcerer King as their savior. If things go wrong, it might affect the Holy King’s--”

“The Holy Queen’s, you mean,” Remedios’ face twisted into a frown. “I’ve said this many times already, but Calca-sama must be locked up somewhere for breeding. There were paladins and priests collapsed everywhere after that battle with Jaldabaoth, but we couldn’t find Calca-sama and Kelart anywhere. He wouldn’t need to move her if she was dead. I’m sure she must have been taken hostage. “

“I misspoke, Captain. I feel that it might be a problem that could cause problems for Her Majesty’s reign.”

“Problems for her rule?”

“Yes. ... Our fortress line has been smashed and nobody can stop the

demihumans from invading. There will start to be people who want to flock to the side of a supreme being who can protect them.”

“But he’s undead… you know?”

“I say again, it doesn’t matter if he’s undead. He did save them in their hour of need, didn’t he?”

Remedios still could not understand that point.

“But the Sorcerer King wasn’t the only one fighting, was he? We fought too, under the Holy Queen’s flag.”

“Yes. You’re right. We all fought, even the common folk. But even with all that taken into consideration, if the Sorcerer King does more than us, then there might be people who would value him over the Holy Queen and seek to make him their new ruler.”

“Hah!?” Remedios unconsciously raised her voice. “How did that happen? Not only is he a hero, how is that undead creature being placed above the Holy Queen? Do you even know what you’re saying?”

“No, that’s from the people’s point of view--”

“--Good or not, he’s still undead! How much suffering and effort do you think Her Majesty had to go through for the sake of the people? How could the people--”

“--Please wait, Captain!”

“What do you mean, please wait!? What the hell are you talking about, Gustav? No, is that what you truly believe?”

In the grip of her powerful emotions, Remedios slammed her fist down on the table. The furious blow -- delivered by a heroic individual -- crushed the area of the table beneath it and gouged a chunk out, which fell to the ground. The bizarre damage pattern looked like some giant had pressed out the edge of the table, and it indicated how angry she truly was.

“Please calm down, Captain. We all know the greatness and kindness of Her Majesty as a matter of course. There’s no way the Sorcerer King or any other undead creature could compare to the great Holy Queen. But we only know that because we stood by the Holy Queen’s side.”

“Are you retarded? Even if they’ve never had an audience with her before, there’s no way anyone would respect the undead of another country more than the ruler of their own nation! You’re delusional!”

“Captain!” Gustav exclaimed in a tone that was close to a wail. “Even if the Sorcerer King is undead and the king of another nation, he was still the one who freed them from torment! And that is something… something that Her Majesty, that we could not do!”

Gustav spewed those words out in one big burst, and the room echoed with the sound of him trying to calm his flustered breathing

“...What do you all think?”

The paladins who had previously been in the room all looked at each other as they heard Remedios' quiet voice. After that, one of them spoke up, a look of mortal determination on his face.

"Naturally, we paladins do not consider the Sorcerer King a hero. However, we also know that the common folk might feel that way."

After that, another person spoke.

"Most of the people know that the Sorcerer King conquered this city with the strength of just two -- no, one person. Those who have not seen the Sorcerer King's power in turn exaggerate these rumors, further deifying him."

The last one added:

"It is a fact that the Sorcerer King stepped forward by himself to offer aid to a country which was neither an ally nor one that was friendly to him. If we disregard the fact that he is undead… those actions would qualify as heroic."

It would seem Remedios was the only one who could not accept this state of affairs. In that case, how could she respond to Gustav's question after all this had sunk in?

It was true that not having their hero take part in the fighting would cause morale to drop, and thinking about the reasons for that would lead to a commotion. The enemy was an army which outnumbered them four to one. It was only natural that they would be in that frame of mind when they thought about having to fight something like that.

“...Then why don’t we paint the Sorcerer King as a villain and kill two birds with one stone? How about telling the masses that the Sorcerer King won’t help us any more?”

“Lying would be a very bad idea,” Gustav said. “The mood of the people is like a dam just before it bursts. If they learn the truth through one channel or another and discover that we were trying to hide the truth, the matter would spiral out of our control.”

“Well, we don’t have to tell a flat-out lie. We can do it in a roundabout way.”

“If the people think it’s a lie, then it’ll become a lie.”

“Then all we need to do is keep them from seeing the Sorcerer King, no?”

“...So if a riot breaks out or if someone wants to plead with him in person, we’ll kill them off?”

“...I don’t want to do that.”

Gustav sighed heavily.

“This is frustrating. The Sorcerer King showed too much of his strength. I feel we wouldn’t be like this if we had taken this city back under our own power… If the worst comes to worst, the country itself might be torn apart. Who’s going to stop the Sorcerer King if he declares this land an enclave of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“This nation belongs to Her Majesty and the people who live upon it! Not to the undead! And besides, do you think the surrounding nations will accept that!?”

Remedios pounded on the table again. However, Gustav’s face did not change, and he interjected:

“They probably will. Captain, you saw them too, right… the monsters in his city. No other nation would want to become the enemy of the Sorcerous Kingdom, which possesses such frightening military power. It would be wiser to simply turn a blind eye to the Holy Kingdom, which is now impotent… and if this place becomes an enclave, the Sorcerous Kingdom’s defensive strength will be halved, and many of the nearby countries will agree that it is a good thing. And if the people wish for this to happen as well, the Sorcerer King will have just cause for his actions.”

“...So being a country of the undead is better than being a nation whose people can’t even defend themselves… is that how it is, vice-captain?”

Gustav nodded at the paladin’s question. “Just so.”

“Gustav. Did I make a mistake in bringing the Sorcerer King back here?”

“Of course not, Captain. It was the best choice at the time. However… it is true that we’ve relied too much on the Sorcerer King’s power. Like I said just now, if we had taken back those prison camps with our own strength, we would not be in this situation now. For all we know, the people might still fear and hate the Sorcerer King, being that he’s one of the undead.”

“...What should we do?”

“We need to deal with the people, buy time, and defeat the enemy army by ourselves. If we can’t even do that, then even if we defeat Jaldabaoth… the war might still continue.”

Remedios looked up to the ceiling.

“...Then that’s what we have to do. Damn that Sorcerer King… did he plan all this out beforehand?”

“I don’t know… I really don’t know. But he might have.”

“Maybe he desires to expand his domain. Is the Sorcerous Kingdom very small?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s very small, but it’s true that the Sorcerous Kingdom is only his city and the land around it, as well as that plain which is rumored to spawn large quantities of the undead.”

So that was why he had his eyes on the Holy Kingdom’s land. There was certainly more than enough evidence to lead to that conclusion.

“That damn undead creature! We should have asked for Momon’s strength after all!”

“Perhaps things might have ended the same if Momon had come. The shock

would simply not have been as great as the impact which the Sorcerer King had. A king conquering a city by himself is an incredibly striking image. The fact that said king is one of the undead who are our nation's sworn enemies is also very influential."

"...Dammit."

Now that silence had returned to the room, Remedios -- who finally realised that Gustav was asking for her opinion -- gave her orders.

"We'll discuss this with Caspond-sama. If, perhaps, though I feel it's not too likely, just in case, Her Majesty has passed away, then he is the most eligible person to be the next Holy King."

"Since we have not yet found any other members of the royal family, that will certainly be the case. We'll go ask his opinion of all this, then."

Remedios left the paladins in the room and led Gustav to Caspond's room.

In the end, things turned out just like Gustav's predictions. The conclusion was that they would delay answering the people and if the enemy should attack during this time, they would face them without the assumption of the Sorcerer King's assistance and beat them back, thus showing the world that the strength of the Holy Kingdom was still undiminished.

Part 3

There were large movements in the demihuman camp -- upon receiving that report, Neia knew that the time had come.

There was no doubt about it; this was a prelude to an attack.

Neia ran through the city, clad in the gear she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King.

She knew that the people she was running past were staring at her with eyes wide.

Their line of sight was drawn to the beauty of the bow she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King, and then they looked at the armor previously worn by the ex-ruler of the city, the Grand King Buser, and they were filled with shock. Neia's acute hearing picked out people asking a question through the noise of the crowd: "Who is that warrior?" It was answered by "It's the Sorcerer King's squire" or "The woman from the Sorcerous Kingdom."

I'm not from the Sorcerous Kingdom...

It bothered her every time she heard false rumours like that. Part of her wanted to know, yet did not want to know how the rumors had wrongly depicted her. However, she would need to clearly and firmly deny any rumors which might inconvenience the Sorcerer King.

Still, the Sorcerer King's squire...

Just as a brief surge of joy filled Neia and she was about to smile, a quiet groan came from one of the people she passed.

Even if he does resemble Father...

That thought passed through Neia's mind as she arrived at the wall adjoining the west gate, where she had been assigned. That was also where practically all the demihuman forces were gathered.

Close to 80% of all the paladins, priests, soldiers and able-bodied men in the city had been stationed at the west gate or in its vicinity. The remaining 20% were assigned to the east gate, while the women, children, old folks and other non-combatants were keeping watch from the north and south city walls.

Remedios Custodio commanded the west gate. Gustav Montagnes commanded the east gate. Caspond Bessarez was the nominal supreme commander. Of course, the supreme commander stayed within the headquarters in the center of the city and did not venture out.

She could see the west gate at last.

The Sorcerer King had demolished the east gate's portcullis, but the west gate's portcullis was still intact. However, many demihumans were stronger than human beings. They could probably wreck it easily with logs.

Neia clenched her hand into a fist before it could tremble.

If they broke through this point and made their way inside, it would be very difficult to deal with the demihumans once they began spreading through the city. In other words, the city would be lost.

Given the circumstances, Neia could not run. She would probably fight and

die in combat against a vast swarm of demihumans.

Neia brought her trembling hands to her mouth, and then bit down.

Don’t be afraid! If you’re scared, you’ll miss a target you could have hit!

The magic item she borrowed from the Sorcerer King could defend against magical mental attacks, but it could not suppress the fear born of her own heart. Even so, she would probably have been even more frightened if she had not worn it.

As she felt the pain spreading from her fingers, Neia entered a tower on what seemed to be the left side of the city and ran up the stairs to the top of the wall. Neia had been assigned to the Sorcerer King’s side, and so she was apparently the last to show up -- of course, her superior officers had granted her special dispensation so she would not be censured for being late -- and the other people who were supposed to be here were already present.

As Neia prepared to rush off to her station, the paladin commanding the left flank of the western wall stopped her.

“The Sorcerer King -- His Majesty seems to be missing.”

For a moment, Neia looked at the paladin in surprise. She had already reported to her superiors that the Sorcerer King had no intention of taking part in this battle.

Yet, they were still asking her this question -- did that mean they had not informed them about it?

However, Neia immediately sensed that this was different. This man held onto a sliver of hope, and he must have been wondering if the Sorcerer King would change his mind and show up.

Neia looked upon the demihuman army that was sprawled outside the city. There were well over 30’000 demihumans there, but the pressure of looking directly at them made them feel more numerous than they actually were.

Neia could understand why anyone would wish for the aid of the overwhelmingly powerful Sorcerer King in the face of such odds. That was because Neia had once felt the same way too. However--

“Yes. The Sorcerer King is not here. That’s because this is our -- the Holy Kingdom’s battle.”

The paladin could not answer her.

Neia slipped past him and ran to her post--

“--Hold on! Squire Neia Baraja!”

“Yes!”

Neia stopped and stood at attention.

“Stand by here for the time being.”

“Eh!?”

Neia looked around. This place was close to the exit of the tower which led to the top of the city wall. The flow of human traffic here was vast. Would she not be inconveniencing people by standing here? In addition, this place was far from Neia’s assigned position, which was close to the center.

“May, may I ask the reason for this? Is there something you need me to do?”

“No, no, it’s not like we need you to do anything, it’s actually a little troublesome. ...Squire Baraja. Just stay put here. Do you understand!?”

“Ah, yes…”

She had no idea what was going on, but there must have been some reason for it. There was no reason to keep a trained soldier here for no reason when the fighting might break out at any moment.

Was my assignment changed? Is it so that I can focus on sniping the enemy commanders? ...The bow I borrowed from the Sorcerer King looks amazing even at a glance, so does that mean they’re using me as a trump card?”

“I understand. How long will I be waiting? Where shall I wait?”

“Ah, um, well, just until the enemy moves in. As for where, anywhere is fine.”

“Huh? I need to wait until a busy time like that?”

It was indeed weird. Just as a sense of wrongness began to fill Neia, several men who looked like they came from the militia carried a huge pot up the stairs. This was probably a meal for the defenders standing by on the walls. They were sweating far more than the cold weather warranted, and it was clear that these men had come back and forth many times. It was only to be expected, given that they were feeding several hundred men.

Neia leaned against the wall to give them room to pass, and the men walked unhurriedly past her. However, one of them lifted their head a little and noticed Neia's face.

"Huh? Aren't you the Sorcerer King's squire -- ah, no, would that be you, ma'am?"

"Ah, no need to be so formal… er, forgive me. Yes. I have been assigned the duty of serving as the Sorcerer King's squire."

Perhaps they had heard Neia speak with the man, but the other pot-bearers stopped and looked at Neia in surprise. It was probably for the same reason as the man from just now.

She was slightly embarrassed to be known as the Sorcerer King's squire, but at the same time she felt very proud of herself.

The men did not know how Neia felt, and they worriedly asked:

"I say, ah, actually, there's something I'd like to ask the Sorcerer King--"

“--Hold on! No, could I please ask you to wait? She’s very busy. Would you mind carrying on with your work?”

Suddenly, the paladin stepped between Neia and the men, as though to hide her.

That was a strange stance to take. It looked as though he did not want her to speak with those men--

Was that the reason for the order just now? He doesn’t want me to talk to them… why is that? Is it because they were going to ask a question about the Sorcerer King?

She did not know why he was doing this, but gaining answers would be simple enough.

“I don’t mind. Could you let me through?”

Since the paladin did not want her to speak, then she would just have to address them directly.

“Squire Baraja!

“Are you trying to keep people from asking about the Sorcerer King!?”

Neia answered as loudly as the shout which had been directed at her.

In truth, it was quite shameless to keep borrowing the Sorcerer King's reputation like this, but she had to make sure the Holy Kingdom was not doing anything which might negatively impact the Sorcerer King. She did not want her home country to disgrace itself.

Neia gently addressed the man who had asked her the question earlier. Of course, she knew that it was probably going to frighten him, even if she felt her tone was gentle.

"I will answer to the best of my ability if your question is related to the great Sorcerer King. That said, I am not of the Sorcerous Kingdom, so I regret to say there are many things I do not know either."

"Eh!? But you -- aren't you from the Sorcerous Kingdom, ma'am?"

"Eh!? No, no, it's not like that. I'm a paladin squire from this country."

"Eh? Really?"

"Well, yes? So you don't need to be all formal with me…"

The crowd burst into a commotion. Perhaps it was because the paladin had shouted at her just now, but at some point the militiamen on the walls had started looking her way.

While matters had taken quite an embarrassing turn, she could not look bad now that she had invoked the name of the Sorcerer King. Neia puffed up her chest proudly, determined to let all the soldiers present hear her. It would seem the paladin had resigned himself to the fact that he could not keep this a secret,

and so he stood aside to glare angrily at Neia.

“Then, first off… That armor of yours looked like something that the boss of those goat-headed monsters wore. Were you the one who defeated it?”

“No, not at all. The one who wore this armor was the Grand King Buser, and the Sorcerer King put him into the grave with a single spell.”

Ohhh, the crowd enthused.

She could hear snatches of conversation from the crowd: “He actually beat that--!” “I can’t believe he used only one spell” “Did he really take down a whole city by himself… he actually defeated so many demihumans…” “He’s super strong... I think I’m falling for him…” “He’s not like the undead I know at all…” and so on.

Even though they were whispering into each others’ ears or muttering to themselves, Neia’s keen ears could clearly hear them.

Of course, it made her very happy to know that others felt the same way about the great man she so admired. This was particularly true for those people who maintained that opinion despite knowing that he was undead.

His Majesty’s efforts were not in vain, there are people out there who get it...

“Then, then, ah, will His Majesty be lending us a helping hand this time round?”

The ruckus fell silent in an instant, and that reaction told Neia that this question was a critical one.

“...His Majesty will not be taking part in this battle. This is because it is a battle that we, as citizens of the Holy Kingdom, are fighting to save our nation, and not another country’s war. In addition, His Majesty needs to conserve mana for when he faces Jaldabaoth.”

The men’s faces turned downcast as they heard her reply. Neia prepared herself for a rebuke--

“Well, that makes sense… normally, the king of another country wouldn’t come over by himself. Heaven will punish us if we’re not grateful to him despite all he’s done for us.”

“Yeah. Also, she said that he’s saving up his mana to defeat Jaldabaoth.”

“...That king is very calm and perceptive, but even so he’s a man who’ll choose a method that saves more people… no, he’s undead. In that case, there must be a reason why he won’t take part in this battle. I mean, I saw it back then.”

“Ahh, I saw it too. After all, we’re the ones who value this country the most. -- Then I’ll be the one to protect my wife!”

“What are you talking about?”

“We came from the prison camps before this city was liberated--”

She could hear voices of goodwill from all around her.

Of course, there were some who were unhappy that the Sorcerer King was not coming to help. However, they were outnumbered by the people who could understand the Sorcerer King's considerations, and it gave Neia quite the underwear crisis.

"May I return to my post now?"

Neia addressed her question to the paladin. She now understood why he did not want her to go to her post earlier. In that case, there ought to be no problems in letting her head there now.

The paladin did not hide how he felt as he told Neia to "Go" with a bitter look on his face.

Neia walked past the soldiers who were loudly discussing the Sorcerer King and arrived at the place she had been assigned to. She then intently studied the enemy encampment.

It was a vast army. It boasted enough manpower to devour everyone here in one gulp. It was the enemy which would be attacking them.

She felt like she was going to throw up again.

How many times had her father felt like this when he was manning the fortress line?

Neia looked up at the sky, which was as overcast as her heart.

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The demihuman army made their move during the day.

Neia picked up the pace as she ate her oatmeal porridge.

Said porridge was made of oat grains boiled with milk and served in a wooden bowl. Thanks to the winter air outside, it was cold by the time it reached Neia's hands and frankly speaking, it was awful. However, if she did not eat her body would not be able to endure the extended exertion it would have to go through afterwards, and there would be no more food waiting for her. In addition, while there was supposed to be a relief shift for her, Neia had the feeling that she would not be successfully relieved, and that she would not have the chance to have a proper meal later on. That was her assumption from the large portion they had been given for lunch.

She rammed the thick rod into her mouth, fighting the urge to gag as she gulped down the clumpy white stuff.

The sheer amount she had to swallow bloated her belly, but the knowledge that this horrible stuff might be her last meal filled her with despair.

At the battlements overlooking the demihuman army, Neia curled herself up on a cotton mat. Her grey-colored coat would be her only defense against the winter cold from now on. The militiamen had started eating at the same time as her but they had not yet finished.

Everyone was frowning. Clearly nobody was happy with the taste. That could not be helped.

However, their tense expressions were not due to the oatmeal porridge. Their eyes were not looking at the food they held, but the demihumans making their advance.

There was no way anyone could be happy -- or hopeful -- when looking upon those overwhelming number.

Then there were those who had once been prisoners. Their taste of

demihuman rule had engraved an intense fear into them. They were under so much stress that they were unable to eat.

What would the Sorcerer King do?

Would he give a grand, spirited speech to heighten their will to fight? Or would he laugh it off?

Neia had no idea what heroic actions he would take. Still, even if she knew, she could not emulate him. After all, she was completely different from the Sorcerer King, who was a heroic monarch.

Also, it would probably cause problems if Neia said something like “relax and don’t worry” to them. After all, appropriate tension was what drove things forward.

Their hearts might be gloomy, but there was no sign that they had given in to despair, nor were there any signs that they wanted to flee. They had something about them, something that soldiers who had prepared themselves to meet their fate would possess.

The reason for that was apparently due to something that one of the militiamen -- who had been one of the first to be freed from the prison camps -- had said about the Sorcerer King. It spread through the soldiers stationed at the walls like wildfire.

Lives were not equally important.

They were unhappy when they heard he had killed a hostage whom the demihumans were holding. It was a ruthless act that was very characteristic of the undead. However, the people who had been there strenuously insisted that it was not the case. They spoke of how that incomparably powerful Sorcerer King had said, “even I would become the victim in the face of someone stronger than me”.

Neia remembered those words too. Back then, he had seemed extremely human, even radiating a tragic stoicism which felt like determination and resolve personified. It was a powerful promise to protect those things which were important to him and it had a persuasive power to it which could not be

put into words.

And then, they thought about what would happen to the people dear to them if they were defeated here.

Their fighting spirit was strengthened by a powerful sense of purpose, which said “I don’t want to let my loved ones share my own hellish experience”.

Had His Majesty considered that things might end up like this all that time ago?

If he had not said those words to stiffen the people’s resolve, their forces might have lost their morale in the face of the overwhelming army before them, and they might even have dissolved into a rout.

Neia had only seen the Holy Queen once. She had almost no idea of her abilities or her character. Still, she was certain the Sorcerer King was superior to her as a ruler in both aspects. Or rather, the Sorcerer King was probably the sort of sovereign who was known as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the highest grade of monarch, even among other kings.

“And here I used to feel that the people of the Sorcerous Kingdom… well, being ruled by the undead was a sad thing…”

However, they might be very lucky now that she thought about it. Those words caught in Neia’s throat, did a loop and refused to leave her mouth. After all, it would not be good if the people around her heard them. Just then--

“Confirmed enemy advance! All hands prepare for battle!”

A great shout came from afar.

Everyone gulped down their oatmeal porridge and went to their fighting stations.

If an army which was over 10’000 strong made its move, the air would shudder, to the point where it might even shake the walls of the city. It felt like the oncoming pressure would squash them flat.

In truth, Neia’s acute hearing had picked up the earthshaking clamor of an advancing army, and despondent wails rose up from the militiamen.

Morale was falling fast.

Still, there was nothing Neia could do, and she was not in a position to do anything either. Neia's sole job was to fill everyone who entered her range with arrows.

Ever since this city had been taken back, she had spent every waking moment practicing her archery when she had not been performing her duties as a squire. She mused that it was thanks to that practice that she had mastered the special characteristics of Ultimate Shootingstar Super, and she was now able to use it properly.

Still, why are the demihumans attacking now? Attacking at night would be better for them… do they have something in mind? If the Sorcerer King were here, I could ask him about this…

The absence of the magic caster who had walked beside or in front of her for the past month made her feel like there was something important missing from her heart.

No. I need to stand on my own two feet. I can't rely on His Majesty for everything… Although I'm not sure exactly what the demihumans are planning, there ought to be a reason for launching their attack in broad daylight. In that case, it would be best not to be careless.

As Neia observed the demihumans from the battlements, the frontline of demihumans drew her attention.

...Hey, that's…

There was an Ogre standing three meters tall in the front rank. That demihuman carried a massive weapon.

It was some kind of ranged weapon that was protected by a wooden shield. It was a ballista. Although it seemed just right for the demihuman due to the latter's massive size, the fact was that they could be used as siege weapons.

Many Ogres carried these weapons, which ought to have been fixed in position before use, and they stood in a row.

Had they scavenged them from a city and remodelled them for upright shooting?

The drums thundered, and the ballistas were prepared to fire.

And then--

--The city walls began to shake. In some places, the battlements even began to collapse. They would be lucky not to take any casualties given the circumstances, and luck was with them for now.

A massive bolt shattered the battlements. It was not so much a bolt as a javelin. A thick javelin that was easily as tall as Neia raced through the air and embedded itself in the walls. At this point, the only word for it was “siege weapon”. Surely nobody could take a hit from it and survive.

The Ogres looked like they were preparing for a second volley.

“You bastards!”

Neia stared at them.

The Ogres were far, far away.

It was probably possible for a bow of this draw to hit them at that range. However, its penetrating power would drop drastically, and the fact was that she could not practice long-range shooting like this within the city limits. She did not know the range to them, and she was not confident that she could shoot through the ballistas’ shields and kill their wielders.

That being the case, all they could do was open the gates and fight a pitched battle to kill the ballista team, but that would be an extremely foolish move.

In other words, all they could do was keep taking this one-sided assault.

We have to pull back… but if we do, we can’t stop the enemy advance. What kind of plan does the brass have?

Although the enemy was only shooting so far, the enemy would move to take the walls if the men retreated. And if the enemy seized the walls, then the city was all but lost.

They would take control of the stairs leading down from the walls and force

the soldiers around it back to open the gates in order to let the main body of their forces into the city. All they needed to do was force that sequence of events through by dint of sheer power. There was nothing they could do about it. Even Remedios would not be able to handle being surrounded and pounded in a melee.

In that case, all they could do was sacrifice the temple and flee the city from the east. However, that would probably lead to the situation they had discussed in a previous strategy meeting -- they would be harried along the plains, or they would be mauled by the army arrayed against their southern forces.

What would the paladin commanding the west gate decide?

Would he fall back, or would he fight to the end?

As Neia contemplated the matter, a second volley came from the enemy.

The walls shook again as the lance-sized projectiles struck it. The trembling felt more intense than the last time, and at the same time she heard an unrecognizable sound.

“Abbbahhhhh!”

Anyone who glanced at its source would witness a horrific sight.

One of the ballista bolts had shot clean through a wall and impaled a militiaman hiding behind it. Blood bubbled out of his mouth. Several seconds later, the man collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The bolt had nailed him to the wall like an insect specimen, and his arms and legs dangled limply downwards.

Screams broke out from around her as the men saw the hideous corpse which had suddenly appeared among them.

Neia grabbed the necklace which the Sorcerer King had lent her, and bit her lip.

That was a fatal wound. No amount of healing magic could cure that.

The death of one soldier did not greatly affect their fighting strength. However, the fear generated by his gruesome death infected the surroundings.

The thought that they might be next and that there was nowhere safe for them triggered the survival instincts of the men, and their bodies trembled.

“「Under Divine Flag」!”

Someone cast a spell.

The terror coursing through the militiamen was suppressed in a moment. This was the result of using magic to improve their resistance to fear. While the divine spell「Lion’s Heart」provided complete immunity to fear, it was only effective on a single target. In contrast,「Under Divine Flag」affected everyone in a sphere around the caster.

That was why the paladins stood among the militiamen.

“Don’t be afraid!” The paladin who had cast the spell shouted, “Take up your weapons to free those who have gone through the same pain as you!”

Spells or certain special abilities could briefly panic people, but the fear they felt now came from their own hearts. Under the effects of the fear-suppressing spell, the fire blazed anew in the militiamen’s eyes.

Still, that was simply covering up the actual problem. The important thing was whether they could do anything about the present situation, where they were subjected to a one-sided attack from the enemy. Otherwise, the only thing that would come of it would be more dead and wounded. However, Neia could not come up with any good ideas.

“Take cover! The enemy doesn’t have unlimited ammunition! They couldn’t have brought so much with them!”

I see, Neia thought. Most of their resources ought to be going to the south in order to provision the army standing off against the southern forces, so was that why they thought that they would not have brought enough ammunition for their weapons here? Still, even a captive craftsman could make a lot of those bolts in a short time, although the crossbows were a different matter. This was a gamble.

--The third wave came.

The ogres were not used to archery, and many of them missed their shots. Even so, many of the battlements crumbled under the third volley, and there were many casualties among the militiamen.

The massive, lance-like bolts could pierce a man and the man behind him as well.

「Under Divine Flag」was a spell that was centered on the paladin who had cast it, which meant that its effect were strongest when many people were bunched up within its effective radius. However, that only led to more casualties.

The sound of flapping came through the air before the enemy could fire a fourth time. Winged angels flew through the sky and passed over the heads of Neia and the others.

While they were angels of the lowest order, they headed straight for the demihumans. They had burning brands in their right hands and they held pitchers with cloth sticking out of their mouths in their left hands. Those pitchers clearly contained oil or powerful spirits.

In other words, they were carrying explosive throwing weapons -- firebombs.

Of course, the flames produced by those weapons would not harm fire-resistant opponents in the slightest, or demihumans with thick hides and trained, brawny bodies. They might not even have an effect at all.

On the other hand, there were also those demihumans who could not deal with fire, and damaging the ballistas would also stop the enemy attack.

The angels filled the sky above the ballista-wielding Ogres and lit their pitchers. However, they did not even have the time to cast them down.

There was a flapping sound as demihumans took to the sky. They were Pteropuses. Their hands were shaped into leathery wings, and their arms remained still as they rose straight into the air like they were riding the wind. That was probably the effect of some kind of magical power.

A white weblike substance flew out at the same time, entangling the angels. It had probably been produced by a special ability of the Spidans.

The angels looked like butterflies caught in a spiderweb, and they plunged to the ground since they were unable to move freely. They were swallowed up by the demihuman hordes, and it was needless to say what happened to them after that.

However, the angels had not sacrificed themselves in vain.

Several firebombs hit the ground, and roaring flames spread all around.

Neia judged that this was the best chance she would get, and drew her bow.

Until now, it had been impossible to aim directly at the Ogres due to the shields mounted on their ballistas. Even if she took aim at their unshielded legs instead, it would be nearly impossible to kill them in one hit.

Her father would have been able to shoot out an Ogre's eye with just a slight gap. However, Neia's skills were not as honed as his. Perhaps it was because they feared the flames or they were afraid for their ballistas, but the Ogres raised their ballistas and pointed their shields upwards. Their attention was focused on the fire, and they did not pay any attention to her.

If she missed this chance, she would probably not get another.

She drew her bow to its limit, and then loosed her arrow.

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The magic item she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King aided Neia in bringing forth a result that approached what her father could do.

The arrow flew on a startlingly straight path, and struck an Ogre's head.

Neia did not aim for the sturdy skull, but a squishy eyeball. While some monsters' eyeballs were protected by a protective membrane, she judged that it would be easier to strike a fatal blow there than by targeting the skull.

However -- things did not go as smoothly as planned.

Her arrow sank into the vicinity of the Ogre's jaw.

The stricken Ogre howled loudly, shuddering from the pain.

The Ogre dropped its ballista, and it clutched its face -- the part where it had been shot. Then, it shakily turned its back on Neia before falling back. While she had not dealt it a mortal blow, she had at least broken its will to fight.

If the demihuman army had healing units, it would probably be able to return to the frontlines soon.

"Tch!"

This was all Neia could accomplish, even with the aid of the powerful magic items the Sorcerer King had lent her.

Neia clicked her tongue and immediately took cover, and then she pressed herself to the city side of the wall and began to move. The militiamen looked at her in surprise for suddenly leaving her post, and she addressed them in harsh tones.

"--Get out of here! They're going to counterattack this location!"

It was not because they had heard Neia's shout, but several of the ballistas discharged their projectiles in her direction. Even if most of the bolts had gone awry, some of them had landed in Neia's vicinity, and they had wrecked the nearby wall.

If Neia's luck had been any worse, she might well have been impaled by those bolts.

She peeked at the demihumans again. The chaos from the angel and fire attack was being steadily contained, and the Ogres raised their ballistas again. It would seem news of being hit by an arrow had spread throughout the enemy army. In that case, they would probably not make the mistake of lowering their shields again. Therefore -- would she gamble on being able to emulate her father's skill by a stroke of luck, hitting them even if she could only strike their bodies? Or would she shrink up like a turtle and wait for the time to deal a fatal blow?

Amidst her confusion, the bow she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King caught the sun's light and gleamed with an eyecatching radiance.

Yes. She had managed to borrow such incredibly potent items, and she had to return them no matter the cost. Therefore, she ought not to take risks.

They can’t have that many special bolts!

It would seem the demihumans were volleying an endless hail of lance-sized bolts at them. However, their crude manufacture meant that very often, they flew towards places with nothing to hit, and some of them even fell into the city streets without striking anything.

She could not return fire, so all she could do was hunker down and wait for the enemy attack to stop.

Neia’s body was spattered with fragments of the destroyed city walls. Some unlucky militiamen were hit and died on the spot, but most of the others simply prayed in silence for the enemy attack to stop, since they could not do anything else.

Soon, she heard a mighty doom, the beat of a massive drum. The same sound repeated itself four times. In the distance, the same sound came from what should have been the left wing of the enemy’s formation.

...They’re communicating battle information with the number of drumbeats. It looks like the right and left wings are using that to coordinate their operations. If I could enter the enemy camp and steal one of those drums, then beat wildly on it, that ought to disrupt the enemy’s cohesion -- that said, it would be impossible.

The enemy ought to know the importance of their drums. Therefore, they would be heavily guarded. In that case, who could charge into their camp?

Perhaps an adventurer could use「Invisibility」or「Silence」and other spells to

cause chaos among the enemy and then sneak in.

There’s no point hoping for the impossible...

Still, there was no doubt that the enemy was changing tack. Neia -- and many militiamen -- nervously rose up to peek at the enemy’s movements.

After that, their hearts were profoundly shaken.

It was a feeling which combined shock, fear, and furious anger.

The army arrayed on the other side of the wall was advancing at last. The left and right wings of the Demihuman Alliance forces advanced in parallel. The center detachment approached the city gate in a layered formation.

The demihumans advanced with earthshaking steps, as though they wanted to hunt down and kill Neia and the others.

And then there was another unit -- a very small one -- which seemed to be flanking the city. Were they planning to scale the walls, or was this a feint?

In any case, the enemy had already launched the second wave of their attack. From now on, it would not be a one-sided struggle, but a mutual struggle of savage bloodshed.

However, that was not where the problem lay. After all, they had been waiting a long time for this, though they could not take joy in the fact that the time had come at last.

What angered the militiamen was the advance of the left and right wings. Their foremost units were composed of many different species. While they lacked a sense of unity, they had two things in common.

One was that they were all carrying siege ladders.

In other words, their unit was meant to scale the walls and break into the city. That also implied that this was Neia's objective.

The other thing was that they had human children bound to their bodies.

Some of them were crying and wailing, while others hung limp. All of them were naked, and all of them were alive.

Neia bit her lip hard.

But at the same time, Neia's heart was surprisingly calm.

She watched the demihuman tide pressing down on them from a darkened nook in the walls. Neia then slid an arrow out of her quiver and began to draw her bow.

Even if the enemy pioneers had entered her shooting range, she had to hold on.

It was still to early.

She took several deep breaths, focused herself, then turned as fast as she could and drew her bowstring taut.

She had only a moment to aim, and there was only one point where she could aim.

--There it is!

She released her arrow.

Without any hesitation, the arrow pierced the human shield -- the chest of a child -- and the demihuman behind it in a single shot.

Perhaps even that powerful shot would have been hard-pressed to bring down an Ogre and its ridiculous stamina. However, the demihuman she had just hit did not seem to possess such unreasonable vitality.

Neia paid no heed to the demihuman she had downed and drew another arrow.

She had killed a person, the child bound in front of the demihuman.

Her hands would not stop shaking. All she could see was blackness, and her heart was trembling.

Even if she knew this would happen and had prepared herself for it, this was ho she had reacted.

Her old habit led her to reach for the scabbard of her sword, but her fingers touched the bowstring instead.

It was as though her bow was chiding her, telling her that now was not the time for that sort of thing.

A faint lamp lighted up in Neia's frozen heart. It spread like wildfire, and dispersed the chill winds blowing through her soul.

She stopped shaking, and her vision was no longer narrowed. What filled her heart was a sense of justice that could not be put into words.

Ahh, to think it would have such a great effect.

Neia reconfirmed that what the Sorcerer King said had been correct.

The demihuman pioneers that Neia had attacked was visibly slowing down. That was because they had been shaken to discover that their human shields were not effective.

Therefore, she had to shout.

Neia opened her eyes, and shouted at the staring militiamen.

"What are you standing there for? Hurry up and throw your stones down! We can't save those hostages!"

Yes. Neia and the others could not save the hostages. And then, they had already seen what the enemy would do to hostages that had lost their value. Therefore, what she needed to do was...

She fired another arrow to speed the demihumans on their way to the afterlife.

Neia used her practiced vision and saw that her shot had pierced a boy through his forehead. She did not know if it was because she had been aiming for an Armatt or because the boy's skull had lessened the impact, but this arrow had not been immediately fatal. However, the enemy's front line was in chaos. That was only to be expected. Both humans and demihumans would slow their pace when things did not proceed as planned.

However, all she could see of the enemy lines stretched from one edge of her vision to the other.

Neia had only had an effect on the region where she had shot. Everywhere else, things were continuing as though nothing had happened.

It looked like a small dent in a long, long line.

"Hurry up and throw the stones!"

Neia shouted at them once more.

If they did not throw their stones, everything Neia had done would have been

for nothing.

That was something even more unforgivable than taking the lives of children who had futures ahead of them.

The enemy was attacking on the left, right and center at the same time. A head-on clash with an enemy that outnumbered them several times to one result in them being crushed under the sheer weight of numbers. However, if even one of the enemy elements slowed down, it would relieve the pressure on them.

If the enemy reached the walls, they would climb up while using the children as shields. If they managed to make it up the walls, the militiamen would not be able to resist the demihumans. What she had to do now was see how much fighting strength she could shave off the enemy before they came into contact.

It's very difficult for militiamen to kill children. Therefore, there has to be someone who's willing to set an example, even if they get their hands dirty!

Neia fixed her eyes on a paladin in the distance.

You should have realized that when you took the prison camps and this city! You ought to have known that the Sorcerer King did the right thing! And you ought to know that nobody else could do this! And you certainly should have known that it's pointless to agonize over lives you can't save! What you should be doing is devoting all your strength to save the lives which can be saved!

Neia fired another arrow.

Just like before, her shot killed a girl and the demihuman that she had been tied to.

“Hurry--”

“--Uooooohhhh!”

A shout echoed all around Neia as a stone flew. It seemed to sweep away the anxiety in her heart.

The thrown stone hit the demihumans, who were still hesitating. While it was a long way from being fatal, it would seem that it had done a certain amount of damage.

“Hey, you guys! Hurry up and attack the demihumans! Forget about the kids they’re holding hostage!”

Neia recognized the militiaman who was shouting.

He was the father of the boy that the Sorcerer King had killed when they had liberated the first prison camp.

Neia was surprised to find him here.

“If they get past us, the women and children will suffer worse than they did before we saved them! If you still love your children, then throw those rocks as hard as you can!”

His voice seemed to banish all their doubts, and it was shortly followed by a volley of several rocks. While they flew on weird paths and there was no telling where they were aimed at, the fact was that they had been hurled out.

By the time Neia drew her bow again, a hail of stones descended on the demihumans.

Many of those stones hit the front-running demihumans, the ones using children as meatshields. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that they hit the children tied to those demihumans, than the demihumans themselves.

The children cried and wailed in a heart-rending way. Even so, the rocks smashed mercilessly down on those pitiful children. They were the most tragic sacrifice of all, caught between the savagery of both sides.

Neia prioritized aiming for those children.

This was a sign of respect for the sacrifices which had to be made in order to save the most people.

Neia leaned out to find her next target, and then she felt something tearing through the air as it approached her, but all she saw was a burst of light.

Is this a magic attack from the enemy?

Neia froze for a moment. At the same time, she felt a thunk from her belly. It felt like something had struck her lightly there.

Startled, she stumbled a step back and then she heard a clattering from her feet. She looked closely and saw something that looked less like a lance than a gigantic arrow -- in other words, a ballista bolt.

Its tip looked like it had been hammered into a right angle by a hammer.

Neia hurriedly ducked back behind the wall. After that, she heard a scraping sound as something huge struck the city walls.

Cold sweat ran down her back.

Neia unconsciously stroked the part of her where she had felt the impact.

She thought of how the Sorcerer King had thrown his sword earlier, and it had been deflected by the field of light from Buser's armor. That would explain what had taken place just now.

It would seem she had been saved by Buser's armor, which the Sorcerer King had lent her. In other words, Neia's life had been saved in the nick of time.

Is that some kind of protection from ranged attacks? My chest, shoulders and belly are protected by the armor, but what about other places? Does that ability have to be activated? No, more importantly, how many more times can I use it? Or is it a one-shot kind of thing?

Without the armor that the Sorcerer King had lent her, Neia would have been impaled through her abdomen.

That fact sent shudders through her body.

“Huh… huh… huh. Come on, come on, me!”

Neia had not entered the radius of 「Under Divine Flag」. She had felt that it was unnecessary because she had the crown which the Sorcerer King had lent her. That was why she could feel the fear of death like this. However, there were no tears in Neia’s eyes -- instead, she gripped her bow before revealing herself.

She had resolved herself to continue fighting, even if it meant taking the children’s lives. She could not allow herself to lose the will to fight after taking a measly little ballista bolt.

This was to keep the children they could not save from suffering any further. At the same time, it was also to slay the demihumans who had dragged them into battle. The arrow she loosed embodied both these things.

The intention to attack without regard for the children spread from her portion of the wall, until everyone was throwing rocks at the demihumans.

Neia even saw the paladins throwing rocks.

“Bastards! You bastards!”

“Ahh, dammit, those demihumans…”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!’

“I’m sorry… please forgive me…”

Although those cries of remorse echoed up and down the line, they did not stop throwing their rocks for a moment.

This was the attack made by those people who had accepted that “some blood has to be shed to save the highest number of lives.”

However, the enemy’s numbers were far too overwhelming. By the time they had struck down the front row -- the ones who were using children as shields -- the demihumans had already reached the vicinity of the walls, and they began deploying their ladders one after the other.

While the technologically-backward demihumans could only make battering rams and assault ladders in terms of siege weapons, the truth was that there was no perfect countermeasure against both of those. Several men tried to push the ladders away with long staves or let the angels destroy them, but there were far too many who were at a loss for what to do.

“How about the firebombs? Get the priests to assist with their spells!”

“This is bad! They’ve got a ladder up over there! I’ll be going over, take care of this side for me!”

“Throw those rocks!”

There was a big commotion on top of the walls. The defenders were throwing

rocks or stabbing with longspears to repel the demihumans who were clambering up the ladders, but the ladders went up one after the other, and it became difficult to deal with all of them.

Several demihumans nimbly avoided the spear thrusts from the militiamen, instead grasping the spears and pulling their wielders off the wall. Then there were those demihumans like the Armatts and the Bladers, who had natural armor on par with steel plates. They ignored spears and rushed all the way up.

While the paladins had been trained in combat and could deal with these heavily-protected demihumans, the number of demihumans on top of the walls grew and grew. If any gap appeared in the defensive lines, it would be filled almost immediately.

After stiffening her resolve, Neia leaned out from behind a battlement and shot a climbing demihuman from the side.

It was not Neia's skill so much as the weapon she wielded which killed the demihumans in one shot. She could slay the resilient Armatts and Bladers because she possessed the Ultimate Shootingstar Super.

Neia's body was clearly visible as she leaned out, and she was hit several times by stones spat by Stone Eaters. Although those stones could put dents in metal plates. Neia was protected by Buser's armor. Still, she would probably be bruised and she might have suffered a fracture or two.

Though she was sweating heavily, she did not stop firing on the demihumans for a moment.

I can still do this… I only have enough mana to use the necklace of healing which His Majesty lent me once, so I need to save it!

As she continued taking shot after shot, part of her mind tried to estimate how long she could hold out. After all, Neia's single use of recovery magic was her trump card.

She pulled an arrow from her quiver, nocked it to her bow, took aim at a demihuman's head or heart and then loosed it. She repeated that sequence countless times.

A rock hit her hard enough to knock the arrow from her hand.

Neia hurriedly ducked behind a battlement.

She had dropped her arrow because the Stone Eater's attack had rocked Neia's entire body, but that was not the only reason.

Paladins were sword-users. As a squire, she had trained with swords, so even if she knew the fundamentals of archery, she had not spent much time practicing with bows. This lack of practice made her arms cramp up and her fingers ache.

If she could not use a bow, then she would only be getting in the way. It was far too soon for her to use her trump card now, but she had no other way to restore her ability to fight.

"Item activation:「Heavy Recover」!"

The mana drained from Neia's body, and it made her feel a little dizzy. She would not be able to do this a second time.

At the same time, all the pain in her body vanished, be it the cramps in her arms or her aching fingers.

"I can do this!"

Neia leaned out again and continued shooting.

Fortunately, Jaldabaoth's forces possessed some degree of leadership. Otherwise, the ballistas would have fired on Neia to kill her without hesitation, but since they were being led, they did not shoot for fear of hitting their friendlies.

Neia focused on shooting, and eventually the hand that reached down to her quiver came up empty.

She looked down in panic and saw that she was out of arrows.

Just then, a scream came from the militiamen.

There was a very strong-looking demihuman standing in front of a ladder. While it was no different from the Stone Eaters who had fired rocks at Neia, its physique was excellent. Though it was no match for Buser, it still radiated the aura of a powerful being.

It held a crude-looking greatsword in its right hand, which resembled a meat cleaver. The other held a helmet that seemed to contain something. It was the head of the paladin which commanded this area.

“The great Jajan-sama of the Lagon Tribe has taken the head of the enemy commander! Now, you dogs, kill them! Kill all the humans!”

***

The situation immediately turned grim.

Paladins were few in number, and a death from among those small numbers meant that the defensive strength of this area would plummet. That was not the only thing.

There was a tremendous disparity in fighting strength between a militiaman and a paladin, even if the latter were not part of a hand-picked elite. There was no way the militiamen could win against a demihuman that could kill one of those paladins.

As the militiamen froze in fear, the demihumans scaled the ladder behind the Stone Eater from just now -- Jajan. They burst forth like water from a broken dam, one becoming two, and two becoming four. It was like mitosis.

Demihumans began to fill the top of the wall, and in turn, the number of militiamen began to diminish.

Demihumans and militiamen. THe difference in their individual abilities was plain to see.

She looked around in panic.

Arrows. She could not do anything without arrows.

She cast her eyes around like a traveller in a desert searching for an oasis, and then she saw a thoroughly exhausted soldier leaning against a battlement. There was a quiver with arrows beside him.

That's it! I'll take the arrows from the casualty and send him back to the rear.

But Neia sucked in a breath as she ran over. The man who looked like an archer was missing half his face. He was clearly dead.

He had probably taken a direct hit from a Stone Eater. His brains were oozing out, his glassy eye stared out into nothing, and his fate might very soon be Neia's as well.

She looked more closely, and found several similar corpses. Her usually-sensitive nose finally picked up the thick scent of gore in the air. No, her nose was fine, her brain simply had not gotten the message,

As the oatmeal porridge rose in her throat, Neia forced herself to swallow it back down with all her might. She barely succeeded, but there was no telling if it was because she had been lucky, or because she had become resistant to this after watching the "live eating performance" earlier.

(TL note: the term here is 踊り食い, or eating live and twitching seafood)

Neia clenched her teeth and transferred the arrows remaining in the nameless archer's quiver to her own. Restocking her empty quiver felt like she was restoring her own fighting spirit.

I can still fight. There's still things I can do….

After quickly finishing up her work, Neia put the archer's hands together and closed his remaining eye. There was no time to spare on doing that, but she could not stop herself from doing it.

"I'll fight for your sake too, until the very end..."

As Neia turned and rose, she no longer muttered to herself.

Her spirit flared to a peak it had never reached before, and her senses were incredibly keen. She felt like she was a part of the bow which she held.

The top of the wall was now a chaotic melee. Given Neia's skills, it seemed almost impossible to snipe Jajan -- who was holding up the head of the paladin -- given the sheer numbers of friends and foes between them. However--

I still have these gauntlets! And the Ultimate Shootingstar Super His Majesty lent me! -- I can do this!

She loosed her arrow as she filled herself with that powerful conviction.

By the time Jajan noticed the whistling in the air, it was too late.

The arrow pierced his head, and Jajan fell limply to the ground.

“Jajan of the Lagon Tribe has fallen by the hand of Neia Baraja!”

Although she shouted those words, she was not answered by a cheer. That was only to be expected. There was no time for a long hurrah in the middle of a life-and-death battle. Neia blushed a little as she realised that, but she had managed to shake the demihumans. She could feel the pressure on them easing off.

This had not been a complete defeat.

Neia took up her arrow again, then turned to face a suitable demihuman before sending an arrow his way. She shot the demihuman through the head and he fell from the wall.

Neia reached for another arrow. She was doing it like it was nothing, like it could not be helped. Was she a master archer like her father now?

Neia’s bowmanship had rapidly improved during the course of this battle. That was how she had managed to kill Jajan, though the latter had been wounded during the battle with the paladin.

Amidst the chaos of war, Neia sought new prey to bring down.

--Why aren’t they targeting me, as an archer?

That question was answered as her next arrow pierced another demihuman skull.

“Don’t approach that human carelessly! She’s wearing the Grand King’s armor!”

“The Grand King?”

“Grand King Buser? Grand King Buser’s armor?”

Neia’s sensitive ears caught the chatter between the demihumans.

“No doubt about it! That’s Buser’s armor!”

“Don’t tell me that human brought down…”

Ah! Is that it!? When the Sorcerer King said it would protect me, was he not referring to the armor’s ability to protect against ranged attacks but the reputation of defeating Buser!?

The Grand King Buser’s name was well known throughout the demihuman forces. Therefore, the demihumans who had mounted the wall were under the false impression that they were fighting the warrior who had defeated Buser. The fact that Neia had killed a leader-class demihuman in one shot only added to that.

That was why they refused to advance against her, even though they knew Neia was an archer.

I have to hand it to the Sorcerer King, did he take this into account as well?

In all likelihood, few demihumans would chase her now even if she turned tail and ran. They would probably prioritize holding their ground over chasing a strong foe, even if they were making a mistake. Therefore, Neia's life was probably in no great danger. The Sorcerer King's advice to "flee to the east gate" suddenly reached her mind, but she could not do it after all.

Anyone like that would never have come here in the first place.

Neia loosed another arrow, and killed another demihuman.

"Uoooh! That… that glare again…"

Glare… well, I am looking at them...

"It's the eyes of someone who kills like it's second nature! That, that human sow, she's something else!"

Probably… a sow...

"Look at that bow! It's amazing! It's not just her skills!"

Hehe!

"The Mad-Eyed Archer!"

...Eh?

“What, what’s with that name? Do you know that human?”

...No, no...

“Does that human sow have a nickname?”

...Hang on!

“I once heard there was a human archer with a devil’s face and amazing skills… could that be it!?”

That was Dad!

“The Mad-Eyed Archer! The archer who killed Buser!”

For some reason, the phrase “Mad-Eyed Archer” spread through the demihuman ranks like a wave. They’ve already decided it! As that thought ran through her mind, Neia no longer had any opportunity to correct them.

As Neia loosed her arrows, the militiamen began moving.

“--Everyone, hold the line! Don’t let the demihumans near that girl!”

“Ohh! Form ranks! Remember your training!”

“I’m moving up!”

About 20 militiamen were planning to use themselves as shields for her.

“Just kill those bastards for us! We’ll protect you!”

“Got it--”

The sound of flapping wings came from the enemy encampment.

Neia pivoted and pointed her arrow at the source of the sound.

Her eyes were filled with the sight of winged demihumans rising from the enemy formation. There were many of them.

While it seemed as though bypassing the wall should have been their objective, several of them dove from the flock and descended on Neia.

She had long since abandoned the thought of who to aim at. In this silent, pure white world where all she could see were her enemies, Neia calmly loosed an arrow at each and every one of her enemies. Her trance of unhesitating speed was inhuman in its mechanical precision.

After downing the winged demihumans heading at her, Neia exhaled lightly. She could hear again after being released from that state of hyperfocus.

To the side--

She wanted to dodge, but a torrent of pain came from her left arm.

Her arm had been torn apart by an Armatt's claws from the side.

"Gwaaargh!"

Despite her cry of pain, Neia still made to pull out another arrow, but then she thought that she might not be able to properly brace her bow. In that case, perhaps drawing her sword might be better.

Her hesitation was a huge weakness, and the savage-looking Armatt raised its arm, preparing to follow up on its previous attack with a strike to the face.

She wanted to backstep, but her opponent was a superior fighter and managed to close the distance to her, so she could not evade it.

Intense pain filled her face. While she had managed to turn her head and thus avoided having her eyes shredded, the claws had ripped through her left cheek and opened a wound that allowed access to the interior of her mouth.

Fresh blood filled her mouth, and the taste of blood spread over her tongue. In addition, she could feel her warm blood oozing from her cheek, the sensation spreading down her neck and chest.

Neia had no time to draw her sword, and so she slammed Ultimate Shootingstar Super into the Armatt's face.

The Armatt had probably not expected her to do that with the bow, so it tried

to back up to avoid the attack.

Since she could not move her left arm well to brace her bow, Neia drew her sword with her right arm.

Neia stabbed with a charge like she was pouring her life into it. The Armatt immediately countered with razor-sharp claws, but a nearby militiaman had wounded its leg and its aim was off. The claw missed her ear by a fraction of an inch, but her own steel blade sank into the Armatt's throat.

She glanced down to the Armatt as it collapsed and then surveyed the situation.

While she had been focusing on loosing arrows, her militiamen blockers had been almost completely wiped out. The demihumans had reached Neia, and there were only five more men remaining, all pressed close to the wall.

The nearest reinforcements were fighting on the other side of the demihumans who had scaled the ladders, and they would be hard-pressed to help her over here. Frankly speaking, they seemed to be engaged in melee, so they would not have the free time to come help her.

There were over 30 demihumans in Neia's sector, and there were only six people on her side.

Neia glared at the demihumans, and they backed off a little, easing the pressure on them.

"My apologies, Baraja-sama!"

The militiamen who had been pressed to the wall took a defensive formation in front of Neia.

“We won’t let those bastards past us, even if it’s the last thing we do!”

The person who said this looked like a cowardly man in his 40s, with an unhealthy, protruding gut. However, his face was flushed with what seemed like the excitement of battle, and his body was covered in so much blood that one could not tell if it was his or the enemy’s. Even so, he refused to kneel, standing tall with an indomitable spirit.

He certainly looked like a reliable warrior.

“Thank you very much!” Neia said as she spat out a mouthful of fresh blood which had pooled there. Then, she continued -- “I’ll leave this to you!”

He was not the only one who was like this. None of the militiamen’s fallen bodies showed any sign that they had attempted to leave the perimeter they had formed around Neia. What else could she do except place her faith in them?

The man’s eyes went to Neia’s left arm, and his face stiffened.

“You can see the bone…”

“Please don’t say that, it hurts a lot when you point it out.”

“Ah, ahhh, sorry.”

Once one reached a certain degree of skill as a paladin, they would be able to use low-tier recovery spells. However, Neia was only a squire, so she could not do so. There were no paladins or priests by Neia’s side, and her mana had not yet recovered enough to use the magic item again. It would probably be best to abandon the thought of using her left arm in this battle.

Neia glared at the demihumans, but just moving her eyeballs made the wound on her face ache.

The pain made her gaze that much more ominous, and as the demihumans felt it, they went on their guard.

“Baraja-sama, you kept shooting them down with your bow, so now there’s nobody left like that guy who charged in just now. That’s how we managed to survive.”

If the demihumans before Neia’s eyes rushed them all at once, the militiamen would probably be routed in an instant. However, they were all wary of Neia the archer, so they could not move together. In truth, she could understand their caution once she heard what the demihumans were saying.

“The Mad-Eyed Archer… she’s nothing much using a sword?”

“Don’t get careless, she’s just pretending she can’t use a sword to throw her opponents off.”

“Really? You’re a real smart guy.”

“Should we get the Snakemen over and kill her from a distance with spears?”

Neia mocked them in her heart. It would seem that she had gained quite an undeserved reputation thanks to the power of the magic bow she had borrowed.”

“...Is there hope for me?”

Neia asked herself that question quietly enough that the demihumans could not hear, and then she laughed.

“...If it’s the bow… the bow I borrowed from His Majesty, the Ultimate Shootingstar Super, shooting wouldn’t be a problem, but…”

The man tried saying the name Ultimate Shootingstar Super, and then he laughed sadly.

“Really… so it’s very bad, huh. Say, Baraja-sama… jump down from the wall and flee. You should live on.”

“Aiieee! For-forgive me. It’s only natural for you to be angry at such foolish words. But, but, while I don’t know what sort of hell you lived through, you’re around my daughter’s age… I think, but letting a girl like that die is just…”

I wasn’t angry, I was just looking normally at you. The thought crossed her mind, but this was a common thing by now and Neia did not take offense at it.

The man was speaking the truth. It would be wiser to fall back for the time being and heal her wounds until she could use her bow, rather than swing a sword she was not used to.

--What'll happen to them if I do that? I know very well. I can't help them even if I stay and fight. I'll just die for nothing. But...

Neia swept the bow in her left hand down and to the side.

I need to return this weapon. There's many reasons why I should run. But, but, what will His Majesty's enemies think if I run away while I'm wielding a weapon that He lent me? In that case--

"How could I run!?" she bellowed. "How could I, as one who holds a weapon borrowed from His Majesty, turn and run!?"

She tightly gripped the sword in her right hand.

Repaying good unto good was only natural for a human being.

The people of this country -- specifically, the head of their paladins -- were not the sort to do that, but she wanted to show the Sorcerer King that not everyone in this country was like that.

"Yeeeaaaart!"

Neia charged in with a battlecry that sounded like a wail. Since she could not use her bow, the militiamen would die for nothing protecting her. In that case,

she ought to take advantage of the demihuman's mistaken fear of her power and attack while they could not bring their might to bear.

The enemy had probably not expected Neia to charge so many enemies, and they moved slowly enough that even Neia's meager swordsmanship was enough to cut them up.

The remaining militiamen behind Neia followed her lead.

Neia swung her sword.

It bounced off, and the demihumans swung at her open body, only to have their attacks deflected by Buser's army.

Neia thrust her sword.

She stabbed a demihuman's body, and when she pulled it out, its organs followed. Before that demihuman hit the ground, another demihuman's claws struck at Neia's face. The wound on her left cheek was followed by one on her right, and the blood which flowed out got into her eyes.

An intense pain filled her legs.

A demihuman drove his dagger deep into flesh.

One of the militiamen fell.

Swords swung.

Two more militiamen went down.

One demihuman collapsed.

All the militiamen were dead.

There were nothing but enemies in front of her and to her sides.

Her breathing was ragged, and her heartbeat irritated her.

The parts of her body which had been struck by the enemy blazed hot, and every time she moved them, waves of seizing pain filled Neia with agony.

--I’m scared.

Neia was afraid.

She was going to die, and the thought of that frightened her.

She had been prepared to die here.

The enemy outnumbered them several times to one, and they were better individual fighters as well.

The enemy had all the disadvantages, and the only advantage her side had was their defensive position.

That being the case, it would be stranger if she did not die.

Even so, looking death in the eye was terrifying.

The word “east gate” -- said by the person she deeply respected -- echoed through her mind. Though she was prepared to die, she still wanted to live.

Neia had once thought about what would happen when people died.

What would the moment of her extinction be like?

Her soul would return to the great river, where the gods would judge her, and those who did good as described in the scriptures would go to a land of eternal rest, while the wicked would be delivered into a land of torment.

Still, even if she had accumulated good deeds throughout her life with the aim of reaching her eternal rest, she was still afraid to face the end of her life.

She swung her sword.

That powerless strike could not possibly slay a foe in one hit.

Anyone attacking even when surrounded, would take vicious counterattacks from the enemy.

Swords pierced Neia’s armor, and she was covered in wounds.

Neia was still alive thank to the armor which the Sorcerer King had lent her. She would have died long ago without it. Indeed, she would have become a corpse like the countless dead militiamen and civilians who had been scattered throughout the city like they had been carelessly thrown away.

I must be in really bad shape...

Neia laughed at herself for being able to think about such inappropriate things even as she was this close to the afterlife..

Her feet slipped due to the force of her swing. Her left thigh seized up and her right thigh was injured and could not hold her upright.

She lost her balance and fell. She leaned against the battlement, but it was all she could do not to collapse.

The world was turning white and cloudy, and she could hear a distant, wheezing panting.

It was an annoying sound. She wondered who was making it, and realised that it was herself.

She was at her limit

Neia was going to die.

“Just a bit more and the Mad-Eyed Archer will be dead!”

“Ahhh! All together now!”

The voices of the demihumans came from far away.

This is… a real pain...

Neia could no longer tell what the demihumans were saying. However, they were probably not singing her praises. As her thought processes failed one after the other, a part of her mind thought only of things like that.

She was simply waving the sword in her hand to keep them away -- her attacks were meant to keep the enemy at bay.

I’m… so scared… but everyone… is waiting for me...

In that white and cloudy world, she saw the smiles of her mother, her father, and her friends from her home village.

Who… are they… ahh… Bu-chan… Mo-chan.. Dan-nee…? I’m… scared… Your… Majesty…”

Her lungs and her heart and her arms and her brain wanted to rest.

Neia could no longer resist that temptation, but still, she had not broken yet.

Why was that?

She was afraid of death. She was filled with her squire’s conviction to fight to the very end.

Apart from that -- she wanted to achieve results that were worthy of the wargear she had borrowed.

The demihumans’ weapons thrust out at once, stabbing into Neia’s body.

And after that, Neia Baraja died.

Part 4

The air of the battlefield had a unique smell to it. It was a muddled mess of all kinds of odors, and simply put, it was a revolting stench. Still, it was a stench that one could get used to.

The sole person behind the closed portcullis -- Remedios -- took several deep breaths of that stinking air.

Her eyes were fixed on the advancing force before her, which numbered over 10’000.

The leaders of the assault on this location were Ogres and horse-like demihumans. Remedios gripped her holy sword tightly.

She liked using the sword to settle matters. She loved it. It clearly defined winners and losers. After all, there would be no more trouble after you killed the opposition. Life would have been so much easier if things were all so simple. Her sister--Kelart--and her master--Calca--would no longer knit their brows.

“Haaaah.”

She sighed.

After that, Remedios thought about what she had to do.

Gustav had said a lot of hard-to-understand things just now, but the gist of it was that they could not let a single demihuman past this gate.

The demihumans numbered in the tens of thousands. Around 10’000 of them were bearing down on the gate.

Not letting a single one past would be impossible if we were fighting on the plains, but here I can use the gate to limit the numbers who can attack me. So as long as I can keep fighting, it’ll be easy enough to keep them from getting past! I just need to keep drinking fatigue recovery potions and keep fighting them one-on-one!

If Gustav were here and he heard this, the look on his face would probably say “Are you fucking serious”, and as she calmly considered that mental image, Remedios laughed. Still, the idea was quite ridiculous, and it was no wonder he would often grab his head in frustration.

See how perfect my plan is! Calca-sama said I could delegate command to

someone else, and Caspond-sama seems like an excellent person.

Umu, Remedios nodded.

After that, Remedios thought about the only flaw in her plan to “fight one-on-one ten thousand times”

That was the existence of Jaldabaoth.

Remedios’ plan broke down when it encountered someone stronger than her.

She was retarded for the most part, but she was surprisingly intelligent when it came to warfare.

That was why she understood that it would be very difficult for her to defeat Jaldabaoth. Of course, she could not admit that in front of her subordinates. She was the strongest paladin in the Holy Kingdom, and if she admitted her defeat to him, morale would probably plunge to rock bottom.

That was why they should have brought the Sorcerer King over.

The Sorcerer King, huh...

The fact that they had to entrust one of the undead with the fate of the nation upset her so much that she wanted to throw up. However, they had no other option.

Tch. If only that undead creature had fought in a sneaky way, like using those goats or sheep which killed all those Kingdom troops. That way, no innocents would have to be sacrificed. Don't the undead understand that people with strength have to protect the weak? Still… he's really strong, isn't he?

Taking a city by oneself was an impressive feat. Buser was a famous demihuman -- according to Gustav -- and defeating him was also quite outstanding. However, Jaldabaoth was a different matter altogether. She had her doubts as to whether even a magic caster who could conquer a city without assistance could actually defeat him.

Perhaps she would have learned the truth if she could have crossed blades with him just once, but Gustav had desperately pleaded with her not to. Therefore, she did not know exactly how strong the Sorcerer King was.

Remedios remained dubious of the Sorcerer King's strength.

She had personally experienced Jaldabaoth's might when he had revealed his true nature, but she could not sense anything like that from the Sorcerer King. If he was truly able to crush the Kingdom's army, then he ought to be surrounded in an aura of power that could not be hidden.

Was that because he was a magic caster? However, if he was on Jaldabaoth's level, she ought to be able to sense something from him.

It would be good if he was really as strong as he claimed. Well, we won't lose much if he dies. That undead creature will be a thorn in the Holy Kingdom's side in the future. Ideally, the two of them would kill each other.

Remedios' opinion had not changed even after her subordinates protested it. No, it had only grown more deeply rooted after the Sorcerer King killed the boy who had been taken hostage. As a paladin, she could not tolerate anyone who could calmly commit such inhuman acts.

The people of that country were actually ruled by fear, right?

When she thought about it, she found a lot of points which pointed to that conclusion. Perhaps having him and Jaldabaoth kill each other would be for their good too.

The problem is the people of our nation. Gustav was right when he said that this was a chance for us. We paladins can show our strength and abandon the foolish words of the Sorcerer King… Still, if Jaldabaoth shows up, we have to let him handle it.

Remedios took off her helmet. She wanted to scratch her head.

It was hard to imagine that the citizens of a country run by an amazing individual such as Calca would tolerate one of the undead like that. Just thinking about the matter should have revolted them.

Squire Baraja also -- hm? Could it be that she's been charmed by a spell or something? Yes! He might be using some spell with a wide area of effect that forces people to like him!

Dammit! Remedios thought. She had not considered that possibility.

I should tell Gustav about this. That said, it'll have to wait until we win this

battle!

Remedios looked behind her.

There stood neat ranks of civilians holding spears and shields.

“Brave gentlemen! Regretfully, the Holy Kingdom is currently being trampled by demihumans, but you must accept it! Defeat the demihumans and save the innocent civilians -- your friends and family -- from their suffering! This is the first step towards our goal, which is to drive out these bastards here and take the Holy Kingdom back with our own hands!”

As Remedios shouted imposingly, anxious looks filled the faces of the militiamen.

“The filthy demihumans are attacking this place. Gentlemen, raise your shields and thrust your spears! Become a wall that will not let the enemy past you! There’s no need to be afraid. Other than their first strike, the only demihumans you will have to deal with are the demihumans fleeing from me! All you need to do is hold them for a while so that the paladins and I can take them down!”

That eased their tension a little. While being too relaxed was not a good thing, being too tense was even worse. Remedios mused that all the militiamen she could see were in an ideal frame of mind.

“You lot were trained all day yesterday! All you need to do now is show the fruits of that training. No need to be so tense!” Remedios paused for a moment, and then shouted louder than before.

“First rank! Shields up!”

The first row of the militiamen -- who looked like they were encircling the gate -- braced their shields.

These were greatshields which could completely conceal a human body, and their bottoms were lined with spikes that were the length of a finger.

“Shields! Dig in!”

The shield-wielding civilians slammed the spiked portions down with all their might. Thus, they produced a wall of steel in moments.

Yesterday, these shieldbearers had vigorously practiced three drills. The first was to raise their greatshields into the air and slam them back down, in order to drive the spikes deep into the ground. The second was not to falter, regardless of the pressure they were under.

“Second rank! Shields up!”

