



OVERLORD [4] The lizard man Heroes *Tegane Maruyama*

illustration by so-bin

オーバーロード 4 蜥蜴人の勇者たち 丸山くがね



OVERLORD Volume 4

The Lizardman Heroes

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Prologue

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PROLOGUE

“Welcome back, Ainz-sama.”

It had been two weeks since he had last returned to his room, but the words which followed next sent a shiver through his bones.

“Would you like dinner? A bath? Or — would — you — like — me♥?”

For a moment, Ainz imagined that he saw several pink hearts wafting out from behind Albedo.

“...What’s the meaning of this?”

“I’m playing newlyweds, Ainz-sama. I’ve heard people say that this is the best way for a newly-wedded wife to greet her husband after he returns from a business trip with his pet. Do you like it?”

So this was why she had not met him directly at the surface when he returned. He was a man without a girlfriend, much less a wife, but just as he was about to coldly retort, “Who cares?” he swallowed those words. He had his pride as a male to consider, and he wanted to protect his image.

Besides, what sort of answer was she expecting when she asked, “Do you like it?”

Despite his lack of confidence, he put on an attitude which seemed to say, *All is within the palm of my hand*, and replied in a way which should probably not cause too many problems.

“That was quite a charming welcome, Albedo.”

Albedo smiled and replied, “That is good to hear, kufufufu~”

As Ainz saw her smile seductively, he lowered his stance and prepared himself

for battle.

He sensed something like a venomous snake slithering up his spine.

There was a bestial lust hidden in Albedo's eyes — most likely the source of that slithering sensation. Those eyes were deadly serious. If he had replied, "I'll have you, of course," even in jest, there was no doubt that the superpredator before him would latch onto that and savagely pounce him. The words "reverse rape" even came to mind.

While he had little in the way of a sex drive, the remnants of his human personality seemed to be responding to Albedo's mood, telling him to see what would happen next. His still-undiminished curiosity only added to that feeling.

Stop that, you moron.

It was not exactly self-control, but Ainz used something similar — something which would have been impossible had he not been undead — to force himself to ignore the subtext of Albedo's words.

Still, something like disgust welled up from somewhere within Ainz's heart. Before he had been transported to this New World, he had altered Albedo's backstory, writing that "she loved him" in jest. He had been using her and that twisted personality of hers, without going the next step with her.

But it's gone ...What can I do about that? It's not as though a relationship between a man and a woman can progress through a meeting of minds ...Is that why I'm afraid of taking the next step?

Ainz — a virgin who had never dated a girl before — pondered that problem.

At the same time, another thought came to mind. The NPCs made by his former friends could be considered to be their children. How could he stain those precious offspring and let them carry on with warped minds?

Idiot, now's not the time to be thinking about that sort of thing.

"Ah!"

Albedo's sudden yelp caused the fiery points in Ainz's eyes to flare.

“What, what is it, Albedo? Did something happen?”

“How embarrassing. I, I heard that a newlywed wife ought to welcome her husband home while dressed in her final decisive battle attire (a naked apron)...”

With that, Albedo looked down at her dress and her face turned pink. Then she replied:

“If you wish, I shall immediately ...”

Her voice was quiet, but he could hear it very clearly. She sneaked peeks at Ainz as she continued, “...Change in front of you, Ainz-sama ...”

“Ah ...yes ...ahem! Really ...haaa. Listen, Albedo, that's enough clowning around for now. It's time for the intelligence briefing.”

“Yes, I understand.”

With some reluctance — though he was not sure where exactly said reluctance stemmed from — Ainz forced himself to ignore Albedo's temptation and sat himself down on his chair. Then, he tossed three pouches onto the table. He then dictated instructions to Albedo, who had changed modes from an eager newlywed to an efficient secretary.

“This is the money I earned in E-Rantel. Use it for experiments.”

The three pouches looked different from each other. The largest of them appeared to be on the verge of bursting, and it was filled with the silver and copper pieces Ainz had earned during his time as an adventurer.

“Understood. I shall see if these funds can be used to summon monsters or activate Nazarick's defense systems.”

“Please take care of that. Also, see if we can use them to make items, such as scrolls and so on.”

Ainz's eyes turned away from Albedo, whose head was deeply lowered. Then he looked back towards the pouches with a prayerful expression in his eyes.

The gold pieces which one obtained in YGGDRASIL could be used to buy magic items, but they could also be used for guild base maintenance fees. For instance, they could be used to summon monsters of above level thirty — which did not naturally respawn, or “pop” — as catalysts for the use of certain spells, in the creation of magic items, resurrecting dead NPCs, and so on.

He had already verified that YGGDRASIL coins could be used in this world. However, he had not made sure that the currency of this world could also be used within Nazarick. He was particularly curious about whether silver and copper coins could be utilized, since YGGDRASIL only had gold coins.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the results of that experiment might determine the future of Nazarick. If the money in this world could be used in the same way as YGGDRASIL gold coins, it might greatly affect their future plans. After all, it would dramatically change the importance of earning money.

In fact, under certain circumstances, a situation might arise where the earning of large quantities of currency became essential. In contrast, if currency from this world could not be used, then the wealth within the Treasury would become an irreplaceable resource, and unnecessary expenses would have to be minimized.

“Also, about Clementine—”

As Ainz spoke the name of the missing corpse, his nonexistent brows wrinkled.

His error in judgement had resulted in the disappearance of that girl, who knew quite a few things about him. There was no telling if she had been resurrected or if she had told what she knew to others. Unease welled up in Ainz's heart.

There were many potential enemies to be wary of, but he had learned nothing about them, and he had even revealed information about himself by accident.

If this news reached the ears of any of my friends who ended up in this world ...but I shouldn't count on that sort of luck. I need to be more careful from now on. In any case, the most important thing now is to decide what I should do about the Momon identity.

If anyone came after him, they would be coming after Momon. However, Momon was a stepping stone for him at the moment, and it would be a shame to discard him. The time had not yet come to reveal that Ainz was Momon.

I'll have to see how things go...

No matter how hard he thought, his contemplations only led him to a dead end with no answers. Therefore, he decided to put his problems aside for now and think no more on it.

“I might as well order Pandora’s Actor to put one of that woman’s blades into the Treasury’s shredder and see what happens.”

“The shredder?”

It was only when he heard Albedo’s surprised voice that Ainz recalled the proper name of that item.

“That would be the Exchange Box. Someone with merchant-type skills can get better prices when using it. Order Pandora’s Actor to take Nearata-san’s form and use his skill.”

After seeing that Albedo had nodded in acknowledgement, Ainz unfurled the scroll he was holding onto his desk.

“Also, it took some effort to obtain it, but this is a map of the world which I acquired in E-Rantel.”

“This is ...I see.”

Ainz understood why Albedo’s brows had furrowed ever so slightly, because the details of the map before them were terribly vague.

“I understand why you’re unhappy. After all, this map only covers a small portion of the surrounding world. The scale was haphazardly written and many landmarks are not recorded either. In addition, this map focuses on the human countries, and there is only one demihuman nation recorded. It is a crude map, no doubt ...but it is unlikely that we’ll find anything better.”

For instance, he had heard about the Centaur tribes on the plains, the Scorpion-Men (Pabilsag) settlements in the desert, the country of the Dwarves in the mountains, and so on. But he had learned of all these by speaking to the guildmaster of E-Rantel’s Magician’s Guild, and they were not recorded on the map. In other words, this was a map for human convenience.

A vague map like this was hardly reliable, but he would have to expend a lot of money and time to obtain a better one.

That was what the Magician’s Guildmaster, Theo Rakesheer, had told him. The man was very favorably disposed towards Ainz, so that information was most likely accurate.

Besides, he sensed from the other man’s reply that even a map like this was quite a harsh demand.

“I see. Then, I shall have the map duplicated and distributed to each Guardian.”

“Please do so. Then, before that, I shall briefly explain the contents of the map.”

Ainz pointed to the center of the map. It was the region which had been most accurately detailed.

“This is E-Rantel, and this region contains the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.”

His finger moved northeast, to the vicinity of a huge forest. He was quite confident in his knowledge of the area surrounding Nazarick.

“This is the Azellisian Mountain Range, which marks the border between the Re-Estize Kingdom and the Baharuth Empire. The large forest around the

southern tip of the mountain range is the Great Forest of Tob, and there is a large lake here. “

The lake in question was shaped like an inverted gourd, and it was located between the southern foothills of the mountains and the Great Forest. Ainz’s finger stopped at the southern tip of the lake.

“There is a Lizardman village here, in these large wetlands.”

After seeing Albedo nod in understanding, Ainz continued:

“Now I will tell you what the Magician’s Guildmaster told me about the surrounding countries. To the northwest of the Kingdom is a region bounded by mountains. This region is the Agrand Council Alliance, which is inhabited by many demihumans. What we need to be most wary of are their councillors, which are said to be Dragons. Apparently there are five of them, but some say that there are seven. To the southwest of the Kingdom lies the nation known as the Holy Kingdom. Apparently, it is surrounded on all sides by a high wall, indicated roughly on the map, and it is known as the Great Wall. This country is on guard against the many demihuman tribes which battle frequently in the wilderness surrounding them, though it is not indicated on the map.”

“Is that not where Demiurge has gone?”

“That’s right. On the other end of the wilderness is the Slaine Theocracy, entities which we must be mindful of.”

“Is this a national border?”

Albedo traced a line around the surrounding region with a lily-white finger.

“Probably. Frankly speaking, there’s no use trying to study borders from this map on account of how vague it is. Then, let’s take a look on the Empire’s side. There are many city-states located to the northeast of the Empire, who have formed up into a City-State Alliance. There seems to be a city of demihumans there as well. To the southeast of the Empire is a region with many gigantic standing quartz pillars, as well as many caves. Apparently, there are humanoid tribes there who raise Wyverns.”

When Ainz had heard the description of the place, it reminded him of Wulingyuan in Zhangjiajie City, but the details were not clear.

“Are they Wyvern Riders, then?”

In YGGDRASIL, players with over thirty five levels in equestrian-type classes could summon the magical beasts known as Wyverns to serve as mounts, However, there was no proof that the same held true in this world as well.

“...Possibly. Going by that logic, the opposition should be quite strong, but even so, they aren’t exactly fearsome opponents for the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick ...However, the portion of the map below them — the eastern shore of this great lake — hasn’t been filled in yet.”

Ainz indicated one of the outer edges of the map below them.

“And they say there’s a Draconic Kingdom here.”

“Dragons?”

“Yes. A powerful Dragon founded that nation in the past, and apparently its royalty has inherited that Dragon’s bloodline ...but whether those rumors are reliable remains to be seen. In any event, that’s enough about the map for now.”

In the world where Ainz had lived as Suzuki Satoru, it would have been a far-fetched rumor, but in this world, that rumor might well be true.

“Then, Ainz-sama, we should be wary of the Slaine Theocracy and the Council Alliance, am I correct?”

Ainz folded his arms across his chest and went, “Hmm ...” While she did have a point when it came to nations, she might have come to that conclusion because they did not know enough in that field. As she saw Ainz’s reaction, Albedo slowly bowed in apology.

“Forgive me. Given our present circumstances, we should be on guard against all other countries, am I correct?”

“...Indeed, that is so. Even if they aren’t much as nations, they might harbor surprising individuals among them.”

For instance, the person who used that World Class Item on Shalltear.

Albedo could sense that underlying meaning in Ainz’s words without him having to explicitly state it.

Ainz’s finger continued tracing the eastern and southern edges of the map.

“However, there’s a city that floats on the waves in the east, while there’s the city founded by the Eight Greed Kings to the south. Those two are probably the ones we need to be the most mindful of. The city of the Eight Greed Kings in particular ...they say it’s a flying city in the middle of the desert.”

“A flying city?”

“According to the news I’ve heard, it would be more accurate to describe it as a city built underneath a flying fortress. They say water flows endlessly from the fortress to the city, and that the city itself is completely surrounded by a magical barrier and doesn’t look like it belongs in the desert at all.”

Albedo’s eyes turned cold, and she quietly replied:

“Shall we have the vassals conduct a reconnaissance in force?”

“There’s no need to go around stepping on the tiger’s tail. Even if the World-Class Item’s user came from there, we should try to get along cordially with them until we’re sure of their fighting power ...Speaking of which, how is Shalltear doing?”

“Her body seems fine after her resurrection, but ...”

“Come on, spit it out. Even I feel uneasy about her too.”

“Ah! My deepest apologies. In truth, Shalltear’s mental state is somewhat unsettling.”

“...Aftereffects from her mind control? Could it be that even death cannot fully erase the effects of a World Class item?”

“No, it’s not like that ...It’s more like she still feels intense guilt for raising her hand against you and she cannot forgive herself for doing so, Ainz-sama.”

For a moment, Ainz did not quite understand, but it became clear almost instantly.

It had been Ainz’s fault, not Shalltear’s. He had told her that many times already.

“Please forgive my rudeness for interfering with your deliberations by interrupting, Ainz-sama.”

Ainz nodded to Albedo, who had a severe expression on her face.

“I feel that it would be best if she were punished.”

The crimson glow in Ainz’s eyes socket dimmed slightly. He made to speak, but closed his mouth without making a sound. That was because the woman before him seemed to have something else to say.

“...Rewards and punishment must be handed out as they are due. If you assign punishment to Shalltear, it will eliminate the guilt in her heart. In contrast, she is currently stewing in guilt because she has not been punished for her actions.”

Ainz felt that she made a lot of sense. Indeed, it was because of punishments that rewards could exist. However, the matter of how severe a reprimand he should give her and how much he could forgive was beyond a mere salaryman like Ainz. Under normal circumstances, he would wave the matter aside and forgive Shalltear easily.

On the other hand, while he might feel bad about punishing Shalltear, it might end up being good practice for next time.

“...I understand. I shall give Shalltear some punishment, then.”

“I feel it would be better that way. Please forgive any offense I have given.”

“What are you saying? I look forward to such suggestions. I have always hoped that someone would be able to step in with an opinion when I was unsure about what to do. Albedo, what you have done is very fitting of your position as the Overseer of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.”

“Thank you very much!”

The stunning beauty bowed before him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes moist. Feeling a little uneasy about Albedo’s very open reaction, Ainz coolly waved it aside and replied:

“Now then, there are some things I need to handle. I will leave this place to you.”

“Understood! Please leave it to me! I will take care of matters while you are not around, Ainz-sama!”

He seemed to have heard something along the lines of, “in the capacity of your wife,” somewhere in the middle of those words, but he decided to pretend he had heard nothing, because she still had more to say.

“Still, please be careful, Ainz-sama. The person who controlled Shalltear with that World-Class Item might not just be targeting us.”

“Hmph!”

That was the first time Ainz had snorted in displeasure ever since he had returned to this room.

“If the enemy attacks ...they might not be easy to deal with. But relax, Albedo. Since I have no idea what sort of enemy we’re up against, I intend to prioritize retreat when we encounter him, and I also have several meatshields prepared for such a circumstance.”

Ainz slowly raised his head to look at the ceiling, and began visualizing the foes against which he would need to prepare.

There was the mysterious holder of that World-Class Item who was probably their enemy, and other players, whose very existence was still unclear. In addition, there were the traces of players who should have existed in the past. Of course, it might be too rash to take them all as enemies, but doing so would ensure that he did not overlook them by accident. He had to assume the worst-case scenario when doing his planning.

“Before we learn more details about the enemy, it would be wise to act as low-key as possible. However, we might need to scatter some bait to tempt the foe ...how is the progress of plans on that front?”

Albedo lowered her eyes, and from that reaction alone Ainz could guess what the results were.

“Cocytus has not made any reports yet, but Entoma indicates that the plan has not yet exceeded our scope of predictions. They should have set up camp near the objective and they are preparing to make contact.”

“Is that so ...Well, it wasn’t what I hoped for, but the important thing is what we can gain from this.”

“Your saying so fills me with relief.”

“All right. Originally, I had planned to observe the developments from here, but unfortunately, I have several tasks to complete in my role as an adventurer, and thus I must move out in person. Still, I would like to see how the battle goes. Help me record the battle between the Lizardmen and the forces of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.”



Chapter 1| Departure

Overlord Volume 4

CHAPTER 1: DEPARTURE

1

The Azellisian Mountain Range lay between the Baharuth Empire and the Restize Kingdom. Its southern foothills were surrounded by a sprawling forest — the Great Forest of Tob — and there was a huge lake at its northern edge.

This lake was over twenty square kilometers in size, and resembled an inverted gourd. It was divided into the Upper Lake and the Lower Lake. The Upper Lake was very deep, and was home to larger creatures, while the Lower Lake was where the smaller creatures lived.

The southern end of the Lower Lake was surrounded by wetlands, and countless structures had been erected in this large, marshy region. Each of these houses was built in the marsh and supported by about ten stilts each.

Among the many stilt-houses, one of them had its doors open, its owner revealed to all under the golden rays of the sun.

He was a member of the demihuman race known as Lizardmen.



Lizardmen resembled a cross between humans and reptiles. To be precise, Lizardmen had human-like hands and feet and were essentially bipedal lizards, although their heads bore no resemblance to those of humans at all.

As demihumans — along with such races as Goblins and Ogres — they were easily dismissed as savages, due to a lack of technology and the way of life which subsequently resulted. However, they still had a civilization of their own, though it was not very advanced.

Mature male Lizardmen averaged around a hundred ninety centimeters tall and weighed over one hundred kilograms. Their body mass was not composed of fat, but of bulging muscles, which contributed to an impressive and imposing physique.

Reptilian tails sprouted from their waists, which they used to maintain their balance.

Their feet were large with webbed toes, optimized for movement in water and marshlands. Therefore, they were not as adept at overland movement, but it did not pose a problem for them given their living environment.

Their bodies were covered in scales, whose colors ranged from a dirty-looking green to gray to black. Instead of lizard-like skin, they had tough hides which resembled those of crocodiles, which protected better than lower end human armor.

They had five-fingered hands, like those of humans, and each finger was tipped with a short claw.

The weapons they used were quite primitive, because they had never had the chance to mine and refine ores for armaments. Thus, their most commonly-used weapons were spears made from the fangs and claws of monsters, as well as stone-headed clubs.



The blinding sun hung high in the azure sky, with only a few ephemeral clouds to interrupt the endless expanse of blue. The weather was very good, and one could clearly see the towering peaks in the distance.

This Lizardman had a broad field of vision, and he could see the blazing sun above even without turning his head. He — Zaryusu Shasha — glanced downward briefly, and then descended the stairs at a steady pace.

Zaryusu clutched at the brand on his black-scaled chest.

CHAPTER 1: DEPARTURE

That brand represented his position in the tribe.

Lizardman tribes were a strictly-ordered society, and the highest authority among them was the tribe's chief. The position was not hereditary; it was awarded to the strongest person within the tribe. Every year, they would conduct a ceremony to select a new tribal chief.

In addition, there was a council of elders who would advise the chief, composed of the eldest members of the community. Below them were the warrior Lizardmen, the regular Lizardmen, the Lizardwomen, and the juvenile Lizardmen. Together they comprised Lizardman society.

Of course, there were some Lizardmen who stood outside this hierarchy.

First, there were the priests — more of druids, actually — who predicted upcoming danger by forecasting the weather or aiding the tribe with curative magic.

Then, there were the rangers, who formed hunting parties. Their main task was to catch fish, but the regular Lizardmen would help in that task as well. Thus, their most important job was their activities in the forest.

Lizardmen were omnivorous, but their main diet was a kind of fish which was around eighty centimeters long, and they disliked vegetables and fruits. Even so, the hunters still had to enter the forest for logging purposes. The land was not safe for Lizardmen; thus specialists were needed when they went to fell trees.

While they could move as they pleased and make their own decisions, they were ultimately subject to the tribal chief's authority. Lizardman society was patrilineal, with clearly defined rules and responsibilities for its members.

And yet, there were some who were outside the tribal chief's authority.

Those would be the travellers.

One might think of foreigners when one heard the word “travellers.” However, that was impossible. Lizardman society was fundamentally a closed one, and

it did not admit anyone outside the tribe.

That being the case, what were these travellers?

They were Lizardmen who wanted to explore the world.

Fundamentally speaking, Lizardmen would not leave their birthplaces unless it was a matter of life and death — for instance, when prey had run out — or a similarly dire emergency. Still, there were a rare few Lizardmen who thirsted for the chance to see the outside world.

When a traveller decided to leave his tribe, he would receive a special brand upon his chest. It represented his departure from the tribe — and its authority.

Often, those who left to travel the outside world did not return. Sometimes they died far from their homes, sometimes they found a place to stay in the wide new world they had discovered, and so on. However, a rare few did come home after taking their fill of the world.

Those travellers who returned to their hometowns were highly acclaimed for the knowledge of the outside world which they brought back with them. They might have been outsiders who had evaded the chief's authority, but in an instant they could become local celebrities.

In fact, there were some villagers who kept a respectful distance from Zaryusu, but for the most part the others viewed him with awestruck eyes. However, that was not just because he was a traveller. There was another reason for their admiring gazes—

As he stepped onto the marsh from the stairs, his favored weapon clattered at his waist as it touched his scales.

That weapon had a pale, razor-sharp edge and emitted a dull glow. It was bizarrely shaped, resembling a sai whose blade and grip blended into one, but the blade grew thinner the further it went from the hilt, until it was paper-thin at its tip.

There was no Lizardman who did not know of this weapon. It was one of the

magic items regarded as the Four Great Treasures of the surrounding Lizardman tribes — Frost Pain.

The fact that he possessed that weapon was a major source of Zaryusu's fame.

Zaryusu strode forth.

He had two destinations in mind. On his back was a present which he would take to one of those places.

That present was four fish, each of which was one meter long. He carried them on his back as he strode on, and their odour did not repulse him, but instead tantalized him.

How I'd like to eat these fish — Zaryusu had to cast that desire aside while sighing several times as he splashed through the shallow water towards the Green Claw Village.

The children, whose green scales were still bright and shiny, giggled and laughed as they ran around Zaryusu, but they ground to a halt once they saw the big fish on his back. He could see growing kids with their ravenous appetites peering at him from the gaps between the houses, their eyes focused on Zaryusu — no, on the fish he carried. Almost all of them had their mouths slightly agape, most likely drooling in anticipation. Even as he drew away from them, their eyes were still glued to him. Those were the eyes of children begging for snacks.

Zaryusu smiled bitterly at this and pretended that he had not noticed. Instead, he continued on. He had already decided who would receive this present, but unfortunately it would not be these children.

The fact that the glow in the children's eyes was not entirely due to hunger pleased Zaryusu, because it was a sight which would have been unimaginable several years ago —

After leaving those longing looks behind him, Zaryusu passed several houses along the way before he found the dwelling that was his destination.

He was now at the outskirts of the village, and if he carried on any further, he would no longer be in the marsh, but in a fairly deep part of the lake. The houses built on this subtle dividing line seemed quite sturdy in appearance and were larger than Zaryusu's own.

The odd thing was that the house was slightly tilted, so half of it was submerged in the water. However, this was by design, and not by some external force.

Zaryusu approached the house, splashing loudly as he went.

As he came close, a playful cry came from within. Perhaps its occupant had scented something.

A serpentine head poked out of what should have been a window. It was a snake with deep brown scales and amber eyes. When it spotted Zaryusu, it stretched its neck out and coiled playfully around him.

"That's a good boy."

Zaryusu caressed the snake's body in a familiar way. The snake seemed to find it very comfortable, and closed its eyes — both its eyelids and its nictitating membranes. Zaryusu too enjoyed the feeling of the scales under his fingers.

This creature was Zaryusu's pet, Rororo.

He had raised Rororo from a young age, so it seemed as though it was actually carrying on a conversation with its owner.

"Rororo, I've brought food for you. Eat it slowly and don't fight over it."

Zaryusu tossed the fish into the house through the window, and soft *thuds* came from within.

"I wanted to play with you, but I have to go check on the fish now, so maybe later."

Perhaps the snake understood what its owner was saying, but it reluctantly

nuzzled against Zaryusu's body several times before returning to the house. Soon, the sound of tearing flesh and vigorous chewing reached him.

The way Rororo ripped into his food suggested that he was in good shape, and so Zaryusu was relieved as he left the little house behind him.



After that, Zaryusu's destination was the lakeside some distance from the village.

His feet slapped against the ground as he walked into the forest. While swimming would have been faster, Zaryusu had a habit of checking his surroundings to see if anything was going on while he was moving on land. However, given that visibility was very poor in the forest, staying alert took a mental toll even on someone like Zaryusu.

Before long, he saw his destination through the trees. The fact that nothing had happened filled Zaryusu with a sense of relief. Zaryusu quickened his pace through the forest now that he was close.

After dodging one branch after another, Zaryusu emerged from the woods. It was then that his eyes went wide. That was because he saw someone surprising before him.

That someone was a black Lizardman who looked very similar to Zaryusu.

“Ani-ja—”

“—It's you.”

The black Lizardman turned to regard Zaryusu with a keen gaze. This Lizardman was the chief of the Green Claw tribe, as well as Zaryusu's older brother — Shasuryu Shasha.

He had defended his title as chief on two previous occasions, and with nobody to challenge him this time round, he had retained his chief's position. His mus-

cular body was one of staggering proportions. If one stood them side by side, Zaryusu and his more balanced body type would appear smaller in comparison.

An old white scar marked his black scales, like a thunderbolt arcing through storm clouds.

The greatsword on his back was an unadorned, heavy sword almost two meters long and forged of steel. It was the symbol of the chief and it had been enchanted with spells to prevent rust and improve sharpness.

Zaryusu approached the lakeside and stood beside his brother.

“Why did you come here?”

“...I should be asking you that, right, Ani-ja? You don’t need to come down in person as the tribe’s chief, right?”

“Muu.”

Unable to respond to that, Shasuryu grunted and turned back to the lake before him.

Sturdy pillars emerged from the lake’s surface, enclosing an area between them. Densely-woven nets had been strung up between the pillars. Their purpose was immediately obvious.

This was a fish farm.

“Could it be ...you came here to pinch food?”

Shasuryu’s tail sprang up in response to Zaryusu’s words, and it pounded the ground several times.

“Muu... As if. I merely came to see how the breeding went.”

“ ... ”

“Seriously, little bro. Do you think your Ani-ja is someone like that?”

After that forceful statement, Shasuryu took a step forward. Though Zaryusu was a hardened veteran of many battles from his time as a traveller, that looming sense of pressure — like an encroaching wall — made even someone like him want to back off.

However, Zaryusu now had the perfect way to respond to him.

“If you were only here to see how they were growing, then that implies you don’t want any. What a shame. I was thinking of giving you a few if they had turned out well.”

“Muu.”

The sound of pounding faded away, and Shasuryu’s tail drooped limply.

“They’re really delicious, you know. I gave them lots of tasty feed and raised them up nice and fat. They’re better than the ones caught in the wild.”

“Yeah ...”

“Fresh and lovely juices flow out once you bite into them. Once you actually chew off a piece, the meat practically melts on your tongue.”

“Muuuu~”

The sound of a thumping tail rang out again, more intense than just now.

Zaryusu stared at his elder brother’s tail, and in a playful tone he added:

“Big Sis always did say that your tail was too honest, Ani-ja.”

“What? Damn woman, how dare she make fun of her husband like that. Besides, how is it honest?”

Zaryusu had no idea how to respond to his elder brother, who was staring at his own motionless tail. Eventually, he mumbled something along the lines of,

“That’s true ...”

“Hmph, that damn woman ...if you’ve ever been with one, you’d understand how I feel now.”

“You know I can’t get married.”

“Hmph, what nonsense is that? You mean that brand? Who gives a damn about those elders, anyway? Not a single female in this village would reject you if you went after them ...even if she had a tail that was out of this world.”

The tails of Lizardmen were used to store nutrients. Thus, a thick tail was very appealing to members of the opposite sex. Zaryusu would have preferred large-tailed females in his youth, but after growing up and seeing the world, he chose to avoid them as much as possible.

“Given the current state of the village, I’m not into females with thick tails. If I had to go by tails, I’d rather have one with a slimmer tail. Personally, I think someone like Big Sis would be all right.”

“Well, you would think that way, given your personality ...But honestly, you shouldn’t bed females like that. You might get hurt. Haa, you should go learn how bad marriage is as well. It’s unfair that I’m the only one who has to go through such suffering.”

“Oi oi oi, Ani-ja, if you’re not careful Big Sis will find out about this.”

“Muu ...see? That’s part of why marriage is bad. People like you can threaten me, someone who’s your big brother *and* your chief.”

Cheerful laughter pealed out over the quiet lake.

After Shasuryu calmed down from his mirth, he studied the fish farm before him once more. As a complex mix of emotions played through his heart, he murmured in awe:

“Still, you’ve really done some outstanding work here with this ...”

Sensing his older brother's loss for words, the younger brother gave him a helping hand.

"The fish farm?"

"Yes, that's it. Nobody's done this before in our tribe, and now everyone knows that raising fish is a workable plan. If this keeps up, a lot of people will begin imitating us in envy."

"That's all thanks to you, Ani-ja. I know you've been selling the idea to everyone."

"Zaryusu, what good would it do to just spread the word? It'd be nothing more than idle chatter. What really counted was your hard work in breeding all those delicious fish from this farm."

Of course, he had failed many times when he had first begun setting up the fish farm. After all, it was merely an idea he had after being inspired by what he had seen and heard of in his travels. Even the surrounding net had broken down countless times, and it had taken a full year of trial and error before he could build a functioning fish farm.

And yet, things had not ended there.

The fish had to be tended, and they had to be fed.

He had tossed in all sorts of feed to see which would be most effective, and as a result he had killed all the fish in the farm more than once. There had even been cases where monsters had broken down the net penning in the fish, sending him back to square one.

People had pointed and whispered behind his back about how he was using caught fish as toys, and some had even gone and called him an idiot to his face. However, his hard work had now borne fruit.

Large fish swam placidly beneath the surface of the lake. They were bigger than fish caught in the wild. No Lizardman would believe that they had been raised from fry. Well, nobody except for Zaryusu's elder brother and his sister-

in-law.

“...You did good, Zaryusu.”

Shasuryu murmured his praise as he looked on the same scenery as his younger brother. His voice contained undertones of various emotions blending together.

“It’s all thanks to you, Ani-ja.”

His younger brother’s reply was colored with similar complexity.

“Muu, what did I do?”

Indeed, his brother — Shasuryu — had not done anything to help. However, that was only in reference to taking direct action.

Whenever anything had happened to the fish, a priest would immediately show up. Many people had come to help him collect materials to weave the nets. And when the tribesmen brought fish back to share, they would give him the healthiest fish. Meanwhile, the hunters had delivered fruits for use as feed.

All of these helpers adamantly refused to reveal the identity of the person who had sent them, but no matter how stupid Zaryusu was, he could tell who had asked them to give him a hand, as well as the fact that said person did not wish to make his identity known.

That was because a tribal chief helping someone who had separated himself from the tribe was very inappropriate.

“Ani-ja, when the fish get bigger, I’ll make sure you’re first in line to get one.”

“Oh, I’ll look forward to that.”

Shasuryu turned to walk away, and then he quietly said:

“I’m sorry.”

” ...What are you saying, Ani-ja? ...After all, you did nothing wrong.”

He did not know if Shasuryu had heard those words. All Zaryusu could do was watch silently as his elder brother left, walking along the lake's shore.

After inspecting the conditions at the fish farm, Zaryusu returned to the village. Then, a strange hunch made him suddenly look to the sky.

There was nothing unusual there. The only thing he could see in the clear blue sky were the cloud-wreathed peaks to the north. In other words, the scenery was perfectly normal.

There was nothing unusual there. Just as he wondered if he might be imagining things, he noticed a strange cloud in the sky.

At the same time, thick clouds which blotted out the sun suddenly appeared over the center of the village. They were so dense and widespread that they plunged the entire village into darkness.

Shocked, everyone looked to the sky.

The priests had said that today would be sunny. Their weather predictions were quite accurate, being that they were based on magic and knowledge gained over long years of experience. Thus, it was quite a surprise that their weather forecast had turned out wrong.

However, the strange thing was that there were no clouds in the sky except in the air directly above the village. It was as though someone had summoned those clouds into being there.

This strange scene continued to play out.

The clouds began revolving around the village, and as they did, they spread out to cover a wider area. It was as though the sky was being rapidly eaten away by these mysterious clouds.

This was highly unusual.

The Lizardman warriors hurriedly prepared for battle. Their children fled into the houses. Zaryusu lowered his stance and glanced around himself, one hand

closing around Frost Pain's hilt.

The dark clouds now filled the air overhead, but in the distance one could still see the blue sky. The clouds only covered the village. It was at this moment that he heard a sound made by Lizardmen, which came from the center of the village. It was a shrill piping carried on the wind.

It was a warning. It warned of a powerful enemy, and the need to flee right away. As he heard the warning, Zaryusu immediately began running through the marshes, at what passed for a sprint among Lizardmen. He ran and he ran and he ran some more.

While it was hard to sprint in the wetlands, Zaryusu kept his balance by shifting his tail's position. With a speed no human being could attain — granted, Lizardmen were better suited for this terrain — he reached the place from which the warning had come. Zaryusu and the warriors formed a circle that looked at the center of the village. His eyes followed theirs, and soon he was staring as well.

Their many lines of sight converged on one place — a monster which resembled a cloud of roiling black mist.

Countless dreadful, ever-changing faces emerged from within the mist. The faces belonged to many races and species, but the one thing they all had in common was the fact that they all bore agonized expressions.



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The wind carried the sounds of weeping, cries of agony, the gnashing of teeth and the last gasps of the dying to them. The endless tide of spine-chilling noise made Zaryusu shiver in fear.

...This is bad ...We should let the others flee so Ani-ja and I can take care of this. But if we do that ...

Zaryusu was easily one of the top combatants among the scattered tribes, and yet even he was afraid of the powerful undead being before him.

Right now, the only people who could hold their own against this sort of opponent were probably himself and his elder brother. The most important thing was that Zaryusu still did not know what special abilities that undead creature possessed.

Glancing around, he noticed that all the warrior Lizardmen around him were panting and nervous, like frightened children.

The monster which had seized the center of the village had not made a single move yet.

He did not know how much time had passed. In this tense atmosphere, the slightest movement, even that of the wind blowing against the grass, might signal the beginning of a cataclysmic battle. The best proof of that was the warriors, who were slowly edging towards their foe. They shrugged off the immense stress bearing down on them and moved.

Zaryusu saw Shasuryu draw his sword from the corner of his eye. With a speed to match his, Zaryusu raised his weapon as well. If there was to be fighting, their plan was to take the lead and charge the enemy before anyone else.

This shouldn't count as reckless if we manage to reveal the enemy's special abilities to everyone...

The tension in the air grew thicker — and then the wails suddenly stopped.

The monster spoke with the voices of many, blended together into one. Unlike the vague, unfocused curses from earlier, this voice had a clear purpose.

CHAPTER 1: DEPARTURE

“—Listen well. I am a minion of the Supreme One, come to relay a message to you.”

A wave of commotion spread through the crowd. Everyone looked at each other. Only Zaryusu and Shasuryu remained focused on the monster.

“I formally proclaim that your days are numbered, for the Supreme One has dispatched his troops to eliminate you. However, in his mercy, the Supreme One shall grant you the freedom to fight — however futile it might be — for your lives. Eight days from now, your tribe shall become the second sacrifice among the Lizardmen tribes of this lake.”

Zaryusu’s face turned feral. He bared his teeth and gave voice to a threatening growl.

“Struggle with all your might, then. The Supreme One shall delight in mocking your efforts.”

The mist-like, polymorphic monster floated into the sky.

“Do not forget — in eight day’s time ...”

The monster floated into the clear blue sky, toward the forest. As the other Lizardmen watched it leave, Zaryusu and Shasuryu merely stared into the distant heavens.

2

The largest hut in the village — the one which typically served as a meeting place — saw little use under normal circumstances. After all, the chief held absolute authority within the village, so there was hardly any need to hold meetings. Thus, it was a meeting place in name only. However, a bizarre energy filled the hut today.

It was currently jam-packed with many Lizardmen, and the originally spa-

cious interior was now very cramped. Apart from the warrior Lizardmen, the priests, hunters, elders, and the traveller Zaryusu were present. They sat cross-legged on the ground, looking towards Shasuryu.

As the tribe's chief, Shasuryu announced the beginning of the meeting, and then the head of the priests was the first to speak.

She was an aged Lizardwoman, her body painted with sinister-looking white markings. Apparently they had some sort of significance, but Zaryusu did not know what that significance was.

“Does everyone remember the clouds that covered the sky? That was magic. I know of two spells which can control the weather. The first is 「Control Weather」, a spell of the sixth tier. However, that cannot be the case here, because a magic caster who could wield such magic would be a legendary figure. The other is a spell of the fourth tier, 「Control Clouds」. Only a powerful magic caster could work such a spell, and only a fool would oppose such a person.

The similarly-painted priests nodded in approval from where they were lined up behind the High Priestess.

Zaryusu understood how powerful that was, but many others could not understand how powerful the spell was even after being told that it was magic of the fourth tier. The room soon filled with puzzled muttering.

The High Priestess looked baffled, unsure of how to explain the situation to them. Then, she pointed to one of the Lizardmen. Said Lizardman had a baffled expression on his face as well, and pointed to himself.

“Yes, you. Do you think you could beat me in a fight?”

The indicated Lizardman hurriedly shook his head.

He might be able to win if the fight was limited to weapons, but if the use of magic was also allowed, then his odds of victory were slim. No — slim did not cover it; a mere warrior like him would have no chance at all.

“Even so, someone like me can only use magic of the second tier at best.”

“In other words, that person’s twice as strong as you, High Priestess?”

The High Priestess did not know who had asked that question, but she sighed and shook her head as she heard it.

“It isn’t just being twice as strong. Anyone who can use fourth tier spells could kill our chief easily.”

She fell silent after qualifying her statement with, “Well, it’s not a given, but it’s very likely.”

Now that they knew how powerful fourth tier spells were, the interior of the meeting hall fell silent. Then, Shasuryu spoke again:

“So what you’re trying to say, High Priestess, is that—”

“I think we’d be better off fleeing. We stand no chance no matter how hard we fight.”

“What the hell are you saying!?”

An imposing-looking Lizardman leapt to his feet with a bass growl. He was easily the size of Shasuryu, and he was the Head Warrior of the tribe.

“You’re telling us to run without a fight!? How could we flee from mere threats!?”

“—Are you retarded? I’m saying that by the time we fight, it’ll be too late for us!”

The High Priestess jumped up as well, her angry eyes locked with those of the Head Warrior. Both of them began growling in low, dangerous tones. Just as the words “powderkeg” flashed through everyone’s minds, a cold voice spoke:

“...Get a grip, both of you.”

The Head Warrior and the High Priestess blinked, like they had been struck by a bolt from the blue. Then, they turned to look at Shasuryu. They apologized, and then sat down.

“Head Hunter, tell me what you think.”

“...I understand the opinions of the Head Warrior and the High Priestess, and agree with what they have to say.”

Shasuryu's question was answered by a skinny Lizardman. That said, calling him skinny was doing him a disservice; his build was more on the wiry than the musclebound side.

“Therefore, since there is still some time, should we not carefully observe the changes around us? The opposition says they will send an army, so it makes sense that they will encamp. That requires a lot of preparation work, so why don't we decide after seeing what the enemy does?”

There's no point going back and forth while we don't know anything — murmurs to that effect could be heard in the background.

“—Elders.” “I can't make a decision here. All the opinion stated have their merits. The rest is up to you, our chief.” “Muu ...” Shasuryu's eyes shifted and met Zaryusu's. His gaze seemed to convey an approving nod. Thus, with a feeling like he had been gently pushed forward from behind — and perhaps into danger — Zaryusu raised his hand to share his opinion. “Chief, I would like to say something.”

The attention of all the Lizardmen converged on Zaryusu. Everyone looked expectantly toward him. Of course, some of those eyes were filled with anger.

“How dare you address us, traveller! You should be glad we allowed you in here at all!” came the rebuke from one of the elders.

“Now sit down and—”

There was a loud thump of a tail forcefully striking the ground. It cleaved the elder's words in half like a sharp blade.

“Shut up.”

There was a frightening undertone to Shasuryu's voice. It was laced with the

low growling any Lizardman made when they were angry. Nobody dared interrupt him when he was like this, and the tension in the hut rose like the tide. The mounting heat in the air froze solid.

Just then, one of the elders spoke up. However, he had not realized that there were many reproachful looks directed at him, urging him not to cause any more problems.

“But Chief, you can’t give him special treatment even though he might be your brother. Travellers are—”

“Did I or did I not tell you to shut up?”

“Uuu ...”

“Everyone at this meeting was invited because they have some relevant insights on the issue. Is it strange to ask a traveller his opinion?”

“But travellers are—”

“Your Chief has declared that it is fine. Or are you saying that you intend to defy my orders?”

Shasuryu turned his eye from the now-silent elder to the other tribal leaders.

“High Priestess, Head Warrior, Head Hunter, do you also think there’s no point in hearing him out?”

“There is value in Zaryusu’s words,” the Head Warrior replied before anyone else. “No warrior would reject the opinion of the one who bears Frost Pain.”