While the shields they carried were roughly the same size as those of the first rank, theirs did not have spikes. Those shields would go over the heads of the first and the second ranks, like a lid on top of them. This way, they could defend against attacks which made it past the first rank.

There were also paladins who could cast「Under Divine Flag」spaced evenly through the second rank, to protect them from the fear of being pushed by the

enemy.

“Third rank spearmen, advance! Fourth rank spearmen, advance!”

The third and fourth ranks were composed of longspear users.

Their longspears would protrude from between the shield teams, their butts firmly planted in the ground to stop the enemy’s advance. The third rank and the fourth rank’s spears were slightly different from each other in that the fourth rank’s were slightly longer. Normally they ought to have had several more ranks of spearmen to form a spear wall, but since they were lacking in numbers, their aim was to overlap killing zones to prevent the enemy from breaking through.

It was a perfect formation.

However, it had a flaw.

While this formation did very well against warriors, it was very weak against demihumans with special abilities or magic casters.

It was true that the shield wall could block spells like「Fireball」and greatly minimize the damage done. However, spells like「Lightning」would pierce straight through them, and one could not say the demihumans did not have similar special abilities.

They knew this, but they had taught those drills anyway because there was no other effective formation they could take under these circumstances.

“Very good! Then let’s begin! Open the gate!”

The portcullis began to rise as Remedios shouted. The advancing demihumans were shaken, and their movements slowed down. The defenders were opening the gate of their own accord -- optimists might consider it a surrender, but realists would think of it as a trap.

Remedios laughed.

“You filthy demihumans! I’ll skin you and wipe my ass with your hides!”

After being taunted by a feeble human, the frustrated demihumans broke into a charge.

Remedios turned and ran. She planted both hands on the militiamen’s shields and vaulted over them.

The demihumans continued their charge, and several of them fell down as they approached the gate.

Large quantities of oil had been poured there, and only two outcomes awaited those who fell during the charge. Either they would pull down those behind them, or they would be trampled flat instead.

Unfortunately, the big-framed demihumans like the Ogres did not fall, and they made it into the city. The horse-like demihumans slipped and fell, which slowed them down.

A large demihuman's charge ought to be on par with a collision from a warhorse. However, if they could not sustain it, then all bets were off.

The Ogres continued charging even though their pacing was messed up. They swung their large mauls back and forth, but spears were longer in comparison, and they impaled several Ogres who had failed to properly judge the distance. Unfortunately, the Ogres were not fragile enough to be killed by that.

"Now! Throw them!"

In accordance with Remedios' instructions, firebombs flew over the heads of the militiamen, and the sounds of pottery smashing could be heard near the gate as an inferno sprang up. The demihumans around the gate were surrounded by a great fire.

The demihumans should have predicted something like this, but Remedios was certain that the fires were far beyond what they had expected. That was because both the oil on the ground and the oil on their bodies had ignited at once.

The Ogres facing the shieldbearers began to falter.

It was only to be expected, considering there was a blazing fire behind them.

While they had thicker skin than a human being, that did not mean they could not be burned.

Wails and cries rose from the vicinity of the gate. However, not many of them had lost the capacity to fight despite being enveloped by a fire of that intensity. Perhaps one had to hand it to the great vitality of demihumans.

Those demihumans only had two options. They could advance or retreat.

Black smoke blocked their lines of sight. Thus, they were robbed of all other options. While many demihumans could see in the dark, that ability did not allow them to see through smoke.

Nobody could act calmly while they could not see, were suffering from the smoke and when they were being burned by the flames.

Retreating was very difficult given the circumstances. That was because others were following closely behind them in order to storm the city. In fact, the demihumans outside the gate were stymied by the fire, but they could not know that given that smoke surrounded everything.

Therefore, the demihumans chose to advance.

That was exactly as Remedios had predicted.

The demihumans attempted an assault, banking on their powerful bodies to carry the day. However--

--The shieldbearers' third drill consisted of maintaining their shield wall even when surrounded by billowing black smoke.

“Spearmen! Pull!”

The spears retreated as one--

“Spearmen! Thrust!”

--And the hard shafts thrust out in unison.

The demihumans gave voice to savage howls, thinking only of getting out of the smoke, and it was under these circumstances where defense and evasion were very difficult that they ran into the spear line. However, a commoner’s strength would be hard-pressed to impale a demihuman’s body. This was particularly true of the hand-picked demihumans who were intended to break through the gate in a frontal assault.

However, that was no problem.

Remedios did not think that the first wave of attacks would bring down anything.

As long as the shieldbearers were in place, the spearmen could attack over and over again.

“Pull -- thrust!”

「收——刺！」

As she repeated the order, Remedios jumped over the shields in the reverse of her previous actions and cut down the demihumans in the places where the spears could not reach.

Black smoke filled her eyes and throat, but she did not have the time to worry about that. There were very few demihumans who had made it through the oil and the portcullis, about 50 at the most.

First she would kill them all and weaken the enemy's willingness to fight. Since they were part of the vanguard, they must surely be highly-motivated elite troops. Wiping them out would be more effective than killing mooks.

Remedios' breathing was calm and unhurried as she killed one enemy after the other.

Large demihumans like Ogres could not bring their full abilities to bear in a pitched melee.

The holy sword roamed everywhere without restraint.

Eventually, the shapes of the demihumans vanished from her tearstained vision. However, she could still hear a large force of demihumans on the other side of the smoke. They might have been in the middle of reforming their lines.

As Remedios slowly backed away, the silhouettes of several demihumans came into view.

"Captain! Come back here!"

Her subordinate paladin shouted to her as she cast「Under Divine Flag」.

However, Remedios did not retreat. Her instincts were telling her something.

As the smoke thinned, she could sense three demihumans slowly approaching her, and shortly after that, her hunch was proved right.

One of them was a warrior with the upper body of a beast and the lower body of a carnivore.

One of them was a four-armed demihuman woman.

And the last was a simian demihuman who was festooned in golden accessories.

Remedios had originally planned to kill tens of thousands of demihumans by herself here, and she was very confident of doing so. However, she now sensed that fighting these three demihumans at once was extremely dangerous.

There were only three of them. While she could not make them out due to the smoke, she could tell they were brimming with confidence, given their unhurried pace. Even their fellow demihumans seemed to have handed their task over to those three, unwilling to come any closer.

...They're strong. I don't know if I can beat them even if it's a one-on-one fight… or can I? I've got no chance if it's three-on-one.

Remedios' instincts screamed at her to flee rather than take these three on at the same time. But how should she escape? She had no idea. In contrast, if she beat those demihumans, it would amount to a flawless victory for this theater of combat.

Remedios gripped her holy sword tightly, and spoke without looking back.

“...Paladin Sabicus, Paladin Esteban.”

Both of them replied with a “yes!” and from the sounds they made, she judged that they had come to her side.

“Until I kill one of them, can you two pin the other two down?”

The two of them replied in unison: “Leave it to us!”

Remedios’ instincts told her that she was being unreasonable. They might be able to buy a few minutes for starters. But how about sending more people to take the demihumans on?

No. Remedios shook her head,

Her opponents were a mere three people, who had entered the fray by themselves. Clearly they were confident in their own abilities and wanted to show off their strength. Enemies like those would surely accept a one-on-one challenge. Such was the arrogance of the mighty.

In addition, such arrogant beings typically took pleasure in making the weak suffer. They would take the extra time to torment their victims even if they could have finished them off in a matter of seconds. With that faint hope in mind, she decided on a three-on-three.

“Paladins, if the two who stepped up are defeated, continue fighting them one-on-one. The order goes: Sabicus, Esteban, Franco, Galban and so on.”

They were abandoning their advantage in numbers to buy time. Simply put, she was ordering everyone to kill themselves. However, the paladins did not hesitate for a moment when they received those orders.

This was what it meant to be a paladin.

This was what it meant to embody justice.

This is what it means to sacrifice yourself for others.

This was probably the last time they would be seen alive and unscathed. Even so, Remedios did not take her eyes from the three demihumans for even a moment. She did not want to miss any chances to glean information from them.

I don’t have a clear picture of what’s going on, but the first two demihumans look like skilled fighters. Perhaps that ape-like demihuman is a monk. That four-arms looks like a magic caster. Or is it something else?

There was nothing to fear when dueling demihumans who relied on brute strength alone, but demihumans who had been trained were truly frightening. If they had received warrior training, then they could stack their training and their natural physical abilities to become exceptional individuals who could surpass even veteran warriors of the Holy Kingdom. In truth, the opponent who had given Remedios her hardest fight -- Jaldabaoth aside -- was such an entity.

She recalled the blow that had plunged into her womb. That was why she

paid attention when fighting demihumans and heeded the warnings of her instincts on top of that.

...Spellcasting demihumans are the biggest problem. It'll be bad if they can fly through the air.

While Remedios could use her armor's abilities to fly for short periods of time, she would not have her full range of movement while in flight. Ascending, descending and turning were all very exhausting, and she would not be able to use her usual fighting style. If her opponent could cast

「Fly」, she might never be able to reach them with her attacks. While she possessed martial arts which allowed her to make ranged sword attacks, it would be difficult to win quickly when one took into account the fact that their effectiveness was a great deal lower.

The three demihumans entered through the gate, and then stopped.

"--To think we'd have to join forces for a puny human."

She could not make the three demihumans out clearly through the smoke, but their relaxed tone had reached her.

The hand gripping the holy sword beaded with sweat, and a bitter taste spread over her tongue, something that only happened when danger drew close.

She could keenly feel her opponents' approach.

The beast and the ape were the cream of the crop. While she was not sure about the four-armed one, the fact that she could stand by their side meant that she must have a certain degree of power. In other words, these three demihumans were all on Remedios' level.

"This smoke's getting in the way. What a pain in the ass."

A strong wind blew the remaining smoke away with a whoosh.

The demihumans' forms were revealed. Standing at their head was a gigantic, axe-wielding demihuman.

"Zoastia!" Paladin Esteban exclaimed.

Remedios was somewhat baffled. Zoostia? she thought. Was that the demihuman's name?

"Hmm… well, it makes sense that you'd know of me," the beastman said with an evil grin on his face. "In that case, I'll spare you on account of your learning, so that more people will hear of my strength."

"Heeheehee, Vijar-dono. Jaldabaoth-sama will get angry if you take matters into your own hands like that. At the very least, have him drop his weapon and take him prisoner."

The entity addressing the Zoastia was the ape-like demihuman.

Thoroughly confused, Remedios turned to the people around her, a question

mark floating above her head.

“Zoastia? Vijar? Vijar Zoostia? Zoostia Vijar?”

While she was simply asking the names of the opposition, Vijar did not realize that and so he laughed in delight.

“Kuhahahaha! You’re calling me that because you’ve concluded that I’m the leader of our race? You humans have good taste!”

“She’s just being polite, Vijar-dono,” the four-armed demihuman behind Vijar said in a mocking tone.

“That, that’s right, it’s just a courtesy, Vijar!”

It was only then that Remedios realised she had made a mistake about his species’ name.

Right after that, the demihuman called Vijar twisted his face in displeasure.

“Hm, and I even asked Jaldabaoth-sama for permission to spare anyone who pleased me. Don’t regret it.”

“Who’s going to regret it? You can regret fighting us in the afterlife!”

“Heeheehee, what a spirited girl you are… you are a girl, right? I can’t tell the ages of other species…”

“It doesn’t matter, that ought to be it.”

The demihumans were probably being very serious. This was simply the difference between their species.

”Now then, human girl, I shall introduce ourselves. I am Halisha Ankara. This is Vijar Lajandara, who needs no introduction. And last of all is Nasrene Bert Kyuru-dono.”

“Those names! Aren’t they the White Elder and Iceflame Thunder!?” Paladin Sabicus exclaimed.

“Kukukukuku. Even the humans know our names. The fledgling, on the other hand--”

“--Human. Do I not have a title like that?”

“I’ve never heard of the name Vijar Lajandala. However, there’s an axe-wielding Zoastia like you who’s quite famous. It’s the Demon Claw, Demon Claw, Vaju Sandiknara.”

“That was my old man,” Vijar snorted. “I’m the heir to the title of Demon Claw, Vijar Lajandala. I’ll make sure you think of my name when you hear the words Demon Claw.”

“Heeheehee. We’ll leave the human general to you then, Vijar-dono.”

“So be it. It’s hard enough that you’ve been forced to come right up to your opponents instead of using spells from a distance. Frankly speaking, I was planning to fight them all by myself.”

“Heeheehee. We were ordered to work together, you know?”

“So you’re having trouble because you’re getting on in years?”

“Tch!”

The four-armed demihuman (Nasrene) who had clicked her tongue turned and gave Vijar a scary look. In truth, it felt like they might start killing each other at any moment if they were left unchecked.

“Still, I’m really alright doing this by myself…” Vijar stared at Remedios. “But let’s hear your name before that. While it’s a pain to have to listen to some mook name themselves, that sword of yours looks pretty good.”

“Remedios Custodio.”

Vijar and Halisha’s expressions changed, but in different ways.

Vijar was smiling at the thought of taking a strong foe’s blood, while Halisha was surprised.

Nasrene, on the other hand, remained unmoved.

“So you’re the one, huh? You’re Remedios Custodio? They say you’re the strongest paladin in this country. Excellent. If I kill you, I’ll become famous. I’ll be the Zoastia who defeated the strongest paladin in the Holy Kingdom. The new successor to the title of Demon Claw!”

“Hmph. In that case, that must be the holy sword, right? Say, Vijar-dono, how about letting me face her instead? I’ll have my people sing your praises if you let me take your place.”

Both demihumans reacted immediately to Nasrene’s words.

“Heeheehee. So you're planning to hand it over and then ask Jaldabaoth for a child?”

“Hmph, we’ve decided that I’ll deal with her. There’s no need for you to do anything.”

“--Begging to be bred by a demon? You make me sick.”

Remedios had no choice but to blurt out what she really thought after hearing that exchange, and Nasrene turned an irritated look to Remedios.

“So you don’t even understand what it means to bear the child of the supreme ruler… humans truly are moronic creatures.”

“Even Jaldabaoth-sama would lavish care on the species of his offspring, no? When you think about it, there’s a lot of advantages to being a woman, huh.”

“Oh yes. And if the father’s excellent blood can be passed down, the child that’s born might come close to -- no.” Vijar puffed up her chest. “Might even be able to bear children that surpass their father -- hm? Though you could consider me an exception too.”

These three demihumans did not act like they were feeling threatened despite being on the battlefield.

Remedios began to boil with anger as she watched them chatter idly.

“How dare you demihumans come here and spout nonsense? There’s no use thinking about a future you won’t have? I’ll crush your stupid dreams here. No, not just you, I mean all of you.”

“Heeheehee. Oooh, I’m soooooo scared.”

While Halisha looked like he was flailing his arms and legs around in panic, he was not actually afraid. That was because he was confident of victory even against an opponent like Remedios. It only served to displease Remedios even further.

Remedios shouted an order to the paladins, loud enough for the demihumans to hear.

“Listen up. This is a duel. I’ll fight Vijar. As for you--”

“I’ll take him on,” Sabicus said as he pointed to Halisha. “In that case, I’ll take that one on,” Esteban said as he walked in front of Nasrene.

“...Oya? ...I’m not a warrior so I’m not too sure, but they’re pretty weak, aren’t they?”

“Heeheehee… who knows? Best not to be careless, Nasrene-dono.”

Remedios picked up Vijar snorting at her, and she roared, “Here I come!” He must have sensed that those paladins were weak. No good would come of letting him mention it.

The first strike was key. The militiamen were watching her from behind with bated breath; not only would it wipe away their unease, it would also let her opponent know that he was facing a worthy opponent. For these reasons, she had to make an unreserved blow with all of her might.

Remedios hacked down on Vijar, holding the holy sword in one hand.

In response, Vijar raised his massive battleaxe to intercept her blow.

Both sides collided, and the very air shuddered.

She could hear shouts from the militiamen behind her. There was no time to slowly determine if they were cheers or cries of panic. Her full-power blow had been answered by a counterattack of equal force.

The weapons of both sides were undamaged from that exchange of evenly-matched blows.

If someone had brought a mundane weapon to this intense clash, it would probably have been chipped or bent. In other words, Vijar was also wielding an enchanted weapon.

“Kuh!”

“Nuuu!”

Remedios’ next swing grazed Vijar’s upper body, sending forth a spray of blood. However, the battleaxe struck Remedios’ chest at the same time.

While her enchanted armor turned the battleaxe’s keen blade, the impact knocked the wind out of her, and it became hard to breathe.

In contrast to Remedios -- who had been knocked back by the blow -- Vijar roared and stepped forward, bringing his battleaxe down on her.

She did not have enough oxygen to counterattack. Remedios raised her holy sword high and gracefully deflected the battleaxe’s force. That hair-rising strike missed her by a few millimeters and slammed into the ground. So powerful was the hit that for a moment it felt like she was floating.

Remedios turned to face Vijar -- now defenseless because his battleaxe was buried in the ground -- and lunged in with her holy sword.

“「Strong Strike」!”

“「Fortress」!”

Having judged that he did not have the time to extricate a heavy weapon like his battleaxe, Vijar took one hand off its hilt and used it as a shield,

Vijar's right arm spurted fresh blood.

However, the Holy Sword did not reach Vijar's face. There were two reasons for that.

The first was because he had used a defensive martial art. The other was because Remedios' arm was numbed and could not exert her full force.

In that case, she would simply force the holy sword that had already penetrated deeper in -- and then the intense pain racing up from Remedios's leg froze her briefly in place.

The source of the pain was Vijar's lower body; the forelimbs of his bestial body had swept across Remedios's legs. Her greaves protected her from most of his razor-sharp claws, but one of them had still managed to slice her leg apart.

At that moment, the battleaxe was pulled free and raised up.

Remedios took a step towards Vijar to keep the battleaxe from moving. Just moving her leg filled her with agony.

"「Strong Strike」!"

“「Power Claw」!”

As the holy sword stabbed in, Vijar deftly deflected it with his battleaxe.

In response, Remedios took control of the holy sword as it bounced away and guided it into a slash over a strengthened animal forelimb.

If Vijar backed off, Remedios would advance to close the distance between them.

They went back and forth several times, both sides using martial arts.

While neither side had sustained any mortal wounds, each round they fought send blood splashing all around.

Full of confidence, Remedios pressed against her opponent.

If this keeps up, I’ll win!

Delight boiled up in her heart.

If she could defeat these three powerful demihumans, she could protect the people here. That way, they would regain their trust in the Holy Kingdom.

There’s no need for that undead being to show up!

Simply put, the difference between warriors and paladins was that warriors

were offensive frontliners while paladins were defensive frontliners.

While it was hard to express in figures, one could say that a warrior's attack rating was 11 and his defense was 9, while a paladin's attack was 8 and his defense was 11. Needless to say, paladins could cast spells, but warriors could learn all sorts of martial arts, so it was impossible to make a simple comparison. Still, this was the easiest way to explain the situation to someone of Retardios' intelligence.

If the question was who would be better against a magic caster, the answer would be a paladin. Thanks to the protection of the gods, they boasted superior magic resistance to warriors. Therefore, if Nasrene had been a magic caster on the same level as Remedios, she would not have been much of a threat.

Next was Halisha, who was very likely to be a monk-type given his weapons and movements. Monks had the advantage against magic casters or thieves, but the reverse was true against paladins. Therefore, that monkey was hardly a frightening foe.

Therefore--

If I can beat Vijar, chances are high that I can slaughter all three of them.

Between "fighting Vijar after being worn down by previous fighting" and "fighting Vijar while unhurt", the latter option promised better odds for her. Remedios had challenged Vijar based on that decision. There should not have been anything wrong with that decision. However, she had miscalculated--

"My my. Dead already?"

“Heeheehee. Same here.”

--Because the paladins fighting the other two were far too weak.

“What!?”

Had she overestimated those two paladins, or underestimated the strength of those two demihumans? Or was it both?

“You’re insulting me by taking your eyes off me!”

Vijar swung furiously at Remedios.

“Guwaaargh!”

While she had barely managed to stop that strike, she had still been forced a short distance away. The tide of battle had turned in an instant.

“Remedios, was it… You do know that I am the great Vijar, a being of great power whose name will resound throughout the world? If you don’t put all of your body and soul into it, you’ll die in seconds, you know?”

Remedios bit her lip as she heard the sounds of the others fighting.

“Heeheehee. I wonder if this paladin is strong enough?”

“...He’s no different from the previous one… well, I can’t really tell since I’m not a warrior.”

“I am Paladin Franco.”

“And I am Paladin Galban. I will be your opponent.”

Several seconds after they had spoken, she once again heard the sound of armored men collapsing.

Paladin Franco was a good man. While he was not a very strong paladin, he placed a lot of emphasis on getting along with others and he was well-liked as a result. In truth, he had been assigned here because Gustav trusted him. Remedios knew his character, and so she had given him the task of assigning the militiamen here.

She had heard that Paladin Galban was a newlywed. However, his wife was currently locked up somewhere. He had extinguished his desire to save her and had come to assist Remedios instead, in order to help more people.

These two people -- who were too young to die -- had been killed.

“Distracted again!”

Vijar roared, and dealt her a blow that was even more ferocious than the previous one. Remedios flung herself towards Vijar, taking the blow on her sword arm, and then she slid her blade -- but Vijar nimbly evaded it.

“Hm. What’s this, some kind of bluff? Or did your body remember that movement because of all your training?”

Vijar growled. He was not wary of a worthy foe, but delighted.

“Hey, fledgling. We’re done here, but you’ve been at it a long time. How about it, need help?”

“You must be kidding. My legend will be tainted if I need your help to kill her. Many people will speak of this if I beat her in a one-on-one.”

“Vijar-dono’s words are correct. How about this, Nasrene-dono. We’ll destroy the humans’ shields, and then--”

“--As if I’d let you!”

While she was still confronting Vijar, Remedios took her eyes off him and turned to look at the defenseless pair. However--

“You bitch! I told you already, I’m your opponent!”

Vijar did not allow her to do so. Her defense was full of holes, but he did not swing at her with his battleaxe, instead launching a kick. Remedios took the blow and was sent flying into the shield wall with tremendous force.

She gasped for a moment from the shock of the impact.

“Aiiieeee!”

The militiamen cried out in fear.

“Focus, human! Fight me seriously!”

Vijar’s shout was followed by the sound of his footsteps. If he swung his long-handled battleaxe, he would smash the shield-wielding civilians far away, creating a gap big enough that returning to formation would be impossible.

Even though Remedios had lost her balance, she still took a step forward, lunging at Vijar who was in front of her.

If possible, she would have liked to finish off Vijar with her own strength, That was because of the power that Remedios had hidden to deal with the other two.

It was a powerful move that the holy sword Safalrisia possessed, which could only be used once a day.

It was a strengthened version of a paladin’s holy strike.

It was the most powerful blow that a paladin wielding this sword could unleash.

Her instincts told her that it would be best not to do so. However, if she did not immediately defeat Vijar, the other two demihumans would kill more people.

I-- want to protect Calca-sama's wish--!

"!!"

She cried out without words, ignored her instincts screaming at her, and mentally sent a command to the holy sword. At the same time, she infused her holy strike into the blade and made her move.

The holy sword glowed with divine radiance, and light extended out to twice the length of the actual blade.

This light was apparently more dazzling the more evil a being was. In this state, avoiding or blocking this blow would be more difficult. The word "apparently" because it did not seem that bright to Remedios' eyes.

Remedios raised her holy sword to the sky, and brought it down.

Since Remedios had lost her bearings, predicting the path of the attack seemed very easy, and so Vijar casually prepared to take the blow on his axe and then force her back. However--

"!!"

Following another wordless cry, Remedios continued pressing down with her holy sword where the battleaxe had caught it, and continued forcing it down.

She did not intend to force her sword to strike its target through brute force.

The reason for this was because the radiance on the sword followed the path of the blade down, passing through the battleaxe and entering Vijar's body.

This was the ultimate technique of the holy sword Safalrisia.

It was a holy wave that ignored defenses and armor.

The sturdiest armor, scales and hides meant nothing to it. Since it could even pass through magic weapons, it could not be stopped by weapons or shields, which made it an unavoidable finishing move.

Of course, if one did not choose to clash with the blow and was nimble enough to avoid it, they would not be hit by the wave of light. However, there was no way to avoid that blow made with all of Remedios' speed while one was dazzled by the light.

As the wave of light blew past like the wind, the holy radiance on the blade vanished as well.

However -- Remedios' eyes went wide.

She had clearly hit her target, but Vijar did not look like he had been badly hurt.

"...Hm, what's this? What a pretty move… but it hardly hurts at all. Is it just for looks? Though I have to say, it did startle me…"

Remedios was shocked.

This guy -- he’s not evil-aligned!

This move was more effective the more evil one’s foe was. In contrast, it did little damage to non-evil targets. It did practically nothing to good-aligned people. In other words, the fact that it had hurt Vijar meant that he was not good, but it meant he was certainly not evil.

He made the people suffer! He invaded our country! How can someone like that not be evil!?

“Heeheehee. Well, that was quite a spectacular lightshow, Vijar-dono. Are you really unhurt?”

Halisha narrowed his eyes as he questioned Vijar.

“It was so bright… it’s still scorched onto my eyes.”

Nasrene grumbled from the side.

She had made a mistake -- she should not have used that move on Vijar after all.

Vijar limbered up his limbs and made sure his body was fine before shrugging. While he seemed defenseless while doing this, Remedios could not find any weaknesses in his defense.

“...A dazzling light? Well, I’m not too sure what that’s all about, but it’s nothing much, right?”

“...Vijar, I’m kind of surprised. To think you were unharmed by that attack… I might have underestimated you.”

“Hah! You get it at last! Hahaha! Alright, human. You did well in standing up to me. If you surrender, I’ll kill you painlessly. How about that?”

“Don’t make those unfunny jokes! We haven’t settled this yet!”

Remedios raised her sword and shouted at the three demihumans.

Remedios could still fight, like she had said. She placed a hand over her wounds and used her healing abilities. Her pain was carried away by the sensation of warmth.

A lot of paladin techniques won’t work on him since he’s not evil… but since the two of them were dazzled by it, I’ll save them for those two instead.

All she had to do was fight Vijar as a pure warrior.

“Heeheehee. Well then, we’ll leave her to you, Vijar-dono. We’ll be hunting the humans in the rear.”

“What? You scumbags!”

All the paladins she had called up were already dead. The militiamen could not possibly stop them.

“As if I’d let you have your way!”

Remedios backed off and repositioned so she could face the three demihumans at once.

“It seems you’re ready to take the three of us on at once, but Vijar said he wanted to take care of this.”

“Heeheehee. Our aim is to wipe out the humans in the city as needed, not to serve as your opponents. Nasrene-dono, may I count on you to wipe out that rabble in the back with your power?”

“Ah yes…”

There were masses of magical power in three of Nasrene’s four hands. One was ice, one was fire, and one was electricity.

“Dammit!”

Remedios ran toward the female demihuman--

“I told you just now! I’m your opponent!”

--And blocked the battleaxe swung at her with a roar, but she was flung far

away.

At this moment, Remedios realised that she could not deal with Nasrene while fighting Vijar at the same time. While she could have just jumped right to Nasrene's side, defending against Nasrene's attacks would leave her open to Vijar.

What do you mean it's impossible… I won't accept this! Not being able to do anything is just an excuse!

The moans of the Militiamen played on Remedios' emotions.

These people had not fled in the face of terror because they believed in her. She could not show them a disgraceful side of herself.

She would not abandon Calca's ideals -- to make a country where nobody would cry.

"Militiamen! Fall back!"

As she gave the command, Remedios prepared herself.

I won't die from taking a single hit. I'll rush that female demihuman while activating「Fortress」!

Vijar laughed as he watched Remedios break into a run. It would seem he had misunderstood something.

“Ho. It seems you’ve made up your mind. That’s the way! Fight me with all you have! Give me a battle worthy of a legend! 「Showdown Declaration」!”

“--Huh?”

Vijar roared, and there was a special power in it. Remedios legs, which were supposed to carry her towards Nasrene, charged towards Visha like she had lost control of them. Nor was it just her legs -- her sword, her mind, her vision, she could not pull any of them from Vijar.

“「Fireball」.”

A third-tier spell flew past Remedios’ body and at the militiamen. A spell that Remedios could endure but would be fatal to the militiamen--

“--「Wall of Skeleton」!”

The fireball collided with the grotesque-looking wall of bones that had sprung up in front of the militiamen and vanished.

Someone exclaimed in surprise.

Initially, it was because they had no idea what had just happened. However, it slowly changed. That was because they saw something descend like it was unaffected by gravity and land on top of the frightening wall of skeletons.

That person possessed none of the intense emotions of the battlefield, and spoke with a gentle tone that seemed completely out of place with his

surroundings.

“While this is a common enough occurrence on the battlefield, a three-on-one battle is a little hard to watch. You don’t mind if I join in, do you?”

The owner of that voice was undead.

Everyone in this city recognized him. He was the person who had originally refused to fight in order to recover his mana.

He was the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown.

Ooooooh! An earthshaking cheer came from the other side of the wall.

Remedios tightly clenched her sword hand.

“What, what’s that, who is that?”

“...By the looks of it, I think it’s an Elder Lich. So there were kinds without skin. Still… can a mere Elder Lich possibly stop my spells? Is it because of his cape? It does look quite impressive. Or no, is it because its summoner possesses great power?”

Remedios did not comprehend the demihumans’ words at all. She heard the sounds, but she did not understand what they were saying. That was because all her energy was focused on quelling the intense hatred welling up within her. She was not even aware that she was standing defenseless in front of Vijar

--Reeeeeeeeeeeeee!!! Why did he show up!? Why are they cheering for him!? Why! Why!! Why!!! For this filthy undead being!!!!?

A corner of Remedios' mind was calm enough to note that it was a natural reaction to help someone in difficulty. However, it was overruled by her inability to forgive the civilians for cheering on the undead. They could clearly see the corpses of the paladins who had sacrificed themselves as shields to protect the people.

You're not cheering for the people who fought as your shields, but for someone who showed up late!!!!!

She was so angry that she wanted to rip her helmet off and scratch her head while rolling around on the ground.

Remedios struggled to curb the anger in her heart, and she addressed the undead being on the wall.

"--Why did you come here?"

The Sorcerer King';s movements stopped, as though he had been frozen in place. The red flames in his empty eye sockets turned to Remedios.

"...Why? ...I came? ...To help you, no?"

"...I see."

Why had he not come earlier? Was he waiting until the paladins had died?

Did he plan to make a stylish entrance in front of the people.

She wanted to shout that at him, but--

“Then I’ll leave it to you.” She could not bring herself to ask anything of him, and she did not want to say “get rid of the wall.”

“Hm?”

“I said I’ll leave it to you!” she unconsciously shouted, Remedios strove to quell her rising emotions. “--And tear down that wall. You can’t?”

“...Certainly not.”

In an instant, the wall beneath the Sorcerer King’s feet vanished. The Sorcerer King did not fall, probably because he was using a 「Fly」spell.

Remedios turned her back on Visha. She did not care if he killed her from behind. That way she could laugh at the Sorcerer King for not protecting her.

Having abandoned herself to despair, Remedios trudged back in front of the militiamen. In a sense, it was a little regretful that the demihumans did not attack her from behind.

There was a hint of fear in the militiamen’s eyes. Was the look on her face so horrible?

“--We’ll let the Sorcerer King handle this place! Let’s go help where they need us more!”

After hearing Remedios’ orders, the militiamen looked at each other, and they seemed confused.

“Are you disobeying orders!?”

After Remedios glared at him, one of the militiamen quietly asked:

“Ah, n-no. But… the Sorcerer King, by himself…”

“The Sorcerer King is strong! Isn’t that so!? In that case, something like that won’t be a problem for him! Let’s go!”

Remedios led the militiamen to another battlefield. They repeatedly looked back at him as they left.

Ainz looked at the empty space where they had been and muttered to himself.

“Eh? ...That bitch, she actually dumped it all on me.”

This ridiculous state of events made Ainz reveal his true nature

Normally, wouldn’t we have a scene like “oh, let’s fight together~” or something? Or “thanks for coming, we’ll leave them all to you”? At the very least she could have been polite about it, we could have gone back and forth several times about “will you be alright here?” and so on… And not even a single word of gratitude after being saved? What the hell, man?

Frustration built in his heart. However, it did not reach the level of true anger, so it was not suppressed. It was like a tiny flame of indignation simmering inside him.

It was as though how someone had messed up and forced him to work overtime, and the person in question had said that they had something on and just up and left.

No--

I would've been more angry. Like say, if I was going home to play YGGDRASIL… and the guild had plans already, and being late would cause problems for everyone. It happened before, and while everyone forgave me back then...

Thus fuelled, the miniscule flames blazed up into an inferno, and then they were forcibly extinguished.

"Hm… While my anger's been suppressed, I'm still unhappy. That's the first time I've been treated so rudely."

While she had shouted "shut up" at him before, the situation had been different back then. In the first place, they had agreed that Ainz could sit this battle out, but Ainz had still rushed over as reinforcements. Surely anyone who had an inkling of common sense would have taken a different tone when addressing him.

Everyone Ainz had met until now had been at least minimally polite.

That was why Ainz found it strange.

After cooling his head and searching through his memories, Suzuki Satoru recalled having met people like Remedios several times before.

Still, none of it comforted him.

Ainz turned his still-irate gaze on the three demihumans.

Granted, it was not entirely their fault either.

Ainz understood that he was simply taking it out on them.

What should have happened was that Remedios' relationship meter with Ainz should have maxed out when the latter saved her from danger, she should have apologized for treating Ainz this way all this time, and then worked hard for Ainz in all ways in the future. That was why Ainz had been observing Remedios from the air with 「Perfect Unknowable」active all this time, and then stepped in to help her when she was in trouble.

But in the end, things had turned out like this.

He could not understand how they had ended up this way.

If the department's quota was not met and it was close to the end of the month and someone stepped up to make up for the shortfall, surely everyone would be grateful to that person, right? Especially if that person had finished his own work long ago and had come back from his leave to help them.

Ainz had been observing the battlefield from above, and he had a firm grasp of the big picture. There were many more dangerous places than this. He was even aware that the girl who had glared at him all this time was in danger.

Even so, he had chosen to come to this place because he wanted to sell a favor to the highest ranking person he could -- better to rule in hell than serve in heaven and all that -- and he had judged that the captain of the Holy Kingdom's paladin corps was the highest-ranking person here.

However--

"I really am annoyed."

As he grumbled without thinking, Ainz heard a piercing laugh.

“Heeheehee. Looks like you’ve been left here. Heeheehee, how sad, how sad.”

“An Elder Lich. In other words, an individual that’s powerful as a magic caster. Is there a need to be careful? I haven’t seen that wall-making spell before, but it seems to be of a fairly high tier.”

“Hmph. So it’s still a magic caster, then? Don’t really feel like fighting it. In the end, you need to beat a warrior if you want people to sing tales about you.”

The three demihumans seemed to have recovered from the bizarre situation enough to banter with each other. Ainz turned to look at them, and his eyes focused on the ape-like demihuman among them who seemed to have laughed just now.

“Does it matter? First we kill him, then--”

“--Shut up.”

Ainz interrupted their conversation and cast a silent eighth-tier spell,「Death」.

The ape-like demihuman’s smile was frozen on his face as he slowly collapsed.

“...What? What did you--”

“--I told you to shut up, didn’t I?”

Ainz once again cast a silent「Death」spell.

The four-legged demihuman collapsed in the same way as just now.

“Eh? Ehhh? What happened? What’s going on?”

The female demihuman who remained still did not understand what was going on, but it would seem she had already understood who had done it.

“Was, was it you? You killed those two in an instant…?”

Terror was deeply etched on her face. Her body was shaking hard.

“Yes, yes,” Ainz carelessly cast a silent「Death」on the female demihuman as well. “--Hmmm?”

She did not die. Ainz’s「Death」had been resisted.

In the moment he realized this, Ainz’s mind immediately switched into gears, entering a mental state that could be called a combat mode.

Was it a defensive racial characteristic? A protective spell she had cast on herself? Had she resisted it normally? Had a magic item protected her? Or was it something else?

While one could not completely rule out the possibility that it might have been a coincidence, surely she could not have resisted it under her own power. Ainz had observed the three of them as they fought. While he did not think that he had the full measure of their abilities, Ainz was certain that they could not resist the power of his magic in a direct contest.

As Ainz mulled over the reasons for this, he felt that it would be best to stay on his guard and let his opponent make a move.

Perhaps he might discover something that could only be found here. He would like to see the trump card wielded by someone who could resist Ainz's usual attack methods.

"Hmm… Well, it doesn't matter what she did. What a waste of time. If I'd known, I would have left that woman alone and gone to help elsewhere. I was thinking that if I fought together with that woman, we could have put on a show of hard-fought triumph, so we would have spent a bit more time on the back and forth…"

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A chatty undead being stood before her.

What kind of undead creature is this? ...The undead couldn't possibly ally themselves with humans. Is it being controlled by a necromancer? Still, that power...

While she had no idea what he had done, he had instantly killed two warriors who were on par with her. Could such a powerful undead being even be controlled?

If his finger pointed to her, would she be the one to perish next?

The only people she knew who could do this besides the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth would be the archdemons who were his confidants.

--That's impossible! Anyone who could control an undead creature who was on par with those mighty beings must be on the level of a god! How could such a necromancer exist?

If this human nation such a necromancer, how could the Demihuman Alliance have pressed their invasion so far?

Should I run? Should I take the chance to flee while he's acting all relaxed? Or can I even escape?

She did not possess any spells which were handy for escape. After all, she had never been in such danger before and had not felt the importance of learning such spells.

In that case, the only way out is through!

“Ahhhhhhhhh!”

She used her battlecry to rouse her spirit, and began to cast spells with her trembling lips.

There was a fourth-tier arcane spell called 「Silver Lance」. It was a physical-type spell, but since it possessed silver properties, it was a tremendously damaging spell against enemies who were weak against silver. In addition, it also had a special effect known as “piercing”, which made it do more damage to unarmored opponents. However, it also had the drawback that its damage could be reduced by armor.

Her trump card was altering this powerful spell to produce new, unique spells.

There was the 「Burn Lance」, which inflicted fire-element damage.

There was the 「Freeze Lance」, which inflicted cold-element damage.

There was the 「Shock Lance」, which inflicted lightning-element damage.

These three spells all did elemental damage, so armor could not reduce their potency, and they still retained the deadly “piercing” ability.

Of course, in keeping with their deadliness, those spells consumed far more mana than fourth-tier spells.

She activated three of these potent -- to her -- spells at once.

She was simultaneously casting three spells, each one of which used a significant amount of mana. In addition, simultaneously casting spells was very draining in itself, and as the shock of using huge quantities of mana hit her, she felt light and floaty, as though she were about to pass out.

“Diiiiiieeeee!”

The three lances flew toward the undead being -- and then vanished without a trace.

“--Hah?”

She could not understand what had happened before her eyes. She could understand if it had taken damage, or shrugged it off. But this -- this was like nothing had happened at all.

The lances had simply vanished.

“Eh? Eh? What? What what?”

“...I gave you all that time and this is the best you can do? Is this the ace up your sleeve? Hm. I guess I didn’t need to let you make the first move out of caution. Now then, there’s not much time left, so hurry up and die. 「Maximize Magic Reality Slash」.”

Part 5

The world was darkness

She did not even know who she was

She wanted to open her eyes -- but she did not know what eyes were

Darkness, the world, she did not know what any of them were

She did not know why she was thinking of these things

She knew nothing

She was vanishing

She did not know what “vanishing” meant

But she was vanishing

However, suddenly, she felt like she was being pulled by something

From above, from below, from the left, from the right, somewhere--

A world that had reached its completion was pulling her

A pitiful being who had been completed by the works of their friends

Someone who had sealed their thoughts away because they felt nothing was more important than that

And then -- an explosion of white light dyed the world

There was a tremendous sense of loss --

A sense of separation from a whole--

Neia Baraja blinked several times, seeking to return her vacant field of vision to normal.

She sensed that something had happened, but she could not remember anything about it. However, she ought to have been fighting demihumans. What on earth had happened?

“...That was a dangerous place.”

As she heard that calm voice, Neia narrowed her eyes and looked up with an abnormally keen gaze.

It looked dark.

It was not the darkness a child would fear, but the darkness which granted peace to those who were tired.

It was the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown.

“Yhour… Mhajeshty…”

Neia reflexively reached up to him, like a worried child reaching for her parents--

“Neia Baraja. Do not force yourself to move. Let me take care of this place and rest.”

Behind him, she could see the demihumans frantically attacking the Sorcerer King, stabbing him with swords, hacking at him, punching him.

However, the Sorcerer King completely ignored them. He spoke to her as though nothing was happening.

The memory of Buser came to Neia’s mind.

The Sorcerer King reached into the sleeve of his robe and after a brief delay, he withdrew a poisonous-looking potion. Normally, potions were blue.

Neia did not question the Sorcerer King even as he poured that poisonous-looking potion on her. What the Sorcerer King did must surely be correct.

Reality turned out as she had imagined it. The purple potion that he poured on Neia’s body healed all her wounds instantly. It would seem the Sorcerous Kingdom’s potions were of a different color.

“While a full recovery is a long way off, you should recover your energy before that -- what a pain. Tch. The militiamen are all dead… looks like there’s a few left over there. In that case…”

The Sorcerer King turned to face the demihumans as they attacked him from behind over and over again.

There was fighting all over the city at this very moment, and someone was dying with every second that passed. However, in that moment Neia completely forgot about that, because her eyes were stolen by the glorious back of the Sorcerer King who had risen to protect her.

Her unease and worries about the demihuman army were completely gone.

That was -- what Neia had longed for.

So it was here all along. I see...

Neia was certain that she had found the perfect answer to the doubts that she had been holding on to all this time.

The Sorcerer King casually cast his spells.

A dazzling stroke of electricity raced along the top of the city wall. It was apparently a spell called「Chain Dragon Lightning」.

The demihumans on the wall were swept away in one go, so easily that it was hard to imagine there had been a life-and-death struggle here earlier.

“Did… yhou… dhefeat… them… all?”

“No, there were some people still fighting some distance away, so I was trying not to catch them in it. However -- 「Napalm」ah, that’s all of them. Next we have to deal with the idiots climbing up.「Widen Magic Wall of Skeleton」.”

A wall of bones suddenly sprang up on the outside of the city wall, where the demihuman forces were. While she could not see the other side because her vision was blocked, she could hear the demihumans on the ladders wailing, followed by the sound of something falling and hitting the ground hard.

“Now to take care of their forces which are already in formation… I sent some undead over there before this, they’ll take care of it in short order.”

As he spoke, he took out another potion. It was completely different from the one just now, being stored in a beautiful, slender phial. While she had no idea what the potion inside it could do, it looked like it must be a very valuable item.

“I, ahm fhine, Yhour Mhajeshty…”

“...Enough of that. I’m sorry I was late in saving you.”

The Sorcerer King shielded the upper halves of his eye sockets like he was being dazzled as he poured out the contents of the bottle. The sense of weakness she had been feeling since just now melted away. However, her body still felt heavy. She felt like something had been scraped away from herself, but matching it -- no, exceeding it -- was a warmth in the core of her body.

She could get up like this. While her body still hurt so much that she was in tears, she could not remain in such a disgraceful posture in front of the person who had come to save her.

“Stop -- Miss Baraja. There’s no need to force yourself to stand.”

While she wanted to get up, Neia obediently lay back down as her shoulders were pushed down.

“Yes, like that… I’ll get someone to carry you. --You lot, over here!”

The Sorcerer King waved to what seemed to be militiamen.

It was at this point that Neia realized that for the sake of expressing her gratitude, she had not yet asked a question which had to be asked.

“Your Majesty, will you be alright? You came to help us and used the mana you should have been saving to fight Jaldabaoth.”

“It’s fine. It couldn’t be helped, considering that it was for the sake of saving you.”

“Your Majesty…” A weighty stone seemed to have fallen from her chest. “I understand.”

“Hm? What is it?”

The Sorcerer King waited for Neia's reply.

"I understand what justice is."

"--Ah, so you've found the justice that belongs to you? That's wonderful. ...Protecting the weak, or something?"

His voice was full of tenderness, and so Neia replied with confidence.

"Your Highness is justice."

For a moment, the Sorcerer King froze.

"....Hm???"

"I understand now! Your Highness is justice!"

"...Ah, is that so. You must be tired. Don't you think it would be better to rest? You'll think of strange things when you're tired. Surely you won't want to roll around on the bed and make weird noises after you calm down, right?"

"I'm a little tired, but more importantly, my heart has cleared up. I am absolutely certain that Your Highness is justice!"

"No, nono, I said so back then, but I'm not justice. Look, what they call justice ought to be a concept like protecting the weak is common sense, or something, That kind of… uh, abstract concept. Right? I mean, normally speaking."

“No. Justice without power is meaningless, but power like what Jaldabaoth possesses is not justice either. Therefore, being strong, and using that strength to aid others is truly justice; in other words, Your Majesty is the incarnation of justice!”

As Neia’s eyes went wide while she spoke, the Sorcerer King suddenly raised his hand, and then placed it over Neia’s eyes like he was coaxing her to sleep. The cold sensation of his fingerbones made Neia’s cheeks relax into a smile.

“...Ah. If you shout too loud, won’t it make your wounds hurt? After this, we can slowly continue what you were talking about just now.”

“Yes! Your Majesty!”

She heard the sound of several footsteps, and by shifting her gaze, she saw the forms of paladins and militiamen approaching her.

“Your Highness! Thank you very much for coming here to help us!”

“Don’t mention it.”

As he answered, the Sorcerer King slowly rose to his feet. Neia felt lonely as he stood up and wanted to reach for the Sorcerer King’s robe, but then she realised that doing so would be terribly shameful and so she curbed herself.

“--No, actually, maybe you should. Therefore, I hope you will take Squire Baraja to a safe place in order to show your gratitude. While you can’t see it

from here, I've already sent the undead I made into the demihuman encampment, so it should be alright for you to stand down for a while."

"Your Majesty--"

"--Neia Baraja. And also, the people of this country. Let me handle the rest. I promise you that I will do my best to save the people of this city."

The Sorcerer King floated lightly into the air.

"Also, there's one more thing. Can you help me transport the bodies of those three demihumans over there? They were strong foes, so I want to study them carefully."

The three corpses to which the Sorcerer King pointed looked like they had once been very imposing demihumans.

"Move them with their wargear. Don't worry about being rough with them, but do not misplace their equipment. I'll leave that to you."

As he watched the Sorcerer King fly into the air, a paladin turned to Neia.

"Squire Neia Baraja, while we would like to carry you… the lack of materials for a stretcher makes things difficult, so can you stand?"

"Yes, somehow."

Neia slowly got to her feet. Her legs were trembling, and they ached as soon as they took her weight. Neia grabbed onto the shoulder of a militiaman and leaned on him.

Looking down from the city wall, the defensive unit that was supposed to be near the west gate was gone, and there were no bodies. The sound of clashing blades on the wind seemed to be coming from far away, so taking the shortest route down from the side tower ought to be alright.

Neia sought the form of the Sorcerer King who had disappeared into the sky, and as she thought that it was a shame that she could not see him, Neia entered the side tower.

As he greeted the demihumans invading the city with attack spells from the air, Ainz thought about the sequence of events which had transpired and wrinkled his nonexistent brows.

--That was a huge mistake. The order was all wrong. I should have prioritized Neia Baraja over that annoying woman.

Neia had died because he had helped Remedios and thus been delayed in going to Neia's side. He had to use a high-level wand to resurrect Neia, because he was not sure how high-level Neia was, and he was afraid of her turning to ash like the Lizardman from back then.

In truth, he had no idea whether the price of resurrecting Neia was justified by the benefits she could bring to Ainz and Nazarick. That said, since the plan to help Remedios and indebt her to him had been a complete failure, he ought to at least try again with Neia, which was why he had chosen to resurrect her. However--

...Would it have been alright to use a Wand of Resurrection -- a seventh-tier spell -- as well? ...It seems I was being too generous. Also, it'll take an hour before I can swap out this ring.

Ainz was looking at one of his eight rings, the one on his right thumb.

It was the Ring of Wand Mastery.

Said ring was an ultra-rare artifact dropped by a boss.

Normally, only magic casters of the appropriate tradition would be able to use the spells stored within a wand. For instance, only a divine caster could use a wand imbued with the first-tier divine spell「Light Healing」. Staves -- which were more expensive -- could be used by magic casters of other traditions.

That said, a patch had updated certain wands so they could be used by all players. Unfortunately, the wand imbued with the ninth-tier spell「True Resurrection」that he had used to resurrect Neia was not one of them, and Ainz would not be able to use it under normal circumstances.

However, he could use it as long as he had this ring.

Yet every time the ring was used, it only applied to one wand at a time, and he would have to wait an hour before he could change it out. It also carried the drawback of requiring mana to use, but it was still a very valuable item regardless.

Due to its high rarity, very few people in the guild “Ainz Ooal Gown” possessed it, and the one which Ainz had was left to him by Amanomanohitotsu when he had quit the game.

Eh, from here it looks like there’s nowhere else I’ll need to use that wand, so I shouldn’t mind it too much. Speaking of which, I just realised that when I cover her eyes, it feels like she’s paying her respects to me normally. Given what she said… does that mean I’ve gained her trust? Umu. I wonder what happened?

Ainz recalled Neia’s reaction.

Her gratitude sounded sincere… but at the same time it felt like she was glaring at me. Is it because her face is scary? How about recommending she wear sunglasses or something?

Ainz might have thought that, but of course he could not actually say it. In the carriage, she had mentioned being conscious of how scary her eyes had looked.

If one encountered a lady with body odour, how would they react when you said, “you stink” and gave them a bottle of perfume?

It feels like all the respect I’ve cultivated would vanish and she’d only resent me...

In addition, Ainz -- Suzuki Satoru -- was not a brave man who could say such things.

Ainz spotted a cluster of demihumans and discharged an area-effect spell at the ground, slaughtering them all. The militiamen who had been facing them

waved their arms to him. Ainz raised his arm as well by way of response. Originally, he had intended to just raise his hand, but there was a distance between them, so he put his arm up high in order for them to see him.

That's right~ It's the merciful Sorcerer King~ Be grateful to me~ speaking of which, does resurrection magic make people go mad or act weirdly? Compared to that, it would be better if she was just being purely emotional...

AInz thought about Neia.

It felt strange no matter how he thought about it. She had been perfectly normal when he had parted ways with her, but she had ended up like that after being brought back to life.

Is she mad? Should I heal her with magic? It's a little worrying if it's a side effect of resurrection. I don't want to end up warping her personality as time passes.

There had been a strange force in Neia's murderous eyes, an insane, ferocious gleam that frightened him.

It's so bad that she mistook me for justice, huh. Some rest ought to help with that… oh.

Ainz turned his gaze to the demihuman camp.

Half of it had already been destroyed, and Soul Eaters were walking lazily among the fleeing demihumans. Even that much was enough to send the demihumans collapsing in droves from their instant death auras. The Soul

Eaters who consumed their souls became stronger in turn.

When Soul Eaters appeared in YGGDRASIL, they were almost always on-level encounters, so the chances of a player being downed by an instant death effect would only be one in a hundred or less. That was why this special ability of Soul Eaters rarely got the chance to see use.

However, it was different this time. This was the perfect opportunity to show it off.

“Souls, huh… oh no. I ought to experiment with this.”

Ainz suddenly landed. Then he used his ability to create mid-tier undead to craft a Soul Eater.

Go.

After he issued a mental command, the Soul Eater immediately began to move. At the same time, he sent an order to the Soul Eaters who were obliterating the demihumans outside.

It went: leave some prey for the newly-made Soul Eater.

Undead created with corpses did not vanish with the passage of time. But why did they not vanish?

If it’s not because they’re using the corpse as a medium, but the soul, does it mean that Soul Eaters which have eaten souls won’t vanish? ... Well, even if I

found the answer I wouldn’t know where to apply it. Still, knowing is better than not knowing.

He ascended into the sky once more, and verified that the city was safe. Most of the demihumans should have been wiped out by now, but he ought to be careful, just in case.

Muu, that annoying woman is there. Ignore her, ignore her.

Ainz looked away from Remedios and flew elsewhere.

As Ainz flew, he could hear cheers coming from below him, and Ainz responded with a wave of the hand. After verifying that there were no more demihumans -- that the fighting had ended, Ainz began making his way to the war room. He would need a lot of time to return to Nazarick and take care of all sorts of annoying meetings.

“I need to handle this properly…”

A crushing surge of uneasiness flooded into him, and then his emotion suppression calmed him down. The only thing that remained was a chilly sensation in his heart.

I need to use Message to tell Demiurge to meet me in Nazarick.

***

Once Ainz made his move, victory was all too easy. After wiping out the demihumans attacking the city and finishing a couple of other things, Ainz returned to his own room.

One of those things was to show his face at Caspond's chambers and ask him for some minor favors in the future. The long and short of it was that after trampling the demihuman encampment underfoot, he had no issue with giving them the leftover rations and everything else -- magic items excepted.

Since Ainz had devastated the demihuman camp by himself, then the spoils from the demihumans would have rightfully belonged to him. Dumping them into the Exchange Box would have yielded quite a tidy sum. However, if he monopolized it all, the goodwill he had so painstakingly built up might end up losing its value. That being the case, he ought to write it off as an investment and give it all to the Holy Kingdom. Of course, there might be valuable magical items among the loot, and he had no intention of giving those up.

Normally, Ainz would have gone to the camp by himself and used 「Greater Magic Vision」, 「Detect Magic」and other such divination spells to examine the scene, but he felt that there was no need to do so. In addition, Demiurge ought to have investigated what magic items the demihumans possessed ahead of time. Even if something had slipped the net, there ought to be nothing there which could harm Ainz. If there was, then it would have been more eyecatching.

After that, he went to recover the equipment from those three demihumans. As expected, nobody had dared loot the corpses, and so Ainz recovered their magical items without incident. Of course, he had an idea of how powerful those items were from the mana they contained, but he still held out hope for something bizarre or unusual.

He dumped them onto the bed and prepared to magically investigate each and every one of them, but he had something he needed to do first.

“--Now then!”

He deliberately made noise.

Part of that was to psyche himself up, but there was another meaning to it.

There was something he needed to do before sending Demiurge a 「Message」.

Ainz took out a scroll -- Demiurge-brand -- and cast a spell, whereupon a pair of bunny ears sprouted from Ainz’s head.

He used them to check for nearby sounds, and it seemed like there was nobody hiding to spy on him. However, that was not enough to put him at ease. After all, there was magic, such as the second-tier spell 「Silence」, which could eliminate sound, and then there were also thief skills, so it was too early to conclude that there was nobody around just because he could not hear anything.

It’s thanks to Demiurge’s farm -- which allows us to obtain raw materials easily -- that I can use scrolls this casually. Dumping large quantities of produce into the Exchange Box means we can make back the gold spent on the scrolls without any problems. I’ve thought about this before, but I have a good feeling about the various ways in which Nazarick is developing.

They could still use the ordinary parchment from this world for first-tier spells like 「Rabbit’s Ear」. One would need YGGDRASIL materials to go any higher. However, part of the supplies problem had already been solved.

While it was true that they could only be used to substitute for up to the third tier, Demiurge's contributions were already very great. The first and most indisputable thing was that when considering everything that had been done until now, he was the most deserving of commendation for his work. Next would be Albedo and her perfect management of Nazarick.

Ainz then went on to use his ability to create lesser undead and brought forth a Wraith.

Check the surroundings and see if anyone's spying on me.

After receiving the order, the Wraith left the room without opening the door. Wraiths had astral bodies, and so they could move straight through walls and other such obstacles. Still, there was a limit depending on how thick those walls were, so it was hardly unlimited, but the thickness of the room's walls were no problem for it.

Ainz focused himself on the ears he had sprouted.

Even if there was a skilful thief lying in wait, could he remain motionless if an undead creature suddenly appeared, especially if it was surrounded by an aura of terror? In addition, they would need a concealment ability that could hide them from detection by a Wraith. Of course, deceiving low-tier undead was easy, but if someone actually possessed these abilities, then they must be very capable indeed.

Ainz concluded that there could not be such a person. If there was someone like that in this nation, then they should have had them take part in the previous two battles.

That said, I can't rule out the possibility that someone like that might be wary of me and thus lying in wait. Still, given that woman's personality, it shouldn't be possible… if there was someone like that, it wouldn't be unusual for Demiurge to inform me about them.

It would not be unusual. As he thought of those words, Ainz wondered, is that really the case?

Surely Demiurge would not have felt that Ainz would have understood even if he did not say anything, right?

...Ah, the more I think about it, the more my stomach hurts…

If such a mistake had resulted, then he ought to gather his resolve and sit Albedo and Demiurge down for a good chat.

Eventually, the undead being returned.

"Was anyone there?"

The undead being replied in the negative. Ainz's ears had not picked up any suspicious sounds either.

"Is that so. Then hide in the walls and keep an eye on the surroundings.

After watching the undead being enter a wall, Ainz mentally prepared himself.

Now then, I'll be casting「Message」next.

It was a simple thing, but he could not bring himself to do it.

It was like an employee who knew he would be scolded by his boss after returning to the office.

Still, he could not stay this way forever. His heart would also be heavy if Demiurge contacted him first.

"Time to do it, me!"

After cheering himself up, he sent a「Message」to Demiurge. He had rehearsed what he wanted to say in his head countless times and had run more than enough simulations. All he had to do now was say it.

However the「Message」connected before he could breathe in deeply to ease his stress -- or rather, there was practically no delay between casting the spell and opening a channel to Demiurge. The response had been way too fast.

"Demiurge, is that you?"

『Indeed, Ainz-sama.』

"Umu." He had practiced this many times. All he had to do now was say it.

"...I was wondering if you had any questions about the divergence of my

actions from the report, and so I contacted you. While I understand what you want to say, I feel that Albedo ought to be present as well if there are detailed questions. Return to Nazarick without delay. I will be returning presently as well. We'll meet in the loghouse on the surface."

『Understood. Then I will contact Albedo from my end.』

"Ahh, please do."

He immediately cut off the「Message」. After that, Ainz sighed deeply.

Ahhh, that's good. He didn't sound mad. Ahhh, that was scary.

What should I do if a talented subordinate gets mad at me, he had thought. Ainz's heart was full of fear; in order to put himself at ease, he channelled new strength into his faltering body and stared at the wall.

The Wraith's mission was complete. Thanks to friendly fire being on, he could destroy the undead like Shalltear had, but there was no need to waste his strength. Ordering it to return was also a simple task. Incidentally, there was no need to speak either; he could simply issue a mental command. In that way, he could break the tenuous link between them.

That said there were countless such links stretching back towards E-Rantel. Over there, he was not confident of being able to give a clear order without speaking it. That much was true. However, Ainz had made very few undead in this place, so issuing a clear-cut command would be simple enough.

--Disappear. Now then, to return to Nazarick...

After this would come a very frightening task -- a task of deception that had to be completed. He would have liked someone else to handle it if he could, but that was impossible, Besides, who could he hand it to?

He touched the magic items from the three demihumans on the table in the hopes of clearing away his unease.

Fufu. They're weak, they're cheap, but still, obtaining magic items in this world makes me happy… well, maybe I'm not as happy as Pandora's Actor would be, but it does feel like I enjoy magic items too, huh?

The first thing he did was appraise the magic items belonging to the four-armed demihuman. Among them, was the armband that had protected against Ainz's instant death spell, and its name was the Deathguard Armband. It could grant immunity to death magic once a day.

Ainz picked it up and twirled it in his hand several times, then put it back on the table.

Boring. If only there were better items. Now then--

Just as he was about to set out, he heard the sound of knocking on the door. A voice from the outside said, "Your Majesty, this is Squire Neia Baraja."

Ainz immediately inspected himself. Then he looked around the room to ensure that his bearing was that of the absolute sovereign that was the Sorcerer King. After that, he slowly settled himself into a chair and the pose he adopted was King Ainz No. 24.

“--Enter.”

He did his best to speak in a low, weighty voice. This change in pitch was also the result of repeated practice.

The door opened, and Neia -- her injuries now recovered -- entered the room and bowed to him.

“I am deeply grateful to be granted permission to enter, Your Highness. I have come here in order to discharge my duties as a squire.”

“Umu. I am glad you came, Miss Baraja. But there is no need to fulfil your squire’s obligations today. While your wounds might have healed, the fatigue of the battle must--”

Ah, it’s been taken care of, Ainz thought. The potion he had used back then was one which removed both fatigue and exhaustion. It was a potion that Nfirea -- his skin dry and rough -- had praised to the heavens.

“I am able to fulfil my obligations as a squire thanks to Your Majesty’s power. Also -- I am very happy to be allowed to stay by Your Majesty’s side.”

Neia smiled -- or was it a smirk? One’s body would naturally go on the defensive in the face of a hostile or evil smile, but Ainz’s kingly poise was unbreakable.

“...Is that so. However, I must return to the Sorcerous Kingdom for a while to

handle some critical tasks. I apologize for wasting your trip.”

“I see…”

She looked very disappointed, but she did not look cute at all. All he could think was that she was glaring at him. However, Ainz had already thought of a way to deal with Neia.

All he had to do was close his eyes. That way, her eyes would not frighten him any more.

“Speaking of which, I am glad that you are well -- that you are alive, Miss Baraja.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty! All this is thanks to your power. In particular, without this suit of armor I might not have been able to hold on until Your Majesty arrived.”

But you didn’t hold on, you died… well, all’s well that ends well. Come to think of it, I heard she was fighting on the city walls, so giving her that armor which could defend against ranged attacks was the right choice!

“Fufu. Well, that is good to hear. How about the bow? Did you show off its power to the masses?”

“Yes… many people saw the great power within this bow… although, they’re all dead now.”

“What!? --I see, so that’s what happened. What a shame.”

He had failed again. Ainz was filled with a profound sense of regret. If everyone who saw it was dead, it was no different from nobody seeing it at all. Maybe I should give up on trying to advertise rune weapons, Ainz thought. Still -- I think there ought to be a chance. Even if this plan failed, it doesn’t mean I’ve lost anything, and there’ll be great benefits if it succeeds.

“I am sure that without the gear which Your Majesty lent me, I would be in Heaven with the others… thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

Ainz sensed that her words came from the heart, and so Ainz thought, well done. Of course, he could not express that emotion. He had to keep showing her a ruler’s poise, after all.

“Pay it no heed. All you need to know is that a master’s duty is to protect his followers.”

Ainz cracked his eyes open a fraction to study her reaction.. Neia’s face had twisted slightly when she had heard the word “follower”. It was probably not anger, but it felt like some kind of unhappiness. If her present attitude and the flow of the conversation were to be trusted, that was not the case.

In other words, opening his eyes had been a mistake. Ainz closed his eyes again.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. Also, the people whom Your Majesty saved also wish me to express their gratitude to you.”

“Ho…” All right! Ainz struggled to hide the way he felt. You need not worry about it. I simply happened to save them because they were there. However, I hope they will not expect this good fortune to repeat itself, I used quite a lot of mana in this battle, so I might not be able to help next time, you know?”

“Understood, I will convey your message to them.”

“Ahh. However… that’s right. Please inform these people that I am glad to receive their gratitude… and now, Miss Baraja, I apologize but I really must be going. After this -- yes, can you come back in four hours’ time?”

“Yes! No problem at all! Then, please excuse me, Your Majesty!”

Neia left the room, and Ainz opened his eyes.

Hm. Her gratitude does seem quite genuine. Looks like I’ve got one person at last. No, as the saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Should I give out free healing potions as advertisement? That ought to win me more gratitude… but can it make up for the mistake with the rune weapons?

Ainz took out the purple potion.

This was Nfirea’s potion. Its quality was slightly inferior to that of YGGDRASIL-made potions, and it was still in the development phase. However, its effects might catch up in the future, or he might end up being able to make YGGDRASIL’s red potions.

It would have been too wasteful to spread the news of YGGDRASIL’s red

potions for nothing, so I didn't use them… still, I don't know whether people who are used to blue potions can accept purple potions. Using and testing them here sounds like a good plan.

Right now, he intended to have Nazarick conceal the potions which Nfirea and his grandmother had made. He did not plan to distribute the technology. However, that plan might change in the future, and the time might come when he could sell that potion. It would be good to prime the pump for such a situation.

This is complicated. There's merits and demerits on both sides...

Frankly speaking, the fact that he's discussing his sex life with me is causing me a lot of problems. I mean, at least they're not doing it in front of me, but wouldn't it be bad if word got out that he was talking about his wife?

In the first place, why is Nfirea even discussing this with me? Is it because he has no male relatives and is far away from the city he had lived in until now, so he thought that he had nobody to talk to? For all I know, he might be thinking that Narberal and I have that sort of relationship.

But he ought to know that I'm a skeleton...

While Ainz had thought of spying on their sex life to satisfy his curiosity, he felt that doing so would change his attitude towards the two of them, so he had curbed the impulse. However, every time Nfirea came to discuss it with him, it took a great deal of effort to suppress the curiosity that flashed through his mind.

I remember something about it feeling very good, so he was asked to do it a lot of times… could it be that the reason he made so much of that potion -- some kind of nutrient supplement, I think -- and then gave it to me was because...

In any case, he had decided to give it to those two Lizardmen so they would work hard on making more rare children.

The fruits of technology are first applied to the military, then sex and medicine. Is that true? ...Ah, time to go back.

Ainz Dies

Part 1

There were a total of four people within the room.

There were two paladins, who had come straight in after the fighting and were thus covered in bloodstained armor -- Remedios Custodio and Gustav Montagnes. There was the person in charge of the surviving priests, a middle-aged man who could use third-tier spells -- Siliaco Naranho. And then there was Prince Caspond Bessarez.

Two of them had come from the battlefield and one of them had been in charge of healing the wounded. As a result, Prince Caspond's room was filled with the stench of blood.

Remedios had not removed her helmet even now. That was not proper etiquette for visiting a prince's chambers at all -- one could even call it disrespectful -- but Caspond did not seem bothered by it and he appeared very calm.

At the same time, the air in the room was terrible, though not because of the preceding point. It was true that it reeked in here, but the reason was because the mood in the air was harsh. It was so weighty that it even seemed to dull the sunlight entering through the window..

This was not how people who had beaten overwhelmingly unfavorable odds and emerged victorious ought to be.

Caspond was the first person to speak in this weighty silence. Still, who else could speak first but him?

“Tell me about our casualty situation.”

“Of the 6’000 militiamen we brought onto the battlefield, 4’000 of them have been injured or killed.”

“...If I may add to the Vice Captain-dono’s words, there are also a thousand people among the wounded who are being healed by the priests, but half of them perished because we could not reach them in time.”

“...And then half the paladins survived, and eight priests died.”

Caspond closed his eyes and shook his head as he heard Gustav’s words.

“Against a demihuman army like that… while we can’t say losses like these are a good thing, should we be grateful that those were all we took? Or should we be sad for the sheer number of casualties--”

“The latter.”

Remedios’ still, small voice interrupted Caspond.

“The latter.”

“...Captain Custodio is right. We ought to be sad to have suffered such

losses.”

Gustav and Siliaco looked down as they heard Caspond’s words.

They knew that against a 40’000-strong army of demihumans, it was a miracle that the woefully-outnumbered Holy Kingdom Liberation Army had so many survivors -- albeit a man-made one. However, they also understood that saying something like this would be disruptive and unproductive, so they had no choice but to do this instead.

“Was it the Sorcerer King who defeated the demihuman forces in their formation?”

“Yes. There were few eyewitness reports amidst the chaos of defending the city walls, so we’re unsure of the details, but there’s talk of mysterious undead beings destroying the army.”

“I see. That matches up with what I heard from the Sorcerer KIng. So he used the undead he created to clean them up -- wiped out a massive army like that, hm? In that case… we can conclude that the Sorcerer King can defeat Jaldabaoth, am I right?”

Caspond shifted his gaze to Remedios, but she simply pursed her lips and remained silent. The highly volatile air around the Holy KIngdom’s strongest paladin made her a figure of dread to the weak. Caspond turned away from her and toward Gustav, who immediately returned his gaze with a deeply apologetic look in his eyes and bowed his head.

“Hahh… is it really alright to bet the entire KIngdom on him? Or rather --

should we think of what to do if the Sorcerer King loses to Jaldabaoth? Does anyone have any ideas for the next best thing we can do if that comes to pass?”

He was answered by silence. Amidst all this, Remedios spoke up.

“In that case, how about calling Momon over?”

The three people other than Remedios looked at each other with severe expressions on their faces.

Remedios -- who felt it was a good idea -- frowned.

“What? Do you have any better ideas? It’s more proper than that damn undead creature, no?”

“...Captain. We are now discussing what to do if the Sorcerer King dies. In such a situation, expecting to go to the Sorcerer Kingdom to get more help would be very risky.”

“Not necessarily,” Siliaco said as he stroked his white moustache.

“A moment please, Vice Captain-dono. The Captain-dono’s idea is risky, but not a bad move. How about lying about the Sorcerer King being captured by Jaldabaoth and getting Momon to come over?”

“Priest-dono, that would be too dangerous. Even if Momon defeated Jaldabaoth, discovery of the lie could trigger a war. Even if all goes well, the Sorcerous Kingdom’s impression of our country will plunge to rock bottom. And

if things go badly, Momon might very well become a second Jaldabaoth and lead the Sorcerous Kingdom's undead army into our nation."

"Precisely, you two. And the worst thing is that the Sorcerous Kingdom will have a justified grievance against us."

Remedios tilted her head at Caspond's explanation.

"We're not adjacent to the Sorcerous Kingdom, so that's okay, right?"

"...Captain Custodio, please stop thinking of dangerous things. I don't want to adopt any policies that will endanger us… that said, I don't have any good ideas. How about you two?"

Siliaco and Gustav could not think of anything either.

The room was plunged into a brief silence.

Eventually, Caspond quietly spoke up.

"...For the time being, let's each go back and think about it on our own. There'll be no problems if the Sorcerer King can defeat Jaldabaoth." Caspond clapped his hands together. "Then let's talk about something else. What about the rations that the demihumans brought? Can we eat them normally? And if we can consume them, how long can they last?"

Normally, they would belong to the Sorcerer King since he had defeated the demihuman army, but he had already said that he would hand them over free

of charge.

Gustav answered. He was in charge of sundry tasks like that.

“Sire. There seems to be a lot of hardened bread-like objects and vegetables that we should be able to eat. Thanks to the attack of the Sorcerer King’s undead creatures, they were captured intact, so they are in very good condition. In addition, there are also some food items which need to be further investigated, such as sour-smelling vegetables and so on.”

Preserved food was very common in the Holy Kingdom. However, these were demihuman rations, so they might belong to a species which ate rotting food, which was why Gustav said they had to investigate further.

“There is only one problem. That would be the meat.”

“Which means?”

Gustav’s face was dark as he looked at Caspond.

“A portion of the meat looks like it came from humans. That conclusion came from looking at their shape and we’re not certain about it. Maybe we could tell if we ate it, but I’d rather not sample it, if you don’t mind.”

“How much meat are we talking about here?”

Siliaco had a disgusted look on his face.

“Many demihumans eat meat, so there was a lot of it. At a glance, it seems like half the rations they brought were meat.”

“What!? Half of the rations for an army of 40’000 troops is meat?”

Hypothetically, if a demihuman ate a kilogram of meat a day, that would make 40 tons. If they had enough for two weeks, that would be 560 tons. In that case -- the Prince grabbed his face.

“...How much of that is human meat?”

“We don’t know. Checking each and every piece would take a lot of time, and if they aren’t in their original shapes…”

“It would be a shame to toss out food when the future seems grim. I would like to separate the human meat from the other meat… Priest Naranho, can your spells do anything on that front?”

“My apologies, Prince-denka. We cannot do something like that. I feel my colleagues among the paladins should be the same way.”

Caspond saw Gustav nod and sighed deeply.

“So magic can’t do everything huh? How about having the captive demihumans eat it to find out?”

“We should let the dead rest in peace. If there’s human meat, we ought to return it to the earth.”

“Exactly, Captain Custodio… what do you think, Vice-Captain Montagnes?”

“Yes, I agree with the Captain. I feel that no amount of time will be enough to investigate each and every barrel of meat. We ought to use our time and effort on other areas.”

“I see… very well, I understand. So with regards to the demihuman meat, we’ll dispose of everything that looks questionable. In that case how about the demihumans’ arms and armor?”

The Sorcerer King had also handed them over for free, but he had also said that that he would be expecting something in gratitude, so they would have to hand over the appropriate items if the time came.

If they could defeat Jaldabaoth or take back the Royal Capital, Caspond planned to announce to the people that he would be handing the nation’s riches over to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“Firstly, recovering the equipment from the demihumans and burying the corpses will need time, therefore we won’t even have time to check their quality… Priest-dono, if any undead spring up here, will they become the Sorcerer King’s minions?”

Undead spawned easily in places where many people died. A place where more than 10’000 demihumans had died fit perfectly.

Upon being addressed, a profoundly worried look appeared on Siliaco’s face.

“I do not know. I truly do not know. But anything could happen, so we ought to deal with the bodies and sanctify the land as soon as possible. I would like to rely on our strength alone for that, but we simply cannot manage that way, so I would like to get some help from the paladins.”

“Ahh, leave it to us. We’re used to dealing with the undead, after all.”

“I’d expect no less from Captain Remedios, it puts my heart at ease… If only the Holy Queen-sama or Kelart-sama were here…”

Everyone fell silent as Siliaco’s words tapered off.

After what seemed like a period of silent prayer, Caspond spoke.

“Ah, something on that point, Vice-Captain Montagnes. The Sorcerer King seems to want to take the magic items back to his nation, so he picked them out first. Of course, he’ll return anything that belongs to the Holy Kingdom.”

“Understood. Still, while I can tell when it comes to swords and armor, I’ll have difficulty with other items. If anyone here has knowledge of magical items, I would like them to step up and help.”

“I could help when it comes to items passed down through the royal family. As for religious items, however--” Siliaco nodded as Caspond looked to him. “--In that case, we’ll go get helpers from among the civilians. Still, this was really unexpected. No, we should say it was more than we hoped for. We ought to thank the Sorcerer King’s power for surpassing our expectations.”

Nobody present voiced any objections. Amidst the silence, Caspond spoke

again, like he was their representative.

“This city was saved from conquest thanks to the Sorcerer King’s power.”

There was a very audible sound of teeth grinding, and Caspond looked worriedly at Gustav.

“After this, I will need to thank him on behalf of the Holy Kingdom. When the time comes, I hope you will all be present… in any event, being able to draw on the Sorcerer King’s power and achieve victory is a joyous occasion.”

“Don’t forget we did our best too.”

Remedios’ words seemed to freeze the air in the room. No, it was two people who had frozen up; Gustav and Siliaco.

Gustav’s mouth opened and closed like a koi. He looked like he had no idea how to apologize for his superior’s outburst.

“...Indeed. Captain Remedios, it is a fact that we would not have won this battle without the fierce resistance that you and the people put up.”

Caspond saw Remedios nod, and then he continued speaking,

“However -- it is also a fact that without the Sorcerer King’s help, we would have lost, and it is just as true that he could have won by himself. Am I wrong?”

Remedios savagely ripped off her helmet and flung it at the wall, making a loud bang.

“Your Highness! Did something happen!?”

The door to the room flew open, and the paladins on guard outside rushed in.

“Nothing happened. Continue waiting outside.”

The paladins’ eyes went back and forth between Remedios’ helmet and the look on her face, and they realized what had happened. After indicating that they understood, they quietly left the room.

“Captain Custodio, please do not get worked up. I ask you to be calm.”

“How can’t I be worked up!? All the people I’ve met on the way here have only been praising the Sorcerer King! It’s as though he won the whole thing by himself! Didn’t he only show up halfway? How many people died before he won!? That was a victory paid for by the lives of the people, the paladins, the priests, men, women, elderly and children!”

Remedios glared at Caspond.

“It’s not true that he won by himself!”

“Captain!”

Gustav could no longer hide his fear at the way Remedios was acting in front of the prince. Remedios had never been one for thinking, but at the very least she was smart enough to know who was her superior. However, things were different now -- she seemed like a pain-maddened beast.

“That boner bastard was flying around in the sky when it was all over to show himself off! Is war a game to that bastard!?”

“...Captain Custodio, it seems witnessing the deaths of so many of the smallfolk has upset you. Would you like to take a rest?”

In response to Caspond’s mature answer, Gustav shot the man a grateful look.

“Before that, there’s one thing I’ve been thinking of. I’m sure Jaldabaoth and the Sorcerer King are in league with each other.”

The three people other than Remedios looked at each other.

“Do you have a single fact to back that up, Captain-dono?”

Siliaco looked coolly at Remedios. If one looked calmly at what she had done until now, she was clearly saying that because she hated the Sorcerer King and wanted to bring him down. Now was clearly not the time to let one’s personal preferences dictate one’s decisions.

“Isn’t he the only one gaining from this? Both the demihumans and the people of the Holy Kingdom are dead. He -- the Sorcerous Kingdom is wearing away at our fighting strength in order to someday take control of the nation and

the hills! That's why he came here!"

"...I see. That certainly makes sense from the perspective of profit. What do the two of you think?"

Gustav furrowed his brows as he answered Caspond's question.

"The Sorcerer King came here because we asked him. Also, was it not the Captain's suggestion to have the two of them fight?"

"...Indeed it was. That masked bitch in Blue Rose is also one of them. If not for what she said, we would never have gone to the Sorcerous Kingdom. If not for that suggestion, we would have gone to the Empire or the Theocracy. And who knows, he might have come anyway even if we didn't say anything."

Haaaaah, Caspond sighed deeply.

"Captain Custodio, your logic has been nothing but self-serving from the start. You're simply twisting the facts to match what you're saying. I recall the Sorcerer King saying he wanted maid demons, am I wrong?"

"...Please forgive me for saying these things which are unbecoming of a priest. I hear that those maid demons are quite powerful. In that case, I can understand why the Sorcerer King would like to obtain them. Demons do not need to eat or drink and they do not have a maximum lifespan. Being able to dominate such a powerful demon might be better than gaining an army.

"In that case, it would mean the Sorcerer King is aiding our nation because he felt there was sufficient value in it. It is only common sense for a king who rules

a nation.”

“Still, nobody’s seen those maid demons before, right!?”

As Remedios screamed like a reeeeeetard, Caspond looked at her like she was a pitiful, sad child.

“Captain Custodio. I would like to speak reasonably with you, and not speak with emotion… but it seems you are tired. Go and rest. That is an order.”

The red-faced Remedios still looked like she wanted to shriek something else, but Caspond was a step ahead of her and continued speaking.

“Go comfort the wounded men. That’s part of your duties as a field commander, am I wrong?”

“...I understand.”

Remedios picked up her helmet and left the room.

There was no way to describe how the air in the room relaxed after that. It felt like the sense of fatigue one would have after a storm had passed and all the pieces had been picked up, mixed with a sense of relief at the fact that they had managed to survive.

However, one man had unfinished business.

“Your Highness! I sincerely apologize for Captain Custodio’s actions!”

Caspond smiled bitterly to Gustav as the latter bowed his head.

“You had a hard time too. However, could you think about the future? I honestly have no idea what’s going to become of this country after this war is over. If only we could find my sister, the Holy Queen… what happened to the Holy Queen in the battle of Kalinsha? Did you hear anything from Captain Custodio?”

Gustav was Remedios’ personal assistant. Therefore, he would have been present when Remedios told Caspond about it.

The fact that he knew but was asking again proved one thing -- the prince suspected that Remedios might be lying to him.

“...My Prince, I heard the same thing from Captain Custodio that she told Your Highness when we met for the first time.”

She had been sent flying by a shockwave and when she came to, the Holy Queen and her sister -- Kelart Custodio -- were nowhere to be seen. Though the corpses of paladins and adventurers and priests were strewn all around, the bodies of those two were nowhere to be found.

“Is that so? Maybe I was worrying too much… Captain Custodio does not seem like one of those people who say one thing and mean another. It would be better if they were captured by him. Instead. If they were killed… the matter of the succession would become very complicated.”

Startled, Siliaco asked him a question.

“Caspond-sama, are you tired of the position of Holy King?”

“Are you flattering me? In truth that might be the case if my sister had perished of an accident under normal circumstances. However, things are different now. The north is tired and the south is ready to fight. In that case, it’s very likely that the south might support someone to be Holy King. Frankly speaking, it’s very likely that one of the great nobles from the South might end up as Holy King.”

“What!?”

Caspond smiled as he looked at SIliaco’s shocked face.

“I don’t think that’s something that should be so shocking… in that case, with regard to what Vice-Captain Montagnes said earlier, if things go well, the first thing the Southern nobles will do is request that Captain Custodio take responsibility for the whole affair and be placed under house arrest.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Then I’ll ask you, Vice-Captain Montagnes -- why would they not do that? Is a paladin who failed to protect Her Majesty not the perfect outlet for their unhappiness? And that’s not the only reason either. She can beat an army single-handedly. In that case, surely defanging your enemy is a basic tactic in warfare, am I wrong?”

“The enemy!? Who’s the enemy!?”

“The southern nobles are the enemy. In other words, the Holy Queen’s faction. Remedios Custodio was a confidant of the Holy Queen. Surely the paladins she leads would also be seen as the enemy, am I wrong?”

“In that case, what about the priests, that Kelart Custodio-sama led?”

“While there are priests who climbed the ranks thanks to their connections with the Southern nobles… don’t you think that would be the case too? Priestly magic is indispensable in everyday life. While I feel that anyone knows how stupid it is to put someone incompetent in high office, people sometimes do things that can only be described as foolish by others.”

“My Prince… what should we do?”

“Vice-Captain Montagnes, what do you mean by that? Do you want to keep her from being placed under house arrest? Or do you want to keep the paladins from getting involved?”

“I mean, what should we do for a better future for the Holy Kingdom.”

“...We need to find my sister. Then, we need an achievement that all the people will accept as having saved the nation. For instance, by driving out the enemy without having to draw on the strength of the South.”

“That’s impossible… we can’t possibly win without the Sorcerer King’s power.”

Caspond looked at Gustav, who was confessing his hardships, and shrugged.

“Still, that has to be done. Otherwise there won’t be any way to stop the pressure from the South after we win. Hm, yes, or we could damage the South as badly as the North. All that matters is that the balance of power is preserved in the end.” Caspond looked up at the ceiling. “If only we’d made a deal with the South sooner. She was too kind for her own good. And I understand how all this might have struck a nerve with Captain Custodio. After all, the only one who looked good in this battle was the Sorcerer King. If things go badly, the Sorcerer King might end up becoming the Holy King as well, am I wrong?

The other two felt it was impossible, but neither of them could deny it.

“In that case, we need to start thinking about our plans from now on. While I would like Captain Custodio to be here, will she disobey a direct order?”

“...I feel it would be fine as long as it’s in keeping with this country’s justice.”

“I see… I’ve been thinking about how to attack the prison camps. The reason for that is--”

Caspond began to explain.

Roughly 100’000 demihumans had attacked the nation.

Since they had not heard of any movements from the demihumans squaring off against the forces of the Southern Holy Kingdom, they estimated that the 40’000 demihumans that had attacked them this time round were a large portion of the forces assigned to manage the prison camps in the North.

“I agree with your opinion. By attacking the undermanned prison camps, we can both destroy them piecemeal and increase our own forces at the same time. I feel it will kill two birds with one stone.”

“Captain Montagnes, I am glad to hear you approve. How about yourself, Priest Naranho?”

Siliaco also agreed with Caspond’s suggestion.

“The Sorcerer King is in this city. Since he can keep us safe, I would like the paladins to attack the prison camps… can you do that? Also, one more thing. I would like Captain Remedios to stay here while you are launching the attack. Make her think that she’s in charge of bodyguarding me.”

“Thank you very much, My Prince!”

“...I don’t think I’ve said anything you need to thank me for, Vice-Captain Montagnes,” Caspond said as the smile faded from his face. “...The absence of the country’s strongest paladin means that if there’s someone like the Grand King at the prison camp you’re attacking, you might all be wiped out, am I wrong?”

“Can we decide which camp to attack?”

“But of course. I’ll leave it to you. There’s no need to force yourself to attack a large camp that’s more dangerous.”

“Understood. In that case, I feel only we should go.”

“Captain Montagnes, may several of our battle-capable priests go with you?”

“Certainly. Then we’ll set out in a couple of days’ time.”

***

Ainz used [Greater Teleportation] to reach his destination, which was the log cabin on the surface of Nazarick. While he did not know how long they had been waiting for him, Albedo, Demiurge and Lupusregina were all standing there already.

Albedo and Demiurge had been summoned by Ainz, while Lupusregina ought to have been on duty in the cabin.

Since Lupusregina was in charge of all matters concerning Carne Village, she should have been excused from the log cabin’s duty roster, but that was not set in stone.

Perhaps someone else might have been on duty, but they had not been able to make it, so Lupusregina had rushed over instead. If that were the case, it would be great. After all, that would imply that even if there was a lack of manpower after completing a mission, there was a system to immediately swap someone else in to make up the shortfall.

Still, wait.

While the Pleiades each had completely different job abilities, their maid skills were all equal. It only made sense that they could substitute for each other in a professional capacity.

However, in contrast to that, there were also personnel who were hard to use. Starting with the Floor Guardians and the Guardian Overseer, there were some NPCs with highly specialized abilities who might need someone to take over them for one reason or another. In addition, Ainz had also been working hard towards establishing a vacation system.

After all, letting Pandora's Actor substitute for all of them is also dangerous.

To take an extreme case, what if Ainz himself was not around? For instance, if he were imprisoned, or if he were charmed, or something else. While he did not think that everything would break down without him to make decisions, he had the feeling that Albedo and Demiurge would say, "Ainz-sama would never let that happen to himself" in the same voice and thus not think about such possibilities.

I need to seriously assess the need for this, and quickly.

In a grave tone, Ainz bade the three people bowing to him to raise their heads.

"It has been a while, Demiurge."

"Yes!"

In truth, Ainz had headaches about the Holy Kingdom's affairs every day, and he also thought about Demiurge every day, so he did not actually feel that way. However, it had been quite a while since the last time they had met in person.

“Now then, you probably have questions about why I did that. While I would like to answer you, doing so in this place is not quite appropriate. Let us move somewhere else.”

Ainz went into the log cabin first.

He could have taken a shortcut here because there was a Gate Mirror set up, but he did not use it today.

There was a table in the center of the room, and there were two chairs facing each other on either side of it. Ainz took the seat of honor without hesitation, as if he were used to it. He had already experienced his share of troublesome things that had happened because he had not taken that place. While he had once had to ponder which seat it was before sitting down on it, he had now reached the point where he would unconsciously take his place.

As he approached the chair, Lupusregina immediately pulled it out for him.

In truth, he was of the opinion that he ought to pull his chair out himself. However, his observations of Jircniv had made him understand that it was very important for a ruler to let his subordinates work. Still, letting them handle even trivial tasks like this gave Ainz the commoner a bit of difficulty.

After settling down into his chair Albedo and Demiurge did not sit down, but instead knelt on the floor. Behind them, Lupusregina went to her knees as well.

“--I permit the two of you to take a seat.”

The two Guardians politely refused in unison. Ainz once again granted his

permission to the two Guardians, whereupon they finally sat opposite Ainz after gushing their superlative gratitude to him. Lupusregina, on the other hand, stood stock still behind the two of them.

This takes so long and it's a waste of time. Couldn't it be simpler like back then… ugh.

"Then let us continue our previous topic. While I said there was nobody who needed to be saved, I rescued the people of the Holy Kingdom nonetheless. I am sure you have your questions about that, do you not?"

"No, not at all."

--Er? W-why?

Demiurge shook his head gently, as though he could not resist the urge to sigh in admiration.

"Everything you do is correct, Ainz-sama. I feel that the reason why you acted was because you saw a value in it that I could not imagine."

"That is correct. If you feel it needs to be done, then it must be correct, Ainz-sama."

--Eh?

Albedo's words froze Ainz's expression on his face. But of course, Ainz had no expression to speak of.

The way the two Guardians -- who were also the most knowledgeable Guardians in Nazarick -- nodded in unison before him filled him with various flavors of terror and anxiety.

“Wait, wait. Indeed… yes, it is true.” Ainz began to panic. The conversation had travelled a path that was slightly different from what he had foreseen, and so he had become confused and could not clearly think of what he wanted to say. However-- “--Indeed, under normal circumstances I would have acted as you had imagined.”

Huh? Ainz was slightly baffled by how the topic was beginning to stray. Off course. He had been struggling to piece some words together and throw them out offhandedly, but even so, the two of them were nodding vigorously, and Ainz found that a little odd. However, he continued praying for a last minute miracle as he carried on.

“But, er, but. This time was slightly different. I did not do this because I was planning something.” Having found a way to amend his words, Ainz delightedly continued, “This time round, I was deliberately introducing a flaw into the plan.”

“What would be the reason for that, Ainz-sama?”

Ainz slowly leaned on the back of the chair with a “Hm”. Then he adopted a long-drilled posture that was befitting of a ruler, which a master ought to have, and then spoke.

“Demiurge. Albedo. The two of you have always been more intelligent than me.”

“That--”

Ainz held up his hand to stop the two of them from speaking.

“I am just saying that I have always felt this way. In that case, what would happen if something unexpected occurred during parts of the event described in your plan? If everything proceeded as you outlined, then everything would have been perfect and ended in excellent form.”

That said, your plan was really over the top, Ainz grumbled in his heart. You threw all the details at me in your playbook and I had the feeling I would mess up somewhere.

“Therefore, a question suddenly came to mind, Demiurge. A perfect tactical mind cannot only function when everything is going on course; it must also be usable when the situation changes dramatically or when it diverges from your expectations. That is to say, I wanted to know if your adaptability was also as laudable.”

“I see, so that’s it!”

Eh--!? He already got it!? And he sounds like he understands it all too!

Ainz resisted the urge to make a jab about Demiurge’s preternatural processing speed, something along the lines of “You’re already so smart, why do you think I’m smarter? Is this some new way of bullying me!?”

“As expected of, ah… you’re as impressive as I expected, Demiurge.”

“Thank you very much, Ainz-sama.”

“Still, I, ah, apologize, though it feels like I was testing you…”

“Certainly not, Ainz-sama. To me, the fact that you would wish to assess my abilities is an honor that knows no equal. I will assuredly return results that match your expectations, Ainz-sama!”

“Umu. I’ll leave that to you, Demiurge. In that case, during the course of our activities in the Holy Kingdom, I will cause problems as needed and you will amend the plan in response. Will that be alright?”

“Yes! I understand!”

All right--! Ainz rejoiced within his heart. He was so happy that the emotion was suppressed.

Even so, excitement still remained inside him.

Very good, very good. This way, even if I screw up, I can say that I was doing it on purpose! No, of course, I need to be careful not to screw up under normal circumstances. If I’d known, I should have said this from the start.

While he did not have the bad habit of gloating when a subordinate’s plan went awry, it was possible that he might accidentally do something to make them worry. In this way, they would not have to guess if he had some intention

in mind, but instead move on to revising the plan as needed. Ainz felt the sense of bliss which came with taking a heavy weight off his shoulders.

"...Your servant understands your concerns, Ainz-sama. So does that mean that you will be simultaneously assessing the abilities of each Floor and Area Guardian as well?"

As he heard Albedo's question, Ainz was briefly puzzled for a moment and thought, what's she saying? However--

"There's no need to be so hasty. I am doing so for Demiurge because he must work outside Nazarick for extended periods. As for the others, I will test them when it becomes necessary."

"I see…"

"Umu. Now, for the next topic… the initial plan was to take those people of the Holy King who were enthralled with me and proceed to the eastern part of the Holy Kingdom, to the Abelion Hills where the demihumans lived. However, I am going to amend this part of the plan. I will go there first. From there, spread the news of my death."

It felt like time had stopped for a moment. And then--

"--Eh? What are you saying, Ainz-sama!? How could we announce the death of the Supreme One, Ainz-sama!?"

That protest came from Albedo. This might have been the first time he had seen Albedo's expression crumble down like this. At least, the look on her face

made him feel that way. But before Ainz could explain his true intentions to Albedo, it was Demiurge's turn to speak up.

"Albedo. Since Ainz-sama has stated this, he must have some aim in mind that we cannot hope to imagine. Do you not think rejecting it on an emotional basis is inappropriate?"

"Demiurge. I question where your calm comes from. Would you react in this way if Ulbert Alain Odle …-sama were to say the same thing? Or…?"

"Fufu… Albedo. Could you tell me what you mean by that? Or do you mean that you have something to say to me afterwards?"

The two Guardians directed freezing-cold glares and blazing-hot stares by turn, and a strange atmosphere began to brew between the two of them. This choking sensation was just like what he had felt when he was fighting Shalltear. Perhaps it was fear or tension, but even Lupusregina was starting to pant heavily.

"--Enough!"

The dangerous mood in the air instantly vanished as Ainz shouted. The sudden change made Ainz wonder if everything just now had been a delusion. However, Lupusregina's labored breathing proved that it had not been a vision.

"Calm down, both of you. This is the reason why I must fake my death. There is an activity called a disaster drill. We must mentally prepare ourselves and plan ahead of time in case of an emergency. In that case, what would you do if I died? I'll start with you, Albedo. Tell me what you have in mind."

“Yes! I would immediately subject the person who dared disrespect you to all the suffering in this world, and then prepare to resurrect you, Ainz-sama!”

“I see. Your turn, Demiurge.”

“Yes! While preparing for your resurrection, I would strengthen Nazarick’s defenses and then obtain information on the person who offended you.”

Albedo glared at Demiurge out of the corner of her eye.

“Merely gathering information is too lax. Regardless of who dares offend the Supreme One, they must be captured with all the strength Nazarick can bring to bear and then tormented to the point where their ego breaks down.”

“Albedo, I feel what you say is very sensible. However, the enemy is someone who can kill Ainz-sama. Thus, we cannot be careless. Learning the enemy’s movements and strengths is vital. If the enemy is stronger than we can imagine, then the place in which we resurrect Ainz-sama will become very important.”

Before Albedo’s expression could turn even more grim, Ainz rapped his staff on the floorboards. The hard impact was like splashing a bucket of ice water on the two of them, and their faces immediately regained their calm.

“I did not say I was killed by someone. If things go badly… it is not impossible that I might end up dying naturally from some unforeseen circumstances.”

In truth, he could not think of any natural cause from which he could die,

which was why he was using such vague terms.

“However, it would seem that even the two people that I consider the most intelligent of all have differing opinions. That distresses me. That is why we must undertake this training, so that there will be no problems if this imagined scenario comes to pass.”

The two of them bowed their heads.

“Of course, I am not the only one that this could happen to. Demiurge, as Nazarick’s defensive commander during a time of attack, if an unexpected situation occurs and you are struck down, could Nazarick continue functioning normally?”

“Yes! I have made thorough preparations in that respect. I recall submitting a report on that to you in the past, Ainz-sama.”

Eh, did I receive something like that? Ainz decided that it would be better to trust Demiurge’s memory than his own.

“Umu. Still, that is only in documentation, is it not? The reason I am asking is because I would like to know if you have checked to see if normal operations can be continued.”

“I sincerely apologize! I have not carried it out!”

Demiurge bowed his head, his face a mask of deepest regret and his voice trembling.

“My, my deepest apologies, Ainz-sama! I was utterly foolish for signing off on the document but not making that suggestion!”

Albedo had the same look on her face as Demiurge as she bowed her head.

Ainz was filled with a tremendous sense of guilt. Whose fault was it? The answer was that it was his own. If he had been more reliable, the two of them would not need to apologize like this. Was he not a scummy boss?

“--There is no need for you two to apologize. It was my fault for not properly explaining matters to you. I was the one who should not have noticed that no test had occurred. The mistake is mine.” Ainz bowed his head until his forehead touched the desk. “All this was due to my unworthiness, and I seek everyone’s forgiveness.”

“What!? Ainz-sama!”

“Please, please do not do that!”

The two of them hurriedly tried to stop Ainz. However, Ainz did not raise his head. He was too ashamed to show them his face, because he knew that he was so shallow that he could not even come clean when apologizing.

“Lu-Lupusregina! Hurry and raise Ainz’s head!”

“Eh! Me? Please, please forgive me, I can’t possibly raise Ainz-sama’s head by force!”

“Please, please raise your head!”

It was only after the three of them -- Demiurge in particular -- started looking especially flustered that Ainz hurriedly looked up. After that, he heard sighs of relief from the three of them.

“...I am grateful that you have accepted my apology. Now then, when I reach the Abelion Hills, we will use my death as the basis for an exercise. Yes. Since this is a rare opportunity, why don’t we conduct other exercises as well? For instance, if Demiurge and I were killed off by someone, that sort of thing…”

At this point, Ainz began to feel uneasy about his own suggestions.

“That said, even I have not fully planned out the details when it comes to this training. Therefore, if you have come up with an even better plan, then go ahead and carry it out. Ahh, no need to ask my permission. After all, this is an exercise founded on the premise that I am dead.

The two of them smiled bitterly.

“Ainz-sama, having to consider you dead from the start of the exercise’s planning phase is a little…”

“It is as Demiurge says, Ainz-sama.”

Hahahaha, the laughter of three people rang through the cabin.

Two of them were laughing from the heart, but one was merely pretending.

“Still, you don’t need to take it too seriously, you know? After all, the objective of this exercise is not to spread ill-will throughout Nazarick, like what happened with the two of you just now. However, I would like to conduct various kinds of training and storing up knowledge in that field, so that every Guardian can become interchangeable -- well, I know what I’ve said is pointless given your respective intellects. Do what you feel needs to be done, to whatever extent you deem fit. Can I leave that to you?”

Now that he thought about it, Suzuki Satoru had never been the type of person who had seriously carried out disaster drills, so was it really convincing when someone like that told others to do their best? That was why he could not forget to tell them to take it easy.

After seeing the two of them had deeply bowed their heads, Ainz said, “Now then, while this is a different matter--”

Let’s go, me!

The reason why he had drawn up all these flowcharts and simulated ways of talking down the two Guardians was for this aim.

“--You are to freeze all progress on the planned giant statue of me.”

“I understand. We will do as you direct.”

Albedo’s single sentence seemed to put an end to the entire topic.

Huh? Ainz's attitude turned from baffled to fearful as he nervously asked what he had in mind.

"...Is that alright? It was your idea, was it not, Albedo?"

"How could anyone contradict a decision that the Supreme Being has made, Ainz-sama? If you say it is white, then it will be white even though it is black. That is all, Ainz-sama."

Ainz gulped. That line of thinking frightened him, and he trembled.

"...I do not like that way of thinking, Albedo. That is just like abandoning all thought, and even I will most certainly make mistakes at some point."

He was just saying "most certainly", but it felt like it had been happening all the time.

"And in that case, won't everything be over if I'm captured? The person who brainwashed Shalltear is still out there, you know? While there is no need to question each and every one of my aims, if I suggest something and you think of something, you ought to bring it up."

"I understand."

Albedo and Demiurge glanced briefly at each other through narrowed eyes.

"Then, may I ask why you wish to cease construction? Is the aim of that statue

not to let the world better understand your glory, Ainz-sama?”

“Umu,” Ainz laughed in his heart. “My greatness is not something that can only be expressed through material objects.

He recalled that this line had received approval from Neia.

--It’s perfect.

“Would it not be better to teach them with material objects? Fools, as they say, are those who can only understand what they see before their eyes.”

Albedo’s words froze Ainz in place. It was just like a pitcher throwing a ball at a batter, but instead of having it being hit back at him the batter caught it and threw it back at full force.

“...I see. You have a point, Albedo, but--”

As Ainz thanked his voice for not trembling, he struggled to work his brain, and then gave up when nothing came to mind. While he nearly rounded his shoulders, he could not allow his image as a ruler to crumble before his subordinates.

“--No, forget it. I’m sure that Albedo can pick out at least five of the flaws I’ve spotted, and the merits outweigh them. In that case, there is nothing else for me to say.”

“Five, five flaws? ...Demiurge, I need to discuss something with you later. May

I borrow your intellect for a while?”

“But, but of course. I, I expected nothing less of you, Ainz-sama, to think you would say our minds were superior… truly, you are too humble.”

The two of them began to get flustered, and Albedo bowed her head deeply.

“I, I am truly sorry, Ainz-sama. While my plan to build your statue has already received your approval, please allow me to temporarily suspend construction. I sincerely apologize.”

“Hm, mm. Well, it can’t be helped then. Proceed, Albedo.”

Ainz had merely tossed out an offhand remark, but Albedo and Demiurge seemed abnormally shaken by it. He could even hear Lupusregina whisper “amazing” from the rear.

Ainz averted his eyes, feeling guilty because he had confused the two of them by talking nonsense. However, he was glad that the plan to build the giant statue would be briefly halted.

Next, I need to do something about the four festivals with my name on it, like the Sorcerer King Grand Thanksgiving, the Sorcerer King’s Birthday and so on! If the Sorcerer King Grand Thanksgiving is cancelled because the statue’s been cancelled as well, that just leaves three of them! Besides, if these were normal festivals, I wouldn’t want to stop them either!

In truth, Ainz had once pretended innocence and suggested a plan for organizing festivals. However, that had led to the formation of a strange and

embarrassing festival committee. Ainz sighed long and loud in his heart, and then looked at Demiurge.

“Alright, that leaves the details which I need to discuss with Demiurge. After this, you’ll have the demon you summoned, that is to say, Jaldabaoth, attack that city, right?”

“Yes. Indeed, that is so.”

“Therefore… I have a couple of requests. The first concerns a personal project I am carrying out which is not going too well, for which I will need your help. Ah, don’t worry, there’s no need to get too flashy with it. And the second thing is, can you command that summoned demon to fight a serious battle with me?”

***

Neia quietly closed the door to the Sorcerer King’s room and turned on her heel. And then… her body quivered.

She lightly patted her somewhat scalding cheeks to force her face to tighten up before it completely collapsed. One reason for that was because she knew how her relaxed face made others wary, while the other, more important reason was because it deeply embarrassed her.

Neia did not want to walk around outside with an unseemly look on her face. She would have to meet others later, so at the very least she had to look presentable.

More to the point, Neia was the squire of the Sorcerer King, so anything disgraceful that she did would also damage the Sorcerer King’s reputation.

Still, I'm only acting as his temporary squire, so it's the Holy Kingdom which would be disgraced...

However, the people who hated the Sorcerer King would not think that way. As the saying went, one was blinded by one's hate. Or rather, those who hated swords hated swordsmiths as well.

Alright!

Neia did not want the Sorcerer King to regret the fact that she was his squire. In other words, all Neia had to do was her job.

As Neia headed for the place where she had arranged to meet, she thought incessantly about the kindness that the Sorcerer King had shown just now.

--Is that so, is that how it is, what a shame.

She had sensed deep regret from the Sorcerer King when he said those words back then. There was no way he could have been rattling them off casually.

...His Majesty really is a kind person...

The Sorcerer King had grieved for someone from another country who had died in battle as though she had been one of his own people. Where in the world could you find a king like that? Of course, Neia did not know any other kings, so perhaps that simply reflected her dreams.

For instance, if Neia and the others had held on a little longer, they would

have been saved along with Neia, and that father who had lost his child would also have survived.

Neia was not unhappy that the Sorcerer King had been late in his rescue. In the first place, she was grateful for the fact that he had come to rescue her, because he had already said that he had to conserve his mana for the battle with Jaldabaoth. In addition, she had heard some of the militiamen in Remedios' unit say that he had fought several powerful demihumans at the west gate before he had come to rescue Neia.

The Sorcerer King had fought two demihumans who could each kill a paladin in a single attack and another one whose strength was on par with that of the Holy Kingdom's strongest paladin.

The militiaman telling Neia all this had been hard-pressed to hide his excitement as he rattled the proceedings off like a machine gun, and he added, "We'd all have been killed if not for the Sorcerer King."

Indeed. Neia felt her panties moisten.

The Sorcerer King had gone elsewhere to help others before coming to save Neia.

While she was slightly disappointed that the Sorcerer King had not prioritized helping her, it was wrong to feel that way. The defense of the city wall was important, but it would be a far worse matter if the city gate were to fall. If the gate had been breached and the demihumans managed to get into the city, there would have been merciless slaughters everywhere.

Anyone with any sense would have prioritized the city gate to save more lives.

People who acted according to logic were more reliable than people who were ruled by their emotions.

That’s the Sorcerer King for you!

Neia thought of the strongest paladin in her country.

Comparing His Majesty to a retard like that is an insult to him!

After that, the Sorcerer King had also hunted down the few demihumans who had made it into the city, and many people had been saved as a result. In fact--

“Ohhh! Squire-sama! Did you tell His Majesty for us?”

It would seem that Neia had reached her meeting point while she was pondering how cool the Sorcerer King had been.

In a certain sector of the city, six men gathered on a street which still smelled of the battlefield.

They addressed Neia like they had been waiting anxiously for her. In fact, they had actually been very anxious

“Yes, I’ve relayed your gratitude to His Majesty.”

Several people unconsciously went on the defensive as Neia looked at them, but after hearing her words, they smiled and thanked her.

“Ah, thank you very much. It’s hard to thank the king of another nation. Ah, although, it’s hard to thank even the Holy Queen-sama.”

“That’s true, you can’t even see her, to say nothing of actually thanking her.”

The people before her had ages which ranged from 14 to 40. However, all of them were squad leaders. Some of them had even been professional soldiers once.

Judging by their attitude, they did not feel any sense of dread toward the Sorcerer King because he was undead.

It was true that some people were still wary of the Sorcerer King because of his undead nature. In addition, people like that were more common among the smallfolk than the priests or paladin. They often said that the Sorcerer King was being kind in order to betray them at the right moment, and other such things.

However, Neia felt that their reaction was because they did not understand the Sorcerer King and had simply acted out of the usual disdain for the undead. The reason for that was the group of people before her. There were many people who had changed their way of thinking once they got to know the Sorcerer King.

“No, please don’t worry about it. I simply conveyed your gratitude intact to His Majesty. Ah, yes, His Majesty said that your thanks made him very happy.”

There were bashful looks on the representatives from the militiamen.

“Nonono, we’re the ones who should be happy… oh, what should we do…”

“That’s right, His Majesty really is compassionate. I’m embarrassed by how we used to fear His Majesty because he was undead.”

“Indeed, his Majesty is a kind person. However, I hope you will not expect such good fortune to happen again and again. After all, His Majesty did say that he had used a great deal of mana in this battle, and he would not be able to help you again next time.”

The group’s faces immediately sobered up.

“So we might not have His Majesty’s help next time… this is bad.”

“A lot of people will be afraid if they know they can’t borrow His Majesty’s power. My team especially.”

“You aren’t the only one. It’s the same on my side too… we can’t tell them about this.”

Neia quietly addressed the shaken group.

“Everyone, I have come to understand one thing. That is: weakness itself is a sin.”

Neia slowly explained herself to the people who had puzzled looks on their faces.

“Do you get it? If we were strong enough, things would not have gotten to where they are now. We could have saved our parents, our children, our wives, our friends, we could have saved all of them with our own strength. The Sorcerer King once said that we are the ones who value the things important to us the most highly. After all, His Majesty is not the king of this country, and he simply came to assist us for a special reason.”

Neia took a breath.

Neia raised her voice, in order to let the people watching her and the people of the Holy Kingdom passing by hear her words.

“...When the Sorcerer King defeats Jaldabaoth and returns to his own country, what will we do when the demihumans attack again? Will we cry and beg the Sorcerer King, the king of another country, for help once more? For all we know, the Sorcerer King might not help us next time. That’s because this time was an exception. Have you ever heard of a country’s king working so hard for another nation?”

Nobody answered Neia, because such a thing did not exist at all.

“Maybe you don’t feel happy that a girl like me is telling you this. But who else can protect the things that are important to you other than yourselves? That’s why I feel we need to become stronger. We need to be strong enough to protect others, strong enough that we don’t need to rely on the Sorcerer King’s strength.”

“Yes, you’re right. Exactly. I’m going to train myself.”

“Ah, me too. Next time, I’ll be the one to protect my wife and kids.”

“...I want to train too. I didn’t want to when I was first conscripted… but now I feel glad that I was drafted.”

“Still, the Sorcerer King does make a lot of sense. Valuing the things important to us… mm, when you think about it, that really is true.”

“So if someone else values my wife the most highly, I have to kill him, then?”

“...I, I don’t think so, right? I don’t think the Sorcerer King was talking about something like that, right?”

“...Hey, I’m just kidding, you know?”

“It didn’t sound like a joke...”

As the crowd laughed, Neia made a suggestion.

“Everyone, would you like to train with me? While I can’t teach you all swordsmanship, I know a thing or two about archery.”

Weakness was a sin. That was because the weak only created problems for the Sorcerer King, who was justice. In that case, all they had to do was become strong. She could not allow herself to cause trouble for the Sorcerer King next time. She had to allow His Majesty to focus on fighting Jaldabaoth. That was what she ought to do, as a squire.

“Ah, that’s a good idea.”

“We need to become strong. I’ll protect my family next time.”

“--Why are you all gathering here? Are you discussing something?”

“Ah -- Captain.”

After being questioned out of nowhere, Neia looked back and saw Remedios Custodio standing behind her. In fact, Neia had heard her footsteps approaching, but she had not thought that it would be Remedios.

Someone annoying showed up, Neia thought as she tried to keep her face from showing how she felt. The militiamen representatives, on the other hand, looked like they were in distress.

“Can’t you answer my question?”

“Yes, ma’am! I was telling these gentlemen that I had conveyed their gratitude to His Majesty.”

“To him, you say?”

“...It is hardly appropriate to address the king of another nation as ‘him’.”

Remedios glared at Neia.

“The strong protecting the weak is common sense, is it not?”

“...I do not know if it is common sense, but I feel that only the strong are qualified to say such things, and not the weak.”

“What!? Are you saying that I’m weak?”

“Yes,” Neia replied on the spot. “Compared to His Majesty, you are weak… Captain, have I said something wrong?”

Neia stared back forcefully at Remedios.

“Hmph, it doesn’t matter if you want to be friends with the Sorcerer King, but he’s undead, you know that, right? A monster who inhabits a different world from the living.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“I said that because I was worried about you. It seems it was for nothing.”

While Remedios looked like she was disappointed, it felt very fake to Neia. That was not what the paladin before her really thought.

“I’m certain you must be busy with many things, Captain, and I would not dare take up your time. In addition, I have things to tell the others. Would it not be better for yourself to move on to the other places you have to be, Captain?

“...Very well then. You lot, it’s only natural for the Sorcerer King to help you. You don’t need to think too much about it, got that?”

Remedios left after saying so. As they watched her go, someone from the militia representatives spoke up.

“How should I say this… that was amazing… is that the strongest paladin of this country…”

“Yes, that’s what she is.”

After hearing the representative speak his mind, Neia unconsciously replied to him. After that, the militia representatives covered their faces with their hands. It would seem they had suffered quite a shock.

Although Neia had not done anything wrong, she still felt a little guilty.

“The, the paladins aren’t, aren’t all like that. How shall I put it… she’s a special education case. And she’s… ah, like that. Yes.”

“It’s hard for you, Squire-sama… I’d like to buy you a drink, if you can drink.”

“I appreciate your goodwill… uh, where was I again? Yes, training together. I can find a way to borrow a training area and equipment. Can I contact you later once everything’s ready?”

“We’ll let you handle that”, “Alright, we’ll wait,” the men answered cheerily.

Part 2

Neia smoothly drew her bowstring.

She turned her keen gaze toon the target, and she could see the silent white wisps of her breath drawn to the edges of her vision by the wind, where it disappeared. Spring was close, but the weather was still cold.

Neia buried the random notions in her mind deep within her, staring at the target in a state of no-thought, and then she slowly drew herself back.

During the defense of the city, Neia had come to understand that nobody had time to slowly take aim on the battlefield, but right now they were training to improve their accuracy, so quick-fire drills could be left for another time.

And then -- she released her arrow.

The arrow whistled as it tore through the air and flew in a straight line that ended in it striking the target dead on.

Hoo, Neia exhaled.

Of the ten arrows she had fired, not a single one had been off target.

This was an outstanding accuracy rate, but Neia took no joy in it.

She could not do it in the past, but right now, Neia could even split the arrow she had just launched. Of course, she would damage the arrow if she did that, so she did not.

The reason why she had ended up like this, why she could do something that was previously impossible for her was because after that battle, she was not just capable of archery, but of harnessing what they called divine power. However, the strange thing was that it was slightly different from the abilities that paladins were said to possess. This was because normally, paladins could only channel their powers through melee weapons, while she could imbue ranged weapons with her powers.

While she did not quite understand what that meant, the Sorcerer King had seemed quite happy when he had heard about this. Still, even the Sorcerer King had only said, “It’s hard to tell from just that, let me know if other abilities awaken.”

Applause rang out, and Neia smiled bitterly, because she felt uncomfortable.

“Wow, you’re amazing, Baraja-chan.”

“Oh yes, it’s the first time I’ve seen anyone with such great shooting, nobody in my village could do that.”

“Ahh, it’s true. I used to be a hunter by trade, and I knew a few people in my own right, but none of them had Baraja-chan’s skills.”

The people praising Neia were the majority of the people practicing archery in the same training field as Neia. Many of their faces had not been seen on these

streets during the defense of the city three weeks ago.

The reason for that was because people were being rescued from the nearby prison camps and the city's population has risen swiftly as a result. The people among them with a talent for archery or who had used bows before were drafted into archery units and placed under Neia's command.

Normally, people would balk at being made subordinate to a squire girl, especially if some of them were old enough to be her father. However, none of the men -- and women -- gathered here protested.

The main reason was because nobody dared voice any objections after being subjected to her vicious gaze, and also because they had to acknowledge her skill with the bow. Some of them were even more grateful to Neia after learning that she was the Sorcerer King's squire.

There were also some who were afraid she was undead because they had heard that she was the Sorcerer King's squire, but not everyone was like that.

In these three weeks, the paladins had been sent out to liberate prison camps, but at the same time, the Sorcerer King and Neia had also gone out to attack camps and rescue prisoners.

When the Sorcerer King had first broached the subject, there had been a shocking number of objections. However, the Sorcerer King then said, "Now that the Demihuman Alliance is short on manpower, they will start to execute the captives if they judge that they lack the ability to run the prison camps, so they must be rescued without delay", and that had convinced Caspond to accept the Sorcerer King's suggestion and send the two of them out.

Neia had originally wanted to argue that the Sorcerer King ought to conserve his mana in order to battle Jaldabaoth. However, Neia admired how he acted to protect the people of another country and felt the justice emanating from him, so she could not bring herself to stop him.

And so, Neia and the Sorcerer King had freed many captives and brought them to this city. For this reason, there were people who were happy to serve under Neia.

“Ahhh~ I ought to learn a few things from Baraja-chan.”

“Yeah, that’s right. She’s amazing. Also, that bow you borrowed from the Sorcerer King -- the Ultimate Shootingstar Super -- you can do even more amazing things with that bow, right?”

“The Ultimate Shootingstar Super, huh. What an amazing bow…”

All their eyes went to the bow stowed behind Neia’s back -- the Ultimate Shootingstar Super.

She ought to have used it during her training, but she had avoided doing so because she did not want to rely too heavily on her weapon.

“Yes, during the battle for the city walls, it was thanks to the Ultimate Shootingstar Super that I was able to survive until His Majesty arrived… no, that’s not it. It wasn’t just the Ultimate Shootingstar Super, but the armor I borrowed from His Majesty and all his other items that helped me too…”

Neia caressed Buser’s armor.

“This armor came from a renowned demihuman, it looks amazing to me no matter how many times I look at it…”

“She let me touch it once, and its hardness is amazing. I chopped at it with a sword and it just bounced off.”

“Seriously? I’ve never heard that before?”

As Neia’s wargear became a hot topic, she clapped to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, enough chitchat, back to training. According to the Sorcerer King, Jaldabaoth’s preparing to make another move soon, so we can’t waste a single moment.

There was a chorus of acknowledgements.

“Alright, it’s time to begin practical shooting. Let’s start, everyone.”

As she watched her subordinates -- the word sounded really grand, and it embarrassed her a little -- disperse, Neia removed the item which covered half her face. It was an item she had borrowed from the Sorcerer King.

This magic item was a visor-shaped set of mirrorshades that allowed her to use a special ability known as the Serpent Shot once every three minutes. It was a technique that allowed an arrow to twist and turn in front of one’s opponent, like an animal bringing down its prey.

She was not too sure what it did because she had not fired it at anyone, but in all likelihood, one would need to be very agile to avoid it.

It was a very handy item for someone like Neia, who used the bow as her main weapon, but more importantly, the fact that it hid her eyes was amazing. Or rather, without that item, she could not have gotten along so well with the others.

Neia put her visor on, and took up her bow again.

Everyone here was experienced, and now that time was tight, she did not need to instruct them on the finer points of finger positioning. She had touched briefly on how to fire quickly, and after that all that was needed was to give them individual coaching and have them practice until their fingers ached. The most important thing for them was to accumulate shooting experience.

As usual, Neia wondered about requesting healing magic from the priests as she loosed an arrow.

Just at that moment, Neia’s keen ears picked up a noise.

It had come from the outside. While Neia’s shooting form nearly broke down, she managed to keep it together. It might not have been what she expected, and even if it was the person she had hoped to meet, they might have only been passing by, and not intended to come here.

However, the being that appeared at the door to the training yard was the great king with the skeletal face -- the Sorcerer King.

In the beginning, everyone had feared the undead, but many of them had been rescued by the Sorcerer King during the defense of the city and from the prison camps. The clamor of respectful and thankful voices soon came to herald the arrival of the Sorcerer King.

However, nobody stopped practicing. Normally, they would have knelt before the Sorcerer King when he appeared, but the Sorcerer King himself had put a stop to it.

This isn't a public place, so you don't need to do that when I'm just showing my face, am I wrong?

No king, especially the savior of a nation should have been treated that way.

Even so, the Sorcerer King had said that they did not need to do so.

What a great person he is...

After sighing in awe, Neia went to the Sorcerer King's side, and forced her slackening face to tighten up.

She kept her visor on.

That was because the Sorcerer King had said that she ought to be ready to fight at any time, so she did not need to take it off.

He was probably concerned about whether she could use a magic item like it

was part of her own body and thinking that she ought to be on guard no matter what unexpected things happened. Neia was deeply impressed by the depth of the Sorcerer King's considerations.

Neia understood that the Sorcerer King's eyes had gone from looking into his hands to herself as she ran over. For some reason, observing the Sorcerer King's habitual movements made Neia a little happy.

The thought that she understood the tiny quirks of an extraordinary individual made Neia's cheeks relax.

"Your Majesty! We are grateful that you have chosen to visit this place in person!"

Neia was still the Sorcerer King's squire, even after being appointed the commander of the archery unit. That said, it was hard to say that she had done a squire's job properly, while leaving his side to train others in archery instead, not to mention she had even made him come here instead.

Neia wanted to prioritize her work as the Sorcerer King's squire, but instead she had chosen to do this, because she no longer wanted to be a burden to him. And there was also another reason, which she had not told anyone else.

That was because the Sorcerer King refused to have anyone except Neia serve as his follower. He had said that to Caspond's face with Neia in attendance.

As more and more people gathered, there were many more skilful or charming people than this mad-eyed maiden. Even so, he had said that Neia would be fine. The person she viewed as justice had said that about her.

Could anything have made her happier?

“--Umu. While I know you’re being humble, I don’t think this is a mere ‘place’. After all, it is where you sharpen your fangs, is it not?”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty!”

She looked around -- perhaps it would be disrespectful to look away from the Sorcerer King, but the visor she wore made it possible -- and saw that her people had heard it and the tips of their ears were turning red. The problem was that their performance deteriorated, possibly because they were nervous, or because they had stiffened up their shoulders in order to look good for the Sorcerer King.

That said, her own ears felt a little hot too.

“...Miss Baraja. Your men have made a great deal of progress since last time. Surely that must be your accomplishment as their leader.”

His pleasantries both embarrassed Neia and left her at a loss for how to answer.

It would be embarrassing to say that they got nervous and can’t show their full ability because Your Majesty arrived. They would think so too.

Therefore, Neia decided to take his words as they were given. However--

“No, it’s nothing of the sort. I hardly taught them anything. They could have done that by themselves.”

“Is that so? Well, if you say so, then it must be true.”

In other words -- the Sorcerer King did not think so. Which meant that the Sorcerer King thought very highly of Neia.

Neia raised her voice a little to try and hide her soaring emotions.

“In, in that case, Your Majesty, does your presence here mean that the meeting is already over?”

“Ah, yes. They’re done for the day, but that said, I did not make any special suggestions.”

Right now, this city had a mountain of problems, all of which stemmed from the increasing population of the city. The original population of this small city of Lloyds had been less than 20’000, but after gathering the people from the liberated camps, it was now in excess of 150’000.

The most recent of these overpopulation problems was the slimes used in the sewers -- the Sanitary Slimes -- whose own population had surged due to an abundance in food and had thus caused a panic when they erupted from the waterways.

When the slime population grew, they were typically burned back down with magic items, but the unexpectedly rapid growth meant that this was not done in time and several men and women had been attacked.

When these men and women were surrounded by the slimes, a group of rubbish-clearing monsters called the Filth Eaters appeared from the sewers to help them.

Unlike how they appeared, the Filth Eaters were intelligent monsters, and they knew that humans could produce a great deal of their food, and so they saved the people with their acidic bodies.

However, the people were not grateful to the Filth Eaters. That was because Sanitary Slimes were not infectious themselves, but the Filth Eaters who helped them were colonies of pathogens. Thus, the people they had helped had been infected by disease and were in a very bad state, particularly those who had contracted encephalitis.

In addition, it was winter now, so firewood and other fuels were scarce. Then there was the fact that there had been delays in the construction of housing. While there was no food shortage yet, that would become a danger in the future.

The Sorcerer King had been invited to many of the meetings to deal with these problems, possibly because they were counting on his prodigious knowledge to solve their problems.

While the Sorcerer King had simply said that he did not know that much and had merely sat aside to listen, such a person could not have been summoned to meetings time and time again.

The fact that he conducted himself so humbly despite being the king of a nation only deepened Neia’s respect for him.

“What do you intend to do next, Your Majesty?”

“Umu. I had intended to see if the moving of logs was going well… Are you busy with practice, Miss Baraja? If you don’t mind, would you like to accompany me?”

In order to solve the lack of fuel and housing, they were using the Sorcerer King’s undead horses to transport logs from a distant forest. Initially, many people had been averse to using undead horses for transport, but now there was a steady stream of praise for the merits of these undead horses.

“Ah, please allow me to go with you! I am Your Majesty’s Squire, after all!”

The knowledge that she would be able to perform her squirely duties at long last and her delight at being alone with the Sorcerer King caused Neia to unconsciously speak faster and louder. As a result, Neia’s ears burned.

“Is, is that so? Then let us proceed.”

“Yes! Please--”

Then, as though to interrupt her, a sky-blackening inferno erupted in the distance.

For a moment, Neia wondered what was burning.

But that was wrong. She had been too far off. That could not have been

caused by any form of natural combustion.

That fire seemed to be enveloping the city. In other words, it was a wall of fire -- Neia's mind immediately recalled what the members of Blue Rose had said.

"--Your Majesty! That's--"

"Ah, it is as you are thinking, and the same as what I heard from Momon… the time has come at last. It seems that bastard Jaldabaoth is attacking. Miss Baraja, I'm heading out."

Had he anticipated this series of events? As though influenced by the Sorcerer King's calm attitude, Neia's heart calmed down as well. Or no, it would be better to say that the presence of a supreme being like the Sorcerer King gave her peace of mind.

"Where to!?"

"Ah -- hm. Jaldabaoth's aim is still unclear. So, ah -- he might just be here to slaughter indiscriminately. However, if he has an objective, he'll either be targeting me or the Holy Kingdom's leadership, so it would be best if we met up. Tell your men to get ready for battle and then have them flee to a safe district."

"Eh!?"

"They'll be of no use against Jaldabaoth. In that case, it would be better to have them prepare to deal with any demons which might appear. Since the city will probably be in chaos now, once you form up your unit, won't it be better to

have them head outside the city?”

While his words had been unclear at first, perhaps he had organized his thoughts later on, because the middle part onwards was a nonstop series of instructions to Neia.

“Yes! Thank you very much, Your Majesty! Alright, everyone!”

While they had made plans in case Jaldabaoth led an army against them, they had not expected a blaze to surround the entire city. Another big problem was the fact that they did not know the extent of the preparations that the enemy had made.

Neia gave her instructions. There was only a single squad here and they could not do as they pleased, but as a team leader, she had a responsibility to do several things before her orders came.

The instructions were something like this:

Everyone in the squad was to take their families and head to the east gate, because if the enemy attacked, it was more likely that they would attack from the west gate. After that, they would form up at the east gate, and if there were demons outside the east gate, they would climb the walls near the east gate and attack them. In addition, they were to listen to Neia’s adjutant until she arrived and adapt to changes in the battlefield conditions.

Neia’s subordinates obeyed her instructions and moved swiftly into action.

“Your Majesty!”

After giving her orders, Neia turned back and saw that the Sorcerer King's eyes were on his hands, while he had used a flight spell to rise to somewhere around the level of Neia's head.

"Your Majesty! Let me go with you!"

Perhaps he was startled by Neia's shout, but the Sorcerer King suddenly closed his hand and a quiet sound came from within.

"Hmm… well, alright."

The Sorcerer King cast a flying spell on Neia as well. In that moment, she realised the greatness of magic as she learned what it was to fly.

Neia and the Sorcerer King moved as though they were skimming along the ground. They did not leave the surface except to soar over crowds of people, who had descended into chaos, because they could not get a grip on the situation. The reason for that was because flying in the air without cover made them very obvious, and if there were demons about, they might be subjected to attack spells from all directions.

Neia bit her lip in unhappiness, feeling like she was being a burden. Whatever spells the demons used, they could not possibly pose a problem for the Sorcerer King. She could not help but think that he had chosen to go the long way around instead of flying directly to his destination because she was around.

Eventually, they reached their destination -- the headquarters, which also doubled as Caspond's chambers.

The two paladins at the door had their hands full trying to manage the people jammed up near the door.

“Miss Baraja, we’ll go in from above.”

“Yes!”

After seeing that it would be a little difficult to enter from the front door, the two of them floated up and arrived at the balcony. Just then, the window facing them opened up.

“Your Majesty! Thank you for coming.”

It was a paladin.”

“Are the others here yet?”

“No, Your Majesty. The priests are assembling. Vice-Captain Montagnes is off to liberate a prison camp and isn’t expected to return today. Right now, only Captain Custodio and Caspond-denka are present.”

“Is that so. Still, it’s good that the two of them are here. Lead the way.”

“Yes!”

After the paladin led them to Caspond’s room, they could hear a loud

discussion through the door. It seemed quite chaotic.

The paladin opened the door for them, and over a dozen pairs of bloodshot eyes greeted them.

“Sorry I’m late. We’re out of time, so what plans were you discussing just now?”

Everyone looked at each other, and Caspond spoke up on their behalf.

“We have not spotted Jaldabaoth yet. Your Majesty, could this fire have been made by a magic item or a demon other than Jaldabaoth?”

“I am unsure. After all, even I could not do such a thing.”

The others were shaken. The Sorcerer King employed magic that surpassed the imagination. How powerful must Jaldabaoth be if he could use a spell that even the Sorcerer King could not?

“In that case, what effects does that fire have? Blue Rose said that they managed to pass through it, then surely normal people can do so as well, right?”

After saying so, Remedios turned to look straight at the Sorcerer King.

“That won’t be a problem. As for its effects, demons standing inside the fire benefit from improved attributes, negative-karma spells will do more damage, item drop rates will increase and many other effects. But according to the

results from the investigation team, none of those effects exist. However, it still remains to be seen whether it has any other effects."

"Which means we can freely move in and out, right?"

"Hm? Didn't I say that at the beginning?"

"In that case, we ought to evacuate as long as there are no demihumans or demons around, and then form up into units there. After all, I heard that demons appeared within the area surrounded by the fire when it was last seen in the Kingdom. Let's go with that plan of action, everyone."

After giving the paladins their orders, he asked the Sorcerer King again, "Can you use your magic to pinpoint Jaldabaoth's location, Your Majesty?"

"If I could, I wouldn't need to stay in this city now, would I?"

"You have a point."

Just as the Sorcerer King was dealing with one question after another, everyone heard an ominous creaking.

It started out quietly enough, and then it steadily grew to drown out the clamor in the room. One by one, they realised that the sound had died down, and finally, in the silence, the only thing that remained was the sound of creaking.

Everyone looked around nervously in all directions, and just then, Neia

noticed something odd on the outside wall of the building and exclaimed an “Ah--”

A crack appeared on the wall, and as everyone watched, it began to spread. The wall bulged, and then--

“Everyone, get away!”

Just as Remedios shouted, the Sorcerer King stood in front of Neia.

The wall broke apart and there was an explosion. Bricks flew through the room like a spray of shotgun pellets. Groans filled the air; they came from those people who had been hit by the high-speed chunks of bricks.

5章 アインズ死す

If the Sorcerer King had not shielded Neia with his body, Neia might have

ended up groaning on the ground with them.

“Th-thank you--”

The Sorcerer King held up his hand to stop Neia before she could thank him, and then he pointed at the smoke-billowing gap in the wall to draw her attention there.

There was a gigantic silhouette there, the color of a roaring blaze.

“--Thank you for the warm welcome, humans.”

It was a deep and powerful voice.

As though cutting through the smoke, that being calmly poked itself through the hole in the outside wall and entered the room.

It was -- a demon.

Due to his size, he had to bend down in order to barely fit inside the room. His posture looked a little stupid, but now was definitely not the time for laughter. Her throat could not work properly; she wanted to swallow the saliva pooling in her mouth, but it stuck there instead.

This was an overwhelming gathering of power.

Neia had never been very good at judging the strength of her foes relative to

herself, but she understood that she could not win against him even with tens of thousands of Neias. She was swallowed by a swell of might comparable to the Sorcerer King after removing his ring, and she could not move a muscle.

It was then that she realised who she was facing.

That, that's Jaldabaoth… the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth...

His face was filled with wrath, his wings were red, and his burning arms -- he seemed to be holding something in one hand, and Neia could not help but doubt her eyes.

That was -- though she dared not believe it -- a lower body. It emanated a vile stench, one of advanced decay.

"Yeeeaaarrt!"

It was a shout -- no, a scream. It was a sound that only one who had burst the shackles on their emotions and fallen into madness would make. It came from behind Neia.

Neia's back shuddered. The person making that sound was Remedios.

Remedios raised her holy sword high and charged straight at Jaldabaoth, not caring about her own defense.

This was too rash. Even Neia, who was not skilled with swords, felt that it was a foolish charge.

“--Get lost.”

Those weighty, quiet words were accompanied by the sound of splashing sound. At the same time, Remedios flew in a straight line and crashed into a wall. Her impact made such a crash that it seemed as though the entire building would collapse. After that, Remedios -- who had been swatted aside like a fly -- collapsed limply from the wall.

It would seem Jaldabaoth had sent Remedios flying with the object that looked like a human’s lower body.

Neia would surely have died if she had taken that hit. But as expected of the country’s strongest paladin, her life did not seem to be in danger.

However, in its place, a revolting odor began to spread through the air.

The room was filled with chunks of meat from the decayed lower body that Jaldabaoth had used to strike Remedios.

“Ahh… what a mess. I sincerely apologize for getting the room dirty. Of course, it would not have ended up like this if that woman had not charged at me without thinking -- well, that’s just an excuse. Please forgive me.”

Jaldabaoth slowly bowed his head. He seemed genuinely apologetic, but that only made everyone else more afraid.

And then, he casually dumped what he was holding -- something that looked

like the charred remains of a human ankle -- to the ground.

“My my, I guess I got too excited when swinging it around and the top half flew off somewhere. It’s a dirty little thing, so I’ve been looking for a chance to dispose of it… but in the end I managed to make good use of her. Am I not a kind demon? She must be thanking me from the afterlife.”

Jaldabaoth muttered to himself.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

Remedios touched herself as she wailed in anguish, fresh blood streaming from the corner of her mouth. No, she was collecting the chunks of meat that were stuck to her. What was she doing? Had she lost her mind at last, Neia wondered.

No, there was a method to her seeming madness.

Don’t tell me, that corpse was… how could this be...

Although the lower body had tattered bits of what looked like armor stuck to it, it should have belonged to a woman. In that case, she could imagine two people that it could have been.

If that was really the case...

“What a lovely sound,” Jaldabaoth waved his hand like a conductor. “In that case, I believe this is the first time we have met, Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown-

dono -- or perhaps -sama would be a better form of address?”

“It doesn’t matter. Now then, I trust you’re here for a showdown with me?”

“Indeed. No amount of weaklings will make a difference.”

“I concur on that point. I have no intention of generating meaningless deaths.”

Still sniffling, Remedios looked towards the Sorcerer King.

“Your Majesty, you are strong. Stronger even than Momon. I hope you will allow me to adopt a strategy that will guarantee my victory.”

Jaldabaoth raised his hand, and a head poked itself through the hole.

It was a woman wearing a mask and a maid’s outfit. There were two of them, in fact.

“I trust you will not call me despicable?”

“--Uh, hm. Well, this is… mhm… uh… um.”

The Sorcerer King was starting to get worried. That was only to be expected.

Nobody could have expected Jaldabaoth to arrive with his maid demons in tow. However--

That’s probably not the case. The Sorcerer King is wise, and he must have anticipated this. In that case, why is he like this? Could it be that it’s because we’re here? Perhaps he’s not confident of protecting us all as well, so he’s worried!

“Your Majesty, please do not worry about us.”

“Eh?”

The Sorcerer King made a tiny exclamation of surprise.

Neia knew very well that the maid demons were beings who could kill everyone in this room, and they were so powerful that she could not be at ease even if someone told her not to worry. Compared to someone on the Sorcerer

King’s level, Neia and the others, probably including Remedios, were little more than valueless pawns.