“I think so too. It’s worth listening to him,” the Head Hunter said in a casual tone. The last was the High Priestess, who simply shrugged and replied:

“Of course we should hear him out. Only an idiot would choose to ignore the advice of an experienced individual.”

The council of elders frowned under this barrage of mockery. Shasuryu nod-

ded at the replies of the three leaders, and then raised his chin to indicate that Zaryusu should speak. While still seated, Zaryusu said:

“If I had to choose between fleeing or fighting, I would choose the latter.”

“Oh ...and why is that?”

“Because it is the only real option we have.”

Normally speaking, he would have to explain his reasons for saying so if the chief asked for them, but Zaryusu did not elaborate. His attitude seemed to say, *That’s all there is*.

Shasuryu cupped his chin with his hand, and he looked like he was deep in thought.

...Don’t tell me you’ve realized it as well ...Ani-ja.

As Zaryusu struggled to keep his thoughts from showing up on his face, the High Priestess spoke up, a discomfited expression on her face.

“...Still, can we win?”

“Of course!”

The Head Warrior shouted with an intensity that could evaporate the unease in the air, but the High Priestess merely narrowed her eyes.

“...No, I think given our present situation, our chances of victory are very low.”

Zaryusu answered on her behalf, denying the Head Warrior’s words.

“...And what do you mean by that?”

“Head Warrior, the enemy should be fully aware about us — about our fighting strength. Otherwise, they would not sneer so openly at us. That being the case, if we fight them with our current strength, we will not be able to win.”

Then what should we do? As that thought flickered through everyone's minds, Zaryusu concealed his true intentions and seized the initiative:

“That means we'll need to defy their expectations ...does everyone still remember that war from the past?”

“Of course,” someone replied.

Nobody here was stupid enough to have forgotten the incident that had happened several years ago. Or rather, they would have remembered the fighting no matter how stupid they were.

Seven tribes had occupied this marsh in the past. They were the Green Claw, Small Fang, Razor Tail, Dragon Tusk, Yellow Speckle, Sharp Edge, and Red Eye tribes.

However, only five of those tribes remained now.

That was because there had been a war which had taken many lives and wiped out two tribes.

The cause of that war had been the inability to catch enough fish to feed their people. Eventually, the hunters were forced to leave their territory and fish outside it. Every tribe had done this.

Before long, the hunters from each tribe encountered each other at their fishing spots. Since this matter concerned the food supplies of their respective tribes, they could not back down.

Soon enough, arguments turned to violence, and that violence claimed lives.

After that, the warriors of each tribe began travelling with their hunters to back them up, and thus battles broke out over food.

The war dragged in five of the seven tribes, with the Green Claw, Little Fang, and Razor Tail tribes on one side against the Yellow Speckle and Sharp Edge tribes. It became a state of total war that did not just involve their warriors, but even the average male and female Lizardmen.

After repeated all-out battles, the alliance containing the Green Claw was victorious, while the other two tribes were so worn down they could not function as tribes any further and disbanded. However, the tribeless Lizardmen were absorbed by the Dragon Tusk, who had not taken part in the fighting.

The irony was that the lack of food which had led to the war was solved by the decrease in the Lizardman population in the marsh, because everyone who survived now had enough fish to live on.

“What does that war have to do with what’s happening now?”

“Think about what our enemy said. He mentioned that this village was ‘the second.’ That implies that they sent messengers to other villages, right?”

“Oh ...”

Murmurs of understanding rose from the crowd as they realised what Zaryusu meant.

“In other words, you want to reform the alliance, then!”

“...No way.”

“He’s right. We should renew our alliance.”

“Like the war from the past ...”

“Does that mean we could win?”

The whisperings from the gathered Lizardmen grew louder and louder. Everyone within the hut talked about the plausibility of Zaryusu’s suggestion, but Shasuryu remained silent. He did not seem like he was going to speak. Zaryusu did not dare look his brother — and that gaze of his which seemed to see through his thoughts — in the eye.

After enough time had passed for everyone to discuss the matter, Zaryusu spoke again.

“I hope you don’t get the wrong idea. What I mean is for us to ally with all the tribes.”

“Say what?”

The Head Hunter — who was the second person present to realize what he was getting at — exclaimed in surprise. Zaryusu stared intently at Shasuryu, and every Lizardman in their way cleared a path for them.

“I would suggest forming an alliance with the Dragon Tusk and the Red Eye tribes as well, Chief.”

That bombshell sent ructions through everyone present.

They had not had any prior dealings with the Dragon Tusk and Red Eye tribes, and they had abstained from fighting during the tribal war. In addition, the Dragon Tusk had taken in the survivors of the Yellow Speckle and Sharp Edge tribes, so it made sense to consider them a potentially problematic tribe in future.

Still, if they could ally with those two tribes, it would form a five-tribe alliance.

If it worked out, they might have a chance to survive. Just as everyone dared hope for that, Shasuryu asked tersely:

“Who will be our envoy?”

“Let me go.”

Zaryusu’s prompt answer did not startle Shasuryu. He knew Zaryusu well, and in all likelihood, he had already anticipated an answer like this. The lizardmen around them murmured about how there was no better candidate for this, but one person expressed his dissatisfaction.

“—Sending a traveller?”

It was Shasuryu. His icy-cold gaze pierced Zaryusu.

“That’s right, Chief. This is an emergency, and if the other side won’t hear me out because I’m a traveller, then they’re not worth allying with.”

Zaryusu returned the cold stare. After looking at each other for a while, Shasuryu smiled sadly. Perhaps he had given up on his brother, or on persuading him from his course, or he had already acknowledged that he was the best man for the job, but it was a genuine, unclouded smile.

“—Take the Chief’s seal with you.”

The seal symbolized that the bearer acted with the chief’s authority, and it was not something a traveller could be allowed to possess. Several members of the elder council made to speak, but they withered under Shasuryu’s keen glare and swallowed their words.

“Thank you very much.”

Zaryusu bowed deeply in thanks. After that, Shasuryu continued:

“...I will appoint our envoys to the other tribes. First—”



Night fell, and with it came a cool breeze. The humidity and heat made the marshlands feel oppressively hot, but once night came, that feeling slowly subsided. In fact, once the night winds blew it even felt a little chilly. Of course, these changes in the weather meant nothing to the Lizardmen and their thick hides.

Zaryusu padded along the marsh, headed for his pet Rororo’s home.

While there was still some time, an emergency might crop up. In addition, there was no guarantee that the enemy might stick to their agreement, and they might do something to impede Zaryusu. After considering these factors, Zaryusu came to the conclusion that riding Rororo out was the best course of action.

The sound of Zaryusu's footsteps slowed down, and eventually they stopped. He carried a pack filled with all manner of items, which shuddered mightily as he ground to a halt. The reason why he had stopped was because he saw a familiar-looking Lizardman emerge from behind Rororo's hut, under the moonlight.

They exchanged glances, and then the black-scaled Lizardman tilted his head in puzzlement at the stationary Zaryusu. Then he closed the distance between them.

“—I've always felt that you ought to have been Chief.”

This was the first thing that Zaryusu's elder brother Shasuryu had said since he had approached him.

“...What are you saying, Ani-ja?”

“Do you remember the war?”

“Of course.”

Zaryusu had been the one who had brought it up before the tribe — how could he not remember? Then, he realised that Shasuryu had probably been thinking the same thing as well.

“...Do you know how much I regretted branding you when you became a traveller after the war? I thought that I should have tried to stop you, even if I had to do so by force.”

Zaryusu shook his head. His brother's face from back then was still stuck deep in his heart.

“...But because you granted me permission to be a traveller, I could return after learning how to farm fish.”

“You could probably have figured out a way to do that by staying in this village. A smart man like you ought to be leading us.”

“Ani-ja ...”

One could not take back the events of the past. Therefore, talking about maybes was meaningless at this point. Still, were they discussing these matters because they were actually weak inside?

No, that could not be.

“...I’m telling you this, not as the tribe’s chief, but as your brother. I’m not going to ask, ‘Will you be all right by yourself?’ but you must come back safely. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Zaryusu smiled at those words.

“Of course. I’ll come back after completing my mission. It ought to be easy.”

Shasuryu went “Muuu,” and then smiled bitterly.

“So if you fail, I’ll be helping myself to the fattest fish in your farm, then?”

“Ani-ja, that sort of thing doesn’t bother me. And really, saying things like that at this juncture doesn’t make you look strong at all.”

“...Muuu.”

And then, the two of them smiled.

Eventually, they looked at each other again, with serious expressions on their faces.

“Then, are your intentions merely to secure an alliance?”

“...What are you saying? What are you trying to say?”

Zaryusu’s eyes narrowed, and then he thought, *Crap*. Given his brother’s keen insight, his reaction just now was very bad for him.

“...You seemed to be holding something back during the meeting. It was almost

as though you were trying to guide everyone's thoughts."

Shasuryu continued speaking to the dumbfounded Zaryusu.

"...I believe that one of the reasons for that war was because the petty disputes between each tribe went away and the number of Lizardmen increased."

"Ani-ja, please don't say any more."

Zaryusu's iron tones only seemed to lend credence to Shasuryu's words.

"So ...that was it."

"...It's the only way to keep a war like that from happening again."

Zaryusu spoke those words with a hint of resignation in his voice. He felt his scheme was a wicked and despicable one. If possible, he would like to have kept it from his brother.

"...Then, what do you plan to do if the other tribes refuse an alliance? There's no way we can compete with them if our people have been depleted by flight and warfare."

"If that happens ...we'll have to eliminate them first."

"So we're going to start by killing our own people?"

"Ani-ja ..."

As he heard the pleading note in Zaryusu's voice, Shasuryu laughed, as though he thought nothing of it.

"I understand. There's nothing wrong with your way of thinking. In fact, I agree with it too. The leader of a tribe must concern themselves with the survival of their tribe, so don't worry, brother."

"Thank you. Then, shall I bring the other tribes to our village?"

“No. If that monster was telling the truth, our village will be the second target. So in all likelihood, the fiercest fighting will occur at the first village to be attacked. Under normal circumstances, it would be best to gather at one of the later targets or at a more defensible village. However, if our villages are burned down, life after the war will be very hard for us. Therefore, it would be best to make our stand at the first village to be attacked. As for communications ...I’ll ask the High Priestess to keep in touch with you using magic, so could you guide the other leaders directly to the rendezvous point?”

“I understand.”

It would be difficult to send a lot of information using the spell his brother had in mind, and it would not work at all if the distance between them was too great. It was a barely passable communication method. However, Zaryusu felt that it would suffice, given the circumstances.

“Also, I’ll be taking the fish in your farm as rations.”

“Naturally. However, I hope you’ll leave the fry and the young fish. The farm’s just gotten on track recently, and even if we have to abandon the village, sparing the fry will help the farm in future.”

“I promise you that. Then, how many people can those fish feed?”

“...If you include the dried ones, there should be enough for about a thousand people.”

“Is that so ...then our food problem will be solved for the time being.”

“Mm, I’ll leave that to you. Then, I’ll be heading out, Ani-ja. Rororo?”

A serpent head poked itself from the window in response to Zaryusu’s call. Its scales gleamed wetly in the pale moonlight. They sparkled faintly as their angle changed, producing a scene of phantasmal beauty.

“We’re heading out. Can you come to me?”

Rororo looked at Zaryusu and Shasuryu, and then pulled its head back in. That

was followed by a burbling and the sound of something heavy on the move.

“Then, Ani-ja, I’d like to ask you something. How many people do you plan to evacuate? Depending on the circumstances, I may need to use that number as a negotiation tool.”

Shasuryu only hesitated for a moment before answering:

“...Twelve warriors, twenty hunters, three priests, seventy males, one hundred females ...and some of the children.”

“...I see. I get it.”

Zaryusu fell silent after seeing Shasuryu’s tired smile. Then, the sound of water splashing echoed through the oppressive atmosphere. The two of them looked to the sound’s source, and they smiled nostalgically.

“Muu ...It’s grown up pretty well. I was quite shocked when I entered its hut.”

“Mmm. Same here, Ani-ja. I didn’t think it’d get so big. After all, it was pretty small when I found it.”

“I find that hard to believe. After all, it was already quite big by the time you brought it back to the village.”

Just as the two of them reminisced over the way Rororo looked when it was young, four serpentine heads popped out of the water near the hut. They approached Zaryusu and Shasuryu.

Just then, the serpent heads suddenly reared up, revealing a massive form hidden within the water. Its four reptilian heads were joined to its body by long necks, and said body had four legs.

It was a magical beast — a Hydra.

That was the name of Rororo’s species.

It was no simple snake, given the fact that it made chewing noises when Zaryusu

had tossed it fish.

Rororo was five meters long, but it was a nimble navigator, and soon made its way to Zaryusu's side.

Like a monkey climbing a tree, Zaryusu gracefully clambered onto Rororo's body.

"You must come back safely. Also, don't worry too much about things. Getting worked up and shouting, 'I won't let anyone die today' is your style."

"...It seems I've grown up a little now."

Shasuryu snorted as he heard this.

"And so the brat has become a man who can stand on his own ...Forget it. In any event, take care of yourself. If you don't return, then we'll know who to attack first."

"I'll come back safely. Wait for me, Ani-ja."

After that, the two of them looked at each other — their eyes brimming with emotion — and then, they parted ways.

3

There were many rooms on the Ninth Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. The private quarters of the guild members and the NPCs notwithstanding, there was also a large bath, a dining room, a beauty salon, a clothing shop, a convenience store, a skin care center, a manicure parlor, and many other such things. A stunning variety of facilities were available here, encompassing just about every form of service or good imaginable.

These facilities were largely meaningless in the game. They had most likely been created because their creators were sticklers for detail and wanted the

Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick to fit the image of an arcology. Alternatively, it might have been a psychological response to the miserable living conditions they faced in the real world.

And then, there was the interior of one of these rooms.

It was run by the Sous-Chef of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. While he normally showed his skills in the dining room, on certain times and dates, he would come to this place to prepare food for all to enjoy.

This room was themed to resemble a small cocktail bar with few regular patrons, and the interior was gently lit with dim lamps.

It contained a liquor cabinet, a counter, and eight chairs before it. Though the room was simply furnished, the Sous-Chef thought of it as “a place where people could quietly drink in peace.” This place which he had been granted was like his personal fortress, and it filled him with satisfaction.

However, a few minutes after receiving this first-time customer, he realised that the atmosphere was directly related to the nature of its clientele.



Glug glug glug, fuwaaah~

Judging by the sound, the customer in question had just finished a drink in one gulp.

As he cleaned a wineglass, the Sous-Chef idly thought, *If you want to drink like that, there's better places for you to be.*

And indeed, there was a social bar and a club on the Ninth Floor, so there was no need for her to come here and drink like this.

With a thump, the glass — probably a shotglass, judging by the size — slammed down on the counter. The Sous-Chef struggled against the anger which threatened to twist his face.

“Give me another!”

Sous-Chef obliged, filling the glass once more. After pouring distilled vodka into it, he added some No. 1 Blue food coloring.

Then, he gently mixed it before handing it over.

“This drink is called ‘Maiden’s Tears.’”

He had made the name up on the spot as the girl before him gave him a doubtful look. Apparently, she had never seen a drink being mixed before, because her expression immediately turned to one of gratitude.

“Oh, so the spreading blue color represents tears, then?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

He spoke that lie without any hesitation whatsoever.

She raised the glass and downed it in one gulp, like she was polishing off a coffee milk after a hot bath.

Then, like before, she slammed the glass down on the counter with all her might.

“Hoo, I think it’s getting to me.”

“Well, you have been drinking it too quickly. How about going back to rest for tonight?”

“...No. I don’t want to.”

“I see ...”

Sous-Chef picked up his glass and began polishing it again. His irritation built as the girl stared at him.

If you want to say, it, then just come out and say it. That’s why women are so

troublesome. My clients should be elegant gentlemen, not annoying women. Can I ban women from this place ...I guess not. That would disrespect the Supreme Beings. Still, that was a mistake on my part.

This woman had been invited here by nobody other than himself. When he had met her on the Ninth Floor, he had seen her from behind and worried that she was depressed. Thus he had made conversation with her, something which he now regretted. Still, since he had invited her here as a guest, then he ought to treat her as a bar's owner would.

I need to be hospitable, even if I am serving her drinks I've slapped together out of whatever's handy!

After preparing himself, he asked a question.

“Is something wrong, Shalltear-sama?”

In that moment, the girl — Shalltear — opened her mouth. It would seem she had been waiting for that question for a long time.

It would also seem that his guess had been off the mark.

“Sorry, I don't want to talk about it.”

Are you kidding me!? — and then his face wrinkled in a frown. However, Shalltear could not interpret the facial expressions of Myconids, and so she did not comment on it. Instead, she used her finger to toy with the glass before her.

(TL Note: Myconids are mushroom creatures. Sous-Chef is one of them)

“I think I'm a bit drunk.”

“...Really now.”

...As if.

Shalltear might have felt that she was drunk, but Sous-Chef was utterly convinced that it was not the case.

Drunkeness was similar to being poisoned. Thus, it was impossible for someone who was immune to poison to get intoxicated. As one of the undead, Shalltear was immune to poison, so she could not possibly be drunk. The fact was that the people who came here removed the items which made them immune to poison, or they came to enjoy the atmosphere while knowing that they would not get drunk.

Still, Shalltear believed that she was drunk. That was probably true — she was intoxicated by the ambience.

Just as Sous-Chef was wondering what he should do next, he heard a most wonderful sound. He turned and bowed to its source.

“Welcome.”

“Hi, Peaky.”

He had gained that nickname because he looked quite similar to a certain mushroom. The person who had addressed him by that nickname was one of his regular customers — Assistant Head Butler Eclair. He was accompanied by the manservant who was carrying Eclair by his waist.

Eclair was deposited onto one of the stools, as was customary. This was because Eclair was only one hundred centimeters tall and had trouble climbing onto the stools by himself.

He was baffled by why two of his customers — who were seated side by side — had not greeted each other. Then, he glanced over to Shalltear and found that her head was lowered and she seemed to be muttering to herself. He could faintly make out something which sounded like an apology to the Supreme One (Ainz Ooal Gown).

With a somewhat exaggerated motion, Eclair signalled for a drink.

“I’ll have that one.”

“Understood.”

There was only one drink which came to mind when he said “that one.”

That would be a ten-colored cocktail made with ten different liquors — Nazarick.

Not only was the cocktail visually attractive, but its taste was pleasing to the palate. His frequent customers approved mightily of it and felt that it was worthy of the name “Nazarick,” but this was not something he would recommend to others.

Sous-Chef had experimented repeatedly to fine-tune the flavor, but he did not know when it would be complete.

With practiced movements, he poured the ten-colored cocktail and placed it before Eclair.

“This is for you, miss.”

And then, what followed was a *whoosh* and a *crash*.

Perhaps Eclair was trying to slide the glass across to her over the counter, but only a manga character or a very skilful person could do so. A penguin was neither.

He picked up the fallen glass and breathed a sigh of relief after he saw that it was undamaged. He wiped up the spilled liquor and then fixed Eclair with an unhappy look:

“Could I trouble you not to flail around with your flippers? If you insist on doing so, I will have you carted out in a bucket.”

“...My sincerest apologies.”

Shalltear raised her head. It would seem she had realized Eclair’s presence thanks to their two-man act.

“Ara, if it isn’t Eclair? It’s been a while.”

“It’s been a ...Well, it seems I keep running into you whenever you come to the

Ninth Floor.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Still ...I didn’t expect to find you here. I always thought only Demiurge came here, among the Guardians. I believe once he came here to drink with Cocytus.”

“Oh, really?”

Shalltear’s eyes went wide as she heard about her colleagues.

“Still, what happened to make you like this?”

“I just made a big ...no, I made a terrible mistake. So I came here like a dejected Guardian to drown my sorrows in drink.”

A puzzled look came over Eclair’s face, and he asked the sous-chef with his eyes, *What’s with this girl?* However, he did not know either, so all he could do was shake his head in response.

However, he still hoped that everyone could be happy here while they drank. With that in mind, Peaky suggested something which surprised the two of them.

“How about trying something to change your moods? A glass of apple juice, perhaps?”

The two of them froze as they heard this.

“Made with apples harvested from the Sixth Floor.”

Those words seemed to interest them, and they nodded in unison. He was pleased to see their earnest response.

Soon, he had two cups of ordinary-looking apple juice on the counter. Sous-Chef glanced to the manservant, wondering if he wanted any as well, but the offer was silently declined as usual.

Naturally, he had a straw for Eclair, who was an avian.

“It tastes delicious.”

“It’s pretty good, but it lacks impact ...perhaps it’s not sweet enough?”

That was the feedback the two of them gave after downing their drinks in one shot.

“Well, it can’t be helped. I’ve had those apples before and they’re not as sweet as the ones stored in Nazarick.”

“Is there an apple tree on the Sixth Floor? I don’t recall one.”

Apparently, Shalltear had heard of that before, because she answered before he could.

“Could those be the apples Ainz-sama brought back? I heard from Albedo about a plan to replenish our consumables, where we’d grow seeds from the outside in Nazarick to see if they would bear fruit.

Peaky had heard of that as well.

He had also been ordered to use all sorts of food from the outside to make dishes, in order to see if they could boost their eaters’ stats.

“Yes, I heard that too. If it works out, there’s going to be an orchard too. However, it just isn’t sweet enough.”

“No, it’s not undrinkable yet. Perhaps this fruit juice would be perfect if you wanted to cleanse your palate.”

“...Still, who’s planting them? Aura and Mare are both outside ...Are the magical beasts in charge of it?”

“No, no, that would be the Dryad Ainz-sama brought back from the outside.”

Eclair’s face seemed to be saying, “Who?” In contrast, Shalltear’s seemed to

be saying “Ah!”

“...I see, so this is a case of the right person for the job. Could it be that Ainz-sama was thinking about something like this from back then?”

“What’s the matter? Has someone new come to Nazarick?”

Shalltear answered Eclair’s question. He had seen the Dryad before, but he did not know the details. Thus, he pricked up his ears and listened.

The Dryad had been brought back after that battle to gauge the Guardians’ ability to fight as a group. Apparently, there had been some sort of deal made with the Dryad which resulted in the Dryad being brought to Nazarick to be an apple farmer.

“Which means Nazarick is constantly improving and growing, right?”

The two of them nodded at Eclair’s words.

He was the Sous-Chef, so he was not quite sure about the details of this matter and the future plans for the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. However, he now understood that the last Supreme Being who remained here, Ainz Ooal Gown, was attempting to conserve their strength in this world and planning to grow his power further.

“I see. That means that in future, Nazarick might have many more newcomers like the Dryad ...am I correct?”

Shalltear puffed up her cheeks in displeasure after hearing Eclair’s words.

“...I certainly hope not. How can we let these trash walk freely about the places which the Supreme Beings built?”

He felt the same way too. He could not help but frown as he thought about the dwellings of the Supreme Beings being stained by outsiders. However, there was one thing which overshadowed these feelings.

“Still, we have to bear with it, because that is Ainz-sama’s will.”

CHAPTER 1: DEPARTURE

The word of the Supreme Being, Ainz Ooal Gown, was absolute. If he said that something white was black, then it would certainly turn black.

“I, I don’t intend to defy Ainz-sama’s decision!”

The other two nodded to the shrieking Shalltear.

“Then, we will need to be ever more loyal to Ainz-sama, as examples for the masses. Of course, I feel that nobody other than you will betray Ainz-sama.”

“Exactly. Ah yes, Shalltear, what do you think? Right now, I can guarantee you a lofty position—”

Eclair began his usual — and never successful — recruitment spiel, but it was drowned out by a bizarre cry.

“Noooooooo~”

Shalltear grabbed her head as she shrieked before them.

Her moaning was filled with pledges of loyalty.

“...What happened? Her tone seems different from usual.”

In response to Eclair’s question, Sous-Chef merely shook his head and shrugged:

“Who knows?”

Chapter 2| Gathering, Lizardmen

1

The sun was high in the sky after half a day's ride on Rororo. Zaryusu reached his destination without encountering any of the enemies he had been worried about.

There were several houses here which resembled those of the Green Claw tribe, surrounded by barricades of sharpened stakes pointing out on all sides. The gaps between the stakes were fairly large, but they were enough to keep away monsters like Rororo. There were fewer structures here than in the Green Claw tribe, but each of them was larger.

Therefore, he could not determine which tribe had more people.

Each building flew a flag which waved in the wind. Said flag was emblazoned with the Lizardman symbol for “Red Eye.”

Indeed, this was the first destination Zaryusu had picked —the tribal dwelling place of the Red Eye tribe.

After looking around, Zaryusu breathed a sigh of relief.

Fortunately, they still lived where his past information had told him they would be. He had feared that they had migrated after the previous war, and he would have to start by finding their tribe.

Looking back at the direction from which he came, Zaryusu saw his own village at the limits of his vision. They must surely be preparing an ample welcome for their incoming guests. While he had felt uneasy when he had left his village, he was quite certain now that they would not be attacked.

The best proof of that was Zaryusu's safe arrival here.

While he was not sure if that was an oversight by that so-called Supreme One or if this development fell within the predicted scope of events, it would seem the enemy did not intend to go back on their word, and neither did they intend to stop the Lizardmen from preparing themselves.

Of course, even if the forces of that Supreme Whatever did show up, Zaryusu had no choice but to follow through with all his might.

Zaryusu dismounted from Rororo and stretched lazily.

Although riding Rororo for long periods of time made his muscles stiff, stretching like that filled him with comfort.

After that, Zaryusu indicated that Rororo should stay where he was and wait. Then, he took out some dried fish from his saddlebags and fed them to Rororo for brunch.

Originally, he had intended to have his people bring their rations here, but he could not give that order because it might have damaged the Red Eyes' hunting grounds.

After patting all of Rororo's heads, Zaryusu set forth by himself.

If he had kept Rororo by his side, the presence of the Hydra might leave the other side too wary to come out and speak. Since Zaryusu had come to propose an alliance, he did not want to pressure them unduly.

Water splashed around his feet as he advanced.

From the corner of his eye, Zaryusu noticed several warriors of the Red Eye tribe following his movements from within the barricade. Much like the warriors of the Green Claw tribe, they wore no armor and carried long spears, each of which was essentially a long stick tipped with a sharpened head of bone. Others carried slings, but the fact that none of them had discharged projectiles at him suggested that they had no intention of attacking right away.

Zaryusu did not wish to agitate them either, so he slowly drew closer until he reached their main gate. Then, he turned to the Lizardmen watching him warily, and shouted at the top of his voice:

“I am Zaryusu Shasha of the Green Claw tribe! I seek an audience with your chief!”

After some time, an old Lizardman holding a gnarled staff arrived. He was trailed by five strapping members of his tribe. The old Lizardman’s body was painted with white designs.

Is he their High Priest?

Zaryusu cut an impressive figure even as he stood there waiting.

Currently, they were equals. Thus, he could not show any sign of weakness. Zaryusu remained still even as the priest inspected the brand upon his chest.

“I am Zaryusu Shasha of the Green Claw. There is something I must discuss with you.”

“...Though I do not wish to welcome you, our leader has decided to grant you an audience. Come with me.”

This roundabout reply left Zaryusu somewhat confused.

What baffled him was why he did not call their leader “chief.” In addition, they had not asked him for any proof of his identity. That said, it would be troublesome if he spoke too much and upset them. With a vague sense that something was wrong, Zaryusu followed behind the group of Lizardmen.



He was taken to a well-appointed little house.

It was easily larger than Zaryusu’s brother’s house, back in his village. The walls were decorated with designs drawn with rare paints, implying the high

status of its occupant.

Curiously enough, this house lacked windows, though it had ventilation holes scattered throughout its walls. Like any other Lizardman, Zaryusu could see just fine in the dark. However, that did not imply they enjoyed living in darkness.

That being the case, why did this leader live in a dark little hut like this?

Questions like that popped up in Zaryusu's mind, but nobody would answer them for him.

Looking back, he saw that the priest and the warriors who had led him here were nowhere to be found.

When he had first heard the people leading him tell everyone else to leave, he had thought they were being too careless, and he had almost asked why they had done this.

However, once Zaryusu learned that the request came from the village's leader — its acting chief — his respect towards the person within the hut only grew.

Zaryusu had promised his elder brother that he would return safely, but that did not imply he had to come back unharmed. Surrounding him with armed warriors to apply pressure would do no good. Rather, if they had done that, he would have been disappointed at their lack of insight.

However, if the opposition had already anticipated that, and put on this great show for him...

Does that mean I'll be dealing with a skilled negotiator...

Zaryusu purposely ignored the people watching him from afar. He marched up to the door and loudly shouted:

“I am Zaryusu Shasha of the Green Claw tribe! I was told that this tribe's leader was here! May I request an audience?”

A faint voice came back, granting him entry. It was a female voice.

Zaryusu entered without a moment's hesitation.

As expected, the interior was pitch-dark.

While he possessed darkvision, the dramatic change in light levels made Zaryusu blink.

An acrid odour hung in the air, possibly from some kind of herbal concoction. Zaryusu had expected an aged female, but the voice easily shattered that pre-conception of his.

“I bid you welcome.”

The voice had come through a door from the interior of the dark room, so he had assumed that it must have belonged to someone old. But now, he realised that her voice was young and full of vigor.

As Zaryusu's eyes finally adjusted to the ambient light, the form of a Lizardman resolved itself within his field of vision.

Snow white.

That was the first thing Zaryusu thought when he saw her.

Her scales were as white as snow and bright as day, clean and free of imperfections.

Her round, shiny eyes were crimson, glowing like rubies. Her slender body was not masculine, but feminine.

Her body was covered in red and black tribal designs indicating that she was an adult, that she knew many spells...

...And that she was unmarried.

Dear reader, have you been stabbed by a lance before?

Zaryusu had. It was a searing pain that made him feel that something hot had been forcefully pressed against his body, an agony that pulsed through his body in time with the beating of his heart. Zaryusu experienced something like that.

Only, it did not hurt, but—

Zaryusu stood silently in his original position.

His counterpart's reaction to his silence was unreadable. With a mocking smile, she asked:

“It would seem even the bearer of Frost Pain —one of the Four Treasures — regards me as an aberration as well.”

In the wild, albinism was a very rare condition. That was because albinos were very obvious and they had a hard time surviving the rigors of life.

The same applied to the Lizardmen, who possessed some degree of civilization. That was because they lacked the technology to enable people who feared the sun and had poor eyesight to survive. As a result, there were very few adult albino Lizardmen, and some were even killed at birth.

Among the Lizardmen, being considered a mere nuisance was already quite good. In the worst-case scenario, some were even regarded as monsters. That was the meaning of the mockery in her smile.

However, none of that applied to Zaryusu.

“—What's wrong with you?” the surprised female inquired of Zaryusu, who was frozen solid at her doorstep.

Zaryusu's answer was a cry that grew high-pitched near the end, with some warbling in the middle.

The Lizardwoman's eyes went wide and her jaw dropped slightly. It encompassed her surprise, confusion, and embarrassment.

That sound was known as a mating call.

After realizing the foolish act he had unconsciously performed, his tail swished back and forth; the Lizardman equivalent of a human blush. It thrashed so violently that it seemed as though the house would be torn down.

“Er, ah, no. No, that’s not it. I didn’t mean that, I—”

Zaryusu’s panicked reaction seemed to calm the female down. Her teeth ground against each other in a creaking laugh, and then she tried to comfort him in an exasperated tone.

“Please calm down. It’ll be quite troublesome for me if you lose control here.”

“Ah! Sorry.”

After apologizing, Zaryusu entered the hut. By now, the Lizardwoman’s tail lay flat on the ground. It would seem she had finally managed to regain her composure. Still, its tip twitched and shuddered, which hinted that she had not completely calmed herself down yet.

“This way, please.”

“—Thank you.”

The female ushered Zaryusu to what looked like a seat on the ground that looked like it had been woven from plant fibers. She took a place opposite him once he sat down.

“Pleased to meet you. This one is a traveller from the Green Claw tribe, Zaryusu Shasha.”

“Thank you for your formal introduction. I am the acting chief of the Red Eye tribe, Crusch Lulu.”

After introducing themselves, the two of them studied each other, as though conducting an appraisal of their counterpart.

The brief silence filled the hut, but it could not last. Zaryusu was a guest, so it fell to Crusch — as the host — to speak first.

“Then, Your Excellency, let’s not stand on ceremony. I would like us to be able to speak freely, so it’ll be all right to relax.”

Zaryusu nodded in response to the request for openness.

“I’m grateful for that. The fact is, I’m not used to speaking formally myself.”



“Now then, why have you come here?”

Crusch had an idea already, despite her question.

The mysterious undead being had appeared in the center of their village, and it would seem someone else had used cloud-controlling magic of the fourth tier — 「Control Clouds」. In addition, the visitor was a Lizardman hero from another tribe.

Thus, there could only be one answer. Just as Crusch was wondering how to react to Zaryusu, she heard an answer which completely exceeded her expectations.

“—Please marry me.”

—

—?

—!

“Ah—?” For a moment, Crusch wondered if her ears had been mistaken.

“Granted, that’s not why I came. In addition, I know very well that this sort of thing ought to come after we’ve finished discussing business. However, I can’t

deny what I feel in my heart. I suppose you can mock me as a foolish male.”

“Uu, er, mm. Oh ...”

After hearing these words that she had never heard before since birth, and which she believed would never be directed at her, a storm of chaos tore Crusch’s heart apart, and she was completely unable to focus.

Zaryusu smiled bitterly as he saw Crusch in that state, and continued:

“I’m sorry, I really am. I shouldn’t be doing something like that at a time like this. I don’t mind if you tell me your answer later..”

“Er, um ...hm.”

At great length, Crusch had finally managed to gather her thoughts once more, or at the very least she had managed to begin thinking again. In any event, she finally calmed down, but as Zaryusu’s words appeared in her mind, she felt as if her head would burn up at any moment.

She studied the face of the male opposite her, taking care not to let herself be noticed as she sized up his stoic expression.

I can’t believe he can be so calm after saying that sort of thing to me ...does he make proposals like that often? Or is he used to having people court him ...Granted, he is very handsome ...Ah! What am I thinking!? This must be his scheme... yes, that’s right. Clearly, he’s just trying to wind me up. Besides, it’s not as though anyone would pro-propose to someone like me ...!

Having never been treated as a woman before, she was thrown into turmoil by this experience. She did not notice the way the tip of Zaryusu’s tail twitched slightly. The male before her was also struggling to control his emotions and keep them from erupting forth.



2章 集う、蜥蜴人

Thus, silence passed between them for a time. It would take a while before the two of them could cool their heads, heated by feverish thoughts.

After enough time had passed for them to regain their composure, Crusch realized that they should return to the original topic for now.

Just as Crusch thought to ask Zaryusu about his reasons for coming to this village, she recalled what he had just said.

How could I ask something like that!?

Crusch's tail slapped the ground with a *thwap*. The male before her shuddered, as though he had been physically struck.

Crusch panicked, realizing that this was very rude behavior.

Even if he was a traveller, he was still a representative of his tribe. Neither was he an ordinary Lizardman, but a hero who bore Frost Pain. This was not the attitude she ought to be taking with someone like that.

But it's all your fault! Just hurry up and say something already!

Zaryusu had chosen silence because he was embarrassed about what he had done, but Crusch had not discerned that as she tried to put a lid on the volcano within her heart.

The silence continued. Realizing that this could not go on, Crusch made up her mind and decided to change the subject.

“Given that you're not afraid of the way I look, I imagine you must be very brave, am I wrong?”

As he heard Crusch's self-deprecatory reply, Zaryusu replied with an expression that seemed to say, *What nonsense are you spouting?*

What on earth is he thinking, anyway? Crusch thought.

“I said, do you not fear this white body of mine?”

“...It’s like the snow that covers the mountains.”

“...Eh?”

“—It is a beautiful color.”

And of course, he would have to say the one thing which nobody had ever spoken to her before.

What, what is this man saying!?

Unable to bear the strain from within, the lid on Crusch’s emotions burst off, never to be seen again.

Seeing Crusch at a total loss for what to do next, Zaryusu casually reached out and touched Crusch’s scales. His hand grazed over those lustrous, beautiful, seemingly-polished scales — which were somewhat cool to the touch.

“*Shaa!*” Crusch gasped in what sounded like fright.

That sound seemed to cool their heads off somewhat.

Both of them knew something was happening to them, but they could not hold themselves back. Panic filled them. Why had he been unable to control himself and touched her? And why had she let him do it? These questions became anxiety, which in turn became confusion.

In the end, their tails thumped repeatedly on the ground, so forcefully that the entire house seemed to shake.

Before long, their eyes met, and they realized the state of each other’s tails. Then, their tails froze mid-motion, as though time had stopped for them.

“...”

“...”

One could describe the mood in the air as heavy. The word “tense” would

also be quite applicable. Silence descended upon them once more, and they studied each other as stealthily as they could manage. After that, Crusch finally managed to compose herself. With a look in her eyes which said that she would not let any lies get by her, she asked:

“...Why ...did you do that all of a sudden?”

While Crusch had not adequately expressed what she wanted to say, Zaryusu seemed to have picked up on her meaning, and gave a direct and honest answer.

“I believe that’s what they call love at first sight. Also, we might die in this battle, so I didn’t want to leave any regrets behind.”

Crusch was left dumbfounded at how to reply to Zaryusu’s earnest confession. However, there was something within those words which she could not accept.

“...So even the bearer of Frost Pain feels he might die?”

“We don’t know about the enemy, so we can’t take them lightly ...Did you see the monster they used to relay their message? The one which came to our village looked like this ...”

Zaryusu handed Crusch a sketch of the monster in question. She looked it over, and nodded.

“Mm, it’s the same one.”

“Do you know what kind of monster it is?”

“No. Nobody else in my tribe knows, for that matter.”

“Is that so ...Well, I’ve seen a monster like that before ...”

Zaryusu’s voice trailed off here, and then he studied Crusch’s reaction after saying, “I ran from it.”

“—Eh?”

“I didn’t beat it. Or rather, it nearly killed me.”

After realizing how potent that monster was, Crusch breathed a sigh of relief. It would seem holding the warriors back had been the right thing to do.

“That thing can confuse one’s mind with its wails, and it’s an incorporeal creature. Unenchanted weapons are useless against it, so I couldn’t overwhelm it with numbers.”

“We druids have spells which can temporarily enchant weapons ...”

“...Can you defend against mental attacks, then?”

“We can improve resistance to such attacks, but protecting everyone’s minds is beyond me.”

“I see ...can all priests cast spells like that?”

“Almost any priest can bolster resistances, but I’m the only one in my tribe who can ward against confusion.”

Crusch realised that Zaryusu’s breathing was somewhat ragged. It would seem he had realized that Crusch’s position was not for show.

Indeed, Crusch Lulu was a veteran druid, and her powers were probably in excess of any other High Priest among the Lizardmen.

“...When will the Red Eye tribe be attacked?”

“They said we would be the fourth.”

“Is that so ...then, what do you plan to do?”

Time passed.

Crusch debated the merits and demerits of telling him. The Green Claw tribe would surely choose to fight, and Zaryusu was most likely here to secure an alliance to fight with them. How could she turn that to the advantage of the

The Red Eyes had never intended to form an alliance. They had intended to flee. After all, fighting anyone who could use fourth tier spells was foolish in the extreme. There was no other conclusion they could draw given that their opposition could deploy the undead as well.

However, would it really be wise to tell them that?

As her thoughts swirled within her head, Zaryusu narrowed his eyes, as though he was going to bare his soul to her.

“Let me state my honest opinion.”

Crusch did not know what Zaryusu would say next, and kept her eyes trained on him.

“What worries me is what will happen after we evacuate.” Crusch had no idea what Zaryusu was talking about. Zaryusu calmly explained himself.

“Do you think you can continue living as you always have after leaving a familiar place?”

“I don’t think so ...no, it would be close to impossible, right?”

If they left this place and built a new life elsewhere, that would entail entering a new environment. They would have to bet their lives in a struggle for life and death — for survival — and win. And in truth, the Lizardmen were not the rulers of this lake. They had fought for years to carve out their niche in these wetlands. A race like theirs could not easily uproot themselves and thrive in unknown territory.

“That is to say, it might be difficult just to find food and shelter, am I correct?”

“Indeed,” Crusch replied in a somewhat shrill tone that conveyed her doubts.

“Then, what would happen if the five tribes all tried to evacuate at once?”

“This—!”

Crusch was speechless, because she had already divined Zaryusu’s true intentions.

The area around the lake was spacious, but anywhere that a particular tribe fled to would also be hotly contested territory for the other tribes. In other words, just moving to a new place would spark a battle for survival. On top of that, they would all be fighting over the fish that was their staple food. What would happen if events unfolded in that way? For all they knew, something terrible might occur, like that war from the past.

“So you’re telling me ...the reason why you want to fight despite our lack of confidence is ...”

“...Yes. It is not just a matter of my own tribe, but I have also considered how to thin the ranks of the other tribes.”

“What kind of a reason is that!?”

That was why he wanted them to close ranks and fight. Even if they lost, the number of Lizardmen would be decreased.

The idea was a radical one — the idea that everyone was expendable besides the warriors, hunters, and priests. Yet, she could understand the rationale behind it. Or rather, when one took a long view of things, sacrificing everyone else was the wisest choice.