However -- she would rather die than get in his way.

She had once heard that the Sorcerer King’s subordinates were prepared to die if they became hostages. While the Sorcerer King said he had felt distressed by it, Neia could finally understand how his subordinates had felt. They did not want to become a burden to the person they respected.

“Hahaha! Do not worry, humans. I will torture you all to death afterwards. We will be waiting in the fountain at the center of town. Of course, you may flee if you wish, Sorcerer King.”

“I take those words and return them to you, Jaldabaoth.”

The Sorcerer King and Jaldabaoth stared each other down.

After that, Jaldabaoth turned -- and Remedios jumped up, her holy sword in hand, and rushed at him.

The weakly-glowing holy sword looked like a band of flowing light.

“Dieeeeee!”

And then, she stabbed it into Jaldabaoth’s back.

“What’s this? This is… Are you satisfied?”

--It was a cold, flat voice.

“Why… why… after taking a strike from the holy sword… you should be evil…”

Remedios’ back looked far too tiny and insignificant in comparison.

“I have no idea what to make of that. Why? What do you mean by why? It felt like a little prick, how about that? If you’re done, would you mind getting out of the way? I don’t intend to kill you here. I’ll decide after I kill the Sorcerer King.”

Jaldabaoth paid no heed to Remedios and spread his enormous, fiery wings before flying off. The maid demons followed him.

“...Then I’ll be going too. You should go take shelter so you don’t get caught

up in the fighting. While I don't think it'll be a problem, I hope you'll understand if this city ends up wrecked."

"Your Majesty, will it be alright?"

Caspond rose from where he had dived for cover to avoid the debris flying about the room. His eyes looked at Remedios, who looked utterly defeated and could not rise to her feet.

"It'll be fine -- I can't say that for sure, but there ought to be a chance. It would have been very troublesome if he'd brought the demihumans along as shields. Looks like he's still underestimating me, and this is also a chance to bring the maid demons into my fold.

"It'll be fine. It's okay. My sister is still here. Kelart is still here. As long as she's around, Calca-sama might…"

Remedios smacked her face as she muttered to herself, and then she forcefully rose to her feet.

"Sorcerer King! I'll go too! Lend me a weapon that can harm him! I'll become your sword for the time being!"

The Sorcerer King looked at Remedios, her eyes bloodshot and filled with hate, and then shook his head.

"...Forget about it. You would only get in the way."

"What are you saying!?"

"Do you not understand? I speak of the disparity in strength. Or do you mean to say you understand it, but refuse to accept it? Simply put -- you are a burden."

Remedios glared at the Sorcerer King like he was her nemesis.

The Sorcerer King's words were very harsh, but they were also true. Or rather, they were hard to accept precisely because they were true.

"Captain Remedios! I have another task for you. Evacuate these people outside the city!"

Caspond gave the order in a stern, commanding tone.

“The plan was to let His Majesty handle Jaldabaoth. You agreed to that too, didn’t you?”

“...Ahh, I know,” Remedios bit her lip, and then she forced out her next words. “You must kill that bastard.”

“Understood.”

“--Paladins, carefully gather the remains of that body. Don’t leave a single piece behind.”

“Captain… that body is…”

The paladin had an idea of what was going on, and ventured his question in a trembling voice. Remedios replied in a tone that seemed to be telling him not to ask any more.

“Don’t forget that there might be demonic trickery at work.”

Remedios left without looking back. Several paladins followed her, with half-frightened looks on their faces.

“Your Majesty, I sincerely apologize for the way she treated you… May I apologize on her behalf?” Caspond lowered his head. “Please, I beg your forgiveness.”

“...I accept your apology. Now then, hurry up and evacuate. If he has to wait too long, he might decide to go back on his word. I’ll be heading off first to buy time, but I hope you understand that I can only give you about 30 minutes.”

“I understand. Everyone heard that? Get moving!”

Several priests and paladins moved out with Caspond.

The only people left in the room were the Sorcerer King and Neia, as well as several paladins and priests who were stuffing the remains of a certain someone’s body into a bag. In that case--

“Your Majesty, may I come with you!?”

There were gasps of awe and sudden intakes of air from all around her. But Neia ignored those irrelevant people. She took off her visor and looked straight at the Sorcerer King.

"...Umu. I cannot. He may have said all that just now, but he's a demon. If pressed, he will reveal his true nature and use you as a hostage.

"But if that happens, Your Majesty will kill me without hesitation, will you not?"

"When you say that with such a serious look on your face, you make me sound like a cruel person. Well, if I can't save you, I'll discard you. I'll hit you with an attack spell as well."

"In that case--"

"--I am not doing this because I want to kill hostages, you know?"

"Ah! Forgive me…"

That was how it was. He would do it because it was the best choice available. If there were a better alternative, this merciful man would surely choose that instead. Thus, not letting Neia accompany him was because it was the best of the best alternatives.

"But… Your Majesty, you have used many spells and even your magic items and mana in order to free this city. As a magic caster, surely you must be weakened now. Will that be alright?"

"Mhm! Indeed, it might be dangerous, but I came here to defeat Jaldabaoth. Fortunately, he came to find me instead. Now I'll destroy him and mape the raids… ugh, saying that I want the maids makes me sound like a dirty old man, hm…"

Neia smiled bitterly at the Sorcerer King, who could still make a lame joke at a time like this. She wanted to speak, but the Sorcerer King cut her off with a raise of his hand.

"Besides, I'll be a laughingstock if I run away here."

The Sorcerer King shrugged, like he was kidding. Neia sensed that he was not

being serious, and so she raised her voice.

“Your Majesty! If they want to laugh, let them! I humbly submit that you should only fight him in top condition! Also, you came here to battle Jaldabaoth, but you ended up using a vast amount of mana and strength on the behalf of the Holy Kingdom. That’s not what you agreed to in the beginning. If we say that, the people of my country will…”

“Indeed, that is true. But humans are creatures who only believe what they want to believe. Even if you spread the word, nobody would take it to heart, Miss Baraja.”

“That…! In that case, I can be a witness! And…”

Neia looked out the corner of her eye at the paladins and priests listening to their conversation, Surely they would be willing to be witnesses.

“...Neia Baraja. I thank you, but there is no need for that. I will not change my intention to fight Jaldabaoth.”

“This -- why is that?”

“Simple. It is because it is a promise I have made as a king.”

Neia had nothing to say. There was nothing she could say in response to that. A commoner like herself could not possibly say anything that could change the mind of a King.

There were murmurs of admiration around her. Indeed, this great and proud person was none other than His Majesty the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown.

Neia was filled with pride for the king that she held in such high esteem.

“Your Majesty, I know this is deeply disrespectful, but if you feel there is danger, I beg you to flee.”

Perhaps mentioning the possibility of his loss might make him unhappy, but even so she still had to say it.

“...But of course. It is a fool who fights without preparing a means of escape. Even if you lose one battle, you can make good use of the information gained in

the next one. It doesn't matter if you lose the first battle."

"I expected nothing less of you, Your Majesty."

An extreme interpretation of that was that if his aim was to defeat Jaldabaoth, then all he needed was to be victorious in the end. Neia was excited by this line of thinking, which was not a warrior's mindset, but that of a king.

"Then I'll be heading out first."

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Ainz walked toward the place Jaldabaoth had indicated. Along the way, he used [Message] to order the two Hanzos who had followed him to check for tails and if anyone was observing from afar.

After receiving a negative report on both those items, Ainz had originally intended to terminate the transmission immediately, but then he received a somewhat confused report that there were members of the Pleiades present.

Ainz acknowledged it and ended the [Message].

...We didn't find any other players or World-Class Item holders this time round either. I keep thinking they ought to have shown themselves by now… but if they don't exist, how do you explain what happened to Shalltear? Was it some kind of coincidence? It should have been the effect of a World-Class Item, right? Or was it the work of some Talent?

The fact that nothing had turned up despite going to these lengths made the whole thing feel like a trap for him. For all he knew, the opposition was waiting for him to lower his guard before striking.

Honestly… well, it doesn't matter. Careful planning for the future won't be

wasted.

Therefore, Ainz contacted the other Hanzo squads with [Message] to verify their readiness and that his orders had been received.

Alright, preparations are complete. The next part is simple, I just need to follow Demiurge's playbook. Even if I make a mistake, I can always say "I was just testing you" and so on.

That was good.

Ainz was moved by how light his tread was. This the first time he had felt so relaxed since coming to this world, and it was like floating through the sky.

Soon, Ainz came to an average-sized square.

This had originally been a periodically-activated fountain square for the citizens' leisure. However, there was no water flowing through here after the demihumans had wrecked it. There were no plans to restore it for the time being, and the surroundings looked very austere.

A demon stood proudly there.

It was a huge demon with burning wings and two crimson, brawny fists.

This was the Evil Lord of Wrath from Nazarick. However, what stood here was merely a monster that Demiurge had called up with his Evil Lord Summons. It could only be used once every 50 hours, but it could be freely controlled for a

time. Nazarick would not be diminished even if it were killed.

It was level 84.

As a physical-attacker type Evil Lord, it had a very high HP total.

Of all the special abilities that Evil Lords possessed, the most dangerous one was the ability to summon another Evil Lord which was lower level than themselves. However, summoned monsters could not in turn summon more monsters. Therefore, the Evil Lord of Wrath that Demiurge had summoned could not summon another Evil Lord.

If this Evil Lord had been created or made, then it could summon additional another other creatures. For instance, the Evil Lord of Sloth would often summon pack after pack of demons and undead, making them very hard to deal with.

In addition, one troublesome point about the Evil Lord of Wrath was that it was very hard to manage its hate.

The Evil Lord of Wrath built aggro more easily than other Evil Lords. He had heard tanks say that the most aggravating thing about dealing with multiple Evil Lords at once was how to keep the Evil Lord of Wrath from going off-target.

In addition, it had the special ability of doing more damage and gaining more defense the higher its hate value became. Still, that was not too frightening. The only thing that Ainz had to be worried about was its ability called [Soul-Bought Miracle], which produced unknown effects.

The spells it could cast included:

Tenth-tier spells: [Meteor Fall], [Time Stop], [Field of Unclean]

Ninth-tier spells: [Greater Rejection], [Vermillion Nova]

Eighth-tier spells: [Distort Moral], [Insanity], [Astral Smite], [Wave of Pain]

Seventh-tier spells: [Napalm], [Hellflame], [Greater Word of Curse], [Greater Teleportation], [Blasphemy]

Sixth-tier spells: [Flamewing]. [Wall of Hell]

Third-tier spells: [Fireball], [Slow]

While the exact number of spells that monsters could use varied with their level and type, it was typically around 8. However, high-level monsters like Dragons, Demons and Angels were an exception.

Still, as a pure warrior type, the Evil Lord of Wrath's spells were not particularly fearsome.

It had no skills to strengthen its spells, and its magic-related stats were very low. While the Evil Lord's attack spells were fire-element and thus targeted a weakness of the undead, there was no need for him to be cautious. Its mind-affecting spells were also useless against the undead, and Ainz's karma values had been negative to begin with, so spells like [Distort Moral] were a waste of time.

To Ainz, who was of negative karma, Angels were harder for him to deal with than Demons.

As he contemplated his opposition's data, Ainz glanced at the two maids behind the Evil Lord. He would think about them later.

“Now then, you have heard everything?”

“But of course, Ainz-sama.”

Hearing that weighty voice made Suzuki Satoru smile unconsciously from inside Ainz’s heart. That was because this demon -- and all the monsters of Nazarick -- were designed in accordance with their image.

Those voices were probably what the developers or their creators had envisioned for them. In that case, who had come up with the adorable voice that Lip Bugs had before consuming any vocal cords? Or did the whole seiyuu-in-your-mind thing that Peroroncino was talking about really exist?

No, that was impossible.

Pandora’s Actor was a good example. He was a being who did not feel like he reflected what his creator had in mind. And then there was the fact that even a being without vocal cords like Ainz could speak. All he could say was that magical worlds were truly astounding.

“If you’re addressing me in that tone, I take it the surroundings have been swept clean?”

“Indeed.”

“Then I will ask you the most important question. Are you prepared to fight with the intent of killing me?”

“Yes, I was ordered to do so.”

Ainz nodded as he heard the Evil Lord’s reply.

One thing that had made Ainz uneasy all this time was a lack of strong opponents to fight.

After the battle with Shalltear, Ainz had been worrying about not having chances to fight with all his strength.

After that, he had gained experience in close combat, and he could skilfully move his body as Momon and fight as a warrior of roughly level 33.

But how would this body function in higher-level combat?

He should have conducted combat training against high-level opponents. Unfortunately, he had not encountered such high-level monsters until now.

That was why he had ordered Demiurge to command the Evil Lord to kill Ainz.

He would defeat this powerful foe who wanted to kill him, and strengthen himself.

That had been easier said than done. The two of them had been strongly opposed to the idea and persuading them had taken a lot of time. One could not fault a mentally exhausted Ainz from thinking, “I thought we agreed that my word was law...”

In the end, after countless concessions and conditions, the stage had been set for this live battle.

A chill coursed through his body as he thought that he might die. It was a completely different sensation from what he had felt during the battle with Shalltear, because this was an unnecessary battle.

However--

While I had a lot of PVP experience in YGGDRASIL, I realised in the battle against Shalltear that this world was not a game. If the time comes when I must face off against a level 100 player with a great deal of real combat experience, I won't be able to win without an equivalent amount of experience. I have to know that fear is the road to defeat.

Ainz was very glad that he was undead and could suppress the fear he might have felt at the prospect of death. If he were still human, he might have curled up into a ball by now.

"Now then, Yuri," Ainz said to the maid behind the Evil Lord. "Since you and Lupusregina are here, does that mean you will be fighting me together with the Evil Lord? How about the others?"

He saw no sign of Solution, Entoma or CZ. They must have been off doing work elsewhere.

"We are the only two who have come here. We sisters will challenge you together with the Evil Lord of Wrath. The reason is because Albedo-sama feels

that allowing the people of this country to witness the maid demons is not a bad thing. In addition, the Evil Lord of Wrath alone might not be enough to satisfy your request, Ainz-sama."

It was true that a single level 80ish Evil Lord would be hard-pressed to stand against Ainz. However, even the addition of Yuri and Lupusregina did not make it a very powerful opponent.

However, unnecessary, troublesome factors can become a disadvantage. Suffering because I underestimated my opponent would be foolish. I'd best stay on my guard.

"In addition, Albedo-sama ordered us to check something with you, Ainz-sama. Are you really alright with the condition that you will not leave Nazarick for the coming year if you are defeated?"

"Ah, that was one of the conditions Albedo insisted on before agreeing to this bout. If I lose, I will spend the next year working hard within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, with Albedo, in the same room… aren't you going to check the conditions that Demiurge mentioned?"

Ainz looked at the Evil Lord, but it said nothing. It probably felt that there was no need to check.

"Thank you very much."

Yuri bowed.

Now, there would be no room to change the plan. As he thought of how dire

the situation was, Ainz could not help but sweat internally.

It would be easy enough to kill Yuri and the others due to the tremendous disparity in their respective strength, but Ainz Ooal Gown would never allow that. Killing an NPC for the sake of training was utterly ridiculous.

In other words--

I have to kill the Evil Lord without harming Yuri and Lupusregina.

Ainz could not help laughing. This would be one hell of a challenge. Still, there was nothing better for practice.

“Is something wrong, Ainz-sama?”

“No, it’s nothing, don’t worry.”

“Also, Cocytus-sama requested that we record this battle so everyone in Nazarick can learn from it. Do you mind?”

While he did not want to do so because he felt it was embarrassing, recording battles was very common in YGGDRASIL. With that in mind, he ought to approve that request.

“Still, recording the battle proceedings will trigger interference from the anti-divination offensive barriers. Shall I lower it?”

“Surely you mean the divination-detecting spell, do you not, Ainz-sama? And not the linked offensive spell model?”

“Ah, yes, that’s the one. After all, if it were the latter, it would be bad if someone from Nazarick were trying to find my position and triggered it.”

If he deployed the linked offensive spell barrier he had so carelessly done in the past, any member of Nazarick trying to cast a divination on Ainz would be very badly hurt. While he used to do that all the time because friendly fire was off, doing so now would be dangerous.

Of course, the denizens of Nazarick would not be hurt by the offensive barrier, given that they were protected by a World-Class Item, but the defense would incur a cost in gold coins. Rather, expenses like that were more painful for him.

“Then there’s no need to worry ~su.”

“No, I’d best deactivate it. Besides, offensive barriers disappear once they activate and have to be reset. In that case, I might as well just deactivate it from the start and have some peace of mind.”

“I see ~su, then I’ll leave it to you ~su.”

Ainz deactivated his offensive barrier.

“Alright -- then let’s begin the combat recording. Whose point of view are you using? Mine is fine too.”

“I think I was supposed to do the recording ~su.”

In truth, Ainz was fine with anything. Anyone’s perspective would have been alright.

In addition, the memories of sparring with his friends were coming back to him, and Ainz began to enjoy himself.

Simulated battles with his friends were a fundamental part of devising new techniques and weapons.

He had often sparred with Touch Me, but those battles did not count and had not been entered in Ainz’s PVP record.

Since Ainz had never won even once, his win rate would have dropped if they had been recorded. He had never taken it seriously, simply treating it as “training” since he knew he could not win. Ainz always emphasized that.

“Shall we begin, then? You need to prepare yourself to kill me. Of course, I won’t kill you.”

“No, actually, it’s alright if you kill us.”

Before Ainz could say that he did not want to do so, Yuri stated the reason.

“Ainz-sama, we are not the actual members of the Pleiades. All of us are Greater Doppelgangers.”

“W-what?”

“We are musicians of the Erich String Orchestra under Chacmool-sama of the Five Worsts. By Albedo-sama’s order, we have transformed into members of the Pleiades.”

“--Is that so?”

He looked at them several more times, but Ainz could not tell the difference between them and the Yuri and Lupusregina which he knew. He could not help but wonder if this was a lie they were telling so he could kill them without worries during the fight.

Perhaps one of them was fake. He had once heard that the best lies were those that were truths blended with some small falsehoods.

Ainz could not see through the Greater Doppelgangers’ disguise. There was a spell that could dispel the Greater Doppelgangers’ shapeshifting, but using that spell would keep them from transforming again for a period of time due to the spell’s effect. In that case, having them transform into the Pleiades would be meaningless. It would be a different matter if Ainz had learned lower-tier spells but--

No--

“Hm, it does seem like Lupusregina is speaking differently from normal. What’s going on?”

Lupusregina’s face went blank for a moment.

“Is that strange, Ainz-sama?”

The Greater Doppelganger pretending to be Lupusregina changed its way of speaking. That was probably its usual speech pattern.”

“Ah, those aren’t the usual expressions she uses.”

“But Lupusregina-sama always spoke like that in front of us…”

When a Doppelganger impersonated someone, people closer to the target would find it more difficult to see through their disguise. That was because they used a form of telepathy during their shapeshifting to read the surface thoughts of the people they were speaking to and those around them in order to extract information related to the target they were impersonating and then apply it to their impersonation act -- at least, that was what the monster encyclopedia said.

That was according to Pandora’s Actor, whose ability had become real in this world.

However, that was simply to discern the possible reactions that the impersonated subject might have, and it did not read minds or search through memories.

In addition, since this ability was a form of psychic attack, it was useless on Ainz and other undead creatures. One could also simply resist it if the level difference was great enough. That was probably why it could not discern

Lupusregina's possible reactions from Ainz and had revealed itself.

Incidentally, it was more likely that Doppelgangers would out themselves when facing multiple people, because each of them would have a different impression of the target.

Umu. Why did Lupu always add a ~su at the end of her sentences in front of them? Ahh, I see, so it was to make them sound disturbing. Perhaps she was trying to help me. What a cute little rascal she is...

"...Hm? My apologies. I have another question that is unrelated to combat. While that is Albedo's order, if I were to tell you to abandon that order, who would have priority?

"Naturally, your words would have priority, Ainz-sama. However, I must sincerely apologize that we will obey orders from our summoner, Anyami Shirabe-sama, above all else."

"...Hm? Who's that?"

Was there an NPC like that? As the question grew in his heart, the flames in Ainz's eyes flared as he heard Yuri's answer.

"That would be Temperance-sama."

"Eh? Temperance-san? Anyami? Ahhh… well, that does work as a physical description… but still, Anyami Shirabe?"

“Yes. Temperance-sama once asked to be addressed that way, so Chacmool-sama instructed us to do so as well.”

“...After I return to Nazarick, I would like to hear all about this. Anyami Shirabe, is it.”

This was the first time he had ever heard him refer to himself that way.

Ainz could not help laughing as he learned that a former friend had referred to himself that way in a place where nobody else knew. This was truly a cunning trap, set to decrease his fighting spirit.

Ahh, no, no. I mustn’t fall for Anyami Shirabe’s trap! Ku, kuku...

Though he knew it was not the right time to do so, he recalled the guild member in question.

How had he looked and felt when he had given that name?

Ainz narrowed his eyes as he reminisced about his friend from the past, and then he saw a surprised look on the face of the Yuri-Doppelganger as it tilted its head. Ainz sensed that he had become careless and pulled himself together.

He could remember his old friends later. Right now, he ought to analyze the Doppelganger’s speech.

After this, I’d like to question all the vassals and NPCs about the secrets they’ve been hiding. Kukuku -- in that case, another question popped up.

In the absence of a direct order, vassals like Doppelgangers would obey the NPC in charge of them. In that case, what would happen if a certain NPC wanted to kill Ainz and gathered many high-level vassals and ordered them to attack Ainz with their strongest moves? Of course, this would be happening while Ainz was unable to detect or stop them.

Would they carry out that order? Or would they refuse orders like that?

“...You’re also ready to come at me like you want to kill me, is that it?”

“Yes. Those are the orders I have received, and I have determined that I also have your permission, Ainz-sama.”

The Yuri-Doppelganger’s answer made Ainz wrinkle his -- nonexistent -- brows.

...Isn’t this dangerous? It’s probably best to see exactly where the boundary lies here.

If even Ainz could think of this, then Albedo had most likely inspected it herself, Still, he ought to make sure, just in case. He could not let a safety loophole sit unfilled.

“...Indeed. I permit you to use your full abilities to kill me in this battle. Then swear on the name of Ainz Ooal Gown once more. Can you swear that what you said about your true identities just now was the truth?”

“Yes. This we do swear, upon the names of all the Supreme Beings.”

Yuri and Lupusregina transformed their hands into alien-looking objects.

“--Ah!”

“What? What is it, Doppel-Yuri?”

“Ainz-sama, there is one thing I forgot. Our equipment was borrowed from the Pleiades. Therefore, can we trouble you to recover them for us if we are killed?”

Doppelgangers could even copy the clothing and equipment of their targets if they wanted to. However, they could only duplicate appearances, and not the equipment’s abilities. Since they would gain no benefits from the gear, when fighting a magic caster like Ainz, the difference between them would be like that between heaven and earth. Therefore, they had no choice but to borrow the real thing from the originals.

Greater Doppelgangers can imitate people of up to level 60. However, unlike the NPCs, they can only copy up to 90% of the originals’ abilities. Even if they possess gear from the Pleiades, there’s no need to be worried… is there? In that case, killing them would be too much of a waste. After all, they’re mercenary vassals, which means summoning them cost money -- as I thought, I should just remove their ability to fight. Do I need to put that into the rules after all?

“Alright! I will add one more rule. Once you Greater Doppelgangers are near death, you are out. I will monitor your health with [Life Essence]. You can hide your HP totals, right?” After Yuri replied in the affirmative, Ainz nodded. “Then

suppress that ability for a while. If I judge that you'll die after a light hit, I will call your name and rule you out. In that case, you will count as dead. Leave the battle area immediately. In addition, the same thing applies to the Evil Lord of Wrath. If I declare victory, the combat will end. Do you understand?"

The Evil Lord of Wrath and the two Doppelgangers indicated that they understood.

"Very well. Then we'll start when the coin hits the ground… about 25 minutes has passed, so I guess they won't complain even if we start."

Ainz cast [Life Essence] and then took out a gold coin. Of course, this was not a YGGDRASIL gold coin, but a trading gold coin used in this world.

"Will you not buff yourself?"

"Ensuring you have time to buff up is also part of combat training."

After replying thus to Doppel-Lupusregina, Ainz backed away from them, then flicked the coin up with his thumb so it landed between the two of them.

As the coin hit the ground, Ainz jumped back, then threw his hands out and shouted:

"Absolute Immunity Barrier!"

He saw the Evil Lord and the two Doppelgangers freeze up for a moment. However, the Evil Lord and Doppel-Yuri immediately rushed in.

That was it. That was the right answer.

Ainz's previous actions were meaningless. There was no ability called Absolute Immunity Barrier in YGGDRASIL -- or at least, there should not have been, was far as Ainz knew. Still, Ainz had shouted that name not simply to fake them out, but also for a different reason.

Ah-- it feels like they're a little slow. Could it be that they think something was done to them and they've become a little timid now? Well, that's what happens when you wonder if you've fallen into the enemy's trap.

The uneasiness that came from the fact that such a technique might actually exist in this world restricted their movements. One could say that this feint had succeeded because there were still unknown things out there.

Of course, that was not simply because of the unknown. Special abilities like the kind that were innate to Ainz were a good example.

During YGGDRASIL, there was no such thing as using a corpse as a medium to ignore the duration on created undead. This aberration had only sprung up after coming to this world. One could imagine that there were many other such changes that had happened in the process of coming to this world from the game. No, only a fool would think no such thing had happened.

In other words, making decisions with YGGDRASIL knowledge alone was very dangerous.

I ought to discuss this with Albedo… and the others, Cocytus included.

Ainz cast a silent [Fly] spell and began thinking as he retreated to the rear while keeping a fixed distance from his pursuers.

Albedo said that it would take about two years of preparation before destroying the Kingdom. Should I collect information until then? Expanding one's nation means expanding the area that will be in contact with the outside...

I ought to throw these questions at Albedo and Demiurge and get their opinions. Hm -- illusions seem to be surprisingly powerful, it might be very bad if we don't watch out for them. It feels like you could do a lot with them if you were smart. If I meet a skilled illusionist, I should probably treat them well to recruit them. Fluder -- whoa!

The Evil Lord had outpaced Ainz's [Fly] spell on foot. Unfortunately, flying was not that fast.

"!"

After taking the Evil Lord's maul-like fist, Ainz felt pain -- though it was immediately suppressed. Though he had felt the same way during the fight with Shalltear, he was once against thankful for this body of his that could even suppress his pain. It was thanks to it that Ainz could fight.

After that, the Evil Lord pursued Ainz -- who had been knocked flying -- and closed the distance to him.

To Ainz, this was the worst possible thing they could have done.

Yuri's circled around behind me. They're using a pincer attack of two people who can do bludgeoning damage, which is my weakness. Meanwhile, Lupusregina's keeping her distance and casting spells… hm, that's a buff. Good grief, this is the best way to deal with magic casters. Is this because of the Evil Lord's combat AI? Or is it because it's choosing moves from the mind of its summoner, Demiurge? Ah, never mind.

If they would not let him keep his distance, then he would make his own space.

"[Greater Teleportation]."

His field of vision immediately opened up, and the city spread below him. Under normal circumstances, he would not have been able to teleport to an unknown destination, but it would be alright as long as it was within line of sight. Having teleported 1 kilometer above the ground without any hesitation whatsoever, Ainz cast a spell. It was [Body of Effulgent Beryl].

This spell was exceptionally effective because Yuri and the Evil Lord both did bludgeoning damage.

As he muttered, "Of course, that's not all", Ainz looked to the ground. "...If Bukubukuchagama-san or Variable Talisman-san were here, the backliners wouldn't be getting beaten up."

When playing as a party, skilled aggro managers like tanks would not make mistakes like allowing the magic casters in the backline to be attacked.

During the time when they had stopped playing the game -- when he had gone out to earn the money to pay for Nazarick's upkeep by himself, he had used mercenary NPCs to allow him to act with impunity. The only time he had truly fought alone was the battle with Shalltear. Perhaps that was why he could not help complaining.

It had been a while, so he had no idea where the Evil Lord was, but he had a rough idea of where the square was. While carpetbombing the location with attack spells was a valid tactic, that would be pointless. One could say that the objective this time round was to win in a full-powered contest with the opposition.

"[Widen Magic Delay Teleportation]!"

Come to think of it, I used to get pissed off by the mercenary NPCs' poor management of aggro. That was probably the devs' way of saying "please group up with other players" or something.

He then confirmed that there was something large that was going to teleport above him, within the area of the [Delay Teleportation] spell -- the Evil Lord. Thanks to the effect of the [Delay Teleportation], it would take a while before it appeared in the real world. In other words, it meant that these two weak enemies which had lost their strongest shield were completely exposed before him.

In order to weaken the enemy's fighting strength, he ought to defeat the weaker two first. Ainz let gravity claim him, and then accelerated further with [Fly].

The added speed of the freefall meant that he was moving quite fast. The air

struck Ainz's face and flowed past him. At the same time, Ainz opened his eyes and observed the square.

"Though I think hiding in a house would have been better…"

Ainz muttered quietly and then selected Lupusregina -- who was proudly standing in the middle of the square -- as his target.

Yuri was some distance away. While she could see him, she did not look like she was prepared to intercept him. Leaving a healer alone was quite frustrating, but Yuri had made the right decision considering that she had to be wary of area-effect spells,.

Ainz ground to a halt -- in truth, Ainz would not have been hurt even if he had crashed straight into the ground -- and cast his spell.

Ainz chose one of the most destructive tenth-tier spells in his arsenal. At the same time, he used a special ability to maximize the spell. While he could have tripled the spell or something similar to do a great deal of damage, it would be very dangerous while he did not know how much damage the Doppelgangers had taken. He had to avoid the dangerous possibility that he might kill them by accident.

"[Maximize Magic--]"

As he raised his hand, his hand was struck and damaged, and the spell fizzled. The mana spent on casting the spell was wasted.

What? Interfering with a spell through a ranged attack? Is it some kind of

special ability?

Perhaps it was because he was undead, or because he was a veteran player, but his confusion only lasted for a moment. Ainz immediately analyzed the attack he had received.

Neither the Evil Lord nor Yuri nor Lupusregina possessed abilities like this.

Perhaps it's the World-Clas Item holder who brainwashed Shalltear--

To think the Hanzos missed him--

And if it was a ranged weapon user--

If it was her, she could use a special ability to interfere with spell--

"--I fell for it!"

Ainz shouted as he found the answer.

Although Yuri closed in and delivered a punch, Ainz had already enhanced his defense with a spell, so he did not need to be so wary of her. After all, there was something more important than that.

The whole thing was a trap from the start! No, Yuri -- I see! "Here" was referring to the square! That was why the Hanzos said "the Pleiades" were present! Dammit! I was wondering why they said "all of us" when it was just the

two of them!”

All the points of data made a beautiful line.

CZ was attacking now.

It was not just Yuri and Lupusregina who were present. CZ was also on the battlefield. In all likelihood, Solution and Entoma were here too. All the Doppel-Pleiades were present in the city.

No, no, I need to calm down. Doppel-CZ was just lucky. It was easy enough for me to resist that because of the level difference between us. She won’t be so lucky -- well, unlucky for me -- next time.

“[Greater Word of Curse]!”

The Evil Lord has finally caught up and he cast a spell, but Ainz resisted it without any problems. It was only threatening in close combat, so all he had to do was keep his distance.

Ainz ignored the Evil Lord above him and ignored Yuri, who had only done minimal damage to him from the start. He lunged straight at Lupusregina.

In that moment--

Countless Bullet Bugs flew over from the side. There was no doubt that it was Entoma.

He did not even need to use his High-Tier Physical Immunity to stop it. That was because non-magical ranged attacks could not harm Ainz.

Perhaps it was a weapon carried by the Pleiades, Ainz's immunity would have been defeated thanks to the massive amount of data within them. The best example of that was CZ and Yuri's attacks from just now. However, certain skills were calculated based on the user's level. Entoma was a prime example, since she possessed many of these user level-based attacks.

Entoma was only around level 50, so her attacks did not bother Ainz at all. In addition, if all damage from an attack was nullified, none of the rider effects would take place either.

Therefore, he could ignore it.

Ainz did not even spare Entoma a glance as he moved in to finish off the healer, but just then, Solution erupted from her ambush point in front of Lupusregina. It would have been a futile gesture if she was facing an area-effect attack, but that was the only way to protect the healer.

However, Solution had made a fatal mistake. Ainz was a magic caster and did not need to close to attack. All he needed to do was cast attack spells from a distance. He had to think about why she would charge out from in front of Lupusregina.

Ainz had only one aim.

He wanted to expose the enemy and reveal whatever card they had up their sleeve.

Narberal's not around?

He did not understand. She was not among the maid demons who had attacked the Royal Capital. However, one could not rule her out if all the Pleiades were present. It was possible that they were saving their ace in the hole for the last moment. Still, since he knew what kind of hand the opposition had, there was no reason to continue fighting in the middle of the enemy.

"[Greater Teleportation]."

CZ did not interrupt his spell, and he managed to teleport under a roof within line of sight.

I need to remember what Yuri and the others can do. Who should I kill first? -- Lupusregina, the healer. While I need to be very careful of CZ… I have no idea where she is… so I'll let the others go first. The Evil Lord will take the most time, so I'll save him for last.

He saw Lupusregina casting a spell on Solution. Had they not pursued Ainz because drawing out the battle was not a problem for them? No, it was because they understood that since Ainz could move at will with [Greater Teleportation], they could be easily scattered and individually defeated. After all, Ainz was hoping for that too.

It did not matter if they saw through him.

All he had to do was worry them with ranged spells and then take them out one by one. While CZ the ranged combat specialist was present, she would

eventually expose herself if she attacked continuously. Therefore, she would only attack at critical moments. In that case, she would not be so frightening. Or rather--

“I didn’t see her, so let me guess, you’re standing in for Narberal.”

Ainz muttered to himself as he watched the Evil Lord land.

“Haha, you’ve become fat, Narberal. Shall we call you Gorillal now? And your element’s changed greatly too. Well -- this is interesting. If the Doppel-Pleiades are my opponents--” Ainz flourished his cape. Of course, there was no meaning to it; he simply wanted to show off in a kingly way. “Then I ought to get a little serious.”

Don’t die~

“[Twin Maximize Magic Re--”

Just as Ainz was about to cast a spell at Lupusregina, another bullet hit Ainz’s arms and interrupted his spell.

“--Hah?”

Impossible.

Even if she had succeeded once by luck, she could not have interrupted his spell twice in a row. CZ was far lower level than Ainz.

Could he have been unlucky enough to fail his resistance check twice in a row? How unlikely were those odds? Or perhaps this was not bad luck, but certainty -- for instance, if his opponent was not CZ at all?

The Evil Lord of Wrath spread his fiery wings and closed in on Ainz. Yuri came in from the right, and Entoma flew in from the left in a roundabout fashion.

What's going on? Why is this happening? Is this some change that occurred after coming to this world? Or did Garnet-san give CZ something? Or is it not CZ? What did Yuri say just now? They're sisters, but they're Doppel… Pando--ahhhh!

The Evil Lord had closed the distance and then cocked his hand back, preparing to deliver a haymaker.

Dammit! I hate people like that who just rush straight in and start punching! If you're a substitute for Narberal than attack with magic! You damn Gorrilal!

Well, if he had really cast a spell on him he would have resisted it, so it would have been boring anyway.

Ainz did not hesitate; he stepped in before his enemy could fully close the distance.

The Evil Lord had guessed that Ainz would flee, so his movements slowed by a beat. Behind him was Yuri, who was probably planning to completely surround Ainz with the Evil Lord.

The strike from the flaming fist -- was a feint, which was why Ainz had

managed to evade it by stepping into the range of the blow.

A pure mage had evaded the attack of a warrior-type monster.

While he thought that this would be impossible if he were a YGGDRASIL player, this was not due to luck. As mentioned before, the Evil Lord had not expected Ainz to step into the attack, so he had not used his full force. And then there was another point, which was that this was the result of his training.

Ainz had practiced this method of evading his opponent by closing in with them several hundred times with Cocytus. About one in every ten times, if Cocytus was not attacking in earliest, he could completely slip past an attack.

Cocytus did say that a good warrior would never make such incredibly flashy and telegraphed attacks, so I shouldn't get careless… but it's pretty useful in an actual fight, isn't it?

And so, Ainz placed his bony hand on the Evil Lord's sturdy chest.

And then he cast a touch spell.

While most spells had an effective range, some spells had a range that was practically zero. Such spells needed direct contact with the target to be cast, so only people with levels in spellcaster and warrior classes could use them well. It was because they were so inconvenient that they were more powerful than spells of a similar tier, being roughly a tier more effective,

Ainz used an eighth-tier spell from his specialty of necromancy, [Energy Drain]. It was a spell that drained the opponent's levels and granted various

benefits depending on the amount of levels drained. Naturally, this spell had also been maximized.

He beat the Evil Lord's spell resistance and drained his levels. Thanks to that, he recovered almost all the damage Yuri had inflicted. That said, that was about as much as that spell could do in the way of healing.

Ainz's parameters were all temporarily enhanced, and he received a special buff which would fade in a short time. On the other hand, the Evil Lord had received a level down debuff which could not be removed by the passage of time as thanks.

This time, the Evil Lord backed away.

His wrathful visage was tinted by something else.

Was it surprise, or was it admiration?

Ainz wanted to praise himself for successfully evading that blow too. That said, he had managed it because his opposition had been far too cocky. Just like how a magic trick became boring once you pointed out the gimmick, this move would probably not work a second time.

"Well, however good a plan is, only an idiot would use it more than once. Isn't that right -- Pleiades! Aureole Omega!"

That was how it was.

He was fighting five Doppelgangers, the Evil Lord of Wrath and a level 100 NPC.

Is Albedo trying to make me lose? I didn't think she's even use Aureole.

Aureole Omega was the lastborn of the Pleiades Seven Sisters. She was an Area Guardian of the 8th Floor and a level 100 NPC specialized in commander-type classes. As a commander, she could issue orders which buffed her allies. CZ must have been able to beat their level difference thanks to that.

While he had no idea what kind of special ability Aureole had used, if one looked at party roles such as physical attacker, magical attacker, healer and so on, then she would be a wild card -- an allrounder. It was hardly strange that she would be able to do anything.

What exactly could Punitto Moe-san do?

Ainz never went head to head with his opponents during PVP< so Ainz had little experience in dealing with commander-type opponents.

She could not have left the 8th Floor and come here without my permission. That would mean that she must have buffed the Doppelgangers before they came here. That would mean she probably didn't buff them too carefully - or no, is there a Doppegnger of Aureole here?

--No. There was no time to think about such pointless things. Only one thing mattered. Could they completely shut down Ainz's spellcasting, and could they keep it up forever?

There were two kinds of special abilities in YGGDRASIL. One kind had a cooldown period after use. The other had a limited period of uses within a certain period. There were also combinations of the two.

In general, the more powerful the ability, the longer the cooldown or the fewer times it could be used. Ainz's trump card of [The Goal Of All Life Is Death] that could only be used once every 100 hours was just such an ability.

In that case, which type did CZ's ability to interrupt Ainz's spellcasting belong to?

That move just now was very handy, but it did not seem to have a long cooldown time. That would mean it was the use-limited type.

However, he could not tell how long it would take for her to recover her uses. All he could do was hope that she could not recover them during the course of the battle after they were depleted.

--Though I think I ought to save my tenth-tier spells for when they've been depleted...

Ainz quickly verified the positions of the Pleiades and the Evil Lord. The Evil Lord was in front of him. Yuri was behind him -- and preparing to slug Ainz. While her ki-enhanced attacks could even shatter steel, they were little impediment in the face of Ainz's levels. After reconfirming that the Evil Lord would soon be a threat, he turned his attention to the others.

Entoma was inside a house on the left side of the square. Lupusregina was in the square. Solution stood in front of her, like she was protecting her. CZ's

location was unknown.

While not knowing a sniper's position was the worst possible scenario, the fact that the enemy was now dispersed was the best case for him.

Ainz snorted.

Though he knew that now was hardly a time to laugh, he could not resist the mirth welling up inside him.

Now this is interesting!

"Alright, now get out of my face. [Maximize Magic Nuclear Blast]!"

"!"

Before Ainz's eyes, the space between him and the Evil Lord flashed and swelled, consuming everything in an instant. Yuri was surprised, but that was only to be expected, because Ainz had been caught in it as well.

Using the ninth-tier spell [Nuclear Blast] as an attack was a questionable choice. It did composite damage -- half fire, half bludgeoning -- and it was one of the weaker 9th-tier spells in terms of damage.

Considering the Evil Lord of Wrath was immune to fire, this spell should not have even been considered for use. Even so, Ainz had his reasons for using this spell.

First of all, it had a very large area of effect. In that respect, this spell was superior to almost all others. In addition, this spell also generated all kinds of negative status effects such as poisoning, blindness, deafness, and so on. Anything of the Evil Lord's level would be able to resist it with their raw statistics alone. The Pleiades ought to have countermeasures against all these effects. The main reason he had chosen this spell was because it also possessed a very powerful knockback effect.

Of course, Ainz would also be damaged by this spell. While friendly fire was off in YGGDRASIL and so using a spell this recklessly would not be a problem, right now he would be hurting himself. Even if his magical defense was very high, there was no need for him to go out of the way to take damage to cast his spell. Rather than act like a suicide bomber, he ought to have chosen another spell.

However, Ainz had it all worked out.

If he expended the [Body of Effulgent Beryl] spell to stop all the bludgeoning damage, the fire-elemental damage would also be negated, which would mean he would not be harmed. In addition, all those negative statuses were ineffective on the undead.

In other words, Ainz was undamaged by the spell.

Since he had completely resisted its damage, the knockback did not take effect either, and so Ainz was the only one left standing in the heart of the explosion.

"Hahah."

Ainz laughed. The feeling of everything going as planned was very refreshing, after all.

Ainzs' aim was to send the enemy flying and tear the enemy formation to shreds.

For a moment, Ainz briefly saw the guild members who had taught him various things -- including this tactic.

Both the earlier simulated battle but even this battle where failure meant death reminded Ainz of YGGDRASIL, and made him strangely happy.

I wondered about this before, but I don't think I'm a battle maniac...

"Come, it's not over yet. The battle's just beginning. I'll show you the strength that I trained with everyone.

Unleashing the fury of that 9th-tier spell meant that the surrounding buildings had all been swept away, and there was much more space all of a sudden.

That could not be helped. After all, this city had outlived its usefulness.

However, he could have widened the spell to try and catch CZ in the blast. However, Ainz was worried about the problems that might result from destroying too much of the city, hence this method. For all he knew, it might have been a mistake.

Forget it, let's leave it at that. What's left is--

Ainz looked in Lupusregina's direction. The enemy envelopment was in shambles.

Even with Aureole's buffs, they could not avoid the knockback, and Ainz could see the enemy hurriedly getting to their feet.

"That's about all the damage [Nuclear Blast] ought to be able to do, so--"

Ainz flew towards Lupusregina and cast [Reality Slash].

This time, he was not interrupted by CZ, and Lupusregina's body fountained blood.

"[Widen Magic Sharks Cyclone]."

An extra-large cyclone came into existence behind him, swallowing up Yuri and the Evil Lord. This was both to obscure Yuri and the Evil Lord's vision and also to buy Ainz time. In truth, Ainz had planned to create a cyclone before the [Nuclear Blast] to block their vision and then get rid of Yuri first, but after considering that the Evil Lord could probably break out of the spell easily he decided not to go with that plan. Instead, he had decided to use it when the enemy was confused.

There was the sound of rolling stones as Ainz saw Entoma push a pillar off herself as she rose to her feet.

He had no idea where CZ was even now. Ideally, she would be pinned under a

fallen house.

“He’s coming here! Stop him!”

Solution shouted from her place in front of Lupusregina, but her voice could not reach the ears of Yuri and the Evil Lord, who were inside the cyclone. In particular, Yuri was shifting desperately within the cyclone to avoid being blown away. While certain classes could use spells or special abilities to teleport or go incorporeal and thus escape the cyclone easily, she did not seem to possess such an ability.

And that would mean Yuri had focused on strengthening other things--

After reviewing this battle, they ought to understand what gear they need to have and what preparations they need to make, right? No, that’s not it...

If they were the true Pleiades, they might have been able to deal with this this better. They were simply Doppelgangers copying the Pleiades’ abilities, after all. It only made sense that they would lose out to the real deal in terms of combat skills.

As Ainz closed the distance and prepared to cast [Reality Slash], bugs fell from the sky one after the other. They were large transport insects with no combat ability. The objective of this action was simply to block Ainz’ line of sight.

Such a use would not be possible in YGGDRASIL. Even so, Entoma -- though actually a Doppelganger -- could use them in this way. Ainz gave thanks in his heart as he incanted a spell.

“[Greater Teleportation].”

After teleporting into the air and avoiding the rain of bugs, Ainz cast [Double Maximize Magic Reality Slash].

Even if CZ had Ainz in his sights, the fact that her target had suddenly teleported into the air meant that she would lose him. After all, the weakness of the humanoid body was its inability to follow sudden up and down movement with the eyes.

That said, if he were facing an experienced sharpshooter like Peroroncino, for example, they would be able to anticipate their opponent’s movements, even in the vertical plane. Therefore, it was possible that one could not even escape with teleportation magic,

Peroroncino-san’s aiming would have been like locking on to his target… CZ, you need to work hard to get on his level...

As he basked in the nostalgia, Ainz shouted:

“Lupusregina, out!”

Having to fight while keeping an eye on the HP of his opponents was very difficult. One could even call it a handicap. Therefore, if he was asked if Lupusregina’s HP was really depleted, Ainz could not reply with any confidence. Even so, he had to avoid any chance of killing Lupusregina because of a moment’s carelessness.

She’s a Doppelganger, so not only is she weaker than the original, but her HP

isn’t the same as the original Lupusregina’s. Alright, now that I’ve taken out the enemy’s magic caster, it’s time to be a real bastard. [Perfect Unknowable].”

While there were ways to discover Ainz after he had cast [Perfect Unknowable], without the aid of magic items, the only member of the Pleiades who could do it was Lupusregina, and the Evil Lord ought to be unable to detect him too. Therefore, it would probably be safe to say that they had no way to deal with this underhanded means of attack.

Since I’ve taken out the enemy healer, I should go search for CZ. Don’t tell me she’s burning up consumable items?

Personally, Ainz could not forgive wasting the wealth of Nazarick on a battle like this.

“Where is he?”

“He’s gone! Is he using [Invisibility]?”

“I can find him if he’s invisible! But he’s not there!”

“Is this some other kind of invisibility?”

He could hear their confusion.

“You Narberals! He’s using [Perfect Unknowable]!”

“Lupusregina! You’re cheating!” Ainz shouted, but thanks to [Perfect Unknowable], others could not hear him.

Ainz scratched his head.

The Evil Lord and Yuri seemed to have broken out of the cyclone, and they were now looking all around for Ainz. While the best option would have been to drop another [Nuclear Blast] on them, that might end up killing Lupusregina, so Ainz abandoned that notion. Instead, he descended and kept tabs on Yuri’s position at the same time. After that, he compared the amount of HP Yuri was missing to that of the others, and verified that she had taken fire damage from the earlier magical attack--

“[Triplet Maximize Magic Vermilion Nova]!”

Ainz used the highest-level -- super-tier magic notwithstanding -- anti-personnel fire-element attack spell on Yuri.

It was only to be expected that there would be tenth-tier spells that could do fire-element damage.

For instance, [Stream of Lava], [Uriel], and the like. However, the use of both of them presented problems for Ainz.

First off, [Stream of Lava] was a divine spell which only a druid like Mare could cast. Therefore, Ainz could not cast it. [Uriel], on the other hand, was a spell that could be learned by a magic caster of any type as long as the requirements to learn it were met, but it only did its listed damage when cast by a magic caster with a maxed-out positive karma value. Its damage decreased as one’s

karma value decreased, and for someone like Ainz, it would do less damage than a first-tier spell.

Therefore, this spell was Ainz's only choice when it came to handiness.

Yuri's health dropped drastically.

"[Perfect Unknowable]."

"He disappeared again!"

"He can't keep getting away with this!"

"If only Ainz-sama would fight us fair and square!"

No, no, you're in the wrong for not even thinking of a way around this.

"And besides, I have no idea where CZ is! You three never said anything about who was taking part in this battle! Now who's being treacherous!?"

Ainz shouted, even though he knew the opposition could not hear him.

After coming to his senses, the Evil Lord charged at the place Ainz had been.

"Too bad, I'm not there anymore~"

Ainz had begun moving, so he was not there anymore, However, he would still be within the area of effect if the Evil Lord decided to cast area-attack spells, but just as Ainz thought that, the Evil Lord suddenly changed direction and came straight at Ainz.

“Hah?”

Was he not invisible? That question was soon pounded out of existence by the pain he felt.

The Evil Lord sent Ainz flying back. Since he was much more serious than just now, Ainz found it hard to defend against or evade the attack. No, Ainz had been too relaxed -- he had not even thought of evading.

Fortunately, the [Fly] spell helped control his posture and spared him the ignominy of rolling across the ground. It was just like how it had been in the Shalltear battle.

The Evil Lord jumped over, hot on Ainz’s heels, and his line of sight was most definitely tracking Ainz’s flight path.

...The Evil Lord of Wrath shouldn’t have the ability to see through it… Ah, he used it! His trump card, [Soul-Bought Miracle]!”

Inspired by stories of selling one’s soul to the devil to fulfil one’s wishes, this ability was truly miraculous. While he was not sure how the procedure worked, once one used this ability, one could use any one spell of under the 8th tier once.

Normally, when Evil Lords used this ability, they would almost always use healing spells -- that was an unwritten rule. However, this time he had probably used a spell to see through [Perfect Unknowable]

Ainz silently gave thanks that the Evil Lord had used the ability of which he was the most wary even as he felt the pressing need to formulate a new battle plan.

As the Evil Lord closed in and punched him again, Ainz began to get worried.

While there was quite a large level difference between the two and he still had some room for laxity, he could not simply allow himself to continue getting beaten up like this.

“Cheh. Here, have some back. [Triplet Maximize Magic Call Greater Thunder].”

High-level demons had very high elemental resistances. While their exact resistance varied between type, electricity was one of the more effective energy types. After taking three hits of a maximized elemental attack spell, the Evil Lord’s body trembled.

Ainz cast another spell.

“[Perfect Unknowable].”

“Cheeeeeap! Ainz-sama, you’re so cheeeeeeap!”

“Ahhh, seriously!”

Entoma was literally hopping mad, while Lupusregina was rolling around on the ground. Solution was the only one who was surveying her surroundings with a razor-sharp gaze.

In theory, each individual mercenary vassal should have been identical, yet they had developed divergent personalities like this. Was it because they had copied the relationships between the members of the Pleiades? Or had their personalities changed over time? The Evil Lord before Ainz followed his movements closely and shouted:

“Here! Use area attacks here, hit me with it too!”

Entoma breathed a black cloud from her mouth. It was her trump card, her fly breath.

However, it was useless against Ainz, because that move did piercing damage. In addition, Ainz was a skeleton; what would the flies eat? In the end, it only served to annoy the Evil Lord.

“Hey! It didn’t work on him! It only works on me!”

“Eh!?”

Being able to copy an ability and use it well were two different things altogether. Surely the real Entoma would not have made such an amateur mistake.

“I don’t have any area-effect attacks, how about you, Yuri-nee?”

“I’ve got this!”

Yuri gathered light between her palms.

The Kibakushou was a technique that acted as an anti-individual attack when it touched the enemy, but which became a spreading shockwave if it did not make contact. Naturally, as an attack intended for direct contact, it became very weak when used as a spread effect. Since monks were a class focused on fighting individuals, they had very few area-effect attacks -- practically none, in fact -- therefore one could say that it was completely useless.

“There! He moved!”

“Here?”

Yuri launched her area Kibakushou at the location where Ainz had been. Ainz wrinkled his brow -- despite having no brow -- as he saw this and reached a hand out.

“...No, no, you should have prioritized healing.”

Yuri could have healed herself with her qigong.

After making his jab at Yuri, Ainz cast his spell. Needless to say, it was a spell that he already knew to be effective.

“[Double Maximize Magic Vermilion Nova].”

Having cast an attack spell, Ainz came into view. He looked at Yuri, who was wreathed in flames, and made a cold pronouncement.

“Yuri, out -- [Perfect Unknowable].”

Now then, things will get bad if I don’t find CZ. Having made that decision, Ainz began making a big detour as he kept an eye on the Evil Lord.

***

Many people stood on the city walls with Neia, watching the battle unfold.

While many people of them were had been swayed to the Sorcerer King’s side after being rescued by him, they were not the only ones here.

There were priests and paladins here as well. Neia could not see Remedios from where she was standing, but she was close enough that Neia could hear her speak.

The only members of the command staff who were not here were Gustav and Caspond.

Everyone watching the battle was silent -- no, it was simply because there were no words to describe the battle.

They should have known this.

The members of Blue Rose had said that Jaldabaoth's difficulty rating was above 200. In other words, this was like fighting a huge dragon in the form of a human. Just fighting said battle in the land of men would lead to a great tragedy.

They ought to have been grateful that only a single city district was destroyed. Many houses were on fire and white plumes of smoke reached to the sky, but the total casualties were almost nil.

While watching the battle, she had seen cyclones, blazes, strokes of lightning and other tremendous manifestations of power that were beyond man's knowledge running wild. Each of these discharges of energy could have easily taken countless lives.

Especially--

"It's beautiful…"

What had truly moved Neia's heart was the ball of white light that she had seen twice.

It was power which consumed everything and made it disappear without a trace. It felt like something good to Neia, although she could not confirm whether it was truly the work of divine might. The incredible devastation she saw in the wake of the light's disappearance frightened her, but her admiration of its great power had won out in the end.

It seems the fighting is still going on. I can't believe the battle still isn't over

after using all those spells… Jaldabaoth is really strong.

She had heard about it, and she had even seen it with her own eyes. Yet, Neia's thinking had still been too naive. That naivete was now thoroughly eradicated.

The king she served -- though only temporarily, and only within the Holy Kingdom -- was fighting. She felt that searing his heroic visage into her eyes was only natural as part of her squire's duties, which was why Neia was keeping watch from here. Yet, if she could--

--Neia tightly squeezed the bow she was carrying.

If one looked closely, they would see several other shapes battling the Sorcerer King in addition to Jaldabaoth. Those were the maid demons, who were rated at difficulty 150. Neia could not do anything but admire the Sorcerer King's power for fighting so many powerful adversaries at once without giving ground.

It was at this moment that Neia finally realized something about herself. She envied the people of the Sorcerous Kingdom -- those people who were protected by justice. How happy they must be to live in a country ruled by such a being.

"Weakness is a sin, so one must become strong, or humbly accept justice similar to that of His Majesty."

It was at this moment that Neia voiced the words she had been mulling over all this time. The way she repeated it several times sounded very much like a

prayer.

Suddenly, there was a large explosion as a meteor fell.

It threw the carcasses of buildings high into the air, and they rained back down to the earth amidst a shower of gravel and sand.

“Captain… isn’t Jaldabaoth… too powerful?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The Sorcerer King -- His Majesty is also incredibly strong. If he becomes an enemy of our nation… what will we do?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Captain?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

She could hear Remedios talking to three paladins.

The paladins asking her questions had probably not seen how Remedios had ended up being toyed with like a child even after unleashing the holy sword’s power and stabbing Jaldabaoth in the back.

Ahh, maybe they didn’t see it. Still, anyone who saw that fight would

understand. Both the Sorcerer King and Jaldabaoth were unimaginably powerful. Still, it was too late to think about things like that now. No--

If His Majesty could take this country under his rule, we would not have to suffer demihuman invasions again.

Neia was startled at how perfect that idea was, and even a little afraid.

Merging with the Holy Kingdom… if he were a frightening tyrant, even I wouldn't think about it. But the Sorcerer King isn't like that. He is justice. In that case… I ought to gather people who feel the same way as me!

Neia pondered the matter.

Many people had come to respect and idolize the Sorcerer King. There were those who were drawn to his overwhelming power, those who were grateful for being freed from suffering, those who hated the demihumans and who were glad that he had taken revenge on their behalf, and many such others.

From them she would select those people who had always been praying for the peace of this country, and then let them hear her words.

Neia knew that she was still young and lacked life experience. However, adults with good sense could stop Neia if they felt that her judgement was in error.

Let's start by looking among my subordinates in the archery unit.

There were people among them who had lost their loved ones and harbored hate in their hearts. It might be better to try persuading them, because Neia could understand how they felt.

As she pondered this, she heard a doom as an exceptionally large explosion rang out.

After that, far in the distance, a tall building began to collapse.

The Sorcerer King would not have destroyed that building for no reason. Neia narrowed her eyes to try and see what was going on, but she could not tell what was happening in the building as it collapsed amidst billowing clouds of dust.

It was followed by a massive stroke of lightning from the sky.

It would seem he was working towards some objective here, as she had expected.

After a while, all manner of spells wrecked the city, and the situation repeated itself.

Neia was uneasy.

That they were incredible spells went without saying, but could the Sorcerer King’s mana really hold out?

Neia shook her head and banished the fear and unease from her heart.

It’ll be fine! The Sorcerer King must have taken all this into account! He’s already wasted so much mana on this country, but even so--

Still, hypothetically, if Jaldabaoth won, there would be no salvation for this world, only despair. What should she do if that happened?

Your Majesty, I’m counting on you!

And then, two shapes soared into the sky, as though Neia’s wish had gotten through.

The first to ascend trailed darkness in his wake, while the one pursuing him flapped his crimson wings and left a streak of fire behind him.

The fact that the maids were not pursuing them meant one thing -- the Sorcerer King had defeated those difficulty 150 monsters among monsters while battling Jaldabaoth.

--He’s amazing!

Neia was so moved that she shivered.

His Majesty is more powerful than Jaldabaoth!

Indeed. There was no need to think anything else.

In turn, the maids were far weaker than Jaldabaoth, who was a notch below

the Sorcerer King. That was why he could defeat them while fighting Jaldabaoth.

Neia struggled to contain her delight. As she carefully engraved the greatness of the person she respected into her eyes, she was so filled with joy that it seemed like it would explode out of her.

Neia’s heart pounded, to the point where it almost hurt.

They were all watching a scene that would one day be enshrined in a heroic saga.

--No, that’s not right.

It would seem they were going to fight again in the air.

Crimson spheres and glowing spheres blossomed in the sky.

Each of these spells could probably destroy an entire city district by themselves, and they were hurling them at each other in wild flurries. However, they looked kind of cute from a distance.

Even so, that was an exchange of power within a realm that mankind could never reach.

This is...

As she looked out the corner of her eyes, she saw the people lining the city walls gulping as they saw all this. It would seem that they understood as well. They watched the aerial battle in silence, with earnest looks on their faces.

Someone put his hands together in prayer, and the people beside him followed suit -- and soon almost everyone on the city walls had their hands together as they looked to the sky.

It felt like they were at worship.

...This is mythology...

Neia did not know how much time had passed, but eventually -- there was a commotion among the people.

Before everyone’s eyes, one of the shapes in the sky fell towards the east -- and then it vanished.

The battle was over.

As everyone watched closely, the remaining shape slowly descended. Neia’s vision was better than most, and so she saw it first. It shocked her so much that she covered her mouth.

When the others saw the crimson fire, the city walls were silent. However, nobody tried to flee. Everyone who had seen the battle knew that there was no point in running.

With a flap of his fiery wings, the victor (Jaldabaoth) showed himself.

Though he was the victor in name, he was a tragic sight.

His entire body was covered in electrical scorch marks. Half his face seemed to have been crushed, and his deep wounds oozed fresh blood. Perhaps it was due to its temperature, but the blood sizzled as it touched the city walls, and the sound did not stop for a moment.

The way he looked was a better testament to the intensity of their battle than words could ever be.

“No way…”

A weighty, yet somewhat pained voice echoed across the city walls, as though to wipe away Neia’s muttering.

“...What a mighty opponent. He was one of the strongest I faced since Momon. I underestimated him. How foolish. Leading the demihumans nearly became meaningless. However -- yes, however, he is dead.”

Neia could not believe this. Therefore, she cried out:

“You’re lying!”

Jaldabaoth turned his intact eye toward Neia, but she did not budge despite being bathed in the gaze of a creature from a completely different order of life. The intense emotions within her heart left no room for fear to enter.

“I am not lying.”

“His Majesty is very bad at jokes… so you’re lying, right?”

“I am not lying.”

The words Jaldabaoth had repeated hit Neia hard enough to shatter her soul.

The world seemed to shake under her feet.

Neia instantly understood why the Sorcerer King had lost to Jaldabaoth. There was no need to even think about it.

It was simply because this country lacked Blue Rose’s Evileye and Darkness’ Nabe, the two magic casters who could hold the maid demons in check.

No, there was another reason apart from that.

“If that undead had been in top condition, I might have been defeated instead. But to think he actually expended his mana for the sake of humans like you -- truly, he was a fool who did not know his priorities. For that, I thank you.”

I knew it, weakness truly is a sin!

Neia was certain that she was correct.

“For that I shall reward you. The reward shall be your lives.”

“...What does that mean?”

Jaldabaoth snorted in delight at the question from an unknown source.

“I’m saying that I will spare you, at least for now.”

Someone sighed in relief, but Neia was furious.

“Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! It’s all a pack of lies! Everything you say is a lie! Who would believe what a devil says!?”

“It seems you are unable to accept reality. Are you mad, human? Pitiful.” Jaldabaoth pointed to Neia. “Disapp… I see,” and then he immediately withdrew the finger.

“What’s wrong! Jaldabaoth!”

“You intend to provoke me and thus prove I am lying? ...Is losing your life worth that much? I cannot understand it, but it seems to be the case.”

Neia’s teeth creaked as she clenched them.

Jaldabaoth had to be lying.

He had to be a liar, the kind who would tell a ridiculous lie like the Sorcerer

King was dead.

“I will not allow it. Your lives have been saved. Now then, I will return for now. I must recover from these wounds. During that time, you may weep your tears of despair.”

As Jaldabaoth was about to take off with a flap of his wings, Neia’s hands moved with a mind of their own.

She readied her bow -- and let loose a shot.

She had fired at him from the back, without giving him any warning of her shot.

However, Jaldabaoth immediately turned and seized the arrow. Despite his terrible wounds, he was still very agile.

Jaldabaoth turned to face Neia, and then his eyes went to Neia’s bow, the Ultimate Shootingstar Super. After that, his wrath-twisted feature changed slightly.

“Ohh!? Ah! What an incredible weapon this is! I haven’t seen a weapon like this in so long! That was close, it almost finished me off!”

Jaldabaoth gesticulated wildly with his limbs as he said that. He seemed composed, but also quite anxious.

“What kind of weapon is this! How was it made?”

“As if I’d tell you!”

What on earth is he thinking? Neia’s mind boiled over with scorching hate.

How could she tell this liar what she had learned from the Sorcerer King?

“How could I tell a liar like you!?”

“Muu, ah, don’t, don’t tell me, was it made by runecraft?”

Naia’s heart lurched for a moment as he hit the nail on the head. Although she had managed to calm down a little, as her broken heart recalled the compassionate figure of the Sorcerer King once more, her anger reawakened.

“You’re wrong!”

Neia screamed like she had abandoned everything else, and Jaldabaoth groaned. Taking that as an opening, Neia fired again.

Her next target was his feet, which were hard for the hands to reach.

This time, Jaldabaoth frantically moved his feet to avoid the arrow.

He’s wary of it! Maybe this bow could--!

There could only be one reason why Jaldabaoth had so desperately evaded her shot when he had been indifferent to being stabbed in the back by the holy sword. What else could it be if not that this bow could harm him.

Neia's heart filled with regret as her eyes filled with tears.

She realized that she should have joined that battle even if she would have perished swiftly, if it was possible that she could strike him with the Ultimate Shootingstar Super. She should have taken part, even if it was just to be a shield. If she had, then maybe--

Neia launched another arrow.

Jaldabaoth moved his head. The arrow missed and flew off to parts unknown.

"Hit, damn you!"

She fired again.

And again.

But none of her shots found their mark. Despite his size and his severe wounds, he had still evaded Neia's attacks with startling ease.

"Rune--"

"--Shut up!"

Neia fired another arrow to shut Jaldabaoth up.

However, it too missed.

Why, why isn't anyone attacking?

She could understand their inability to strike Jaldabaoth because he was airborne. However, even so, how could they simply let the lying demon who had killed the most merciful Sorcerer King go free?

"..Muu. Well, eh, I guess it can't be helped… no? [Greater Teleportation]."

Jaldabaoth suddenly vanished.

"Get back here!!!"

Neia looked around.

All she saw were the wide-eyed faces of people who were shocked by what Neia had done. Jaldabaoth was nowhere in sight.

"Motherfucker! He ran away!"

"Calm down!" Remedios shouted.

The angry cry of a mighty being could exert a pressure of its own, and normally it would have brought Neia back to her senses or even made her freeze up. However, it did little more than annoy Neia right now.

“How can I calm down!?”

“Squire Neia Baraja! Did you borrow that weapon from the Sorcerer King? Why was he so interested in it?”

“Don’t ask me irrelevant questions like that! More importantly, we need to find His Majesty! I saw him fall to the east! We need to send out a rescue party!”

“Surely he must be dead.”

“How could he be dead!? How could His Majesty die!?”

Neia instinctively grabbed Remedios, but Remedios easily swept her aside and Neia fell to the ground.

“Are you calmer now? Nobody could survive a fall from that height.”

“Calm? You actually believe that demon’s words? Captain, did you sell your soul to him!?”

Remedios’ expression changed, and then it twisted.

“Squire! Damn you, there are things you can and can’t say!”

She grabbed Neia’s collar with tremendous force, and Neia found it hard to breathe.

“You two! Cool it! Cool it right now!”

The paladins, priests, soldiers and so on hurriedly made their way between Neia and Remedios, pulling them apart.

Neia panted heavily as she shouted:

“We need to send out a team to rescue His Majesty!”

“We can’t waste our resources on that!”

“How dare you call it a waste!”

Neia wanted to go up and punch Remedios, but the people between them stopped her.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you!” Having cooled down a little, Neia addressed the people holding her.

“Could you let go of me? There’s something I have to do.”

“Where are you going !?”

In response to that question, Neia looked at Remedios with an utterly incredulous expression on her face.

“What kind of eyes are those!? Is that how a squire should look at a paladin!?”

Hmph, Neia snorted.

“First, I will be asking His Highness the Prince to organize a rescue party for the Sorcerer King. After that, I will go straight to the Sorcerous Kingdom and tell them exactly what happened to His Majesty, and then I will ask for aid for His Majesty.”

Given the circumstances, nothing good would come of going to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Even so, she was still the Sorcerer King’s squire, and she had to complete her duty.

Neia was unsure if she could safely reach the Sorcerous Kingdom from here, but she had to go, even if it meant her death.

“Ohhh, if you’re going to the Sorcerous Kingdom, let me go with you, Baraja-san!”

The person who spoke was an ex-soldier, who had retired and become a hunter. He had been lauded for his archery and had joined Neia’s unit.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m old enough as it is, I don’t have much longer left.”

“Baldem-san!”

From his tone, she knew that he understood what sort of fate awaited him even if they reached the Sorcerous Kingdom safely.

“Hey, Neia-chan. Don’t forget me!”

“You too, Codina-san!?”

“I’ll go too. Not for you, but if it’s for the Sorcerer King then it can’t be helped.”

“Even Mena-san?”

All the skilled people in Neia’s unit stepped forward, one after the other. With their help, it might be possible for them to reach the Sorcerous Kingdom safely. However--

“Thank you very much. But everyone, could you join the rescue party?”

“What are you saying? You were all gathered to rescue the Holy Kingdom and the suffering people from the clutches of that demon, weren’t you? Where are your priorities!?”

“What are you saying, Captain!? Could anything be more important than rescuing His Majesty!?”

“Of course! Right now, at this very moment, how many people of the Holy Kingdom do you think there are living in the hell the demihumans made for them!? Could anything be more important than rescuing them!?”

“Of course! That’s--”

“--What on earth are you doing!? What’s all this shouting for!?”

The argument immediately stopped when the interloper showed up. It was Caspond.

“Captain Custodio, should you not have returned immediately? Where is His Majesty? What about Jaldabaoth? What happened? Could somebody please explain?”

Caspond sounded like he had lost his bearings, and his voice echoed loudly in the miserable silence.

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The meeting room was very cramped, with paladins, priests, nobles who had been prisoners until recently and honorary paladins who had been summoned here. That said, there were no better rooms for them to use, since Jaldabaoth had destroyed the one which Caspond had previously used.

Caspond had called an emergency meeting after receiving a report from a paladin, and he had instructed all key personnel to gather in this room.

After everyone had assembled, Caspond and Remedios entered with quick

strides.

Everyone bowed as the prince entered. Neia was one of them, because she held no grudges against Caspond.

Caspond stood in front of everyone and began to speak.

“Thank you all for coming here. I wish to discuss our future actions.

Although it was supposed to be a discussion, there was only one thing Neia had to do, and she was certain that it was the right thing to do. Just as Neia was about to speak, Caspond raised his hand to stop her.

“I’m sure everyone has concerns of their own, but I pray you will hear me out first.

Caspond looked out at everyone gathered here.

“I believe many people have witnessed the extent to which Jaldabaoth’s strength exceeds ourimagination… yes. While I regret to say this, we must accept the fact that nobody in this country can triumph over him.”

Several people frowned in silence, then peeked at Remedios, who had been hailed as the strongest in the Holy Kingdom. After learning that she agreed with Caspond’s opinion, hints of fear and disappointment appeared on their faces.

“However, it is too early to give in to despair. If we cannot defeat him, then we will derail his plans in some other way and make him give up on trying to

conquer the Holy Kingdom. We will not drive him out directly, but indirectly. Caspond waited several seconds for his words to sink in, and then spoke his conclusion. “What we will do is slaughter all the demihumans he leads.”

“Why are we doing that?

Caspond saw someone asking a question and nodded to them.

“In the past, Jaldabaoth made trouble in the Kingdom. Back then, he fought a certain warrior in a duel, and then he lost and ran away. At that time, he led an army of demons, but not an army of demihumans. In other words, he came to lead the demihuman army after losing to that warrior.”

Caspond looked around, as if to see if everyone understood.

“In other words, he is using the demihuman army as meat shields to avoid being forced into a one-on-one battle with that warrior. Didn’t Jaldabaoth say something like that when he defeated His Majesty? Something about leading the demihuman army almost becoming meaningless, or something.”

It made sense.

Back then, it had made no sense, but after hearing that explanation, it was hard to think of any other reason.

“In other words, the demihuman army is like armor and stamina for when he fights that warrior again. What will Jaldabaoth do if he loses the demihuman army? Will he remain stripped of his armor and stamina? When that warrior might appear in front of him again at any moment? Or perhaps -- would he

choose to flee?”

“I see… then do you intend to abandon this city, defeat the southern demihuman army, and then join forces with the South to drive out the demihumans?”

After a certain priest asked his question, a certain rescued noble answered him.”

“That would be good. Thanks to the Sorcerer King’s power, almost 40’000 demihumans have been wiped out. The demihumans have lost a great deal of their fighting strength, no? The remainder ought to be staring down the South. If we rally all the people this city has rescued for an all-out attack and strike them from the back in a pincer attack, we ought to be able to rout the demihuman army. That way, we will be able to join up with the Southern forces and take back our land.

“--I propose the opposite. We will take back the closest major city on the west, which is the northern stronghold of Kalinsha.”

“Why is that, may I ask?”

“He’s right. All the major cities to the west such as Kalinsha, Prart, Rimun and the capital of Hoburns will be very hard to take. Many lives will be lost. Why don’t we fight the southern demihumans instead? Would destroying the demihumans’ fighting power not fit more with your plans, Prince-denka?”

“I see. All of your concerns are valid. I am grateful for the fact that many of the people present here are wise. However, is that an action which everyone

can understand?”

There were baffled looks on the faces of many of the people here.

“How about this? Going to the south implies that we will be abandoning -- though it is only temporary, we are still abandoning them -- all the imprisoned people that we will not rescue as a result. Can the masses -- can the people understand that?”

“That, that… but that makes more sense, there’ll be a higher chance of saving them, no?

“You’re a baron, I believe?”

Caspond turned to look at the middle-aged man who had asked the question.

“Y-yes. I believe we met once, Prince-denka.”

“Ahh, just so. Now, have all the people of your domain been rescued?”

“Ah, no, not yet. I was imprisoned when I took the field beside Her Majesty, so I don’t know about my domain…”

“I see. So when you join up with the Southern forces and take back the North, people might say you fled to the South.”

The nobleman’s face froze up.

When one thought calmly about it, the nobleman was right. However, there was no guarantee that everyone -- especially those who were writhing in agony -- would be able to see the sense in what the nobleman had said. It was possible that there would be people who would say “why didn’t you save us earlier, our families were slaughtered by the demihumans” and turn the blades of their hatred on the nobles. Neia had seen such people before.

However, nobody had said that in the prison camps which the Sorcerer King had liberated. Given his overwhelmingly potent magic -- which could sometimes wreck city walls in a single blast -- and the fact that he was the king of another nation, nobody would dare anger him for personal reasons.

“Also, I had been intending to speak to the landholders one-on-one after this. In this case, we might as well do it now.”

“...We are all exhausted. In contrast, what will the nobles of the South do? In particular, what will the other nobles do about nobles who have abandoned their fiefs?

The sticky scent of politics and privileges began to fill the air.

While it sounded unbelievable to Neia, was this what the nobles wanted? They nodded repeatedly.

“Prince-denka. Our domains…”

“I want you to pretend that you did not hear what comes next. That is because I cannot guarantee you anything. However, the privileges of the

Southern nobles will probably increase all of a sudden. That is why you must pick the best methods for post-war conditions."

"A moment please!"

One of the paladins called out to him.

"How can we shed more of the people's blood for courtly disputes!?"

"Indeed! Indeed!" The priest called Siliaco shouted in a voice which was said to have been trained for volume. "What's important is how to save more people!"

"...Driving out the demihumans doesn't mean it's all over, you know? If the South takes all the advantages, then we'll have a hard time refusing the demands of the Southern nobles. And there's no guarantee that they won't impose heavy taxes on the exhausted people."

"...Now that the Holy Queen is dead, it would be very bad if the next Holy King were to be chosen by the Southern nobles. However, if we can show concrete results with our strength, then at least…"

There were two factions in the room now.

The nobles' faction and the paladins and priests' faction.

Both sides were at odds. Speaking of Remedios, the paladins were trying to spoonfeed her a simplified version of what the Prince had said.

Neia was not part of either faction. She simply followed the flow of the conversation in silence. That was because Neia had already made up her mind about what she would be doing, so it did not matter what conclusion they reached in the end. Rather she wanted to bring up her own suggestion and set out as soon as possible.

That said, talking about irrelevant things here will only ruin the mood, and people who might have helped me won't come to my aid...

Shortly after listening to numerous boring topics, she decided to toss the ball back to Caspond once both sides had worn themselves out with arguing.

"The Prince-denka brought up this topic. Perhaps we should let him finish speaking?"

"Ahh. Like I said earlier, I intend to take back Kalinsha. This is also militarily advantageous. In truth, this city is far too cramped, and much of it has already been destroyed. Living here is difficult, so I would like to have a larger, more solid home base. In addition, by taking back a major city, we'll have an advantage when dealing with the Southern nobles. Also, Kalinsha was meant to stop enemy advances, so it ought to have military stores, assuming they haven't been moved out yet."

"...I approve the proposal to secure a better base."

"Ahhh, I'm a little uneasy about the sanitation of a city like this. Many people are shivering from the cold too."

However, they went on to say, “we need to avoid large numbers of deaths”.

“Indeed. That is why it is the best time to attack the enemy strongholds. After all, Jaldabaoth cannot take action now.”

There was no telling how long Jaldabaoth’s wounds would take to heal, but surely he would recover before the demihuman army was completely defeated.

In addition, it was very unlikely that he would show his face before making a complete recovery. After knowing of the existence of a powerful warrior like Momon, he would surely take the possibility of Momon showing up into consideration before taking action. Therefore, if he acted, it would not happen before he was almost completely recovered.

That said, no matter how many forces they had, the Holy Kingdom would be at a loss once Jaldabaoth took the field. Therefore they had to take the fortress now.

So that was it. After listening to that agreeable explanation, Neia expressed her approval as well.

“--In that case, it seems the only thing you are unhappy with is the number of people who must die for this. Can I take that to mean that you will give me your support if I can minimize the number of deaths?”

Everyone present nodded, with the exception of Remedios. Neia did not mind either way, but after considering the flow of the conversation, she realised that it would be bad if only one person was not nodding, and so she nodded with everyone else.

As for Remedios, several people looked at her face and saw that she did not

seem to have any special reasons, so they chose to ignore her.

“It’s decided then. We will discuss the details of retaking Kalinsha afterwards. Now then -- our next item.”

Caspond sighed loudly and then turned to Neia.

“This concerns the death of the Sorcerer King.”

“Prince-denka, I sincerely apologize, but I hope you will amend that statement immediately. The Sorcerer King’s death remains in question. That was simply what Jaldabaoth told us. It would be foolish to take a demon’s words at face value.”

Neia eyed Remedios and continued, “I think it it more likely that he is trying to deceive us.”

“In that case, why has he not come back? He can cast teleportation spells, can’t he?”

“Perhaps he was immobilized by his wounds, perhaps he’s out of mana, there could be many reasons for it.”

Remedios did not ask any further.

“That’s true. That’s why I’d like to hear from all of you. What do you think we should do?”

“There’s no point in asking what we should do!” Neia shouted, forcing the words out like she was trying to strain them out through her teeth. “...I think we should dispatch a rescue party and relay this news to the Sorcerous Kingdom at the same time. If possible, I would like to be the messenger.”

“I see. That’s what you think, Squire Baraja. How about the others?”

As Caspon looked up and down the gathered people, one of the nobles spoke up.

“I have a question. While the Sorcerer King was supposed to have gone down in the east, considering we will be mounting a rescue operation in demihuman-controlled territory, would it not be better to wait until we have some concrete

intelligence before…”

“It’ll be too late by then,” Neia immediately shot back. “The more we delay, the more His Majesty will be exposed to danger. I suggest we make our rescue as soon as possible.”

The majority agreed with Neia’s opinion. What she said made perfect sense.

“In that case, we ought to send out a search party at the same time as the envoys to the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“...I have something I would like to confirm with you, since you have the role of His Majesty’s squire. Do you think the Sorcerer King told the people of his country that he was coming to the Holy Kingdom?”

Neia began to think.

“I apologize, but I am not sure. However, I feel it would not be strange for him to have told the people of the Sorcerous Kingdom, because there were times when he returned to his country with teleportation spells.”

“In that case, I feel you should not send an envoy to the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Why!?”

Neia glared at the noble who had done nothing but naysay. The noble retreated two steps and his face went pale under that glare. The people around that noble also backed away from him.

“No, ah, please calm down and listen. That, uh, that is because it will bring trouble. Wait! Please calm down and listen to me. When you think about it normally, the possibility exists that the Sorcerous Kingdom’s undead armies would take revenge on us, am I wrong? And revenge would be one thing; they might annex the Holy Kingdom as well. And… ah, why is that? Who’s to say the Sorcerer King was not aiming for that all along?”

“Excuse me!” Neia was so angry that she actually felt dizzy. “In that case, permit me to ask a question of my own! If His Majesty returned to his country by teleportation, what will he think of the Holy Kingdom, who knew what happened but said nothing?”

Everyone she could see nodded in agreement. Amidst all this, Remedios spoke.

“Well, it can’t be helped then, can it? Our country doesn’t have the luxury of doing that now. We’ll apologize after everything is over.”

“Even if you--”

Neia was so worked up that she was about to shout, and then she heard the sound of clapping from beside her. She looked over, and saw that it was Caspond. Since the Prince wanted to speak, all Neia could do was remain silent.

“Squire Baraja. Allow me to pick the people who will go to the Sorcerous Kingdom. How about that? After all, if we send over a mere squire as a messenger, won’t the other country think we’re making fun of them?”

“That, that is as you say…”

His explanation made perfect sense. Under normal circumstances, they would surely pick a country’s ambassador over a squire who had borrowed a magic bow from the Sorcerer King. However, would he really send out an envoy? She found that part hard to believe. Even so, it would be very bad to show that she did not trust the Prince’s words.

“I am glad that you understand.”

“In that case, please allow me to lead several people to the east.”

“Indeed. I would very much like to send you as well, but we still do not know where the Sorcerer King fell. He might be ten kilometers away or a hundred. If things go badly, he might have fallen into the Abelion Hills, which Jaldabaoth controls. Even if I allowed you to go to such a desolate place, would you have any means of finding the Sorcerer King?

Neia could not answer him.

Finding where the demihumans lived in unfamiliar terrain was an impossible task. She could easily imagine the scouting team meeting with difficulty and being wiped out.

“Surviving in the hills, slipping past demihuman observation and gathering information,” Caspond counted off on his fingers. If you go there without preparing, you will simply be killing yourself indirectly, and what good is a rescue party that ends in failure?”

“Then, then do you have another way!?”

“Of course.”

“Eh?”

How could there be? As she thought about that question, it was easily answered. Neia’s eyes went wide in surprise, and then Caspond adjusted himself before telling Neia the answer.

“All you need is to find someone who knows the hills.”

Neia blinked, and Caspond smiled to her.

“Listen. All we need to do is to take a demihuman captive and have him lead the way. Would it not be safer to order a demihuman to act as your guide?”

“Ah.”

Indeed, that was the case. Humans would be taking an absurd risk in entering that land. However, it would be a different matter if they had guides.

However, there were also problems with it which could not be ignored.

If they simply threatened a demihuman prisoner into showing them the way, then if the prisoner was willing to take them with him, the searching party would be going to their deaths. The Orcs she had met earlier seemed like the type who did not care about whether they lived or died.

They would need trustworthy demihumans, but where would they find those?

What could she do to make a demihuman act as a reliable guide?

Neia racked her brains, but when she thought of demihumans, she could only think of them coming at her murderously, and she could not imagine them accepting an offer to turn their coats.

No, the Orcs and the Grand King Buser felt like humans -- I see, take their relatives hostage… no, if we could take a king like Buser prisoner, his tribe would probably obey us.

Or on the other hand, the angered tribe might put up stiff resistance. Besides, how would they capture a mighty demihuman king like Buser--

As Neia wandered aimlessly in a mental labyrinth, chasing an answer she could not find, the room's door swung open and a paladin barged in.

He panted heavily and looked around the interior of the room, but he approached Caspond instead of Remedios.

Perhaps he did not want others to hear what news he had. He brought the Prince to a corner of the room and whispered in his ear, but Neia's keen hearing picked up snatches of their exchange. Among them, the last piece of information piqued her interest.

He had said "maid demons".

"Gentlemen, something urgent has come up, Unfortunately, the meeting will end here. I hope you will begin working on ways to take back Kalinsha. Also, Captain Custodio, come with me."

Intermission

Recently, Jircniv had been in great shape.

Terrific, even.

In any case, life was good.

After visiting the nightmare that was Nazarick, the stomach cramps that had been plaguing him all this time were gone. The cabinet which had once held potions now contained neat stacks of documents. He was free of all his troubles, he no longer collected hair from his pillow and he was no longer shocked by how much of it there was.

How refreshing!

How pleasant!

How comfortable!

This was probably the first time he had been filled with such a feeling of liberation. He felt so good that he could not help but imagine he had sprouted wings with which he could flap into the sky.

He put his heartfelt smile away and faced his subordinate. You smile more often now, his not-beautiful concubine had said, but this was not a time to let others see him smile. Dignity was a thing that caused a lot of problems when one lost it.

And so, the usual morning meeting began.

Jircniv had many scribes, but the one before him now was an excellent man called Roune Varmilinen.

At first, he had been worried that something had been done to him after he had returned from the Sorcerer King's palace, and so he had placed him in a sinecure. However, that too was a thing of the past. Roune's position as head scribe was now secure. This was not because he was certain that nothing had been done to him. It was simply to prove that he had nothing to hide from the

Sorcerous Kingdom. In addition, it was also a fact that Roune was very skilled.

He glanced over the document he had taken from Roune, and due to the ridiculous content within, Jircniv lost control of himself and burst into laughter.

“Whoever wrote this was quite the comedian. What do you think of the Sorcerer King’s death?”

“I am absolutely certain that this is one hell of a lie.”

Jircniv agreed with what Roune had said.

“Ahh, that’s right. It must be fake. Besides, it’s impossible that His Majesty would lose or die or whatever.”

Nobody could possibly kill a magic caster who could crush an army of 200’000 with a single spell and fight in armed combat with the Martial Lord, the Empire’s mightiest warrior. Jircniv was certain of that.

Of course, one could not poison him either, and he could not fall to disease or die of old age. It felt more realistic that someone was spreading a bad joke on a massive scale in order to make the punchline of “...because he was already dead to begin with”.

“Well, it’s probably to root out any malcontents. Still, I have a question.”

“Which is?”

“That is to say, I am wondering why is His Majesty, who possesses unrivalled intellect, resorting to a lame little scheme like this which anyone can see through. Unless it means there’s some other… yes, it’s possible there may be some grand conspiracy brewing that even I cannot discern…”

Who could say for sure there was none? No, if this was a scheme laid by the monstrous intellect who knew every detail of Jircniv’s movements, then Jircniv was certain that this was nothing but the tip of the iceberg.

For all Jircniv knew, even thinking that way might have been part of his plan.

However, what if this was not a scheme hatched by the Sorcerer King, but by one of his underlings -- for instance, that utterly imbecilic-looking toad monster?

“...I don’t know. Besides, if you can’t figure out something you want to figure out, you can only abandon it. More to the point, all we need to do is obey Albedo-sama, the prime minister of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and do what she says. There’ll be no problems so long as we don’t betray them and complete our tasks. As the ruler of a vassal nation, I won’t be so easily purged if I’m appropriately incompetent.

“It is as you say.”

Roune shrugged.

In the past, he was a person who would not make such movements, It would seem he had trained himself to do so after his many experiences. Or perhaps it was because he had grown bold.

Regardless of the Sorcerer King’s vital status, all would be well as long as the Empire did not stop being a vassal of the Sorcerous Kingdom. In this way, they would be immune to any stratagem the opposition employed. Loyalty was the best defense. If they were killed even after giving their loyalty, then all they could do was laugh at the pettiness of the other party and go to the grave in peace.

“Now then, is that all the work for today?”

Ever since he had become a vassal nation, Jircniv’s administrative workload had dropped to around half of before, Still, today’s workload seemed too light.

“No, Your Majesty, there’s still something else. This is a document we received this morning. It was submitted by the knight legions.”

Unfortunately, his work was not yet done.

Jircniv accepted the proffered document with a mocking smile on his face.

He glanced briefly through it. It seemed to contain the knights’ complaints about their legion being reconstituted.

In the past, he would have given a certain amount of special consideration to the knights. Or rather, considering Jircniv had many nobles as his enemies, he could not allow the enemy to snatch away the martial force which the knights represented. However, things were different now.

“Tell them this: you can tell His Majesty the Sorcerer King in person. I can’t believe they wasted paper on this.”

Paper used in these reports was made by utility magic, and it cost more regardless of what tier of spell was used to make it. Jircniv could have thrown it away after use without any concerns, but he did not intend to keep quiet about excessive expenses.

Paper made from zero-tier spells was crumpled. It was coarse and discolored.

Paper conjured from first-tier utility spells was thinner and whiter. Papermaking could produce paper of this quality as well, but spells of this tier produced less paper and so it was more expensive.

Second-tier utility spells produced very sheer and very clean paper. Of course, one could color magically-created paper to a certain extent. Spells of this tier could produce a very soft paper known as noble paper, and all productivity went to that aspect.

“Still I don’t understand why they’re so resistant to letting another country handle our national defense.”

“Don’t complain about that to me, tell Albedo-sama. Also, didn’t we already say that we weren’t entrusting everything to them?”

This came from Prime Minister Albedo’s instructions to supplement the Empire’s military manpower with the Sorcerous Kingdom’s undead armies.

Jircniv believed that this was part of the program to complete the vassalization process, and so he obeyed it. He planned to let some of the knights retire and disbanded two of the Empire’s eight legions.

This ought to have been a good idea since there were many people who were mentally exhausted from that massacre, but there had still been some disgruntlement about the lack of seats which could be taken.

“And I even prepared positions for them to transfer into…”

“People are just unhappy at losing their privileges and uneasy about doing jobs they’ve never done before, I think.”

“If it’s the latter, then they just have to work hard, but if it’s the former then

it’s only to be expected. Or am I expected to pay people who simply do their job and engage in physical labor the same amount that people in hazardous and deadly jobs receive?”

Jircniv snorted and disregarded it.

Perhaps he would have needed to masterfully manipulate them in the past, but now there was no need for that.

Jircniv had the backing of someone called the Sorcerer King who possessed absolute power. No matter what happened, all he had to do was say, “please tell His Majesty yourself” and all dissent was quashed in an instant.

Nobody in the Empire could express their displeasure to someone who could slaughter on such a scale and even defeat the Martial Lord in combat.

While they had used to field their complaints to Jircniv in the past, his position was now secure, given that he was a servant of the Sorcerer King. No, because he was feared, he ought to say it was more secure than secure. Immovable, perhaps?

And frankly, there were shockingly few people in the Empire who were unhappy about becoming vassals of the Sorcerous kingdom. That was because the Sorcerous Kingdom made very few demands. There were quite a few finely-detailed requests, but there were only two main demands.

The first was to amend a part of the Empire’s law -- this was to emphasize the absolute nature of the Sorcerer King and his confidants.

The second was to hand over criminals sentenced to the death penalty. This was shocking in the opposite sense. While he had felt that they would suffer horrible fates, one of them had been safely returned because “he was framed, and so he was innocent”.

And so, one could say that there was practically no change from daily life.

“Come, let’s finish up quick so I can meet my friend.”

Today, a true, freshly-made friend was scheduled to visit Jircniv. All the preparations for his welcome were complete, and all that was left was Jircniv’s part of the work.

He spent half an hour taking care of sundry tasks, and then his subordinate entered the room after receiving the approval of his guards and Jircniv himself.

“Your Majesty, your guest has arrived--”

“Ohh! Hurry and let him in!”

His work was not finished. Still, what about it? What could be more important than greeting a friend?

Soon, his friend was led into the room by his subordinates.

Jircniv rose, his face all smiles, and he spread his arms in welcome and invited his guest in.

It was a demihuman who looked like a short, squat mole. The enchanted pendant he had given him dangled back and forth.

“Ohhh! Welcome! My true friend, Riyuro!”

Jircniv embraced Riyuro without any hesitation and wrapped his arms around him.

“Ahhh! Jircniv, oh friend with whom I have shared my troubles! I am deeply grateful for your welcome!

Riyuro embraced Jircniv as well. Given the sharp claws on his forelimbs, one could see the gentleness in his movements as he took care not to hurt Jircniv with them.

They held each other for a while, and then slowly broke apart.

“--What are you saying? My doors are always open to Riyuro.”

Riyuro smiled savagely.

While the smile looked very menacing on a demihuman, Jircniv understood that he was smiling. Such was the intimacy of their relationship.

Jircniv was suddenly struck by how interesting this was.

He had been born and raised as a candidate to be the next Emperor, and everyone around him of his age considered him the Crown Prince. Therefore, he had not had anyone he could call a friend. But now, the fact that his first friend was a demihuman--

--Hmph. If I had told myself from 10 or 15 years ago about this, I wouldn't have believed it… For this, if nothing else, I have to thank that undead being.

He had first met this dear friend before him in a waiting room when he had gone to see the Sorcerer King.

At that time, he had simply wondered where this demihuman had come from and how far the Sorcerer King's domination reached.

But after that, they met again, and engaged each other in conversation to learn more about each other -- and then they forged a spiritual bond. After a minute together that could have been a month, a deep friendship was born.

That was why they no longer addressed each other with honorifics, This was not because they were both kings.

Indeed, it was because the two of them--

--Were both being tormented by the same oppressor -- they were comrades in suffering.

"Come, I've prepared all sorts of delicacies that will surprise you. Why not come enjoy yourself for all your labors?"

"Ah, I look forward to it, Jircniv. I too have brought many of the mushrooms you said were delicious. Let us eat them together when we have the time."

"Ohhh! Thank you, Riyuro."

The mushrooms Riyuro had brought were fragrant and meaty, and they were a luxury ingredient called Obsidian.

The two of them left the room side by side.

In the past, Jircniv had been uneasy when he heard that the Sorcerous Kingdom treated demihumans the same way it treated humans.

However he snuck a glance at Riyuro beside him and thought.

Demihumans aren't bad. At least, compared to the undead -- the Sorcerer King.

"Speaking of which, have you heard, Riyuro? The Sorcerer King seems to have kicked the bucket."

Riyuro expelled a great rush of air from his nose. This was his way of snorting in laughter.

“Jircniv, that is impossible. How -- how could someone like him die?”

“Indeed, I agree with that statement. However… which nation will see its people lamenting this time…?”

“Yes…”

Riyuro and Jircniv both looked to the sky.

There was pain in their eyes. They grieved for a tragedy that was happening in some faraway place, and the shared sympathy that soon they would gain a new comrade.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The cry that rang through the room made the man go stiff. He belonged to a secret organization called Eight Fingers, and while he had seen many things before, he had never seen an eruption of such dark emotions. It seemed like genuine hatred and unadulterated cursing.

He would not have been shocked if it had come from an enemy. Indeed, he would be smiling serenely instead. However the people making that sound were his friends, friends with whom he had forged a spiritual connection due to having gone through the same suffering and misery.

Friends -- he thought that there could not be a word that was less applicable to him than that.

Even the organization he belonged to now simply hamstrung each other, struggled for power, and tried to suss out each others’ weaknesses. If there was a conflict of their interests, there would have been blood.

However, things were different now.

Even if there was only one less person, everyone would have to do more work and their probability of failure would go up. When that happened, they would be dragged into that hell as well, because they were responsible for them. Even being punished once would be enough to condemn one to a liquid diet and

being plagued by nightmares. For all he knew, there were other hells waiting for him.

With that in mind, whenever anyone began to fall behind in their work, everyone would immediately support him with all their might, worry about his health, and fret about his mental state. And they were desperate in their efforts.

They had become true companions, those who shared their fate, their lives, and their deaths.

And one of those friends of his was now screaming and rolling around on the ice-cold stone slab flooring. The fear called “if you don’t find out the reason soon, you’ll end up like that too” drove the man to action.

“What, what is it, Hilma? What happened?”

The wailing woman stopped moving, and her eyes slid up from below to look at the man.

“--I’ve had it! Swap with me! I need to watch that idiot’s movements! My stomach hurts! What the hell’s wrong with him! I lose my mind around idiots!”

They knew only one man who could be called an idiot. While they had used the word “idiot” often until now, that man was enough to show others what it truly meant to be an idiot, and so they could no longer use the word idiot lightly.

“What is it? What’s that idiot done now?”

Hilma spoke quickly, like she was vomiting her pent-up rage.

“Ah, yes! You heard about it, right, how His Majesty perished!?”

He wanted her to slow down a little, but it sounded like Hilma was venting her stress, so he did not interrupt her, but listened patiently.

“Mm, of course.”

Eight Fingers had been the ones who spread the news. Of course it went without saying that they had used unrelated merchants to spread the news through the Kingdom.

“What do you think he said after hearing about it!?”

Well, he was an idiot, after all. He ought to have considered that point before answering. However, all he could think of were ordinary answers. Still, there was no telling what an idiot thought, so he gave up in the end and said something normal.

“...He said something about the burial?”

“If that were all, my stomach wouldn’t hurt like this! He, he said that if he married Albedo-sama, he would be able to inherit the Sorcerous Kingdom!”

“Aiiieeee!”

「唏」

The man squeaked and looked around himself.

The man could not sense them but there ought to be watchers from the Sorcerous Kingdom here. After making sure that they had not made their move, the man sighed in relief.

They had been ordered to prepare an idiot, but he would much rather not be pushed into that hell because he was an idiot beyond all limits.

“Oi oi oi! We were ordered to prepare an idiot, but why don’t we just kill him off? Wouldn’t it be better to prepare a more suitable idiot!?”

“Can we prepare anyone else at this point?”

The man’s answer made Hilma roll around while screaming “Ahhhhhhhh!” The hem of her dress rode up her leg and above her thigh.

She had originally been a high class whore and was as beautiful as one, but all the man could feel for her charmless, disgraceful state now was sympathy.

After all, he knew very well that if he had been assigned to the same task, he would be rolling around on the floor instead of Hilma.

“Come on Hilma, give it your best.”

She suddenly stopped and glared at the man before speaking.

“Wouldn’t it be alright if you manipulated that man… or made sure he didn’t do anything excessive?”

“Idiots like that ought to be controlled by women. Am I right?”

After hearing that question, Hilma went “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” again and continued rolling around on the ground.

“I think it won’t last much longer. We’ll move in earnest after another two or three years. Get more idiots together before that. We’ll do our best to help if you need to form a faction of idiots.”

“Two years is too long ahhhhhhhhh!”

“Still, those are our orders. Control the information they receive, and make a faction that will do even more foolish things.”

“That’s true ahhhhhhhh!”

Hilma suddenly stopped, and then she bolted upright.

“You’ve got it easy. All you need to do is mobilize the traders and spread the news of the Sorcerer King -- His Majesty’s! -- death to the Second Prince.”

You make it sound so easy, he thought,

In the past, he did not think that either of the princes was very bright. However, he had slowly come to realize that this was because of the First Prince, which had made him disguise himself.

It was because the Second Prince was intelligent that getting the news to him required extremely careful and complicated maneuvering.

This was to keep him from realizing that he worked for the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“...It’s not as easy as you say it is.”

“...Ahh, my apologies. It’s given you a lot of work too, right… how about tonight, coming?”

Hilma mimed the action of drinking a big mouthful of wine.

“Sure. I need to make sure I don’t leak anything even when I’m stinking drunk.”

They might not be able to eat solid foods, but drinking was a different matter.

“Haha,” a withered smile appeared on Hilma’s face. “It’ll be fine. Our watchers will help us take care of it.”

“Haha,” a similar look appeared on his face. “That… is true…”

“But now that you mention it, where’s that lucky fellow now…”

There was only one person among them who could be considered a lucky fellow.

“Coccodol’s still in jail because he lost his power during that struggle… lucky him.”

“You’re right… he really is…”

Gunner and Archer

Part 1

After leaving Caspond's room, the first place Neia went was the archery range. Neia's subordinates had been waiting there and they swiftly flocked to her.

As her friends went, "How did the meeting turn out, Miss Baraja?", "We're always ready to go" and other such things, Neia told them about the meeting.

She told them everything -- what had happened, what had been said, and the conclusions they had reached.

Most of them hunted for a living, and they were all excellent outdoorsmen. Even they could not help but nod grimly at Caspond's conclusion. There was no doubt that searching the Hills would be extremely difficult.

That being the case, they would not be able to cover a large area with a search party within a short span of time. However, they could conduct a simple search within the Holy Kingdom -- heading east from this place to the fortress line. Since it was unclear where the Sorcerer King had landed, he might be within the Holy Kingdom's borders.

Several people skilled in ranger techniques stepped forward.

Neia wanted to take part as well, but she had practically no ranger skills, so she would only get in the way if she accompanied them.

This was an operation to rescue a righteous king who had reached a helping hand out to save the people of another country. As his squire, not being able to go felt like disloyalty, and it gnawed at Neia's heart.

She felt like screaming the way she had done at Remedios, but nothing would come of it even if she did so.

Neia told everyone that they had received Caspond's permission to search within the Holy Kingdom's borders, but she could not take part herself.

"Leave it to us, Miss Baraja."

"Ahhh. We'll keep our eyes open while searching our great benefactor, His Majesty. We won't miss a single clue!"

"Alright, everyone. Once the Prince-denka gives his permission, I, I'll be counting on all of you!"

Neia bowed deeply to them.

"Miss Baraja, what will the rest of us do? How can we be useful to the Sorcerer King?"

As everyone looked at her with zeal in their eyes, Neia was filled with delight.

Even after witnessing that sight, nobody felt that the Sorcerer King was dead.

That’s right! How could His Majesty be dead! I’m sure, I’m sure he must be waiting for us to rescue him… I think.

Neia could not imagine a scenario where that supreme being would wait for these people to rescue him. For all she knew, they would probably find him elegantly sipping a glass of fine wine in front of a pile of demihuman and demon corpses.

“Alright! Then everyone who’s left will start training, because weakness is a sin!”

Indeed, that was all Neia could do now. She had to become strong enough to be of use next time. If she and her people had been strong enough, the righteous Sorcerer King would not have ended up like this.

“Ohhhh!”

Their spirited answer echoed loudly. That was because everyone understood what Neia meant when she said, “The Sorcerer King is justice and weakness is a sin”. Not many people had agreed with those words when this unit had first been formed, but after mixing with them, more people had come to understand them.

“Then I’ll go see the Prince!”

After speaking directly with Caspond, the search party was quickly granted permission to move out. They had set out on the day itself, and three days had passed since then.

While things might have gotten troublesome if the members of the search party had not been of one mind, the fact was that all of them had been chosen because they agreed with Neia's proposal, and so they had left without delay.

While rumors of taking back Kalinsha had circulated through the city during these three days, the Liberation Army had not actually made any moves and merely let time pass aimlessly. The exception was Neia and the increasing number of people who had come to accept the Sorcerer King as justice -- they diligently applied themselves to their training

Neia let loose an arrow at the target bored, an irritated look on her face.

Her anxiety and anger had probably made her hands slip, because the arrow embedded itself just slightly off the center of the target.

Normally, someone would have come over to lightly chide Neia, but nobody dared address Neia now.

The reason for that was Neia's face.

Her anxiety over not being able to do anything for the Sorcerer King and a lack of sleep due to a lack of news meant that the area around her eyes was swollen and discolored, which made for a frightening face when one factored in the wrinkles between her brows as well. Since she typically concealed her face with her visor, it made a great impact on others when she removed it.

While Neia's subordinates keenly understood how she felt, nobody dared come near her.

--Your Majesty, Your--

Those words tumbled round and round in Neia's head.

"--Ahh, honestly."

The shoulders of everyone around Neia who was drawing back their bowstrings trembled as they heard those quiet words.

--Majesty. No. I need to calm down. Calm down. It's only been three days! Just the eastern region of the Holy Kingdom is large enough as it is! You don't want to scare the others, do you?

Neia took off her visor -- and heard something like a choked scream from someone who had happened to look her way -- then massaged her temples lightly as she tried to relax her stiff face.

Just then, Neia heard two sets of footsteps running toward the archery range. Given the metallic clinking of shirts, they were not militiamen who had come here to train. Paladins wore armor of metal plates, so it could not have been them wither. They were probably somewhat higher-ranked soldiers, or colleagues (squires).

"Squire Neia Baraja!"

When Neia turned to face the people who had barged in, the two men who had shown up simultaneously stepped back and cried out.

“What, what’s going on? Did something happen?!”

Weren’t you the ones with something to say? Neia thought as she replied:

“Ahh, it’s been a while. That’s the usual reaction… no, maybe it’s a little more than the usual reaction?”

These two people were also squires, and they had been trained alongside Neia. That said, she knew next to nothing about their characters since she had barely spoken to them, but at the very least she still remembered their names and faces.

If Neia knew them, then they must also know Neia. That would mean they ought to have been used to Neia’s murderous eyes. Even so, the fact that they had reacted this way showed how terrifying Neia’s face was now.

Speaking of which, Neia recalled that they too had been freed from prison camps.

“Ah, yes. I usually don’t look like this -- like I hate the entire world… I think. No, am I usually like that?”

Neia rubbed her face and mused that maybe she should not take off the visor.

“...Ah, sorry. It seems there’s something going on, can you tell me about it?”

“Ah, no, Prince Caspond is looking for you. Please report to him right away.”

“The Prince?”

Why was he looking for her? She had a few ideas, but she did not know which one was correct, so all she could do was pray that he was seeking her out for a good reason.

“I understand. Please tell him I’ll be coming right away.”

However, they did not look like they were leaving, even after she had given her answer. It puzzled Neia.

“What is it? Is there anything else?”

“No, it feels a little -- well, it’s not your face, but maybe it’s the air around you? Feels like the air around you has changed. I know I can’t express it too well in words…”

“Well, I’d be glad if it was a good change… but we’re all going to change. We’ve all been through so much.”

“Ahh, yes. You’re right. It’s just like what you said, Baraja.”

The two of them smiled tiredly. She did not know if they had bought it. They

said, “We’ll talk again some other time” and then they left.

Neia told her subordinates looking at her about how she was going to see Caspond, and then she headed out.

Caspond still stayed in the same building as before, but he was in a different room now.

That was because Jaldabaoth had smashed a huge hole in the previous room’s wall when he had shown up.

Nobody stopped her on her way to the room, even with her visor on, and she reached it with no problems.

During this time, nobody had asked her to leave behind the bow on her back either. There was no telling if it was because they trusted her, or because they were mindful of the fact that the bow had been borrowed from the Sorcerer King.

“Caspond-denka, this is Squire Neia Baraja reporting.”

Caspond was sitting inside the room, and two paladins stood beside him -- Remedios and Gustav. Neia immediately fell to one knee.

“I’m glad you came. We’ve been waiting for you. Ahh. that’s fine. Don’t worry about it, just stand up.

Neia stood as requested, and then asked:

“I apologize for keeping you waiting. May I know your bidding?”

“Before that, remove the item covering your face, Squire Neia Baraja.”

Those matter-of-fact words came from Gustav. Common sense indicated that she ought to have done so.

“Yes! Please forgive me.”

After Neia removed her visor, Gustav’s eyes widened slightly.

“...Ah, are you not feeling well? Would you like the priests to examine you?”

“No, I don’t feel that bad yet.” Since explaining was troublesome, Neia decided to press on. “...Now then, may I ask what’s the matter?”

“About that… well, there’s one more person who will be joining us besides the four of us here. I’m going to get them now, so don’t be too shocked, alright?”

She could see a look of distaste on Remedios’ face from the corner of her eye. If it could put a look of disgust on the Captain’s face, it was probably related to Jaldabaoth. And then the word “maid demon” suddenly came to Neia’s mind.

After hearing Caspond’s order, Gustav opened a side door and spoke to the person within.

And then, a heteromorph emerged before them. Neia knew what species it was.

It was a Zern.

While it was a species with a shiny carapace, its appearance was not offensive. However, there was a faint, almost imperceptible smell of bloodshed surrounding it.

What's a demihuman like that doing here, Neia wondered. Caspond seemed to sense this, and he spoke.

"He is an envoy."

So Jaldabaoth's envoy is here, is that it? Neia unconsciously let her hostility show, and the Zern twitched like it was going on the defensive.

"Hold it, Squire Baraja. It seems you are slightly mistaken. He is not Jaldabaoth's envoy. It is the opposite. He is an envoy of those people who plan to rebel against Jaldabaoth."

"Eh?"

Neia could not help exclaiming in surprise. Caspond seemed to have expected that response, and laughed.

"You look surprised. Well, that's only to be expected. Surely you didn't expect anyone to rebel against Jaldabaoth's subjugation of the demihumans, did you?

However, there are people like that. According to the envoy-dono, not all demihumans serve Jaldabaoth wholeheartedly. For instance, these Zerns. There are other species like the Zern who have no choice but to help Jaldabaoth because their ruling class -- their royal family -- was taken hostage. What they want is to rescue those hostages.”

“Precisely.”

Neia had never heard that female voice before and it startled her. She looked around the interior of the room. Finally, just as she was about to go “no way”, her eyes landed on the Zern. That voice would have sounded perfectly fine coming from a human being.

From where on its disgusting and frightening body did its human-like voice come from?

Was this a special ability of the Zerns, or was it a kind of magical power?

“The city you humans call Kalinsha that is four or five days’ travel to the southwest holds someone important to us. We ask that you save him.”

Neia conjured up a map of the Holy Kingdom in her head.

From her previous words, the city of which the Zern spoke was indeed Kalinsha. Of course, it was closer to west-south-west than the south west and she wondered if travelling there would really take five days, but everything else was within the margins of error.

However, there was one thing she did not understand. Why were they telling

Neia about this?

However, before Neia could contemplate the reasons for that, Caspond said something shocking.

“That is why we have decided to ally with them to fight against Jaldabaoth, Miss Baraja.”

Ehhh? Neia could not help but doubt her ears. Could they trust a species like the Zern, monsters who did not even have facial features to read?

“While we were forced to bow to Jaldabaoth’s power and invaded this place as part of his army, we received news that our king, who was being held hostage in the Abelion Hills, was killed by demons. As for the other one, the prince who’s being held prisoner as a symbol of our submission… now that the previous king has been killed, he is our new king. If you rescue him, we will help you.”

Did they kill him because they did not need two hostages? Or was there a more demon-like reason for the killing? While she could not read that deeply into matters, it would seem the important thing was that their king had been killed.

“That said, we are preparing to take our new king somewhere that Jaldabaoth cannot reach, so our most elite royal guard will not be able to help you. However, the remaining three thousand or so of our warriors that Jaldabaoth brought along will fight by your side. Our species will not die out as long as there is a king and a single female, so you may use those warriors as you wish. There will be no problems even if you kill them all.”

“That’s how it is. You also know the conditions I’ve laid out to triumph against Jaldabaoth. Rather than decreasing the demihumans numbers with combat, we will take fewer losses if we persuade them to leave his side. Also, they have provided us with important information, and we have finished verifying it.”

Caspond smiled, and then continued.

“From what we know, this news is not a trap set by Jaldabaoth. On the contrary, this is something we can use to deal with the Zern. If Jaldabaoth finds out, they will be purged, and their prince -- the new king -- will also be killed.”

That’s what’ll happen to you if you betray us, Caspond was threatening the Zern.

Although it was only natural for anyone in a high position to think like that, the fact that Caspond could ruthlessly describe such a development frightened Neia a little.

However, once the calm returned to Neia’s heart, a question boiled up inside her. Namely: why had he brought her here to listen to their planning? If he wanted Neia to take part in the rescue, all he would have to do was give her an order. It was true that Neia was now a unit commander, but ultimately she was just a squire who was somewhat skilled with the bow. There was no need to explain the operation to her in such detail. And not just that--

...Ah, don’t tell me that they still regard me as His Majesty’s squire? I mean, I’m halfway to being a citizen of the Sorcerous Kingdom already, right?

They probably mean that the Sorcerer King would also be listening to this

under normal circumstances. Or maybe they want me to explain this to the Sorcerer King when we see him again.

That was it. Neia was still the Sorcerer King's squire.

Neia puffed up her chest, and Caspond was slightly surprised at the sudden change in her attitude.

"Now then. With regards to rescuing the Zern prince, we have reached the decision that rescuing him during the chaos of attacking Kalinsha will be very difficult."

"Indeed," the Zern followed up on Caspond's words. "Let me tell you where the prince is being held. Vice-Captain, I hope you will help clarify details for me."

The Zern launched into her explanation with Gustav backing her up.

First of all, the great city of Kalinsha occupied the top of a hill. It was under the direct administration of the royal family and was protected by thick walls. On its west, near its highest point, was Castle Kalinsha.

It was intended to hold the demihumans at bay should the fortress line be breached, and at the same time, it was near a major trade route leading to the south. Therefore, it was more sturdily built than any other city in the Holy Kingdom.

In addition, Kalinsha's seldom-used castle was very solidly-built in order to withstand sieges.

The imprisoned Zern prince was held within one of the towers of the castle. Since he was in the innermost of the towers that were intended for last-ditch defenses, one could say it was the hardest place in Kalinsha to infiltrate.

It did not even have windows in order to protect against aerial attack, and one could not reach it without travelling down an aerial walkway.

This tower was now inhabited by powerful guardians -- the water-using ogrekin known as Vah Uns. The Zerns were not allowed to go near it, lest something happen to their prince if they did.

However, provided their treachery was not exposed, if the guards saw humans -- who were not related to the Zerns -- they would not harm the prince. In fact, they would protect the prince instead. That was what they meant by borrowing the strength of humans.

“But once the actual fighting begins, if the prince is still imprisoned, we will have no choice but to kill you humans. Since all our fellows who were brought to this land are present…”

The Zern’s words started to lose coherence, but everyone understood her meaning.

It would be too late by then.

There was value in rescuing the prince because the Zerns were enemies of mankind. If the Zern were all wiped out, then there would be no need to rescue the prince.

“It’ll be too late to send reinforcements once the fighting begins. Therefore, the safest and most effective way to rescue the prince is to send a group of elite warriors who will move as stealthily as possible. Squire Neia Baraja, I would like you to command this operation.”

“I cannot. It is impossible for me.”

Neia responded to Caspond immediately.

Normally, gainsaying the prince -- who was her supreme commander -- would not be tolerated, both in terms of military discipline and social conventions, but at the same time, that order was truly ridiculous. It was simply too much, no matter how you looked at it.

“I knew you would say that. However, Miss Baraja, this matter is of great benefit to you as well,” Caspond narrowed his eyes. “They will furnish us with knowledge about the hills and introduce reliable guides there.”

Neia gulped.

She bit her lip, desperately trying to keep a lid on her emotions.

“...How much trust can we place in those words?”

“Once you rescue the prince, the Zerns will respond by rising up in revolt from the inside, at which point retaking Kalinsha will be much simpler. It’s certainly better than a conventional siege, and we will be able to take more demihumans

prisoner. The Zerns also say that they will ask around to see which prisoners have the knowledge you desire."

"I'm not too sure about the details," the Zern added on to Caspond's words. "It seems you wish to travel to the Abelion Hills. If you rescue our prince unharmed, our entire species will be indebted to you. Who would refuse to share what they know with a benefactor? In addition, that knowledge is nothing special."

Her argument was utterly irrefutable.

Refusing them would mean being disloyal to His Majesty. If I let a chance to be useful to His Majesty slip out of my hands because I'm afraid…

After calmly considering the matter, she felt that this was her best chance. However -- she did not intend to kill herself.

"Who else will be going on the mission to rescue the prince?"

Neia looked at Remedios, who had been silent all this time.

"I'm not going. I can't infiltrate or anything."

If you say that, then what about me, Neia thought, and then she looked silently to Caspond.

"...I asked her to go with you several times, but she kept refusing. Therefore, you will be accompanied by that captive… no, that collaborator."

“Hmph. Captive will do.”

“...Captain.”

“It doesn’t matter. Vice-Captain Montagnes, can you bring her over?”

Montagnes left the room with a “yes”. At the same time, the Zern envoy left the room as well. It would seem she did not want to let unrelated people learn her true identity.

Gustav returned before long, but not alone. He had with him a girl wrapped in layer upon layer of chains, a girl that Neia had never seen before. She seemed more petite and delicate. Given her looks, she seemed to be younger than Neia.

She wore a scarf that blended dark green and sand yellow in a complex pattern, as well as a strange maid’s outfit.

Her facial features were exquisite, and even the patch that covered one of her eyes did not diminish her beauty.

Neia suddenly remembered what Evileye had said, and while she was quite sure who this person was, she decided to ask just in case.

“Prince-denka, who is this?”

“...Haven’t you already guessed? She’s one of the maid demons who showed up in this city.”

Neia went stiff. She had guessed as much, but it still startled her. She was difficulty rating 150. In other words, she was a monster among monsters. A being which humanity could not overcome now stood before her eyes.

However, Neia also sensed something else that startled her.

That was the fact that she could still feel such intense hatred with an unbeatable monster in front of her.

How could she hold on to such emotions when facing a creature that outclassed her so tremendously? Was it because this maid demon was not radiating an aura of fear, or was it because of her loyalty to the Sorcerer King?

Regardless of which it was -- Neia sank her hatred for the maid demon into the depths of her heart and did not let it show.

If she was careless, she would start berating her as one of the reasons why such an outstanding monarch like the Sorcerer King lost to Jaldabaoth.

However, while Remedios had her hand on the hilt of her holy sword, Caspond and Gustav did not seem to be doing anything special on their part.

Therefore, Neia could conclude that she did not pose any immediate danger. Otherwise, they would never allow her to stay in the same room as the prince.

“...Murderer girl. Do not be afraid. Right now I am not sworn to Jaldabaoth, but to Ainz-sama. I will not attack.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ainz-sama. That term of address filled Neia’s heart with displeasure, as if she was trying to reject the fact that it had been said. However, the maid demon replied to her in an inflectionless monotone.

“...You do not have to believe me. It is simply the truth.”

“Miss Baraja. It seems that His Majesty somehow managed to usurp control over her from Jaldabaoth during the battle.

Neia’s eyes went as wide as saucers.

Had he actually managed to carry out a nonlethal tactic like taking control of her while fighting multiple opponents -- Jaldabaoth and the maid demons?

Neia did not know much about magic, and she did not know how difficult that was. If one needed an example, it would be like trying to snatch equipment off a very powerful opponent during the middle of combat. If that was the case, then it must have been an incredibly difficult maneuver which only the Sorcerer King could pull off.

Neia came to respect the Sorcerer King more and more.

However, she had two questions now.

She wanted to believe that if the Sorcerer King had done it, then everything

would be fine and she could accept that fact. But was she really under the Sorcerer King's control? That was the first question. Could it be that she was not actually working for the Sorcerer King, but acting under Jaldabaoth's orders to pretend that she was under his control?

And then, the other question was--

"I understand that you're loyal to the Sorcerer King. But why are you here? Is it because of your chains?"

"...It's not like that."

The maid demon began to exert her strength, and the thick chains emitted a distasteful creaking sound.

"Stop that!"

As Remedios shouted in time with a wave of killing intent, the sound stopped.

"...Even I could break ordinary unenchanted chains."

"Then why? Why haven't you left this place and gone to His Majesty's side?"

She had asked because she was hoping that demonic instincts or the abilities of a bound demon would lead her to the Sorcerer King. The maid demon flatly replied:

“...Because it’s an order. The last order I received from him was to help you. So I will do my best as long as it does not mean my death.”

“Eh!?”

Neia was stunned.

...The Sorcerer King came to this country to seize control of the maid demons. He came to obtain the maid demons, a tremendous fighting force that could make the Sorcerous Kingdom even stronger. In that case, his first order to the maid demon should have been for them to return to the Sorcerous kingdom. But instead, His Majesty… What a kind person he is… Is there a king out there who is so compassionate to the people of another country? No, it can’t be, only the Sorcerer King is an exception. His Majesty really is justice! How amazing! I was right all along!

Neia forced herself to keep the boiling liquid from spilling out of her eyes.

“In that case, what does “as long as it does not mean my death” refer to?”

“...If you ask me to fight Jaldabaoth I will refuse. It will be very difficult to escape if I face him.”

I see, Neia understood. Caspond had already verified the truth of everything she had said. That was why she had been brought here.

“So this demon will come with me.”

“Just so. While I thought of sending her to the Sorcerous Kingdom as an envoy, compared to that -- ah -- well, once that’s over and we learn information that we can trade, ah-- I was planning to have her join the search party we’re sending out. That’s because it’s dangerous… Those people you picked out haven’t found anything yet, so we can be sure that they landed in the hills.”

She did not know why Caspond’s instructions were so vague.

She peeked at the maid demon’s face and saw that it had not changed. She did not look worried.

Of course, this maid demon might not know what had happened to the Sorcerer King, and she probably could not imagine that the Sorcerer King was in dangerous territory. However, her blank face still made Neia very unhappy.

Most importantly, could she let a demon like that use a familiar term of address like “Ainz-sama?”

No, of course not! Neia fumed. Not even she had addressed him in such an intimate manner.

“--iss Baraja?”

“Ah, yes!”

Oh no! Neia’s face was slightly red. She had apparently forgotten herself due to her distaste for the maid demon.

“What’s the matter? Is something bothering you?”

“Ah, no! It’s been only three days since the search started, so I think it might be a bit hasty to conclude that he fell there…”

“I see. That does make sense. However, would it not be better to be prepared for anything?”

“That is true.”

“Alright. In that case, maid demon-kun. This is the third time I have spoken to you. The day we found you, yesterday, and now.”

The maid demon said nothing and looked at Caspond.

“If I asked you to go to a certain large city to rescue someone imprisoned there, would you help us?”

“...It is like I said yesterday. I will.”

“Ahh, good, I understand. Then, I apologize for this, but would you mind returning to your room? Vice-Captain Montagnes, if you would.”

He led the maid demon away, and they began speaking again once Gustav returned.

“Miss Baraja. While I do not know if I need to tell you all this, possessing this

information might mean the difference between success and failure when you infiltrate Kalinsha. Therefore, I will speak to you about a few things. The first concerns Jaldabaoth."

Caspond told her what they had learned from the maid demon.

It would seem she knew little about Jaldabaoth, practically nothing, in fact. She did not even know what abilities or attacks or weaknesses he possessed. In addition, she did not know what Jaldabaoth was doing now or what his objective was.

However, she had said that he would need a very long time to recover if he was severely injured. It was like how it would take longer to refill a larger vessel when the water level inside it decreased.

And so, after learning about Jaldabaoth, the demihumans and the other demons, Neia asked Caspond the question whose answer she wanted to know most of all.

"How far can we trust her?"

"We can't. We should kill her to be safe."

That answer had been supplied by Remedios.

Neia resisted the urge to ask if she could beat a difficulty 150 maid demon, and listened to Caspond's judgement.

“I find it hard to trust her. This might be one of Jaldabaoth’s schemes. She might be a spy sent out in case someone like Momon appears, someone who can fight back against Jaldabaoth.”

That was why they had asked the Zern envoy to leave before bringing the maid demon in, and spoken obliquely in front of her.

“I told you, right? It would be better to kill her. That way there’ll be one less thing to worry about.”

“I see, Captain Custodio. That is an option. However, it is very likely that the maid demon is indeed under the Sorcerer King’s control. That is because she has not been spouting false information about Jaldabaoth nonstop, but replying that she does not know. However, why is she not asking about the Sorcerer King at all… Umu. Still, you agreed to hand the rights to the maid demons over to him, did you not? Since you did that, once they find out we killed her, they will regard our country as incapable of keeping its promises, you know? Once that happens, it is possible that nobody else will want to help us no matter what happens to our country.”

“He’s already been killed by Jaldabaoth, hasn’t he?”

Remedios’ words made Neia look down as she struggled to bite back her anger. Thanks to Remedios, she felt like she had gained the ability to better manage her emotions.

“We cannot be sure about that. That is why I feel we need to test and use her during the rescue of the prince. If she betrays us and leaks the information, then only the Zern will be eliminated, which will reduce the number of demihumans. We will also be able to root out the rat among us. These are the

two merits of this option. And of course, if we succeed, we can simply rejoice.”

Please don’t forget about the life of the person who will be carrying out the infiltration, Neia grumbled in her heart.

“Did you ask the maid demon about her own weaknesses? If she betrays us en route, would it not be better to have some way to deal with her?”

“We didn’t ask about anything like that.”

Caspond smiled bitterly. Neia followed suit.

Even if she told them, there would be no way to determine if she were telling the truth. They could not tell by looking, and obviously they could not test it out.

“Well, we’re not the ones who control her. Ultimately, she’s only helping us because the Sorcerer King ordered her to do so.”

Gustav was still going on about that, but in truth both Caspond and Neia had realised it already. There was probably only one person present who did not understand the situation.

“So the infiltrators will be myself and the maid demon. Has anyone else been selected?”

“On that point, if you have nobody else to recommend, then the two of you will go by yourselves.”

For a moment, Neia looked at Caspond because she thought he was kidding, but his face was serious.

“Allow me to add on to the Prince-denka’s words, but surely an infiltration is best handled by a very small number of people, am I wrong? People getting in the way would be bad news, which is why we have nobody to put forward.”

While Gustav’s explanation was convincing enough, Neia knew that was not the only reason.

It was because of Neia Baraja’s situation.

It would be all well and good if this rescue operation went well. If it failed, all they would lose was an interfering squire who had grown close to the Sorcerer King and one of the Sorcerer King’s minions. In addition, they would lose little even if the maid demon betrayed them. It was perfect.

In that case -- was it a lie when they said they had asked Remedios to go before? It was also possible that it was not, and they were just trying to minimize their losses.

Neia exhaled. There could be no other answer. This was a good chance to show her loyalty to the Sorcerer King.

“I understand. I and her--” she mused that she was probably a female “--The Maid demon will go together.”

“Oh, I see. Then we’ll be counting on you.”

“Yes!”

“Then Vice-Captain Montagnes will draw you a rough sketch of the city. Prepare yourself before you leave. Also, avoid combat if any demons close to Jaldabaoth are present.”

According to the maid demon and the Zern’s information, Jaldabaoth was served by three great demons. These three demons were--

The ruler of the Abelion Hills, where the demihumans lived.

The marshal of the invasion of the Southern Holy Kingdom.

The one in charge of three major cities, who teleported between Kalinsha, Rimun and Prart.

That seemed to be it.

Therefore, if she was unlucky, the great demon in charge of the cities would be present.

The great demon in charge of the cities apparently had no head, and its body was like a withered tree. It was two meters tall and had no wings or a tail. It had clawed hands, and its slender body possessed an unimaginable strength. Also, it lacked a head, but it was still able to sense its surroundings, and similarly it could even read.

As a demon, it had a truly fiendish physiology.

Incidentally, the capital of Hoburns was apparently under Jaldabaoth's direct command, and not that of his aides.

"May I know who is stronger between it and the maid demon?"

"In the maid demon's own words, she does not know."

She wanted to see the maid demon's fighting ability just once. In particular, she wanted to know what weapons she favored and what special abilities she had. If she did not know that, they might suffer an unexpected defeat.

The three great demons are both generals and lords. He probably feels that demihumans are not suited for brainwork, so he seems to have set up a dictatorial power structure. Therefore, the great demons handle much of the administration and they have not appointed any successors or substitutes. If you can defeat them, you'll be able to deal the Demihuman Alliance a devastating blow. "

"That would satisfy the victory conditions you have laid out, Prince-denka."

"Ahh. Although Jaldabaoth might lead in person once his wounds have recovered… Right now, I don't think he'll force himself to take the field. However, if you can take the limbs, then victory will be close at hand even if you do not crush the head. That said, your main priority now is the rescue, so avoid combat if you can."

“I understand.”

“In that case… when will you begin the rescue mission?”

“I was planning to set out as soon as possible. However, I would like to speak to the maid demon before that.”

“I see. Then how about in two days’ time?”

Neia replied in the affirmative and received permission to meet the maid demon. After that, she left the room.

While she had a heavy burden to bear, her stride was energetic and her face was filled with determination. The flames of madness that came from losing her purpose recently received new direction, and they became a blinding light that illuminated her path.

There was still something she could do, and her path led to His Majesty. When she thought of it that way, even travelling with a dangerous demon was nothing.

***

The maid demon lived in an average-sized house with a garden. It should have once belonged to a wealthy resident of the city. During the savage takeover of this city, part of the beautiful decorations had been destroyed, and statues which should have been there had been smashed. Still, the house itself was intact, and it did not seem like the cold air outside would leak in.

Still, even a cheap and crude house could boast that. Every opening that could be considered a window had been boarded up tight, as though whoever did it

were determined not to let air flow in -- or out. It smacked of paranoia.

On the whole, this was a cage, or some kind of sealed-off space. It was a place for someone who was nominally a minion of an undead being or a demon, but also a place for the subordinate of a hero who had come to save the Holy Kingdom. It was a place which blended many purposes, as well as a sense of impending crisis and aversion.

While she wanted to ask what she could do with several loops of chain around her, the Sorcerer King had not officially introduced her, so they could not treat this maid demon politely.

The wall around the house had been hastily repaired, but it did not have a gate with a lock. Had they taken it away because there was not enough steel to go around? In its place was a hastily-built guard post that looked like a temporary hut.

The man standing there was a fully armored and powerful-looking man, the paladin who had been appointed commander of this place. Neia handed the scroll Caspond had prepared to him.

The paladin quickly scanned it, then returned the scroll to her while handing over a lit candlestick.

It was daytime, but the boarded-up windows meant that light could not penetrate inside. Since the maid demon did not need light either, the interior was pitch dark.

Neia went through the door and looked around the desolate garden before

heading toward the house. As she walked over a shattered brick road to the main door, Neia took a deep breath.

She used the knocker on the door, but there was no response. Neia hesitated, and then tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. She cracked the door open, and peered into the darkened interior. There was no sound from the inside, and it was as silent as a mausoleum.

She made up her mind and then entered. There was no light inside, and no servants. There was nothing in this house but Neia and a difficulty rating 150 demon.

Sweat beaded on her back. The candle she held shook unsteadily. Everything outside the candle's small circle of illumination seemed to have been sucked into the darkness.

"I'm Neia Baraja! I'm here to see you! Where are you!"

Neia shouted into the darkness, but the darkness did not respond.

Was she sleeping?

She shouted again, louder than just now, but there was no response.

Neia screwed up her determination, and stepped forward.

This was a two-storey building. It had many rooms, and checking them all would take quite a lot of time. Still, even without doing that, Neia might be able

to pick up something with her acute hearing.

She began with the first floor.

As Neia gathered up her courage and took a step forward--

“--Uwah.”

Someone called out to her from the side and a face appeared in the light.

“Aiieeeee!”

Her shoulders twitched, and she unconsciously backed away from the face that appeared.

She hit a wall with a thud.

She could not have missed that face. It had appeared beside her as though it had passed through the walls.

“...Feels surprisingly good.”

She saw the maid demon through her tear-limned eyes. She watched the panicking Neia with a blank expression on her face.

“Damn demon…”

Neia grumbled.

Was even the Circlet of Iron Will helpless to prevent the feeling of surprise? Her heart was pounding like a drum, and it felt fit to burst. If that was the demon’s aim--

Nah, it couldn’t be...

“...Why did you come here?”

“I came here to ask you something. In two day’s time, I want the two of us…”

It would probably be too dangerous to explain the operation in detail since she did not know how far she could trust her.

“...To go on a certain mission.”

“...Got it.”

“So I think it would be good if we could share what we know and discuss what we can do…”

“...Sharing information is important. Understood.”

Whether or not she would really share information would depend on the upcoming discussion.

“...Alright, then come this way.”

The maid demon moved with rapid steps, as though she did not care about the lack of light. It would seem the paladin she had met earlier was telling the truth.

As Neia trailed behind her, she studied the back of the maid demon.

She was a beautiful girl whose slender limbs and pretty face all evoked a protective desire in others.

Still, it all seemed like a charade to Neia, who knew the truth about her.

The chains she had been festooned with in Caspond's chambers were nowhere to be seen. However, the chains were meaningless to begin with. This demon was simply made in the shape of a human girl. Her true identity was a monster that could surpass Dragons.

As she considered that even a slight pat might be the death of her, her stomach began to ache.

"I'm very fragile, so please be gentle with me."

As she heard Neia mutter those words reflexively, the maid demon stopped in place, then turned around and said, "Got it." Even Neia's eyes could not make out any changes in her expression. Not knowing what she thought made her a little uneasy

In this way, they arrived at the reception room.

There was only a single candle for illumination.

“...Sit,” she pointed to the facing chair. Neia sat down. “...Drinks.”

She suddenly produced a bottle of brown liquid. It was just like how the Sorcerer King took out objects.

As Neia watched in surprise, she opened the cap and inserted a straw. It was made of a bizarre material that looked both soft and hard at the same time.

She hoped that muddy liquid was not poison. It would be very distressing if she accidentally forgot that it was harmful to humans.

However, if she was really a subordinate of the Sorcerer king, then she would not be able to refuse. Neia emboldened herself and moved her tongue.

She took a mouthful of it, and swirled her tongue.

It was not as bitter as she expected, and it did not prickle like needles--

It’s sweet!? What is this!

Neia took one mouthful after another. While it was sticky and needed some effort to suck up, it was cool, refreshing and delicious.

“...Chocolate-flavored. Calories are a little high… around 2000. But don’t

worry. Eating good food and getting fat is a long-cherished ambition for women, according to a certain great person.”

The change in tone made Neia peek at her face again, but she was still expressionless.

The words “great person” made her think of the Sorcerer King, but Neia had the feeling she was referring to someone else.

“...Want another?”

“May I?”

The maid demon probably knew that it would be a shame to finish it up in one go, and she took out another bottle.

Neia was also a girl -- although the Orcs had wondered if she was a female -- and it was hard for her to reach out for something that would make her fat. However, this drink was in a small container, which meant there was not much of it. Eating too much of anything would make one fat, so all she had to do was eat less at dinner to cancel it out.

I have no idea what these calories are or how much two thousand of them make, but she said it was a little, so it should be fine.

It was a sweetness that was completely different from that of fruits or honey. This time, she would savor the taste before drinking it.

She took a mouthful--

“Ah! No, that’s not why I came. I came to talk.”

“...Mm.”

The maid demon sucked on the straw and drank in the same way as Neia had, while her eyes signalled Neia to continue.

“Er, well, first, if you have a name, could you tell it to me? I’m Neia Baraja, but you can call me whatever you want.”

According to Blue Rose, each individual maid demon was completely different from the others in terms of appearance and equipment. In fact, the maid demons she had seen behind Jaldabaoth at Caspond’s room were completely different from this one. Maybe there were different names for different types of maid demons, much like Goblins and Hobgoblins.

While there might not be a need to know its individual and race name, if she really was a subordinate of the Sorcerer King, then as a squire, it would only be polite to treat her with all due courtesy.

“...Fuhaa. CZ is fine. I’ll call you Neia.”

“CZ, is it?”

Neia had expected to be addressed as “human”, so she was mildly surprised.

Is the maid demon's personal name CZ? Or is CZ her race name? Well, both of them work for me…

"Is that your personal name?"

"...Personal name? An excellent question. Yes. Personal name."

"Ah, forgive me. I don't understand demons that well…"

"...Mm. Demons… huh. This… mm."

CZ seemed to be mumbling. Neia could hear all of it, but since she was talking to herself she decided not to take a jab at her.