If there were fewer Lizardmen, they would not need so much food. In that way, the various tribes might be able to coexist in harmony.

Crusch searched for some way to deny that idea of his.

“—You’re telling me that you want to reduce our numbers and make a new life elsewhere without even knowing how dangerous our new home will be?”

“Then let me ask you this — what happens if we easily win the battle for our survival? When the supply of fish runs low, will the five tribes slaughter each

other again?”

“For all we know, it might be easier to catch fish in future!”

“And what if it isn’t?”

Crusch had no idea how to answer Zaryusu’s cold retort.

Zaryusu seemed to be assuming the worst-case scenario while planning, which seemed like an extreme position to Crusch. If they did as she was thinking, then a tragedy would play out when times got tough. However, if they did as Zaryusu implied, then said tragedy might be averted.

In addition, even if the adult Lizardmen died in battle, it would be a glorious death for them.

“...If anyone refuses our proposition, then we will have to march against them first.” His low tones made Crusch shiver.

What he meant was that he would not allow the Red Eye tribe to migrate elsewhere with their numbers undiminished.

It was a sensible conclusion, and a very appropriate one.

When the depleted tribes ran into the Red Eye tribe — whose strength was undiminished — they would be at risk of annihilation. In order to avoid that, the only choice they had was to assault any tribes which did not choose to join the alliance. It was a perfectly rational decision to make from the perspective of a leader whose people were in danger, and if she were in his position, she might well have made that decision as well.

“I feel that so long as we form an alliance, even if we lose, there will be a minimal chance of us killing each other when our tribes relocate to new lands.”

Crusch did not understand the meaning of those words, and her ignorance showed on her face. It was then that Zaryusu decided to explain himself in simpler terms.

“I feel that the alliance will foster a spirit of mutual cooperation and change our perspectives. Everyone will be comrades who have shed blood together, and not people from different tribes.”

“So that’s it,” Crusch murmured as enlightenment dawned on her.

In other words, the tribes which had fought alongside each other might not necessarily descend into violence once food ran scarce. However, given Crusch’s opinion and her past experiences, she wondered if they could reach such a state.

Just as Crusch lowered her head and began her contemplation, Zaryusu asked:

“Come to think of it, how did your tribe survive that period, anyway?”

Crusch jerked her head up, like she had been jabbed by a needle. She turned stiffly toward Zaryusu, who had a look of surprise on his face.

So he really didn’t know about it before he asked.

While they had not known each other for a long time, Crusch had a rough grasp of Zaryusu’s personality, and her instincts told her that his question posed no threat to her tribe.

Crusch narrowed her eyes and stared at Zaryusu, as though trying to penetrate him with her piercing gaze. She knew that Zaryusu would be confused about why someone was looking at him like that, but even so, she still had to do it.”

“—Must I tell you?”



Her tone was filled with disdain and resentment. So great was the change that it made Zaryusu wonder if he was speaking to someone else.

However, Zaryusu would not back down here, because this was potentially a lifeline that could save everyone.

“I would like to hear it. Was it by the power of the priests? Or was there another way? Perhaps there might be a way to save—”

Zaryusu cut his words off halfway.

If there was really a way to save everyone, then the look on Crusch’s face would not have been so bitter.

Perhaps Crusch had sensed what Zaryusu was thinking, but she laughed, as though to mock herself.

“You’re right. There’s no way to save everyone.”

She stopped here, and smiled tiredly.

“We resorted to cannibalism — eating our dead comrades.”

The incredible shock left Zaryusu speechless. Killing the weak — reducing their numbers — was not forbidden, but eating one’s fellow man was an unclean practice, a taboo among taboos.

Why is she telling me this? Why is she telling me something she should have kept a secret all her life, to someone outside the tribe — to a visitor? Could it be that she doesn’t intend to let me leave alive ...no, it doesn’t seem like that.



Even Crusch was surprised at why she was telling Zaryusu all this.

She knew very well that her tribe would be vilified for it. But why—

And then she continued speaking, as though her mouth were no longer under her control.

“At that time — during the tribal war — our tribe was in dire straits due to a lack of food. However, we did not participate in the fighting because our tribe had more priests and comparatively fewer warriors. The priests could create

food with magic.”

As though under the control of another will, Crusch carried on.

“However, the food that the priests created with magic was little more than a stopgap measure, and our tribe was slowly and surely heading towards destruction. However, the chief suddenly brought back some food one day; fresh red meat.”

—Perhaps, I wanted to confess ...my sins to him.

The sound of Crusch gnashing her teeth filled the air.

The male before her listened silently. If he was repulsed by it, he showed absolutely no sign.

Crusch was thankful for that.

“Everyone had an idea of what that meat was. There had been strict laws laid down, and those families who violated them had been exiled. The chief only brought that meat back after those exiles had left. But everyone ignored their suspicions and ate the meat in order to survive. Of course, things could not go on like that forever. Everyone’s pent-up feelings reached a head, and then they exploded.”

Crusch closed her eyes and recalled the face of the previous chief.

“We, who ate that meat ...even when we knew what it was ...we were guilty of the same crime as the chief. When I think about it now, it almost seems laughable.”

After she finished her monologue, Crusch looked Zaryusu in the eye. As she saw no sign of revulsion in his eyes, a secret thrill of delight ran through her, followed by surprise at her joy.

Why was she so happy about this?

Crusch began to realize the answer to that question.

“...Please look at me. Sometimes, people like myself appear in the Red Eye tribe. When they grow up, they develop some form of special ability — in my case, I was talented at priestly magic. Therefore, I was in the running to be the next tribal chief ...and so I raised my banner in revolt against the chief. That battle split the tribe in two, but we won because we were stronger.”

“And so your stores of food were now adequate because your numbers had decreased?”

“Yes ...and in the end, our tribe survived. When we rebelled, the chief held out until the bitter end, and he died after being covered in countless wounds. Before he received the fatal blow, he looked at me and smiled.”

The words slipped painfully from Crusch.

That was the guilt which had been festering in her heart ever since she killed the previous chief.

She could not confess these sins of hers to the people who had stood by her, complicit in her treason. But now, she could unburden herself to Zaryusu. That was why she was going on and on about the past.

“It was a smile which I did not expect from someone looking upon the person about to murder them. There was no hatred, resentment, hostility, or malice there — it was such a beautiful smile! I was wondering ...could it be that the chief had done all this after taking everything else into consideration? In contrast, we were merely acting out of hostility and idealism. The chief was the one in the right! And after the chief died — that is to say, after the scapegoat for all our sins had been killed — our tribe united once more. In addition, he left us the parting gift of solving our food shortage!”

By now, Crusch had already reached her breaking point.

She had struggled for so long with her guilt and the burden of becoming the acting chief. Thus, when she let herself break down, she would do so with tremendous force. However, Crusch swallowed the impending deluge inside her, because she knew that if she allowed her thoughts to fall into chaos, she might not even be able to speak.

A quiet sobbing filled the air. Biologically speaking, it was an insignificant amount of tears, but the fact was that on a psychological level, she had been broken to the point of weeping.



What a frail little body she had.

In the natural world, weakness was intolerable. While children were still a protected group, there was little difference between male and female Lizardmen; all of them valued strength. From that point of view, he should be scorning the female before him. After all, how could the leader of a tribe show weakness before a member of another tribe — before a stranger?

However, Zaryusu thought differently.

Perhaps he felt that she was a beautiful female, but more than that, she seemed to him like a warrior. She was a warrior who had been wounded, who was panting and in despair, but yet she continued forging ahead. Zaryusu felt that this was merely revealing her vulnerable side.

If she was still willing to stand up and advance, then she was not weak.

Zaryusu leaned close, and gently wrapped his arms around Crusch.

“—We are not all-knowing, and each of us might make a different decision in a different situation. If it were me, I might have done the same thing. But I don’t want to try and comfort you or anything, because there’s no such thing as a right answer in this world. All we can do is to choose to move on, and I feel that even after all the regret and misery and the wounds that cover the soles of your feet, all you can do is choose to press forward.”

The warmth of their bodies flowed into each other, and the tiny tremor of their heartbeats went with it. For a moment, it felt as though their hearts were slowly syncing up with each other.

What a strange feeling.

This was a warmth Zaryusu had never felt before in his life. It was not because he was embracing a Lizardman.

Could it be that it's because I'm holding this female — Crusch Lulu — in my arms?

Before long, Crusch wriggled free of Zaryusu's chest.

Zaryusu briefly regretted the departure of her warmth, but he kept silent because he did not know how to express that feeling.

“It seems I've embarrassed myself in front of you ...do you think less of me now?”

“What do you mean, embarrassed? Do I look like the sort of male who would laugh at someone who carried on moving forward despite their wounds and worries about the future? ...But I think you look very beautiful.”

“—!”

“—!”

The white tail curled, and slapped repeatedly at the ground.

“...Oh dear.”

Zaryusu did not inquire about what Crusch had meant by those words. Instead, he asked another question.

“Right, does the Red Eye tribe raise fish?”

“Raise?”

“Yes, as in breeding and nurturing fish to be eaten.”

“We don't do that, because fish are a blessing from nature.”

From what Zaryusu could tell, no Lizardman tribe had ever practiced fish breed-

ing. That was because they felt that growing their own food was a form of blasphemy.

“That seems to be what the priests — what the druids think. Could you try to change their minds and persuade them to raise fish to fill their bellies? The priests in our tribe seem to have accepted that.”

Crusch nodded.

“Then, I shall teach you how to raise fish. The important thing is their feed; you need to feed them with the fruits conjured by druidic spells. The fish grow large and fat when fed on those.”

“Is it really all right for you to tell me the secrets of fish-rearing?”

“Of course. There’s no point hiding it. It’s more important that I help as many tribes with that as possible.”

Crusch bowed deeply to Zaryusu and lifted her tail in thanks.

“You have my utmost gratitude.”

“You ...Well, you don’t have to thank me, but in return, I’d like to ask you something again.”

The emotion disappeared from Crusch’s face, and that shift in attitude calmed Zaryusu’s heart down.

This was a question he could not evade. Zaryusu took a deep breath, and so did Crusch.

And then, Zaryusu asked:

“What does the Red Eye tribe intend to do about the coming battle?”

“...After what we discussed yesterday, we are currently in favor of fleeing.”

“Then, acting chief Crusch Lulu, let me ask you one more time — do you still

feel the same way?”

Crusch could not answer him.

It was only natural to hesitate, given that this concerned the fate of the Red Eye tribe.

However, Zaryusu could do nothing about that response but force a smile to his face.

“...You have to make that decision. I believe the reason why the previous chief smiled at you was because he was entrusting you with the tribe’s future. That being the case, now is the time to live up to his trust in you. That’s all I have to say. The rest is up to you.”

Crusch’s round eyes panned around the room. It did not imply she wanted to flee or seek help, but that she was searching for the right answer within her heart.

No matter how it ended up, all Zaryusu had to do was accept her answer.

“As acting chief, may I ask how many people you intend to evacuate?”

“For the time being, we are planning to evacuate ten warriors, twenty hunters, three priests, seventy males, one hundred females and some children.”

“...As for the others?”

“—Depending on the circumstances, we might have to let them all die.”

Crusch stared off into empty space and murmured:

“—Really now.”

“Then, please give me your answer, acting chief Crusch Lulu of the Red Eye tribe.”



Crusch considered her options.

She could kill Zaryusu. Personally speaking, she did not want to do that, but it was a different matter in her capacity as acting chief.

How about killing him and fleeing with the rest of the village? Crusch abandoned that line of thought, because it was an extremely dangerous gamble and it concerned their future. Besides, there was no guarantee that he really had come alone.

Then, how about agreeing with him and then running away with everyone?

That would probably be problematic too. If they tried to be clever and messed up instead, it might lead to a war with the Red Eye tribe — one that would lead to an extermination of their people. After all, their intention was to reduce the population, and it did not matter who had to die for that to happen.

Ultimately, if he did not receive an answer agreeing to an alliance, he would probably lead an army to the Red Eye tribe to destroy them.

However, she did not know if Zaryusu had realized there was a flaw in that plan. The problem of food scarcity still remained.

Then, enlightenment dawned on Crusch, and she smiled. There had never been a way out to begin with. From the moment Zaryusu had proposed the alliance; from the moment he had suggested they work with the Green Claw tribe—

The only way for the Red Eye tribe to survive was to ally with them and join the battle together. Zaryusu should have realised that as well.

Even so, he wanted Crusch to give her answer. He probably wanted to see if Crusch — the leader of her tribe — was worthy of standing beside him as his comrade.

After that, all that was left was to speak her decision.

However, if she told him, many people would surely die. Still—

“Let me get one thing straight. We are not fighting to die, we are fighting to win. I may have said a lot of things that made you uncomfortable, but as long as we beat the enemy, we can laugh it all off. I hope you understand that.”

Crusch nodded to show that she understood.

He was a compassionate male. With that, Crusch replied with her decision:

“...We, the Red Eye tribe, will join you, because I do not wish to make the previous chief’s smile meaningless, and also because I want to give the Red Eye tribe its best shot at survival.”

Crusch bowed deeply, and lifted her tail.

“—Thank you very much.”

Zaryusu nodded, and his firmly erect tail spoke more of his emotions than his words ever could.



It was morning.

Zaryusu looked toward the main gate of the Red Eye tribe’s village, from where he stood in front of Rororo.

His mouth opened, and a yawn slipped out. He was still feeling a little tired, because he had been sitting in on the tribal meeting of the Red Eye tribe until late last night. However, time was of the essence, and he had to visit another tribe by today.

Zaryusu furiously battled the spectre of sleep, but he lost his fight and yawned again, louder than before.

While Rororo was hardly a stable ride, for some reason he felt that he could still fall asleep on top of it.

Zaryusu glanced at the sun, which seemed bright yellow despite having just risen, and then he looked back at the main gate. A feeling of confusion came over him, because something strange had walked out from it.

It was a bundle of grass.

It was a set of garments that had been made with long strips of cloth and stuffed full of long grasses. If it lay down on the marsh, it would look like a pile of weeds from a distance.

Ah, where have I seen a monster like that before—

As Zaryusu recalled the sights he had seen as an adventurer, Rororo growled in a threatening fashion from behind him.

Of course, Zaryusu knew who that pile of weeds was. There was no doubt about it. After all, her white tail peeked out from it.

As he stared dumbly at the swaying tail and absentmindedly rubbed Rororo to calm it down, the pile of weeds had already drawn up to Zaryusu.

“—Good morning.”

“Mm, good morning ...it seems you’ve gathered the tribe.”

He looked toward the dwellings of the Red Eye tribe. It was filled with a frantic energy, with many Lizardmen running back and forth. Crusch stood aside to watch, and then replied:

“Mm, there were no problems with that. We should be able to reach the Razor Tail village by today, and we’ve already picked out the people that we’re going to evacuate.”

According to the spells cast by the priests from the village, the Razor Tail tribe was the first to be attacked. The fact that the first tribe to be attacked was not

the Dragon Tusk tribe was a godsend when they considered the time they had left.

“Then, why are you coming with me, Crusch?”

“The answer is simple, Zaryusu. But before I answer you, tell me this — what do you intend to do next?”

After the long meeting that had lasted from evening to the middle of the night, neither of them felt uncomfortable about addressing each other by their first names. Even the way in which they spoke had changed, probably because they had come to be familiar with each other.

“After this, I intend to visit another tribe — the Dragon Tusk tribe.”

“They’re the tribe that values strength over all things, right? I’ve heard that they have the greatest fighting power of all the tribes.”

“Mm, that’s right. Since we haven’t had much contact with them, we’d best prepare ourselves for anything.”

Everything about them was shrouded in mystery, so even proceeding to their domain was a very risky matter. In addition, they had absorbed the survivors of the two tribes which had been disbanded during the previous war, so that made things even more dangerous.

Zaryusu had distinguished himself during that war, so he would be a hated nemesis for the survivors of those two tribes.

Even so, they were the tribe whose strength they most needed during the upcoming conflict.

“So that’s it ...Then it would be better for me to accompany you.”

“—Why?”

“Is it strange?”

The weed pile rustled softly. Zaryusu had no idea what those words meant because he could not see her face.

“It’s not strange ...more that it’s very dangerous.”

“Is anywhere safe during these times?”

Zaryusu could not reply to that. When he thought calmly about it, there were many advantages to bringing Crusch along. However, as a male, he did not want to bring the female he loved to a place where he knew great danger was waiting.

“—I really can’t calm down.”

He could not see Crusch’s face inside the weed pile, but she seemed to be smiling.

“...Then I’ll ask you another question. Why are you dressed like that?”

“Is it ugly?”

It was not ugly so much as bizarre. However, would it be better to praise her for it? Zaryusu did not know how to answer, but after some thought, he sized up the expression he could not see and replied:

“...Well, I should say it looks good ...does it?”

“As if.”

Crusch shut him down with a flat denial. That was probably why Zaryusu felt weak all of a sudden.

“It’s simply because I don’t deal well with sunlight. Thus, I need to dress up like this whenever I go outside.”

“I see ...”

“Ah, you haven’t given me your answer yet. Will you let me come with you?”

No matter what he said to her, it would all be pointless. Having her around would be advantageous to his aim of forging an alliance. She must have suggested as much because she felt the same way. Thus, there was no reason for him to refuse her.

“...I understand. Then, please lend me a hand, Crusch.”

With a sense of joy that seemed to come from the bottom of her heart, Crusch replied:

“—I understand. Leave it to me, Zaryusu.”

“Are you ready to set out?”

“Of course. My pack is filled with everything I need.”

After hearing that, Zaryusu looked at her back and found a bulge there. The thick scent of fresh grass and other herbs came from it. Since she was a druid, she ought to have skills pertaining to herbs and the like, so it must be filled with such materials.

“Zaryusu, you look tired.”

“Uh, yes, I do feel a bit weary. The past two days have been pretty busy, so I haven’t had time to sleep.”

Just then, a white-scaled hand emerged from under the mass of weeds.

“Here. This is a Rikiriko fruit. Eat it, skin and all.”

The hand proffered him a brown-colored fruit. Zaryusu placed it into his mouth and bit down on it without hesitation.

A bitter taste filled his mouth, chasing away his fatigue. While it was barely passable in terms of flavor, after chewing it several times, an explosion of flavor bloomed on his tongue. In addition, even the breaths he exhaled had the same taste on them.

“Muu! What’s this cool sensation that’s filling my head?”

Zaryusu had unconsciously adopted his elder brother’s verbal tic. Crusch could not help but giggle as she saw him.

“Your desire to sleep has gone away, right? But the fact is that it isn’t really gone, so don’t get too used to it. It would be best to find somewhere to rest.”

Every breath Zaryusu took in and released filled him with bliss, as did the full-body sensation of coolness. He replied:

“Then, I’ll take a nap while I’m on Rororo.”

Saying that, Zaryusu immediately mounted Rororo. He was followed by Crusch. While Rororo glared at Zaryusu due to the sinister feeling of a pile of grass climbing astride it, Zaryusu finally managed to calm it down.

“Then, let’s go. The seating isn’t very stable, so you’d best hang on to me.”

“All right.”

Crusch’s arms encircled Zaryusu’s waist. The prickles from her weed outfit made Zaryusu feel itchy.

“...”

Zaryusu frowned. This was not what he had imagined.

“—Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s go. Rororo, I’ll leave it to you.”

What exactly was making her so happy? Crusch’s cheerful laughter came from behind him, and as Rororo lurched on, Zaryusu was all smiles.

The Great Forest of Tob was silent under the oppression of its new rulers. That was because all the living beings here had gone into hiding, afraid of the gaze of those who held power over them.

However, that was not the case for a specific area of the forest.

The sound of tree-cutting and logs being moved filled the air in that place.

There was a Golem which resembled a piece of heavy machinery — a Heavy Iron Machine — which carried logs to a massive wooden structure that was still under construction.

It looked like it would take a long time before that building was complete. While it occupied a large area, the portions which had actually been constructed were surprisingly small.

A group of undead and Golems worked there.

Among these undead were Elder Liches who wore eye-catchingly bright red robes.

Every now and then, they would be approached by demons that were roughly thirty centimeters tall — small monsters with bat wings and coppery-red skin, called Imps. The Imps kept their slender tails — which were tipped with venom-dripping stingers — out of the way lest they get in the way of the Elder Liches' work.

One hardworking Elder Lich unfurled the blueprints he was holding and gave orders to one of the Golems under him.

The Golem obediently stopped what it was doing and compared the worksite before him to the blueprints, before pausing to cogitate. Shortly after, it spoke to the Imp on its shoulder.

After hearing it out, the Imp indicated that it understood, and took wing.

Flying with ungraceful movements, the Imp opened its eyes and took in the surrounding area. Before long, it found its target and swooped down.

Said target was the Guardian of the Sixth Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick — Aura Bella Fiora. In other words, she was one of the people who now ruled this forest.



The Dark Elf Girl rolled up her scroll into a megaphone so her voice would carry out to a long distance. The Imp landed before her and bowed deeply, whereupon she asked in a familiar tone:

“All right~ and which group are you from?”

“Aura-sama, I come from Number 3 in U Group.”

“U Group, huh? All right, Got it. Anything else?”

The work crews here were divided into named after the vowels from “A” to “O,” and they were assigned to work on different areas. From what Aura could remember, U Group was assigned to the storehouse. Progress on that was the second fastest among all the other areas.

“There’s a discrepancy in the thickness of the timbers used in construction, so could we please have more time—”

The Imp suddenly shut up, because the steel band around Aura’s wrist suddenly made a sound.

“Break time~!”

Aura’s face changed as she heard that lazy, yet cheerful voice. Her ears drooped and she looked oddly vulnerable and embarrassed.

“Got it, Bukubukuchagama-sama!” she answered the wristband.

“So, uh, it’s time to eat, so we’re done working for the morning.”

Hardly any of the monsters here needed to eat. In fact, Aura was also wearing a Ring of Sustenance, which eliminated the need for food or sleep. However, her master had insisted that “everyone must take breaks from time to time,” so she had to obey him despite her wishes.

“Ah, sorry about you, but I need to rest, so come back in an hour’s time.”

“Understood. Then I shall take my leave first.”

The Imp bowed and flew off amidst a storm of noisy flapping.

As she watched the Imp fly off towards the storehouse, Aura worked her shoulders, and then glanced down at the band around her wrist.

Then, her face was all smiles.

This was a reward her master had given her for her hard work. Of course, the Guardians had been created to serve their master and the Supreme Beings, so working hard for them was a fundamental fact of life. Thus, they should not have accepted a reward, as their labor was only a matter of course.

However, she could not refuse the band her master had given her.

“Kukuku, I want to hear more of Bukubukuchagama’s voice.”

Aura tenderly caressed the band on her wrist. That gesture was more loving and gentle than how she stroked her own beasts.

All the voices recorded into this item came from the Supreme Being who had made Aura.

They filled Aura with delight, even if all they did was tell the time.

She had felt jealous when she learned that her brother (Mare) had received a Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown, but in all honesty, she felt that this item was better.

“Ehehehehe~”

Aura’s ears drooped and she caressed the band with an embarrassed look on her face. Then she nodded in satisfaction as it gleamed in the sunlight. But shortly after that, she tilted her head in bafflement.

“Why did Ainz-sama say that I could not set it for certain times?”

Ainz-sama had commanded that the watch not be set to state the times of 07:21 or 19:19, among others.

“Hm ...I might as well ask him. Ah, crap!”

After noticing the time which floated above the watch, she hurriedly rushed off.

There was a maid at her destination.

The forty one maids who served the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick were heteromorphic creatures called Homunculi. All of them resembled beautiful women. However, she did not.

She had the head of a dog that was divided down the middle by a line — it resembled a scar, complete with traces of stitching. It looked as though her face had been split in half and joined back together again.

Her name was Pestonya S. Wanko.

She was the Head Maid of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, and a high-level cleric.

“I have brought the hamburger over as you wish, Aura-sama. The side dishes are two pickles and unpeeled french fries, while the drink is cola ...wan.”

The delay before the “wan” made Aura think that she had forgotten to add her verbal tic at the end of her words, but Aura did not comment on it. Her attention was focused on the smell that tantalized her tummy and made her drool in anticipation. While the ring she wore meant that she did not need to

eat, it did not make her unable to do so. In addition, eating was a pleasurable activity, especially when it came to such delectable cuisine.

“The combined effects of this food and drink are—”

“Ah, no need for that. I didn’t ask you to make this for me just to boost my stats.”

“Understood -wan.”

Aura approached Pestonya and the dinner service she was pushing, which emanated a delicious scent.

“Time to eat, time to eat~!”

Pestonya whipped the silver lid off the tray as Aura intoned her eating-rhyme.

“Ohhhhh~”

Aura’s eyes were glued to the food as it revealed itself, and at the same time she blurted out something which came to mind.

“A7 beef mince is good, but I prefer mixed mince. I hope you can make a triple patty with that meat.”

“Then, I shall inform the Head Chef of your wishes -wan.”

“Mm, thank you!”

Aura picked up the entire tray and giggled as she strode off.

3

As Zaryusu examined the village of the Dragon Tusk tribe which lay before his eyes, a pile of vegetation thrust itself forward from beside his head. Needless

to say, that mass of leaves was actually Crusch. She reached out to pull away the vegetation covering her face, which Zaryusu felt was very beautiful.

“Are you really going to charge right in? Do you want to pick a fight with them?”

“No, it’s the exact opposite, actually. The Dragon Tusk tribe places great value on strength. If I left Rororo behind and went in on foot, I might end up being challenged by all sorts of people before I even got to their chief. Entering while on Rororo’s back will avoid that sort of trouble.”

After advancing with Rororo for some distance, it would seem they had been spotted, because several warriors emerged from the village, each brandishing a weapon and eying Zaryusu and his group.

Rororo sensed their hostility and let out a low growl. As he heard Rororo’s growl of warning, he urged it forward.

Continuing on like this would spark a confrontation. Zaryusu went on until conflict was almost inevitable before stopping Rororo and hopping down from it. Crusch jumped down as well.

Quite a number of warriors stared daggers at the two of them. Their gazes seemed to inflict a palpable pressure; this was no longer mere hostility, but on the level of murderous intent.

Crusch seemed shaken by their gazes and froze. That was because she was not experienced with the battlefield, despite her potent abilities as a druid.

In contrast to her, Zaryusu strode forth. He shielded Crusch with his body and shouted:

“—I am Zaryusu Shasha, a representative who has come to visit. I seek an audience with your chief!”

His powerful voice blew away the bloodlust in the air. The tables were turned on the warriors of the Dragon Tusk, who flinched as they were shaken by him.

Then, Crusch raised her voice and stated her name.

“I am Crusch Lulu, acting chief of the Red Eye tribe. I too seek an audience with your chief.”

Though her voice was not loud, it was filled with the assurance and confidence of one who bore the fate of her tribe on her shoulders. Spurred on by the manly and proud voice of the male beside her, the cowering girl from just now was nowhere to be seen.

“I say again! I am here to see the chief! Where is he!?”

In that moment — a ripple ran through the air. It was as though raw emotion had been transformed into a shockwave, which washed over them.

Rororo’s heads thrashed wildly. Its jaws gaped and it gave voice to a menacing roar, glaring angrily around itself. As the hydra’s roaring echoed from all around, the air seemed to shrink away from it, as though in fear.

“...There’s no need to protect me from small things like this.”

“I didn’t do it to protect you, because you chose to come here of your own free will. However, I was the one who destroyed their tribe, so I should be the one to bear their vengeful gazes.”

The warriors started gathering at the entrance of the village. All of them were heavily muscled and imposing Lizardmen. Their bodies were covered in faded scars, which implied that they were grizzled veterans. However, Zaryusu did not see their chief among them.

All of these Lizardmen were mere warriors. None of them had the fearsome stature of his brother, nor did any of them have anything like Crusch’s unusual looks or her air of authority.

As Rororo roared, the Lizardmen remained on edge. And then—

“Ngk!”

—Crusch gulped and squeaked. However, Zaryusu had already sensed the arrival of another Lizardman and remained unmoved. That was because he had already sensed the slow approach of a mighty being even before it had made its appearance.

Still, he could not help but stare at the Lizardman before him.

Simply put, that Lizardman was a monster.

Facing them was a gigantic male Lizardman who was in excess of two hundred thirty centimeters in height. That alone would not have qualified him as monstrous, but that was not the only reason it was described as such.

For starters, his right arm was extremely large and bizarre in appearance, like the oversized claw of a fiddler crab. No, his left arm was hardly slender, being about the same as Zaryusu's. It was merely his right arm which was abnormally thick, and it had not become that way because of a mutation or disease, but simply because of sheer muscle mass.

The ring finger and little finger were missing from his left hand.

A scar continued back from the edge of his mouth, possibly caused by some sort of injury. His tail was flat, like it had been squashed. It resembled an alligator's more than a Lizardman's.

However, out of all these visual features, the thing which drew the most attention was the brand on his chest. The design was different from the one Zaryusu had on his chest, but the meaning was the same — this Lizardman was also a “traveller.”

And as he sized up Zaryusu and company—

—The rustle of dry kindling spilled from his mouth, the sound of that monstrous Lizardman grinding his teeth. It was probably his version of laughter.

“Welcome, master of Frost Pain.”

The monstrous Lizardman's rich, *basso profundo* voice matched his appear-

ance perfectly. He was probably speaking normally, but even that exuded an awesome air of power.

“Pleased to meet you. I am the Green Claw tribe’s Zaryu—”

The monster Lizardman waved off the rest of his introduction.

“State your names.”

“...I am Zaryusu Shasha, and this is Crusch Lulu.”

“That wouldn’t be a ...plant monster? No, since you’ve brought a Hydra along, it stands to reason that you’d have another creature by your side. Hardly anything to be worried about.”

“...Not quite.”

The monstrous Lizardman once again waved off Crusch, who was taking off her costume of leaves.

“Hey, it was just a joke. Don’t take everything I say so seriously, it’s a pain.”

“—”

After glancing at Crusch as she doffed her pile of leaves, he looked back to Zaryusu.

“So, why are you here?”

“Before that, might I know your name?”

“Oh, I’m the chief of the Dragon Tusk tribe, Zenberu Gugu. Zenberu will do.”

Zenberu laughed in his tooth-grinding way. While this was exactly what he had expected, the idea of a traveller becoming chief was still quite surprising.

On the other hand, it was an answer he could accept. A Lizardman like him was no mere traveller. In truth, the gathering hostility had vanished the moment

he showed up. Clearly, he was a Lizardman with great authority, as well as extraordinary martial might and leadership.

“Zaryusu will be fine, then. Tell me, Zenberu ...have any strange monsters visited your village recently?”

“Mm, that messenger of the Supreme One or whatnot.”

“Well, if they came, then we can discuss—”

Zenberu raised his hand to interrupt Zaryusu.

“I think I know what you want to say. However, we only listen to the strong. Draw your sword.”

The towering Lizardman before him —Zenberu Gugu of the Dragon Tusk tribe —bared his fangs in a toothy grin.

“What!?”

As Crusch gasped, she saw approving looks on the faces of Zaryusu and the surrounding warriors.

“...Well, that makes things simple, chief of the Dragon Tusk. It certainly saves a lot of time.”

“You’re a truly outstanding messenger. No, as the master of Frost Pain, perhaps I should say that it was only to be expected?”



Choosing the strong as their leaders was a very rational decision for the Lizardmen.

However, was it really such a good idea when it involved the continued survival of their tribes? Should they not discuss it with the others and consider the matter from various angles before coming to a conclusion?

Those thoughts ran through Crusch's head —followed by surprise that she would actually think that way.

The fact was that all the warriors watching them approved of their chief's decision, be they male or female. She would probably have felt the same way had she been asked the same thing earlier.

Then, why am I questioning this now?

Where had these doubts come from?

Was it because of some kind of magical attack? That was impossible. She was confident that nobody in this swamp was her superior in terms of magic. That confidence made her absolutely certain that she had not been the victim of some sort of spell.

Crusch turned to look at the two of them.

Zaryusu and Zenberu.

Standing next to each other, they looked like a child compared to an adult.

One's physique did not determine everything. She was very clear about that as a magic caster. However, given the massive difference between their bodies, she could not help but hope that this was not the case.

Hope? I'm hoping that they —that he won't have to fight?

Crusch wanted to know why she was feeling such a bizarre thing. Why did she not want that? Why did she not want them to fight?

There was only one answer for that, which went without saying.

Crusch smiled bitterly, as though to mock herself.

You might as well admit it, Crusch. You don't want Zaryusu to fight because you're afraid he'll get hurt ...that he'll die.

That was the whole thing in a nutshell.

It was rare for these battles to be fought to the death. However, the word “rare” implied that the possibility still existed. Lives could easily be lost if they fought until they were no longer in possession of their senses. As a female, she did not want her companion to die because he had taken part in this fight.

In other words, Crusch had long since accepted Zaryusu’s proposal within her heart.

I gave in so simply because no male ever ...does that mean I’m easily tricked? Eh, it just feels ...I’m both happy and a little upset ...ah, what a pain!

Having accepted her innermost feelings, Crusch stepped up to Zaryusu as he prepared for battle, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Do you need anything? Is anything lacking?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Crusch patted his shoulder.

It was a strong shoulder.

Ever since she had come of age, Crusch had walked the path of the priest. She had touched the bodies of many males while she was praying, while she was applying medicine to them, and while she was casting spells on them. But her contact with Zaryusu’s body was longer than all those other times put together.

So this is Zaryusu’s body ...huh.

His firm muscles, filled with hot blood that was eager for battle and a palpable manliness.

“...What’s wrong?”

Zaryusu was baffled by Crusch's lingering hand.

“—Eh? Ah, that ...It was a prayer. A priest's prayer.”

“I see, so your ancestor spirits watch over those of other tribes, then?”

“The spirits of our tribe are not so petty. Good luck.”

Crusch apologized internally to her ancestors as she peeled her hand off Zaryusu's shoulders, because she had lied about praying to them for the victory of the male she favored.

Zenberu was also preparing for battle. He carried a massive polearm in his right hand—a steel halberd that was almost three meters long. A regular Lizardman would need both hands to wield it.

And then—he swung it lazily.

The sweep of the halberd generated a gust of wind that swept over Crusch, who was some distance away from him.

“Can you ...no, I should ask, will you be all right?”

“About that ...well, I'll see how it goes.”

At first, Crusch had wanted to ask if he could win, but ultimately, she did not. Zaryusu must have fought while knowing that victory was not impossible.

That would mean that the male before her would not lose. They had only known each other for a day and travelled with each other for half that time, but Crusch was certain of that.

She loved this male because there was something about him to love.

“Then, are you ready, master of Frost ...ah, Zaryusu.”

“I'm fine. Whenever you're ready.”

With a dramatic flourish, Zaryusu turned his back to Crusch and stepped into the dueling circle.

Crusch sighed. That was because of the back which could not help but draw her attention.



The warmth of her hand which had been touching his shoulder for so long —not very long, in actual fact —slowly faded away.

The battle which came next was essentially a simplified version of the tribal chief selection battle. Since this was intended to be a one-on-one fight, magical assistance from a third party was against the rules.

However, the warmth on Zaryusu's shoulder —which had made him feel nervous and jittery —and the contact with Crusch made him wonder if she had worked some magic on him. However, there was no way that she, as the acting chief of her tribe, could not know of that rule.

Then, why was he so fired up, even though she had not cast a spell?

Was it because he wanted to do his best for her, as a male performing for his female? His big brother had once said that he was a “withered tree ...” but that did not seem quite right.

Zaryusu entered the circle formed of Lizardmen, and swiftly drew Frost Pain from his waist. The blade emanated a frosty white mist, as though in response to Zaryusu's will.

A disturbance swept through the surrounding Lizardmen.

They were the survivors of the Razor Edge tribe —in other words, they had known the previous owner of Frost Pain, and they understood its fearsome power.

As he beheld the power of Frost Pain which only a true owner could unleash,

Zenberu's savage expression turned to one of glee. He bared his teeth and growled like a beast.

In response to his opponent's fighting spirit, Zaryusu only had a single, cold response:

"I don't want to hurt you too badly."

His taunt immediately incurred the ire of all the warriors around him. However, they immediately calmed down as the sound of an unnaturally loud splash echoed through the air.

Zenberu had driven the point of his halberd into the mushy ground.

"Oh ...then make me accept my defeat! Listen up, all of you! If I die in this fight, he will be your new chief! There will be no objections to that!"

The surrounding warriors did not agree right away, but neither did they protest. If Zaryusu really did kill Zenberu, they would obey him, however unwillingly.

"Good. Now come at me with the readiness to die. I ought to be the strongest foe you've ever faced."

"Indeed ...I understand. Also, if I die by your hand—"

Zaryusu glanced back to Crusch.

"It's fine. I'll let your female go back safely."

"...She's not mine yet."

"Kek, it seems you're really into that plant monster. Is she really such a good female?"

"Very good."

They paid no heed to said female, who was hugging her head and squatting on the ground.

“Now that I’d like to see. Perhaps if I win, I’ll strip her bare and see what she looks like before I let her go.”

Until now, Zaryusu had only been filled with an intent to fight, but now that intent had developed another nuance.

“...It feels like you’ve given me an excellent reason to win. I won’t let someone like you enjoy Crusch’s bare body.”

“You really are hopelessly in love with her, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes. There’s no helping how much in love I am.”

Several other Lizardwomen seemed to be talking to the squatting female, but she hurriedly shook her head. The two males put that matter out of mind for now.

“Ha!”

Zenberu chortled in glee.

“Then defeat me! If you die, none of that will matter any more.”

“That was my intention.”

Zaryusu and Zenberu locked gazes. It would seem they had said everything that had to be said.

“—Here I come.”

“—Bring it on.”

The two of them exchanged terse words, but no blows.

Just as the anticipation of the spectating Lizardmen built to its peak, Zaryusu began inching forward. There was no sound, despite this being a waterlogged marsh.

Zenberu remained still, awaiting his foe.

Before long, when Zaryusu had reached a certain distance, a massive clang rang out from the air which Zaryusu had just leapt away from. It was the sound of Zenberu swinging his halberd.

There was no skill to it; it was merely a forceful swing.

However, it was so shocking precisely because of its artlessness.

Zenberu braced his halberd, took a stance, and prepared himself for Zaryusu's next incursion. He wielded the massive halberd with just his right hand. Immediately after every cyclonic swing, he would immediately reset to a ready position.

Zaryusu felt something was strange.

Therefore, to verify the meaning of that motion, he darted into his foe's attack range —and was subjected to that hurricane-like swing. He blocked the haft of the weapon with Frost Pain, but a bolt of intense pain wracked the hand holding the sword, and he was bodily flung away,

One could say that he had extraordinary arm-strength if he could toss away a grown Lizardman with just the might of one arm.

—Their blood was boiling.

The surrounding warriors roared as they saw their chief display his matchless might.

Zaryusu's tail swished as he stumbled back, still on his feet.

He shook his numbed hand, and narrowed his eyes.

This ...what's this?

Zaryusu's attention was focused on the hulking body before him.

What's going on? This is ...too weak.

Indeed, that was a swift blow, and if he blocked it with his sword he would be sent flying, but that was all. It was not terrifying in the least.

Zenberu's moves were like a child swinging around with a stick. There was no technique to speak of, only sheer brute strength. The question now was if that was really all he had. Someone with a huge arm like his ought to be able to wield his weapon more skillfully.

Could it be that he's not using his full strength to lull me into overconfidence?

Zaryusu felt that it was not the case.

He began to reconsider his strategy, watchful against the unusual feeling of not knowing the truth. The hitherto stationary Zenberu smiled and asked:

“What's the matter? Not using Frost Pain's power?”

He was clearly taunting him with that smile, but Zaryusu did not take Zenberu's bait.

“I was once beaten by the wielder of Frost Pain.”

Zaryusu remembered. He knew the person of whom Zenberu spoke —the former chief of the Razor Edge tribe, and also the one whose head Zaryusu had taken.

He relaxed the intense focus he had directed at Zenberu, and set his sights wider.

Among all those who bore hostility towards him, the ones who hated him most must be the survivors of the Razor Edge tribe.

“That's where the wounds on my left hand came from.”

Zenberu wagged his left hand and its two missing fingers for emphasis.

“Maybe if you use the ability that guy used to beat me, you might be able to win.”

“Really now?” Zaryusu replied in a cold, calm voice.

Granted, that ability was very powerful.

Because it could only be used three times a day, he had a good chance of victory if he used it. The reason why Zaryusu had defeated the previous owner of Frost Pain was because his foe had already expended his three uses of the ability. If his foe had been able to use it back then, Zaryusu might well have been the one to die instead.

However, someone who knew of Frost Pain’s power would not deliberately incite its wielder to make use of it.

Zaryusu’s remained on his guard.

I have no idea ...still, there’s no point dragging this out. Time to make my move.

Having decided on his course of action, Zaryusu charged forward, twice as fast as before.

Zenberu responded to Zaryusu with shocking speed.

Zaryusu did not evade, but met the blow head-on with Frost Pain. Everyone who saw it felt that Zaryusu would be swatted away once more.

Zaryusu met the halberd with Frost Pain —and countered the attack.

There was no need for martial arts or the like. Zenberu’s halberd swings were child’s play. No matter how forcefully he swung, his blows could be easily dispersed.