"Alright then, CZ. What can you do? Also, there were several maid demons, so why did the Sorcerer King choose you?"

"...I'm good at ranged attacks. Also because I was MVP (the best)."

"Best? Ahh, is that it? So at that time you were the most troublesome opponent, is that it?"

CZ chuckled. That said, her face did not seem to change. However, Neia had sharp eyes, and she understood after observing her carefully.

There was a very slight change in her expression -- she seemed proud.

At the same time, Neia relaxed. It would seem she had not been easily controlled because she was the weakest.

“I can use ranged weapons too, but in turn I’m not good at close combat… We don’t have a frontliner.”

CZ sipped her drink in silence.

“Got any ideas?”

“...What are we doing?”

“Infiltrating a city and rescuing a VIP.”

She could not mention the word Zern yet.

“...Then we need the ability to move stealthily. Better not to have a clanky frontliner.”

“Yes, that’s right.

“...Can you move quietly, Neia?”

“I had some training, so I’m probably better than before. However, I’m not fully confident in myself.”

“...Can you cast spells like [Invisibility] or magic items like that?”

Neia shook her head.

“...I see. Work hard then.”

“Yes. I’ll work hard. Then…”

Could she really trust her -- could she believe that she was under the Sorcerer King’s control?

If CZ was still a minion of Jaldabaoth and was pretending to be a subordinate of the Sorcerer King in order to spy on them, then telling her about him would be very bad. However, it was very likely that the Sorcerer King had wrested control of her from Jaldabaoth. In that case, not trusting her enough would be throwing away her best trump card.

And so, nervously and haltingly, she spoke.

“In this place, er, I have the duty of being the Sorcerer King’s squire.”

CZ’s sculpted features did not move.

“...I heard. He said she had vicious eyes. And then he lent her a bow, which was runecrafted™. Show me.”

Alarms blared in the corner of her mind -- Jaldabaoth had seemed quite interested in it as well. Still, if CZ really was in the Sorcerer King’s employ, she would not be able to refuse.

Neia handed over her bow, and CZ took it. However, she only glanced briefly at it before returning it to Neia.

“This is very good. You should let many people see it.”

She delivered the line calmly, so it felt like she was reading off something. However, she was probably imagining things because CZ was not looking at the bow with interest. After all, she had spoken this way ever since she had first seen her.

“Thank you. Ah, yes. About what happens after the mission--”

CZ held out a hand to interrupt Neia.

“You should let many people see it.”

Why is she so hung up on this? CZ probably noted the bafflement on Neia’s face, and continued:

“He lent you an excellent runecrafted™ weapon. You should spread the word of Ainz-sama’s greatness.”

The word Ainz made Neia twitch. Making this clear to her was her top priority.

“His Majesty.”

Neia sensed from CZ's blank face that she had not been clear enough, and added:

"That's 'His Majesty'. Calling him Ainz-sama is too familiar, don't you think?"

This time, it was CZ whose face twitched a little. No, at a glance her face was still blank, but Neia was sure that her expression had changed.

"It's not too familiar."

"No, it is. Normally, you don't address him by his name, but by his title. You just came into his service and haven't been of use to him yet… What's with that face of yours?"

"Nothing. However, I want to call him Ainz-sama and not His Majesty."

Was the expression that could be vaguely glimpsed past that blank mask a look of pity, or was she crowing her victory? Even Neia did not understand, but it made her mad. This thick-skinned newcomer had come out of nowhere, and the fact that she was trying to cozy up to the person she so revered made her very unhappy.

Neia decided not to pretend any more. While she wanted to act as a squire and deal with her politely as a person of the Holy Kingdom, she decided to give up on it. It did not matter if she was dealing with a monster which knew no equal in past or present, she had to make one thing clear.

"Someone like you--"

“I was told to do so by Ainz Ooal Gown-sama -- Call me Ainz-sama, he said.”

“Eh?”

“So I’ll call him Ainz-sama. I’ll. Call. Him. That.”

Left unspoken was “but you can’t”. Neia’s body trembled.

No, she was a demon that the Sorcerer King had bound into his service with magic. Maybe it was natural that she would go that far.

“No, that can’t be. You, you must be lying. You’re lying like a demon would. How could he have explained in such detail in a situation like that?”

CZ shook her head, as though to say, “good grief.”

“It is a shame, but also true. Well, I know you must be shocked. I understand very well. Still, that is where you stand now. However, if you work for Ainz-sama, someday you will be able to call him Ainz-sama too. Devote yourself to it.”

“--CZ.”

“...Neia. It is a predecessor’s duty to teach those who come after them.”

While that was a pretty good line, had CZ not come after herself? Still, the fact

that she could call him Ainz-sama made her feel that maybe she was the senior after all. It was a little hard to accept, but for the time being--

“I want to thank you.”

“...Don’t mention it. One must show kindness to those who know of Ainz-sama’s greatness.”

Neia’s eyes widened in surprise. She had only been bound to him for such a short time, so how had she gained such respect? No, that simply proved how great the Sorcerer King was.

“Yes, that’s right. I know very well how great His Majesty is.”

After Neia answered, the two of them looked at each other for a while.

CZ was the first to move.

She dextrously extended her right hand. Neia responded instantly and without hesitation.

While Neia was mildly bothered by the fact that CZ had not taken off her glove, the two of them shook hands on the table.

Given how much she reveres the Sorcerer King, it would seem she really is under His Majesty’s rule. Otherwise, she would not have called him Ainz-sama, but instead she would have called him His Majesty like me, so she would not sound strange.

Was she being naive? However, at this point, Neia was very confident in her belief. She understood that CZ's loyalty was genuine. Just like how the teeth of two cogwheels fitted together, they could understand each other because they were fellow worshippers of the same god.

"...Speaking of which, it's easy to get along with you. As a human being, you have a bright future, Neia."

"I have very mixed feelings about getting along with a demon. We're talking like this because you're speaking the truth about how great His Majesty is."

Hm hm, CZ nodded.

"...Although I feel it doesn't matter what happens to Neia, I will bring you back safely to this country. I promise."

"Thank you."

Neia's gratitude was honest and straightforward. CZ's difficulty rating was 150. She was on a level where even Blue Rose would be hard-pressed to win against her. It was only right to be grateful for the protection of such a demon. This was doubly true if she was a subject of the Sorcerer King. Although, there was one thing she had to clarify with her.

"...Can you swear that in the name of the Sorcerer King?"

CZ raised a hand, like she had been called on by a teacher.

“This I swear in the name of the Supreme One, Ainz Ooal Gown-sama… However, if Neia dies and is resurrected, that still counts as keeping my word, right?”

“Safe…? No, I think that’s slightly different…”

The two of them looked at each other.

To Neia, there was a big difference between “safe” and “coming back to life after dying”. However, that was just barely within the bounds of what she could compromise with.

“If you don’t become a demon or one of the undead, but come back to life as a human, that ought to count, right…”

“...That should be fine. ...Alright.”

There was a slight change in CZ’s voice, which had been in a monotone all this while. She sounded like she was motivated now.

“...While you’re not cute, this is specially for you.”

CZ took something out and went to Neia’s side. Then she pressed something tightly onto Neia’s forehead.

“Eh!? What!? What is this!?”

Frightened by that inexplicable action, she tried desperately to peel it off, but she could not. It was stuck on so tight that it would not budge. It was very frightening.

“What’s this! Eh! Wait! I’m scared!”

“...It’s okay. It won’t hurt and it’s not scary. Look.”

CZ showed her something with the number 1 and a strange design -- it might have been a letter -- on it. It was made of some kind of paper that gleamed with a frightening lustre and the one on her head was similarly slippery. She had heard of talismancy, so was that a kind of talisman used as a magical medium for that art? No matter what, she could not have given out a trivial item like this, so it must be some kind of magic item. That was what sent a chill down Neia’s spine. Could it be that she would not be able to remove it for the rest of her life?

“Why did you have to stick it on my forehead! Aren’t there better places to put it!?”

“...Mm, like a little sister.”

“Eh!?” Although she had heard something quite shocking, there was a more important matter at hand. “Anyway, take this off. At least stick it on my clothes or somewhere else!”

“...It can’t be helped, then.”

CZ took out a small bottle and placed a drop of something on Neia’s forehead. After that, the tightly stuck-on object peeled off easily, like it had never been attached at all. She picked it up, looked at it, and saw that it was the same as the one CZ had showed her earlier.

“...Sticker. It needs to be pasted somewhere obvious.”

It would seem she would have to paste it on. Making CZ would do no good, so Neia did as she was told.

“Yes…”

“...Are we done?”

“Eh? Ah, no, after this, er, I wanted to talk about finding His Majesty, ah, no, to welcome him back…”

“...I’ll go too. ...We need a lot of preparation. After all that is over.”

“Really?”

“...I promise. But I hope we can make time to finish the map of the demihumans’ hills.”

“That’s true. Eh, demihumans?”

A moment after she agreed, a question suddenly popped up in her heart. Right now, she had not told her anything. Even so, why had she suddenly used the word “demihuman”?

Could it be… she heard about him landing in the Hills from Caspond-denka?

“...What’s wrong?”

“Er, um… I got it. I’ll talk to the people on top.”

“...Pleased to meet you, Neia.”

“The pleasure was all mine, CZ.”

Although she was still mildly bothered by the sticker from just now, Neia stuck out her hand, and CZ responded. They both shook hands again.

“You don’t think His Majesty is dead after all, do you, CZ?”

CZ’s eyes went wide.

“...What did you just say?”

“Actually, His Majesty fell to the east, and then he didn’t contact us again… Since His Majesty can cast teleportation spells, the fact that he still hasn’t come back makes me think something happened to him… So… what if… His Majesty…”

It hurt too much to speak any further. She hesitated, because if she said it, it might come true.

To this CZ responded with what was probably surprise.

“...He’s fine. He’s not dead. My binding is the proof. Hm? ...Why are you crying?”

Her tears were flowing on their own.

The Sorcerer King was really alive.

She truly believed that he was not dead. But sometimes, the uneasiness that suddenly reared up in her mind left her unable to sleep. Many people had told Neia that the Sorcerer King was fine, but all of them sounded like they were just trying to comfort her, to try and keep their own worries at bay, and not because they truly believed it.

But at this moment, someone had told her that with absolute confidence and certainty. That, and CZ was the proof that the Sorcerer King was alive. That allowed Neia to relax at last.

It was relief, like that of a lost child finding her parents, that made Neia weep.

CZ produced a piece of cloth that was printed with the same design as her scarf -- it was probably a handkerchief -- and covered Neia’s face with it. And then, she rubbed forcefully. She was not so much violent as inexperience, but the place where she rubbed hurt a lot.

CZ pulled the handkerchief away, and Neia’s snot stretched out into a bridge.

“...There’s snot on it. ...I’m super shocked.”

After hearing CZ's distinctly shocked voice, there was an indescribable look on Neia's face.

Therefore, she took a handkerchief out of her own pocket and broke the bridge of snot.

"...I'll wash it."

"...Mm."

***

Entering Kalinsha castle was not difficult.

All they had to do was hide in barrels and be smuggled in as cargo. There would be checks, of course, but there were other barrels -- eight in total -- besides the ones they had chosen to hide in, so all they had to do was let the inspectors check those instead. The fact that they could get past security with such simple precautions was due to the diverse nature of the Demihuman Alliance.

The demihumans all came from different cultures and had varying social norms. If they had anything in common, it was that fighting strength meant everything. Therefore, when a powerful individual threw his weight around, he usually got it, and minor transgressions were all forgiven. To demihumans, their personal power determined their capacity for violence and in turn, their social rank. Those lower on the totem pole had no choice but to obey.

Therefore, a strong Zern could put an end to the cargo inspection by glaring at the inspectors.

Eventually, there was a loud thunk as the barrels were laid on the ground.

After that, someone knocked on the top of the barrel.

That was the signal that they had arrived at their destination. As planned, Neia counted out three minutes in silence as she listened to the Zern responsible for transporting them open a door and leave.

After the three minutes were up, Neia pushed up the divider above her. While the bigger pieces of raw meat did not fall when the divider tilted, the smaller chunks rained down on Neia. This barrel was constructed with a false bottom. Neia was below the divider and the fresh meat lay on top of it.

The reason why the barrels were filled with fresh meat and not vegetables or grain was so that they could use the scent of blood to mask Neia and CZ's scent.

While Neia found it a little uncomfortable to be soaked in blood and juices from the meat, she still felt happy that none of the countermeasures they had prepared had been put to use.

Neia slowly lifted up the lid of the barrel and peered outside.

She looked around the darkened interior of the room -- there was a faint light that might have been the glow from a magic item -- and after verifying that there was nobody around, Neia slowly climbed out of the barrel.

There were all kinds of foodstuffs and urns on the shelves of this larder. There

were also many barrels like the ones which had recently been brought here.

It took a lot of work, but she managed to climb out safely. In order to make getting back in easier, she left the divider standing inside the barrel.

They would need to use these barrels to escape after rescuing the Zern prince.

CZ, the other infiltrator, had just made it out of her barrel. She was shorter than Neia, so climbing out of the large barrel had been more tiresome. However, her physical abilities were far beyond those of Neia's and even Remedios', so she had managed to get out by herself before Neia could go over to help her.

"CZ-san."

"...Hm?"

"There's meat stuck to your hair."

CZ looked unhappy. While her facial expression did not change, that did not mean she had no emotions. Perhaps it was because she had been with CZ all this time or because Neia's eyesight was excellent, or perhaps looking at the Sorcerer King's bony features all this time had honed her ability to scrutinize others, but Neia had a rough grasp of how CZ felt.

CZ fumbled around to try and get the small bits of meat out of her hair, but they were stuck to the strands on the back of her head and she could not get them out.

While I was told to cut my hair short because long hair could be easily grabbed in combat, it seems there are many other drawbacks to it.

Neia went to CZ's side and picked all the chunks out before tossing them into the barrel.

"...Thanks… Don't want to infiltrate this way again."

"We'll have to do it again when we escape."

"..."

CZ looked despondently at the barrel, then pulled a towel out of nowhere to wipe herself off before handing it to Neia.

The moist towel had a softness and fineness which Neia had never felt before. Neia imagined that it must have been very expensive. How had she gotten her hands on something like that? Were they common in the demon world?

As all these questions and more ran through her head, Neia wiped her hands that had been made sticky by the meat, and then wiped down CZ's hair with the clean bits. While it only made her feel better, it was better than not wiping at all.

"...Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

While Neia was doing this, CZ took out her weapon.

That strangely-shaped device was apparently a ranged weapon called a spell gun. It used mana to fire bullet-like bolts, and it felt like a crossbow. CZ had said something about the gunpowder not showing any signs of combustion or something, but Neia had not understood any of it, so the explanation was wasted on her.

She had wanted to test it out, but CZ refused to part with it, so CZ's fighting ability was still an unknown. Still, she was a difficulty rating 150 demon, so Neia felt that there was nothing to worry about there.

"...Hm."

CZ produced the Ultimate Shootingstar Super and a quiver of arrows out of nowhere like a stage magician before handing them to Neia, and in turn Neia returned her the dirty towel.

Initially, there had been a discussion on how Neia would bring her bow along. The bow's stave was very long, and when one added camouflage on top of that, she would not be able to close the lid on the barrel, and if the barrel were opened she would be exposed.

While they could have let the Zern carry it in, the bow was a magnificent piece of work and it would have left an impression on others. In addition, the Zern had also refused, for fear of being drawn into all this if the rescue mission failed.

In the end, when everyone had told her to leave the bow behind, CZ said that she could store her weapons in a mysterious space in the air, so she could put the bow in there as well.

The uneasiness of bringing a valuable item lent to her by the Sorcerer King on a mission in a dangerous place blended with the reassurance of not having to part ways with her weapon. Caught between the two emotions, Neia thanked CZ for her kindness. It would seem CZ had accepted Neia as her junior back then, and after that CZ had occasionally acted like her senior.

Part of that was how Neia had to address CZ as “CZ-san”, because CZ would make a fuss if Neia did not. However, CZ was a pretty girl, and when she made a pouty face -- she could tell even though CZ did not show expressions -- Neia actually found it kind of cute.

After they had each readied their weapons, CZ was the first to move.

Neia pricked up her ears to listen for any movement outside the door, but there was nobody there.

“...Let’s head out.”

Time was short, so Neia nodded.

The Liberation Army was approaching Kalinsha while the operation to rescue the Zern Prince was in progress, so the battle for Kalinsha would begin soon.

1: Neia and CZ would infiltrate Kalinsha and rescue the Zern prince.

2: The Liberation Army would approach Kalinsha and begin their attack.

3: If the Zern prince was rescued, the Zern would act as a fifth column within the city walls.

4: If item 3 failed, then instead of the Zern opening the city gates and guiding the Liberation Army in, Neia and CZ would have to handle that task. However, that was far too much for them to take on, so they would only do what was within their capabilities.

Those were the key points of the battle plan.

The important thing was that if they could rescue the Zern prince, then they could count on the Liberation Army and the Zern to relieve them even if they were forced to hunker down and defend themselves. This was good for the Zern as well; if the rescue succeeded, they could release the prince after Kalinsha was taken back.

In other words, whether or not they could take Kalinsha back simply and with minimal casualties all hinged on successfully rescuing the prince.

As she felt the weight crushing down on her shoulders, Neia groaned as her tummy hurt again.

Therefore -- there was not much time. Once the Liberation Army began their attack on Kalinsha or if they were detected before that, Kalinsha's security posture would be upgraded.

In accordance with what they had planned, CZ produced a bottle of what looked like perfume out of nowhere and sprinkled it on Neia and herself. It seemed to be some kind of consumable magic item that contained the first tier spell [Odorless]. There was not much of it, so they had to conserve it as much as possible.

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CZ cracked open the door, peered around outside, and then slipped out.

They had selected their route and decided on how to deal with various situations after consulting the map of Kalinsha, and they had already discussed what duties each of them would be handling.

Neia exited the room as well, then carefully closed the door so as not to make noise before running after CZ.

Though I'm not really helping much…

Frankly speaking, under the present circumstances Neia was nothing more than a burden. That much was instantly clear when one looked at CZ's running stride. She ran like her father moved through the woods -- no, she was far better, being both swift and silent. She was definitely using some kind of technique there..

She's a demon, but she uses techniques like a human… It's always the ones you can't judge by their appearances which are the scariest, huh?

While they could have left everything to CZ, Neia's presence was both to keep an eye on CZ and also to ensure that it was a joint effort between the Sorcerous Kingdom's CZ -- assuming she was truly bound to the Sorcerer King -- and the Holy Kingdom's Neia that rescued the prince. That way, the Holy Kingdom could act like they had contributed to it.

The passages were dark. It was night-time. Moonlight streamed in through the windows -- or rather, the only thing which entered was the moonlight. There were no other sources of light here, no magical illumination or torches.

This was because many demihumans were indifferent to the darkness. However, there were different degrees of being able to see in the darkness. While some species had complete darkvision, most of them simply had superior night vision. Therefore, Neia and CZ avoided the moonlight and slunk from

shadow to shadow.

As a human being, Neia had to focus herself and sharpen her senses. Not only could she not see clearly due to the darkness, the patrolling guards did not carry light sources either, so she could not spot them from afar.

While she did not quite understand why the larder had lights, that was probably for the sake of those species who lacked darkvision.

The two of them kept their footfalls as quiet as possible while they ran through the castle towards their destination.

Considering CZ's physical attributes were far superior than Remedios', even a pace which left Neia panting and barely able to keep up was probably slower than a jog to CZ.

They occasionally spotted demihuman guards, which was their cue to hold their breath and quietly wait for the opposition to move on. They could not kill them, because that would mean having to take care of the corpses and hide their traces. Since they were in the midst of the enemy, it would be best not to be spotted at all until the rescue was a success.

Fortunately, Neia and CZ were not spotted, and they continued forward.

There were few guards within the castle thanks to most of the personnel being assigned to the walls and the watchtowers, as well as the city's prisons. The Sorcerer King had killed a great deal of demihumans, which meant that they could not set up a tight security net. Thus, vigilance within the castle had grown lax, according to the Zern.

The reason why they could proceed safely was because the Zern had reconnoitered the area ahead of time and made nearly-perfect preparations, but Neia still felt a twinge of uneasiness.

There were two challenges in their way.

The first was the long passageway they had to traverse in order to reach the tower.

The second was the bridge to the tower -- the aerial walkway.

There were no hiding places there, and obviously there would be sentries standing watch as well, not just one guard, but several of them. In addition, at least one of them would be stationed out of the line of fire for ranged weapons because they were on guard against ranged attacks.

While they had discussed the matter in a big group in front of Gustav's map, they would still have to pass through both these places in order to reach the tower.

If we could use [Invisibility] to deceive their eyesight and [Silence] from the priests to deceive their hearing, we would be able to infiltrate perfectly… that's why adventurers -- who form groups that can take on all kinds of situations -- are so highly-valued.

Eventually, the two of them reached their objective.

This was the first challenge, the long passageway. If they tried to run straight down it, they would be spotted before they could cover the distance. In order

to avoid that, they needed to reach a location where they could execute ranged attacks while not being spotted by the opposition.

That was why they had come here, the level above the long passage, the room directly above where the guards were stationed.

If they lowered a rope from here and rappelled down the outer walls, they could take a shortcut without being detected.

“...Is this the place?”

In response to CZ’s question, Neia consulted the map in her head and the route they had taken, and nodded a yes.

“...Hm. Not bad.”

CZ’s reply sounded like she was praising a junior, and then she pressed her ear to the door. Then, she quickly and silently opened it.

While the room was filled with various sundry items, it looked like it had not been used in a long time, and there was a white layer of dust on the ground. However, there were traces that the Zern scouts had been here. They had moved between the window and a very large shelf.

CZ produced a rope out of nowhere. It was the same color as the castle wall.

After that, she secured it to the large shelf. She used all her strength to tug on it to see if it could take the weight of Neia and herself, but it did not budge, and it showed no signs of fraying.

The size --and weight -- of the shelf was a factor, but the web-like strands stuck to the shelves was probably more important. The Zern who had come to this room beforehand had fixed it in place with sticky threads taken from the Spidans.

The window opened easily, and CZ looked at the city walls outside. After verifying that there were no patrolling guards in sight, CZ slung her weapon onto her back and said, “I’ll go first.”

She threw herself out of the window and slid down the rope to the window below.

She took her weight on one hand and used the other to push open the next window, which opened easily. That too had been the work of the Zern.

CZ then slid inside. Her skilful movements had only taken a few seconds.

After confirming that the room below was safe, CZ poked her face out and beckoned to Neia.

Neia grabbed the rope and leaned out of the window.

While the window on the floor below was only four meters away, they were now over 100 meters off the ground. If Neia fell, she would go SPLAT. No, it would be worse if she did not die. She would surely be tortured until she gave up what she knew and then she would be killed. Falling to her death would be a merciful alternative.

The rope had evenly spaced knots along its length -- handholds, in other words -- and there had been no problems during the several practice sessions they had conducted. However, training felt completely different from the real

thing.

Ahh, I really don't want to go…

But she had no choice. If only there was something like a balcony that she could just jump down on--

Neia gripped the rope tightly as she pushed her entire body out of the window. She crossed her legs to firmly clasp the rope between her thighs.

After this, all she had to do was descend slowly.

The ground's just a little lower. The ground's just a little lower.

She slowly went down the rope, reminding herself not to look down over and over again.

She shifted her weight from her right hand, and then to the left, just what like she had practiced. The wind blew and made her body shake at an intensity that could not be compared to training at all.

Come on, come on, come on, me! CZ should have been more scared than this!

The window was open because of the Zerns' help.

However, if someone had locked the window after the Zerns opened it, then CZ would have had to climb back up. With that in mind, Neia -- who only needed to make a single trip -- had it easy in comparison.

She finally approached the window, and CZ reached out to grab Neia's body. Thus, she pulled Neia in with incredible strength.

"Thank, thank you."

"...Mm. But, too long… I'm taking it in, hold this."

"Yes."

CZ leaned out of the window and raised her magic gun. Neia held the rope as indicated. There was a pop-hiss of expelled air and Neia felt a force tugging on the rope. CZ had cut it with her weapon.

She pulled the severed rope back into the room and dumped it in the corner. They would not be using this route on the way back, so she had pulled it back in rather than let it dangle freely, but there were merits and drawbacks to that.

The merit was that it minimized the risk of being spotted by the sentries on the walls.

The drawback was that if anything happened and they could not exfiltrate by their planned route, they would not be able to climb to the upper floor with this rope.

In the end, the two of them had decided that the drawbacks of being spotted outweighed the merits.

"It's done, CZ-san. Next we need to get past the first obstacle…"

“...Mm. Let’s go… got to kill them. Can you do it?”

“Mm. I think I can.”

Once they stepped out of this room, they would be in a position to shoot the sentries stationed along the passage.

If they could not kill them before they raised the alarm, all their effort would be wasted.

Neia took out her bow and nocked an arrow. CZ raised her magic gun as well.

“I’ll take the right, you take the left, CZ-san.”

CZ formed a circle with her thumb and her index finger.

The two of them exchanged looks, and then CZ pushed open the door.

Neia made eye contact with a nearby -- about 1.5 meters away -- demihuman. He did not know what was going on or who they were. The demihuman was so surprised that he could not parse the situation, but Neia did not hesitate and put an arrow into him.

With a katsun, the arrow pierced his skull through the forehead.

I did it!

While Neia’s skills had played a part, most of the work had been done by the

Ultimate Shootingstar Super™.

Thank you, Your Majesty!

Just as Neia's arrow pierced the demihuman through the head, CZ's spell gun blew off half of the other demihuman's head.

The demihumans made more noise than she expected when they collapsed. Neia hurriedly pricked up her ears. Fortunately, she could not hear anyone running towards this place. It would seem nobody had spotted them yet.

"...Hurry."

They had already assigned their tasks beforehand. As CZ dragged the corpses into the room they had just entered with the rope, Neia used the smell-clearing item CZ had lent her. After that, she reached for the waterskin on her belt and poured the powerful wine within all over the place, washing away the chunks of meat, brains, skull and bloodstains on the ground. As the stench of alcohol filled the air, CZ emerged from the room, then produced an empty wine jug and poured a little bit of the jug's wine inside before quietly ripping it up and leaving it in place.

"...Let's go."

"Yes."

While they had tried to cover it up, it was very likely that the next shift would sense something was up when they came to take over. She would be able to relax if they could put the bodies into CZ's mysterious pocket dimension, but CZ

said that she would not do so, thus they left the corpses in the room. Of course, they had made preparations there too, but there was no way to make sure that they would not be found.

They had to assume that they did not have the luxury of ample time.

They finally reached the second obstacle, the aerial walkway. Of the several scenarios they had come up with, this was the closest to being ideal. They still had time and nobody had spotted them yet.

“...It’s a race against time now.”

“I know. If I slip, don’t worry about me.”

The path from the castle to the tower was roughly two people wide.

There were no walls on either side -- it was open to the air. Apparently several people had fallen off the side before, and after seeing this, all she could think of was that it was only to be expected.

This aerial walkway was the reason why this place was the final redoubt when engaging invaders during a siege.

A large force could not pass through here, so an advantage in numbers would be nullified. At the same time, there was also the risk of falling. If there was a spear line at the end of the path, breaking through would be very difficult. This design was the kind that attackers hated. One would need magic casters with attack spells like [Fireball] to take it down.

Using ranged weapons for a sustained attack was disadvantageous for Neia's side, which was operating stealthily and under time constraints. Therefore, all they could do was charge into close range and finish off the enemy, while the enemy could hit them with ranged weapons and they did not have the benefit of cover.

In that case, they would need to close the gap before the sentries spotted them. But at a closer look, the path was uneven. It was designed to slow down anyone trying to run across and force them to slip and fall off the sides.

This is dangerous… if an enemy runs into me and grabs me... I'll fall off and die. If I'm not careful…!

After screwing up her determination, Neia realised CZ was staring at her. Although they were of the same sex, being stared at by CZ, the doll-like beauty, made Neia a little embarrassed.

"W-what?"

"...Using it… Neia, wait here."

"Eh?"

"...I'll take care of the door guards. No matter what happens, don't come out."

"--Eh?"

Before she could get an answer, CZ vanished.

She had disappeared. This was not some super high-speed movement. CZ had been standing here until just now and then she had vanished into the air like she had been an illusion.

A wave of confusion assaulted Neia. However, CZ had already told her to wait, so she ought to stay here and wait.

Neia concealed herself at the entrance to the aerial walkway and listened carefully to the tower and the path behind her for anything out of the ordinary.

Several seconds later -- something happened at the guard post.

She heard a scream and then the sound of a guard collapsing.

Neia poked her face out to see what was going on and saw CZ emerge from the guard post. CZ waved to beckon Neia over.

As Neia began to panic and wonder what was happening, CZ's waving gesture grew larger, until her entire body was moving.

Could she not go, now that CZ had done that much?

Neia bent low, then ran across the windswept, frightening aerial walkway as she paid attention to her footing.

After she was across, she could smell blood from the guard post. Several dead demihumans lay on the ground, and CZ stood inside, with her usual blank expression. She held what looked like a very sharp and large knife in her right hand. The blade was smeared bright red, and she had her spell gun in her left hand.

“...Clear. Move in.”

“Eh, eh…”

“...Can’t disappear any more today.Be careful.”

“Got it.”

It would seem there was no need to explain, so Neia did not ask, but merely followed behind her.

That’s a maid demon for you, Neia thought.

She could not have come all this way without CZ.

And this is also thanks to the order His Majesty gave to CZ.

Only the Sorcerer King could inspire deeper respect in people even when he was not present.

Honestly, the fact that he was undead or whatever was a trifling problem.

I need to let everyone know, after all. I need to tell them how great a person His Majesty is!

The tower was almost completely made of stone and it only had a small window for light. It was darker than the castle that they had pass through earlier.

The passage inside the tower was quite spacious, big enough for Neia and CZ to walk side by side. It spiralled up along the inside of the tower's wall.

Their objective, the Zern prince, ought to be near the top, so the only thing they did when passing doors along the way was check for movement inside while the two of them continued ever upwards.

About two circuits later, CZ raised her hand to signal that they should stop. This happened almost at the same time as Neia's keen hearing picked up some creature's footsteps.

It would seem it was wearing metal armor, because she could hear the sound of metal striking stone.

"It's alone, CZ-san."

"...Yes. But… heavy footsteps."

Neia could not tell, but if CZ said it, then it was probably so. In other words, whatever it was, it was not human-sized.

“What… should we do? Should we hide behind one of the doors we passed along the way?”

“...It’s already here. Kill it.”

“Got it.”

Neia readied her bow after CZ. Her plan was to shoot first and not bother with questions. She had heard that the Zern prince was about the size of a human child. In addition, he would not be wearing metal armor.

A massive object came into view, and Neia and CZ attacked without hesitation.

The arrow and bullets entered its body, as though they had been sucked in.

“Gaaahhhh!”

The massive object stumbled, and backed up along the path.

Since it had retreated along a curved path, it was no longer in the line of fire.

The fact that it had survived their attacks -- particularly CZ’s -- suggested that it was a very tough demihuman.

“What! Who are you!”

An angry cry echoed from the depths of the passage.

“What should we do, CZ-san?”

“...Can’t sit here and wait… Close in and attack before the enemy gathers the tower guards.”

“Understood.”

Neia and CZ broke into a run.

Since it could survive CZ and Neia’s surprise attack, they could assume that it was one of the guardians -- a Vah Un. Vah Uns were beings which possessed very good overall fighting power and a shocking amount of stamina.

As they ran, the humidity in the air seemed to increase as well -- Neia’s nose picked up the scent of rain.

“Goooaahhh! The humans! The humans are here!”

After closing in, they saw a massive demihuman.

While it possessed the savage air of an Ogre, it looked much more intelligent than Remedios.

Its skin was bluish-white, though it looked more demonic than unhealthy.

It had a single thick horn on its forehead. It carried a mace that was bigger than Neia.

Judging by its physical appearance, it was quite similar to the descriptions of the species known as Vah Uns.

While it was not as bad as Buser, it was still quite a dangerous opponent. The arrow and bullets had clearly hit it, but it did seem to be wounded. There was no smell of blood either, so it would seem it had not covered it up with illusions.

Somehow, it had negated their attacks -- particularly CZ's.

"So you're here for my life, are you!? You've got good eyes on you, humans!!!"

It seemed very happy.

In that case, she would let it remain mistaken--

"...No."

CZ fired as she spoke.

There was a pop-hiss of expelled gas as something flew through the air. After that, part of the Vah Un's body dissolved into mist and the bullet passed through.

"...Mm."

“Wahahahaha! Ranged weapons are useless against me!”

Neia loosed an arrow at the Vah Un’s forehead, but its head also sublimated into mist and the arrow sank into the wall behind it.

“--Useless! It’s useless! Now quiver in fear of me, the enemy of all archers, and then die!”

“...Immune to all ranged weapons? On something that’s only that strong?” CZ muttered. “There must be a trick.”

Neia glanced at CZ and shook her head. Unfortunately, the Zerns did not know any details about its abilities.

“What are you blathering about!”

“Back up!”

The Vah Un closed the gap. The sight of its massive body approaching them felt off, like her sense of distance was messed up.

Neia would not be able to survive a single hit from it, so she obediently listened to CZ and fell back.

CZ stood on the frontline, and the mace slammed down on her. The strike was like a howling storm, but she elegantly evaded it.

The Vah Un's strength was extraordinary, given that it could swing a weapon that was as tall as CZ with one hand. The stone was shattered where it had struck the ground, and cracks radiated in all directions. It felt like the massive tower was shaking.

"Tch!"

Neia loosed an arrow.

While the Vah Un was locked in melee with CZ, there was a huge difference between their body sizes. If she aimed up, she could strike the Vah Un without hitting CZ.

As expected, the Vah Un transformed into mist in order to avoid the arrow whistling through the air.

"Useless! Useless! I told you arrows are useless against me! Foolish -- uwoooooh!"

The Vah Un roared even louder than before. CZ seemed to find it annoying and hacked at him.

While CZ's shooting skills were far superior to Neia's, she was not as skilled in close combat, so unfortunately, her strike was blocked by the mace.

Neia nocked and drew back another arrow.

This time, Neia aimed for the hand holding the mace. While it was very likely

that the weapon would not drop even if it turned to mist, she decided that she had to try, however small the possibility.

In the end--

The mist-formed arm did not release the mace.

“Aren’t you going to stop, human!?” The Vah Un presented a palm to Neia. “[Water Splash]!”

A ball of water flew out at Neia.

Something hit her right shoulder. Neia was blown back like something had crashed into her and fell to the ground.

It hurt like she had been savagely beaten. She might even have broken bones.

After nervously trying to move her right arm, she found that it could move without issue. However, a torrent of pain spread from her shoulder inside her body. She touched her shoulder and found that it was wet. While she was afraid that it was blood at first, she immediately realised that it was water.

“Hmph! You made me use a petty spell!”

The Vah Un swung its club as it spat its reply at them.

CZ muttered quietly to herself as she nimbly avoided a deadly stroke that

could have smashed Neia to bits.

“...Why that girl? Why attack someone who can’t hit you? I don’t get it.”

“Hah, you idiot! That’s because she’s a pain--”

“--Because it was effective? Limited uses?”

The Vah Un’s face changed. In other words, CZ was right.

“Neia!”

“Got it!”

Neia loosed an arrow, which the Vah Un avoided by turning into mist. After that, she fired again -- and the arrow pierced into the Vah Un.

As the Vah Un grunted in pain, CZ spoke.

“...I understand. You can only defend against seven ranged attacks. Is that… per day? Per hour? ...Doesn’t matter. You’ll die here.”

The Vah Un could not catch up to CZ, who dodged with amazing skill. In other words, if this kept up, it would take a one-sided beating and die. Perhaps the Vah Un had sensed this would happen, because its face knotted up.

“Damn you! [Fog Cloud]!”

A bank of fog sprang up.

It was thicker than the fog she had seen in the Sorcerous Kingdom, and Neia did not even know her own location. While she could not see CZ fighting against the Vah Un, she could hear CZ's spell gun going pew pew pew.

When she thought about it, that was obvious.

Even if the Vah Un conjured fog in the middle of the passageway, she still knew where it was. All she had to do was keep shooting. Neia followed CZ's lead and launched arrows. She was a little worried. so she aimed up high; that way even if she missed, she would not hit CZ.

The arrow she loosed melted into the fog, and it was followed by the sound of something striking the wall. It would seem she had missed.

"It's moving behind you now."

As CZ said that, Neia thought Eh?

When one considered the size of the passageway, it was impossible for the massive Vah Un to get behind CZ and Neia without bumping into them. However, along the way here, Neia had come to realize that CZ was a trustworthy demon. Or rather, she did not trust CZ so much as she trusted the Sorcerer King which she served.

Neia turned, and while the fog was still so thick she could not see anything,

she loosed another arrow.

Just like before, she heard the sound of an arrow striking a distant wall.

“Where, Where is it!?”

“..Mm. You’re looking in the right direction. It’s trying to run… get down!”

Neia instantly dropped prone as CZ spoke in a tone that was very forceful for her.

“...Reloading… full burst.”

There was a piercing kyuuuuun and then a cacophonous dakka dakka dakka dakka thundered down the passageway. Unlike the pew pew sound from before, this was a sound that was filled with an oppressive brutality.

“Gobooh~,” There was the sound of someone coughing up something, followed by a crash as a massive body hit the ground. After that, the mist cleared, and she could see the body of the Vah Un lying along the curved passage.

Its body was covered in holes, and it looked like it had been blown apart. There were similar marks all around the nearby walls. What had happened to cause this?

As a demihuman assigned to guard this place, it should have been quite strong. In truth, Neia alone would not have stood a chance at all. Yet CZ could

instantly kill a demihuman like this as long as her weapon was effective against it. That was a difficulty 150 maid demon for you.

“What… was… no. With magic, you can do anything, huh.”

Neia worked her stricken shoulder. She had forgotten the pain during the excitement of battle, but now it was starting to hurt more and more.

“...Okay?”

“Mm. But it hurts to draw a bow. I don’t think I can aim well.”

“...Got a healing potion?”

“No, but I have a healing item His Majesty lent me.”

Neia could only use it once during that battle, but now she felt like she could use it more often. Still, that did not mean she could waste mana, because she might need to heal CZ if the situation called for it.

“Don’t worry. We just need to rescue the hostage and retreat.”

“...Mm. Then let’s hurry.”

Neia nodded and ran with CZ. The Vah Un, which was most definitely a worthy opponent, had been defeated.

All that remained was to rescue the prince and return to the larder.

Part 3

“...Here.”

“Yes.”

Having reached the topmost level, CZ and Neia exchanged looks. There was only one door here. That would mean it was undoubtedly their objective.

They nodded to each other, and then kicked the door in.

They had long since abandoned any thoughts of a covert entry. After all, they had just fought a big battle with the Vah Un. That said, the two of them leaned against the threshold of the door, in case someone attacked them in the instant it opened.

However, their caution had been in vain. Therefore, they both leapt into the room at the same time. Neia grit her teeth against the pain from her shoulder and went left, while CZ went right, and they both covered each other.

The first thing they saw was a large, canopied bed. Perhaps its lace trimmings had once been white, but age had blackened them. The room also contained a simple dresser and human-sized furniture such as a cabinet and others. These pieces of noble-styled furniture were old and damaged, and they did not look like antiques so much as used goods.

A quick glance across the room revealed no demihumans.

CZ raised her chin to signal to Neia, and Neia silently approached the cabinet before opening its doors. Of course, Neia opened it from the outside and stayed out of its way in case anything happened, while CZ pointed the muzzle of her spell gun at the interior of the cabinet.

“...Not here.”

After that, the two of them looked to the bed.

After verifying that there was nothing underneath it, they approached the bed.

Part of it was bulging up.

Neia looked to CZ before nodding to show she understood, and then she flipped up the blanket.

There was a pretty-looking lump of lustrous purple meat there. No, it would be better to say it was a huge maggot. It was about 90 centimeters long, and it did not have hands, but stubby feet.

CZ pointed her gun’s muzzle at it without any hesitation, and Neia hurriedly called out to her.

“Wait! That’s the target we were sent to rescue, the prince of the Zern!”

“...This?”

That was what the Zern envoy had told Neia. However, she could understand CZ’s doubts, because Neia had gone “wat” when the Zern had given her the description of the Zern prince.

The Zern were a species of demihumans whose royalty looked very different from other individuals of their species. In addition to that, they ought to be sexually dimorphic too.

“Er, can you hear us, Zern prince-sama?”

“--Mm. Speak. It seems you are not my food.”

He sounded like a teenager. Neia was curious as to where his voice was coming from and examined him, whereupon she saw that his maggot mouth was opening and closing.

“That’s right. We’ve been asked to rescue you. Let’s start by getting you out of here.”

He was still a prince, even if he looked like this, so she had to abide by the rules of etiquette. In addition, she would need his race’s help when finding the Sorcerer King. Therefore, she ought to do him a favor now, instead of offending him.

“Was it a request from my eggmates (comrades)? Who asked you to do this?”

“It was a Zern called Beebeebee. Do you know him?”

“Beebeebee, you say? Ah, him, then? Hm… But if I leave this place, Jaldabaoth...-sama will be angry. This will place the Zern people and particularly the King in danger.”

“While I’m not too sure about the details, it seems the King has passed away, so we must rescue you at the very least. That is why the Zern made this request of us.”

“What!?”

It was impossible for a human like Neia to read the expressions of the Zern prince, who could not be anything but a gigantic maggot. However, she could clearly sense the profound sorrow in his voice.

“Oh, Father was actually… I see. That bastard Jaldabaoth… In that case, can you get us safely out of here?”

“Your Highness’ underlings will be guiding us out, so I think it should be fine.”

“I see… oh human heroes, who have come this far to aid me, I have a shameless request for you. Can you pretend that you carried me off by force while I was resisting you?”

That request was probably just in case.

“I understand. We shall pretend it is so.”

“Thank you very much.”

The prince raised his head. While it looked just like a maggot raising its head, this was probably how his species expressed their gratitude.

Neia wrapped the prince up in the sheets like a baby -- if he had been a baby, he would have been scared to tears; she had experienced that twice now -- and carried him on her back.

She firmly tied the blanket around her chest, so it would not loosen even when she was moving vigorously.

The weight on her shoulder made Neia hurt. She wiped away the sweat beading on her forehead and used the necklace’s magic.

Her wounds healed instantly. Now she would be fine even if she had to run with the prince on her back.

“Are you feeling alright? If it hurts, please tell me right away.”

“No, I am not uncomfortable… but you smell delicious. It makes me hungry.”

Hearing those words spoken from the vicinity of her neck made Neia shudder.”

“...What do the Zerns eat?”

CZ asked a question which Neia did not want to ask.

“The precious bodily fluids of living creatures, be they alive or dead.”

“...I’ll get angry if you do anything weird to my junior.”

“There is no need to worry. I am not hungry enough to do such a thing to the heroes who came to rescue me. While I have not been allowed to leave even once since the day they brought me here, they took care to feed me, at least.”

If she knew exactly what they are, she would probably have dropped him like a ton of bricks, so Neia hurriedly stopped up her ears. Fortunately, CZ did not ask further.

“...Alright, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

“Please do.”

After that brief exchange, the two -- three of them began to move. There was no time to waste on idle chatter during a clandestine infiltration.

Fortunately, they managed to return to the larder without incident. This was when CZ raised her hand to stop them.

“...There are people inside.”

“I’ll leave them to you.”

CZ readied her spell gun and forcefully opened the door.

Then, she stopped. CZ looked back.

“...Not sure who they are. Zerns. Many of them.”

They ought to be the recovery team. Specifically, they were the Zerns who had brought Neia and CZ here.

They had probably arrived first because Neia and CZ had been later than they had said.

After entering the room, the five Zerns inside turned as one to them. The sight of these heteromorphs with unreadable faces doing the same thing together generated a feeling inside Neia that was either fear or revulsion.

Neia undid the sheets on her back, and revealed the Zern prince within.

“Ohhh! It’s the Prince!”

It was Beebeebee. Neia would not have been able to tell them apart if they did not speak. However, if they were as different from each other as the prince was from them, she might not even have been able to tell if they were fellow Zern.

“Oh eggmates of mine. I hear my father has passed on. I know that he -- Jaldabaoth -- does not intend to keep his word. But where will we flee after betraying Jaldabaoth? He has already conquered our lands, and installed his trusted demons as their rulers… are we not destroying ourselves by choosing to rebel?”

“Your Highness is correct to be worried. But to him, the Zern are no different from livestock. Our hero Boobeebee was a little late to arrive before him, yet it was judged enough reason to have the flesh torn from his shoulder.”

“What! Boobeebee, you say!?”

The Prince’s shuddering told Neia that said Zern must have been of quite some status.

“Once everything is over, will the Zern find a place under Jaldabaoth’s rule? We have determined that the answer is no. My Prince, there is no time, let us save these words for--”

“--You fools. Can we leave that question until after we run? This is the turning point. Once we cross it, we must follow our course to its very end. Now is the only time we can turn back. Tell me, once we go back to our hive, once we go back to our hills, how do you intend to live on?”

“That… that land is vast. Surely there will be a place where we can hide.”

“You think so? Do you intend to have the species walk the road to destruction for this fleeting, wavering chance? Give me a more concrete, more practical

solution.”

“In, in that case, not everyone is in service to Jaldabaoth, we could form a resistance…”

“You fool. That will only invite destruction from Jaldabaoth. An ant swarm draws more attention than a single ant.”

Beebeebee fell silent as the prince shot down each and every proposal. It would be bad if this went on. Neia and the others had carried out this dangerous operation to this stage. If the prince now went, “We can’t do it after all”, their efforts would have been wasted.

It was then that Neia came up with something to soothe the prince’s worries.

“Ah, in that case, why not have the Zern go to the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“The Sorcerous Kingdom? What is that?”

It was not just the Zerns, but also CZ who looked to her.

“Yes. It is the country where Momon resides. He is the hero who once drove off Jaldabaoth in the Kingdom.”

Neia sensed the Zerns were staring at her, but she did not know the implications of their looks. How could humans understand a Zern’s expressions?

“Is what you say true?”

That single sentence was enough for Neia to understand why the Zerns had kept quiet. They doubted the truth of Neia’s words. But that was only to be expected. The better one knew Jaldabaoth’s power, the harder it was to believe that anyone could defeat him.

“I mean every word. I learned this through reliable channels. In fact -- CZ-san?”

“...She’s right. Neia speaks the truth.”

“Also--” this was the crucial part. Neia psyched herself up internally. “If you go to the Sorcerous Kingdom like this, I am sure they will accept you as refugees.”

“Refugees, you say…”

There was bitterness in the prince’s voice.

“But if you can provide information about the Sorcerer King of the Sorcerous Kingdom, I am sure that you will not be slighted even when you go there.”

“Hold on, hold on. Why would they be happy to hear about their own King?”

“Ah, yes. Right now… ah… The Sorcerer King’s location is unclear…”

“Is that not very bad? In the worst-case scenario, he might even be dead, is

that not true?”

“A moment please. His Majesty cannot possibly be dead. There is concrete evidence, and we are verifying it now.”

Neia told them about how the Sorcerer King might have fallen to the hills where the demihumans lived, so she wanted to use their strength to search for him. The prince fell silent. Is it not going to work, Neia thought, but since she had already made her pitch, she could say nothing more. The ball was now in their court.

Also, even if they could not provide any direct assistance, they ought to be able to at least provide knowledge, as they had promised.

“...I see. If we do them a favor… but will we be accepted, as demihumans? The Sorcerous Kingdom is a nation of humans, is it not?”

“No, it is not. The Sorcerous Kingdom is a nation ruled by one of the undead.”

“The undead!?”

Both the prince and the Zern surrounding him exclaimed as one.

“Are you telling us to go to such a dangerous place!?”

Every race harbored a strong hatred of the undead. Even Neia had been that way before she had come to understand the Sorcerer King. As she realized that the people before her were just like how she had been not too long ago, she

was deeply moved.

“A moment please. The Sorcerous Kingdom might be ruled by one of the undead, but its great ruler is an open-minded and noble king, and I have personally witnessed humans coexisting peacefully with demihumans within the country.”

“You’re actually calling the undead great, I can’t believe humans are so--”

“--Be quiet. Neia-dono, I apologize if my subjects have given offense. However, is the Sorcerer King truly as great as you say he is?”

“Yes.”

Neia held her chest high and replied thus to the prince’s question.

“... We cannot read the expressions of human beings. But I understand that someone as brave as you -- who has delved deep behind enemy lines in order to effect a daring rescue -- must be saying so with unshakable confidence.Then I shall not believe in the undead Sorcerer King. I shall believe in you, who believes in the Sorcerer King! Please relay that to him.”

“Ohhhh!” the Zerns cried out in joy.

“It seems we have reached a decision. In that case, I pray you will flee to the Sorcerous Kingdom with all due haste, my prince. Unfortunately, there is some very bad news, namely that one of Jaldabaoth’s trusted demons will be coming soon. I thought it would be a few more days before he arrived… but it will be bad if we are found. Alright, let’s go.”

As a species, the Zern were largely composed of females, with very few males. Pretty much only the king and the prince fell into the latter category. If a tribe's males were wiped out -- although there were cases where females could change sex -- the tribe would be set on the path to extinction.

Therefore, the prince needed to flee to an absolutely safe place -- the Sorcerous Kingdom, which was why they had had the preceding discussion.

"Jaldabaoth's trusted demon? He's coming?"

There was a word the Zerns had said which she could not ignore.

"Mmm. Have you not seen him? He has three trusted demons by his side, and one of them is coming here."

"...We need to defeat him here."

As he heard CZ's words, the prince -- who had been left on the ground -- suddenly sprang up.

"Are you insane!? You two must be quite strong to have been able to rescue me, but even then, you'll never be able to defeat him!"

The label of "strong" only applied to CZ, but Neia could not find a chance to cut in and thus she could not clear things up.

"...They say he teleports between many cities… Him coming here is a rare

opportunity. If you miss it, you won't get another."

"That is true…"

"My prince!"

"Calm down and think about it. If we can kill one of Jaldabaoth's aides, his chain of command will fall into chaos, and it will be harder for them to find us, who are not heading for the hills but for the Sorcerous Kingdom… then, is it possible to defeat him?"

"...Don't know. But this is the only chance."

"Then let's take it. We'll take a chance on the strength that let the two of you kill the Vah Un!" the Prince said. He had been quite shocked when he saw the demihuman's corpse on the way back. "Listen well, all of you. From now on, we will help the two of them defeat the wicked Jaldabaoth's minion!"

"Yes!"

"There are two humans, and six of us. Until recently, the eight of us were mutual enemies, but now we are comrades in arms. Such is the stuff of which heroic sagas sing."

Eh? Surprised, Neia rechecked the number of Zern present, and after seeing that she had not been mistaken, she hurriedly spoke up.

"Wait, please wait. You don't need to get involved in this, my prince. After all,

we came here to protect you!”

In addition, what could this prince do in combat? However kindly one wanted to interpret his intentions, he was still a gigantic maggot that crawled on the ground. Honestly, it would be less troublesome if he simply followed them like a VIP.

“I see, so to you, your mission is over since you have helped me escape. I see, I see. However, with my help, it should be easier to defeat Jaldabaoth’s henchman. No, I should say that without me, it will be very hard for you to defeat him, even if you are the heroes who defeated the Vah Un.”

CZ was the one who had defeated the Vah Un. Neia had nothing to do with it. Even so, the prince still counted her as a hero, which made her very embarrassed.

“So, do you mean that we can do it if we borrow the strength of the Zerns?”

The prince made a strange noise.

“No, no, great heroes. It’s not like that. I can cast spiritual spells of the fourth tier.”

“The fourth tier?”

Neia was surprised. The fourth tier of magic was a realm that only geniuses could barely reach after much hard work. In the Holy Kingdom, the only people who could cast such spells were the high priestess Kelart Custodio and the Holy Queen Calca Bessarez.

Neia glanced to the side, thinking CZ would be as surprised as herself, but CZ's face was as blank as ever. That was a difficulty rating 150 maid demon for you -- such things did not even faze her..

"A...ah...are all the Zern as powerful as you?"

The prince made another strange sound, and thrashed like a caught fish.

"I am special.:

"Precisely. That's why he is the prince."

After hearing the Zern's proud voice, Neia mused, I see, and recalled the contents of the classes she had once taken.

That's right. The royalty of some species are so much more powerful than the commoners that they seem like a different species entirely...

"That said, I do have weaknesses… namely, I am very slow."

Well that's true too, Neia thought. That much was obvious at a glance.

"If someone approaches me, I'll be killed without the chance to fight back. Therefore, may I trouble you to carry me? I can cast spells in response to signals."

“I see. I understand what you wish. However, could the Zern -- that is to say, your royal guards -- not carry you as well?”

“Unlike our prince, we specialize in melee combat. And I believe the two of you fight at range?”

“That is true… hm. It would be better if CZ-san or I carried him… no, let’s leave that aside for now. It would be bad if we carried the prince over and he ended up dying.”

“...Neia. Carrying the prince is significant… That’s why he suggested going with us.”

“Fufufu. Indeed, it is. I say, do you know anything about him? That withered-tree demon who decorates himself with heads?”

“...There are several demons like that. SIlk Hats, Crowns, Circlets and Corollas.”

CZ counted the four types off on her fingers.

“...I believe that henchman demon must be one of them. But… if we encounter a Silk Hat, we ought to flee. Even I could not win against one.”

“So you knew!?”

Neia was surprised, and then that feeling was replaced by anger. When they had prepared for the mission, CZ had said that she did not know much about

the henchman demons.

Was that not lying?

This was because if she was trying to keep information on Jaldabaoth's army from the Holy Kingdom, it would mean that CZ had never been under the Sorcerer King's control from the start. It also meant that CZ's existence did not prove anything about the Sorcerer King's safety,

"...I trusted you! And in the end you were lying to me from the start!"

Caught up in her emotions, Neia seized CZ by the shoulders. She used a lot of force, but the maid demon did not seem hurt. It was not because CZ had no emotions, but because that amount of strength was nothing to her.

The unbearable regret and resentment made Neia want to cry. She had thought that she had forged a bond with CZ, but in the end she had turned out to be nothing more than a laughingstock. Neia could not help mocking herself.

CZ's face was as blank as ever. However, there was a subtle change there which only Neia could read.

It was distress, contemplation, or perhaps -- remorse.

"...I'm sorry."

CZ squeezed those words out after a long silence. It hardly qualified as an apology -- in fact, it only served to stoke the flames of her anger. But right now,

CZ seemed strangely helpless, and seeing her like this helped Neia regain a bit of her composure.

Carefully, like she was doing something she had never tried before, CZ quietly continued.

“...If you knew how strong the henchman demon was, you and the others might have been afraid and not carried out the operation. But for the sake of Ainz-sama’s victory… we must win this battle. That was why I lied.”

Every word she said had been carefully considered before being put together into a heartfelt, agonized statement. But those words also contained a genuine and immovable faith.

Neia did not know how to see through her lies. Not to mention she was a demon -- no, even if she were not a demon, Neia would not be able to tell if a blank-faced girl like her was speaking the truth.

However, even if she were feeding information to Jaldabaoth as a spy, or trying to bring down the Holy Kingdom from the inside, CZ’s actions until now did not match up to those motivations. She ought to have acted more sensibly.

And more than anything else, Neia wanted to believe CZ. Part of that was because her existence was a signpost to the Sorcerer King, but also because the mysterious connection she had to CZ was irreplaceable to Neia.

“...Alright. I believe you. But please, don’t look down on me any more. I would gladly walk through oceans of fire and climb mountains of blades for His Majesty.”

CZ looked visibly relieved. As expected, she could not have been a spy. As for why, that was because she was clearly not suited for it. As she thought that, a natural, unforced smile came back to Neia's face.

"Alright, alright, can we get back to the previous topic? If you know so much about them, can you tell us about that demon's abilities?"

"These demons all possess the same abilities, but they are not very strong in their base forms. However, the problem arises when these demons are able to obtain the heads of intelligent creatures… particularly those of magic casters."

According to CZ, demons of that type could equip themselves with the heads of magic casters and use the powers of the heads' owners. Silk Hats could use four heads at once, Crowns could use three, Circlets could use two, and Corollas could use one. Their threat level rose exponentially if they managed to obtain the heads of exceptional magic casters.

"No matter how good a head a Corolla equips, it can only use up to third-tier spells. Silk Hats, on the other hand, can use up to tenth-tier spells--"

"Wait!"

"Hold on!"

Both the prince and Neia interrupted CZ.

Neia and the prince exchanged looks. While Neia could not read the prince's

face, Neia was certain that he was thinking the same thing as her.

“...After you.”

“Umu… er, did you say tenth-tier? Are fifth-tier spells not the highest tier of magic?”

It was as the prince said. Neia had heard that this was the limit of magic. The reason why she felt that the Sorcerer King could use sixth-tier spells also stemmed from that.

In response to the prince’s question, CZ shook her head as if to say “Haa, what will I do with you.”

“...The tenth-tier is the highest tier of magic. The spell that Jaldabaoth used to call down meteors from the sky also belongs to that tier.”

“How, how did he beat -- eh? Eh? No way! Don’t tell me, His Majesty, who stood with Jaldabaoth…”

As the shocking truth hit Neia, the prince was also shuddering in shock.

“The tenth tier? No. It can’t be, right? The tenth tier… Could it be true… And to think, I was so proud of myself and my fourth-tier…”

No, the fourth tier was already very powerful. He would have been justified in being arrogant. There were precious few magic casters who could reach that level.

“CZ… I’d like to check something, but… can His Majesty use spells of the tenth-tier... too?”

“...But of course.”

Why are you still saying this, CZ’s tone seemed to imply. She sounded like she was rolling her eyes. It might have been the first time that Neia had so clearly discerned CZ’s feelings.

The prince, who was also a magic caster, was twitching from the tremendous shock.

“Hah? Hah? So the king of the land to which we are fleeing -- the Sorcerer King -- is such a powerful undead being? Does mastery of the tenth tier mean he is over twice as powerful as me?”

“...Haaa.” CZ sighed deeply. “His Majesty.”

“Eh?”

“...Call him His Majesty.”

“Ah, yes, yes. His Majesty is truly powerful…”

When one thought calmly about it, CZ had actually been quite brusque with the prince of an entire tribe, but since CZ was speaking about matters of fact, Neia tacitly acknowledged her actions as she expressed her agreement.”

“Indeed, Prince-sama. His Majesty is incredibly powerful!”

“Ah, yes.”

“...Prince. If you could find someone that powerful, he would be in your debt!”

“You, you’re absolutely right! Then we shall give your earlier proposal -- to search for His Majesty in the hills -- our fullest support!”

Neia clenched her fists in excitement.

“Thank you very much, Prince-sama. -- Now then, CZ, could you continue what you were saying just now?”

“...About how powerful Ainz-sama is?”

“We were talking about that henchman of Jaldabaoth. Ah, I’d like to hear about the Sorcerer King as well -- could you tell me more after we return safely?”

“...Hm. Multi-head demons with multiple equipped heads can use them all at once and cast multiple spells at a time, but there are several conditions. First, each head can only use two spells at once. In addition, there is a limit on how many tiers of spells which can be cast at once. For instance, Silk Hats can cast a maximum of 15 tiers of spells at once--”

“--15 tiers! Do spells go up to a maximum of 15 tiers!?”

“...They don’t go that high. The tiers of the spells added together can be up to 15.”

The prince writhed in relief at CZ’s answer.

The fact that Neia could surmise a bit of how the prince felt through his actions began to frighten her.

“...Moving on. The important thing is how many heads that demon can equip at once.”

“Two. One is a demihuman head, and the other is the head of a human like yourselves.”

Neia had a bad feeling about this. Jaldabaoth had been holding a human body back then. Had its upper half not been missing?”

“What was that human head like, prince-sama?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot tell apart individuals of species other than my own. Ah, I do know about the other head. It belonged to the queen of the Pandecks, known as the Grand Mother.”

Neia wanted to ask more about the Pandecks and the Grand Mother, but Neia had more pressing things she needed to learn.

“I’d like to ask about the human. What color was her hair?”

“By hair do you mean the fur on the head? It was light black.”

“Black? So it doesn’t belong to someone from the Holy Kingdom?”

Neia’s heart was somewhat at ease. For a moment, she had wondered if the head belonged to the Holy Queen. Now that her guess had been proven wrong, she felt a sense of profound relief. At the same time, Neia noted that this might be a hint to another riddle.

She had heard that humans from the south generally had black hair. So that’s it, Neia thought. Had Jaldabaoth come from there, she wondered.

To the Holy Kingdom, the south was not a land ruled by humans. Less than half the population was human, and many of those had the blood of other species, and that number was steadily increasing. According to what Neia knew, only the Holy Kingdom, the Empire and the Kingdom were ruled by human royalty. The City-State Alliance and the Theocracy did not have royal families.

So that was why no news about Jaldabaoth had reached these human-dominated countries.

“...Incidentally, multi-head demons cannot use the abilities of heads which do not belong to magic casters. They do not gain the abilities of warriors by equipping a warrior’s head. That is because there are other demons with those abilities.”

“In that case, the demihuman’s head… Prince-sama. Can you tell us a bit

about that Grand Mother?”

“Alright. That is why I want to fight with you. The Pandecks are a species that feed on moss, and they look like us.

In other words, they looked like maggots.

Neia felt a twinge of revulsion at the thought of a demon that adorned itself with the head of maggots.

“...Was the Grand Mother also a spiritual magic caster?”

“Indeed. I use the Yin principle of the Five Elements, but the Grand Mother was the opposite; she used the Yang principle of the Five Elements. Yin and Yang are two extremes, and spells of one can resist or hamper spells of the other.”

“...I see,” CZ nodded. “Letting him come with us would improve our chances.”

“Mm. I am glad that you understand. Personally, I am very unhappy that a demon is using the head of the Grand Mother. Indeed. She was my first love, after all.”

“My prince!”

“What are you saying! How could you fall for a female of another species!”

“Ahhh! That was a childish crush! It’s different now!”

While it sounded like a saccharine-sweet topic, all she felt about a maggot’s first love was utter disgust.

“In, in that case, assuming our enemy is a Circlet who can equip two heads at once, how many total spell tiers can it cast at one time?”

“...A maximum of six tiers. Incidentally, Crowns can cast a maximum of ten tiers.”

“Then if I use fourth-tier spells, it will only be able to cast spells of the second tier. Of course, that is simply nullifying that bastard, so we need to put more effort into it…”

“...Next is that human head. We know too little about it. Neia?”

“I’m sorry. I regret to say I do not know the black-haired person. Still, I’m quite surprised. I thought that you would just wade right into the fight, since you’re CZ.”

“...Ainz-sama said collecting information is very important.”

“Ahh, as expected of His Majesty. What an excellent notion!”

As Neia said this, CZ reached a hand out to her, and Neia immediately grabbed it and shook.

“...Good girl. If you were cuter, I’d put a sticker on you. Maybe a furry one.”

“...A sticker? Ah, you put one on me already, so I don’t need another. Please paste it on someone else you like.”

“...Mm. You’re the first person to dislike my stickers.”

“Eh?”

Neia exclaimed in surprise as CZ said that she was her first. After that, she immediately realized that perhaps she -- as a demon -- had not had many dealings with humans. No, it was possible that others might have despised her in their hearts but had not dared to voice it, due to their fear of her as a demon. While she wanted to poke fun at her for it, Neia could not do anything like spoil the fun of someone who was loyal to the same supreme being as her. Thus, Neia simply let it pass with a bitter smile.

“...Indeed, humans do not have fur like we Zerns. That is why they live in houses like these. Why not dig holes like we do?”

“Prince, we’re straying off-topic. We don’t have much time -- we need to deal with this before the humans attack this city.”

“...Mm. In conclusion, the prince will be going too.”

Nobody spoke up against it. Or rather, Neia had been the only one to voice her opposition to it.

“Regarding our tactics, we will handle the frontline, but what should we do if there are guards who block us? Allowing a spellcasting opponent to move freely is very dangerous.”

“...I’ll engage it in close quarters combat.”

Nobody asked if she could do it. She was one of the team which could defeat the guardian Vah Un -- although that was all CZ’s work -- or so everyone said. Nobody doubted CZ’s abilities.

“Alright. Then let’s move. Before approaching the henchman, place us in the barrels and move us in. If you tell them you’re bringing food to the henchman demon on his orders, you’ll be able to get close to him.”

By “us”, the prince was referring to himself, Neia and CZ. As long as the three of them remained undetected, they could continue maintaining their deception -- the Zern betrayal had not been detected. This was a tactic that could only be put into effect now.

Once again, CZ and Neia hid inside the barrels they had used to enter the city.

“CZ-san. We’re really lucky.”

CZ poked her head out of the barrel.

“...Why is that?”

“Look. Everything’s going well for us. Thanks to the Zern’s betrayal, we

managed to save the prince, and even Jaldabaoth's henchman is here. If we defeat him, we'll have achieved a great accomplishment. That way, nobody will be able to speak ill of us any more. We'll also be able to easily assemble a rescue party to find His Majesty."

"It was all coincidence."

Neia was defeated by CZ's somewhat harsh tone.

"Eh? Ah, is, is that wrong? We're lucky because it was a coincidence… well, we were this successful because His Majesty made you his woman, so I guess in that sense, it's not really a coincidence."

"Ainz-sama's… woman..."

"Ah, maybe woman wasn't the right word, huh?"

"...I don't mind. Neia."

"Eh?"

"...I like you very much. You're not cute, but I don't mind giving you another sticker."

It hurt a little to be called "not cute" over and over again, and as she thought this, Neia said, "never mind" and ducked back into her barrel.

Part 4

While Neia, CZ and the prince were being moved in their barrels, the Zerns were stopped by other demihumans several times, but none of the barrels were opened and searched. In this way, the three of them reached the vicinity of the henchman demon's office.

The three of them emerged from the barrels.

They had peeked outside from within the barrels, but security had not grown tight. It would seem the prince's rescue had not yet been exposed.

Neia slung the prince onto her back, and while she secured him with a rope, one of the Zern went ahead to seek an audience with the henchman demon. This was a form of reconnaissance.

Once everyone had finished their preparations to barge in, the Zern returned.

"He's alone, no guards."

Neia frowned.

Now that Jaldabaoth had been hurt so badly, was he -- as one of only three henchman demons -- not going to strengthen his defences? Or had he relaxed now that the Sorcerer King was dead?

As all kinds of questions swirled around in her head, the only thing that mattered was the prince's summation.

“That means it’s the perfect opportunity to kill him. Let’s go.”

In accordance with the prince’s words, they all moved into action.

Once one of the Zerns opened the door, Neia -- who stood at the head of the group -- could clearly see what was inside the room.

The expansive office had a ceiling that was a full five meters tall, and it was very spacious. Due to its many superior furnishings, it gave off the impression of a stereotypical luxury suite.

There was a hideous monster in front of a black, solid-looking table, and it spoke.

“Humans? Zer…”

He seemed to be saying something to them. However, they were not here to talk.

The prince immediately cast a spell from Neia’s back.

“[Yin - Five Elements - Grand Fireball].”

A feeble-looking flame flew past Neia like it had been thrown into the room. She had heard along the way here that it was a fourth-tier attack spell that was named for its attack power. It was typically the first thing into a room because it would explode upon making contact with anything. However --

“[Yang - Five Elements - Grand Fireball].”

The flame vanished halfway, like it had been snuffed out by the wind.

“I knew it…” the prince muttered hatefully.

He did not cast again. That spell had been an experiment. While he had planned to press the attack if it had not been negated, unfortunately that had not been the case. Even if he did not intend to waste mana, he ought to cast spells in accordance with their attacks.

“...Is that the Zern prince on the human’s back? It doesn’t look like the humans captured him and brought him here… Kuhahaha. It’s treason, then? Interesting.”

The great demon looked like it had come from a nightmare as it slowly got to its feet, like a mockery of a human being.

It was completely naked, so its arms -- that reached down to its knees -- and its legs and its skin-and-bones body were completely exposed.

Its body resembled withered wood, so slender and fragile that even Neia felt that she could break it.

That withered-wood body did not have a head. There was nothing but a straight line extending from shoulder to shoulder. No, there was a slender -- thinner than a woman’s wrist -- branch protruding from its neck region. There

were two fruits on it. Those must have been the so-called heads of this great demon.

“Eh? --Ah.”

Neia could not help squeaking like that. Such was her shock that it was the only sound she could make at first.

Like CZ said, this was the special characteristics of circlets -- two heads.

One of them belonged to a monstrous-looking maggot. It looked very much like the prince, and given the impression of what she had heard, it was probably the Grand Mother. The problem was the other head.

It belonged to a woman, her eyes rolled up into her head and her mouth gaping open like a fish. Her complexion was bad, but the head did not look like it had rotted or was otherwise damaged, and her blonde hair was even gleaming. She could see bright red flesh at the plane where the head had been severed from the body, and it looked moist enough to bleed. While the fact that the head looked like it had been freshly-removed was quite mysterious, that was how she could immediately tell who it belonged to.

“Kelart Custodio-sama…”

While she had only seen her from afar, there was no way she could have mistaken her for anyone else. She was the highest-ranking priest of the Holy Kingdom.

Confusion and doubt swirled within Neia.

What was going on? Had the Zern lied? Did they think Neia and CZ would consider fleeing if they knew it was Kelart?”

“I see, I see, I see. Oh Zern, does this mean you no longer care what happens to your king and the people in that land. I’ll give you a last chance. If you seize these people, I can let you off with a mild punishment, you know?”

Those fruits -- like grotesque heads -- did not move. Neither did those white eyeballs. They seemed like nothing more than decorations. In that case, where had that voice come from?

The prince paid no heed to Neia’s question and castigated the great demon.

His Zern underlings immediately moved into position to attack at any time.

“Hmph! What else is there to say at this point? Who’d believe you after you killed the king!?”

“The king? Is that so…”

Neia heard what seemed to be surprise in that voice. Reading that was difficult because this demon did not have a head of its own and its expression did not change. After all, it was difficult to read one’s opponent’s face to see if one’s attack had been effective. In that respect, Zerns were also troublesome opponents for humans.

“My duty is this place, that is outside of my jurisdiction… I see, so it was

killed? That was because your king was too much of a fool.”

“What!”

“My, my my. Dear traitors, don’t tell me you came merely to speak? You came here because you thought you could defeat me, no? In that case -- what is your trump card? That human?”

A finger tipped with a claw that should have been over 60 centimeters long extended from its hand and pointed at Neia.”

“As if I’d tell you!”

The great demon calmly responded to the prince’s outburst:

“You don’t have to. Shadow Demon.”

The great demon’s shadow stretched out in a sliding motion.

It swelled up, going from a flat plane to three-dimensional. It looked like the commonly spoken image of a demon, but dyed completely black. And there were two of them.

That was probably why it did not have demihuman guards.

“Kill all the Zern other than the prince. I will seize the prince… Human, if you betray them, I can spare the people in the camps who are valuable to you, up to

the number of fingers on two hands.

The great demon made the same proposal CZ had expected it to.

As Neia filled with respect for CZ's knowing eye, she decided to answer its question in order to make it careless.

"Really?"

After she carefully ventured her reply, she could hear joy in the demon's voice.

"What are you saying!? Are you betraying us!?"

The prince shouted from Neia's back, and so the great demon's attention was completely focused on Neia.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up. I'm talking to her… I will keep my promise. Tell me how many people you want to protect and help. If the fingers on two hands are not enough, we can continue discussions--"

The defenseless demon -- who seemed to have forgotten the meaning of caution, was full of openings.

The ace up their sleeve (CZ) would not miss that. She leapt out of the shadow of the door and raised her spell gun.

The muzzle spat fire, and the great demon grabbed its shoulder and stumbled back.

CZ had been waiting alone outside the room for the right timing to launch this surprise attack, and it was signalled the start of the hostilities.

The negotiations which had been intended to manipulate their opponent into carelessness were now over. The Zern royal guards sprang at the Shadow Demons. CZ rushed into the room with fearsome speed, slipping past the the frontliners of both sides with lightning-fast footwork, and closed in on the great demon.

“What! The Sorcerer--”

“...No need to explain.”

CZ hacked with her dagger, and the great demon parried with its claws.

While she knew that there was little time once the battle started, Neia vented her unhappiness on the prince behind her.

“What do you mean, black hair! Isn’t her hair blonde!?”

“Blonde? How is that blonde! It’s light black, isn’t it?”

“Eh?”

He did not sound like he was lying. Could it be -- Zerns perceived colors differently from human beings?

Neia had once heard that certain species with darkvision could not tell colors apart, only black and white. There were also some who could not discern colors without light.

The light in the larder was probably so those species could see what color their food was.

“I”ll tell you later! [Yin - Five Elements - Lightning Claw]!”

“Tch! [Yang - Five Elements - Lightning Claw]!”

A stroke of electricity hurtled through the air like the swipe of a beast’s talons, but it fizzled out halfway through.

While there were spells like [Five Elements - Soften Steel] which decreased defensive strength and spells like [Five Elements - Harden Steel] which increased attack power, as well as summoning spells like [Five Elements - Call The Lightning Lord], the opposition might not negate those and instead cast a high-tier spell on them.

In order to avoid that, the prince simply cast attack spells, which the enemy could not ignore. In addition, he focused on using electricity-element spells, which the enemy should not have been able to resist, and then he used a special ability called Wood Element strengthening. While the demon’s elementalism should have been able to protect against it, the prince’s strengthened spell could not be fully negated, and so it began to take minor

damage.

While the original Grand Mother could have used strengthening techniques just like the prince had, she was now nothing more than an accessory for the great demon. The demon did not possess strengthening techniques of his own and was thus put on the back foot by the power of the prince's spellcasting.

Since CZ was taking the role of frontliner, Neia had to do her job as the rear guard. She could not simply serve as transportation for the prince in the face of such a mighty foe. She loosed an arrow from the Ultimate Shootingstar Super which she held.

While her shot against the main body was highly accurate, the great demon easily batted it away with his hand.

"Out of my way. [Shock Wave]."

Kelart's face -- her lips moved, and she cast a second-tier attack spell at CZ. While CZ's body lifted off the ground from an impact that was invisible to the human eye, she did not seem to have taken any damage which could have hampered her movements. Neia had expected nothing less of a difficulty rating 150 maid demon.

"[Yin - Five Elements - Lightning Claw]"

"[Yang - Five Elements - Lightning Claw]"

They cast the same spells at each other again, and a feeble current of electricity surged past the demon's body.

“[Open Wounds]!”

That counterattack was a spell that would worsen any wounds. Naturally, it was targeted at CZ, who was being attacked by the demon’s claws.

All she could see was CZ’s back. However, her dexterity did not seem to have decreased.

Sweat ran down Neia’s back.

She was the only one who could heal. Therefore, she was naturally the healer. However, while she could tell how badly she was hurt, she lacked the combat experience to tell how severe others’ wounds were. In particular, people like CZ who were not particularly expressive might exceed their limits and collapse before she realized something was wrong with them. Therefore, she had to be more mindful of CZ and the prince. It was just like doing one thing with her right hand while doing another with her left, and she was so busy that she began to get confused.

Still, she had to do this.

The prince kept casting attack spells, while CZ took minor damage as she swung at the demon with her knife. Both of them were perfectly completing their tasks, and she could not simply give up and say that she was the only one who could not do this.

“[Heavy Recover].”

Neia judged that CZ had been badly hurt, so she activated the item the Sorcerer King had lent her and cast a third-tier healing spell on CZ.

“I see!”

Neia’s instincts told her that the attention of the faceless demon was on her.

The great demon’s words implied that it knew the identity of the healer -- who ought to be destroyed first. In fact, the great demon still had enough strength to cast an attack spell on Neia after negating the prince’s spell.

“[Shock Wave].”

An invisible pulse of force rushed at her like a warhammer swung at full power.

She could hear sickening cracks from inside her body, and she writhed in agony from the pain which coursed through her.

It hurt more than the spell the Vah Un had used on her. She could not believe CZ had taken an attack like this with such nonchalance. She now knew why Kelart Custodio had been hailed as a genius. It was because of that powerful hit.

“Aieeee!”

Even though she grit her teeth, Neia could not prevent a choked cry of pain from escaping her.

“Are you alright!?”

“I, I’m fine!”

Neia answered the prince, who was worried for her.

“I’ll call all the Zern--”

“--No. I’ll protect Neia.”

CZ spread her arms, standing like she was shielding Neia.

The great demon was huge, and he made CZ look tiny. Therefore, he must be able to see Neia without any impediment. However, Neia was very happy inside.

“What!? Ahhhh!”

The demon cried out in a hoarse voice. It would seem CZ had done something to him, which had had an effect.

Did she use a special ability? Or maybe a spell?

She was not sure what exactly had happened, but Neia sensed the great demon’s murderous intent weakening. Of course, she was probably imagining things. After all, there was no reason why this great demon should want to kill her any less right now.”

If there was another attack like the last one, another spell as powerful as the last one, she ought to be able to bear it. No, she wanted to bear it.

She had recovered the mana she had lost during the battle with the Vah Un, but the number of times she could use [Heavy Recover] was still unknown, so it was best to save up uses as much as possible. However, if she wanted to tread the line of requiring healing, it would also mean that if she messed up, she would go beyond her limits. It was very difficult to determine the right time to heal.

“And she’s wielding the bow that Ainz-sama lent her!”

Her voice sounded very loud for CZ. She was probably raising her volume to better praise the Sorcerer King. This was a life and death battle, but she could not bring herself to mention it. After all, this was an action taken by CZ, the strongest person on their side, and one who was surrounded in an aura of veterancy. She might have a plan in mind.

“What!? You mean, by the Sorcerer King!?”

There was surprise in the henchman demon’s voice.That was the Sorcerer King for you. He must have heard from Jaldabaoth that he was an opponent to be wary of.

“Yes! It’s a Runecraft™ bow!”

Having heard something she could not overlook, Neia warned CZ.

“CZ! Don’t tell him about us!”

“What! So it was a weapon made with the ancient, lost art of Runecraft™! A weapon like that might even be able to kill me!”

Why was he explaining that in such detail? As Neia thought that, she immediately felt ashamed. Right now, she was fighting with an incredibly powerful adversary with her life on the line. A weakling like herself did not have the luxury of contemplating such matters.

“So it was Runecraft™! Amazing!”

The henchman demon kept on speaking in a very guarded tone. Perhaps it was doing so to distract Neia. In fact.

“Runecraft™?”

The prince’s surprised voice came from behind her. That was why Neia had to speak.

“No! This is not such a weapon!”

As Neia shouted, she sensed CZ and the henchman demon freeze for an instant. That must have been it. When two opponents were evenly matched, all they could do was stare at each other without being able to make a move. That must have been it.

“Rune…”

“No!”

Neia shouted without regard for anything else, and the henchman demon grunted under his breath.

“Is that so… then next, I’ll… [Blindness].”

The spell that came out of nowhere blackened Neia’s vision. He must have done so to render the healer powerless.

The item Neia had borrowed only allowed her to use [Heavy Recover], and not spells that could heal her blindness.

A priest or a divine magic caster could have cured that easily. Unfortunately, there was nobody like that here.

She did not know how long the darkness would last, but if she wanted to heal CZ, she would have to get within touching range of her.

“I can’t see!” It was very important to tell her comrades what had happened to her. “CZ! If you’re hurt, you need to tell me!”

“...Mm.”

“Sorry, I don’t know spells that can heal this condition of yours!”

“Don’t worry about it!”

After responding to the apology from behind her, Neia pulled her bowstring taut. She ought to be able to hit her target from memory alone. This was the fruit of the experience she had gained from fighting the Vah Un and many large-sized adversaries. The bowstring twanged.

“--Guwaaaargh!”

She heard the henchman demon wail in pain.

“You did it! It tried to dodge, but it had the opposite effect! Nicely done!”

After hearing the prince’s explanation, Neia realised how lucky she had been and prayed to the Sorcerer King.

“...Keep shooting like this.”

“Eiii!”

“Mm!”

Although the sound of the Zerns fighting the Shadow Demons around her made it very hard to tell what was going on, Neia focused on CZ’s wounds and the henchman demon’s location and kept shooting at the latter.

Perhaps it was because he had been hurt and realised that he would lose if he

did not defeat CZ first, but the henchman demon focused all its attacks on CZ. In addition, it kept casting [Blindness] spells on her, trying to disable her like it had Neia, but she resisted all of them, so they had no effect.

In that case, all she had to do was keep pressing it.

Just as the prince's mana was about to run out, victory came to them like a matter of course. The prince's cries of joy were even a little annoying.

The Zerns fighting around them had taken losses, but they had emerged victorious.

However -- the spell on Neia had not yet expired. She still could not see anything. Still, it was not a permanent spell. In all likelihood, it would wear off after some time had passed, and the only reason why it had lasted this long was because Kelart Custodio was very powerful.

While she could not see anything, she could sense the presence of the Zerns approaching her.

"My prince! I'm glad you're alright."

"Ahh… please consume Grand Mother-dono's remains with all due respect."

So you're eating it, Neia thought.

And with all due respect. Since they had said as much, all she could do was accept it as a unique tradition of their species.

“Neia. What should we do with the human’s head? Shall we eat it too?”

“No, please don’t. We humans don’t have such burial practices. We will return it to the city with all due respect.”

“I see… human burials are quite strange. No, surely you must think the same of ours as well. This is probably what they call a culture clash. Also, I am deeply grateful to you. If it was only us, we could never have--”

“--Wait. There’s no time to keep talking. Let’s move.”

She could hear a disturbance in the distance. It would seem the Liberation Army had finally made contact with the Demihuman Alliance. Either that, or soldiers had heard the sound of the battle just now and come here to see what was going on. Whichever one it was, they could not stay here for long.

“That’s right, CZ-san. Then, please help the Liberation Army attack Kalinsha as we arranged.”

“Umu, I understand. You lot!”

“Yes! We shall move right away. Will you and the humans be entering the barrels, my prince? We will carry you outside the city.”

While she could not tell because she could not see, she could sense CZ hesitating. The reason for that was obvious -- she hated the barrels. Neia felt the same way.

“...We’ll help too.”

“Mm. Once I recover from my blindness, I’ll help too.”

The prince was thrashing on her back like a caught fish. He was jumping for joy. Neia was a little depressed by how well she had adapted to the situation.

“If our allies are setting out, then let us go as well. Of course, my mana has ben depleted so I cannot cast any big spells, so I shall cast strengthening spells on you instead.”

“My prince!”

“Be silent. Do you intend me to be a male who sends his allies to their deaths.”

“...That ought to be enough. Let’s go.”

CZ urged them on. She seemed eager to get away from the barrel.

“Then I shall send you to where our colleagues are gathered. Please get in.”

Savior of the Nation

Part 1

The liberation of Kalinsha had been surprisingly simple.

The combination of the Zerns rising up in revolt, the sheer lack of demihuman manpower compared to the size of the city and the absence of the henchman demon to command them, meant that it was a foregone conclusion. Of course, there were many casualties on both sides, but the losses to the Holy Kingdom Liberation Army were surprisingly light considering they had managed to retake such a large city.

One of the main reasons for that was Neia, who carried the Ultimate Shootingstar Super on her back.

Of course, CZ had assisted from the shadows, but Neia and her spectacular bow had been a majestic sight which had greatly inspired the people.

And so, Neia stood atop a platform and passionately addressed the audience gathered in the plaza.

She told them: there was no greater king in this world than the Sorcerer King.

The first thing Neia did after liberating Kalinsha was to request support in order to go searching for the Sorcerer King.

The Zern did their part and questioned the demihuman captives about the

Abelion Hills, but she was still severely lacking in material resources, information, experience, and the like.

It would be one thing if they could try as often as they liked, but it was difficult to repeatedly send out search parties and rescue teams into enemy territory. In other words, they had to get it right the first time. That being the case, no amount of preparations would be enough. That was why she had decided to capitalize on the fact that many people had been freed through the liberation of Kalinsha and seek their aid in various areas.

However, the people did not volunteer their help immediately after it was requested. Even after taking back Kalinsha, there were still many other cities that had been captured, as well as many people who had been imprisoned or who had lost track of their relatives. Neia was trying to sell them on the benefits of aiding the Sorcerer King in order to move their hearts.

However, as the number of helpers increased, the contents of her speeches gradually began to change.

The people who had come to hear Neia speak about the Sorcerer King were all people that the Sorcerer King had once rescued. They were people who had tasted the purest of pain and who now wanted to cling to a powerful being in order to heal the lingering emotional trauma in their souls.

Those who knew of the Sorcerer King’s greatness could be considered her comrades.

It was second nature for Neia to joyously tell them about the Sorcerer King’s magnificence.

Gradually, people who did not know the Sorcerer King began to take part as well. These were the friends of those who had been rescued by the Sorcerer King. As the word spread, more and more unrelated people came to listen to Neia's words.

With her visor on, Neia gushed to these people about the excellence of the Sorcerer King during the liberation of the city and the battle with Jaldabaoth.

She would not have been able to speak so unreservedly several weeks ago. She would have tensed up under the eyes of the audience and she would have been at a loss for words as her mind blanked out. But after addressing crowds over and over again, she finally came to realize that she did not need to express her own thoughts, only paint a picture of the Sorcerer King's glory for the audience with her words. Neia had become an eloquent speaker.

Yes, they now spoke of her as the Faceless Preacher.

And so--

"Thus, His majesty is truly beyond compare! How could there be another king who cares so much for the people! Yes, I know what you want to say. After all, Her Majesty Calca Bessarez is also an excellent queen, however -- has anyone here heard of a king who would go this far for the people of another nation! You!"

Neia pointed at one of the members of the audience in front of her.

"Have you ever heard of a king who went out by himself to save another nation's people from torment?"

“Eh, ah, no, that, I’ve never heard… anything like that… before…”

As everyone’s eyes focused on him, the voice of the man who had been called out gradually trailed off.

“Excellent answer! That’s exactly it!”

The rows of people beside Neia on the stage joined the people in the audience who shared Neia’s views, to applaud the man as Neia praised him.

The man blushed and looked a little shy.

“In truth, we checked to see if any other king had done that much, but noooo! No matter how hard we looked, we could not find any king like the Sorcerer King!”

There had been kings who had led armies to rescue neighboring countries, but it was a fact that there had been no kings who had gone alone.

“Think of it, a king going to aid the people of another country regardless of the risk to himself! It’s never been done before! Only the Sorcerer King!” Neia paused, then continued. “Only His Majesty! Only a king like that truly deserves to be called a righteous king!”

“But can we trust him!? Isn’t he undead!?”

Neia responded to the question from the audience with a gentle smile. At

first, Neia had thought the same thing herself. In other words, he was like herself from the past. He simply did not know; he did not understand.

She would make him see -- no, she would open his eyes, just like she had opened her eyes, and those of everyone else's. With that feeling in her heart, Neia addressed the crowd.

"Yes! His Majesty is undead! It is only normal that you should all feel uneasy! It is a fact that the undead are frightening monsters. I have no intention of saying that all undead are good. Many undead are evil, and there is no doubt that they hate the living!"

Now that everyone was listening to her in earnest, Neia seized on the mood in the air and forcefully declared her summation.

"However! There are exceptions to all things! Just as there might be a warm day in winter, just as a bud might bloom from a withered branch, just as a brilliant shooting star can streak across the darkest night. So too is His Majesty -- an undead being who aids the living. You must have heard the stories from the people he rescued. It is also possible that some of you were rescued by him. Then based on what you know to be true, you have the proof that I am not lying!"

After verifying that there were no objections from the crowd, Neia spoke in leaden, grim tones.

"...This time round, that sturdy fortress line was broken, and the demihumans rushed in like an avalanche. Will such a tragedy only happen once? Does anyone believe it will not happen a second time?"

The silence of the audience spoke for them.

Of course they hoped that it would not happen again, but nobody could believe it.

“I fully understand how uneasy you are. Perhaps the generation of our -- everyone’s children might be able to rest at ease. After all, the tragedy that just occurred will spur us on to unflagging vigilance… however!”

Neia’s tone grew forceful.

“Can anyone guarantee that such a tragedy will not repeat itself in the generation of our grandchildren, or our grandchildren’s grandchildren? Does anyone dare say it happened once, so it will never happen again!? That is why we must prepare, so the fortress will never be breached again!”

Voices saying “Yes” and “That’s right” began to float up from the crowd.

“--It seems everyone agrees too, but in the far-off future, in an age when this tragedy is but a distant memory, can the people then still maintain their strength? Do you think we can station twice or three times as many forces on the fortress line?”

The military budget would drain the national reserves, and they would deploy an intimidating amount of fighting strength but have no obvious results to show for it.

“I trust there are people who served in the fortresses during your conscription. Then please recall the daily expenses and stores consumed back

then; if they were tripled, do you not think it would greatly strain the nation? At that time, do you think a country that only knows of that tragedy from memory will continue their efforts?”

As understanding dawned on the faces of her audience, Neia delivered her conclusion.

“--That is why we need the protection of His Majesty!”

“Why! Why must we seek the help of the undead!”

The same voice from before rang out.

It was the man who had questioned her earlier. People like him put Neia at ease. Her toughest crowds were the ones where nobody reacted at all. When that happened, she felt uneasy about whether her words had reached them at all.

Neia’s supporters had suggested planting a few naysayers like that in the audience beforehand, but Neia refused. Similarly, she had rejected the idea of planting shills in the audience.

“I am saying this precisely because he is undead. His Majesty is powerful, but more importantly, he is undead, and so in that far distant future, he will still be alive -- still exist.”

“But, but I heard that the Sorcerer King fell in battle and died.”

“That rumor is both true and false at the same time. Sadly, the first part is true. His Majesty expended a great deal of mana and cast many spells in order to save we who were powerless, and in the end he was defeated by Jaldabaoth. But the second part is false. His Majesty is not dead! The existence of CZ will prove that to everyone.”

This was the cue for CZ -- one of the key figures in the liberation of Kalinsha -- to enter from the side.

The audience gasped in awe, and worshipful murmurs of “CZ-sama” could be heard.

“...Mm.”

CZ held her head high and puffed her chest out.

“Once, she was one of the maid demons in Jaldabaoth’s service, yet she fought alongside us in the Battle of Kalinsha. That is because His Majesty wrested command over her from Jaldabaoth’s hands.”

Many people had seen CZ slay demihumans without pause during the battle. The people who addressed her as -sama had probably been directly aided by her.

CZ was very popular. Even if she had once been a maid demon of Jaldabaoth, she was still very pretty, and more importantly, she felt youthful. One could say it was difficult to bear hostility against her.

Had the Sorcerer King considered this when he bound you to his service, Neia

had once asked CZ. CZ had replied, “Maybe.”

“CZ was bound by the magic of His Majesty, and that remains in effect as long as the Sorcerer King still lives. In other words, she is the proof that His Majesty still lives.”

As the air turned electric, Neia raised her arms to indicate that everyone should be quiet, because she was not done speaking.

“I am sure you are all wondering why His Majesty has not yet shown himself. In truth I do not know either. However, I cannot imagine that such a compassionate lord would abandon us! There must be some reason why he cannot return here immediately. I do not know if that is because of His Majesty’s considerations, or if some danger has arisen. And that is why!”

Neia’s voice reverberated through the silent plaza.

“That is why I beseech all of you for your strength! Please lend me the strength to find His Majesty. Even if we bet our lives to walk the length and breadth of the Abelion Hills where the demihumans live before finding His Majesty, the Holy Kingdom still cannot fully repay the debt we owe Him. And I have said this before, but His Majesty came only to fight Jaldabaoth, yet he ended up fighting the demihumans on behalf of our weak selves, thus wearing down his strength and leading to his defeat!”

Neia raised her voice even louder as she shouted.

“And that is why -- everyone! That is why we ought to repay the debt we owe to the person who came to save us! That great man came by himself to save us!

Even if he is one of the undead, I do not intend to be an ingrate! --And so, I call upon the people who seek to repay the debt to His Majesty in some small way.”

Neia stopped for a while to let the anticipation build before shouting again.

“I am looking for people to help me find His Majesty! But you do not need to go in person! Your skills, your knowledge, anything you can contribute will be useful. Please lend me your strength! Please help me!”

Neia bowed her head, and beside her, so did CZ.

Ohhhh, the crowd roared.

After raising her head, Neia finished thusly:

“...I am certain there are some of you out there who cannot believe based on my words alone. However, how about asking the people from the Liberation Army before Kalinsha was taken back? That way, I am certain you will believe that I am not lying.”

After returning to her room, Neia collapsed into her chair.

“Thank you for your hard work, Baraja-sama.”

The person who addressed her was a woman who seemed kindly enough, if a little gloomy.

She seemed to be in her twenties, and her distinguishing features were a pair of ample breasteses that drew men’s eyes and a head of short hair. Apparently, it had once been long, but it had been cut short in a prison camp.

She was part of the support team which Neia had established. Neia’s supporters wanted to name themselves, and so they called themselves the

Sorcerer King Rescue Unit.

Their job was to help manage increasingly busy daily life.

While it had only been half a month since they had first met, this woman had become irreplaceable to Neia. That was because she had completed her assigned tasks -- cleaning, laundry, cooking and various other tasks -- with consummate perfection.

“Ahh, thank you.”

Neia wiped her face with the cloth the woman had offered her, and the cool sensation felt very comfortable on her burning face.

Neia went “whew” in a way that seemed very reminiscent of a middle-aged man before laying the towel on the table and turning to the woman who immediately reclaimed it.

“Ah, while I’ve been saying it all this time, please don’t call me -sama. After all, I’m not that special.”

“What are you saying? You speak for His Majesty in this country and act on his behalf. Not addressing you as -sama would be rude.”

The fact that a woman older than herself was saying this bothered Neia.

This was a problem only experienced by those who were not used to a superior position.

Speaking of which, Neia was not an orator or anything. Rather, she was wondering how she had ended up in that position.

Neia felt that CZ -- who was staring blankly while lying down casually on a sofa -- fit the description better.

Originally, -- the Sorcerer King's greatness should have been obvious to everyone from an objective point of view -- she was simply stating the obvious, not arguing on his behalf, and she had not intended to begin preaching any form of organized belief or opinion.

While Neia had started doing that of her own accord, she had never expected things to turn out like this.

"I'll take my leave, then. Also, Beldran Moro-shi wishes to meet you."

"I understand. Can you help me call him in? Thank you for your hard work today."

The woman who managed Neia's daily life bowed to her, and then left the room. A man entered, as though to swap places with her. The woman was averse to men and feared them, and she felt uncomfortable when she was in the same location as men. Therefore, she had chosen to excuse herself .

"Baraja-sama, I apologize for disturbing you while you are resting. May I ask for some of your time?"

Beldran Moro.

He had the stout body of a man in his forties, but the part about him that stood out most was his thinning hair

The Moro family had a tradition of buttling for notable noble houses, and in the past he too had worked as a butler. That was why he served as a secretary in the support team, in order to make full use of his skills.

Neia had been very lucky to meet someone like him when she had first founded the group. If she had not met him, her hair would have gone white at an early age.

“No, it’s fine. What is it?”

“Thank you for granting your servant a few minutes of your time allowing me to submit a report. I wish to say that the membership of our organization is now in excess of 30’000.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful! To think we’d gain so many people who understand His Majesty’s greatness! No, that’s only to be expected. His Majesty truly is an amazing person, after all!”

CZ nodded and went “Mhm.”

The organization now had more members than the population of a small city. Of the 3’500’000-odd residents of the Northern Holy KIngdom, around 1% of them now belonged to the group.

“Our supporters have expressed a desire for a symbol of some sort to show their membership in the group.”

“I see… indeed… That… makes sense.”

“Indeed. Some wearable item to indicate their membership is essential in order to foster a sense of reassurance and belonging.

Mhm, Neia nodded. They would be very happy to have some symbol of solidarity-- something related to the Sorcerer King. Neia wanted one too.

“Please use the best possible means at your disposal. However, I do not wish us to give preferential treatment based on cash donations and the like.”

“...unoff... fan...oup…”

Neia picked up on something that even her acute hearing could not fully parse.

“CZ-sempai, what did you say?” Neia asked.

“..Nothing.”

“...Really? Still, if I make a mistake when speaking about His Majesty, you must tell me.”

Neia turned her gaze back to Beldran. Recently, there were more and more people who remained unshaken even when she looked at them, and it made Neia very happy.

“We’ll push it towards the production stage. Now then… can you tell me about the rest of my schedule?”

“Yes, Baraja-sama. About two hours later, the supporters will be organizing a “Sorcerer King Thanksgiving” activity, and you are scheduled to take part and speak of His Majesty’s great deeds.”

“I see.”

Neia felt quite excited. Having discovered that the Sorcerer King was justice, she felt a sense of camaraderie and closeness to the supporters who could understand how she felt, and she very much enjoyed talking to people who shared her views.

“Also, there are people who would like you to witness the fruits of their training. Given that you are very busy, should I reject them?”

Neia had recently founded an honor guard unit and was currently putting them through intense training. Both Neia and CZ had taken part in that training.

To Neia, who felt that weakness would only be a burden to the Sorcerer King, working hard to become strong was second nature. If Neia’s participation could liven up the mood and motivate them, then she had to join them.

“No, I’d like to be there with them.”

“I am certain they will be delighted… and while that summary of events was quite basic, that is all I have to report to you. As for how long it will take to gather the supporters… preparation time will take about an hour, so please rest at ease until then.”

Beldran bowed his head and left the room, and after watching him leave, Neia got up from her chair and walked over to the sofa where CZ was. Then she lay down beside CZ and tightly embraced her, like she was trying to squish her with her body.

“...Good girl, good girl.”

CZ was shorter than herself, but she patted Neia’s back in a soothing manner, like a mother would for her child.

“When will we be able to go look for His Majesty… it’s been a month since then…”

The people searching the eastern region of the Holy Kingdom had not found the Sorcerer King, and while there was a non-zero possibility that they might have missed him, it was almost a foregone conclusion that he had fallen into the land of the demihumans, the Abelion Hills. Therefore they had to make ample preparations, but doing so was simply taking too long.

Of the 3’000 Zern who had betrayed Jaldabaoth, 2’800 of them had gone with their prince to the Sorcerous Kingdom, while the remaining 200 or so had gone to the hills to collect information, but they had not found anything so far.

“...You must not fail.”

“I know! But, but…”

Neia hugged CZ tighter. She took a deep breath of the scent -- like that of black tea -- which came from her.

CZ’s mere presence was enough to wipe away Neia’s uneasiness.

That was because her existence was the proof that the Sorcerer King was alive.

“..It’ll be fine. Ainz-sama is generous.”

“Ah, that’s right, CZ-sempai.”

“...Therefore, you should get more supporters and work out a search plan that cannot fail.”

“Ah, that’s right, CZ-sempai.”

“...That way, Ainz-sama will be happy.”

“Ah, that’s right, CZ-sempai.”

“...Neia. I like you. Now that I’ve gotten used to it, your face is quite cute.”

“...Quite cute… Speaking of which, you must be really bored because you can’t go outside, CZ-sempai. Shall the two of us go somewhere together next time?”

CZ’s extraordinary beauty -- it was practically sculpted -- attracted a lot of attention, but if people knew her true identity as a maid demon, the looks directed at her would become ones of fear and caution. Many of them would have exaggerated delusions like “She’s going to steal my soul!”, which stemmed from the stories where demons transformed into beautiful women to claim souls as part of a deal. However, Neia felt that demons had a right to choose their partners. For starters, being that she was a subordinate of the most merciful Sorcerer King, this difficulty 150 maid demon would not possibly desire the souls of the people around her, let alone want to charm theirs away..

Even so, there had been troublesome things which they could not avoid, and Neia -- as a squire of the Sorcerer King -- would not be able to face him if she ended up causing trouble for CZ, his subordinate. Of course, Neia also understood that CZ was so powerful that she would not be harmed.

For that reason she spent much of her time in here, but now that there were more people in their organization, it ought to be alright to bring her where the supporters gathered.

“...Alright, we’ll go together as a kind of practice.”

“Alright, let’s get ready, then. Although, those maid clothes are a little eye-catching… could you change into something more ordinary?”

“...The doctor… ahem. No problem. Lend me clothes. I’ll leave the

coordination to you.”

“...I’m sorry, but I didn’t have anyone I could go out with and I had no interest in clothes at all, so I’m not confident of being able to pick out clothes for you.”

CZ gently patted Neia’s shoulders. While she looked emotionless at a glance, Neia could understand her maternal warmth. After that, CZ pointed her thumb at herself.

“...Leave it to me.”

“Really?”

The discovery that CZ’s tastes were unexpectedly good would be a matter for later.

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Caspond’s workload had increased dramatically after the recapture of Kalinsha. The people who were rescued needed to be incorporated into the organization, the amount of information which needed to be processed had increased greatly, and both verification and assignment work was very time consuming.

During this busy period, only one paladin was stationed by Caspond’s side for his safety.

While this might have been skimping on security, one could not use a skilled paladin -- they could read, write, do accounts, conduct religious rites, and keep the peace -- as a mere bodyguard. In that respect, it would have been most efficient to assign the otherwise retarded Remedios to him, but after

considering her mental faculties, he decided to have her train with other paladins.

When Neia and CZ had recovered Kelart Custodio's head, her autistic screeching caused such a disturbance that it was a wonder nobody had died as a result. While she had calmed down eventually, they still had to handle her with care.

In truth, nobody could do anything by themselves. He had to be grateful to his maker. As he further devoted himself to said maker, Caspond threw himself into his work, his pen flashing over the pages.

While it was practice for the future, this work was still very annoying. His paladin aide either could not read the mood or he was indeed very bothered, but he spoke to Caspond, who was trying to bury his aggravation in the depths of his heart.

"--Prince Caspond-denka, is it really alright to let the Neia Baraja situation continue as it is?"

Caspond understood the meaning of that question, and he smiled tiredly without taking his eyes off his documents.

"It can't be helped, so don't bother. Also, Prince will do."

"Thank you very much, however, what do you mean, it can't be helped?"

The paladin did not seem to understand, so Caspond lifted his head from his books and looked him in the eye.

“What do you think would happen if we did anything to her, like say, pressuring her to stop?”

“I don’t think anything would happen, my Prince. All she is doing is causing unrest in the nation.”

“I see, so you -- while I’m not sure if this is appropriate -- haven’t heard her speak, then? ...I guess, but I think I’ve seen another version of what she’s talking about elsewhere. Now, my first question… has she lied?”

Caspond watched the paladin search his memory before answering:

“She is not… well, it would be better if she was lying. Next, anyone with a modicum of intellect can check what she has said and find that almost all of it is justified. The Sorcerer King did free them, as a hero who single handedly took back a city, too.”

He took a drink of water from the glass on the table to wet his throat before continuing.

“And then, Neia Baraja is a hero who helped liberate Kalinsha. We lauded her for that. As for the maid demon -- we introduced her as a minion of the Sorcerer King. That led to a sky-high opinion of the Sorcerer King, and so we had to go a little overboard in praising her. Also, her equipment befits a hero.”

The sight of Neia carrying the marvellous bow which the Sorcerer King had loaned her and wearing the Grand King Buser’s armor was nothing less than heroic.

“Now, let’s go back to your suggestion just now. If we try to silence her, how will the world view us? Do you not think they would see us as trying to shut a hero up because what she’s saying isn’t good for the royal family? That sort of thing.”

“But that…”

The paladin tried to stammer out a denial, but his face already said that he understood better than his words could. He knew what would happen.

“On one hand, you have a hero whose star is rising, and on the other you have the royal family which is on the decline. Who do you think the people will believe?”

“--My Prince! Please don’t say that!”

“I apologize… but more to the point, what do you think the Sorcerer King’s maid demon will do if we try to interfere with Neia Baraja?”

“Oh.”

The paladin’s face went stiff, and a ghastly look came to Caspond’s face.

“Hehe. The fact that she’s protected by that maid demon means she’s the strongest in this city, you know? Trying to directly silence her is extremely dangerous, so we’ll have to leave things as they are. I understand your concerns, but every move available to us is a bad one.”

There was a knocking on the door, and one of the soldiers from the outside entered.

“Prince-denka, the Vice Captain-sama wishes to speak with you.”

“He may enter.”

Perhaps he had heard Caspond’s voice, but Gustav rushed in from where he had been waiting outside. The slight panting in his breath showed that he had come here in a hurry.

“Forgive me, Your Highness Prince Caspond!”

Gustav’s work took him further afield than Caspond, and it was also more challenging, so he very rarely came here. That was why Caspond knew that this was a sticky situation. If he had come here in person, he had brought with him a difficult situation that he could not deal with alone.

“I tell you every time, don’t worry about it. Also, you don’t need to bow if we’re the only one’s around. Since you’re in such a rush, it must be quite urgent, right?”

“Yes! Our scouts report a 50’000-strong army flying the flag of the Southern Nobles heading for this city!”

“I see… don’t tell me the South has already overcome Jaldabaoth’s forces? In any event, prepare for battle, because we do not know if the Southern armies are being controlled by Jaldabaoth. Be careful. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes!”

“Do not attack before the enemy makes a move under any circumstances. If they want to talk, bring them here. After that--” Caspond turned to the paladin. “You will be in charge of welcoming them. If they’re what I think they are, there ought to be several high-ranking nobles present. Prepare refreshments and wine to make them happy.”

Both men replied, “Yes sir!” and then left the room. As Caspond watched them leave, he muttered to himself.

“Alright… is it time?”

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“Well, you’re a sight for sore eyes, Marquis Bodipo, Count Cohen, Count Domingues, Count, Granero, Count Randalse and Viscount Santz.”

“Oh, think nothing of it, I’m glad to see you’re well, my Prince.”

“Indeed! Indeed! We were so worried about you, your Highness!”

After a toast, Caspond and the Southern nobles drank to their respective safety and exchanged greetings over and over again.

The nobles described the situation and spoke of their travails. Caspond listened attentively, because doing so showed how hard they had worked -- how much they had given up for the sake of the Holy Kingdom.

Count Cohen, who had been speaking for a very long time, suddenly seemed to have noticed something and asked a question.

“--Oya, Prince-denka. Is it me, or do you seem slightly different now?”

“Ahh, but of course. I trust you know how Jaldabaoth invaded the North? My domains changed greatly as a result. In addition, I feel the parts you have not seen have changed even more… do you not think I have become thinner?”

Caspond indicated his belly. “Well, that does seem to be the case”, everyone cheerfully replied. At the same time, there was a keen glint in the nobles’ eyes.”

Caspond did not miss that. He instantly realised that they were comparing Caspond’s previous value to his present worth.

While they had concealed that quickly enough, he understood that the evaluation was still in progress.

Now he hoped that they would think that nothing had changed, in the hopes that they would not interfere with the royal family after the war.

“...Still, I, Caspond, am deeply grateful that you gentlemen have set out to save the Holy Kingdom.”

“What are you saying? Your Highness, as noblemen, it is only natural that we should marshal our forces and set out for the sake of the royal family. Or no, anyone who is physically able and does not join a battle concerning the survival of the Holy Kingdom cannot even be considered a nobleman!”

The nobles each nodded and made noises of acknowledgement. In other words, the noblemen who had not come here were the political enemies of the ones who were present.

Unfortunately, Caspond did not know which noble houses were not getting on with each other. That probably meant he was not sufficiently learned.

While he wanted to avoid being labelled as biased here, he would need to give them preferential treatment or face rather dire consequences. Everyone hated a bat who flitted around trying to get in everyone's good graces.

"Gentlemen, your loyalty to the royal family needs to be trumpeted far and wide. I feel it needs to be a matter of historical record.

While it was only for a moment, the one who seemed the happiest about that was Marquis Bodipo, the oldest person present, whose blonde hair was flecked with white.

Now that he had power and position, he probably wanted prestige on top of that. The others would probably prefer to be rewarded instead. Of course, it was only natural for them to expect a certain reward now that they had mobilized their forces.

The Marquis muttered some polite words of refusal -- more of a courtesy than anything -- even as he tried to ingratiate himself with the prince. During this time, Viscount Santz -- who looked quite ill at ease -- seized on the right moment to interrupt the conversation and hesitantly asked a question.

“My prince, I have a question I would like to ask you. What is the present condition of Her Majesty? I hear she has passed away…”

“That is a fact.”

Startled by Caspond’s frank and direct answer, Viscount Santz asked another question.

“Then, then where does Her Majesty’s body lie?”

“...It was in a hideous state, so we had to cremate it. Originally, we were planning to use a [Preservation] spell on it and give her a state funeral after driving off Jaldabaoth…”

Caspond shook his head with a pained look on his face, as though he could not bear to continue.

“Also, we confirmed the death of the high priestess, Kelart Custodio.”

“I see…”

During this silence, Caspond used the time to take a drink.

Calca’s substitute was right before their eyes. However, there was no simple way to find someone to replace the high priestess Kelart Custodio, who stood at the apex of all divine magic casters. Therefore, they were carefully considering how best to use Kelart’s death.

After seeing they had not reacted even after he had taken two drinks of wine, Caspond gave them another tidbit of information.

“Her remains were also in terrible condition, so they were cremated as well.”

The nobles frowned. Had they felt something from the deaths of two of the Holy Kingdom’s top individuals? Perhaps they had finally realised that this was a battle where their lives were on the line and losing meant death. They were probably frightened by the realisation that they would not be ransomed even if they were taken prisoner.

“How about the captain of the paladins, Custodio-dono?”

“Do you want to speak to her? Can it wait?”

“Oya, so she’s still alive? Meanwhile, Her Majesty and the high priestess-sama are both dead...”

Count Randalse had a neatly groomed goatee. When he delivered those words in a sarcastic tone of voice, the others smiled mockingly, as if to follow suit. Caspond opened the door and ordered the paladin outside to summon Remedios.

Just as the wine in the bottle was about to run dry, Remedios reached their room.

Just as Count Randalse was about to speak, he took a look at Remedios and his eyes went wide.

“What!? Is she Captain Remedios, leader of the paladin corps!?”

The mockery in his tone had been replaced by shock. Every noble in the Holy Kingdom knew what Remedios looked like. Count Randalse was no exception either, hence his surprise. She looked tremendously different from how he remembered her.

Right now, Remedios Custodio looked like a walking corpse.

Her eyes were deeply sunken and her cheeks were haggard. However, a brilliant light shone in her pupils.

“You called me here right? Who else would I be?”

“What! The… the nerve…”

Count Randalse’s voice trailed off, and he stared intently at Remedios.

Right now, Remedios looked very frightening. The fact that nobody knew what she wanted or what she would do made others uneasy. That was why Caspond did not keep Remedios by his side. It was also why he took care not to let Remedios know anything about Neia.

“What is it?”

Everyone in this country knew that Remedios Custodio was the strongest paladin of this nation. In terms of sheer brute force, she was the foremost being in this nation.

What use was authority against violence that was on the verge of running wild? The most solid armor of the aristocracy was like paper to her. In the past, there were people beside her who held her reins, so she was in a state of mind where she could endure being badmouthed. However, it was a different matter now.

The nobles all understood this, so they said nothing. Remedios snorted as she saw them, and then shrugged.

"...May I leave now, Your Highness? It seems there was no reason to call for me."

"Ahh. Thank you for coming."

After Remedios left, the nobles finally allowed themselves to look unhappy.

"Can you permit her to show such disrespect to His Highness?"

"Even if she is the captain of the paladin corps, that attitude is intolerable. Can we allow someone without any loyalty to the royal family to remain as captain?"

Caspond raised a hand to quell the venting of their spleens.

"We are at war now. Her talents are still useful. Let us leave her disposition to the future Holy King."

Quite a few people had been upset by Remedios' attitude. Some of them

were hiding their fear of her with anger, but others had ulterior motives. Caspond knew this, and he smiled coldly in his heart.

Remedios had once been the mailed fist of the previous Holy King and a powerful weapon. Surely someone out there would not want to leave that weapon to the next Holy King. Or rather, all of them might be thinking that for all he knew.

“Ohhh! Your Highness is correct! This is wartime! However, we won’t keep fighting the demihumans forever!”

“The Count is right! I believe our envoy already mentioned that we managed to come here because we defeated the demihuman forces. Your Highness! We ought to sustain the momentum and mount a pursuit!”

“Exactly! We ought to destroy the demihumans in one fell swoop, so Your Highness’ achievements may reach more ears.”

“I see, I see. Then -- how’s Old Purple?”

The nobles looked at each other, and then Marquis Bodipo spoke on their behalf.

“He seems unwell, so he did not come here with us.”

The Marquis was the oldest person here, and so the person that he called “old” was an 80 year old individual who had been appointed one of the Nine Colors. As a great noble of the South with the rank of Marquis, he had been granted that color in recognition of his loyalty to the royal family and his

achievements.

Not all the Nine Colors had earned their position because of their fighting strength. Much like Purple, some of them had gained their title because of some great contribution. For instance, there was a Duchess who had been appointed Blue due to her fame as a composite artist.

As he pondered Marquis Bodipo's reply, he sensed for a moment that the other man was not hiding anything, and Caspond smiled coldly in his heart again. While he already knew this, he was simply confirming that reaction with his own eyes.

"...I see. It would seem that your opinions coincide with mine." Caspond outlined his plan to ruin Jaldabaoth's scheme by slaughtering the demihumans. "However, what will we do if Jaldabaoth shows up?"

"Is Jaldabaoth such a mighty demon? I hear even the Captain-dono could not protect Her Majesty."

Count Granero had never faced Jaldabaoth before, which was why he was asking such a naive question. Caspond responded in a somber tone.

"He is extremely powerful. We asked the Sorcerer King to face him, and his battle with Jaldabaoth was truly intense."

"The Sorcerer King? Do you mean that undead kin?"

It was only to be expected that they would exclaim in surprise.

“Oya? Did you not hear about that? I see…”

“So you called upon the help of another country’s army, my Prince? That is very bad!”

“Not an army. Just the Sorcerer King.”

The nobles froze with an”Eh?” on their lips. It took some time before they stirred again.

“The Sorcerer King? By himself? The one and only king, the one who stands at the pinnacle of his nation came over by himself?”

Caspond nodded in response to Count Randalse’s question.”

“How could that be, that’s impossible, right? There’s no way such a king would exist! Did he not bring his armies with him?”

It makes no sense at all, the gathered people muttered. Some wondered if this was some kind of scheme. However, Caspond shattered their speculations with his unyielding reply.

“Though you might say so, it is the truth. All we can do is accept it. In addition, if the Sorcerer King had brought his armies with him, then he would have used them the moment he lost his duel against Jaldabaoth.”

“He lost?... I don’t get it. They say he’s one of the undead, so could it be that

even his brains rotted away? However… is this not very bad?”

“It is. However, one of the envoys who requested the Sorcerer King to come was Remedios. I believe handing her over to gain the forgiveness of the other party will be a necessity, as are other diplomatic measures.

“Will that settle matters? …Now that you mention it, the Sorcerous Kingdom is a nation within the borders of the Kingdom. In that case, they will not be able to cross the Kingdom’s borders to reach us… does that mean we must be on alert once the Kingdom is destroyed?”

They could not understand what was going on, and the nobles all clutched their heads. It was as though they were thinking about what to do if the sun rose in the west. Therefore, they decided to leave that aside for the time being.

“Well, let’s put that aside for now. What are your future plans, Your Highness?”

“I -- I would like to retake the capital. And i would like to do this as soon as possible.”

“In that case, we will surely aid you!”

“Your Highness will become the hero who saved this nation from Jaldabaoth!”

“The demihuman army which invaded our nation was 100’000 strong. They’ve been culled down to around 30’000 strong now, If we rally the people of this city and the soldiers we brought, we’ll be able to beat them easily!”

“Your Highness! The day will soon come when they call you Your Majesty!”

Caspond faced the flattering nobles and deliberately put an understanding look on his face.

“Umu. I will not forget to be grateful for the help all of you have given me.”

“What are you saying? We are only doing our duty to the Holy Kingdom and the royal family!”

In his heart, Caspond smiled in a completely different way.

“Very well. Then, gentlemen, let us make ready to take back the capital!”

*

A week after they had joined up with the armies of the Southern nobles, they finished their preparations and began a new advance.

Their next target was the city of Prart, to the west of Kalinsha.

Neia could not hide her unease as she wobbled on the back of a horse.

While it was perfectly logical not to let go of this chance to exterminate the demihumans while Jaldabaoth’s wounds had not yet healed, it did not sit well with her feelings. She wanted to increase the number of supporters and put her

efforts into finalizing the preparations for the rescue effort that would be sent out in search of the Sorcerer King.

That said, Neia knew from first-hand experience with Remedios that a commander's irritation would agitate the people under them. She could not take her frustrations out on her subordinates.

She took several deep breaths to calm down, and her lungs filled with cool air. While spring was close, one could still feel winter in the air.

After regaining her composure, Neia surveyed the army which was going forth.

There were about 95'000 people here, so many of them that she had to move her head to take them all in. Their forces were composed of roughly 30'000 men from the Southern nobles and 65'000 men from the Liberation Army. Incidentally, of the remaining 20'000 men from the South, 10'000 were assigned to secure an axis of retreat and the other 10'000 were resting in Kalinsha.

Among them were 2'000 archers led by Neia, all of whom belonged to the Rescue Corps.

The remnants of the demihuman army which they faced were estimated at around 30'000 strong, so they had an overwhelming advantage in numbers.

However, each individual demihuman was stronger than a human being, and more importantly, they had to be on guard against Jaldabaoth, so they could not be careless even with this disparity in numbers.

They had embarked on this operation under the assumption that Jaldabaoth was still wounded and unable to take action. If Jaldabaoth had fully recovered, then they would be marching to their deaths.

Her heart beat like an alarm clock.

Should I have prioritized the Sorcerer King's rescue over everything else, Neia wondered. Her thoughts began to go around in circles.

"--Baraja-sama. Do you require information from the corps members in other units?"

Beldran had walked his horse beside her before asking his question, and Neia blinked in response. She had no idea what he was talking about.

After some thought, Neia finally got it, and she hurriedly waved the hand which was not holding the reins of her horse.

"No, no, we don't need to do spy-like stuff like that. After all, we're comrades marching towards the same goal."

"Ohhh! I expected nothing less of you, Baraja-sama. As the spokesman for His Majesty, your words are most kind."

"...Although her face is scary."

After Beldran praised her, CZ spoke up from behind Neia. Since CZ could not

ride, the two of them shared a saddle.

Even if CZ was her senior, and one who was worthy of her respect, it was still a little annoying to hear her keep harping on that over and over again.

Should I just have her walk...

CZ's stride and stamina exceeded those of a regular human being. She was riding only because it would be rude to let one of the Sorcerer King's subordinates walk.

Beldran heard this, but he did not help her at all. He neither supported nor rejected that statement. He probably could not deny those words because they had been spoken by a subordinate of the Sorcerer King and because they were true.

Well, I guess he can't just say no… after all, I wouldn't have to wear the visor if I weren't like that...

That said, Neia was a girl. Even if it was true, and even if people had said it enough that she had become used to it, having people say her face was scary still hurt.

"Now then, Baraja-sama. A messenger came from headquarters. Our pioneers have sighted the demihuman army. Their numbers are estimated at 30'000. Therefore, we will be taking formation here. The messenger returned to headquarters after telling us that. What do you make of this?"

"That's fine. If you feel it needs to be done, then it should be alright."

Beldran was doing very well as her executive officer.

“Still, do the demihumans really want to fight a field battle…”

The demihumans had a mere third of the Holy Kingdom’s numbers. While each of them was a superior individual combatant, surely they would have no chance if they fought on an open field. If they defended a city instead, they would be able to make full use of the city’s defenses and make up for the shortfall in fighting strength.

In any event, the situation would be dire once Jaldabaoth recovered. The demihumans’ best strategy ought to be buying time.

Either that, or setting up areas inaccessible to cavalry and fighting limited battles.

“So we’re set to fight in an open field, then?”

“Yes. Just so. There are no woods nearby where the enemy could hide ambushers. Rather, there aren’t even any hills, so surely they would be squabbling over where to form up.

“...Why in a place like that?”

Beldran prefaced his response to CZ’s question with “It might be”

“They’re preparing to run away, I think?”

“Running away?”

“That’s right, Baraja-sama. Just like how the Zerns betrayed him, not all the demihumans are devoted to Jaldabaoth. If they want to flee even if it means betraying Jaldabaoth, then the people who want to live would not hole up inside a city but choose to fight on open ground. That’s because disengaging will be difficult if they’re defending a city.”

A dark emotion flashed through Beldran’s eyes, and it made her shiver.

Just as Neia wondered if she ought to use the ability she had recently developed, the darkness gradually ebbed away, and his eyes regained their usual shine. Since the fighting was about to start, maybe it might be good to quell the hatred inside him.

“...I see.”

CZ nodded in approval, and Beldran simply replied, “That is probably the case.”

Beldran’s words made a lot of sense.

Not even Jaldabaoth could know for sure if they were planning to die in a field battle or run away. If that was the case, it might be better to wait until nightfall before probing them. That way, they might be able to gain a chance to flee, and thus reduce the amount of people who would die for nothing.

Neia knew this, but she did not say it.

The demihumans had caused too much woe to the people of this nation.

While the demihumans under His Majesty could probably be forgiven, they're going to kill all the other demihumans besides them...

There had even been rumors that people who advocated coexistence with demihumans or who supported demihumans had been secretly killed or openly lynched.

In truth, there were certain prison camps which the Sorcerer King had liberated where she had witnessed several human corpses who looked like they had been the victims of mob justice. They had apparently been people who had tried to suck up to the demihumans.

"Baraja-sama. While I do not know how headquarters intends to deploy us, shall we gather all the unit commanders first?"

"No, I just need a rough idea of where they've been allocated. No matter where they've been assigned, I believe everyone will know what to do."

The position of Neia and the others would be determined by how the Holy Kingdom's leadership wanted to deploy CZ, who was hugging Neia around the waist.

If there were strong foes among the demihumans, then CZ would be sent to the frontlines. If she was to be used as nothing more than an archer, then she would be positioned in the middle of the formation, or perhaps she would be

stationed with the other archers. If they did not want to let CZ -- a subordinate of the Sorcerer King -- achieve too much, then they would place her all the way in the rear.

Neia predicted that they would remain into the rear until the army had finished probing.

Three hours later, she realised that this was the right answer.

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In contrast to the demihumans' fish-scale formation, the humans had chosen to divide into two columns. The left flank was composed of 30'000 men from the South and 10'000 men from the Liberation Army, for a total of 40'000. The remaining 55'000 members of the Liberation Army made up the right flank, and together they formed something like a crane-wing formation.

Since the humans wanted to exterminate the demihumans in this battle, they had chosen to encircle the enemy and slowly draw the noose closed.

The demihumans, on the other hand, had chosen a formation that emphasized penetrating power, though whether it was in order to break out of the encirclement or to slaughter as many humans as possible in a melee remained to be seen.

Finally, Neia and the others were a detached unit that were some distance away from the battlefield, and they were placed in charge of protecting the engineers who were setting up camp for them.

This was less an order from Caspond than a request, which meant that they had practically been allowed the run of the place. They could even neglect their

duty to protect the engineers with no consequences, which meant that the leadership of the Holy Kingdom had essentially relinquished all command authority over them.

Surely enough, the reason for that was because of CZ's presence.

While Neia was nominally in command, the fact that she travelled with CZ -- who was practically a citizen of the Sorcerous Kingdom -- meant they could not order her around as they wished. A member of the Holy Kingdom's royalty issuing a command to a minion of the Sorcerer King might end up becoming a casus belli.

Neia very much wanted to ask why they were doing things differently after CZ had done so much during the attack on Kalinsha. However, the arrival of the Southern nobles had changed the reception she had gotten. This was because they could not simply consider the present, but future events in mind as well.

As Neia and the others formed up, she kept her eyes on the distant battlefield.

That said, she was far enough away that she did not feel the tension of being on the battlefield, because the bloodlust from there could not reach this place. The sound of the engineers pounding stakes with their mauls sounded very leisurely.

"...Are they still looking at each other? When will it start?"

"Our advantage wanes with each passing moment. While I feel we ought to make the first move…"

Beldran had answered CZ’s question.

The darkness of night was the demihumans’ ally. While one could see clearly on a plain as long as there was moonlight, the sky was clouded over. There was no doubt that the demihumans would be a very tricky opponent if they attacked under these circumstances. That was because the camp they were building now was not very sturdy.

Therefore, the humans should have made their move before nightfall.

Besides, they had a massive advantage in numbers, so if they could achieve a complete victory here, they might be able to ruin Jaldabaoth’s scheme. In other words, the Holy Kingdom would be freed from this long torment. There was no reason not to advance.

Neia also hoped that the fighting would end here. That way, nothing else would bind Neia. She could throw her full strength into searching for the Sorcerer King.

Neia looked up.

Her keen hearing had picked up an explosive shout and the thunder of many people running. Beldran seemed to have heard it a moment later, because he quietly said, “It’s begun.”

Nobody knew how these two armies which numbered over 100’000 strong together would move, and then they had clashed furiously.

The plains where the demihumans waited was flat, with no high ground from which they could overlook the battlefield.

While this would be the time to set up a prefabricated watchtower, they did not have such a structure in their camp.

“...What now?”

“Our mission is to stay here and protect them. Let’s focus on completing it.”

It was practically impossible for the tremendously outnumbered demihuman army to break through the human forces and reach this place. Keeping CZ -- their strongest fighting force -- here was a good political move, but it was a poor military move.

If they placed her on the frontlines, it would greatly diminish the losses to the Holy Kingdom’s forces.

Everyone understood that, but nobody could actually act on it. That was because they wanted to avoid building CZ’s reputation.

What a senseless waste of lives, Neia thought, but wild horses could not have torn the words from her.

30 minutes later, there were cheers from the right flank. It was not just Neia and her keen ears which picked it up -- the cries of joy were loud enough that they reached the ears of everybody in Neia’s squad. They must have scored quite the victory if they could be heard over such a great distance.

10 minutes after that, a messenger from the battlefield loudly announced what had happened.

“Captain Remedios Custodios of the Paladin Corps has just defeated the enemy commander, one of Jaldabaoth’s henchman demons, the Scale Demon!”

The messenger left after relaying that message.

Neia began to wonder if it was actually true.

No, it was probably true that Remedios had defeated a demon. But was that demon really one of Jaldabaoth’s henchmen?

Neia knew very well the power of the demon she and CZ had fought in Kalinsha.

She did not think that Remedios could have beaten it.

Is the Captain strong enough to beat something like that? Or… could it be some kind of double? If I don’t ask Sempai...

“CZ-sempai, I have a question. How strong is that Scale Demon?”

“...Enough that the Captain could beat it.”

“But the Circlet was stronger, right?”

“...The existence of strong demons implies that there are weak demons. The Scale Demon is one of the weaker ones.”

“I see…”

Neia was relieved. Two of the henchman demons which had entered this country had already been defeated. While that left the great demon in the hills, there was no point thinking about that one.

“The country’s saved now… Since the enemy commander’s dead, the demihuman army ought to break up. According to the Prince’s plan, everything should be over.”

There was a wistful look on Beldran’s face, because he had lost the chance to avenge himself with his own hands.

“...Still need to hunt down the stragglers.”

“That’s right! I expected nothing less of you, CZ-sama!

The left wing -- right in the middle of the noble forces, in fact -- suddenly sprouted a pillar of flame. The roaring inferno was high enough that they could see it clearly even from this distance, and it looked like it would scorch the sky.

Everyone looked worriedly to CZ.

They could think of only one being which could do such a thing. Right after

that, CZ confirmed their suspicions.

“...Oh no… it’s Jaldabaoth.”

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“Captain Remedios Custodios of the Paladin Corps has just defeated an enemy commander, one of Jaldabaoth’s henchman demons, the Scale Demon!”

The right wing exploded into cheers as they heard what Caspond’s messenger had told them. Marquis Bodipo’s face lit up with a smile.

“Hahaha! She did it! She took down the enemy general! Whatever that woman’s brains might be like, her swordsmanship is first rate. That ought to weaken the enemy’s momentum. I order everyone to conduct a sweeping advance. Kill every last one of those demihumans! In the Prince’s name, let none survive!”

“Sir!”

The soldiers spread out immediately upon receiving the Marquis’ orders.

“Truly splendid, Marquis-sama. We are truly fortunate that the commander of the unit facing us in this battle -- in the same battle as us -- has been eliminated.

Count Cohen, a man who was held in quite high regard in his own faction, was all smiles as he said so.

“Indeed it is, Count. Now we’re a step ahead of them.”

Eliminating the commander of the unit that had skirmished repeatedly with the forces of the Southern Noble Alliance during their long confrontation was a massive coup. It was undoubtedly a significant card they could play when negotiating with the other Southern nobles.

Compared to Remedios Custodio, her sister Kelart Custodio had left far more bitter memories in their minds. However, this was an achievement that could wipe those grudges away.

In addition, this was also a feather in the cap for Caspond. Simply put, if he managed to survive all this, the position of the next Holy King was practically his. Even the remaining Southern nobles with any power would not be able to complain about it, and with his own undivided support, there would be no problems at all.

If there were any uncertain elements in this scenario, that would be the other members of the royal family. There would be no problems if all of them were dead. However, he was not yet prepared to stain his hands, so all he could do was pray.

The Marquis joyously imagined the future balance of power in noble society.

If he wanted his family to become the most influential one in the Holy Kingdom, he could not afford any mistakes in the clean-up operation that would follow this. Everything until now had been perfect. All they had to do was keep on going like this.

“Count. Do you think we can drive the demihumans to the south?”

“Marquis-sama, why would you do that?”

The Count looked surprised, and he sounded confused as he asked his question. The Marquis mocked him in his heart.

There was no way he could not understand. The Marquis would not give his favor to anyone who was that incompetent. The Count was pretending surprise even though he knew what the Marquis had in mind.

He must have been trying to give the impression that the great and mighty Marquis-dono was planning something that he could not fathom. It was truly a boring attempt at sucking up to him.

The Marquis decided to go with the flow. If he made the Count believe he could be that easily manipulated, it would be easier to use him.

“Are you listening? The demihumans are an excellent tool to weaken the nobles who aren’t of our faction.”

He raised a finger, adopting the air of an old man who could not resist the urge to explain himself.

“Now that the Northern nobles have been weakened, the balance of power between the North and South has been shattered. Things being what they are now, it is unavoidable that the Southern nobles will end up having a greater say in matters.. However, that would be problematic for the royal family. In other words, this is what the royal family we are helping will face.

“I expected nothing less of you, Marquis-sama. To think your considerations

stretched that far!”

The flattery was blatant at this point, but the Count still delivered it with a joyful tone and a loud voice.

“Indeed. Nothing would be better than if they would ravage the lands of the nobles who did us no good.”

As he watched the Count look around hurriedly, the Marquis stroked his beard and thought, this man really is a good actor.

“Relax, Count. We are surrounded by trustworthy people. Word will not get out. Besides, who would believe it?”

“Is, is that so? But, there are too many uncertain elements if we just let the demihumans flee to the South. In that case, why not press them to their wits’ end, and then forge a secret pact with the demihumans…?”

“Employing demihumans, then? A good idea.”

Although the Count sounded like he was disgusted by the idea of using demihumans, that was probably acting too. He was the sort of man who would use everything he could until there was nothing left.

Getting such an excellent man in his own faction was also to keep an eye on him.

In truth, he had already embedded several people in the Count’s family. He

had also used people from other factions so he would not be found out even if one used charm spells.

“Count, would you go as well if there was a chance to make a deal with the demihumans?”

The Marquis was keenly aware that the Count was plotting all sorts of things behind those eyes of his.

“I, I don’t really want to go, but if you intend to go, then I would certainly accompany you, Marquis-sama.”

He was probably doing this so he could say “the Marquis said so-and-so” and thus obtain a trump card to use against the Marquis. However, just going there with him would tar him with the same brush. It was too feeble to be used as a trump card.

“...Is that so? Then should we not tell His Highness to stop attacking the demihumans? There’s no need to sacrifice more people in fighting. After this, we shall achieve victory at the negotiation table.”

“It is as you say, Marquis-sama. However, the other Counts seem to be mounting an all-out attack, so we ought to stop them as soon as possible for a better effect.”

“Indeed.”

While stopping them as they were trying to make a name for themselves would be doing them a disservice, it would be better to keep things as they

were when one considered the future. The Marquis was delighted that he would soon be able to influence the future of the Holy Kingdom. Of course, he would never let that show on his face.

“Contact the Counts--”

The pillar of fire that erupted cut the Marquis off halfway.

The Marquis was not completely clueless about magic. He might not be able to use it himself, but knowledge about divine magic was commonplace among the Holy Kingdom’s nobility. However, that was of secondary important, and it was not linked to knowledge of magic from other traditions.

Even so, he understood that the pillar of flame before his eyes was incredibly powerful magic.

“What, could that be magic of the so-called fourth tier? The kind that Kelart Custodio and Her Majesty could use?”

“I, I don’t know. What, what should we do, Marquis-sama?”

“Er, hm. I’m not too sure, but let’s just back up a little and move to a safer place.”

Part 3

Trooper Robi was a young man who was 24 years of age. While he had not received a complete education, he understood that there were many things in

this world which he did not know.

Therefore--

“Humans. I have returned. --Truly you have indulged yourselves while I was healing the wounds which the Sorcerer King left on me.”

--As the angry roar reverberated through the core of his body, Robi pissed himself.

He could no longer feel his soaked pants sticking to his skin.

After realziing the power of the monster before him, he had a premonition that he was about to die, and so his survival instincts went into overdrive. They abandoned his useless senses and swiftly searched for a way to survive.

However, before they could find anything, Jaldabaoth had unleashed his power.

“Die. Burn to ash in the flames of Wrath.”

Fire roared up, and a wave of heat struck Robi in the face. The incredible heat dried his eyes out and filled him with incredible pain. The hot air entering his lungs felt like it was about to set his entire body on fire from the inside. In fact, that was exactly what had happened

His skin was scorched and its water content evaporated. His dermis burned, and then the fat beneath, followed by his muscles and then his nerves. Where

the subdermal layers where thin, like on the arms, the flames immediately reached the muscles and nerves. This should have caused the muscles to contract and make him take up a bizarre pose. However, the high temperatures seared his skin to his armor, which prevented that.