Zenberu’s eyes went wide in shock —no, in respect.

At the same time, Zaryusu dashed forward with lightning speed, faster than Zenberu could bring the halberd back. Even with muscles like his, resetting

his stance after a full-power hit with his halberd would take time. That time was enough for Zaryusu to close in.

In the next moment, Frost Pain cut in at Zenberu's body—



—And blood splattered.

Thunderous cheering erupted from all around, as well as a whimper of pain.

It was not Zenberu who stumbled back, oozing fresh blood. It was Zaryusu, with two bleeding wounds on his face.

In contrast with what he had done until now, Zenberu strode forward at Zaryusu, intent on not letting him escape. He led the way with the weapon that had wounded Zaryusu.

That weapon was —his claws.

They collided with Frost Pain, and the ringing of metal pealed forth. The halberd splashed as Zenberu let go of it.

“Guh—!”

Zenberu exhaled, and as he stepped forward, his massive arm launched into a flurry of blows.

Compared to his amateurish spearplay from earlier, his bare-handed chops were on the level of a master. Now that the most important piece of the puzzle had been revealed, it all came together for Zaryusu.

Zenberu was not a warrior, but a monk; one who used the power of ki to turn his body into a living weapon.

Zaryusu blocked his chops with Frost Pain.

Lizardman claws were sharper and harder than human nails, but even they would not make metallic sounds like this. Indeed, this was a monk ability called 「Iron Natural Weapon」, which hardened one's natural weaponry, such as claws or teeth.

It was said that the fists of the most skilled monks could even break adamantite, the hardest metal known. However, judging by the sensation which filtered back through Frost Pain, Zenberu had not yet reached that level. He was only on par with steel. Even so, his hardened claws could stand on even terms with Frost Pain, one of the Four Treasures, so he could not look down on it.

The two of them exchanged blow after blow.

Zenberu swiped with his chops while Zaryusu swung with Frost Pain. They leapt away to avoid each other's strikes, opening up the distance between them.

“—Haha, so you're still alive!”

Zenberu licked at the flesh and blood staining his fingertips.

Zaryusu too extended that tongue of his that was longer than a humans, and licked at the red fluid that flowed from the place which corresponded to the cheek on a human being.

He was glad that he had managed to evade the knife hand thrust that had been intended to gouge out his eyes. He was wounded, but not deeply, and he could continue fighting. He thanked his tribe's spirits for protecting him, and—

Maybe I evaded it because the ancestors of Crusch's tribe protected me.

Zaryusu was grateful, but Zenberu was grumbling instead.

“Come to think of it, if I beat you without making you use that move, it'll feel like you're going easy on me.”

Zenberu clenched his fists and pounded his chest several times.

“Sorry, but I don’t intend to use that move.”

“Oh? Then don’t say you didn’t go all-out after you lose.” “Do you think I’m someone who’d say that, after fighting me?”

“...No, I don’t. Forgive me, I misspoke. Just ...if you’re not using that move, then here I come!”

With a *whoosh*, Zenberu’s leg cleaved through the air at Zaryusu.

There was no hesitation in that movement.

Zaryusu slashed at Zenberu’s leg with Frost Pain while evading the kick, but a metallic clang rang out, and the strike bounced off.

Zaryusu’s eyes went wide.

When a sword met flesh, the flesh should have been wounded. That was the way of the world. Yet, a monk’s *ki* turned that precept on its head.

This was the result of 「Iron Skin」. That skill could shroud the body in *ki* before any attack could touch it, making it as tough as steel. Much like 「Iron Natural Weapon」, the more skilled one was, the harder it would become.

The fact that his opponent had repelled a magic sword with his bare flesh spoke volumes about his monk skills. However, Zaryusu still felt that he had a chance of victory.

It was not that there was an overwhelming difference between their combat skills. It was only that the circumstances had been against Zenberu from the start.



He came with a bewildering series of strikes.

Flying kick. Tail sweep. Straight punch. Knife hand. He attacked with all these

and more.

Every blow Zenberu struck was both fast and weighty. All Zaryusu could do against a foe like that was adopt a total defense. Combination followed combination.

If he did not defend against his foe's destructive strikes, Zaryusu's defeat was assured. Confident in their chief's victory, the surrounding Lizardmen cheered as Zenberu lashed out with blow after blow.

Zenberu's claws occasionally grazed Zaryusu, easily scoring his scale-sheathed body and leaving wounds which wept blood in their wake. Those injuries could not be considered light in any sense. Zaryusu's body was covered in those wounds. His life hung in the balance, and it would not be strange if he surrendered at any time. The joyful looks on the spectating Lizardmen's faces only proved it as they prepared to celebrate their chief's imminent victory.

However —that was not the case for Zenberu. Every time his strikes were blocked, Zenberu felt victory slipping further and further away from his grasp, and it made him anxious. Frost Pain was imbued with cold, and it inflicted additional cold damage whenever it wounded a foe. A side effect of that was that it dealt cold damage to anyone who touched the weapon. In other words, just touching the weapon was enough to slowly wear away at Zenberu's body with its cold damage. His hands were freezing, his legs were numb, and his movements were slowing down.

Dammit, I lost too quickly in the previous fight ...so I didn't know it had a power like this too! So it didn't just have that move alone! That's one of the Four Treasures for you!

Zaryusu had adopted a defensive stance because he knew the item had an effect like this. Or rather, he had done so because he knew it was an assured way to deal damage. That was probably why he had not dodged Zenberu's attacks.

He had chosen a steady path to victory.

This lack of openings made him Zenberu's greatest enemy right now.

Zenberu used his trump card on Zaryusu, who was rushing in. If he managed to block that move as well, Zenberu's chances of victory would be slim at best.

He felt like he was charging an impregnable fortress alone.

Ahhh, dammit, can't I beat him —But! I've waited too long for this!

His battle with that Lizardman from the past flashed through his mind. He was stronger now than he was then, and he had trained nonstop in order to attain victory. Even when he heard that the person who had defeated him had been killed, he might have felt regret, but he never stopped training.

He had been waiting for this day.

As chief, he could not abandon everything to indulge in battle, so he had been delighted when he heard that the bearer of Frost Pain had come to his village.

He could not let this long-awaited battle end like this.

Zenberu began losing the feeling in his punches and kicks, and his ki could no longer reach his limbs. Still, he kept attacking.

He's strong, stronger than that guy from last time!

Just like he had honed himself ceaselessly, the Lizardman before him must have trained himself without slacking off until now.

While he could have said that he could not narrow the gap between them because of Frost Pain, he had no desire to spout quitter talk like that.

Amazing! He truly is the master of Frost Pain! The mightiest Lizardman ever!

Zenberu did not halt his combination attacks, even as he praised Zaryusu, who was blocking his strikes with Frost Pain.



CHAPTER 2: GATHERING, LIZARDMEN

Wounds, blood, and more wounds.

Crusch had devoted all her attention to witnessing this intense back-and-forth struggle, and with her outstanding druid skills, she had already seen how the battle would end.

Incredible ...he must have predicted all this when the battle started.

Crusch was in awe of Zaryusu's outstanding warrior skills.

The cheers continued from all around.

They were cheering for Zenberu, who was attacking non-stop and seemed to have the upper hand. None of them realised that Zenberu's limbs were gradually growing sluggish.

Zaryusu was very strong. Crusch was certain of that.

Almost all Lizardmen did battle with their bodies and brute strength, but Zaryusu —and Zenberu —fought with skill, and Frost Pain aided that fighting skill.

Therefore, Frost Pain was a major factor in the development of the present situation —of the gulf between them. However, it was not the sole reason for it.

If one gave Frost Pain to an ordinary warrior, could they fight with Zenberu like this?

The answer was no. Zenberu was not some two-bit mook.

The weapon was powerful, but the fact that Zaryusu could exploit it to its full potential because he was a first-rate warrior.

But more outstanding than that was his perceptive and analytical mind.

Zaryusu had evaded the strike when Zenberu had cast down his halberd because he had been on top of the situation and had been closely observing it. He had sensed the presence of his foe's ace in the hole and that the halberd

was a mere distraction.

When he went on that journey as a branded traveller, what else had he brought back with him besides the knowledge of fish-rearing and these battle techniques?

Before she knew it, Crusch had become certain of Zaryusu's victory. Now, she merely watched the profile of his face, her heart pounding in what was no longer anxiety.

“He really is an impressive specimen of a male ...”



Time seemed to fly past for those watching this exciting battle, but the two participants felt otherwise. The toll on their bodies and spirits caused by their panting was more intense than the passage of time.

Despite being covered in blood, Zaryusu's fighting spirit was still strong. For that, the surrounding Lizardmen congratulated him. After all, nobody else had lasted this long against their chief before.

And then, just as Zenberu seemed on the verge of claiming victory, he dropped out of his fighting stance.

The audience waited with bated breath. Zenberu ought to be declaring his victory anytime soon.

However, the opposite happened.

“I've lost!”

But their chief should have been the winner.

Even so, why had he announced his defeat? Only Crusch had foreseen this. She raced into the fighting ring.

“Are you all right?”

As he heard those words, Zaryusu exhaled and lowered the sword in his hand. In a very tired voice, he replied:

“It’s nothing fatal ...I should be able to fight in the upcoming battle.”

“...Mm. In any case, I’ll use healing magic on you.”

Crusch’s grass costume rustled, and she poked her head out.

Zaryusu felt a comfortable warmth suffusing his wounds, different from the searing heat that had made them. As he luxuriated in the sensation of vitality flowing back into his body, he turned to look at the gigantic Lizardman with whom he had just fought a life-and-death struggle.

Zenberu was surrounded by his tribemates. He was explaining the situation to them, and the strategy Zaryusu was using.

“That’ll do it.”

Crusch declared that his treatment was complete after casting two spells on him, and Zaryusu looked down on his body.

While the clotted blood still stuck to his skin, the injuries beneath had completely recovered. There was a certain tension over the former wounds when he shifted his body, but at least they did not look like they would open up.

“—Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Crusch smiled brightly, and the pearly teeth she exposed were very pretty.

“—You’re beautiful.”

“What—!?”

Her tail swished, and splashed against the water.

The two of them gazed silently at each other.

Crusch's silence was because she had no idea why this male would casually mention something like that. She was not used to such compliments, so hearing Zaryusu say things like that was not good for her heart.

Meanwhile, Zaryusu had no idea why Crusch was being quiet. *Did I do something wrong?* Thoughts like that ran through his mind. The fact was that he had little experience with females, so he had no idea what he should do. Zaryusu was surprisingly tense as well.

Just as the awkwardness between them reached its height, a voice saved them.

“Oi oi, are you trying to make me jealous, you bastard?”

The two of them looked to the source of the voice —to Zenberu.

Their simultaneous and identical reactions left Zenberu momentarily speechless.

“Hm! Oi, whitey, how about some healing over here?”

Zenberu seemed quite nonchalant about Crusch's albinism. However, Crusch recalled the Zenberu's branded body and realised why he reacted that way.

“Fine, fine, fine ...but shouldn't you let the priests of your tribe heal you?”

“Ahhh, it doesn't matter. Enough talk, it really hurts. Feels like even my bones are frozen. Could you hurry it up a little?”

“Just remember to tell your priests that you were the one who asked me to do it.”

“It's fine, I'll say I forced you into it, as a request.” Crusch sighed, and worked her healing magic.

Zaryusu noticed that the hostile glares around him had diminished somewhat, and that there were a few friendly eyes looking upon him.

“All right, it’s done.”

Crusch had cast more healing spells on Zenberu than on Zaryusu. That implied that his injuries were not external, but internal.

“Ohh, you’re better than our priests.”

“Thank you. Still, I don’t usually heal members of other ...never mind. Thank you for your kind words.”

“Now then, since we’re both healed, why don’t we talk about the main topic. Might be a bit of a rush, but you don’t mind, right?”

“Oh! Then let’s hear it —although I wanted to say that ...”

Zenberu stopped mid-sentence and then smiled.

“But first, let’s drink!”

Zaryusu and Crusch had no idea what those words meant, and their faces were equally confused.

“Troublesome business should be discussed over wine. You know that, right?”

Zaryusu understood the meaning of the life-and-death duel. After all, it proved their respective strength, which was useful in negotiation. It was the Lizardman way of life. Drinking parties, on the other hand, were alien to him, because the Green Claw tribe had no such practice.

People who went drinking right after fighting for their lives seemed terribly sad to him.

“I don’t get it ...”

The strength drained from Zaryusu’s body and his face was one of frank sur-

prise as he muttered his response. However, it was immediately drowned out by a surging wave of regret in his heart, regret for behaving so childish in front of a chief with whom he had not even allied with yet. In fact, he felt Crusch looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes.

Zaryusu had no experience with love, so he had no idea Crusch had been studying him all this time. He was seeing a new side of his beloved, and he found it both curious and adorable.

“No, I mean, if we drink a lot, our heads won’t be clear, which would be troublesome for us.”

Zaryusu hurriedly tried to amend his words, but Zenberu brushed it aside with his reply:

“Oi oi oi, you’re a traveller, aren’t you? Don’t they say that if you want to learn something, go to the Dwarves?”

“No, I didn’t learn from the Dwarves, but from the people of the forest.”

“Really? Then all you need to know is this lesson of the Dwarves: friends who drink together become firm friends. Maybe we won’t have much time together, but we ought to discuss things frankly and openly. Shouldn’t we, Zaryusu Shasha?”

“I see ...yes, I understand, Zenberu Gugu.”

“Good! Come on, everyone! Time to drink! Bring it over! Get everything ready!”



The pile of logs resting upon the ground stood nearly two meters tall, and the crimson flames upon it burned fiercely, as though they were reaching to the sky. This massive red blaze chased away the dark of the night.

Near the log pile was a large vessel that was over a meter tall and about eighty

centimeters wide. A fermented scent wafted out from it.

Several dozen Lizardmen took turns scooping out liquid from the vessel. However, the wine within did not seem to deplete.

This was one of the Four Treasures that was ranked alongside Zaryusu's Frost Pain —the Great Wine Cask.

While it could produce an infinite supply of wine, the taste was passable at best, and anyone who knew their wine would turn their noses up at it. However, it was delicious nectar to the Lizardmen.

Therefore, the guests kept coming.

There was a quiet region some distance away from the wine cask. The reason why this place was quiet was simple enough —because it was littered with the bodies of many drunken Lizardmen, who lay insensate here.

All the Lizardmen who had gotten so drunk that they had passed out were dumped here.

Having shed her leafy costume, Crusch carefully —taking care not to step on the tails of the fallen Lizardmen —made her way to this place, paying close attention to the ground. Her footsteps were even, so she looked like she was still sober, but it was hard to say that she was not drunk.

Her tail seemed like it had a life of its own, energetically flexing here and there. Sometimes it curled, sometimes it stood straight and sometimes it drooped. It behaved like an excited child.

The fact was that Crusch felt something like a cool wind coursing through her soul. While part of that was because of the wine, that was not the sole reason. The liberated feeling of her body had also contributed to it.

This was the first time she had shown her albinoized body to so many people. However, their leader was a monster in his own right, so while the people around her had been startled at first, she soon blended in with them.

With both hands full of food, a bliss-filled Crusch continued forward.

She reached the place where Zaryusu and Zenberu were sitting on the ground and hoisting a glass to each other.

Said glasses seemed to have been made using coconut shells, and the liquid within was transparent, but it emanated a thick fermented smell.

Crusch laid a pair of raw fish in front of the two of them —snacks to go with the drinks. Zenberu smiled and greeted Crusch.

“Yo, plant monster.”

“...Could you not call me that?”

She had already shed her costume, so why did he insist on calling her that? It would seem he planned to amuse himself in that way. Once she realised it, Crusch decided to cease her pointless resistance.

“Have you finished your discussions?”

Zaryusu and Zenberu looked at each other, and nodded.

“For the most part.”

The two of them wanted to speak in private, so they asked Crusch to leave them be. Since they had said as much, all she could do was leave and bring some food over, but within her heart, she was hoping to be part of their conversation. After all, if they were discussing the upcoming battle, then she was certainly involved in it.

She was hoping to be allowed to skim the essentials, even if she could not listen in on the inconvenient parts—

“This is a conversation between males.”

—But Zenberu shut her down with those cold words. Crusch expressed her displeasure on her face, but she had no choice but to change the topic.

“So, what do you plan to do? Fight shoulder to shoulder as allies?”

“Wha? Oh, as if you had to ask. Of course we’re going to fight. Or rather, even if you didn’t come, we’d be fighting anyway.”

A sound like sticks scraping against each other came from Zenberu’s maw.

“You really are a battle maniac.”

“Aw, don’t praise me like that, now I’m all embarrassed!”

Zenberu paid no heed to Crusch as she rolled her eyes, but made a request of her.

“Oh right, help me talk some sense into him, plant monster. No matter how I ask him, Zaryusu won’t accept the position of our chief.”

There was a weary, despondent look on Zaryusu’s face. Judging by the fatigue there, Crusch could tell that he had repeated his answer many times in her absence.

“He can’t accept that position. After all, you’re from different tribes, and he’s a—”

Crusch was about to say “he’s a traveller,” but then she considered that Zenberu was also a traveller, and decided to change the topic.

“So why did you become a traveller, anyway?”

“What? Oh, after I lost to Frost Pain’s previous owner, I was devastated, and wanted to become stronger. That being the case, why not leave this place and go somewhere else? That was why I became a traveller.”

Beside him, Zaryusu rounded his shoulders in powerlessness. It was then that Crusch recalled what Zaryusu had told him about his own travels.

In the past, when he had left on his journey, the only thing keeping him going was his determination, resolve, and his sense of duty towards his tribe. Zen-

beru —as a fellow traveller —ought to have felt the same way ...but right now, he could not sense any of that from him.

Crusch placed a gentle hand on Zaryusu's shoulder, as if to say, *He's him, and you're you.*

At this moment, anyone observing them would probably conclude that they were lovers. As she realised this, Crusch's tail curled up, while Zaryusu's tail swished back and forth.

The two of them gazed at each other, and smiled shyly.

Zenberu pretended that he had seen none of that and continued:

"I thought there must be someone pretty strong inside that mountain, given how big it was. So during my travels, I met the Dwarves and learned a lot of things from them. Got that halberd from them too. I didn't want it at first, but since they asked me to keep it as a memento of our meeting, I had to hang on to it."

"...So that happened. That's nice."

Crusch's answer seemed a little slapdash, or rather, somewhat cold.

"Oh, thanks."

—Sarcasm did not work on him either.

Now that the good mood in the air had been ruined, Crusch picked up her wine and downed it in one gulp. She felt it burn as it went down her throat, and the heat seemed to radiate from her stomach throughout her entire body. Zaryusu polished off his wine in one go as well.

Just then, a quiet question made its way through the air. It seemed completely different from the voice just now, and for a moment it made them wonder who had asked it.

"Say, do you think we can win?"

Zaryusu quietly replied:

“...I have no idea.”

“Mm, same here. After all, there’s no such thing as a battle where victory is assured. If someone actually dared brag about how he’d win despite not knowing his enemy’s strength, I’d beat the crap out of him to shut him up.”

Crusch had no response to Zenberu as he chuckled.

“Still ...our foe’s gotten a little careless. The changes here ought to affect our chances of victory.”

In place of Zaryusu, Crusch looked at Zenberu with a puzzled look on her face.

“Could you recall what that monster said?”

“Sorry, I was sleeping then.”

“...Surely you must have heard of it from someone else?”

“Hmph, I couldn’t be bothered to remember something like that, so I forgot it. In any case, the important thing is that if they come looking for a fight, then we’re going to give them one.”

There’s no hope for this guy —Crusch decided to abandon her attempts at explanation with that. Zaryusu grinned wryly, and answered.

“...He told us to struggle with all our might.”

A dangerous expression came over Zenberu’s face, and his features twisted savagely.

“Well, that just pisses me off. To think they’re sneering at us from the beginning.”

Zenberu roared with frightful anger.

The cry carried with it his wrath and displeasure.

“That’s right, they’re turning their noses up at us. The fact they’re so arrogant ...probably suggests they’re powerful enough to break our resistance easily. But we’re going to crush their self-assurance. We’re going to gather the five tribes and show them our full power. I want to beat back their assault and show them that we’re a force to be reckoned with.”

“Hmph, well put. I can understand that. I like it.”

Just as the two males were eagerly discussing their battle plans, Crusch rained on their parade.

“I doubt there’s much merit to wounding their pride. All we need to do is prove our worth to them, right? Perhaps if they know that, they won’t exterminate us.”

“Oi oi oi, are you telling me to bow to annoying people like that?”

“Zaryusu ...I know fleeing is dangerous, but I think it’s better to live on, even in bondage,” Crusch quietly said.

The other two did not deny her or tease her for her slave mentality.

It was not that they wanted to be ruled, but being slaves had more of a future than being corpses. As long as there was a future, there was infinite possibility.

For instance, they could teach the method of fish farming to everyone, and that might allow them to abandon their homes and flee elsewhere.

Any leader who abandoned that possibility and ordered everyone to die was not worthy of his position.

“Now, listen closely, you all.”

As they heard Zaryusu’s calm voice, the three of them pricked up their ears, and they heard the sounds of mirth coming from the party.

“After we’re ruled, we might not be able to laugh and rejoice like this.”

“The operative word being might, right?”

“Really? I don’t think so. I don’t think anyone who would take pleasure in watching us die would be so compassionate. After all, if there was any mercy in their hearts, they would not plan to exterminate us in such a playful manner.”

Crusch nodded.

But even so—

“Still, what I want to say is ...please don’t die.”

“—I won’t. Not before I hear your answer.”

“—!”

Crusch and Zaryusu exchanged passionate looks under the night sky.

And then, they made their vow.

—Paying no attention to Zenberu, the bored outsider.

They were probably discussing something else in the meeting room behind him.

However, his duties in that room were over. That was why he had left.

That said, he still had work to do. Back then, he was merely giving a report, but now he had to fulfill his responsibilities as the First Seat of the Black Scripture — in other words, as its leader. This included resurrecting his dead comrades, picking temporary replacements for their positions, as well as training, conducting experiments, and so on.

After all, the Six Scriptures were a secret organization, so they led double lives, going undercover within the Theocracy.

Speaking of his personal life, he had to get married — and to multiple partners. Currently, there were only three awakened God-kin within the Slaine Theocracy, and so the higher-ups had hinted that he had to do his patriotic duty and reproduce.

All these demands on him piled up, and left him with hardly any free time.

“Still, I was hoping I could relax for today.”

After being liberated from the meeting of the Cardinals — a gathering of the highest appointment holders in the Slaine Theocracy — he worked his shoulders, and then his attention was drawn by a *clack-clack-clack* sound.

He knew who had made that sound before he saw it. There were very few in the Slaine Theocracy who were permitted to enter this place, and when he thought about the people who were not present within the meeting room, the answer leapt out at him.

As he had expected, there was a girl leaning against a wall.

She had a unique hairstyle, with the left side being a different color from the right. One was a scintillating silver, while the other was an all-consuming black. The color of her eyes was similarly mismatched.

Beside her was a war scythe that resembled a cross-shaped spear, leaning against the wall.

Although she looked youthful, barely fifteen, her age did not correspond to her appearance at all. Ever since he had become the captain of the Black Scripture — its First Seat — the girl's looks had not changed at all.

He turned his eyes to the ears under her hair — and then checked himself.

This was because he knew that the girl hated people looking at her ears.

The girl's seductive lips formed into a curve, as though she were reading his mind.

She was a cross-blooded child born of nigh-impossible odds, the Black Scripture's Extra Seat, known as "Certain Death." She was a guardian, responsible for defending the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Slaine Theocracy, the place where the relics of five gods were kept.

The sound he had heard came from the toy in her hands. In the Slaine Theocracy, it was called a "Rubik's Cube," and it had apparently been handed down from the Six Great Gods. The girl's voice blended with the *clack-clack-clack* of its motions.

"One face is simple enough, but getting two faces right is hard."

It was not difficult for him, but he had no idea if he should tell her that. In the end, he chose to smile bitterly by way of response. The girl did not seem to care about his answer and nonchalantly continued:

"What happened? Even the Cardinals showed up."

"You were given a copy of the report, right?"

“Didn’t read it,” the girl replied without any hesitation. “Besides, asking someone who knows is faster. Did Thousand Mile Astrologer make a mistake? You were sent out to deal with the Catastrophe Dragon Lord ...did something happen?”

Throughout all of this, the two of them had never met the other’s gaze. The girl’s attention was focused on the toy in her hand.

“...We engaged a mysterious undead creature that resembled a Vampire. There were two dead and one severely wounded, so we fell back.”

“Who died?”

There was no trace of sorrow for her fallen comrades in her voice. She seemed to be asking about something completely unrelated to her. Still, he did not mind. It was simply her way.

“Cedran, who was protecting Kaire-sama, and Beaumarchais, who tried to capture the unmoving Vampire.”

“Great Wall and Divine Chains, huh. The Miko Princess of Earth died in a strange explosion recently, and now the Black Scripture has lost two of its finest ...when it rains, it pours, I guess. Who was wounded?”

“Kaire-sama. There seemed to be some sort of curse in effect preventing curative spells from healing her, so we fell back.”

“And what of the Vampire?”

“We left it there. The Vampire entered an attack posture every time we tried to capture it or come close. We decided that it would be wiser to leave it alone.”

“But that doesn’t solve anything, does it?”

“...They decided to leave things as they were during the meeting just now.”

That was the decision they had reached in the meeting room earlier.

INTERMISSION

—134—

It was judged better to leave it alone and gather their forces than to charge in rashly and take severe casualties. Besides, no other country ought to be able to defeat that undead creature. In fact, if someone like that did show up, that would make them a powerful being that bore watching, which meant that they ought to shore up their national defenses first. In the end, everyone had agreed on that course of action. They had decided to leave behind only those essential intelligence personnel and have everyone else retreat.

He agreed with their judgement.

After all, the only people who could defeat that Vampire were probably God-kin or Dragon Lords. Therefore, they would leave sentries in place and if they found anyone who could defeat that Vampire, they would be on their guard against them.

“Really now. So that monster wasn’t a Vampire, then?”

He concurred. That was why he had called it a mysterious undead being

“Could it be a Dragon Lord? The Vampire Dragon Lord or the Elder Coffin Dragon Lord?”

The curve of her lips widened, a clear smile. That is, if the look on her face, like a splash of blood, counted as a smile.

“...Aren’t those two Dragons already dead?”

He felt a little awkward as he asked that, but she immediately replied:

“They’re both undead Dragon Lords, so we don’t know if they were really destroyed.”

The girl finally raised her head to look straight at him. Her mismatched eyes seemed to sparkle with what seemed like curiosity, delight, and battle-lust.

“Who do you think is stronger, between myself and that Vampire?”

He had expected that question, and met it with a prepared answer.

“You, of course.”

“Really ...”

The girl looked back at her toy, as though she had lost interest in the topic.

Within his heart, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“What a shame. I was thinking I might be able to taste defeat.”

As he heard her mutter to herself, he wondered, *Who would win, if they fought?*

He had exchanged blows with both the girl and the Vampire, and he felt that the Vampire was superior. However, that Vampire would not be able to defeat “Certain Death.”

That was because of the difference in their panoplies.

The Vampire looked to be completely unequipped, which was a weakness in powerful monsters. They placed great pride in their strength, which meant that they did not make use of potent magic items.

In contrast, she was kitted out in the relics of the Six Gods, so he could conclude that she was more powerful.

However, what if both sides were outfitted in items of similar power?

Impossible.

He immediately rejected the question which arose in his mind. After all, it was impossible to find gear which rivalled her panoply, which had been handed down from the gods.

But what if it was possible?

If that happened ...the mightiest, never-defeated Extra Seat of the Slaine Theocracy might be vanquished. In other words, that moment would be the end of all hope, when the defenders of mankind were finally laid low.

INTERMISSION

—136—

No, why was he assuming that she would be fighting by herself?

While he could not compare to her, he was still an awakened God-kin who also possessed many magic items. That Vampire might be powerful, but it was alone, and if he could make use of his panoply, they should be able to deal with it.

There was no way there could be more than one such powerful undead being.

As he sank into thought, he heard the sound of giggling. Then, he frowned and looked towards its source.

“Let’s talk about something else. When are you getting married?”

That was one of the topics that had come up during the meeting just now. In short, it was asking when he would find a suitable girlfriend. To put it nicely, they were talking about a marriage partner, but more crudely, she would be a baby-making machine.

“I haven’t found anyone yet.”

“Hmm, because you’re still young, huh?”

When the Black Scripture moved out, their members wore magic masks to hide their identities.

According to the laws laid down by the gods, the age of majority in the Slaine Theocracy was twenty, but after removing his mask, his true age was much lower than that figure.

“Granted, after you’re married, your partner will be sequestered in a secret location within the Theocracy ...but she’ll still be able to raise your child.”

“I know that. I *am* a member of the Scriptures, you know.”

“Oh yeah. Ah, still, you should probably tell your wife-to-be that you’re going to take other wives. The law says it’s fine, but they’ve all been brought up to dislike having multiple spouses.”

The Slaine Theocracy permitted the practice of polygamy as long as the nation sanctioned it. This was a practice which had been grandfathered from a time when bloodlines had to be kept pure due to a lack of powerful entities. However, under normal circumstances, the standard practice was one man to one woman, and there were only a few cases where national sanction had been granted. Even when it was granted, one man could only have two wives.

“Thank you for your kind reminder, but as for you ...don’t you want to get married?”

He asked that question because she might have looked young, but her appearance did not match her actual age.

“Hmm, well, I could marry a man who could defeat me. I don’t mind if he looks ugly or has a bad personality ...or even if he wasn’t human at all. After all, he’s the man who beat me. How strong would our children be?”

The girl was all smiles as she placed her hand on her lower belly. He was quite confident that answer meant that she would never marry.

However, would things change if someone appeared who could defeat that Vampire?

A wave of unease swept through his heart.

Chapter 3| Army of Death

Overlord Volume 4

CHAPTER 3: ARMY OF DEATH

1

“Oh, I can see it.”

Zenberu —seated near the back of Rororo —laughed as he looked forward.

A few hundred meters ahead, they could see the first tribe marked for extinction —the village of the Razor Tail tribe. While it was about the same size as the Green Claw village, there were more Lizardmen here, probably because the Lizardmen from other tribes had steadily flocked to it.

Now that they were preparing for war, everyone was very busy.

“It’s hard to hold myself back with the mood in the air.”

There was an audible intake of air from Zenberu’s nose as he inhaled the ambient scent. It was an odor that boiled one’s blood. However, Crusch had never smelled it before, and she said something different from the other two.

“Is it safe to ride over with Rororo?”

Having sensed the tense atmosphere from a distance, Crusch the plant monster was starting to feel nervous, and she said as much. She was worried that the battle ready Lizardmen would rush Rororo if he got close.

They might know Zaryusu, but not Crusch or Zenberu, and it was not as though everyone in the the Razor Tail tribe knew Zaryusu either.

“No, it’s the opposite. We’re safer mounted on Rororo.”

A puzzled look appeared on Crusch’s face (obscured by leaves as it was). Sens-

ing her confusion, Zaryusu elaborated:

“My brother should have come by earlier, and he should have told them that I’d be riding Rororo. Therefore, news about us on Rororo’s back should have reached him by now, so all we have to do is advance slowly.”

In fact, as Rororo was splashing through the marsh, a black Lizardman emerged from the village. Zaryusu waved to the familiar figure.

“And that would be my brother.”

“I see.”

“Oh ...”

The two of them spoke as one. Crusch was genuinely curious, while Zenberu was like a beast that had sighted a powerful entity.

As Rororo moved forward, the distance between the two of them —between Zaryusu and Shasuryu —grew shorter. Soon, they were close enough to see each other’s faces, and the brothers looked at each other.

They had only been apart for two days. However, they had prepared themselves for the eventuality that they would never see each other again, so their reunion was particularly touching.

“I’m glad you’re back, Zaryusu!”

“Mm, and I have good news, Shasuryu!”

Shasuryu’s gaze fell on the two people seated behind Zaryusu. Zaryusu felt Crusch’s arms tighten somewhat around his waist, due to her tension.

Once they were in front of Shasuryu, Rororo stopped in front of the familiar face and nosed at him with its four heads.

“Sorry, I didn’t bring any food with me.”

In the instant Rororo heard those words, its heads immediately recoiled from Shasuryu, like a child throwing a tantrum. The Hydra might not be able to understand Lizardmen, but it must have telepathically sensed his thoughts. Either that, or it did not smell any food on him.

“Let’s get off, then.”

After waving to the other two, he lightly hopped off Rororo’s back, and then took Crusch’s hand as she jumped down. Shasuryu looked at Crusch with a look of puzzlement on his face.

“And what’s that plant monster?”

The fact that everyone reacted the same way left Crusch a little demoralized, but she had no desire to contest it. That was probably due to Zenberu’s constant needling of her. But the words which followed were a bombshell that made Crusch stiffen up.

“She’s the female that I love.”

“—Ohh.”

Shasuryu murmured in awe. Then, he turned his attention to the still-frozen Crusch, who was holding his little brother’s hand.

“Muu ...One thing, is the person inside beautiful?”

“Mm, and we’re considering marr—!”

The sudden pain in his hand shut Zaryusu up, because the person holding it had jabbed her claws into Zaryusu’s hand, and very forcefully too. Shasuryu looked at them with some displeasure.

“I see ...To think someone like you who went on and on about appearances and said ...what was it, ‘You know I can’t get married?’ You were just trying to act cool. You just didn’t have anyone to fall in love with ...anyway, back to business. I am Shasuryu Shasha, chief of the Green Claw tribe. Thank you both for joining us.”

The way Shasuryu spoke did not seek out confirmation of their alliance, but radiated the certainty that they would help. However, Crusch and Zenberu were not the sort to be rattled by small things like that.

“We should be the ones thanking you. I am the acting chief of the Red Eye tribe, Crusch Lulu.”

Everyone expected Zenberu to introduce himself after Crusch was done greeting Shasuryu, but they did not hear anything of the sort. Instead, Zenberu eyed Shasuryu from head to toe.

After he was satisfied with what he had seen, he nodded and spoke with a bestial expression on his face:

“Oh, so you’re the one —the warrior who uses priestly skills in battle. I’ve heard of your deeds.”

“I’m quite surprised that even the Dragon Tusk tribe knows of me.”

Shasuryu’s response felt like two wild animals circling each other.

“Until your brother agrees to take the position, I am the chief of the Dragon Tusk tribe, Zenberu Gugu.”

“Thank you for coming. You certainly seem suited to be the chief of the tribe which values strength.”

“How about a go, then? We need to show each other our strength, right?”

“...That’s not a bad idea.”

Zaryusu did not feel like stopping them. It was true that once they figured out who was stronger, many things would become much simpler in the future.

However, Shasuryu raised his hand before they could get into it, and put out the flames of Zenberu’s eagerness for battle.

“—At least, I think it’s a good idea, but now doesn’t seem like the right time.”

“Why?”

Shasuryu smiled as Zenberu frowned.

“...The scouts we’ve sent out ought to be returning soon, so we’ll be able to learn about the enemy. It won’t be too late to spar after they’ve given their report, no?”



There was a small house that was being used as the meeting room for the various chiefs.

All the chiefs and Zaryusu were here, for a total of six people.

The name of Zaryusu —bearer of Frost Pain and slayer of the former chief of the Razor Edge tribe —was famous among the tribes. In addition, he was the hero who had persuaded the Red Eye and Dragon Tusk tribe to join their alliance, so none of the chiefs here opposed his presence.

The six of them sat in a circle within the cramped interior. The three chiefs had been hard-pressed to hide their surprise when Crusch revealed her snow-white skin, but they had calmed down now.

After greetings were done with, the first to speak was the chief of the Small Fang tribe.

He was small-framed for a Lizardman, but he had honed his limbs until they were as hard as steel. He had originally been a hunter, so he was probably the best ranged attacker among all the Lizardmen around this lake. In fact, he had eliminated all of his opponents during the chief selection trials with a single well-aimed stone apiece.

After mobilizing all the hunters to scout, he now understood the disposition of the enemy.

“The enemy numbers around five thousand.”

This figure was far in excess of the Lizardmen's troop strength, but it was still within the range they had expected. Someone even sighed in relief as they heard that figure.

"...Then, who's the enemy leader?"

"We're not sure. The scouts spotted huge monsters that looked like giant blobs of red meat, but it was hard to get close to them."

"How about their makeup?"

"It's an undead army, with skeletons and zombies."

"Did they use Lizardman corpses?"

"No, the corpses did not come from Lizardmen. I don't know land-dwelling creatures too well, so I'm not confident in identifying them, but they were probably humanoids of some sort and I didn't see any tails."

After hearing about those characteristics, Zaryusu was sure that they were from a plains tribe —humans.

"Can't we take the initiative and launch a preemptive strike?"

"That would be difficult. The enemy is using a clearing in the forest as a staging area, but how long did they take to clear it? I didn't even see the logs which should have been left over —ah, I've gone off-topic. In any case, they're in the forest. It's questionable whether we could get into position by ourselves. It would be very difficult if we had to bring the warriors too."

"Then how about sending the hunters to ambush them?"

"Give us a break, Crusch-kun. There's only twenty five hunters. How could we defeat five thousand undead? All we'd accomplish is dying."

"Hm ...then how about mobilizing the priests?"

Several people nodded at Shasuryu's suggestion, and turned to Crusch. How-

ever, Zaryusu answered the question.

“I think it would be better if we did not.”

“Ah? Why is that?”

“The opposition has honored their agreement so far, but I don’t think it’ll extend to allowing us to launch a sneak attack.”

“Indeed. Seems like it would be best not to make the first move before all the tribes gather.”

“Then are we going to prepare for a siege?”

“Defending sounds hard.”

That inarticulate voice came from one of the Lizardmen, the chief of the Razor Tail tribe.

He was dressed in a suit of white armor, which shone with a luster not born of metal.

The armor radiated a faint magical aura. It was one of the Four Treasures — the White Dragon Bone.

This armor was made from the cold-infused bones of the Frost Dragons which laired within the Azellisian Mountain Range. Of course, armor made of mere bones —even the bones of powerful beings like Dragons —could not possibly be magical. Yet, somewhere along the line, that suit of armor had taken on magical properties.

The problem now was that said properties might have been the result of a curse.

That was because the White Dragon Bone converted intellect into defensive strength. If an intelligent person put it on, it would become harder than steel —it might even be able to rival the strength of mithril, or the legendary metal adamantite.

However, the lost intelligence would not return even if the armor was removed. That was why the legends surrounding that item said it was cursed.

The armor's wearer had originally inhabited the peak of Lizardman intellect, and after he put on that armor, it became tough enough to deflect any and all weapons the Lizardmen possessed—even Frost Pain of the Four Treasures. Its hardness might well be on the same level as adamantite.

Also, while the armor's wearers typically lost their powers of reason and became mentally deficient, he was still capable of thought, which was a testament to his original intellect. As a result, the Razor Tail tribe no longer decided chieftainship succession through combat after he was born.

“Here, here is swamp. Poor foundation. Walls ...easily broken.”

“I see. Then, shall we sally forth?”

“Hm, why not? Feels better taking the offensive than to defend. I think each of us has to face three, no four enemies? Easy enough; all we'll have to do is take them down.”

As they heard Zenberu's words, the others looked at each other. Eventually, Crusch changed the subject.

“The question now is if the enemy has reinforcements ...they might still be marshalling their strength.”

“Hmmm ...that's hard to tell. Given the size of that clearing, there shouldn't be any more space to fit more undead ...that said, all they'd have to do is position them throughout the forest.

The undead did not need to eat, drink, or rest, and they did not need large campsites. Therefore, it was very hard to tell their numbers from the size of their camps.

“It seems we had best consider a defense scenario for safety's sake.”

“In that case, we of the Red Eye tribe will strengthen our walls to tide us

through the siege. I hope everyone else will help us with that.”

The other chiefs nodded in agreement, even the disappointed-looking Zenberu.

“In any case, let’s start preparing our defenses. We also need to establish a chain of command.”

“For starters, we’ll assign command of the priests to Crusch-san. She’ll have authority over them in combat as well.”

Everyone agreed, save one.

“All the chiefs should form a separate squad of their own.”

Everyone’s eyes went to Zaryusu.

“I see ...So that’s how it is, little brother.”

“That is, you want us to form an elite unit, then?”

“Correct. The enemy is numerous, and if we don’t eliminate their commander, we might well lose this battle. In addition, if they deploy monsters like the ones they sent to each village as messengers, we won’t be able to overwhelm them with numbers. We’ll need to destroy them using small teams of elite troops.”

“Still, won’t leaving our men leaderless result in confusion?”

“Just... pick, pick... replacement from Head Warriors.”

“So even if there aren’t any commanders, all they have to do is attack the enemy before them with all their might, huh ...”

“...What about having the elite squad give orders from behind and only move out when they find the enemy’s headquarters or if the situation turns bad?”

“That ought to be pretty good, right? Then, let’s form a six-man squad with

everyone here, including Zaryusu.”

“No, let’s divide it further, into teams of three.”

Dividing into two teams meant that they could fight in two places, but it also meant their strength would be divided and weakened.

“One team will be a search-and-destroy unit to deal with the enemy commanders, while the others will be responsible for tying up their garrison troops.”

“In that case, I think having we three chiefs form one team ought to work. Zaryusu-san can group up with the chiefs he brought along. We’ll adapt the team objectives to suit the circumstances.”

“Hm, that sounds good. Will that be all right, Zaryusu?”

“Yes, I got it. Crusch, Zenberu, do you object?”

“I don’t mind?”

“Me neither. It’s a shame we won’t get to show our stuff, but I’ll obey the winner.”

“Then, there’s still four days to the enemy attack?”

“Yes.”

“Then, is there anything which needs to be prepared ahead of time?”

“We need to stockpile stones for throwing and to strengthen our walls. In addition, we need to let the various tribes mingle and establish working relationships so they can function in harmony.”

“We of the Small Fang tribe would like Shasuryu to handle this, as before.”

“We also ...feel it should be fine ...and you two?”

Crusch and Zenberu nodded in agreement.

“I’ll be taking command, then. After this, we’ll decide on our tasks for the next three days.”



After the day’s work was done, Zaryusu walked silently through the bustling village. Several Lizardmen saw the brand on his chest and Frost Pain at his waist, and greeted him respectfully.

It felt a little troublesome, but he had to respond to them in order to boost morale. Therefore, he put a confident, dignified look on his face, and replied in a bold, fearless voice.

In this way, Zaryusu reached the location of the walls surrounding the village. Many Lizardmen were there, all their attention focused on erecting the walls as quickly as possible.

First, they used vegetation to serve as the foundation for wooden pillars and to fill the spaces between them. Then, they covered them with somewhat drier mud. The priests would then enchant them, and the walls were complete. There were cracks on the surface of the walls, probably because their water content had completely evaporated. Then, they repeated the same process on the other side.

“Oh, Zaryusu. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, I just wanted to see what you were doing.”

Zaryusu splashed softly over the wet ground as he walked up to Crusch, who was still in her plant monster getup. Then, he pointed to the unceasing activity before him.

“What is that?”

“That’s a dirt wall. We don’t know what sort of enemies we’ll face, so I wanted to make it difficult for them to attack us ...though we haven’t even finished half of it yet, since we don’t have enough time.”

“I see ...Still, isn’t it going to break easily, being made of dirt and all?”

“It’ll be fine. While a thin layer of dirt is easily broken, that’s not the case for a thick wall of dirt. Granted, we haven’t been able to gather enough material for it due to the hasty construction and it’ll be weakened if it rains, but it won’t fall apart so easily.”

When he thought about it, just about anything would be difficult to destroy if it was made thick enough.

Dozens of Lizardmen were working as fast as they could before Zaryusu as he agreed with that conclusion, but they were proceeding at a turtle’s pace. Even if they pushed themselves for three days straight, the wall still would not be that long, but it was better than nothing.

“Currently, we’re changing the structure of the fences on the places we can’t cover up, so they can’t be pulled down.”

In the direction where Crusch was pointing—

They had uprooted the wooden pillars and erected them on a triangular clearing. The space between them was laced with loose ropes that had been woven from plant fibers. Zaryusu felt that they seemed similar to the fence surrounding the Red Eye village.

“And what is that?”

“We’re going to put heavy objects in those triangular openings to ensure that the fence doesn’t fall if it’s pushed or pulled. Those ropes are meant to obstruct the enemy’s movements. If they’re drawn taut, they can be easily cut with swords or other bladed weapons, which is why we’ve left some slack in them on purpose,” Crusch eagerly answered Zaryusu’s question.

She had been the recipient of Zaryusu’s wisdom during their journeys over the past few days, so she was delighted to be able to dole out wisdom for once. In addition, there was another emotion behind that.

“I see ...That way, it can’t be easily destroyed.”

Those words of respectful praise filled Crusch with pride.

Zaryusu nodded vigorously.

They were accelerating the plan to convert this village into a fortress as much as they could. While they could not begin to hold a candle to the defenses of humans or Dwarves, it was the best they could do on these wetlands where movement was difficult.

“Come to think of it, Zaryusu, did you tell the warriors ...”

Just as Crusch said that, the wind carried the clamor of the warriors to them. Their voices were filled with excitement and seemed quite hot-blooded.

“What’s happening? This cheering sounds familiar ...that’s it! They’re cheering for a fight. Could it be that your brother is dueling Zenberu now?”

Zaryusu nodded. Then he realized Crusch had revealed her face and seemed quite worried.

“...Your brother’s the supreme commander. Won’t things be troublesome if he’s beaten?”

“I don’t know. Still, my brother’s strong too. Once he has an opening to use his priest spells, he’ll get even stronger. For all I know, I might lose to him as well.”

Shasuryu’s strength was extraordinary after applying several buff spells to himself. In addition, while he probably would not use offensive spells during a mock battle, if he did, even Zaryusu —before he had come into possession of Frost Pain —would not be a match for him.

After all, when Zaryusu had defeated the previous owner of Frost Pain, the only reason why said owner had not used its special ability —limited to three uses a day —on Zaryusu was because all three instances had already been expended on Shasuryu.

“That’s good ...”

Just as Zaryusu thought he should show the worried Crusch his brother's fighting form, he recalled the hidden worry he had not brought up until now.

He did not know if he should mention it, but in the end he decided to do so.

It was somewhat despicable to talk about something he had chosen not to speak of earlier, now that everything was largely settled. However, he could not hold back the pure and intense feelings he had, and he did not want to hide anything from her.

“There's one thing which worries me—”

Crusch laughed as she heard the unease in Zaryusu's voice. She seemed to be making fun of him. The look on her face did not suit the mood in the air—or her character, for that matter—and Zaryusu was left speechless. Therefore, it was Crusch who spoke in his place.

“—It's what you didn't bring up earlier, right? What if the enemy had already seen through our plans and anticipated that we would form an alliance, am I correct?”

Zaryusu was silent because she had hit the nail on the head.

In other words, the possibility that the enemy might have given them all this time to prepare, informed them of the attack order, and allowed Zaryusu to form his alliance, all for the purpose of gathering the tribes together so they could all be crushed in one fell swoop.

“Well, you would be worried, given that you're so prone to introspection. Still, no matter what, it would be best to fight the enemy first and worry about things like that later.”

“Even if we win, the enemy probably won't give up. No, in all honesty, there's very little chance the enemy will give up.”

“That may be so, but you were right about what you said that night. And look—”

There did not seem to be anything in the direction where Crusch was pointing. However, Zaryusu understood that she was referring to the entire village.

“Do you see how all the Lizardman tribes are struggling together for the same goal?”

Indeed, the Lizardmen were all working towards the same objective.

Zaryusu recalled the great feast which had been held to celebrate the alliance of the Five Tribes. The people of each tribe had mingled without reserve. Of course, it would be wrong to say that the survivors of the two destroyed tribes bore no grudges, but at the very least, they had managed to swallow their resentment.

“How ironic,” Zaryusu muttered to himself. He had always thought they would keep themselves secluded for all time, but he had not expected to see everyone united as one due to an external enemy.

“We should protect the possibilities that the future holds, Zaryusu. The tribes coming together will surely spur us to grow.”

Zaryusu had never seen the techniques of building walls with mud. However, now that all the other tribes knew it too, the Lizardmen tribes would surely build such walls in future. These sturdy walls would be able to keep out monster incursions. If that happened, the number of attacks on children would drastically decrease, and the Lizardmen’s numbers would increase in turn.

And as the number of people went up, they could use Zaryusu’s fish farms to feed them.

Perhaps in the near future, this marsh might become the home of a large, united tribe of Lizardmen.

“Let’s win this, Zaryusu. We can’t predict what will happen in the future, and for all we know, all this might be cleared up after we win this battle. If that happens, we’ll be able to expand, and that might bring about a world where we won’t need to worry about killing each other or food shortages.”

Crusch smiled. Zaryusu fought back the surge of emotion within him, because if he let it run wild, the consequences might be irrecoverable. Still, there was one thing he had to say, no matter what.

“You really are an outstanding female —after this battle, please tell me the answer to the question I asked when we first met.”

Crusch’s smile grew even brighter.

“Yes, Zaryusu. I’ll tell you after it’s all over—”



Demiurge hummed happily as he worked.

He picked up a polished bone and considered where best to put it. Before long —perhaps he had already decided —he shaved off part of its tip and slotted it into the article before him, which he was building.

The shaved bone fit snugly into its place, as though it had always belonged there.

If building a house without nails was called “timber-frame construction” then Demiurge’s technique could be called “bone-frame construction.”

“I have a good feeling about this.”

Demiurge smiled as he ran his fingers over the bones. He sensed that he would produce an outstanding work if he carried on like this.

“Still ...I need a thigh bone from a male of about a hundred twenty centimeters in height.”

He could still complete it without the bone, but the finished product would not look as good.

Under normal circumstances, he would let it slide, but this gift was intended

for the beloved master to whom he owed his loyalty, so he had to complete it to the best of his ability.

“If only I could find a suitable bone.”

In high spirits, Demiurge moved on.

The truth was that Demiurge enjoyed making objects like these. It was not a love for bonecrafting, but a love for crafting in general. He was very interested in that field, covering items ranging from objets d’art to furniture, and his techniques had surpassed those of a casual dabbler.

In fact, his current piece would draw gasps of awe from just about anyone who looked upon it, provided one disregarded the materials from which it was made.

This tent contained other items as well, such as a statue of his master made from solidified lava, all sorts of chairs, assorted clamps, and so on. All of them were the handiwork of Demiurge. While those pieces were all built for functionality and were not ornamented, they were still excellent specimens of workmanship.

Demiurge picked up a piece of raw material from the corner of the tent and began evaluating it. Just then, he sensed movement from the tent’s entrance.

He gently put the bone back and squeezed the irreplaceable item which his master had lent him, before focusing his attention on the movement outside. Under normal circumstances, the person outside ought to be one of his vassals or his comrades. Nobody could breach that triple-layered defense without Demiurge’s knowledge. Still, it was true that he had to be wary of the enemy who had dominated Shalltear.

Several seconds later, someone opened the tent flap. He was dressed in white and wore a black bird-like mask with a long nose.

It was Pulcinella.

He was a clown who had been created by the Supreme Beings, much as Demi-

urge had. He had been assigned to assist Demiurge for this operation.

After ensuring that he was not under mind control, the tension left Demiurge's eyes. At the same time, he released his grip on the artifact in his hand.

“Demiurge-sama, the skinning is complete.”

Demiurge felt a twinge of regret at those words.

Originally, Demiurge would have done that work in person to savor it, but the need to be wary of their mysterious and powerful foe meant that he could not leave this place under normal circumstances. Thus, he had handed the task to Pulcinella.

Taking care to keep his emotions hidden, Demiurge gave Pulcinella new orders.

“Well done. Then, begin the next step immediately. It would be rude to directly present something in that state to Ainz-sama.”

As Pulcinella bowed gracefully, Demiurge asked him:

“So, how many died?”

“None. Thanks to the torturers, they only passed out, so we should be able to skin them soon. While some of them were unwilling to accept healing magic ...it was well within acceptable parameters, so it is not a problem.”

“Marvellous.”

Gathering the raw materials was an arduous task, and they had to perform several skinnings to recoup their investment. Even so, he had not used anesthesia or painless methods to remove the skins.

“I want to make everyone happy.”

This sudden interjection made Demiurge think of Pulcinella's personality.

Pulcinella was famous in Nazarick for his kindness and mercy. He had been created to make everyone happy, and so everything he did was intended to fulfill that purpose.

“Everyone in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick is happy to serve Ainz-sama.”

Demiurge nodded in agreement.

“I see. Then, a question for you, Pulcinella: do you mean that others will be happy to serve Nazarick?”

“How could that be? That was not my meaning. Serving Ainz-sama is truly a blissful thing, one that makes me want to shed tears of joy, but it cannot be counted as true happiness if it is forced.”

“Ohh, then what should be done?”

“Simple. Pick one person, and chop his arm off. Then, the others will compare themselves to that person and count themselves fortunate. How wonderful! And then, to make the person whose arm was chopped off happy, you simply chop off someone else’s legs! Oh, how happy I have made them!”

Demiurge nodded at the clown, who was laughing to the high heavens.

“I see. You do have a there.”

2

Time would pass slowly if all one did was wait. However, it practically flew past when one was preparing for a task with a time limit.

The appointed time had come.

Today, the searing sun crawled slowly into the sky, which was a cloudless clear

blue. There was no sound of wind, and the world was shrouded in a silence so profound that one could hear the proverbial pin drop.

Pre-battle tension filled the air.

Someone gulped, and someone's breathing quickened.

And after who knew how long since the gathered Lizardmen collectively decided to remain quiet—

A hole appeared in the heavens, and a cloud billowed forth. It expanded as swiftly as it had earlier, until it enveloped the entire sky.

Soon, when the clouds obscured the firmament, when the sun's light was gone and when all was darkness—

The Lizardmen saw countless undead lurch out of the forest and over the border it shared with the swamp. The trees obscured them and prevented them from getting an exact count, so all they could see was an endless tide shambling forward.

The attackers were 2200 Zombies, 2200 Skeletons, three hundred Undead Beasts, one hundred fifty Skeleton Archers and one hundred Skeleton Riders, for a total of 4950 troops, not including the commander and his retinue.

The defenders were the army of the Five Tribes.

The Green Claw tribe had one hundred three warriors, five priests, seven hunters, one hundred twenty four males, and one hundred five females.

The Small Fang tribe had sixty five warriors, one priest, sixteen hunters, one hundred eleven males, and ninety four females.

The Razor Tail tribe had eighty nine armored warriors, three priests, six hunters, ninety nine males, and eighty one females.

The Dragon Tusk tribe had one hundred twenty five warriors, two priests, ten hunters, ninety eight males, and thirty two females.

The Red Eye tribe had forty seven warriors, fifteen priests, six hunters, fifty nine males, and seventy seven females.

Their combined fighting strength was 429 warriors, twenty six priests, forty five hunters, four hundred ninety one males, and three hundred eight females, for a total of 1380 people, not including the chiefs and Zaryusu.

A lopsided battle of over three-to-one odds was about to begin.



This was a log cabin.

It was simply designed and made of bare wood, with little ornamentation to speak of. However, it was a full five meters from floor to ceiling, and it was over twenty meters long and wide.

There was hardly any furniture here, only a huge mirror hanging on the wall, a massive, sturdy table, and the chairs surrounding it.

There were several people seated on those chairs, and on the table were many rolled-up parchments —magic scrolls.

“And this is the last one, a teleportation spell scroll.”

As the high-pitched voice —which called to mind the image of a young girl —spoke those words, another scroll was laid on the table.

The person doing so was a humanoid girl in a maid’s outfit.

She was adorably cute, with her hair done up in two buns on the side of her head. However, she was surrounded by a strange air, and her eyes were quite unique.

Said eyes were full and round, but like cheap glass marbles, there was no glow in them. In addition, they did not blink.

Her slender body was fully encased in an enchanted maid's uniform, and the high collar completely obscured her neck. Besides her face, none of her flesh was exposed.

She was one of the Pleiades Battle Maids —Entoma Vasilisa Zeta.

“And then there are the 「Message」 scrolls, but the table is getting cluttered, so could someone please clear the table?”

Entoma looked at the highest ranking person seated at the table, who nodded slowly in response.

“Then, please go ahead.”

“Yes. Then. Please. Tidy. Up. Move. Quickly.”

After hearing Cocytus acquiesce to Entoma's directions, the people around the table began working to clear the table.

Each of them was a heteromorphic being. Some looked like praying mantises, some looked like ants, and one even looked like a gigantic brain.

Each of them had a different appearance, but they had two things in common. The first was that they were Cocytus's vassals, and the second was that they all served Nazarick.

For that reason, they obeyed Entoma despite the fact that she was weaker than them.

Within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick's chain of command, the most crucial factor was not raw power, but whether or not they had been created by one of the Supreme Beings. From that point of view, Entoma ranked very highly.

After verifying that the table had been cleared—

“Then, please take these, Cocytus-sama.”

—Entoma spoke those words without moving her mouth, and then she picked up the bag by her feet and produced several rolled-up scrolls.

“These are scrolls of 「Message」. According to Ainz-sama, they were made with the skin that Demiurge-sama worked hard to obtain. Ainz-sama also said that he would like feedback if any problems came up with their use.”

“Is. That. So? I. Understand. I. Will. Inform. Him. If. Such. Problems. Occur.”

Cocytus took the scrolls from Entoma with one of his four hands.

“Now. It. Seems. Demiurge. Has. Pulled. Even. Further. Ahead. Of. Me.”

He smiled bitterly to the servants around him as he said that. His servants responded with wry grins of their own.

As he picked up the scrolls, Cocytus sank into contemplation.

Cocytus had once heard that the supply of parchment for Nazarick’s low level spell scrolls was running low.

Finding a place to replenish the stores needed to produce various items was a problem which had to be solved sooner or later. The reserves were still ample for the moment, but if they kept drawing on them, they would eventually run out one day. Therefore, everyone —their master included —had begun work on rectifying that situation.

Part of the solution involved the apple trees on the Sixth Floor, of which he had heard.

However, this was a problem which Cocytus —who was responsible for the safety of Nazarick —could do nothing about. After all, since he was assigned to protection duties, he could not go searching around outside.

Demiurge —who had gone around laying foundations outside, would surely solve this problem in the end. One could say that it was only to be expected.

His friend had accomplished his mission.

It was an admirable deed, and Cocytus was glad for him. However, the flames of jealousy smoldered within him. The fact that his comrade could aid one of the Supreme Beings —the master whom he worshipped —filled him with jealousy.

His own calling was the defense of Nazarick.

This weighty task was arguably more important than any order given to the other Guardians. If questioned, any vassal would agree that it was an important task. After all, they could not let common riffraff set foot into the sanctum of the Supreme Beings.

However, Cocytus could not prove his devotion and loyalty without any intruders.

That was why Cocytus wanted to prove himself here by obtaining good results.

To the Guardians, aiding their master was a source of great delight. Cocytus wanted to experience that joy as well.

Currently, a chance for that stood before him.

Cocytus turned to look at the image within the mirror and gripped his scroll tightly.

The mirror did not reflect the interior of the room, but instead it showed part of the swamp. The scene within the Mirror of Remote Viewing was the reason why Cocytus had spent the past two days in the log cabin which Aura had built.

This battle —no, when one considered the absolute power of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, it was more like a slaughter —was little more than a way to recover corpses. When he had received this sacred task, Cocytus's master had also laid down several stipulations.

The first rule was that Cocytus was forbidden to set foot on the battlefield. Naturally, that extended to his servants as well. He was to use the forces allocated to him to deal with this problem.

The second rule was that the Elder Lich who had been designated as the army's commander was to be held back until the end.

The third rule was that he had to make as many decisions by himself as possible.

There had been other details besides that, but those were the most important of the orders he had been given.

His task was to achieve victory using only the forces deployed to the lakeside. However, if he could do it, he could demonstrate his loyalty to his great master.

“Thank. You. Very. Much. Please. Convey. My. Thanks. To. Ainz-sama.”

Entoma nodded disinterestedly.

“Then ...Will. You. Be. Returning?”

“No. I was given instructions to observe the outcome of this battle.”

So she was to be an observer, then.

Cocytus's blood boiled as he realised the importance of his task.

Then, it was about time to begin.

Cocytus cast 「Message」, and gave his orders to the commander of the undead army.

—*Advance.*



Two bonfires blazed on either side of the raised platform, bathing the surroundings in flickering light.

On the platform were several Lizardmen, including the chiefs, leaders, and

other important figures from each tribe.

Before the platform were many battle-ready Lizardmen. The clamor from them rose and fell like the tide. It stemmed from their unease, worry, and fear—they struggled to hide all these emotions, but they could not hide the quaking in their hearts.

This was the eve of battle. The friends beside them might become corpses in an instant, or they themselves might fall in combat. They would soon be heading to the cruel place that was the battlefield.

Shasuryu Shasha stepped forward from the assembled chiefs and interrupted their commotion.

“Gathered Lizardmen, heed me!”

A majestic voice rang through the air. It silenced the immediate surroundings and made Shasuryu’s words sound exceptionally resonant.

“I confess that our enemy is numerous.”

Nobody made a sound, but everybody could sense the tremors in the air.

After a brief pause, Shasuryu spoke again.

“But there is no need to fear! For the first time in our history, the Five Tribes have come together as one! Through our alliance, we are now one tribe! Therefore, the ancestors of the Five Tribes will watch over us—even the spirits from other tribes will protect us!”

“Priests!”

At this command, Crusch stepped forward, at the head of the priests from the Five tribes, and then she shucked her clothing to reveal her white scales.

“This is Crusch Lulu, the leader of the High Priests!”

Crusch took another step forward as Shasuryu called her by name.

“Summon the ancestors upon us!”

“—Listen well, children of the Great Tribe!”

How would this newly-formed tribe turn out?

With an iron determination in her voice, Crusch went on and on. At times her voice was high-pitched, at times it was low-pitched, at times it sounded like she was growling, and at times it sounded like she was singing.

At first, almost everyone was repulsed by Crusch the albino. However, after seeing her unwavering confidence, that distaste gradually vanished.

Crusch’s body swayed gently as she spoke, Her white scales glittered in the light of the bonfire —the reflected light making it seem as though the spirits of the ancestors had descended upon Crusch.

There were looks of worshipful awe on everyone’s faces.

“Now that the Five Tribes are one, it means the spirits of the Five Tribes will protect us all! Behold, ladies and gentlemen! Witness the advent of the numberless ancestors through the generations as they take their place beside you!”

Crusch forcefully cast open her arms and pointed to the sky. Everyone looked up, but all they saw was an expanse of ordinary night sky. There was no spirits descending or anything.

However, someone muttered something.

“Isn’t there a light there?”

The faint voice grew louder, and several Lizardmen added, “I see it.” Someone said they saw a faint light, someone shouted about a Lizardmen, someone muttered about a gigantic fish, someone exclaimed that there was a child there, and someone muttered incredulously about an egg.

There was only one thing within the hearts of the Lizardmen —that the spirits of their ancestors really were with them.

“The spirits have come to protect us!”

Thus, it only made sense that someone shouted exactly that.

“Feel it! Feel their power entering your bodies!”

Crusch’s voice seemed to speak directly to their souls. It sounded like it was coming from a faraway place and very close by at the same time.

As the Lizardmen heard her voice, they felt some kind of strength filling them.

“Feel it! Feel the strength which the ancestors of the Five Tribes have gifted you!”

Now, all the Lizardmen here definitely felt it.

They could feel the intense power within them. This sense of hot-bloodedness wiped away their prior unease; their bodies glowed from within with warmth, as though they had just drunk wine.

This was certain proof that the spirits of the ancestors had descended to the mortal realm.

Crusch turned her eyes away from the crowd of intoxicated-looking Lizardmen, and nodded to Shasuryu.

“Hear me, all you Lizardmen. The ancestors are now with us. The enemy outnumbered us, but will we lose?”

“No!”

The air shook as the Lizardmen —with vaguely drunken looks on their faces—answered Shasuryu in unison.

“That’s right! Now that the spirits of the ancestors are with us, there’s no way we can lose! Let us defeat the foe and offer this victory to them!”

“Ohhhhh!”

Everyone's morale was through the roof. In place of the uneasy Lizardmen from earlier were now warriors hungry for battle.

This was not the effect of charm magic. Even with this many druids, they did not have the luxury of casting spells on everyone here before the battle started.

Rather, this was the result of the special beverage the Lizardmen had drunk before this ceremony began.

Said beverage was a recipe passed down through the generations, which gave its drinkers courage. It was made with herbs which induced a brief period of intoxication, euphoria, and hallucinations in those who consumed it.

The net result was a state of altered perception.

Crusch's spiel had been intended to buy time for the effects to kick in.

When one knew the truth, it hardly seemed impressive at all. However, for the people witnessing this spectacle with their own eyes—in other words, the Lizardmen who saw the proof that their ancestors were walking with them—this ritual ignited the courage within them.

“Then, we shall begin applying the warpaint. Originally, every tribe would have their own color, but now that the spirits of the Five tribes reside within us all, we shall use the colors of each tribe for everyone!”

Several priests took up clay pots and walked among the Lizardmen.

The Lizardmen decorated themselves using the paint from the pots. They believed that the ancestor spirits within them were guiding their hands, so they let their fingertips wander freely, tracing designs all over their bodies.

Many of them painted their entire bodies, possibly thanks to this “advent.” However, almost none of the Green Claw Lizardmen applied paint to themselves. This was because Zaryusu, Shasuryu and the elite members of the tribes had not done so. In other words, it was a form of idol worship.

After looking around and satisfying himself that everyone was done, Zaryusu

drew his greatsword and pointed it at the village gate.

“Forward march!”

“Ohhhhhh—!”

Countless roars rang through the air.

3

The troops from the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick were divided into two groups and stationed in the swamp.

The Zombie division was on the Lizardmen’s left flank, while the Skeleton division was on their right. The Skeleton Archers and Skeleton Riders were stationed behind the other Skeletons.

The Beast Zombies were kept in the rear, as though they were a command company.

The Lizardmen facing them were also divided into two forces, despite their comparatively thin numbers. The hunters and the females were on the Zombies’ side, while the males and warriors were on the Skeletons’ side. Meanwhile, the priests remained within the village, defended by the walls.

The Lizardmen had come out of the village because they knew that there was no point in laying up for a siege. There was no help coming for them, and the walls were anything but sturdy. In addition, the enemy was an army of the dead, who did not need rations or rest.

Given these deeply unfavorable circumstances, a siege was a very bad idea.

However, once the Lizardmen had formed up outside, they keenly understood the tremendous disparity between their forces and those of the enemy.

A situation where one faced three could still be compared to that of ten facing thirty. But if one thousand had to fight three thousand, the vast difference in their respective strengths became very apparent. Even if three thousand undead beings did nothing but stand in ranks, they were still a very intimidating sight.

Despite the circumstances, the Lizardmen did not show any signs of fear. Their ancestors were with them now —numbers counted for nothing to them.

Soon, the undead forces began a slow advance. The Zombies and Skeletons began to move, while the Skeleton Archers and Skeleton Riders remained where they stood. Perhaps they were being held in reserve.

The Lizardmen advanced as well.

“OHHHHHH!”

The wetlands echoed with an ear-piercing shout, accompanied by the sound of countless splashes. Water was churned into foam and dirt flew everywhere.

The two armies continued advancing, until they were on the verge of a ferocious clash. However, an abnormality arose in the Nazarick army.

The Zombies and the Skeletons had begun their advance together, but as they moved forward, they gradually drew apart. This was because the Zombies were slow while the Skeletons were swift. In addition, the wetlands were very difficult terrain.

When slow monsters like Zombies were mired down in mud, their movements became even slower. However, agile monsters like Skeletons were not as badly affected.

Therefore, the first engagement was between the Skeletons and the Lizardmen warriors.

The Lizardmen employed no formations, simply crashing into the Skeletons. There was no art in their technique; they simply swung whenever they saw an enemy.

Leading the way were the five Head Warriors of the various tribes. To some extent, it was foolish for a commander to lead from the front. However, they were the highest ranked warriors of their respective tribes, and morale would suffer if they did not fight at the head of their troops. Instead, the Lizardmen were all in high spirits.

They were backed by eighty nine armored warriors from the Razor Tail tribe. They wore hide armor and carried hide shields, and they possessed the highest defensive strength of any group among the tribes.

They raised their shields, charging the Skeleton horde as a single, united wall.

Then, they clashed —the vanguards of the Skeletons and the Lizardmen colliding with each other.

In that moment, countless bones flew in all directions, and the Lizardman squadron tore into the Skeleton horde.

The sounds of carnage shook the heavens and the sounds of bone crunching seemed endless. There were occasional cries of pain, but those were drowned out by the sounds of shattering bone.

The Lizardmen had an incontestable advantage in this first engagement, and the tide of battle favored them.

If the combatants were not Lizardmen, but humans, the opposite would probably be the case.

Skeletons were made of bones, so piercing weapons were almost completely ineffective against them while they resisted slashing weapons to a certain extent. Therefore, human troops —who used blades and swords as their primary weapons —would have a hard time damaging those Skeletons.

The advantage of the Lizardmen stemmed from the fact that they used crude maces and clubs as their primary weapons, which inflicted bludgeoning damage —the bane of Skeletons.

The Lizardmen easily crushed the bony bodies of the Skeletons with every

swing of their weapons. Even if they survived one hit, the second would pulverize them. In contrast, the rusty longswords that the Skeletons used were deflected by the tough scales and hides of the Lizardmen. While some of them were hurt, nobody sustained any fatal wounds.

This was the first charge.

Almost five hundred Skeletons lay in fragments from that clash alone.



Cocytus's jaw dropped as he stared at the vision within the mirror.

This was only the first time they had stood toe to toe, but the strength of the Lizardmen had exceeded his expectations. As an excellent warrior himself, Cocytus possessed a degree of insight into the strength of his enemy.

It was true that as individuals, the Skeletons were clearly weaker than the Lizardmen and they had no hope of victory. However, their numbers should have compensated for that weakness.

Even so, this outcome had taken place. What was the meaning of this? It made him wonder if the Lizardmen had been strengthened by some other power.

In all likelihood, only the Skeleton Archers and Skeleton Riders could claim victory over the Lizardmen as they were now.

The Skeletons crumbled one after the other as he watched the battle. The Skeletons and Zombies would probably only serve to sap their opponents' stamina.

At this rate, the only effective troops we have are the three hundred Beast Zombies, the one hundred fifty Skeleton Archers, and the five hundred Skeleton Riders. The weight of numbers is now against us.

Cocytus calculated the odds in his mind.

The undead were strong, especially in extended battles; almost nobody could beat them at that. The undead did not feel anything —not fear, not pain, not fatigue, or the need for sleep.

The advantages those characteristics bestowed in warfare hardly needed to be stated.

For instance, if one swung a mace at the head of a living creature, there was a high chance said creature would die, or if it survived, it would bleed profusely and suffer great pain. The person receiving the attack would naturally lose the will to fight. Of course, an exception had to be made for warriors who had been trained to endure great pain, but most people would not want to fight on.

That was a perfectly natural reaction from living beings.

But what about the undead?

Crack their skulls? They would continue attacking while they leaked their brains with every blow.

Break their arms? They would keep attacking with their shattered limbs.

Chop off their legs? They would crawl to launch the next attack.

Indeed, as long as the negative energy which served as their lifeforce was not depleted, the undead would keep fighting. As long as the conditions for instant death were not met —decapitation was quite a common one for most low tier undead beings —they would not lose the will to fight like humans would. In other words, the undead were perfect soldiers.

It could not be denied that the Lizardmen were currently superior, going by individual strength. However, that state of affairs might not carry one.

Cocytus's opinion of the Lizardmen went up by a notch, and he concluded that they were not a foe which could be instantly destroyed. That being the case, he had to draw out the battle.

“Should. We. Pull. Back. And. Wait. For. A. Chance. To. Launch. Another. Attack?”

“Your servant feels that would be the wisest move.”

“Your servant is of the opinion that it would be better to mobilize the archers and cavalry.”

“No, no, we should continue the attack until the enemy is exhausted.”

“But what good does it do to exhaust the foe? If we cannot smash their headquarters, the enemy will eventually recover their strength.”

“Indeed. The enemy seems to have a strong defense, but they are hiding behind those fragile walls. What about taking the village and then encircling them?”

After listening to his servants’ responses, Cocytus picked up the 「Message」 scroll and glanced at Entoma, trying to read her expression.

Entoma looked disinterestedly at the mirror. She produced a green biscuit from somewhere and brought it to her chin, and soon, the sounds of crunching echoed through the room. That attitude seemed to be saying that she was unconcerned about the events that were unfolding. Perhaps that was why she had no expression on her face.

—No, that expressionless face was nothing more than a decoration.

Cocytus thought about her true nature, and realised that trying to read her expression was a foolish gesture.

She was a Familiar Eater. Even Cocytus’s friend, Kyouhukou of the Five Worst in Nazarick, had bluntly stated that “she is a most frightening person.” That was her true nature.

Cocytus abandoned the plan of trying to divine her thoughts by reading her face and unfurled the scroll, sending a 「Message」 to the army’s commander.



“—Are they looking down on us?” Zenberu muttered. He did so quietly, but it was still loud enough that everyone watching the enemy from the wall could hear it.

“They aren’t mobilizing their archers or cavalry. That makes me think that they’re looking down on us.”

“Yes, I thought they’d come at us all at once ...”

“Zombie fight, going well.”

There were only forty five hunters fighting the zombies. They launched hit and run attacks with thrown stones, slowly drawing the Zombies away from the Skeletons. The females slowly moved to a position where they could flank the Skeletons.

“Don’t you think their movements are very suspicious?”

“...Indeed.”

The Zombies were not so much diverted as completely distracted by the hunters. Would any commander permit such movements? No, it should not have been possible, yet the Zombies were moving as described. That being the case, what did the enemy have in mind? Nobody present had any idea.

“I don’t quite understand what they’re doing.”

“Mm, I’m with Shasuryu.”

No matter how hard thought about it, they did not feel there was any particular significance to the Zombies’ movements.

After observing for a while longer, Zaryusu shared his thoughts with the others.

“Could it be that there’s no commander?”

“No commander ...? Ah, do you mean to say that the undead have been acting on the orders they were given at the beginning of the battle?”

“Mm, yes.”

The lowest tiered undead like Zombies and Skeletons did not possess intelligence. Therefore, giving them orders at the appropriate moment was the best way of commanding them. However, the Zombies and other enemies seemed to have received orders to kill any nearby Lizardmen. That was what they were getting at.

“In other words, the enemy thought they could beat us by sheer weight of numbers ...no, could it be that this battle is just to see how well they can fight without a commander?”

“Seems that way.”

“Bastards! Are they fucking with us!?”

It was Shasuryu, not Zenberu, who was cursing. Even Shasuryu could not tolerate this sort of thing. After all, the Lizardmen were all betting their lives on this.

“Calm down, Shasuryu. We don’t know if that’s the case yet.”

“Mm, sorry ...though I guess it’s good that we’re doing well so far.”

“Ani-ja, you’re right, because we need to cut down the enemies’ numbers as much as possible right now.”

Battle was a very fatiguing activity, and a pitched melee was unimaginably taxing on one’s mental strength. On a battlefield where one did not know if the enemy would be coming from the front, rear, left, or right, merely swinging one’s weapon a few times was several times more exhausting than normal.

However, the undead did not feel fatigue, and they would continue attacking

without respite.

This was the difference between the living and the dead, and as time went by, that difference would become more and more apparent.

In other words, time was the Lizardmen's enemy.

“Cheh, it would be fine if only I could fight ...”

“Patience, Zenberu.”

Indeed, if a mighty warrior like Zenberu took the field, they could probably wipe out the Skeletons in moments. However, that would mean revealing their ace in the hole. Zaryusu's group of half a dozen people was their secret weapon. While they would obviously need to play their trump card in times of emergency, they could not reveal their true power as long as the situation was not dire and if their greatest foe had not shown up yet.

“Still, if the enemy doesn't advance, doesn't that play right into our hands?” Zaryusu told the others, who responded in the affirmative. Then, he turned to Crusch and asked, “Are things still okay on your side?”

“...Yes, and the ritual's going well too.”

Crusch answered Zaryusu's question as she looked around the village. The ritual which the priests were conducting in the village might well be another trump card for the Lizardmen. Normally, it would have taken a very long time, but since all the priests of all the tribes were gathered together, it was progressing at a tremendous pace, quickly enough to be used in this battle.

“So this is the power of cooperation ...”

“Mmm ...yes. Granted, we did share some insights after that war in the past ...Still, there's a lot of things I want to do after the war now.”

The other chiefs nodded vigorously at Shasuryu's suggestion. They had shared a lot of knowledge thanks to this battle, and they had seen with their own eyes the importance of everyone working together towards a common goal. The

three chiefs who had allied in the past but not exchanged information were particularly forceful in their agreement.

Zaryusu looked at those five people, and smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s nothing. I just felt really happy despite our circumstances.”

Crusch immediately picked up on what he was thinking.

“—Me too, Zaryusu.”

As he looked on the smiling Crusch, Zaryusu’s eyes narrowed as though she were shining. They had looks of admiration and kindness in their eyes.

It was only natural that they were not embracing. After all, they could not indulge their desires while Lizardmen were dying before them. However, Zaryusu’s and Crusch’s tails seemed like independent creatures as they twitched, occasionally touching and separating.

“Muuu ...”

“Do you know what this situation is, as an older brother?”

“We’ve been completely shut out.”

“Aw, they really do love each other.”

“In short ...good to be young, future is bright.”

The four older Lizardmen nodded as they looked on their adorable juniors.

Of course, there was no way Crusch and Zaryusu could not have heard that. Their tails moved and twitched without pause, but they had serious and proper expressions on their faces.

“Ani-ja, the enemy’s making their move.”

Shasuryu and the other chiefs could not help but smile bitterly at the sudden change in Zaryusu's attitude. At the same time, they cast their eyes toward the enemy formation. The Skeleton Riders were advancing *en masse*.

"Oi oi oi, don't tell me they're heading for us?"

"The cavalry? Are they planning to shake our morale by striking directly at us?"

"No, they should be planning to circle around the warriors and the males and then flank them, right?"

This was bad.

Everyone came to the same conclusion without saying a word. The mobility of the Skeleton Riders was hard to deal with.

If the Skeleton Riders had moved out at the beginning of the battle, they would have prioritized their destruction. However, the warriors and the male Lizardmen were currently locked in melee combat, the hunters were drawing off the Zombies, and the females were flanking the Skeletons with thrown rocks, so there was precious little manpower left to block the Skeleton Riders.

"It looks like it'll be better if we make the first move."

Shasuryu nodded after the Small Fang tribe's chief spoke.

"The question now is who we should send out ...or rather, who we should allow to fight first..."



Skeleton Riders.

They were lance-wielding Skeletons mounted on Skeletal Horses. They had no special characteristics beyond their enhanced mobility, but said mobility was outstanding on this marshy terrain. Their bodies were made of bone and

would not sink too deeply into the mud, which meant that they could advance at the speed of a regular horse.

Nearly a hundred Skeleton Riders were moving forward, intent on circling around behind the Lizardmen to destroy them from behind.

They saw three Lizardmen approaching from their front and left—in other words, from the village—but the Skeleton Riders paid them no heed. They had not received orders to engage them, so they would ignore them as long as they did not attack. Unintelligent undead were such creatures.

Just as they were about to reach the rear of the Lizardman forces, the leading Skeleton Rider's world was suddenly flipped and turned upside down. The horseman flew far into the air and crashed heavily to the marsh.

A human would have been confused and been unable to act. However, the Skeleton Rider was an unintelligent undead being, and it immediately continued moving to fulfill its orders.

Though it rose quickly, it had been injured, and so it moved with a bit of a limp.

Just then, it was hit by another unhorsed Skeleton Rider, and the shattered bones of the two Skeleton Riders were scattered all over the marsh.

Scenes like this were happening everywhere.

Why had something like this happened on the wide-open wetlands? The answer was simple—it was a trap.

There had been open wooden boxes buried in the marsh, and when the Skeleton Horses stepped into them, they had fallen.

The Skeleton Riders fell one after the other. If they were humans, they would have slowed their pace. However, the Skeleton Riders would not do that. While they had enough judgement to avoid a hole they were aware of, they had no ability to be wary of traps. This was because they had no orders to do so, and no intelligence to allow them to adapt to the situation.

Their headlong rush into the traps looked like a form of mass suicide.

Still, while the traps were very effective, they were ultimately only a delaying measure. They could inflict some damage, but they could not eliminate the Skeleton Riders by themselves. The fallen Skeleton Riders rose to their feet, covered in mud.

Just then, there was a whoosh and the sound of the air parting. Just like that, one of the fallen Skeleton Riders had its head knocked off.

The Skeleton Riders judged this to be enemy action, and looked around.

Just then, another Skeleton Rider's head flew off its shoulders, shattered like a glass marble.

The Skeleton Riders spotted three Lizardmen about eighty meters away from them. They also saw them launching stones from the slings in their hands, crushing the skulls of the Skeleton Riders—

The Skeleton Riders began moving.



At the same time, the battle situation with the Skeletons began to change.

After the sound of countless bowstrings being pulled taut, the sound of arrows filled the air like the falling of rain.

The one hundred fifty Skeleton Archers fired at the melee with the Skeletons and the Lizardmen. They did not just discharge one arrow each, but two, three...

The Lizardmen had not expected an arrow storm like that.

Many Lizardmen were hit by arrows and collapsed. They could not fight the Skeletons and block the arrow attacks at the same time.

Of course, the Skeletons were hit by the arrows as well, but they were not hurt.

Using the Skeletons —who were nigh-immune to piercing damage —as screens and then having the Skeleton Archers fire from behind them was a near-perfect strategy. They would have enough time to wipe out all the Lizardmen in the time it would take to bash through the two thousand Skeletons screening them.

The problem was that they had used that tactic too late. If they had opened with that move, the fate of the Lizardmen would have been sealed. They would have been drowned under the overwhelming tide of enemy forces and victory would have been decided. However, the outcome of the battle was largely decided by this point.