His clothes, skin, muscles and The clothes, the skin, the muscles and the fat of his belly all caught fire, and his innards poured out intact.

Human bodies had high water content. That was why it took time for their insides to burn, If this were an ordinary fire, the flames would have continued burning until they reached the inside of the body, but since Jaldabaoth's fiery aura was magically generated heat, it vanished as he moved away.

Therefore, Robi's scattered guts were not discolored by the heat and remained a pretty pink color. The sight of piles of scorched bodies and the fresh guts peeking out through oceans of blood were enough to make onlookers want to throw up. It looked like hell on earth.

Jaldabaoth left Robi -- who had sprouted a garland of fresh innards -- and over 50 other scorched corpses around him as he walked forward.

Jaldabaoth -- the newly-summoned Evil Lord of Wrath was walking. Even that was enough to kill the people around him who were caught up in his [Fiery Aura].

"Get lost! Out of my way!"

While several such shouts could be heard, the first to scream was Militiaman Francesk.

He thought, “Why am I so unlucky” every day. Thanks to the Holy Kingdom’s system of conscription, everyone had to do their national service and join the army.

Indeed. Even the son of a great merchant like himself, a man with a bright future promised to him, was no exception. Granted, his father had paid the appropriate bribes to have him assigned to a slack unit, but the life of a soldier was still miserable.

And just as that misery was about to end, this war had broken out.

Not a day went by when he did not complain about his unhappiness and the unfairness of it all. Still, it would all be over soon, and he could go back to being the heir of a big merchant family and indulge in the money-making activities he so enjoyed..

Things were just a little bit away from turning out like that.

It had been just a little bit.

However, he was now fleeing desperately from the monster in front of him.

If it caught him, he would certainly die.

He desperately moved his legs, which refused to listen to him owing to his fear.

He was surrounded by other people who were also fleeing like himself. That was why he could make little progress despite his panic.

In particular, the fat man in front of Francisk was an eyesore.

Therefore, Francesk shoved the man away.

He did it to get just a single step further away from that monster. He did it for the sake of his joyous future.

However, just as he was about to shove him away, Francesk saw that the people in front of him also had the same idea.

If the man who had been shoved away collided with the people in front of him, it was very likely that they would collapse en masse like dominoes. In fact, that was exactly what had happened to the people in front of Francesk.

Perhaps if it was just one or two people, he could have avoided them. Perhaps he could have jumped over them.

However, Francesk's physical abilities were not great enough to avoid a huge mass of falling people at once.

He collapsed onto the mass.

He thrashed around to get up -- but he was not given the time for that.

The aura of fire centered on Jaldabaoth had caught up to him.

Francesk had no time to scream. Why me, he thought, and then it was instantly swallowed up by sheerest agony and all he could feel was pain.

Still, Francesk had been lucky. That was because he had died immediately.

Jaldabaoth did not stop moving, He trampled blackened human corpses underfoot as he walked on, like he was in an empty wasteland.

“Run away! Run awaaaay!”

One man shouted the obvious. His name was Trooper Golka. He was a man who had faith in his sword skills.

That was why he had the courage to shout those words in front of Jaldabaoth.

Still, that was just foolhardiness, because Jaldabaoth changed course towards Golka. There was no telling if he had piqued Jaldabaoth’s interest or because it had been mere coincidence.

While that was a godsend to the ones Jaldabaoth had been chasing, it was the foulest luck imaginable to the ones on Jaldabaoth’s new course.

Golka saw that it would be very difficult to flee the monster amidst the chaos, and so he drew his sword.

The monster’s eyes shifted, and less than a second later, he walked past Golka.

That was what the monster thought of Golka.

He was only worth a single glance.

Golka bellowed and ran in the opposite direction of the flow of humanity.

The sight of charred people collapsing nearby was very scary, but perhaps there might be some hope for him. Perhaps he might hope to be able to reach that monster.

Golka learned the answer with his body.

Pain filled him.

He could not possibly close in on that monster.

Golka burned with the other troopers who were weaker than him.

Golka realised something.

In the eyes of that monster, Golka was no different from the civilians around him.

If only I had run, he lamented, before that thought was drowned out by the agony of being burned alive. Golka collapsed with a silent scream, contorting on the ground like all the corpses around him.

Jaldabaoth walked with no aim in mind. However, if humans tried to run, he pursued them.

“Stay away!”

She ran.

Viviana, who had joined the battle as a divine magic caster, was running for her life.

Her long blonde hair swayed wildly as she fled with all her might.

She had no time to wipe away her snot or her tears.

Nobody could beat a monster like that.

Somebody was saying something.

She had no time to care about that.

All she could think of was I just want to get away from that monster.

She could not shove away the people running in front of her. All she could do was squeeze past them and keep running.

Out of my way.

Out of my way.

Out of my way.

Why were there so many people in her way?

I don’t care if everyone dies except me, but I don’t want to die.

Viviana ran with that thought in her heart.

While she was ostensibly running, she was surrounded by people fleeing in all directions. Even Viviana, who was faster than the average person, was as slow as a turtle. She could not get away from the demon.

Sizzling heat caressed the tips of Viviana’s hair.

Noooooooo!

She thought of the horrible way people looked when they died.

“I don’t want to die!!!”

It was a perfectly natural thing to scream.

Anyone would have thought the same thing.

It was very difficult to accept one's death calmly when it loomed before you. This was more true the more suddenly death appeared in front of you.

"It huuuurts!"

The incredible heat meant she could not feel anything other than pain. Her brain was assaulted by unbearable agony. She realised that she would soon be dead.

No, I don't want to die, Viviana thought as she burned to death.

Jaldabaoth continued forward in silence as he began to feel bored.

"Don't run! Fight!" a brave man shouted from horseback.

Leonzio was the second son of a retainer in service to a Marquis. He had joined the battle in the hopes of being recognized for his swordsmanship. Around him were the men his father had placed under his command, all of whom were people who knew his abilities.

The demon walked in a leisurely manner, and it left countless corpses in its wake, each of them twisted in agony. He wanted to run away, but if he did, his future would be grim and dark. All he could do was take a bet for a shining future.

Having made that decision, he shouted "Don't run!" over and over again.

However, his horse was not like him. Its instincts screamed that the approaching demon was a terrifying monster, and so it wanted to flee.

What would happen if a horse broke into a gallop among all these people?

It was very simple.

The horse got tangled up in the crowd and fell. The people which the horse landed on screamed. No, some of them had died.

Leonzio was flung from his saddle and thrown to the ground.

Fortunately, he had landed on top of people and he had not been crushed by the mob. However, intense pain filled his arm as he tried to run. He had twisted it when he had been thrown from his horse.

He had no idea where his sword had gone. It must have been flung away by the shock of being thrown off his horse.

He made to look for it -- and in that moment, he was engulfed by a wave of mind-blanking pain. This was the first time Leonzio had experienced such anguish in his life.

The agony stopped him from thinking.

In the tatters of his pain-riven mind, the only coherent thought he could form was why me.

“Hm.”

Someone stood atop a pile of burnt corpses. The Evil Lord that had been given the duty of acting as Jaldabaoth surveyed the fleeing crowds.

It was a little boring.

The fiery aura was not an amazing ability. All it did was inflict fire damage on the surroundings. One could greatly reduce that damage with fire resistance spells. Of course, he had been granted the knowledge that the average soldier did not possess such abilities.

As a demon, he did not enjoy simply tormenting the weak. Rather, he enjoyed toying with the weaklings who thought they were very strong. That was why he hoped that such an arrogant fool would show themselves, but unfortunately there did not seem to be anyone like that.

The Evil Lord of Wrath stomped on a burnt corpse.

The innards squeezed out of it by the impact were charred in an instant.

The odor of said innards filled the air.

The Evil Lord of Wrath turned away.

If it were to get serious and take to the skies, there would be many more casualties. Had these humans realised that yet? The Evil Lord of Wrath held that question in his heart as he walked.

Everyone watched in silence as the demon walked proudly and regally back to the demihuman encampment.

Nobody thought, what was that monster. There was no need to ask either. Even the stupidest of fools knew the answer.

He was the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth.

The being who had trampled the Holy Kingdom underfoot and made the people cry rivers of tears.

The demon that had caused havoc in two nations demonstrated a power which mankind could never overcome. He had returned to bring despair to people who were once filled with hope.

Part 4

I've heard of silence, but this is something else. Neia had been summoned to this tent, and she was surprised at how downcast the interior was.

The table had been specially moved here, and the Southern nobles seated around it were pale. No, the Liberation Army commanders were also the same way.

It was a natural reaction.

Nobody could have witnessed Jaldabaoth's overwhelming power and not

been shocked -- no, back then, Neia's shock had not been that great. However, that had been because the shock of losing the great entity known as the Sorcerer King had been even worse. That, in addition to everything she had witnessed up to this point, might have numbered her heart.

However, the Southern nobles had not experienced harsh fighting until now, so perhaps their alarm was only to be expected. They had not experienced a foe who could kill men one after the other just by walking, leaving nothing behind but hideous corpses.,

In addition, their army of nearly 100'000 had been panicked by a single demon and dissolved into a rout.

"--What's this? What the hell is this! What do you call that, that monster!"

Count Domingues' voice rose steadily.

In contrast, Caspond -- who knew of Jaldabaoth's overwhelming power -- shrugged nonchalantly.

"That is Jaldabaoth… the real thing. I've told you about him before, Count Domingues."

"I've never heard of the ability to kill people just by walking!"

Is that the problem, Neia jeered in her heart.

"Indeed, that is how it is. His battle with the Sorcerer King -- His Majesty -- was in a city, so we could not see the full extent of it. But I've already told you

how powerful it is. So surely an ability like that should not come as a surprise, no?”

“Even, even so!”

“--Count. I know what you want to say. Seeing is believing, is it not?”

It was the Marquis who spoke. All that could be said was that one had to hand it to him for not being as nervous as the others.

“...Still, saying that won’t help us make any progress. Should we not discuss what we need to do from now on?”

“That makes perfect sense, Marquis-sama. What should we do?” Viscount Santz asked in a rapid-fire burst of words. His attitude was understandable, given that he did not know if his present location was safe.

The Southern nobles had intended to crush a few stragglers with overwhelming force in order to become the heroes who had saved the nations. It should have been that simple. However, that was not to be. Now the hunters had become the hunted.

The Marquis had his arms folded and remained silent. Caspond replied in his place.

“We have an overwhelming advantage in fighting strength. The problem is that Jaldabaoth can flip that advantage around by himself. I would like to ask everyone present a question in my capacity as the Prince. What do you think we should do to achieve victory under these circumstances?”

After a brief silence, the Marquis replied, “that’s the only thing we can do” in a supremely confident tone.

“Caspond-denka. As you have said before, Jaldabaoth will probably retreat once we wipe out those demihumans, right? Then we have no other option but to do so.”

“Marquis-sama! Are you still going to fight!?”

“Exactly, Count Randalse. Do you think we can flee now?”

“...Marquis-sama, it would be very difficult for us all to flee, but could a small group not manage to run?”

Remedios snorted at Count Cohen’s suggestion.

“That’s a fitting answer for an incompetent who can’t even understand Calca-sama’s ideals.”

“What!?”

“What will you do after running away and escaping? Cower under a haybale in a barn? Aren’t you a noble? Shouldn’t you say that you’ll sacrifice yourself for the people or something?”

“And you, Captain Custodio? You’re a paladin with a holy sword, but you can’t even beat a single demon!” Count Randalse bellowed.

The ghost-like Remedios' eyes seemed to glow from within as she turned to face him.

"Indeed. I can't beat him. The only one who can fight him is that undead creature. But if it would buy some time -- even if it was only to let the people live a second longer -- then I would fight to the death against him! And you, what would you do?"

When a warrior who had resolved herself to die locked eyes with a noble who wanted to run away, the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

Count Randalse looked away, and Remedios snorted mockingly at him.

"My Prince. While I would very much like to order the paladins to die, do you still wish to continue?"

"While making up your mind is very important… well, could you go? You don't mind leaving Vice-Captain Montagnes behind, do you?"

"I see. In that case, I'll leave the rest to you, Montagnes."

With that, Remedios slowly walked out of the tent. The last thing she did was glance at CZ, who was seated beside Neia.

"Everyone, I apologize on behalf of our Captain," Gustav said as he eyed the nobles -- who were going "Honestly" -- before continuing, "Still, that opinion is indicative of all of us. We paladins are all ready to die as shields for the people.

We hope you gentlemen, being of noble birth, are similarly determined. After all, we can't fight if there are no commanders."

"What!?"

Before Neia could tell who had exclaimed in surprise, Marquis Bodipo spoke up.

"That's about enough… We aren't planning how to die gloriously, we're planning how to win. Am I correct, my Prince?"

"--There's no way to win, is there!? Didn't you see that demon's power!?" Count Granero shouted as he rose to his feet. "If he used magic or attacked or something, we might still be able to come up with some way to stop him! But all he's doing is walking! He can turn the area around him into a hellish inferno just by walking!"

"Come to think of it… Count Granero, you know a bit about magic, right? Do you have…"

"Nothing I learned covered powers like that…"

"Is that so… then, assume there were still 10'000 demihuman enemies remaining. Could we flee from Jaldabaoth while wiping them out at the same time?"

The Marquis seemed to approve of Caspond's proposal.

“It seems there’s no other way… While it’ll be difficult, I think it would be harder to try and defeat Jaldabaoth with our strength.”

“A moment please,” Count Cohen interrupted with a raise of his hand. I object. Jaldabaoth might not leave even after we kill the demihumans. However, he might kill all of us as a souvenir first before he goes.”

He was right. Therefore, Caspond followed up with a perfectly reasonable question.

“So what should we do?”

“We ought to negotiate.”

Few people managed to resist the urge to laugh at Count Cohen as he delivered that suggestion with a perfectly straight face.

Count Cohen’s face turned red as the other laughed at him. Before he could continue, Caspond asked:

“Count, what kind of deal do you intend to make with that devil?”

“Yes, yes. For instance, maybe we could trade him something in exchange for letting us leave safely…”

“What will we give him? Wouldn’t it be simpler to just kill us and take it off our bodies? Or do you mean we should trade him something that isn’t here? What would that be?”

“A moment please, Your Highness! All I’m saying is that fighting is not our only option! I just meant to say that there’s a possibility we might be able to negotiate with him, that’s all!”

“Count, your way of thinking is a little, yes, a little too optimistic. For starters, who will we send to negotiate with that monster… Come to think of it, I heard that His Majesty put one of his maid demons under his control, and she turned out quite useful in retaking Kalinsha. Surely that maid demon could do something, right?

Count Granero turned to look at CZ.

“...I can’t beat Jaldabaoth… Even buying time would be hard.”

“Still, if you fought alongside Captain Custodio, you might be able to buy some time.”

His suggestion made a lot of sense. They would need someone to hold Jaldabaoth in place while they carried out Caspond’s plan, in any event.

However, that would essentially be sending them to their deaths.

“...Hmm~” CZ tilted her head to look to the ceiling. “...This is a problem...”

“How about it? That way, we can deepen the relationship between the Sorcerous Kingdom and the Holy Kingdom.”

“..Hmm… hm!”

“Is that a yes?”

Should I interrupt now? Neia was thinking that as CZ answered.

“...No.”

“May, may I know the reason why?”

“...No reason.”

“There’s no reason?”

CZ nodded to Count Domingues, who was frozen in place.

“Is Jaldabaoth really that scary!?”

“...Hm?...That’s the reason then. He’s scary and I don’t want to do it.”

“Guh.” Count Domingues was at a loss for words. Now that she had said as much, he had no response for her. If CZ said, “If you’re not afraid, then you go buy time” he would be finished. If she had rejected the proposal based on some kind of argument, then all he would need to do was pick that argument apart, but since she had refused based on her feelings, getting past that would be very difficult.

As silence returned to the tent, the one of the Liberation Army's top brass, a person who commanded thousands of soldiers and militiamen slowly said:

"Why don't we run before Jaldabaoth fully gains the upper hand? I don't think we can beat a monster like that. We used to have the Sorcerer King in the past, but he's not here any more… does anyone know of anybody who can defeat Jaldabaoth? No, right? If we fled to the South…"

Beside him another commander quietly said,

"...There's no guarantee that Jaldabaoth won't chase us to the South, right?"

With a loud thump of the table, the previous speaker bellowed:

"In that case, all we can do is follow the Prince's suggestion and kill the demihumans! If we can't run, then we must fight! It's just that simple!"

"That's right. That's the only way we can go on living. I don't want to bow down and go through that hell again. Let's start by putting a formation together--"

The tent flap was forcefully pulled open, and a soldier who reported directly to Caspond rushed in.

"Your Highness! The demihumans are moving! They're reforming their lines!"

They did not have a proper formation in the previous battle. Did they have one now because of Jaldabaoth's command?

“Is that so… Gentleman, the enemy will be attacking soon. We need to prepare for battle as soon as possible!”

After Caspond finished, all the people who had been called here stood up as one. Neia and CZ did as well.

The others rushed out of the tent first, eager to save time.

The final ones remaining in the tent were Neia and CZ. Neia’s unit was already together, so there was no need to go gather them.

Neia suddenly felt that something was amiss about the grim expression on the face of the messenger who had barged into the tent, but she could not do anything about it, and so she and CZ returned to their unit.

“Now then, I believe there’s still some bad news in store?”

“Yes! My Prince! Is it really advisable to let these gentlemen return?”

“That will depend on your report.”

Caspond had once told his subordinates that they could only speak of news that was common knowledge in the presence of outsiders. That was why this man was the last to remain in the tent.

“...Your Highness, the demihumans are advancing on us from the east. At this rate, they’ll reach us in one hour.”

“Im...possible…”

Caspond struggled to keep himself from raising his voice. It would be bad if someone outside the tent heard this.

“Kalinsha is to the east. Why hasn’t the city contacted us yet? Even if they did make a big detour to circle around us, how did they avoid our patrols’ eyes? ...Or are they few in number?”

“No, they’re estimated to be over 10’000 strong… what should we do, sire?”

The Holy Kingdom still had the numerical advantage even if one added 10’000 men to the demihumans forces. However, the fact that they were coming from the east was disastrous. When a smaller force attempted a pincer attack, normally one would simply defeat each arm of the pincer individually. However, this time, they were facing Jaldabaoth.

In other words, their escape route had been cut off.

“...Alright, listen closely. You must not tell this news to anyone, got it?” Caspond coldly told the surprised scout

“This news is very dangerous. If the army learns of it, they’ll lose their will to fight and we’ll lose a battle that we could have won. Also, a lot of people might end up dying. We must not tell anyone about this for the sake of unity.”

“Your Highness…”

“...Don’t worry. All will be well if we can win within an hour. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“...I understand.”

“Also, don’t let the scouts stray to the west. If things go badly, they might let the news slip, and then we’ll splinter and end up defeated in detail. You must keep this secret until the last moment, understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

While he did not seem quite comfortable with it, the messenger probably felt that Caspond’s logic was sound as he left the room. Alone inside the tent, Caspond palmed his face.

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The palisade they had built was very simple. The west and north sides were complete, but the south-side was only half-finished. Meanwhile, there was nothing on the east side. It would be better to take formation on open ground rather than try to fight in such a cramped place, so they abandoned their camp and spread out over the plains.

They had chosen to form a long line.

Any unit that made contact with Jaldabaoth would be lost. Therefore, the other units would abandon it and attack the demihumans. They had taken this formation because they were prepared to make that sacrifice. Remedios would lead the paladins on hit and run attacks, so she had no fixed position. This was so that she could head towards any location where Jaldabaoth appeared.

Neia and her unit were also free-roaming. She understood the two implications of that assignment. The first was that it would be easy for CZ -- as a subordinate of the Sorcerer King -- to escape. The second was that if CZ wanted to fight Jaldabaoth, putting her in an immobile unit would result on a hole being torn in the line of battle.

Neia's unit had already discussed what they would do if Jaldabaoth showed up.

Would they hunt down the demihumans, flee to a safe place -- or perhaps, would they fight Jaldabaoth?

Their answer was unanimous.

They would defeat the demihumans.

All of them deeply hated Jaldabaoth, the source of all evil. However, they knew their place -- what good could they do, if even the mighty Sorcerer King was no match for him? In that case, it would be better to focus on slaying the demihumans, in order to bring them just a little closer to victory. Of course, part of that was also because they did not want to let CZ die, being that she was a subordinate of their great benefactor, the Sorcerer King.

Neia mounted up on her horse, and studied the enemy.

The demihuman formation had been full of openings in their previous battle, but now it was immaculate. What had once been a motley grouping of demihumans by racial types was now a neat line of battle that looked like a veteran army.

Had the demihumans projected such an image of strength and power in the previous battle? Their rows of shields looked sturdy and indomitable, while their bristling spear points gleamed with blinding brilliance. Jaldabaoth's incredible command ability notwithstanding, this unit's cohesion was self-evident.

No--

This is only to be expected. Everyone would obey once they saw his overwhelming power.

Many demihumans placed a great emphasis on personal power. In that respect, they would probably be glad to follow Jaldabaoth.

The battle was about to begin.

Neia and her people loosed arrows from the rear.

A rain of arrows launched by 3'000 people fell upon the enemy.

During this battle, the humans had adopted a wide formation in order to end the battle quickly -- by wiping out the demihumans.

They launched a heavy cavalry charge, leaving nothing in reserve. The humans were committed to an uphill slog, and they attacked ferociously. In contrast to them, the demihumans solidified their defense.

Perhaps it was because they understood that this all-out attack was nothing more than casting kindling onto a blaze. The charred remains of the kindling would scatter all over the ground in short order.

Given that humans were weak individuals, it would be very difficult for them to bring down the demihumans' reinforced defense. Or rather, the humans might have actually had a chance against the demihumans if Jaldabaoth were not around. However, the demihumans' unit composition was one which allowed the many races making it up to make full use of their respective abilities, compensating for their weaknesses and further emphasizing their strengths.

The demihumans' defense made the advantage the humans had enjoyed several hours ago seem like a pleasant dream. No matter how many times they charged, how many times they thrust their lances, or how many arrows they loosed, nothing they did could shake the demihumans' formation. Instead, the attackers from the Holy Kingdom took heavier losses than them.

Time was passing, and they could not let the battle last until nightfall. However, the humans' morale and stamina would probably give out before that and they would be crushed in turn.

In addition--

"Jaldabaoth's appeared in sector 2A! Second Infantry has been completely wiped out!"

"Fourth Infantry has taken more than half casualties!"

“Sixth Lancers has taken over half casualties!”

--The messengers loudly announced the situation on the battlefield.

“Where is he this time!?”

Caspond had suggested they divide the battlefield into several sectors.

They were numbered, to make moving the men as easy as possible. It was a very crude system, but it was easy to understand.

The forces there must have been trying to flee Jaldabaoth. Even from here, it was plain to see that they were in complete disarray. The demihumans in that region began their attack, and troop organization there disintegrated like it had melted.

That was it.

Just by appearing once and using just that little bit of power, he had destroyed a battalion of 500 men, and there were nearly 1000 casualties in total. The demihumans who charged the gap he created caused even more deaths in turn.

It would be one thing if the demihumans had gotten cocky and pressed the attack, but they immediately retreated after pursuing for a short distance, like a turtle shrinking into its shell. This turned the battle into a melee, and the tactics designed to make it difficult for Jaldabaoth to use his powers could not be applied.

That masterful strategy was probably the result of Jaldabaoth's command ability as well.

Remedios led her paladins to sector 2A as quickly as she could. However, by the time she arrived, Jaldabaoth was no longer there. He had moved to another region via teleportation, as if to mock them.

This series of events had repeated itself over and over again since just now.

The word "bad" was not nearly enough to describe this.

Still, it was a fact that nobody here, Neia included, could think of any good solutions. All Neia and her people could do was keep raining arrows on the demihuman troops.

CZ simply watched the battle from beside Neia. Her weapon was not capable of arcing fire like bows were, so she had no chance to demonstrate her incredible skills.

Eventually, her fingers began to hurt from drawing back her bowstring, and everyone's quivers -- including Neia's -- began to run dry.

"Baraja-sama! We're almost out of arrows!"

They did not have unlimited arrows.

"...Fall back for now and replenish supplies!"

The unit obeyed Neia's instructions and returned to the rear to stock up on arrows.

She would have liked to give them some rest time, but unfortunately they did not have the luxury of that.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, Baraja-sama. We can move out any time!"

"In that case--"

Just as she was about to shout for them to move out, Neia saw several mounted scouts from the east.

The lead scout met Neia's eyes for a moment, and then he shouted:

"Demihumans from the east! Look out!"

"Hah?"

Surprised, Neia looked into the distance and squinted. She could make out some rising dust and the shapes of what looked like people. While she would need to check their movement speeds to be sure, given their distance, they would be here soon.

What a mistake this had been.

They had been so focused on the demihumans before their eyes that they had neglected to watch their backs.

She wanted to believe this was fake. She wanted to believe that Kalinsha had sent reinforcements to help them.

However, that was not the case. If it were, then they would have sent a swift horse ahead to inform them.

Neia's legs felt like they might collapse.

This news was far too grim.

Jaldabaoth's plan was to trap them with a pincer attack from the enemy reinforcements.

He did not fight, but let the demihumans fight instead. This way the humans would choose not to flee, but to fight in order to satisfy their victory conditions. Jaldabaoth's aim had been to bait all the humans onto the battlefield and keep them from escaping.

In other words, Jaldabaoth had already surmised that the humans would say that he would flee once the demihumans were wiped out.

"Haha, but of course!"

Beldran laughed with genuine mirth.

Just as everyone was looking at him with panicked eyes, Beldran regained his calm and addressed Neia.

“Caspond-denka made a fatal mistake in his thinking. More importantly, why did he not notice it?”

“What is it!?”

“...Baraja-sama. It is a perfectly natural thing. As long as he controls the hills, he can send reinforcements here. Just destroying the demihumans in this place does not mean Jaldabaoth will retreat.”

“Ahhh!”

After hearing the explanation, Neia was not the only one who understood. The same noises could be heard from around Beldran.”

“After driving away the demihumans here, we will still have to counter-invade the hills. Caspond-denka’s idea can only be proven correct after we exterminate all the demihumans there as well.”

Indeed. Beldran also supplied an answer for why they had not thought of thus.

“...Caspond-denka and ourselves thought of the same thing, and we were blinded by the possibility of salvation and did not consider the matter in greater depth.”

But launching a counter-invasion of the hills was practically impossible. In other words--

“...There’s no way to save the Holy Kingdom?”

Silence filled the air. The clamor of the battlefield seemed very far away.

“No…” Beldran forced himself to speak. “There is a way.”

“Which is?”

“...Jaldabaoth. We have to defeat the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth.”

It was a perfect answer, but there was no rejoicing. It was the most insoluble problem in the world, and they had adopted Caspond’s plan precisely because they could not do it.

“...As I thought, we should have gone to look for His Majesty above everything else. We were the ones who chose poorly.”

If she had not gone to retake Kalinsha, but went to the hills with CZ in tow, they might have avoided this.

Still, it would have been very difficult. Neia had made the best choice she could based on what she could do. She had tried to avoid foolhardiness and pick the most successful path.

However, should they have tried it after all?

What if--

What if--

What if--

Countless “what ifs” flew through Neia’s mind. Every time she thought about “what if I had done this or that” she was swamped in guilt and regret.

Her will to fight was at rock bottom. Neia was not the only one. Her entire unit which felt this way.

The victor was clear.

When one got down to it, the premise of their victory was flawed from the start. Or rather, the battle itself had been a waste of time.

All they could do now was end this with as few casualties as possible and flee to a safe place. However, that was not the right thing to do.

Weakness was a sin.

It was a sin to be so weak that they could not rescue anyone. That was why they had trained hard to this day.

She could not allow this to end with herself as a sinner.

If that happened, she would not be able to face that figure of absolute justice, His Majesty Ainz Ooal Gown.

Neia had prepared her soul for what was to come, and she unconsciously mentioned what was in her heart.

“It’s all ogre now.”

She was louder than she thought she would be. There was no telling if the people around Neia had been affected by her mood, or if they had been thinking the same thing as Neia from the start, but whatever the reason, they all bowed their heads.

This was the end.

The foolish dream of liberating the Holy Kingdom and helping the people had come to an end.

Come to think of it, they had dared to entertain that dream because of the Sorcerer King’s power. But they had ended up like this when they only had themselves to count on.

Neia knew that now was not the time to laugh, but she did. Then her face turned serious, and she looked toward CZ.

“...Can you get away?”

“...How about you, Neia?”

Neia held her chest high.

“I can’t run away! I’m a person who saw His Majesty work for others, and who benefited from it. I can’t let this end with me as a weakling -- as a sinner.”

Neia saw the people around her raise their heads.

“We won’t run from that bastard!”

They looked like proper warriors again.

Those were the faces of men who were prepared to die. How she wanted to show them off before the Sorcerer King.

“But… you… no, you’re not the same… Which is why we want to entrust our wishes to you. I know it must be strange to thank His Majesty through you, but as one of his subordinates… Please do it for us. Please find His Majesty, CZ. You can command those of us who are still in Kalinsha as you see fit. Please…”

“...Got it.”

Neia breathed a sigh of relief after seeing CZ agree.

However, that expression immediately became one of resignation.

“...There’s no need for me to go.”

“What, what does that mean?”

“...Look.”

CZ pointed at the approaching objects -- the demihuman reinforcements coming from the direction of Kalinsha. They were made up of many different races, even Orcs and Zerns. Neia stared at the flags which the demihuman reinforcements were holding up in neat rows. It was--

“Eh?”

Neia was so shocked that she exclaimed despite herself.

She doubted what her eyes had seen and looked again several more times, but what she saw remained the same.

“...See? There’s no need.”

Neia knew that flag very well.

It was the flag of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

The shocked cries from her comrades proved that what Neia had seen was no

illusion.

“Isn’t that the flag of the Sorcerous Kingdom? You told us about it before, didn’t you, Baraja-sama?”

“Are those reinforcements from the Sorcerous Kingdom? Baraja-sama did say something about demihumans in the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

There was a war going on now. At this very moment, countless people were killing each other, and Jaldabaoth was killing people too.

However, Neia forgot all that as she tried desperately to grasp what was going on.

What happened next fired everyone up.

The demihuman army split into two, like they had drilled the maneuver countless times. They made way in the center for a single undead being to step forward.

He was a magic caster in a black robe, mounted on a skeletal warhorse.

That was the form of the hero Neia adored, who she saw even in her dreams.

“It, it’s His Majesty… is this really happening…”

Neia could not confidently say if she was watching a dream or witnessing

reality.

However, the being she saw was immovable, and he could not be a dream.

Her emotions exploded inside her, to the point she could not even describe how she felt.

Her hot tears blurred her field of vision. She could not even think to wipe them away.

CZ waved to the Sorcerer King. He seemed to have noticed this, and urged his horse over to her.

The Sorcerer King was upon them.

What should she say to him? Should she apologize for not searching for him? Would she be forgiven if she did that? While Neia was looking for the right words to say, the Sorcerer King had already reached her and nimbly dismounted from his steed.

“...Umu. What a coincidence, meeting you here. Miss Baraja. Did you think I was dead?”

“Your, Your Majesty!”

Neia could not stem the flow of her tears.

“I believed all this time, because CZ-sempai told me. I thought you would be fine, but… it was true!”

“Ah… um. Ah… hm. Mm. I see. That pleases me. Uh… sempai?”

It would seem the Sorcerer King was also delighted at this reunion, because he seemed to be at a loss for words.

“...Don’t cry.”

CZ pressed her handkerchief to Neia’s face and rubbed it forcefully.”

“...There’s snot on it again. Really shocking.”

“Oh… it seems you’re getting along quite well with CZ, Miss Baraja. This pleases me.”

“It’s all thanks to Your Majesty! I don’t know what I’d do without CZ-sempai! Thank you very much!”

Neia’s heart had been in such an upheaval that she did not know what she had been saying just now.

“I see… That is quite a surprise for me… CZ, how was it?”

“...I like Neia. Her face is very tasty.”

“Please don’t say it’s tasty,” Neia said as she rubbed her eyes, having stopped crying already. Soon, she had cleared away the last of her tears. “Your Majesty, I have many things I would like to ask You, but the most important thing is… are You displeased at the speed of our rescue? If you are, then I take full responsibility--”

“--Miss Baraja,” the Sorcerer King raised his hand to keep her from going on. “Why are you saying this? None of you have displeased me in any way.”

Neia’s eyes filled with tears again. Nor was she alone -- everyone around her who had heard the Sorcerer King’s kind words wept as well. There were people who had been holding their tears in who finally broke down sobbing.

The Sorcerer King’s shoulders shifted slightly.

“...Ah, everyone, do not cry. More importantly, you ought to have other things you wish to ask, no? Many more things? Why not ask ?”

“Ah, yes.”

After CZ wiped her tears again -- she had apparently put the snot-stained handkerchief away -- Neia asked the Sorcerer King a question.

“Are, are those demihumans soldiers of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

While she had not seen any undead among them, these demihumans might merely be the vanguard.

“No… no, you could say that, I believe? When I fell to the Abelion Hills, I took the land there for the Sorcerous Kingdom. Therefore, you could call them forces of the Sorcerous Kingdom, no?”

Neia was speechless.

He was amazing.

How could that be anything other than “amazing”?

The hills were filled with demihumans, and they were supposedly ruled by a henchman of Jaldabaoth. Yet he had dealt with him with just his strength alone and subjugated the hills. Who else could do this besides the Sorcerer King?

Neia was so excited that she sasugasmed.

“And so, well, it took me a bit of time to gather the people suffering under Jaldabaoth and lead them here as an army. All this was in order to settle things with Jaldabaoth -- it seems we had good timing.”

There were no facial expressions on the Sorcerer King’s bony visage, but Neia could sense him smiling majestically.

“I! I expected nothing less of Your Majesty!”

Beldran ran over to the Sorcerer King, his face stained by tears.

“Oh! It is He!”

Suddenly, Beldran fell to his knees. No, he was not alone. Everyone around Neia -- everyone who belonged to her flock -- gathered around and prostrated themselves before him.

“Sasuga Ainz-sama”!

“Simply magnificent, Your Majesty!”

Even the Sorcerer King was startled by the chorus of praise.

“Oh, ahh… hm… speaking of which, I have a question for you as well, Miss Baraja… who are they?”

“They are people who are grateful for Your Majesty’s kindness and who wish to repay it to You!”

“Yes! We were rescued by Your Majesty!”

“Yes! We are the people who wished to repay the debt we owe Your Majesty in some way. Thus, when Baraja-sama called, we answered!”

“We’re not the only ones! There are many more people who want to repay the kindness Your Majesty showed us!”

“Oh… this makes me very happy… although, is everyone like this?”

“Yes! Precisely! Everyone is grateful to you!”

“I… I see… Thank you, everyone.”

The Sorcerer King’s thanks made everyone feel like they had chosen the right way to express their gratitude, and so they wept with lumps in their throats.

“...Are these tears of gratitude for me?”

“Yes! Precisely!”

“And you gathered them all, Miss Baraja… it seems you’ve grown up while I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty!”

Neia was all smiles after being praised by the Sorcerer King.

“Ah, now then… Miss Baraja, please have them rise. I came here to make up for my previous, unsightly display… what happened to Jaldabaoth?”

“Ah! Yes! Jaldabaoth--”

Flames erupted, as though they had been waiting for that moment. Neia shuddered as she thought of how many of the Holy Kingdom’s soldiers must have perished in that blaze.

“..I see. Then there is no need to ask. It seems the time to fight him again has come. CZ!”

“...Yes, Ainz-sama.”

“I will handle what comes after. You will protect the people here. Don’t forget to have them prepare an appropriate welcome for my victorious return, alright?”

Cheers of “ohhhhh!” rose up from the crowd.

“Listen well! I miscalculated in the previous battle. I was outnumbered and low on mana. However, the situation now is different. Jaldabaoth cannot summon that many demons again in a short time. In addition, I am fully recovered now. There is no more reason for me to lose! All you need to do is wait here for me to return in triumph!”

The people cheered as the Sorcerer King announced his absolute victory.

He flourished his cape and advanced into no man’s land. Everyone stepped aside, clearing a straight path for him, as though shaken by his overpowering aura of dominion.

“Your Majesty!”

The Sorcerer King turned to look at Neia.

“Please win!”

“Of course!”

The Sorcerer advanced once more. Though his form seemed to be shrinking, she did not feel alone or afraid. It was the reassurance of a child being held by her parents. Neia was not the only one. There were others who felt the same way.

“...We’ve won.”

From beside Neia, CZ announced the Sorcerer King’s victory with certainty in her voice. Neia agreed with her as well.

Soon -- a plume of flame rose. It was followed by the darkness flying after it.

Just as before, fire and shadow clashed with each other.

By this time, the battlefield had gone silent.

Both sides lowered their blades and looked to the battle in the sky.

Yes.

Everyone knew it in their hearts.

The victor of this battle would have the right to end it all.

They were no longer in a realm where mortal men could intervene. This was a battle of the gods.

Light.

Darkness.

Fire.

Lightning.

Meteors.

All manner of incomprehensible phenomena--

--Collided with incredible force.

And then--

Neia rejoiced.

That was because Neia’s keen eyes had seen the fire die, and the darkness slowly descend.

This battle had been surprisingly swift compared to the previous one. It was as though to prove that with his mana restored and without the maid demons to get in his way, the Sorcerer King could triumph that easily.

“CZ-sempai!”

“...It’s like I told you, kouhai.”

CZ looked like this was perfectly natural, and Neia grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. However, that was not enough to calm her heart. Neia tightly embraced CZ’s little body and the hands behind her back kept patting and patting.

As everyone witnessed his victory, they erupted into thunderous cheers.

The Sorcerer King slowly descended and landed upon the earth.

After that, the Sorcerer King raised both his arms, and brought forth even greater cheers than before.

Epilogue

After the Sorcerer King's victory, things had become very simple. The demihumans had already lost the will to fight, so all that was left was to mop them up. There were practically no casualties from the Holy kingdom, but the ground was littered with demihuman corpses.

Now that the enemy general Jaldabaoth had been defeated, nobody could stand in the way of the Holy Kingdom Liberation Army.

Recapturing the city of Prart and the capital city of Hoburns was practically instantaneous.

It would take a while longer to free the city of Rimun, which was further west, and there were still people suffering in villages which had been converted to detention camps, but this was already a big step.

The liberated capital was filled with joyous sounds, and their ardor had not abated even after the entire day. In fact, it had actually become livelier.

However, the brass -- Neia included -- knew that there was still a veritable mountain of problems to be dealt with.

The first issue was food. The demihumans had eaten everything and caused a shortage of food. It would surely hamper the progress of the Holy Kingdom in the future.

The next was the loss of life. The loss of the workforce was still tolerable. However, if the deceased were skilled craftspersons, scholars or people who might one day become them, then the loss of knowledge would be a fatal blow to the nation.

And then there was the matter of resources. The demihumans had plundered and destroyed many things, and rebuilding all that would take a lot of resources.

Finally, there was the matter of time. The demihumans had taken a full two seasons during their invasion, and they would need to work twice as hard to

make up for the loss.

And of course, there might be demihumans lurking within the Holy Kingdom. They would need to be rooted out and exterminated.

The location of most of the loot taken by the demihumans -- valuables and magic items -- were unclear. The demihumans all had separate cultures of their own, so adorning themselves with precious metals and collecting human wealth was hardly a strange thing, However, the strange thing was that there was no clue at all as to where those things had been taken. That was because they had been completely unable to track the enemy's transport units.

Still, however many problems lay ahead of them, there would be people who felt that it would be fine if they could lose themselves in frank and honest revelry. They would need a short break before the painful days to come, and Neia agreed on that point as well.

However, she could not do that today. She could not lose herself in celebration on this day.

The reason for that was because it was a day of parting.

It was a very painful day.

There was a lone carriage stopped in front of the royal capital's main gate, on the eastern side of the city. In contrast to the carriage's plain exterior, Neia knew that its interior was lavishly and meticulously fitted, and its performance was also excellent. In particular its seats did not hurt the bottom even after long periods spent sitting on them.

Indeed.

It was the carriage Neia had been allowed to share with the Sorcerer King when he had come to the Holy Kingdom.

In other words, today was the day when the Sorcerer King would leave the Holy Kingdom and return to his own country.

Originally, it would not have been a surprise to see a carriage of the Sorcerous Kingdom surrounded by demihumans. The Sorcerer King had united the Abelion Hills and brought many of the demihumans under his banner during the battle

with Jaldabaoth. That said, there were none of them in sight, because the Sorcerer King had allowed them all to return to the hills.

This was not a matter of the past few days. He had let them return after the final battle with Jaldabaoth had ended.

When she had asked the reason for that, she had received the answer, “You must hate being with the demihumans, don’t you?” Such was his sympathy for the people of the Holy Kingdom.

Neia was deeply moved.

He had considered the mental state of the Holy Kingdom and let his own soldiers return home, saying that they would travel in the company of the soldiers of the Holy Kingdom, who were from another nation. This was by no means ordinary behavior for the ruler of a nation.

Indeed, unless it were the King of Kings -- the magnanimous Sorcerer King.

Neia’s group of like-minded supporters were also deeply moved.

Therefore, when Neia and her comrades had taken it upon themselves to become the Sorcerer King’s honor guard, nobody could bring themselves to protest. Of course, there was almost no more fighting, so for the most part they simply moved with the Sorcerer King, but the faces of her comrades were still fresh in Neia’s memories.

She remembered their joy at being able to walk with the person who had saved them, the glorious feeling of being able to accompany the hero who had defeated Jaldabaoth, and then the bliss of being allowed to stand by the side of the king they so admired. Their faces all blended these differing emotions.

They were nowhere in sight today.

All she could see were the walls and the main gate of the Holy Kingdom’s capital, and then the street leading to Prart -- which continued on to the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“Are you going back today, Your Majesty? The people are all abuzz with joy after the liberation of the royal capital. I feel it would not be out of place to have Your Majesty join us for the next few days, in a thanksgiving festival for

the person who did the biggest part of taking back the capital….”

She had asked that question several times in the past. She would probably get the answer she knew she would receive, that he was heading home. Even so, she still had to ask it again. It was probably the incompetent side of Neia showing.

“Ahh, I’ll be returning to the Sorcerous Kingdom today. I’m not confident in my ability to deal with ceremonies.”

As the Sorcerer King muttered to himself, he made a very exaggerated movement, like a comical shrugging of his shoulders, perhaps because he knew Neia would feel distressed if she took his words to heart.

He really is bad at making jokes.

“Surely you jest, Your Majesty.”

“Umu, well, yes I was, I was just kidding. Yes, kidding… In truth, I’ve done everything I came here to do. Thus, there is no need for me to stay here. I also need to guide the development of the Sorcerous Kingdom, in my capacity as its king. If I leave the throne for long, Prime Minister Albedo will nag me.”

Neia’s mind conjured up the visage of the world-class beauty she had seen but once. She was a woman whose beauty made her unforgettable.

Surely she can’t be that scary when she gets mad… or is she scary when she gets mad because she’s beautiful? While I don’t think that’s what His Majesty meant, it’s a little hard to imagine someone as pretty as that getting angry. Still… I’m envious…

Being allowed to speak to him like that, because she was close to him, was something that Neia desperately wanted, yet could not ask for, which made her very envious. How happy would Neia be if she heard the Sorcerer King she so respected tell others “Neia will scold me” or something like that?

The Sorcerer King’s decision to go had been a sudden thing, and there had been nobody to send him off. It was as though he were a sad and lonely person.

“I already told Caspond-denka that it would be troublesome if the festival was too lavish. This nation will be facing a lot of difficulties from now on. Rather

than waste resources and manpower on sending me off, I'd rather have them use it on rebuilding the country."

"Your Majesty…"

Why do you have to go back?

If she clung to his thigh and made a big scene, she could probably delay his return to his nation by a week.

While she keenly felt the desire to do so, she bore with it. She could not act spoilt around the most merciful Sorcerer King.

"Ah, it's not because I want to act like some kind of big shot, ah, it's just that this country really has nothing left, yes...wealth and the like, while I'd thought of asking them to leave a bit more… What I mean to say is, ah yes, I would like you all to not mind me and keep working hard. Also... look, the stability of your country will be good for the Sorcerous Kingdom too, as neighbours. There'll be trade between us and so on in the future, yes."

So he had sensed what Neia was thinking, and he was fumbling to comfort her. While he was typically very cool and stylish, he was now speaking in an unreliable way.

"Thank you very much, Your Majesty."

"Oh? Hm, don't, don't worry about it. I came to this country for Jaldabaoth's maids, after all. And now--" The Sorcerer King patted CZ -- who had been standing beside him all this time, as though she were trying to mask her presence -- on the back. "--And now I have them, so it was worth coming to this country."

The Sorcerer King had gained CZ -- the maid demon -- with his own strength. Neia and everyone who shared her beliefs felt the same way.

There had been discussions about what they would give to him, but someone had mentioned that since he was a king, having someone who did not represent the country giving him a present would instead be very rude, and so the plan had fallen through.

At the very least, Neia had hoped that Caspond would make some

concessions on a natural level, or sign a treaty which was unfavorable to the Holy Kingdom.

“...If you so desire, I can cast a grand spell that can only be used once every year to resurrect your parents, you know?”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty, but -- there is no need for that.”

During the liberation of the capital city, one of the prisoners had witnessed Neia’s mother fall in battle. Given that person’s story of how inspiring she had been as she fought, surely she would not mind if she was not resurrected.

In addition, it was said that resurrection spells required extremely valuable materials as a material component, and Neia would be hard-pressed to afford those. Perhaps the most merciful Sorcerer King might supply them for free, but she could not keep relying on the Sorcerer King’s largesse for her own sake. However, it would seem the demihumans had disposed of the corpse, so she could not even bid her a final farewell, which was quite sad.

“Talking for long will only make the parting hurt more. I ought to be going soon. CZ, is there anything you want to tell Miss Baraja?”

“...Goodbye.”

“Alright! Goodbye!”

CZ extended a hand to Neia, who shook it.

And then, the two of them let go without any further ado.

“...Are the two of you alright with this?”

“...It’ll be… fine.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I see. Then -- we’re going, CZ.”

As the Sorcerer King put one foot on the step leading up to his carriage, he turned back to address Neia.

“...This country will experience many difficulties in the future, but… I’m sure you’ll be able to work hard and pull through. I hope to see you again.”

“Yes!”

Just as the Sorcerer King was about to enter his carriage, Neia looked at his back and could not stop herself from shouting:”

“Majesty! Your Majesty!”

The Sorcerer King paused on the step of his carriage and looked back. Neia gulped, worked up her courage, and asked in a trembling voice:

“Ah, excuse me! Could I, could I call you Ainz-sama!?”

The cheek of her. Surely she, as a commoner from another nation, would be scolded for daring to address him in such a familiar fashion.

“...Eh? Ahh, yes, you may… call me anything you want.”

“Thank you very much.”

She bowed deeply to the magnanimous king of another nation, and by the time she raised her head, it was CZ’s turn to board the carriage.

“Take care, CZ-sempai!”

“Mm!”

CZ stuck out her thumb, and then she vanished into the carriage.

Perhaps it had sensed the two of them had boarded, but the horse whinnied and trotted off.

“--Then, Your Majesty!”

As she watched the carriage move off, Neia could no longer hide her tears as she shouted:

“Long live His Majesty the Sorcerer King!”

She was not the only one shouting at the top of her voice.

There was more than one gate in the royal capital. Her fellow believers had sneakily gathered together and then they had popped up outside the gate to loudly wish the Sorcerer King prosperity and happiness.

“Long may he live!”

“Long may he live!”

“Long may he live!”

At the same time, they scattered the flowers they had struggled so hard to collect.

The carriage carried on amidst all this.

It was hardly a fitting send off for the man who had saved the Holy Kingdom. Even so, it was the best effort from Neia and the people who understood how she felt.

The carriage shrank in her tear-dimmed vision.

Neia sobbed.

She felt so lonely now.

She wanted the Sorcerer King and CZ to ask “Would you like to come to the Sorcerous Kingdom?” If they had asked that, Neia might have abandoned everything to go with them.

But they had not.

She hated it.

In the end, Neia had been nothing more than a squire for his brief stay in this country.

All manner of negative emotions roiled up inside her.

However -- that was wrong.

In Neia’s ears echoed the words which the Sorcerer King had said.

...This country will experience many difficulties in the future, but… I’m sure you’ll be able to work hard and pull through. I hope to see you again.

In other words, he had expectations for Neia.

Something like, though the Holy Kingdom is in chaos, I’m sure Neia could pull the country together, or something.

It had felt like a long time, but also a very short time, but it had changed her life tremendously -- and now it was over. However, this was only the beginning. There were many things she had to do.

For starters, she had to repay the Sorcerer King’s kindness with her actions.

Then, she would need to rebuild this country. Justice and evil. Neia had never really understood what the two of them meant, but now she could hold her chest high and answer.

The Sorcerer King was justice, she would answer. And being weak was a sin. The important thing was to work hard to be strong, and so on.

Neia had to spread the truths she had learned throughout the Holy Kingdom.

“Baraja-sama, please wipe your tears.”

It was Beldran.

At a closer look, his eyes were also red. Perhaps he had wiped his own tears before coming to Neia’s side, but his voice was still trembling, so he had clearly wept recently.

“Ahh…”

Neia forcefully wiped her tears away, just like how CZ had first wiped her face.

“Baraja-sama. The people who witnessed that battle all want to hear about the Sorcerer King. Many more have come with their families in tow.”

“I understand. Tell them that His Majesty -- Ainz-sama is a truly noble king, and also about CZ.”

Neia looked straight ahead.

“Goodbyes really are depressing. However -- Everyone! Let’s go! Let us spread the truth -- that His Majesty is justice -- to more people!”

“--Ohhhh!”

Over 3’000 people shouted in unison by way of reply, and then they fell into step behind Neia.

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The carriage moved on.

The long project was finally over. Ainz had never experienced it himself, but

this must have been what it felt like to be an expatriate. Even if he had returned to Nazarick from time to time, this might have been the first time he had been away from it for so long.

He had thrown the matter of ruling the demihumans of the Abelion Hills to Albedo, and he had handed the entirety of the Holy Kingdom's future affairs to Demiurge.

In other words, Ainz had taken the weight off his shoulders. He sighed, subtly enough that CZ -- who was sitting opposite him -- did not notice. While he had simplified Demiurges's script halfway through, the fatigue from all the complicated events until that point had not yet been fully eliminated. However, he did feel the sense of relaxation which came from solving a previously insoluble problem.

That said, after returning to Nazarick -- E-Rantel, rather -- he would need to carefully and slowly take care of the work he had put off for the past two seasons. Once, he had put his stamp on documents in a slapdash manner, trusting that Albedo had already looked them over, only to be told, "Truly, this snap decision-making is only possible for Ainz-sama. I am filled with respect". Ainz had wondered whether that assessment of him was sarcastic or not.

Indeed. It was not because he had work waiting for him that he had not used [Gate] -- which could take him back in an instant.

Definitely not.

There were ways to teleport to places one had not seen before, but it was still too early for that. It would do no good to show his hand. Of course, the Hanzo on the carriage had said nothing, and the anti-divination spell he had cast had not been triggered. It was a clear sign that nobody was monitoring Ainz and the others, but there might be methods which Ainz did not know about.

If there's enough time, we can wait until we reach a less visible place before teleporting, Ainz thought.

Indeed. It was definitely not because he wanted to keep away from those documents he could not understand no matter how many times he read them.

Still, if there was a problem--

CZ hasn’t said anything since she got on the carriage...

Neia had been that way too, but he always felt restless when he shared a carriage with someone else and they remained quiet. He could casually mention something if the other party were a man, but he would have to watch his words since she was female.

Can’t you say something, CZ? That thought had been in Ainz’s mind ever since the beginning. Regretfully, it did not seem like it would be happening anytime soon. Finally, Ainz was no longer able to bear the silence, and after preparing himself for the worst, he spoke.

“CZ, how do you feel about leaving Nazarick to work on your own? Do you have any questions or suggestions for the future?”

He would start by listening to a report from his subordinate, who had been busy with work when she had been sent out for an errand.

While he was not good at speaking to women, it was fine when he imagined them as female coworkers.

“...I think… worked hard.”

“Is that so. You have worked very hard.”

That was the end of the conversation. It was dead and gone.

Even if he waited a little longer, he ought not to expect CZ to carry on.

Once the words “worked hard” were mentioned, it was very difficult to follow on from there. She had not answered the question about having any questions or future suggestions.

That said, these thoughts of his were merely the shallow contemplations of a superior. He ought to be thinking since she worked hard, all I have to do is wait for the results. There were also benefits in doing so. That was because the implication was that nothing had happened which might cause a problem or become an issue.

However, CZ continued speaking.

“...It’s hard to think on your own and then take action…”

“Indeed, that is the case.”

CZ had been working in Nazarick all this time, and all she had done was take instructions and carry them out. However, he had only given her rough instructions this time, and then the actions she took based on the decisions she made within the scope of those instructions were her first task. For all he knew, that might have been too broad for her. Perhaps he should have started by giving her a simpler task, but Ainz also knew that CZ had given him concrete results.

“Still, it’s hardly unusual for the Pleiades to go outside for their work. The fact that the maid demons are now the Sorcerer King’s minions has spread from the Holy Kingdom to the other nations by now. This was a good experience. But giving vague instructions was a bad idea. Just as I thought, the person giving orders has to make them clear--”

At this point, Ainz sensed that he was digging his own grace. As the pinnacle of Nazarick, Ainz was the most likely to give out orders.

I can’t possibly come up with concrete action plans. Or rather, if I come up with shallow plans, Albedo and Demiurge will frown on me!

“--should draw up plans that emphasize adapting to the situation, and a certain degree of undefined space are fine too. As I thought, it’s the person on the ground who knows best!”

“...Yes. I learned a lot more compared to just following instructions.”

“Ahh, indeed, just so. I’m very glad you understand this, how it feels.”

Ainz scratched his head as he went “Umu”, but then as he realised the difference in competency between CZ and himself -- whose nonexistent stomach ached when he had read Demiurge’s reports -- he wept softly in his heart.

“Speaking of which,” Ainz decided to change the subject. If he went on, he might only end up shocking himself more. “It seems you and Miss Baraja got along very well. It felt like a shame that we had to part.”

“...I like her…”

“--Really!? That’s wonderful!”

Ainz’s expression of joy was genuine.

While Suzuki Satoru had not had children before, anyone would feel like a parent when one heard that a child who had no friends had made friends for the first time.

Ah, I’m glad I resurrected her… hm? What does liking her mean… don’t tell me she’s not a friend, but more like a sex toy...

“...Can I assume that you are friends?”

CZ briefly bowed her head in thought, but in the end she replied with a “...yes.”

Ainz was filled with delight. However that explosion of joy was promptly negated.

While he was unhappy about that, the thought that this might be the first time someone from Nazarick had made a friend outside brought a trickle of joy to his heart.

Most of the people in Nazarick did not leave it, so they did not make friends outside. Perhaps if he let the other members go outside regularly, they would be able to make good friendships.

Ainz did not think that people with friends were superior to others. However, thinking that one did not needs friends was also not correct.

Still it was always better to have the chance to make friends than not.

I had my friends from Ainz Ooal Gown. In that case, it might be good to let the other members go outside and give them free time to interact with others… especially Mare and Aura. No, it’s also possible that giving them all some time on their birthday is… umu.

“Have you arranged to meet Neia again?”

“...No...too far…”

“Ahh! No need to worry about that. I’ve already marked this place as a teleport point. You can go and have fun whenever you want. You can use [Gate]

as you wisht, so there's no need to be shy. Mm."

"...If I'm free… please let me do so…"

"That's right! Free… I'll give you free time. I've been thinking about a holiday plan for some time now. I should give the Pleiades vacation time too. Wouldn't it be good to go out and have fun with the others? I've arranged to have you placed under me, so it should be fine."

CZ thought briefly about it, and then shook her head.

"...It'll cause problems."

"Problems, you say…"

What does that mean? Problems for Neia? Or will it keep her from having fun with Neia? Or is it because the other members won't approve...

"Well, if it causes problems then it can't be helped. You'll have to go on your own, CZ. Speaking of which, let me change the topic. Miss Baraja's parents are both dead. Is that alright?"

Neia Baraja's parents were both dead. If she had asked him, he felt that it would be alright to resurrect them. If doing so would make her even more grateful--

No, that's not right.

In truth, resurrecting Neia's parents was not a very lucrative matter. It was plain to see that Neia was sufficiently grateful to him. In that case, there was no need to continue scoring points with her. In addition, Wands of Resurrection were very expensive, so he wanted to save them, if possible. If Pestonya and the others were to use resurrection spells, then she would require gold coins or jewels or other valuables in exchange.

In truth, there were practically no benefits to be gained.

However, it would be a different matter if it were CZ's friend. I wouldn't mind giving CZ's friend benefits like that.

Because she seemed close to CZ, he had asked her questions -- both Neia as well as CZ -- to judge their reactions.

“..It’s alright… Special treatment isn’t good.”

“Really? It would make an excellent present… in that case… well, that’s it, then.”

In truth, resurrecting the dead -- especially incomplete corpses -- could prove very troublesome. The scenario he saw most often went something like “How come you could do it for him and not for me?” Also, it would be troublesome if he was asked to resurrect the Holy Queen. Granted, Demiurge could probably handle the situation if he did resurrect the Holy Queen, but the demerits outweighed the advantages.

If you want to play, how about reading that book? Would that be alright?”

“...It’s fine...it’s in the Doctor’s room.”

CZ possessed knowledge on all of Nazarick’s mechanisms. That was too dangerous, and she would not be able to leave Nazarick like this, Therefore he had used [Control Amnesia] to edit her memories.

CZ’s knowledge of those mechanisms had been part of the backstory her creator had made for her. While he did not know if the spell could work on such things, after manipulating her, he found that the spell had worked as intended.

That was a technique Ainz had developed after repeated experiments on a lab rat he had obtained. It felt like he could do incredible things once he mastered it.

The reason for that was because Ainz had the feeling he might be able to access the core of the NPCs. What exactly were the NPC backstories, the origin of their memories? Still, that was ultimately the product of Ainz’s imagination, and it was very likely that they were completely unrelated. If he wanted to sort that out, he would need to further understand the spell, and understand everything to do with the human memory. In that case, he would need a lot of lab rats and decades to practice and research with, as well as preparing himself for the possibility that it might all be a waste of time.

Still, CZ had currently been implanted with incorrect memories, so to some extent, she was a trap.

Anyone trying to use CZ to enter Nazarick would surely suffer.

“The Doctor… hm? Can those CZs move?”

“...If the time comes.”

Aren’t they just mechanisms, then? Ainz wanted to say that, but he did not. It was just like how Santa Claus’ real face was hidden under a veil of mystery.

While he had never visited Suzuki Satoru’s home in his memories, he had come to visit in YGGDRASIL--

Although, they were actually the devs.

As Ainz laughed forlornly, he noticed CZ looking intently at him, and so he said, “I was just talking to myself.”

“...Your Majesty.”

“Hm?”

“...Your Majesty/”

“...What is it, CZ?”

She had addressed him by his name in the past, but now she had suddenly switched to using his formal address. That slightly -- or rather, greatly -- disturbed Ainz.

“...Been too familiar all this time… is that how it was?”

“What, what are you saying? I’d feel sad if you called me Your Majesty. Ainz-sama will do. Frankly speaking, you don’t even need the -sama. How about Ainz-san?”

“...That would be rude. I’d get scolded.”

“..Oh, I see. Well, you don’t need to call me Your Majesty, at least.”

“...Got it.”

“Oh yes, how about the Runecraft™ thing that I told you about over the [Message]?”

“...I tried.”

“I see…”

It would see it had not gone well. Still, it ought not to be a problem even if it

failed.

Still, maybe I should wait to return the items I lent, Ainz mused idly as he watched CZ.

When he had left, he had shared his carriage with a girl who kept glaring at him. On his way back, it was a girl with a blank face. Both of them were unique in their own way.

As Ainz thought about this, he smiled.

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Caspond looked outside from the deepest part of the royal palace -- the Holy King's chambers.

His coronation would be in a few days. Therefore, he had come to this empty room -- including the break room beside this one -- to calm his thoughts.

The first person who would complain, and who would not mind her words was Remedios. She was currently meditating in her home. No, it would not be right to say she was meditating. Rather, she was gathering her strength at home. That was because he intended to send her to see if there were any more demihumans hiding within the Holy Kingdom.

That said, he had still moved to the Holy King's room before the coronation had finished. This was a very good reason for Caspond's enemies to attack him. He had insisted on doing so even though he knew that because the power struggles had already begin.

The aim was to establish the facts before the anti-Caspond nobles could say anything. Given that Caspond did not quite understand noble society, the ability to tell friend from foe was quite convenient. That too was part of the plan.

"...I'm sure some of the nobles must be unhappy by how I took the throne without making arrangements with the other nobles. That's particularly true for the Southerners -- the ones which he did not oppress. In that case, what will the Northerners I fought with think if I listened to them…"

“They would surely be unhappy, and become a major divisive factor. That way, the plan to divide the country in two will be complete.

Caspond’s self-directed mutterings received an answer.

It was a gentle voice that seemed to seep into the heart. It belonged to the entity which was Caspond’s superior.

Caspond immediately turned and knelt to the speaker. He bowed, and then raised his head.

“I bid you welcome, Demiurge-sama.”

He was not wearing his mask, and he had not changed his appearance before showing up. In other words, he was certain that this place was safe.

“I am here in order to move items back to Nazarick. Are there any problems?”

“None at all. Everything has gone as you have planned, Demiurge-sama.”

Caspond smiled, and Demiurge returned it.

“While there were some things which were beyond my expectations, the first phase of the plan has concluded without any problems, thanks to Ainz-sama’s actions. I look forward to your good performance in the future.”

Caspond’s head was bowed, but he knew those words were not true.

Demiurge expected nothing of him. However, if he was about to jump the rails which had been laid for him, he would immediately jump in to correct the plan and keep it on track.

He ought to have prepared several plans for revealing Caspond’s true identity. His instructions had included several items which made him wonder why he had to do these them. Those must have been intended to prepare for that moment.

The first phase of the plan was to bring the Abelion Hills and the demihumans under the sway of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Before that, they would exterminate the troublesome species and then plant the seeds of a conflict between the Northern and Southern Holy Kingdom.

After that, Caspond would be in charge of the second phase, which was to bring North and South into opposition, and then conflict.

The final, third phase would be to have the Sorcerous Kingdom step in to take over everything.

“... I have a question regarding the item needed for that, the body of this one. Will you keep it here?”

“There is no need for that. It has already been brought to Nazarick. When it is necessary for the plan, it can be brought here.”

The true Caspond’s body was wrapped in an item known as a Shroud of Sleep, and it had apparently been brought to Nazarick.

This magic item could arrest the decay of a corpse. He had been neatly killed with instant death magic upon capture, and his body had been preserved before rigor mortis could set in. If one touched it, one could still feel traces of his body heat. With that corpse, one would simply assume he had died all of a sudden.

“Allow me to verify something. Do you understand what you ought to do, as Holy King?”

“Yes. In order to make this a country worthy of Ainz-sama, I must make it prosperous.

“Mm, just so. However, you must keep the people unhappy. After all, dissatisfaction is the best spice to welcome a new king.”

“Yes,“ Doppel-Caspond replied. Then he asked Demiurge about a problem that had not been described in his plan.

“Speaking of which, what should we do about that girl?”

That was all Demiurge needed to realise who Doppel-Caspond was talking about, and for the first time his smile came from the heart.

“I once used the word ‘unfathomable’ to describe Ainz-sama… indeed, that is the case. Ainz-sama has prepared an excellent pawn for me. Her existence has accelerated my plan by several years.”

Doppel-Caspond had the feeling that Demiurge’s eyes -- he could not tell exactly where he was looking -- had suddenly moved. They seemed to be looking at the wall. And over there is… on that topic Caspond remembered that

it was the main gate of the capital.

“While he had said he wanted to enthrall humans to his side… to think he could actually make a girl like that in such a staunchly religious country. Although, I have no idea why he said it would be fine to kill even a girl to whom he had lent such a splendid Runecraft™ weapon, no doubt it must have been to force her into a mental state like that.

Demiurge seemed to be in a very good mood, and he did not seem to be telling this to anyone in particular. Caspond merely waited in silence for Demiurge to turn his attention back to himself.

“The instruction to help that girl was truly the right answer. No, if it were Ainz-sama, he would surely be able to correct anything that I did. While he did say in the past that he planned to introduce flaws into the plan to test my adaptability, to think he had laid such cunning plans… he is truly the one who united the Supreme Beings. Every time, he shows me how far I am from him… Kuku, what a cruel master he is.”

Demiurge seemed profoundly moved as he shook his head, and the interior of the room was silent. Finally, Demiurge adjusted his collar, as if to bleed off the last of his excitement, and then tightened his tie.

“Support Neia Baraja with everything at your disposal. Do so in the name of giving thanks to Ainz-sama. That ought to further accelerate the conflict between North and South… I will soon hand you plans on what to do if someone tries to interfere with that girl. Until then, act as we have discussed.”

“Yes! ...But what will become of that girl? Do you intend to make her the next Holy King?”

In that case, he would need to make the appropriate preparations. That said, Demiurge had said he would be giving him exact instructions, so it would be best to do as he was told.

“That’s not a bad idea too, but it would be better to give her another mission. While there is no telling if Ainz-sama wishes to be regarded as a god, if he does intend that, then it would be better to prepare for it. The experiment of worshipping Ainz-sama as a god will surely be useful in that case.”

“Yes!”

“Now then, is there anything else you would like to take this chance to verify?”

“Yes. It concerns that woman who is no longer necessary, Remedios Custodio. While the original plan was to have her run around as needed, would it not be better to kill her off?”

“No, just keep her alive and let her become a scapegoat for the nobles’ dissatisfaction. That was why I said she was the only one who was not to be killed. Transfer her to another department. Let the Vice-Captain become the Captain of the Paladin Corps and then make use of him. He can be put to meaningful work.”

“I understand!”

“Deal with her when the conflict becomes evident.”

After showing that he understood, Demiurge indicated that the conversation was over, and vanished with [Greater Teleportation]

The demon hiding in his Shadow, and the Hanzo that Caspond could never defeat no matter what he tried were still at his disposal.

Doppel-Caspond rose to his feet and looked outside the window again.

While he could only see the courtyard, he imagined he could see the revelling people throughout the city. After that, he laughed mockingly.

“--Enjoy the taste of happiness for a while longer, citizens of my country.”

OVERLORD 13 The paladin of the Holy kingdom Kugane Maruyama

オーバーロード 13 聖王国の聖騎士 下

丸山くがね

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マッドハウス

4章 攻城戦

5章 アインズ死す

6章 銃兵と弓兵

7章 救国の英雄

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