The Lizardmen ignored the skeletons Skeletons, and charged the Skeleton Archers in the rear.

One hundred fifty arrows fell like rain, and several Lizardmen hit the ground as a result. Yet, that was only a small portion of their forces.

The Lizardmen had thick skin and strong scales, so even without armor, they had the same defensive strength as humans in leather armor. Even if an arrow somehow pierced their hides, their thick layer of muscles kept them alive.

In addition, the Skeleton Archers did not have much strength behind their draws. That was another reason why they could not kill the Lizardmen.

The Lizardmen roared fearlessly as they charged. They crossed their arms over their heads as the arrow storm fell upon them, and even if they were impaled by the shafts, they continued regardless.

Three arrows —

This was the most each of the Skeleton Archers managed to loose. If they had any intelligence, they would have fallen back. It would have been better if they retreated for the moment and then regrouped to engage the surviving undead troops.

However, the Skeletons' minds could not process such complicated orders,

and such orders had not been given anyway. Therefore, they could only do as they had been told —keep firing on the Lizardmen even if they get close.

There was a mighty roar —and then the Skeletons and Skeleton Archers alike drowned under the rising tide of Lizardmen. The Skeleton Archers could no longer show their stuff at this range. Their part was to be punching bags for their enemies, and so they fell steadily, in twos and threes.

Currently, the Zombies were still alive, but the Skeletons had been almost completely beaten into the ground.

This was when the enemy sent out new foes.

Those were the Beast Zombies.

These monsters —made from the corpses of wolves, snakes, pythons, and other such creatures —combined the strength of Zombies and the agility of wild animals.

The Beast Zombies ran at the Lizardmen. The swift ones surged ahead while the slow ones lagged behind; it was a ragged charge with no formation to speak of.

Attacks from below were unexpectedly hard to avoid. The Beast Zombies would tear at their foes' legs and finish them off once they were immobilized. It was a truly savage combat technique.

The increasingly fatigued Lizardmen had a hard time warding off these attacks. Several Lizardmen were too slow to avoid having their throats torn out by the Beast Zombies. After seeing their comrades fall, even the ones who had steeled themselves for combat or believed in ancestral protection could not hide the looks of fear on their faces.

The Head Warriors had led their men into the bloody fray, but now they were gradually being forced back. Just as they thought the line of battle would eventually break, the ground before them swelled.

Before them appeared two armless and legless lumps of mud, around one hun-

dred sixty centimeters tall.

The two clumps of mud began moving.

They had no legs, but they moved adroitly and smoothly over the wetlands, towards the Beast Zombies. After closing the distance, the mud-clumps sprouted whips that were longer than them from the places where a human's arms would have been.

This was one of the trump cards of the Lizardmen, the Swamp Spirits summoned by the combined efforts of all the priests.

The Swamp Spirits charged into the Beast Zombies and attacked with their tentacle-like whip arms, seizing the enemy. Naturally, the Beast Zombies fearlessly counterattacked, slashing with claws and tearing with fangs.

This was a battle between beings that knew no fear. However, the tide turned in favor of the Swamp Spirits, purely because of the difference between their fighting strengths.

The power of their priests had defeated the unliving. This fact rekindled the Lizardmen's courage, and they rallied for another charge.

A brutal battle ensued.

Unlike the previous fight with the Skeletons, the Lizardmen began to take casualties. However, victory was at hand for the Lizardmen, who had the advantage of numbers.



We will lose.

Cocytus understood that much.

There were no intelligent undead among the forces he had been assigned. That was the main cause of their defeat, and something which had worried him

from the start, but he had not expected them to be that weak.

Cocytus's head ached at his naivete. While there was a way to turn the tables in a situation like this, he did not favor it much, because making that move was tantamount to admitting defeat.

Still, how could he report failure to his master? Cocytus picked up the 「Message」 scroll. Who should he send this message to...

“...Demiurge?”

『Indeed it is, old friend. Why would you contact me? Has something happened?』

A calm, even voice spoke in Cocytus's mind. Demiurge's intelligence was top class in Nazarick. Surely he would have an idea for a situation like this.

On a certain level, Demiurge could also be considered a rival of his, so Cocytus was not too happy about asking him for help. Still, the most important thing was to avoid defeat. How could the armies of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick be beaten in battle? He was willing to cast aside his pride and bow before others for help in order to avoid that outcome.

“Actually—”

After hearing a scroll's worth of explanation about the current situation, Demiurge—who had been listening quietly—sighed in exasperation.

『Then, what do you want me to do?』

“I. Hope. You. Can. Help. Me. Think. Of. Something. If. This. Carries. On. We. Will. Be. Defeated. I. Can. Accept. A. Personal. Defeat. But. I. Cannot. Allow. The. Great. Tomb. Of. Nazarick. —The. Supreme. Beings. —To. Be. Disgraced. In. Such. A. Way.”

『...Do you think Ainz-sama truly wishes for victory?』

“What. Do. You. Mean?”

『I am saying, why do you think Ainz-sama picked out such low tier fodder for an army?』

Cocytus had harbored his doubts about that point. He had no idea what reason could warrant drafting the dregs of Nazarick into a fighting force.

“...Ainz-sama. Must. Have. His. Own. Motives. But. What. Could. They. Be?”

『...There are several possibilities that come to mind.』

That's Demiurge for you —Cocytus did not say that, though his respect for the demon grew in silence.

『Let me ask you something, Cocytus. You've been there for several days now. Don't you think you should have gathered intelligence on the Lizardmen?』

He was right. However—

“No, Ainz-sama ordered me to defeat the foe with that force, in a head-on confrontation.”

『That is indeed the case, but I hope you will think carefully on it, Cocytus. The important thing is what sort of results you will show Ainz-sama, am I wrong? If exterminating the village was the objective, then you should have considered the ideal methods for extermination, don't you think?』

Cocytus had nothing to say, because Demiurge had hit the nail on the head.

『Ainz-sama must have assigned you those servants because he had that in mind.』

“...You. Mean. To. Say. That. Ainz-sama, Deliberately. Assigned. Me. Inadequate. Troops?”

『The possibility is very high. If you had researched the village beforehand, perhaps you would have known that your forces would be insufficient to conquer the village. In that event, you would have told Ainz-sama that, ‘Exterminating the village will be difficult with these forces, I wish to request reinforcements.’

That was most likely Ainz-sama's objective.』

In other words, Demiurge was trying to say that Cocytus had to divine his master's intent and adapt his methods to the situation, not follow orders blindly.

『This seems to be one of Ainz-sama's plans to improve the way in which we approach matters, but he seems to have other objectives in mind as well ...』

“Other. Objectives?” Cocytus hurriedly asked Demiurge. He had already erred once, and he did not wish to further add to his mistakes.

『Ainz-sama sent messengers to the village, but he did not state Nazarick's name at all. In addition, he ordered you not to take the field. That being the case—』

Cocytus gulped as he waited for Demiurge to continue speaking. However, Demiurge did not.

『Cocytus! Forgive me, something urgent has cropped up. I apologize, but let's leave our conversation here. Good luck.』

Demiurge's words cut off and the 「Message」 ended.

As Cocytus wondered what would panic a calm person like him, his gaze shifted to someone else seated at a table within the room. He saw Entoma peeling a tattered talisman from her forehead and casting it down.

If she, a talismancer, was using a talisman, that meant—

It was too late for anything else.

That being the case, now was the time to deploy the final undead being, his trump card. However, would that really fulfill his master's aims?

This might be the first time Cocytus had contemplated his master's true underlying motives. However, there was only one conclusion he could reach.

Cocytus cast the 「Message」 spell.

“—Heed me, Elder Lich commander. Attack and show the Lizardmen your power.”



The bony body —dressed in a luxurious but timeworn set of robes —clutched a gnarled staff in one of its hand. Its skin was a thin layer stretched over the skull underneath and it was beginning to rot, and it bore a malevolent intelligence within its eyes. Its body radiated negative energy like a mist which shrouded it.

This undead magic caster was the Elder Lich in question.

After receiving its orders, the undead creature looked over the marsh. Then, it turned to the Bloodmeat Hulks —undead creatures that were masses of red skin and muscle —behind it. To these fellow creations of the same Supreme Being, he gave an order:

“Kill those three Lizardmen.”

Upon receipt of those orders, the two Bloodmeat Hulks lumbered out towards the three Lizardmen who were devastating the Skeleton Riders.

While the Bloodmeat Hulks were low tier undead who could only attack with brute strength, they possessed the power of regeneration. As a result, it would take a long time to bring them down with physical attacks on their level.

The Elder Lich felt that the Bloodmeat Hulks could buy him enough time.

This could be considered a foolish strategy. The Elder Lich was a magic caster and not used to melee combat, so under normal circumstances, it would have been better to keep the Bloodmeat Hulks by his side.

However, he could not do that now.

His orders were to “Show the Lizardmen your power.” Therefore, he had to proceed alone and destroy the Lizardman headquarters with his overwhelm-

ing might.

The Elder Lich advanced. Its face twisted into a fearsome shape as it chuckled.

He felt that this was a piece of cake.

He had been personally made by the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown, and he was far superior to the automatically-spawning Elder Liches in Nazarick. And now, his task was to demonstrate his puissance to the Lizardmen.

He swore to achieve victory by the name his master had given him.

“I, Igva, shall dedicate this triumph to my liege.”

4

After wiping out the Beast Zombies, the Lizardmen rounded their shoulders in fatigue and breathed sighs of relief. There was anguish on their faces, but at the same time there were faint smiles there.

It was true that they had taken many casualties, but they were lucky only to have sustained that much. If the Swamp Spirits had not joined the fight ...no, if they had come in just a little later, their formation would have collapsed and it would have turned into a rout. “We’re moving out,” shouted the Head Warriors. It was an announcement that they were heading into battle.

Their bodies were weak from fatigue, and just raising their weapons consumed a great deal of effort, to say nothing of actually wielding them. They were bone-tired, but the battle was not yet over.

They had to beware the enemy’s reinforcements even as they eliminated the distant Zombies.

“All right, get the heavily wounded back to the village, the rest of you form up on us—”

The sound of roaring fire interrupted him.

Searing heat engulfed the surroundings, and the Swamp Spirits at the center of the blaze wavered.

As the flames vanished like they had never been there in the first place, the two Spirits were in terrible shape. A single gout of fire had half-destroyed them.

Before the Lizardmen could cry out in surprise, the fires raged once more. The Spirits could not endure the attacks and disintegrated into the roaring inferno.

As the Swamp Spirits—who had demonstrated incredible power against the Beast Zombies—disappeared without a trace, the Lizardmen's faces went blank, unable to keep pace with what was happening before them.

What had just happened?

They knew that the Swamp Spirits had been destroyed, but they were desperately trying to deny that reality. That was because if the Swamp Spirits really had been destroyed, it meant that there was a more powerful monster headed their way.

The Lizardmen looked around in confusion and also to hide their fear. Just as they spotted an undead being in the distance, a fireball once more flew from its hand.

The head-sized ball of flame soared through the air in a straight line and flew into the leader squad of the Lizardman troops.

Under normal circumstances, flames would vanish upon contact with water. However, this fireball was a magical phenomenon and defied that logic. When the fireball touched the water, it was as though it had struck a hard surface. A roaring cyclone of flame blossomed from the point of impact.

The fiery explosion consumed several Lizardmen—and then faded away.

Was this an illusion?—that thought vanished in an instant. The smell of charred meat wafting in the air and the bodies of Lizardmen slumped on the ground

was real enough.

The undead creature advanced with unhurried steps, so elegant that one might take it for arrogance. That was the stride of a mighty being, fully confident in its power.

As the Lizardmen hesitated about whether they should rush it with an all-out attack, just like how they had destroyed the Skeleton Archers, another fireball flew at them.

The fireball exploded violently, claiming the lives of all the Lizardmen around it in an instant.

This was overwhelming power. It made people think that everything which had happened just now was little more than a game.

“Uooooohh!”

The Lizardmen shouted to clear the fear from their hearts. Just as several Lizardmen charged recklessly ahead, a cold, clear voice spoke from what seemed like an unthinkable great distance:

“—Utter foolishness.”

That was all their foe said. The onrushing Lizardmen were incinerated by a ball of flame before they could scream.

The undead being took a step forward, and over a hundred Lizardmen immediately took one step back. The disparity between their powers was like a high wall which forced the Lizardmen to retreat.

“Run away!”

A strident, electrifying cry filled the air. The voice belonged to one of the Head Warriors.

“That one’s different from the ones before him! We can’t take him!”

That much was true. The majestic sight of the Elder Lich slowly advancing by itself was an awesome one. It made the Lizardmen feel as though a mighty wind was blowing across their skin.

“Go inform the chiefs and Zaryusu about this.”

“We’ll try to buy time!”

Another fireball exploded, and several more Lizardmen lay upon the ground.

“Run! Go tell them!”

The five Head Warriors ordered the Lizardmen to flee, and at the same time they judged the distance between them. They were spacing themselves out so even when a fireball burst, at least one of them would be able to close the gap to the enemy. It was a suicidal tactic designed to accomplish that objective.

After spreading themselves out, the five of them looked at each other, and then sprinted.

The enemy was roughly one hundred meters away. They despaired at the distance separating them, but even so, they ran with all their might. That was because even if they perished halfway, their deaths would still give the chiefs and Zaryusu information they could use.



The Lizardmen who had effortlessly held off the enemy came running back like a flock of frightened birds.

Zaryusu calmly observed that sight. No, ever since that powerful foe appeared, he had been scrutinizing its every movement. His attention was focused on the undead being that could cast the killing fire.

Its movements were completely different from the mindless foes from before. In all likelihood, that was the enemy commander.

As the undead creature closed to within one hundred meters of the five Head Warriors, it began using 「Fireball」 to execute area-of-effect attacks. This forced them to scatter, and it seemed intent on burning the Head Warriors to death during their run.

“Looks like it’s time for us to take the field.”

Zaryusu nodded at Zenberu’s words. Crusch signalled her agreement as well. She was aware that this might well be a battle where they might all meet a glorious end.

“Yes, it’s time for us to go. Its power is shocking. Our foe might well be the personal subordinate of that Supreme One, or the commander of this army ...Even if it’s not, it must surely be a trump card of some sort.”

“Indeed. Nobody can control multiple undead of such a level. But how shall we make our move? It seems a bit too far away for us.”

Crusch’s question gave Zaryusu a headache.

They were not fighting to die, so they had to plan around that.

Zaryusu and Zenberu could not attack at range, so they had to close in for a melee. The problem now lay in the one hundred meters between them and the enemy.

Zaryusu and the others could probably take one or two 「Fireballs」 with ease, but they would probably take more than just one or two such hits before reaching their opponent, and the true struggle would begin once they got to it. It was not hard to see how the enemy would repulse them if they tried a frontal assault while taking fireball attacks.

“That distance is pretty daunting.”

“Yeah ...you got that right. To think a hundred meters could feel so far away...”

Zaryusu and friends wondered how they could reach the enemy with no or minimal damage.

“How about burrowing through the ground?”

“If we used priestly powers ...it’d still be hard. If we could use 「Invisibility」 ...”

They could probably close the gap instantly by going invisible and using the 「Fly」 spell. However, druids could not cast such spells.

“Then how about making a shield and advancing with it held before us?”

“Making a shield would take too long.”

“How about tearing one of the houses down and using it as a shield?”

Zenberu smiled bitterly as he realised the futility of the words he had just spoken. The enemy attacked with explosive fireballs. Even if it was blocked, the searing temperatures would still scorch them from the side. There was no time now to make a full-body shield which could withstand high temperatures.

“Ah, yes ...we can still do that.”

“What is it, Zaryusu?” Crusch asked nervously, feeling a little afraid. Is my face so scary, Zaryusu wondered. Still, it could not be helped. After all, he was so stressed-out that he wanted to scream.

“A shield, you say ...I think I just found one..”



Igva nodded, pleased with himself and the present situation.

Things were going very well. The Bloodmeat Hulks were still fighting, but he had successfully advanced to the village.

Several stupid Lizardmen had tried to attack him, but after seeing the power of his 「Fireballs」, they realized that resistance was futile. The most successful attackers were the five who had split up to rush him, but even they had only

managed to get within fifty meters of him.

Igva walked on in silence, like he was strolling through an empty wasteland. While he pitied the weak Lizardmen —albeit in a mocking fashion —it would not do to be careless.

He was close to the village, his objective. Once there, he intended to continuously launch 「Fireballs」 to destroy the Lizardmen with their village.

However, the Lizardmen would probably try to stop him from reaching his destination. That would mean it was about time for the next counterattack.

Igva looked to the village, and his suspicions were vindicated.

“...Oh, I see.”

Igva saw a Hydra coming at him.

If that was their ace in the hole, then the Lizardmen would lose the will to fight once he crushed it with overwhelming force. If that happened, he would be able to destroy the village more easily.

For safety's sake, Igva looked around, then checked the sky, and halted only after verifying that there were no traces of the enemy. He leisurely waited for the Hydra to enter his attack range.

As the Hydra reached the edge of said range, it began to sprint. As expected, it was heading straight for Igva.

“How foolish. Did you think you could crawl all the way to me with that slothful speed of yours? Well, beasts will be beasts.”

With a mocking smile on his face, Igva conjured a 「Fireball」 in his hand and launched it at the Hydra.

It flew in a straight line and struck the Hydra dead center. The searing fires which emerged consumed the Hydra.

However, the Hydra continued forward, albeit a little shaky on its feet. It continued running, though it was wreathed in flames ...no, the flames had gone out in an instant, so Igva must have been seeing things. That said, the sight before him spoke of the Hydra's extraordinary willpower.

Igva frowned in displeasure. The fact that it could withstand one of his magical attacks was a blow to his pride.

While it was true that the Hydra seemed to have been enchanted with a defensive spell to reduce the damage it had taken, said defensive spell was not of a high tier and could not completely nullify his magic.

...If I recall correctly, Hydras have the ability of fast healing ...but it shouldn't be able to withstand flame attacks. In any case, it's a beast, so it should be full of vitality. In that case, it makes sense that it could take a hit.

That reasoning comforted Igva somewhat, but it could not douse the flames of rancor within his heart. Igva was a special monster who had been personally created by the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown —the fact that this creature had not died in one hit was an insult to his master.

With cold eyes that were the polar opposite of the anger smoldering within him, Igva studied the oncoming Hydra.

“...How displeasing. Die!”

He cast another fireball at the Hydra, and the roaring flames engulfed its body. For a moment he even thought he could smell its flesh charring from the distance. Even if his foe had not taken a fatal wound, surely it would hesitate over whether or not to continue forward.

However—

“—Why is it not stopping? Why does it persist?”

Rororo continued its single-minded sprint forward. Its body was large, but it was running in the marsh, so its speed was about the same as that of a Lizardman. Water splashed in all directions and a liquid cacophony echoed all around it.

Its amber eyes had turned cloudy from the great heat, and two of its four heads hung powerlessly.

Even so, it continued sprinting forward.

Another 「Fireball」 came, striking Rororo's body. The thermal energy contained within the 「Fireball」 exploded forth and washed all over it. The pain was like being beaten all over its body; its eyes felt drier than ever before, and the superheated air seared its lungs.

Its entire body was burned, and the agony that had been wracking Rororo from just now told it that if it continued, its very life was forfeit.

Even so —it continued running.

It ran.

It ran on.

It continued forward, never stopping. The high temperatures stripped the scales from its skin and causing blood-spurting blisters to blossom upon it, but even so it carried on, straight ahead.

An unintelligent beast would naturally have turned and fled, but Rororo did not do so.

Rororo was a magical beast called a Hydra.

There were many kinds of magical beasts. Some possessed greater intelligence than a human being and some were little wiser than an average animal.

Frankly speaking, Rororo belonged to the latter category.

The fact that Rororo —who possessed the wits of an average beast —would continue forward, on the verge of death, towards Igva, the source of its pain was entirely unexpected, nearly impossible to understand.

Indeed, even its opponent Igva found it difficult to understand. He wondered if Rororo was under the influence of some magical control.

However, that was not the case.

Indeed, that was not the answer.

Igva would not be able to understand it.

Rororo —possessed of an animal's intelligence —was running with all its might for its kin.

Rororo had never seen its parents, yet Hydras were not the sort of creatures to abandon their offspring. Beasts of their kind would live with one of their parents until a certain age, learning how to survive in the wild. But then, why did this not apply to Rororo?

That was because Rororo was a mutant. Normal Hydras had eight heads when born, and as they grew older, they sprouted more heads, to a maximum of twelve.

However, Rororo only had four heads at birth, so its parents had abandoned it, taking its siblings with them.

Without the protection of its parents, even a young Hydra —who might someday grow into a powerful creature —would surely perish in the harsh environs of nature.

That is, if a certain Lizardman had not passed by and picked it up.

—And so, Rororo gained kin —a father, a mother, and a close friend, all rolled into one.

As Rororo's mind was about to break under the agony, it recalled a question it had always pondered in the past.

Why was its body so big? Why did it have so many heads?

It occasionally thought that as it looked at the dear parent who had raised it. As a result, Rororo had also thought of something else.

Perhaps one day some of its heads might fall off, and its body might slowly sprout limbs like the way grass grew, and it would look like its parent.

And if that really happened —what would it ask for?

Yes. They had not slept together in a long time, so perhaps it would ask to curl up and nap together. It had always felt lonely because it had become too big and they had to sleep apart.

The flames felt like they were burning away Rororo's thoughts. They filled his vision and the agony shot through his body once more. It moaned in pain as the anguish washed over it. It felt a comforting warmth from behind, but it was nothing compared to the fire consuming Rororo.

Rororo felt as though it were being smashed by countless iron hammers.

It hurt so much that it could no longer think.

Rororo's legs seized up, signalling to the rest of the creature that it should stop moving forward.

However—

However —was that really enough to make Rororo stop?

—No. It did not stop.

Rororo continued advancing. Its pace had slowed. Its muscles were burnt and stiff, and it could not continue running at its usual pace.

It suffered with every step it took.

It was difficult to breathe. Just drawing breath was hard. Perhaps its lungs had been seared.

Even so, it did not stop.

Now, only one of its heads could still move. The other motionless heads were little more than dead weight. The sight of the undead creature conjuring another fireball in its hand was a blurred scene in Rororo's cloudy vision.

Its animal instincts allowed it to realize something.

If it took another hit, it would die. However, Rororo was not afraid. Without stopping, without ceasing, it forged bravely ahead—

This was a request from its father, mother, and friend. Therefore it would never stop.

Just as Rororo desperately —and tiredly —dragged itself forward, a crimson ball of fire flew forth once more from an undead hand. It soared through the air and headed straight for Rororo.

There was no doubt that this last attack would consume Rororo in flames. It was an undeniable fact.

It would die.

It would be the end of everything. However— Indeed —that was only if the aforementioned Lizardman did not step in. How could he watch Rororo die before him?

How could he permit such an injustice to take place?

That was impossible—

“— 「Icy Burst」 !”

Zaryusu shouted as he leapt from behind Rororo, swinging Frost Pain as he ran beside it.



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The air before the swing froze in an instant, forming a wall of white mist. This was a gout of supercooled air; the frozen wind of Frost Pain.

That was one of Frost Pain's abilities.

That was a special move which could only be used three times a day — 「Icy Burst」. It snap-froze everything in an area in front of it and caused massive damage.

The wall of frozen fog was solid, and it blocked the oncoming 「Fireball」. The orb of ardent flame met the wall of chill mist —by the laws of magic, allowing them to collide was the wisest choice.

It hit—

The scorching flames burst forth, warring with the frozen mist of ivory.

It seemed as though two serpents, one white and one red, were trying to consume each other. After a moment's resistance, both powers vanished.

The undead creature was shocked, and its surprise showed on its face. That was a natural reaction to seeing the dissipation of the spell it had discharged.

There was still some distance between both parties. However, they could already see each others' faces —and movements. Rororo's effort and determination had crossed the seemingly untraversable distance between them and brought the three of them unharmed to this place.

“Rororo ...”

Zaryusu choked up. In the end, Zaryusu picked the most appropriate words he could think of from his vocabulary —a simple, easily understood phrase.

“Thank you!”

As he left those shouted thanks with Rororo, Zaryusu charged forward without looking back, trailed by Zenberu and Crusch.

An almost inaudible croak answered him. It was the sound of encouragement for its kin.



Igva stared in silence. His 「Fireball」 had been countered, and he could not stop himself from expressing his disbelief in words.

“This cannot be!”

Igva prepared to cast another spell. Naturally, it was still a 「Fireball」. He was not prepared to acknowledge that the Lizardmen charging at him had actually neutralized his magic.

The launched 「Fireball」 streaked at the three Lizardmen.

The leading Lizardman swung its sword and blocked the 「Fireball」 with a wall of freezing mist, and both vanished together. Yes, the same thing as just now had happened—

“Bring it on! I’ll cancel out everything you throw at me!”

The Lizardman’s furious cry entered his ears.

Igva went “cheh” in displeasure.

To think a mere Lizardman could deflect a spell from me, a creation of the Supreme Being Ainz-sama!

Igva worked to suppress his boiling anger.

It was quite likely that he could not use 「Fireball」 any more. However, the fact that his opposition had taken shelter behind the Hydra and approached meant that there was probably a limit to the number of times that ability could be used. Still, he did not know if it could be used ten times, or if every use would only deplete stamina —meaning that with the appropriate recovery, it could be used without limit.

How should I deal with this? I'd like to verify his words, if possible...

Igva could still discharge 「Fireballs」, but he could not tell how much of the Lizardman's words were truth or bravado.

Less than forty meters separated Igva from the Lizardmen.

In addition, the Lizardman charging him looked like a warrior. As an undead magic caster, Igva did not wish to be drawn into a melee.

Therefore, his 「Fireballs」 could no longer be used. He was not stupid enough to actually test how many more times his opponent could block his techniques under the circumstances. If only they had not hid behind that Hydra—that is to say, if they had not yet closed the gap—he might have attempted to verify their claims. However, that damnable Hydra had ruined that chance.

“Damn ...a mere Hydra.”

Igva cursed, and decided on his next move.

“—Then, how about this?”

By coincidence, his foes had strung themselves out into a straight line. Igva extended a ginger and pointed at the three Lizardmen who were pressing in. Electricity crackled around that digit.

“Taste my 「Lightning」 !”

A stream of white electricity flashed forward, and then—



Zaryusu was still some distance away, but he could see the white light coruscating around Igva's finger — 「Lightning」.

Frost Pain's 「Icy Burst」 could defend against cold- and fire-elemental attacks, but Zaryusu had never used it against lightning strikes, and he did not know

if it would work.

Then, would it be wiser to take a risk, or fan out to disperse the enemy's targets and minimize the damage taken?

Zaryusu gripped Frost Pain tightly.

He could feel the electrical surge in the air, the proof that the lightning strike was aimed at him.

“Leave it to me—!”

Zenberu acted faster than Zaryusu could, and leapt forward with a great cry. The spell discharged at the same time.

“— 「Lightning」 !”

“Uoooooh — 「Resistance Massive」 !”

Just when it seemed that the lightning bolt was about to pierce Zenberu, his body instantly pumped up. In the end, the electrical discharge which should have pierced him and the two people behind him was scattered and deflected.

「Resistance Massive」 .

This was a monk ability, which discharged ki from the entire body to reduce magical damage.

It was a technique Zenberu had learned during his travels, after losing to Frost Pain's 「Icy Burst」 in the past. The technique could be used to defend against any spell which did damage, even if it did so in an area..

Both sides gasped in surprise, but Zaryusu and Crusch—who believed in their comrade—were not overly shocked by this. Thus, while the undead magic caster reeled in surprise, the Lizardmen drew ever closer.

As he dashed forth, Zaryusu suddenly realised something.

If he had used 「Icy Burst」 during his duel with Zenberu, that move would have been countered by this technique, and Zenberu would have used the opening to defeat him. Perhaps that was why he had been trying to get Zaryusu to use that move on him.

“Haha! Like falling off a log!”

Zaryusu smiled at Zenberu’s confident voice, but his face tightened up almost immediately afterwards. That was because Zaryusu could hear an undercurrent of pain in his voice.

If even a Lizardman like Zenberu could not hold back his pain, that implied his wounds were not light. In addition, if that technique had no weaknesses, he would not have agreed to the plan of hiding behind Rororo.

Zaryusu looked ahead. Less than twenty meters separated them from their enemy. The great distance between them had shrunk that far.



As they drew closer, Igva realised that the people before him were powerful opponents, not to be taken lightly. The fact that they could counter his spells was worthy of praise. Of course, he had other ways to attack, but now he had to give some consideration to defense.

“You are excellent sacrifices; perfectly qualified for me to demonstrate my power.”

Igva smiled coldly as he cast his spell.

“「Summon Undead 4th」.”

Amidst a spray of bubbles, four skeletons emerged from the marsh to defend Igva, each holding round shields and curved swords. These undead were called Skeleton Warriors, and they were in a completely different league from regular Skeletons.

While he could have summoned other undead, he had chosen the Skeleton Warriors in order to resist cold attacks. Igva and other skeletal creatures like him were immune to cold damage.

Protected by his bodyguard squad, Igva looked down upon the approaching enemy. It was the attitude of a reigning champion awaiting a challenger.

The two of them finally drew near each other.

Only ten meters separated them now.

They were only that far apart now. Yes, that was all the distance separating them. After making sure that the undead would not immediately launch an attack, he glanced behind himself.

He looked at the distance they had travelled. It was very close if all they had to do was run it, but that one hundred meters was a killing field without any cover. Without Rororo, Frost Pain, Zenberu, or Crusch, he would never have been able to come this far. One could say it was as difficult as trying to ascend into the heavens. However, he had crossed that distance, and he was within reach of his foe.

They had overcome that distance together.

As Zaryusu saw the Lizardmen take Rororo back to the village, he breathed a momentary sigh of relief. Then he chastised himself for his moment of laxity, and looked back at the undead before him.

Zaryusu could frankly admit that they were fearsome foes.

If he had encountered them under different circumstances, he would have immediately elected to flee upon sighting them from far away. Just by standing before them, his instincts were screaming at him to flee, and even his tail was standing on end. From the corner of his eye, Zaryusu noted that Zenberu and Crusch's tails were exhibiting similar reactions to his left and right.

The two of them must be thinking the same thing as Zaryusu. Indeed —they were fighting the urge to flee as they faced the undead before them.

Zaryusu swished his tail, swatting them across the back.

The two of them looked at Zaryusu with looks of surprise on their faces.

“We can beat them if the three of us work together,” Zaryusu said simply.

“Well said, Zaryusu. We can win.”

Crusch used her tail to caress the spot on her back where Zaryusu had swatted her.

“Ha, now that would be something, wouldn’t it!?” Zenberu laughed, a look of pride on his face.

And so, the three of them traveled the final stretch to their enemy.

—The distance between both sides was eight meters.

On one hand were Zaryusu and gang, who had run all the way here and were panting. Facing them were the undead, who did not breathe. Their eyes met, and the enemy spoke first.

“I am Igva, an Elder Lich under the banner of the Supreme One. Bow before me and I will grant you a quick and painless death.”

Zaryusu could not help but smile, because this undead being called Igva knew nothing.

No matter how hard he thought, there was only one answer.

Zaryusu was smiling, but Igva was not displeased. Instead, he quietly awaited their answer. Igva knew his strength, and he was confident that he could eliminate Zaryusu and his companions. That was why his attitude was one of superiority and even a bit of gratitude —after all, they had come all this way to deliver themselves to him.

“Tell me your answer.”

“Kuku, well, if you really want to know ...”

Zaryusu raised Frost Pain and gripped it tightly. Zenberu raised his fists, taking a special fighting stance. Crusch made no special movements, but she touched the wellspring of mana within her, prepared to cast a spell at any moment.

“Then, here’s my answer —dream on!”

The Skeleton Warriors considered that response to be hostility, and they raised their swords while covering themselves with their shields.

“Then prepare to die in incomparable agony, knowing that you have rejected my final mercy!”

“I was about to say, the dead ought to get their asses back to the underworld, Igva!”

At this moment, the curtain rose on the climax of the battle which would determine the outcome of this conflict.



“Get him, Zaryusu!”

Zenberu charged before anyone else, striking at a Skeleton Warrior.

He did not care that the Skeleton Warrior blocked his blow with its shield; he simply shoved it back with sheer brute force. The shield buckled inwards, and the backpedalling Skeleton Warrior collided into the other Skeleton Warriors and they lost their balance. He also attempted to swat at another Skeleton Warrior with his tail, but it failed to connect.

The formation of Skeleton Warriors buckled under Zenberu’s onslaught, and Zaryusu immediately filled the gap they had vacated.

“Block him!”

Two Skeleton Warriors swung at Zaryusu with their curved blades as they heard Igva's command.

He could have avoided them if he wanted to. If he wanted to take the blows head on, he could have blocked them with Frost Pain. However, Zaryusu did neither. Evasion meant that he would slow down, and he did not want to make such a pointless move in front of Igva.

Besides, somebody else had already made a move—

“「Earth Bind」 !”

The mud lashed out like whips, entangling the two Skeleton Warriors. Said whips of mud seemed like iron chains; they immobilized the Skeleton Warriors as Zaryusu took advantage of the opening.

Yes —Crusch was there too.

Zaryusu was not fighting alone. He could entrust himself to his comrades.

Even Crusch's magic could not completely seal off her enemies' movements. The Skeleton Warriors' blades grazed Zaryusu. However, those injuries meant nothing to him; the boiling hot blood within his soul disregarded the concept of pain.

Zaryusu opened up his steps with flying strides.

He rushed at Igva, who was pointing at him. Even if he was hit by an attack spell, he was determined to eat the hit and keep running.

“You fool! Know fear! 「Scare」 !”

Zaryusu's vision shuddered. He began to wonder where he was as a nameless terror bloomed within him, and he felt as though something was going to lunge at him from the side.

He stopped in his tracks. The 「Scare」 spell had shaken his heart and kept his legs from obeying him. His mind told his legs to move, but his heart would not

allow his body to take a step.

“Zaryusu! 「Lion’s Heart」 !”

As Crusch shouted those words, the terror melted away in an instant, and in its place was a rekindled fighting spirit. The spell that bestowed courage had exorcised the fear from his heart.

Igva glared unhappily at Crusch and pointed a finger at her.

“Interfering busybody! 「Lightning」 !”

There was a flash of white—

“Gyaaaah!”

—And Crusch wailed.

Zaryusu’s heart wavered; it was nearly consumed by an intense hatred, but he managed to control himself in the end. Hate was a useful weapon at times, but against a powerful enemy, it might end up working against him. When faced with a mighty foe, one needed fiery passion and ice-cold logic.

Zaryusu did not look back.

After Igva attacked Crusch, it meant that Zaryusu had an opening with which to draw closer. A look of dismay came over Igva’s face, and he knew that he had made a mistake. That, in turn, brought a mocking smile to Zaryusu, whose beloved had been hurt.

“Cheh! 「Light-”

“Too slow!”

Frost Pain slashed in from the side, knocking away the finger Igva was planning to extend.

“Gah!”

“You let a warrior near you, magic caster! Don’t even think of casting spells any more!”

Legendary spellcasters aside, most magic casters who allowed an enemy to get close might find their spells disrupted during the casting.

Even a powerful monster like Igva was no exception.

Zaryusu narrowed his eyes, confused by the sensation running up his arm. Slashing him felt weird; Igva must have had some kind of resistance to his weapon.

Still, he was not unhurt. Yes, if he could resist damage, then all he had to do was inflict more damage.

That being the case, all he had to do was keep hacking away at him.

Of course, it was easier said than done, and Zaryusu knew that as well. However, that was all a warrior like Zaryusu could do.

“Don’t look down on me, Lizardman!”

Three arrows of light appeared before Igva and shot at Zaryusu. He reflexively parried the unannounced bolts with his sword, but the magic arrows went straight through his weapon and pierced his body, sending a surge of throbbing pain through him.

This was a 「Silent Magic - Magic Arrow」. There was no preparation needed for silenced spells, so they could not be interrupted. In addition, Magic Arrows were unavoidable spells; not even by someone like Zaryusu.

Zaryusu grit his teeth and swung Frost Pain at Igva.

“Kuh! Son of a bitch! You’re just a mere Lizardman!”

「Magic Arrows」were an unavoidable spell, but conversely, they did poor damage. Someone like Zaryusu, with a body honed through hundreds, if not thousands of battles, was not weak enough to be rendered incapable of fighting by

such a spell.

The magic missiles struck Zaryusu again, evincing bolts of bone-jarring pain from him. Zaryusu took the pain and countered with a sword swing.

After several rounds of this back and forth, Zaryusu's movements began slowing down. The severe throbbing hampered his otherwise nimble movements, clearly illustrating the difference between himself and the undead, who knew no pain.

Igva and Zaryusu both realized this, and their expressions were dramatically different as a result.

The strong would live, and the weak would die. That was an unalterable truth. It had been clearly illustrated in Zaryusu and Igva's one-on-one fight. However, it was also true that the weak could contend with the strong if they banded together.

“「Middle Cure Wounds」 !”

Zaryusu's pain vanished with those words, and his vitality returned to him.

That magical healing from the rear aggravated the hitherto aloof Igva, and he cursed loudly:

“Damned Lizardmen!”

Zaryusu was fighting with his trusted companions; Crusch, Zenberu, and—

“Rororo ...I won't lose!”

“Such foolish delusions ...as if I, a creation of the Supreme One, would be defeated by the likes of you! How stupid you are!”

Igva glared malevolently at the three Lizardmen. He had not used summon magic because the undead he had called up were still around. He could not summon new undead as long as the old ones were still around. Therefore, their battle was a monotonous back-and-forth of Igva casting silenced 「Magic

Arrows」 while Zaryusu hacked at Igva.

It felt like it would never end.

That being the case, the deadlock would have to be broken by the backliners. If reinforcements turned up for either side, the battle would soon be decided in their favor.

Zaryusu and Igva both knew this.



The stroke of lightning made Crusch hurt all over, but she bit her pain back and cast 「Summon Beast 3rd」.

A huge —roughly one hundred fifty centimeters —crab with an enormous right pincer appeared from the surface of the water, as though it had always been sleeping there and just woken up. Needless to say, it had been conjured by the 「Summon Beast 3rd」 spell.

The giant crab waddled up beside Zenberu and pinched at the Skeleton Warriors with its massive claw.

Zenberu smiled at this unexpected ally. Considering that he had to defend Crusch and ward off attacks from all directions, the help had arrived just in time, and it was a great reassurance for him.

“All right, strange and giant crab! I’ll leave those two to you!”

The giant crab — a Snap Grasp — wiggled its smaller pincer as though in acknowledgment and turned to the Skeleton Warriors.

The situation is dire now ...but I can’t help thinking that they look very similar.

Crusch smiled, despite the circumstances. However, she immediately wiped it off her face and focused on the battle. At the same time, she breathed hard, to get her panting under control.

She had cast warding spells on Rororo and healed him before coming here, and she had also been casting support spells on Zenberu. She had been overexerting herself.

In addition, she had cast a summon spell on top of that. Her body was in an exhausted state and she was having trouble standing.

She even lacked the strength to heal herself. In addition, Crusch had also calmly decided that the mana would have been wasted on doing so, given that she was slowly losing the ability to fight.

However, if she felt here, it would demoralize Zenberu and Zaryusu, who were fighting on the frontlines. Blood flowed from the corner of Crusch's mouth as she bit at the inside of her cheek to keep herself conscious.

“[Middle Cure Wounds] !”

She cast healing magic on Zaryusu, who was engaged in a melee with Igva.

Her legs felt powerless and her vision was shaky. She felt a liquid sensation all over her body..

For a moment, Crusch had no idea why she had ended up like that. When had she fallen into the mud?

However, she immediately realized the reason why. She had not taken additional wounds, so she must have passed out for a moment and collapsed.

Crusch breathed a sigh of relief, not because she was still alive, but because she could still fight.

She did not plan to force herself to stand. Rather, she had no strength left to stand, and she felt it would be a waste of energy to do so.

She saw the forms of Zaryusu and Zenberu fighting hard in her blurred vision; the forms of the companions she had travelled with for a brief period. Zenberu had taken on four Skeleton Warriors at once, and Zaryusu had endured Igva's onslaught of magical attacks. Both of them were covered in wounds.

Crusch got her breathing under control, and cast a spell.

“「Middle Cure Wounds」 !”

And in addition to healing Zenberu’s wounds...

“「Middle Cure Wounds」 !”

She healed Zaryusu’s injuries.

“Huu ...”

Crusch was panting.

Her breathing felt strange. She was breathless, no matter how hard she tried to take in air.

This must be a symptom of magic overuse. Her head ached like she had been clubbed. Even so, Crusch tried her hardest to force her eyes open.

So many people had died so far —how could she be the first to leave the battlefield?

As she forcefully opened her heavy-lidded eyes, she continued casting:

“「Middle Cure Wounds」 !”



Zenberu’s clenched fist struck home on the Skeleton Warrior’s skull. He felt the bone crumple, then shatter under his fist, and so another Skeleton Warrior bit the dust.

“That’s two — gahahahahh —”

He exhaled like he was breathing out all his fatigue and then eyed the remaining Skeleton Warriors. The giant crab Crusch had summoned was nowhere to

be seen, but thanks to its help in dealing with two of the Skeleton Warriors, Zenberu could wipe out the other two.

The situation had developed in this way thanks to Crusch's support.

Two more. After those were deal with, Igva would be next.

He flexed his thick and powerful right arm —it was still working.

His left arm was covered in wounds and almost useless. Zenberu had gone a bit overboard in using it as a shield. He glanced briefly to the limp, sagging limb.

“Forget it, it was a worthy sacrifice.”

Zenberu eyed the annoying thing and tried to move it. An intense pain filled his body —it hardly seemed as though it could come from moving his fingers.

Still, is this a big deal? Just now, one of my friends refused to stop moving even after his heads became useless. How could I, Zenberu, do any less?

Zenberu could appreciate how strong the Skeleton Warriors were after fighting them for this long. They were strong enough that two of them were enough to match him.

Therefore, dealing with four at once meant that his chances of victory were very slim.

After this, I'll stop eating mud crabs for a while to show my thanks.

With that silent gesture of appreciation towards his favorite food, he glared murderously at the two Skeleton Warriors who were pressing in.

He clenched his fist.

He could still move. He could still fight.

Frankly speaking, he was quite surprised by the fact that he could continue

fighting.

“Hah! There’s no point thinking about such stupid things!”

There was only one reason for that, right?

Zenberu laughed at himself.

He observed Zaryusu’s form behind the Skeleton Warriors, how he stood tall against that foe whose power overmatched his by far.

“Looks pretty heroic, doesn’t he ...”

Indeed—

He could keep fighting because he had been struggling together with Zaryusu, Crusch and Rororo.

“Oi oi oi, Zaryusu, you’re pretty damn beat up, aren’t you? Worse than how you were in that fight with me.”

With a ferocious backhand, he smashed away one of the incoming Skeleton Warriors. However, he could not block the curved blade of the other one with his left arm, and he earned another gash on his side, near the wound Crusch had just closed with magic.

“...Crusch is having a hard time herself, but she’s still helping us. Good on her.”

Crusch’s magic healed Zenberu’s wounds once more. He could not turn back to verify, but it would seem her voice was coming from somewhere very close to the surface of the water. He could imagine the posture in which she was casting her spells—but even so, she was still casting them.

“...What a remarkable female.”

If he had to take a wife, he would pick someone like her.

Zenberu was slightly envious of Zaryusu now.

“I won’t show you the disgraceful sight of me going down first!”

He fainted with his massive arm, and then swiped with his tail. Then he laughed coldly, commenting that he was older than either of them.

The two Skeleton Warriors slowly drew closer, their shields raised. The way they blocked his view of Zaryusu angered Zenberu.

“Get lost, I can’t see his manly back!”

With a roar, Zenberu strode forth—



Igva and Zaryusu’s evenly-balanced back and forth continued. Zaryusu’s eyes were focused on the battle, and he noticed Igva glancing elsewhere. The Elder Lich’s undead face contorted in a savage grin, and Zaryusu’s heart seemed to freeze as he heard what came next.

He heard the sound of splashing as someone collapsed into the water.

“Look! Your friend has fallen!”

He could not look back. Perhaps one of his comrades had collapsed, or perhaps not. Zaryusu’s heart ached like he was having his scales flayed off him, but he was facing an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, and he did not have the luxury of looking away. His defeat would be sealed in the moment he turned to look. Zaryusu had not come here to lose in such a foolish way.

He had come here to win.

However, if Igva spoke the truth, then it might be possible that enemy reinforcements might have come from behind them. He had to think of a way to deal with them, or things might get ugly.

Just as Zaryusu was steeling himself to endure an attack spell, he heard the sound of someone splashing as they stood up, as well as the sound of several

bones cracking.

“Zaryusu! We’re done here! The rest is up to you!”

“... 「Middle Cure Wounds」.”

A great splash followed Zenberu’s pained cry.

Crusch’s incantation sounded more like a groan, but Zaryusu’s wounds slowly mended themselves.

“Muuu—~”

Igva was clearly unhappy at this. Even without looking, he could tell that the other two had done their part. That would mean that after this—

“My turn!”

Igva blocked the slash from Frost Pain.

“Kukuku ...I, Igva, am an Elder Lich, but don’t look down on me because I’m not a melee fighter!”



Despite his tough talk, Igva had already surmised that his chances of victory were slim.

Given the difference in their strength, he might be able to win in a one-on-one battle. However, the white Lizardman had been healing his wounds all this time, so now Zaryusu had the advantage in vitality.

In addition, he could only block one out of every three strikes made at him. That meant the other two would hit him. While Igva was resistant to slashing weapons like Skeletons, and he was not worried about the additional cold damage Frost Pain inflicted, his situation was still quite dire.

He panicked.

He was a creation of the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown and the commander of this army. He could not afford to lose here.

Igva wanted to summon a few more undead soldiers, but he needed time to cast the summoning spell. Therefore, it was difficult to get the spell off while his enemy was right in front of him.

If this kept up, victory would go to his enemy.

With that in mind, Igva fell back to his last resort. It was not an ideal method—it might even be the worst course of action if things went poorly—but it was the only card he had left to play.

Zaryusu was confused by Igva turning to run, but he pursued regardless. Igva took a full-power hit from Zaryusu square in the back and wavered, but did not fall. Zaryusu clicked his tongue at Igva's seemingly inexhaustible vitality and immediately gave chase after the fleeing Igva.

Igva turned, his face distorted with an anger that seemed unbecoming on an undead being, but his expression was tinted with shades of delight.

Sizzling in his hand was a crimson light—a 「Fireball」.

Confusion filled Zaryusu's mind as he drew close.

Does he plan to use an area-effect spell at such close range? Is he prepared to sacrifice himself—no!

A thrill of fear ran through Zaryusu's heart as he realised Igva was not looking at him. Igva's eyes were directed behind Zaryusu—at the fallen Crusch and Zenberu.

—What should I do!?

Zaryusu racked his brains.

Igva was leaving himself wide open. If he ignored the two of them, he could finish off Igva. But if he wanted to save them, it was hard to predict how the battle would turn out. Both of them were badly hurt, and a single misstep might prove fatal.

Had they not come so far for this objective —to beat Igva? Many people had died for this cause as well.

In that case, he ought to abandon them. They would probably smile and forgive him. Zaryusu would probably do the same in their position.

—However.

Zaryusu would not choose to leave comrades he had fought and bled with to die.

In that case —he would help them, and then destroy Igva.

After making up his mind, things became very simple.

“「Icy Burst」 !”

Zaryusu erected a wall of freezing fog which billowed up from his feet.

“Gwaaaargh—!”

The frozen vortex froze Zaryusu solid for a moment; the pain filling his entire body was beyond words.

Zaryusu fixed his eyes intently on Igva to prevent himself from losing consciousness, struggling against the pain.

As he grit his teeth and wailed in pain, the icy mist enshrouded them and drifted in all directions.

As Igva saw the spreading white mist he grinned, his expression seemingly saying, “Just as planned.” His foe could have won if he had abandoned his friends, but yet he had done this.

Igva was immune to cold and electrical damage, which was why he could stand tall amidst the current of freezing air. He crushed the 「Fireball」 in his hand back into mana, because allowing it to touch the wall of white which now surrounded him was a self-destructive gesture.

Once this white mist cleared, he could finish off the other two Lizardmen. First, he had to eliminate the one that was still standing. Igva looked around, and snarled. That was because he had missed something.

“...All right, where’s he gone to now?”

His vision was blocked by walls of white mist.

Igva possessed darkvision, but he could not see through environmental conditions which impeded visibility. Therefore, he had lost track of his enemy’s location.

Still, there was no need to worry too much. Judging by that pain-filled cry, his opponent ought to have been badly hurt. Come to think of it, given that the cold was powerful enough to repel a 「Fireball」 he had projected, he ought to have taken cold damage comparable to being hit by a 「Fireball」 himself.

Taking a hit like that while being so badly wounded might be fatal. That being the case, he could take his time and torment him slowly afterwards.

His goal now was to get out of this bank of fog.

As the idea came up, Igva immediately discarded it.

—Right now, moving would expose his position.

Rather than retreat, he ought to summon more undead. As long as he had meat shields in place, victory was his, even if the Lizardman was not dead yet.

Just as Igva was about to cast his spell, he heard a sudden splashing.



CHAPTER 3: ARMY OF DEATH

Frost Pain.

It was one of the Four Treasures of the Lizardmen, passed down through the generations.

According to legend, Frost Pain was made from the ice when the lake had frozen over for the only time in its history, and it possessed three magical powers.

The first was the cold aura wreathing the blade, which inflicted additional cold damage on every successful blow.

The second was its trump card, 「Icy Burst」, usable only three times a day.

And the third was—



The sound of something cutting through the air reached his ears

Before he realized what was going on, he saw the point of a blade before his eyes.

A great impact rocked Igva's cranium.

The blade that had pierced his left eye rattled his head. Igva howled in surprise as he finally realised what was going on.

“Guwaaargh—! Why aren't you dead—!?”

As Frost Pain sank deeper into his left eyesocket, he felt his vitality draining away in torrents—

The fog steadily dispersed, revealing Zaryusu, whose body was dusted with a light coating of frost. He stood before Igva, who was unsteady on his feet given that he had a sword sticking out of his head.

Igva could not understand how Zaryusu was still standing after such a powerful cold-based attack.



That was due to the third power hidden within Frost Pain.

It was a defensive ability which imparted resistance to cold attacks.



Of course, even Frost Pain could not completely cancel out the power of 「Icy Burst」. It was hard enough for Zaryusu to stay on his feet after taking that cold damage. His breathing was ragged, his movements were sluggish, and his tail was sprawled limply on the ground. He was barely capable of fighting on. In fact, that last blow of his had not been aimed at all. He had simply acted on instinct, fuelling that blow with the last dregs of his strength.

One could say that it was a lucky shot.

Zaryusu struggled to keep his almost-closed eyes open.

The strike he had launched with the remains of his strength felt like it had been enough to finish off Igva.

No longer able to fight, Zaryusu looked at Igva, an expectant look on his face.

Igva shook and struggled.

Perhaps Igva could no longer sustain his bodily integrity, but the skin of his face tore and his bones fragmented, while his clothes fell into tatters. It was only a matter of time before he was destroyed. Just as Zaryusu thought he had won a miraculous victory —

—A bony hand seized him by the throat.

“I ...I am a vassal created by the Supreme Being ...how can I die... like this!?”

Igva's stranglehold was not strong, and he could have shrugged it off. However—

“—Guwaargh—!”

—Agony surged through Zaryusu's body, and he cried out in pain.

That was because he was being infused with negative energy, which ate away at his life force. Zaryusu was trained to withstand pain, but he could not bear the terrible anguish that turned his veins to ice.

“Die, you damned Lizardman!”

Igva's face began to crumble, and the fragments disintegrated in mid-air.

Igva's life was fading away, but his loyalty to his master kept him clinging to this side of the line between life and death.

Zaryusu tried to resist it, but fear filled him as he realised his body no longer responded to commands.

He too was on the verge of death. Igva's negative energy infusion was snuffing out the last of his lifeforce.

Zaryusu's vision wavered and turned cloudy.

It seemed as though the world was slowly filling up with white mist.

Igva was also trying desperately to stay conscious, but he smiled in victory as he saw Zaryusu's resistance flagging.

He had to kill this Lizardman and the two other Lizardmen who had joined the attack. They ought to be the strongest among their race.

That being the case, killing them would be an offering to his great master —the best possible present he could give to his creator.

Igva's expression spoke more than his words could, but that look in his eyes made Zaryusu realize that he felt the same way as well.

“Go to hell!”

His body no longer responded to him, and he could feel his body heat dropping slowly, like a slow poison spreading through him. Even breathing was difficult. Only his mind remained sharp under these circumstances.

He could not die yet.

Rororo, who ran with all his strength.

Zenberu, who had made himself his shield.

Crusch, who had depleted her mana.

And then, there were all the Lizardmen who had died fighting this war.

As Zaryusu thought about how to fight on, he heard something.

—Crusch's gentle tones.

—Zenberu's cheerful voice.

—Rororo's playful cries.

He could not have heard them.

Crusch was unconscious. Zenberu was comatose. Rororo was far away as well.

Had his mind imagined those voices because his mind was clouded? Had it made up the voices of friends he had not even known for a full week? The cries of his kin?

No.

Indeed, that was not correct.

That was because everyone was here—

“—Oh...oh—!”

“—!? You still have this much strength left!?”

The semi-conscious Zaryusu howled, drawing a cry of surprise from Igva.

Zaryusu’s eyeballs swivelled and locked onto Igva. His eyes were clouded, but it was hard to believe that he was not looking directly at him with a smoldering intensity. The sight made Igva freeze up.

“Crusch! Zenberu! Rororo!”

“—! What are you trying to do—!? Just die—!”

Where had he gotten that vitality from? The massive surge of negative energy pouring into him should have been steadily dissolving and consuming Zaryusu’s life force. And indeed, Zaryusu’s limbs felt heavy, and his body seemed frozen.

Even so, every time he cried their names, Zaryusu felt a flicker of warmth within him. This warmth did not come from his life force.

Instead, it sprang from a place within his chest —the heart.

He could hear the sound of muscles tensing. That sound came from Zaryusu’s right hand, from his tightly clenched fist. He was infusing all his strength into that fist.



“Impossible—! How are you still moving!? You monster—!”

He was actually capable of moving. That was a truly unbelievable sight.

Emotions raged within Igva’s heart, but he strove to suppress them.

He was Igva, the overall commander of the forces of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick during this expedition, and most importantly, he was the creation of the Supreme Overlord of Death —Ainz Ooal Gown.

A mighty being like himself could not possibly be defeated like this—

“Die—!”

“This is the end for you, monster!”

He was faster.

Yes, the speed of that full-power strike was faster than the rate at which Igva was infusing negative energy—

The tightly-clenched fist struck the hilt of Frost Pain—

—And Zaryusu’s knuckles bled. Struck by such a heavy blow, the blade pierced clear through Igva’s skull.

“Ohhhhh—!”

As one of the undead, Igva did not feel pain, but he could still understand that the negative energy which animated him had vanished.

“This—this ...how could this ...Ain...z...sama ...”

The full understanding of his failure dawned in Igva’s eyes. As Zaryusu collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, there was a loud splash—

“...Please ...please ...forgive ...me ...”

—And Igva’s body fell with him, accompanied by the apology to his master.



The interior of the room was silent. Nobody could believe what they had just

seen, and so nobody spoke. The sole exception was the maid —Entoma.

“Cocytus-sama, it seems Ainz-sama has sent for you.”

“—Understood.”

Cocytus turned to face Entoma, his head lowered.

He bit back his shame as his vassals looked upon him with unease.

But on the other hand, he wanted to offer praise.

After all, that had been an exciting battle.

To think the foe had actually turned the impossible into the possible. Granted, the Elder Lich had made some errors in judgement, but under normal circumstances, the Elder Lich should still have won, despite his mistakes.

“...Amazing. Truly. Amazing.”

Cocytus repeated those words to express his heartfelt opinion.

They had hurdled that incredible obstacle.

“...What. A. Shame,” Cocytus breathed as he watched the Lizardmen dancing and singing in triumph through the mirror.

The warriors it showed were extremely weak, but they had kindled Cocytus’s fighting spirit.

“Ah ...What. A. Shame.”

Cocytus hesitated. He picked out the most frightening scenario from the many in his mind, thought on it, and made a decision.

“—Let’s. Go.”

Zaryusu felt like he was being carried out of a world of darkness. It felt good.

After he opened his eyes, the blurred scene before him reminded him of what he saw when he woke up.

Where was this place? Why was he sleeping here?

Countless questions rose within his heart, and then he realised there was a weight resting on him.

—White.

Zaryusu looked toward the ball of white. Having just woken up, the word “white” was the first thing which came to mind. As he slowly came to, he realized what it was.

It was Crusch. She had fallen asleep on top of him.

“Ah ...”

I'm still alive.

Zaryusu was so relieved that he nearly spoke those words out loud. Yet, he bit down on them. He could not bear to wake up Crusch, and so he resisted the urge to touch her. Her scales might be pretty, but he still could not touch a sleeping female at his whim.

Zaryusu struggled to chase Crusch's form out of his mind, and started thinking about other things.

There were many things to ponder.

To begin with, what was he doing here?

He searched his memories, thinking back onto what had happened in the past.

The last thing he could recall was the sight of Igva's defeat, and then there was nothing. However, the fact that he had not been taken captive but was sleeping here meant that the tribes had won.

Zaryusu gingerly breathed a sigh of relief, careful to avoid waking up Crusch. It felt as though the burden of the past few days had finally lifted off his shoulders, but in truth, there were still some weighty issues remaining.

However, he wanted to let his heart rest for the time being. Zaryusu savored Crusch's warmth, and quietly sighed.

After that Zaryusu experimentally tried his body. He was fully mobile and there were no notable problems. He had thought that he might be crippled in some way, but it would seem he had been very fortunate.

Just then, he thought of the other friend who had fought by his side. There was nobody else in the room besides Crusch. That being the case, what happened to Zenberu? He felt quite uneasy, but at the same time, a powerful male like Zenberu should be fine.

Crusch seemed to have been woken up by Zaryusu's movements, and her body shifted. It seemed as though her soft, limp body had been infused with a soul. She must be about to wake up.

"Mmmn ..."

Crusch made an adorable noise, and then she looked around with sleep-clouded eyes. Soon, she realised that Zaryusu was underneath her, and smiled in delight.

"Muu—"

After a sleepy-headed Crusch embraced Zaryusu, she began rubbing herself on him. It was as though she was an animal trying to mark him with her scent.

Zaryusu went stiff and let Crusch do as she pleased. In fact, there was even a wicked voice inside him which said, "It's not like I'm the one doing it. "

Her slick white scales were cool and icy. In addition to being very comfortable, they also gave off an alluring aroma of herbs.

He could hug her too, right?

Just as he was about to lose control, Crusch came to her senses, and she locked eyes with Zaryusu underneath her.

—Time froze.

Zaryusu scrambled to think of what to say to Crusch, who was holding him in silence. Finally, he decided on something which ought to be all right:

“—Can I hug you too?”

Well, his surging emotions felt that it ought to be all right.

Crusch yelped in surprise, and her tail thumped over and over against the ground. Then, she practically rolled off Zaryusu, until she hit a wall.

He could hear a soft moaning from Crusch as she curled up on the ground, going, “stupid stupid I’m so stupid,” or something along those lines.

“...In any case, I’m very glad that you’re all right, Crusch.”

Those words seemed to restore Crusch to some semblance of normalcy (her tail aside), and she looked up and smiled at Zaryusu.

“You too, I’m glad you’re safe.”

An untoward thought popped up in Zaryusu’s mind as he looked on Crusch’s gentle face, but he struggled to resist it and asked a more proper question.

“Do you know what happened after I collapsed?”

“Yes, a little. The enemy retreated after Igva was defeated, and it seems your brother defeated the monsters successfully, and then the three of us were saved ...that happened yesterday.”

“Then, Zenberu ...he’s not here...”

“Yes, he’s fine. He probably recovered faster than you; he regained consciousness after being magically healed, so now he’s taking care of the post-battle cleanup. I seem to have overworked myself, so I passed out after hearing all that ...”

Crusch stood up and took a seat beside Zaryusu. He wanted to get up as well, but Crusch gently stopped him.

“Don’t force yourself to get up. You were the most badly hurt of us, after all.”

Perhaps she was remembering the circumstances then, but Crusch’s voice had gone quiet.

“I’m just happy that you came back in one piece...:”

Zaryusu gently caressed Crusch —whose eyes were downcast—to comfort her.

“I won’t die before I hear your answer. I was worried for you too.”

The answer. That word made them freeze.

Both of them said nothing. The silence in the air was so thick that one could almost hear their hearts pounding.

Crusch’s tail moved slowly to twine around Zaryusu’s. The way those black and white tails tangled with each other looked like a pair of mating snakes.

Zaryusu stared at Crusch, and Crusch stared at Zaryusu. They could see themselves in each other’s eyes.

Zaryusu spoke quietly —no, that was not speech, but a call. It was the same call he had made the first time he had seen Crusch.

—A mating call.

Zaryusu did nothing besides making that call. No, it would be better to say that he could not do anything. The only thing that moved was his heart, pounding violently within his chest.

Soon, a similar sound came from Crusch's mouth —a call. It was a similarly high-pitched cry, warbling near the end —the sound of a mating cry which had been accepted.

There was an indescribably entrancing look on Crusch's face, and Zaryusu could no longer tear his eyes away from her. Crusch lay down on Zaryusu, the same way she had when she had fallen asleep earlier.

There was nothing between the two of them now. Their breath and their warmth mingled together. Their heartbeats synched up through their touching chests. In this way the two of them became one—



“Oho! Doing it already?”

—And then Zenberu flung the door open and barged in.

Crusch and Zaryusu froze like a pair of ice statues.

Zenberu looked down at them —at Crusch, straddling Zaryusu —with a look of bafflement on his face, and tilted his head:

“What, you haven't started yet?”

As they realized what Zenberu was talking about, the two of them separated from each other, then slowly stood up and approached him without a word.

Zenberu looked thoroughly confused as he bent down to look over the both of them.

“—Guwaaargh!”

The two fists in his gut knocked the wind out of him, and Zenberu's massive body keeled over onto the ground.

"Uuu ...those were good punches ...especially Crusch's ...ugggh ...that really hurt ..."

Zaryusu aside, even the female's fist of fury was enough to defeat Zenberu. While punching him once was not enough to quell her anger, the mood in the air had vanished without a trace and it would not come back even if she kept on hitting him.

The way they held hands —as a substitute for beating Zenberu up even more —was also quite puzzling, but Zaryusu decided to clear up the worries in his heart by asking Zenberu a question.

"Let's leave that aside for now. I have a lot of things to ask you. I asked Crusch just now, but can you tell me what kind of situation we're in?"

Zenberu ignored the way they were holding hands and answered:

"Don't you know? The tribes are all celebrating."

"And my brother is leading them, I assume?"

"Yes. In any case, the hunters have gone to check, but they didn't find any signs of the enemy, or any trace of reinforcements left in ambush. After all, mobilizing that many people would grab a lot of attention. Therefore, we've decided to stay alert, but your brother has already declared victory. In fact, I'm here on his orders."

"Ani-ja's orders?"

"Oh yes, your brother told me —*Gahahaha, let them rest a little. For all we know they're probably fucking like rabbits now. Gahaha, I feel a little bad about interrupting, but I was kind of curious, gahahaha*"

"Bullshit! What's with that 'gahaha' laugh, anyway?"

“Oh ...oh, come to think of it, I don’t think he actually went gahahaha when he laughed ...”

“As if Ani-ja would actually laugh like that, really ...”

“No, it was just a figure of speech ...”

“—Disgusting.”

The words from Crusch’s mouth were frigid enough to rival the sub-zero temperatures of 「Icy Burst」. Even Zaryusu was frightened by that terrifying noise. Naturally, Zenberu —as the target of those words —froze up in an instant.

“So, why are you here?”

“Oh, I came to...”

“If you came to stick your nose into our business, I will let you taste the magic you wanted.”

Crusch was not kidding. Zaryusu and Zenberu were keenly aware of that.

“Er ...how shall I say this ...I came to invite you two over. We were the key figures in the victory, right? Can’t have you absent. Also, we need to plan for the future together ...”

“I see ...”

Crusch smiled bitterly after hearing Zenberu’s explanation and understanding what it meant. In short: they had to plan for another battle in the future, and now was the best time to show their strength.

“Understood. Can you go too, Crusch?”

Crusch had puffed up her cheeks in displeasure, and she looked like a mutant frog of the kind that lived in the marsh. *She’s far cuter than one of them, however*, Zaryusu thought.

“Then, shall we?” Zenberu asked the pair—who were gazing at each other—in a casual tone.

“Ah ...mm. Yes, let’s.”

After they agreed, the three of them headed outside. Just as they walked down the steps to the hut and set foot onto the marsh, Zaryusu vanished from Zenberu and Crusch’s line of sight. That was because something massive had hit him.

—*dongorogoropashpash*—

That was probably what it sounded like.

Replacing the disappeared Zaryusu was Rororo’s body. Its four heads writhed energetically, and it nosed at Zaryusu, who had fallen into the marsh.

“Rororo! You’re all right!”

The mudstained Zaryusu rose to his feet and gently stroked Rororo’s body while examining it. It had apparently received magical healing, because the burns from earlier were completely healed, as though it had never been hurt before.

Rororo cried out and wrapped its heads playfully around Zaryusu. They bound his entire body, and they seemed to be squeezing quite tightly.

“Oi oi oi, Rororo, stop, please,”

Zaryusu jokingly begged Rororo to stop, but Rororo simply cried out in joy and refused to let go.

Pasha, pasha, pasha.

Zaryusu suddenly heard the rhythmic sound of splashing. He was baffled when he realised its source.

Those splashes had come from Crusch, She was smiling gently as she looked

at Zaryusu and Rororo, but her tail struck the marsh like a metronome.

Zenberu—who had originally been standing by Crusch’s side—was now distancing himself from her, with a stony look on his face.

Rororo stopped playing around. It had probably sensed something strange.

“What is it?”

“No, nothing ...”

Zaryusu looked at Crusch, who was quite confused. He did not understand. No matter how it looked, Crusch seemed to be smiling at Rororo and Zaryusu’s reunion, but for some reason it sent a chill down his spine.

“How strange—”

Crusch smiled again.

Rororo let go of Zaryusu, who was thus liberated, while Zenberu looked on nervously. Perhaps he was unable to bear the creepy atmosphere any further, but Zenberu hurriedly decided to change the topic.

“Okay, Rororo, come with me.”

Rororo could not understand what the Lizardmen were saying, but it looked like it did. After Zenberu mounted up, it immediately dashed off with surprising speed.

After the two of them left, the same sinister air hung between Zaryusu and Crusch.

She grabbed her head, and shook it.

“Ahhh, really, what am I doing, it feels like my heart doesn’t belong to me any more. I know it’s a small thing, but I can’t control myself. Mm, it’s like a curse.”

Zaryusu could understand how she felt. Indeed, he had felt the same way

when he had first met her.

“Frankly speaking, Crusch —I’m very happy.”

“—What?”

Pasha! A splash that was louder than usual rang out. Then, Zaryusu went to Crusch’s side.

“Listen, can you hear it?”

“Eh?”

“The things we’ve protected, and the things we have to protect in future.”

The wind carried a joyful noise upon it. There must have been a wine feast going on. It would be a feast to send back the ancestral spirits, celebrate their victories, and to give the dead their due.

Under normal circumstances, wine was a very valuable commodity. The fact they could host so many feasts over these few days was because Zenberu and his tribe had brought one of the Four Treasures along, which was why they could enjoy unlimited alcohol. In addition, the almost unbelievable festive mood now was because everyone from the tribes was gathered here.

Zaryusu laughed to Crusch as he heard their revelry:

“Maybe it’s not over yet. Maybe that Supreme One guy will attack again. Even so ...let’s relax a little today.”

With that, Zaryusu put his arm around Crusch’s waist.

Crusch allowed Zaryusu’s strength to hold her close, and then she leaned her head on Zaryusu’s shoulder.

“Shall we?”

“Mm ...”

After saying that, Crusch hesitated briefly before quietly adding, “...Darling.”

Leaning against each other, the two Lizardmen vanished into the commotion—

Chapter 4| The Dawn of Despair

1

Cocytus's footsteps were heavy as he plodded towards the Throne Room. It seemed to be contagious, because the tread of his vassals behind him was slow and ponderous as well.

The reason for that was because he had lost against the Lizardmen. They had led the forces of the Nazarick into battle, and it had ended in defeat.

Cocytus personally thought quite highly of the Lizardmen. Having been created as a warrior himself, Cocytus had a deep respect for excellent warriors.

However, this was something else entirely.

Nazarick could not be permitted to suffer a defeat. In addition, this was not a defensive battle, but their first campaign into the outside world. Anyone would be upset that such a glorious first battle had ended in ignominious defeat.

It was true that his forces were inadequate. That made him recall Demiurge's words. However, that was merely an excuse. Even if his master had considered the possibility of failure, it would still be better to win.

Soon, he saw the room before the Throne Room — the Lesser Key of Solomon (Lemegeton). His steps grew heavier, to the point where onlookers might think he had been hit by some kind of spell.

Cocytus did not mind if his master reprimanded him. He had already prepared himself to be slain or ordered to commit suicide in order to erase the stain of his dishonor.

What Cocytus feared was disappointing his master.

What should he do if they were abandoned by the sole remaining Supreme Being?

Cocytus considered himself to be a sword. He was a sword that was wielded by his master, that cut obediently when swung. Therefore, the most frightening thing he could imagine was to be deemed useless and unhelpful.

Worse still, how could he make it up to the other Guardians if they were cast aside as well?

They. Will. Never. Forgive. Me. If. Things. Get. That. Bad. Not. Even. My. Life. Will. Be. Enough. To. Aton.

And also—

If. The. Master. Is. Disappointed. And. Leaves. Like. The. Other. Supreme. Beings. What. Should. I. Do...

Cocytus trembled. He was immune to cold, so the shuddering was not due to an external source, but an internal cause. Had Cocytus been a human being, he would have started vomiting under the tremendous mental pressure that filled him.

No. That. Cannot. Be. Ainz-sama. Would. Never ...Abandon. Us.

He was the sole remaining Supreme Being in the Great Tomb, after all the others had left.

He was their supreme overlord, and their absolute ruler.

How. Could. Such. A. Merciful. Master. Abandon. Us?

He tried to console himself with that thought, but deep in his heart, a quiet voice of denial said that such a thing was not impossible.

He reached the Lemegeton.

Under normal circumstances, there would be nobody here besides the surrounding Golems and the crystal monsters. However, there were many beings present. Specifically, they were Demiurge, Aura, Mare, and Shalltear, along with their hand-picked high level vassals.

Their eyes rested on Cocytus, and his guilt caused panic to briefly flash across his face.

This was because he felt like everyone was castigating him for his failure. Or no — Cocytus felt that they might be blaming themselves instead. The thought from just now crossed his mind once more. Who was to say that they might not feel the same way?

Upon closer inspection, he found that there was no sign of rebuke in their eyes.

“Forgive. My. Lateness. Even. Demiurge. Who. Was. On. A. Distant. Assignment. Reached. Here. Before. Me.”

“Think nothing of it. There is no need to apologize for such trivial matters.”

Demiurge spoke for the others.

His tone was as calm as ever, with no hint of any negative emotions within. However, Demiurge was a Guardian who was adept at scheming, skilled at manipulating emotions, and concealing his true feelings, so Cocytus could not tell if he was truly displeased or not.

From that point of view, one could say that Demiurge’s state while spectating the battle between Ainz and Shalltear was quite a rare thing for him. Granted, that was a display of the depths of his devotion.

“I’ve already informed the other Guardians, but I’ll be taking Albedo’s place as the Overseer this time round. Are there any objections?”

“No. Everything will be fine if you’re in charge.”

Albedo was not around because she was accompanying her master in Sebas’s place.

“Good. Then, once everyone is here, we will proceed to the Throne Room together. However, since Albedo is not here, I’d like to sort out the order in which we show our respects. While this sort of thing should be rehearsed beforehand, there is no time for that now. I shall thus give a verbal explanation to speed things up, so please pay attention.”

The Guardians and their servants indicated their understanding, but despite that, Cocytus had a question. All the Guardians were here, so who exactly were they waiting for?

However, his questions were answered once that person showed up.

Cocytus sensed the presence of a living being moving towards this place.

As he looked in that direction, he saw a heteromorphic creature floating in mid-air, towards the Lemegeton.

It resembled an infant — no, perhaps an embryo might be more accurate. It had a long tail, and its body was bright pink. It had an angelic halo around its head, and a pair of withered, featherless wings on its back. It was roughly one meter long, and it was slowly heading this way.

“Who’s that?”

Demiurge answered Aura’s question:

“He is Victim, Guardian of the Eighth Floor.”

“So that’s Victim ...”



4章 絶望の幕開け

Victim reached the Lemegeton, and then turned a full circle. Cocytus had the feeling he was looking around.

Since Victim had no neck, he had to turn his entire body to look around him.

“KeK esiarp ,sbud esoht kcehc. (How do you do, everyone? I am Victim.)”

Demiurge seemed completely unfazed by Victim’s peculiar manner of speech, and responded on everyone else’s behalf:

“Welcome, Victim. I am Demiurge, and I am taking Albedo’s place for this meeting.”

“Krelc knab edarg-wol a fo ecnaraeppa eht dna ,gar pmad a fo amsirahc eht evah uoy. (I heard about that from Ainz-sama).”

After saying that, Victim turned his entire body to regard everyone once more.

“Noisiced doog a edam eh -nam a rof reh tfel dnabsuh remrof reh yhw dnat-srednu ylluf I .tuo dna edisni htob evitcarttanu si notgniffuH anaira. (I know about everyone, so I hope you’ll understand if I ask that we dispense with the introductions.)”

“Is that so? I see. Then, since we’re all here, I shall explain what I was just talking about.”

Everyone paid close attention to Demiurge’s explanation, because they would soon be meeting their supreme master, Ainz-sama, in the heart of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. The slightest mistake might well be punished by death.

After he finished speaking, Demiurge gave everyone some time to digest what they had heard before he led the Guardians and their vassals into the Throne Room.

Cocytus’s heart soared as he stepped into this room, which he had only entered a few times before.

With its outstanding construction, the flags which represented the Supreme Beings and the World Class Item in its depths, this room truly deserved its name as the heart of Nazarick. The spectacular display before him allowed him to briefly forget the torment within his soul.

Along the way, the Guardians left their vassals behind and formed a line at the steps before the throne. Then, they saluted the guild emblem of Ainz Ooal Gown which hung upon the walls as a sign of their respect and loyalty.

After that, they genuflected with heads lowered, awaiting the arrival of their master.

Soon, the sound of heavy doors opening came from behind, and a pair of footsteps made their way into the hall. Needless to say, it was not the sound of their master, because the owner of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick would never move unaccompanied.

“A warm welcome for Ainz Ooal Gown-sama, Supreme Overlord of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, as well as Albedo-sama, Guardian Overseer.”

That voice belonged to Yuri Alpha, of the Pleiades.

They could hear the doors opening once more, and this time there was the crisp sound of booted feet and a staff tapping against the ground. It was followed by that of high-heeled shoes treading across the ground.

Normally, when their master entered, they should have bowed to show their respect for him. However, nobody present did so. That was because they had already demonstrated their utmost respect.

However, that was not the case for Cocytus.

The unease that filled his soul manifested in his body as a physical movement. It was a tiny thing, but it greatly influenced the mood in the air.

Through the use of a skill, Cocytus could sense the other Guardians shifting their attention to him. Albedo, walking behind her master, was also radiating an anger that she was trying in vain to suppress. However, nobody dared to

speaking under these circumstances.

The footsteps slowly passed around the line of Guardians, ascended the steps, and then reached the throne, whereupon it ended in the sound of someone sitting down. Albedo's voice then echoed loudly through the Throne Room.

"You may raise your heads to gaze upon the glory of Ainz Ooal Gown-sama."

The assembled Guardians looked up — the sounds of their movement perfectly coordinated — to their master who was seated on his throne.

Cocytus also raised his head immediately.

There, he saw the supreme ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, the Supreme Being whose staff of office was wreathed in a dreadful aura, backlit by a mysterious black radiance — Ainz Ooal Gown.

Before him stood Albedo, who cast her gaze down on the massed Guardians, including Cocytus. Satisfied with what she saw, she nodded and then turned to Ainz.

"Ainz-sama, the Guardians of Nazarick are gathered before you. Please bestow your orders upon us."

Ainz went "Umu" in deep, regal tones, before thumping his staff heavily upon the floor. The gesture drew everyone's attention, and then Ainz slowly spoke:

"Welcome, you Guardians who are assembled before me. Now then, I shall first convey my thanks. Demiurge!"

"Yes!"

"I have called upon you every time something came up. Well done. Thank you for your loyal service."

"Oh, your praise is too lavish, Ainz-sama. I am but your humble servant; it is only natural for me to appear before you whenever I am summoned. That requires no thanks."

Demiurge bowed deeply. He seemed to be trembling in delight.

“Is that so? Ah, that’s right. Has anyone suspicious appeared on your end?”

“No. I have been very careful, and it should be easy to detect anyone who approaches ...”

“...That’s good. However, do not allow yourself to grow lax. After all, our enemies might come up with a way we have not anticipated. In addition, there’s the matter of the skin you have brought me ...according to the Head Librarian, it can be used to make low tier spell scrolls. Can you ensure a stable supply?”

“Yes! There will be no problems at all in that respect. We have already captured an adequate quantity.”

“Really now ...Then, what were those beasts called again?”

“Beasts...? Ah! The beasts of which you speak, Ainz-sama ...”

Demiurge paused briefly to think, and then continued:

“They are two legged sheep from the Holy Kingdom. What do you think of the name Abelion Sheep?”

Demiurge’s joyful tone puzzled Cocytus. Demiurge was fundamentally a good-tempered, possibly even compassionate person. However, that was only where his fellow creations of the Supreme Beings were concerned. He was extremely cruel to everyone else.

One could glimpse shades of that cruelty under his good-humored facade. While his deeply-seated malice ought to have been directed at the aforementioned beasts, would he really refer to unintelligent creatures with such an attitude?

Given Demiurge’s personality, something seemed off. However, now was not the time to inquire further.

“I see ...sheep, then.”

Their master seemed amused, which in turn put a smile on Demiurge and Albedo's faces.

"While I think goats would be better ...that name will do. Then, skin those sheep, by all means ...Will excessive capture affect the local ecosystem?"

"I doubt it. In addition, the use of healing magic allows us to skin them again. Therefore, we will not need to capture them en masse if we do not engage in large-scale production. That too is thanks to the monsters called Torturers."

"Hm? Don't severed body parts vanish when healing magic is applied?"

"About that ...we have learned something during our experiments with healing magic. Once some great change has occurred to the severed body parts — mincing, for example — those parts will remain. In other words, once the flayed skin has been processed, the healing magic no longer recognizes it as part of the body and it will not vanish even when the source is healed. This is also why they will not die when they are fed meat. Also, this is not exactly related, but when either the healer or the healed one rejects the magic, it will not be able to operate properly and will leave a scar. Similarly, lower tier spells are more likely to leave scars as time passes."

"I see ...magic is quite impressive. Very well, carry on, then."

"Understood. I shall begin harvesting them according to age and gender. Once that is done, could you tell me which age of skin is most suitable?"

"I will let the Head Librarian handle that. Next, Victim."

"Tihs fo stnap ,tif gnihguoc. (Yes, Ainz-sama.)"

"I have summoned you here for only one reason. If something unexpected happens, I may need you to protect us and the other Guardians with your skill ...I apologize for that, and I promise I will resurrect you immediately. I hope you understand."

"Retteb eht ,ssarg ot tuo tup er'uoy renoos eht dna ,uoy tnaw t'nod ew ,uoy wonk t'nod eW :gniyas ni elpoep hsitirB fo ytirojam eht fo flaheb no kaeps

I taht ecnedifnoc htiw yas nac I dna ,lla ta boj siht ni ycamitigel on evah uoy ,riS .etarotcetorp a naht erom gnihton ot decuder eceerG nees ev'ew ,revo koot uoy ecnis tuB .yrtnuoc-non a hcum yterp si hcihw ,muigleB morf emoc uoy es-uaceb s'taht spahrep - setats noitan fo ecnetsixe eht fo tpecnoc yrev eht rof gnihtaol a evah ot raeppa uoy. (Demiurge has already told me about that. Please do not worry, Ainz-sama. After all, I am also your servant. In addition, the goal of my life is death, so there is no greater joy for me than to aid the Supreme Beings in even the slightest of ways.”

“Is that so ...still, forgive me.”

Victim gasped in surprise as he saw his master bow to him. There was a look of bewilderment and shock on his face.

“Yssup eht yb reh barg tsuj! (I would not dare!)”

“If special circumstances arise, we may need to kill you in order to keep the foe from escaping. Even in that case, I hope you will accept that we are not killing you out of malice. You are one of my beloved children and I do not wish to hurt you, but we may all suffer if we let an unknown enemy be.”

“Nuf erom era semeM .sgniht rehto dna sroloc fo sgnirts sselgninaem s'ti ,ees nac uoy sA .elprup eulb rabannic rehco noitareneg yarg hcaep ynoep hcaep neerg eulb :esenapa] ro esenihC ni ekil sdaer naihconE ekaf s'mitciV tahw fo elpmas a si siht. (There is no need to explain, Ainz-sama. I am fully aware of your intentions.)”

“There is a phrase used in one of Nazarick’s mechanisms. It goes, ‘Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ That phrase describes you perfectly. Thank you for your love.”

Ainz’s gaze moved from the Guardian who had pledged his loyalty to the death, and shifted to another Guardian.

“Next, Shalltear.”

Shalltear’s shoulders trembled. She had not expected she would be called, and her reply seemed abnormally high-pitched.

“Y-Yes!”

“...Come to me.”

Unlike the other Guardians, Shalltear was the only one who had been summoned to her master’s side. She rose to her feet, both surprised and panicked. Her unease was clearly apparent from her back, and she looked like a condemned criminal being sent to the chopping block. Still, she held her head high and thrust out her chest, as though she were walking to glory.

After ascending the steps, Shalltear immediately genuflected a short distance before the throne.

“Shalltear, I wish to speak of the matter which coils around your heart in thorns.”

As her master spoke those words, Shalltear immediately knew what he was talking about, and her face filled with shame and guilt.

“Ahhh! Ainz-sama! Please, please hand down your punishment! I am a Guardian, but still I committed such a foolish mistake! Please give me the harshest punishment possible!”

Shalltear’s anguished wail echoed through the Throne Room, and Cocytus found himself empathizing with her. No, any Guardian — in fact, anyone who was made by the Supreme Beings — would be able to understand how she felt.

Even if she had been mind controlled, she could not forgive herself for turning her lance on the Supreme Beings.

“Really now ...then, Shalltear, come over here.”

As she saw her master beckon her over, Shalltear slowly crawled towards the Throne.

Ainz extended a bony hand to Shalltear, whose head was bowed before the throne, and gently caressed her head.

“Ai-Ainz-sama ...” Shalltear ventured as she nervously lifted her head, almost scared to death.

“...That failure was due to a miscalculation on my part. In addition, you were dealing with a World Class Item, which meant that you were at a great disadvantage. Shalltear — I love all of you who serve Nazarick loyally, you who were created from nothing. That includes you as well. Do you wish to force me to punish you, who bears no sin, and whom I love?”

The master shifted his gaze, as though he felt uncomfortable. Cocytus had no idea where his master was looking, but he seemed to have spoken quietly. His master’s face was skeletal, so there were no lips he could read, but he had probably said someone’s name.

“Oh, Ainz-sama! You actually said you loved me!”

Shalltear’s moved voice echoed through the hall.

Cocytus was behind Shalltear, so he could not see her face. However, her attitude said everything. Her voice sounded choked up, while her shoulders twitched.

He could see his master’s other hand gently caressing Shalltear’s face. It was holding a white handkerchief.

“There there, Shalltear. Don’t cry. It’ll spoil your beauty.”

Shalltear did not answer. She simply pressed her face — probably her lips — to the back of the hand stroking her hair.

Mare and Aura were already shedding tears.

Demiurge too dabbed at the corner of his eyes. Cocytus was somewhat envious of those people who could cry, and he looked longingly at the backs of his utterly loyal colleagues.

What Shalltear feared most was to be deemed useless, a troublemaker and disloyal, and then abandoned by the final, merciful Supreme Being who had

remained with them.

However, her master thoroughly obliterated that unease.

He did so with the word “love.”

How happy must Shalltear be now? As someone in the same situation as her — no, his own situation was worse — Cocytus could only watch her back silently, with unbridled jealousy in his eyes.

“Then, Shalltear, you may lea—”

“—Ainz-sama.”

A cold voice interrupted her master’s words. Cocytus glared angrily at Albedo for her disrespect. And then, a thrill of dread ran through him as a wisp of unease curled through his heart.

“The meting out of appropriate punishment and reward is the way of the world. I feel she must still be punished.”

“...Albedo, do you dispute my deci ...”

Her master’s words trailed off. He must have been left unable to speak by some reason about which Cocytus knew nothing. In the end, it was Shalltear’s words which swayed his final decision.

“Ainz-sama, I agree with what Albedo said. Please punish me as you see fit. The chance to fully express my loyalty would delight me as well.”

“...I understand. I shall do so after deciding on the appropriate form of punishment. You may return to your place.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama.”

Shalltear descended down the stairs, her already red eyes made even redder. She returned to her original position, and bowed with a matchless devotion to her master.

And then—

“Cocytus, Ainz-sama has something to tell you. Pay close attention.”

The air filled with tension.

It was his turn now.

Cocytus’s head was bowed very low. While that posture, which only allowed him to see the floor, was a clear display of respect, Cocytus had done so because he lacked the courage to look directly at his master.

“I have seen your battle with the Lizardmen, Cocytus.”

“Yes!”

“It ended in defeat.”

“Yes! The. Blame. For. That. Failure. Lies. With. Me. Please. Accept. My. Sincerest. Apologies. And. I. Pray. You. Will. Allow. Me. To—”

The sound of the staff striking the ground interrupted Cocytus’s apology. Then, Albedo’s cold voice made his hearing organs tremble.

“...You are being very rude to Ainz-sama, Cocytus. If you wish to apologize, do so with your head raised.”

“Forgive. Me!”

He raised his head and looked upon his master, who was seated at the top of the stairs.

“...Cocytus, what do you have to say as the general of a defeated army? How do you feel, given that you did not take the field and merely acted as a commander?”

“I. Am. Deeply. Remorseful. For. My. Inability. To. Achieve. Victory. Even. After. Receiving. Command. Of. My. Own. Troops. And. For. The. Loss. Of.

The. Elder. Lich. Commander. That. You. Personally. Made. Ainz-sama.”

“Hm? Ah, you can get undead like that from just about anywhere, so it’s hardly a shame. There’s no need to worry about it, Cocytus. What I want to ask is how you felt when commanding a battle. Let me get this out of the way first — I do not intend to blame you for this defeat.”

The Guardians and the vassals behind them were confused by those words, with the exception of Albedo and Demiurge.

So Demiurge was right ...oh!

Cocytus sensed his master was about to continue speaking, and hurriedly re-focused on him.

“After all, anyone can fail. Even me.”

The air in the Throne Room turned uneasy. How on earth could the Supreme Being Ainz Ooal Gown fail? In fact, he had never once made a mistake up till now.

In other words, he was only saying this to comfort Cocytus.

“However, the question is what you learned from that battle. Put in a different way, what do you think you should have done to win, Cocytus?”

Cocytus began thinking in silence. He now knew what he had to do to win, and so he spoke freely of his own deficiencies.

“I. Underestimated. The. Lizardmen. I. Should. Have. Been. More. Careful.”

“Umu. Just so. No matter how weak your opponent is, you can’t look down on them ...I should have let Narberal see that battle too. Is there anything else?”

“Yes. I. Did. Not. Have. Enough. Information. From. This. Battle. I. Learned. That. My. Chances. Of. Victory. Would. Be. Slim. If. I. Did. Not. Know. The. Enemy’s. Strength. And. The. Terrain.”

“Very good. Anything else?”

“The. Commander. Was. Inadequate. Since. The. Troops. In. The. Field. Were. Low Tier Undead. I. Should. Have. Accompanied. Them. With. Commanders. Who. Could. Adapt. To. The. Circumstances. And. Issue. Timely. And. Accurate. Orders. In. Addition. After. Considering. The. Lizardman’s. Weaponry. I. Should. Have. Attacked. With. The. Zombies. To. Tire. The. Foe. Or. At. Least. Kept. The. Troops. Together. And. Attacked. All. At. Once.”

“Is that all?”

“...My. Deepest. Apologies. But. That. Is. All. I. Can. Think. Of. For Now.”

“There is no need to apologize. You have said nothing wrong, and that was an excellent analysis. Of course, there is room for improvement, but you seem to have learned quite a lot. In truth, I hoped that you would not have to consult others and discovered those flaws on your own ...but that is still acceptable. Then, why did you not do all those things earlier?”

“...I. Did. Not. Think. Of. Them. I. Felt. That. I. Could. Overwhelm. Them. With. My. Forces.”

“I see. However, you *did* think of them after the undead were destroyed, no? Very good! As long as you can improve yourself and avoid future mistakes, then there is meaning to this defeat.”

Cocytus sensed that his master was smiling.

“There are many kinds of failure, but yours was not of the lethal kind. All the undead save the Elder Lich were automatic spawns. Their destruction does not affect Nazarick in any way. Rather, if they enabled a Guardian to learn something and avoid future errors, then this failure is actually quite a bargain.”

“Thank. You. Very. Much. Ainz-sama!”

“However, the fact is that you *were* defeated. Thus, you must be punished like Shalltear ...”

At this point, his master fell silent. This brief interruption made Cocytus uneasy as he waited for his master to pass judgment. That said, he was greatly relieved now that he knew that he had not disappointed his master. However, what he heard next made Cocytus freeze up.

“I had originally planned to have you retreat and act as a rear guard, but I think it’ll be better this way. Cocytus, you will personally erase the stain of your shame ...in other words, you will exterminate the Lizardmen. This time, you are not allowed to call on anyone else for help.”

If they annihilated the Lizardmen and kept word from getting out, then this would not count as a defeat for Nazarick.

Those who viewed everyone outside Nazarick as inferior lifeforms would gladly accept this duty, wiping away their shame and that of Nazarick with slaughter. Indeed, if this had been the Cocytus from earlier, he would have accepted this order without hesitation. However—

Cocytus shuddered.

This was because he knew what that order meant.

He breathed in and out several times.

Just as everyone began wondering why Cocytus had not responded to his master’s command, he finally spoke.

“I. Have. A. Request. Ainz-sama!”

The world seemed to stand still as everyone’s attention rested on Cocytus.

Cocytus was a Guardian, one of the most powerful and highest ranked beings of Nazarick. There were scant few people who were in his league, but even someone like himself felt a chill run through his entire body.

While regret stampeded through his heart like an avalanche, it was too late now.

Since he had said it, there was no turning back.

Cocytus had compound eyes and thus a very broad field of vision, but from his bowed posture, he could not see his master's face. That was the only solace he had. If his master displayed any anger or displeasure, Cocytus would be trembling so hard that he would not be able to do anything.

“Please. Hear. Me. Out. Ainz-sama!”

Before his master could respond, someone else interrupted Cocytus.

“How dare you!”

It was Albedo. Her deafening shout roared like thunder, filled with the gravitas which befitted the Guardian Overseer. Cocytus shuddered, like a child being rebuked by his mother.

“What right do you have to ask anything of Ainz-sama after staining the glory of Nazarick with defeat? The audacity!”

Cocytus remained silent. He was determined not to raise his head until his master acknowledged him. He would remain as he was even if Albedo hammered him with the full force of her wrath.

“Hurry up and—”

However, a calm male voice dispersed Albedo's roar like mist in sunlight.

“—It's fine, Albedo.”

His master repeated himself, to soothe the shocked Albedo.

“Raise your head, Cocytus. Could you tell me your request?”

There was no anger in that even voice, which only made it more frightening. The fear Cocytus felt was akin to seeing the bottom of a clear lake and knowing that one was about to be sucked in.

Cocytus's equipment granted him resistance to fear and mind-affecting effects originating from external sources. Therefore, the fear assailing him now sprang from within his own heart.

After gulping — to be precise, it would be like swallowing a mouthful of venom — Cocytus slowly raised his head and looked at his master and ruler.

Points of bright red fire danced within the empty orbits of his eye sockets.

“I say again, can you tell me your request?”

He could not speak. He had tried several times, but the words caught in his throat and nothing came out of his mouth.

“What's wrong? Cocytus?”

A weighty silence filled the air.

“...I am not angry at you. I merely wish to know what you are thinking, and what you are asking.”

His tone was gentle, as though trying to placate a quiet child. In the face of this, Cocytus finally managed to speak

“I oppose the extermination of the Lizardmen, and I beg that you will show them your mercy, Ainz-sama.”

After that simple, direct statement, Cocytus thought that the air was trembling. No, it was actually trembling.

The greatest source of that came from in front of him — from Albedo's murderous intent, followed by the quailing of the other Guardians' hearts. In contrast, Demiurge and his master seemed as calm as still water.

“...Cocytus, do you understand what you are saying?”

Albedo's frigid, murderous tone made Cocytus shudder, despite his immunity to the cold.

“Ainz-sama ordered you to exterminate the Lizardman to expiate your sins, but you would deny his will, as the guilty party ...Cocytus, Guardian of the Fifth Floor, are you *afraid* of the Lizardmen?”

She sounded like she was mocking him, but Cocytus could not retort with anything.

Albedo’s attitude was only to be expected. If he were in her place, Cocytus would most likely be quite angry too.

“Why don’t you speak—”

What silenced Albedo was not the sound of speech, but the sound of a collision. It was the high-pitched impact of a staff against the ground.

“Be quiet, Albedo. I am asking Cocytus a question. Contain yourself.”

“My deepest apologies! I, I beg your forgiveness!”

Albedo bowed in in apology and returned to her previous location.

Cocytus’s master turned to transfix him with a keen gaze. There was no reading his expression. He looked like he was brimming with anger, but at the same time he appeared quite bemused.

“Then, Cocytus, does that request of yours hold any benefit to the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick? Tell me.”

“Yes! In. The. Future. They. Might. Breed. Mighty. Warriors. Therefore. It. Would. Be. A Shame. To. Wipe. Them. All. Out. Right. Now. Your. Servant. Submits. That. It. Would. Be. Better. To.. Instill. A. Strong. Sense. Of. Loyalty. Among. Them. So. That. When. Stronger. Lizardmen. Appear. We. Can. Take. Them. As. Minions. “

“...That is quite a good idea. There’s little difference in the levels of the undead made from Lizardman corpses compared to those made with human corpses. There is no need to worry about Lizardman corpses if we can efficiently recover the bodies buried in E-Rantel.”

Just as Cocytus was about to continue, he sensed that his master was not finished yet. The unease within his heart took material form.

“However, the undead I make with corpses are more economical than making use of Lizardmen. Not only can we be sure of their loyalty, but we will not have to worry about their care and feeding. The only advantage I can see in the Lizardmen is that they will naturally increase in population, and that increase will take a long time to be seen ...Do tell me if I am missing anything out. Are there any sufficiently convincing advantages they possess?”

If Cocytus could persuade his merciful master, his wish could come true. However, Cocytus could not think of anything.

He had always thought of himself as a weapon to be wielded by his master. As a result, he had never thought on his own account before, which was why he could not convince his master. He had not considered what to do in order to benefit the group.

In addition, his master desired gains for the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. Cocytus did not wish to exterminate the Lizardmen because they had outstandingly brilliant people among them. In other words, he wished to spare the Lizardmen because he wanted to spare those talented individuals. That was a personal consideration, paying no heed to the bigger picture.

Cocytus’s heart burned with anxiety.

If he displeased or angered his silent master, this miraculous chance to make a suggestion would be all for naught, leaving him with the order to exterminate the Lizardmen.

He racked his brains as hard as he could, but he could not find an answer.

“What’s wrong, Cocytus? Can’t think of anything? Then it’ll be extermination, no?”

It was the same question from before.

Cocytus’s mind was a complete blank. His mouth felt like it weighed a ton, and

his thoughts simply spun in circles.

A quiet muttering filtered through the silent Throne Room:

“...Really now. What a shame.”

Just as those words of whispered regret threatened to crush the very breath from Cocytus, he was aided by a calm voice.

“Ainz-sama, please permit me to interject.”

“...What is it, Demiurge? Is something the matter?”

“Yes. It concerns the decision you made just now, Ainz-sama. If it pleases you, may I be allowed to supply my humble opinion?”

“...By all means.”

“Yes! Ainz-sama, I am certain you understand the importance of experiments. Therefore, should we not use the Lizardmen for experiments as well?”

“Oh, now that does sound interesting.”

Cocytus imagined that when his master leaned forward from his throne, his red eyes had met his own for a fraction of a second.

“Yes. To begin with, regardless of how Nazarick turns out in the end, we will ultimately need to gather various forces or exert control over various species. Your servant submits that when that time comes, there will be a great difference in the results depending on whether or not we have performed experiments in rulership.”

Demiurge straightened himself up further, looking his master — who was seated upon his throne — straight in the eye, and delivered his summation.

“I feel that we should take control of the Lizardman village and conduct experiments in ruling without the use of terror.”

The high-pitched ringing of the staff slamming into the floor echoed all around.

“...An excellent suggestion, Demiurge.”

“I am deeply grateful.”

“Then, I shall make use of Demiurge’s suggestion concerning the Lizardmen. They are not to be exterminated, but subjugated. Are there any objections? Raise your hands if there are.”

The crimson eyes swept across all the Guardians.

“...It seems there are none. Then it is decided.”

Everyone bowed in acknowledgement.

“That said, your suggestion was quite outstanding, Demiurge. Very impressive.”

Demiurge smiled.

“I would not dare, Ainz-sama. I imagine you must have already known about that, but you were only waiting for Cocytus to bring it up.”

His master did not answer, only smiled bitterly. However, his master’s attitude said everything.

Cocytus felt that his body had gone slack all of a sudden.

He had suffered an ignominious defeat while commanding the glorious armies of Nazarick. He had opposed his master’s wishes without preparing any other alternatives to his will. How could he describe his performance? He had been so—

Incompetent. How incompetent am I, anyway?

“...No, there’s nothing of the sort, Demiurge. You praise me too highly. I was merely hoping that you would express your opinions, regardless of what they

were.”

His master’s gaze shifted again, lingering on Cocytus for the longest time. He understood what his master was implying, but he could not lower his head.

“The most important thing is to understand the true meaning of your orders. After doing so, you must take the most appropriate action. Listen well, Guardians. Do not blindly follow orders. You must think before you act, and consider how best Nazarick can prosper from your actions. If you feel your orders are in error, or if you have a better alternative, then you must tell me or the person proposing the idea. Then — Cocytus, I believe I said I was going to punish you, did I not?”

“Yes. You. Ordered. Me. To. Exterminate. The Lizardmen.”

“Indeed. Now, however, we will not destroy them, but place them under our rule. As a result, I will alter your punishment. You will rule the Lizardmen, and you will instill a deeply-rooted loyalty to Nazarick within them. You are forbidden from ruling them with fear. Instead, you will turn the Lizardmen into a model of rulership without terror.”

Cocytus had never borne such a weighty responsibility before — no, among the Guardians, only Demiurge had this sort of experience.

It’ll be hard to complete this mission by myself.

That thought appeared briefly in Cocytus’s mind, but how could he admit to such weakness now? He could not say such things to the compassionate ruler to whom he owed his ultimate fealty, or to the colleague who had lent him a helping hand

“Understood. I. Have. My. Concerns. About. The. Task. So. I. May. Need. To. Call. On. The. Aid. Of. Others.”

“Of course. In addition, this matter will require considerable resources, rations, and manpower. Nazarick will supply those.”

“Thank. You. Very. Much. I. Cocytus. Guarantee. That. I. Will. Show. You.

Good. Results. And. That. The. Mercy. You. Have. Shown. Will. Not. Be. In. Vain. Ainz-sama!” Cocytus shouted.

“Very well. Then, I now order all the Guardians to move out. One team shall serve as distractions while another will demonstrate our power and show the Lizardmen that our strength is not limited to what they have seen. Of course, if you feel that may affect your future rule, I can rescind that order, Cocytus.”

Cocytus thought carefully about the matter and then replied:

“I. Feel. That. It. Will. Not. Pose. Any. Problems.”

“I see. Then, all Guardians, prepare to move out.”

As one, the gathered Guardians indicated their assent.

“Albedo, I will be heading out as well. Prepare our forces.”

“Understood. After considering that we may have foes who enjoy spying on us, can I assume that this is intended to deceive them about our true intentions?”

“Just so. However, do not forget that we must strike fear into the hearts of our opposition.”

“Then, perhaps we can send out the Old Guard of Nazarick as the main body of our forces so they will look more impressive.”

Cocytus agreed with Albedo’s response.

There was a type of undead guard called the Old Guard.

The Old Guard of Nazarick were high level undead sentries which were only found within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. They wielded weapons with all sorts of magical effects, and they were equipped with enchanted armor and shields. In addition, they possessed many refined combat skills, making them excellent undead sentries.

“That should be fine. How many of them are there?”

“They number three thousand.”

“Seems a bit too little. It’ll be hard to convey the desired shock effect with those numbers ...Our objective is to win a complete victory and frighten those who underestimate Nazarick. If we field fewer troops than before, it’ll mean nothing, so I would like to deploy at least double the forces from the previous engagement. What other forces can we use?”

“Then, how about mobilizing the Nazarick Elder Guards and the Nazarick Master Guards? That way we will have six thousand people.”

As expected of the Guardian Overseer, Albedo replied smoothly and immediately. Ainz’s response was simple and clear.

“Excellent! Then, were there any problems when activating Gargantua?”

“No, Ainz-sama. There were no problems in its activation.”

“Then, use 「Gate」 to send our forces over together.”

“However, my mana might run out if I have to do it alone.”

“Ask Pestonya to help. Have her transfer mana to you. If that’s not enough, get Lupusregina to help as well.”

“Understood.”

“After that, transfer Nigredo’s and Pandora’s Actor’s warning grid to me. This will weaken our surveillance on Sebas ...but that just means we’ll need to focus on physical observation. Very well! Then, carry on, everyone. Tomorrow, we shall show the Lizardmen the power of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.”

“Thank. You. Demiurge.”

Once his master left, the first thing Cocytus did was express his gratitude to Demiurge. Demiurge responded to the deeply bowed Cocytus with the same serene smile as always.

“No, there’s no need for thanks.”

“How. Could. That. Be? Without. Your. Help. The. Lizardmen. Would. Have. Been. Exterminated.”

“...Cocytus, I believe the reason why Ainz-sama approved of your suggestion was because Ainz-sama had foreseen such a development.”

As Demiurge delivered his summation with an upraised finger, a startled gasp rang through the air. The sound seemed to have come from himself, or the Guardians around him.

“In other words, I believe Ainz-sama anticipated that you would say such a thing. That was why he sent you to the Lizardman village. I felt that was the case because Ainz-sama seemed most delighted to hear you oppose the destruction of the Lizardmen village. In contrast, he sounded quite disappointed when you could not bring up an alternative solution.”

“You. Mean. To. Say. Ainz-sama. Was. Disappointed. Because. Things. Did. Not. Go. According. To. Plan?”

“Precisely. In other words, even the conversation we are having now might well have been foreseen by Ainz-sama.”

“As. Expected. Of. Ainz-sama. He. Has. Planned. Everything. Out. With. Meticulous. Perfection.”

“B-But, a-ah ...”

“...Spit it out.”

Aura bade her little brother Mare to speak, in a stern tone of voice.

“Ah, y-yes. Ah, I was wondering why he had sent out such weak undead at first. Ah, ah.. per-perhaps... Ainz-sama had planned on the attack failing from the start ...”

“Well, rather than say that he had planned to be defeated, isn’t it more like our master had anticipated that Cocytus would have investigated the Lizardmen’s strength and then mention that victory might be in doubt?”

A profound sense of shame fell over Cocytus as he remembered his exchange with Demiurge back then. After all, he had messed everything up.

“He couldn’t have come up with something like that if he didn’t understand Cocytus so well. Well, that’s Ainz-sama for you ...”

“While we have already seen Ainz-sama’s outstanding warrior prowess during the battle with Shalltear, to think he also possessed such extraordinary talent as a schemer. I cannot help but prostrate myself before him in awe. While Ainz-sama may have said otherwise, I feel that nothing can go wrong if we simply obey Ainz-sama’s orders ...”

“He’s really amazing. He truly lives up to the name of the one who united all the Supreme Beings.”

Shalltear excitedly added her own praise after Demiurge’s. The other Guardians nodded in agreement.



After returning to his room, Ainz jumped onto his bed. He hung briefly in the air before his body sank into the bed — and then he started to roll. He rolled right, and then he rolled left. The bed was big enough for him to do so.

His luxurious robe was crumpled from this, but Ainz paid it no heed, giggling

quietly as he rolled around. The reason Ainz was doing such a childish thing was because there was nobody in this room besides him. Soon, Ainz had indulged his childish desire for the soft sheets. He then lay on his back, facing the ceiling.

“Ahhh, I’m so tired ...ah, I want to loosen up and get drunk ...although I can’t do that now.”

After complaining to the air, he sighed deeply — although Ainz could not breathe, so he was just going through the motions. Ainz was undead, so physical and mental exhaustion were foreign to him. However, in human terms, he had spent every day hard at work for the past month. If he had a stomach, it would be in ruins by now.

Ainz was currently filled with stress.

The warrior Momon had defeated the silver-haired Vampire — Shalltear. Perhaps someone who was not in full possession of the facts might think it was simply impressive, but to the mysterious person who had used a World Class Item on Shalltear, it would mean something else. The opposition might have their eye on Ainz, or they might try to make contact with him. Therefore, Ainz spent his days on high alert, with many cash items ready so he could make his escape at any time. During his free time, he indulged in a little bit of mental roleplay — or exercising his imagination, more like — and studied whether he would be able to escape if the enemy came for him, while at the same time gathering information about his foe. This nerve-wracking daily life had little effect on Ainz Ooal Gown, but it tired out the remnants of his humanity — of Suzuki Satoru’s personality. The reason why he indulged in immature behavior when he was alone and had free time was probably a sign that Suzuki Satoru was under a lot of stress, hidden beneath the facade of Ainz.

“I don’t remember ever working without rest or sleep like this ...I wonder how much overtime I’ll get this month?”

Perhaps that griping had come from the personality of Suzuki Satoru overriding that of Ainz’s.

“The Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick ...no, Ainz Ooal Gown ...isn’t a stock

corporation. As a joint venture company, we're supposed to be a moral enterprise, so we ought to pay all employees the overtime they're due ..."

After whining to himself like that, Ainz furrowed his nonexistent eyebrows.

"Hm? ...Don't tell me I'm not entitled to overtime because I have a post allowance? Uwah ..."

Ainz rolled around again, and then froze after about half a dozen iterations.

"All right ...that's enough useless thinking for one day ...That said, I'm really impressed that Cocytus actually said something like that."

It had come as quite a surprise. To think Cocytus actually felt sympathy for the Lizardmen.

In truth, Cocytus's actions had been a big headache for Ainz.

Suzuki Satoru was the sort of person who would thoroughly research his sources and regurgitate them by rote when called upon to deliver a briefing. Therefore, he was not used to dealing with unexpected things. However, as long as it was written down in his notes, he could use them to deal with it. In other words, the success of Suzuki Satoru's briefings rested on how much research he did and how well he could use it to respond to the circumstances. He was extremely inept in dealing with situations which required adaptability; in fact, he hated them.

He could not bring his notes into the Throne Room and say, "Ah, please look at the next page." Therefore, Ainz had mentally rehearsed the events in the Throne Room over ten times beforehand. As he did, he prayed that nobody would do anything surprising.

And then, Cocytus had shattered that tiny wish of his.

He had been extremely worried about what Cocytus would say, but he was also very happy.

That was the joy a parent might have — as though a hitherto docile and obe-

dient child had expressed his own opinion for once. The important thing was that Cocytus's growth had far exceeded Ainz's expectations.

When Ainz had returned to Nazarick earlier, he had asked one of the maids to cook something — a steak. Perhaps she might need practice when it came to the doneness and other major points of the meal, but Ainz did not have such high expectations of the steak. Neither did he want food which granted bonuses, like food in YGGDRASIL. All he wanted was something edible.

However, the result could only be described as a lump of charcoal.

No matter how often that maid practiced, she could only make chunks of charred meat.

Ainz had accepted that outcome as he accepted the maid's heartfelt apologies. After all, it was the same as him trying to equip the greatsword in his wardrobe.

In YGGDRASIL, one needed specialized skills to make food. It was only to be expected, since food and drink could grant special bonuses when consumed. However, that maid did not possess such skills.

In other words, if one lacked the proper skills to perform a task, it would end in failure.

The matter of Cocytus was also an experiment of sorts. Ainz wanted to see if finalized characters like himself and the NPCs could learn anything new. This experiment was designed to see if they could grow strong by learning tactics and strategy.

He had given Cocytus command over the weak undead because he felt that he would be able to learn more from their defeat.

In the end, Ainz had been pleased with the results. Cocytus had shown Ainz that he had the possibility for growth.

Of course, there was a huge different between theory and practice.

Ainz's upcoming objective was to thoroughly master the details of this world's unique magic — if such magic existed. Currently, Ainz was still unclear whether magic was a skill or knowledge.

However, this experiment showed that one's knowledge could still grow.

Cocytus had proved the possibility of that development. He had done very well.

Ainz thought.

A lack of growth was equivalent to stagnation. Even if he was powerful now, he might be surpassed one day.

Even if he had a hundred years' advantage in military technology, he would still lose his pole position if he did not continue improving himself. There might be a strong nation nearby, but they would be utter fools if they assumed that they would always be a strong nation and did not seek improvement.

“Well, I think that ...but while I'm happy that the kids have grown, I'm also worried if I'm a ruler who's worthy of their loyalty ...”

Ainz looked at the veiling as he muttered this.

“Ahhh, it's so scary, I'm so scared ...”

The remnants of Suzuki Satoru's personality wailed in fear of the unknown.

Growth was change. Then, who could guarantee that their absolute loyalty would not change? Even if it did not, he was still afraid that someday they would consider him unworthy of being the ruler of the glorious Nazarick. He feared being forced out of his position as guildmaster.

“...I have to become a leader that the Guardians will want to follow ...Why isn't there anyone to teach me the path of rulership ...”

There was probably nobody in Nazarick who was designed for such a purpose.

As Ainz fell into contemplation, he thought of two people, from the Five Worst of Nazarick. One of them was Kyouhukou, who bore the title of Duke, and the other was Gashokukochuuou, who had the title of King. Ainz wondered if he could ask them to teach him, and his answer was simple and succinct.

“...Hell no.”

He did not want to learn from them unless he had no other choice,

“Forget it ...as long as I don’t mess up too much, I won’t need to retire. Also ...yes, about those two-legged sheep ...”

Ainz had already surmised the true identity of the two-legged sheep which was why he had not asked about their appearance. They were monsters he had seen in YGGDRASIL before.

“They have the heads of a lion and a goat, and a serpentine tail. Their hands are those of lions and their feet are those of goats. They are Chimerae ...”

In YGGDRASIL, Chimerae walked on two legs, attacking with lion’s paws, which served as arms. Each of them had two heads, one of a lion and one of a goat. That was because these monsters were based on the visual data of monsters known as Baphomets.

So why had Demiurge not come out and said that they were Chimerae? Ainz had his doubts, but then he also had an answer.

“In other words, they’re mutant Chimerae. Am I right, Demiurge?”

Ainz chuckled, and then he added a mental note to his opinion of Demiurge: he had terrible naming sense.

“Well, the Chimera Lords in YGGDRASIL looked kind of ...no, fish-like Chimerae look disgusting. So these two-legged sheep are a new breed of Chimera ...that makes them Holy Kingdom Chimerae ...it might be good to bring one of them to Nazarick. And then there’s Victim ...hm.”

Victim looked just like how Ainz remembered, but one thing stood out in his

mind.

“The language he’s using ...is that Enochian, the language of angels? It feels like he’s saying something else entirely...”

It was translated, so Ainz did not know what sort of language he was using, but it felt weird to him. Of course, that might be because Ainz did not know Enochian at all.

“Forget it, let’s not worry about it. All right, it’s about time to set out...”

Ainz rolled around again. He stopped when he was face down, to verify something that had been bothering him since just now.

He pressed his face to the bed, and sniffed.

Ainz had no lungs, so he was merely going through the motions. Strangely enough, he could smell something.

“This is the smell of flowers ...did someone spray perfume on this bed? Are the beds of the wealthy like this? That’s pretty surprising ...maybe I should keep them in mind when I’m pretending to be wealthy, then? Umu ...”

3

There was an ability known as danger sensing.

Among adventurers, thieves and those with sensory skills prized that ability. As the name implied, it allowed its user to sense danger.

There were two main variations of this ability. One kind disregarded logic and analysis, making snap decisions based on one’s perceptions. The other was the product of experienced reasoning and deduction. The proverbial sixth sense and intuition belonged to the first category, while those who picked up on minute sensory traces and observed changes in the environment fell into

the latter category.

One would naturally learn the second type when on the battlefield or when travelling alone, even if one did not go out of the way to hone it. It was a form of experience gained from being in hazardous environments.

The Lizardmen were superior to humans in that aspect. This was because their biological abilities — their senses — were sharper, and because they lived in more hostile conditions. A human being would typically live in a safe place that was far away from monsters, but Lizardmen often had monsters as neighbors.

In Zaryusu's case, he was a traveller, and thus used to long, solo journeys. Thus, he could accurately and keenly gauge the changes in the air and mood.

His eyes snapped open as he sensed a tension filtering through the air.

The familiar sight of the room — although he had only lived there for a few days — greeted him. However closely a human looked, they would not be able to see within the lightless interior, but that was not a problem for Lizardmen.

There was nothing unusual about the room.

Zaryusu looked around, and breathed a sigh of relief after making sure that there was nothing unusual around. At the same time, he sat up.

As an outstanding warrior, Zaryusu could go from sound asleep to fully awake in an instant. His eyes would not be weighed down by sleep — he could charge into battle right now with no problems.

This was also related to the Lizardman habit of light sleeping.

However, Crusch showed no signs of stirring from where she was sleeping beside him.

All she did was moan softly as she was deprived of Zaryusu's warmth.

Under normal circumstances, Crusch should have sensed the change in the air

and woken from her slumber. However, she did not seem to have done so.

A sense of regret filled Zaryusu — had he placed too much of a burden on Crusch?

As he recalled last night, he felt that perhaps Crusch's burden was greater than his own. It would seem that the female Crusch had been under more strain than the male Zaryusu during the process of defeating the Elder Lich.

He would have liked for her to be able to continue sleeping, but upon listening carefully, he could hear the sounds of many Lizardmen hurrying around. In an emergency like this, it would be more dangerous to let her sleep than to wake her up.

“Crusch, Crusch.”

Zaryusu shook Crusch several times, using some force.

“Hm? Mmm ...”

After twitching her tail, she opened her crimson eyes.

“Hm? Uuuu ...?”

“Seems like something's happened.”

Those words snapped a half-asleep Crusch to full wakefulness. Frost Pain lay by his side, and after taking it up he rose to his feet, followed shortly by Crusch.

The two of them headed outside, and they immediately realized the source of the disturbance.

The sky above the village was covered in a thick layer of dark clouds.

When they looked into the distance, they realized that these clouds were different from regular clouds, because the sky in the distance was bright and clear.

In other words, this meant that—

“They’re ...coming again?”

A signal of another enemy attack—

“Looks like it.”

Crusch agreed with his assessment. Debate broke out among the Lizardmen of the Five Tribes as they gazed into the cloudy sky. However, there was no fear on their faces.

That was because they had achieved victory even in these dire circumstances, and it had made them all stronger.

The two of them ran to the main gate of the village, accompanied by the sound of splashing. They passed several Lizardmen preparing for battle, and reached their destination before long.

There were many warrior Lizardmen gathered at the main gate, and everyone was peering outside. There were some familiar faces among them, including Zenberu, who had fought and bled with them, and the chief of the Little Fang Tribe beside him.

Zenberu waved to the two of them as they splashed over, and then jerked his chin to indicate that they should look outside the gate.

Zaryusu and Crusch stood by Zenberu’s side and looked in that direction.

Facing them, on the other side of the boundary between the marsh and the forest, were serried ranks of skeletons.

“So they’ve come again.”

“Hm ...”

Zaryusu clicked his tongue after answering Zenberu.

They had expected as much, but this was still too quick. They had thought that the heavy losses that they had inflicted would take the enemy some time to replace.

As it turned out they had been completely off the mark. Their foe had actually mobilized such a large army in such a short time.

“...Still, they ought to be weaker than the skeletons which that Elder Lich summoned.”

There was a hidden meaning to those words. Zenberu was implying that the skeletons before then were stronger than the Skeletons that had attacked earlier.

Zaryusu kept his eyes trained on the skeletons facing them. This was in order to grasp their opponents' strength and prepare the appropriate defenses.

Indeed, they were all skeletal creatures, but they were dramatically different from the Skeletons they had fought previously.

By looks alone, the biggest difference lay in their equipment. The previous Skeletons were only armed with rusted swords, but these skeletons had full sets of gear. In addition, they looked more presentable than those from the earlier encounter. There seemed to be three broad classes of personal equipment on the skeletons present.

Most of the skeletons were outfitted in breastplates, bearing an inverted-triangle shield — a heater shield — in one hand, and all manner of hand weapons in the other. They even had quivers and bows on their backs. These armed skeletons were fully equipped for attack and defense and for fighting at close or long range. Then, there were skeletons who were similarly accoutered with breastplates, but sporting tattered red capes and helmets, wielding bastard swords and round shields. The last group comprised the least numerous, but best-equipped skeletons. They wore suits of shiny golden full plate armor and gripped shiny pikes. Not a single spot of dirt marred their brilliant red capes.

As Zaryusu inspected them, he realized something. He rubbed his eyes several times, wondering if they were mistaken. However, the reality before him

remained as it was.

“Eh ...? No way ...”

“How, how could this be ...”

Crusch realized that Zaryusu was muttering in a pained voice as she gasped in shock. Just then, Zenberu spoke up:

“...Oh, it seems you noticed too.”

Zenberu’s voice sounded similarly tortured.

“Mm ...”

Zaryusu stopped there. He did not want to continue, because he would be afraid if he continued to speak, but he had to say it:

“...Those look like magic weapons.”

Crusch nodded steadily from beside him.

All the weapons wielded by the skeleton army were magical in nature. Some had flaming swords, while others had hammers crackling with electricity. Some had pikes whose heads were sheathed in green light, while others had scythes which dripped a viscous purple fluid.

“Not just that. Take a look at their armor and shields. They’re all... enchanted as well.”

Zaryusu took a closer look as he heard Zenberu speak.

And then, he groaned in dismay. That was because Zaryusu realized that those shiny suits of armor did not reflect the sun’s light, but seemed to glow from within. What kind of ruler could outfit this many skeletons in magic items? If it was only a matter of simple sharpening enchantments, Zaryusu had heard that certain great nations could amass quantities like this after long planning. However, imbuing this many magic weapons with elemental properties — and

in the variety before him — was another matter entirely.

Zaryusu remembered the Dwarves Zenberu had spoken of several days ago. The Dwarves were a mountain-dwelling species, who possessed exceptional skill concerning metal. During a drinking party, the Dwarves had once shared a heroic legend — that of the Emperor who founded the Dwarven Empire, a hero clad in adamantite armor, a man who felled Dragons by himself, and the “Magesmith” of the Thirteen Heroes. Even those legends had not spoken of an army — over five thousand strong — of this size, outfitted in magical equipment like this.

Then, what was Zaryusu looking at now?

“...Is that an army from the legends?”

If they had not come from a human myth, then it must have come from some kind of divine legend.

Zaryusu shuddered. He realized that he had challenged a foe who was not only beyond his expectations, but one that should never have been provoked.

However, he had gathered everyone here with the intention to die. How could someone who had come up with such a ridiculous plan be afraid now? He already knew this foe was beyond the bounds of his imagination. The solution was how they would deal with it.

“It can’t be. That must be an illusion or something.”

As everyone heard those words, a look crossed their faces which seemed to say, “What rubbish are you spouting?” Their enemy was not moving, but they felt real enough. They emanated a frightful presence and they could not possibly be mere illusions.

Still, these doubt-inducing words were spoken by the chief of the Small Fang Tribe. He had not said them because he had gone mad.

“What basis do you have for that?”

In response to Zaryusu's question, the Small Fang chieftain replied confidently:

"We've sent out rotating scout patrols, but nobody reported seeing undead like that. There's no way we wouldn't have spotted them if they were in such numbers. Of course, all the scouts we sent out returned safely."

"I see ...Still, I don't think they're illusions."

"...But ...no, maybe they're not. If they aren't illusions, maybe they burrowed through the earth or used similar means of movement. A tunnel would explain why they weren't spotted earlier."

"It doesn't matter if they dug through the ground or flew through the sky, what do we do about them? Though it doesn't look like they're going to fight just yet, they don't look like they want to negotiate either."

"That seems to be the case ...although, given the present circumstances, I feel the enemy is going to try something ..."

Zaryusu stared at the skeletal army.

He was looking for their commander — and then, a gust of bone-freezing wind blew over them. It was not a one-time occurrence — the chill wind blew over and over.

This preternaturally frigid wind was not a natural phenomenon. There was no doubt that it was the result of magic.

"Wind? Eh ...it can't be! Isn't this the same kind of magic ...how is that even possible ..."

Crusch trembled as she hugged herself. She did not look like she was doing so purely because of the cold, so Zaryusu asked:

"Crusch, what's with this cold wind ..."

"...You might not believe me if I say this, but please listen to me. I originally thought that the weather changes from before were the result of the fourth

tier spell 「Control Clouds」, but I was wrong. 「Control Clouds」 can control clouds, but it cannot generate cold winds like this. Therefore ...this isn't just controlling clouds, but altering the weather. In other words, I think the enemy used a sixth tier spell ... 「Control Weather」.

Crusch lowered her voice so nobody could hear, and continued, “However, that spell is beyond my ability to use, so I'm not too sure if that's the case.”

Zaryusu knew how shocking spells of the sixth tier were. Magic like that was beyond even Igva, the strongest opponent Zaryusu had ever fought, and it was considered the most powerful form of magic in the world.

“Is this ...the power of the Supreme One? I see ...that would explain it.”

If he could use magic of the sixth tier, then the title of “Supreme” would be well-deserved.

“Oi oi oi, when I look around at everyone, it doesn't look good.”

Zenberu's mumbling highlighted the mood in the air.

Such cold winds could not blow in this weather — in other words, this was a supernatural change in the environment that was beyond their ability to comprehend. The Lizardmen's morale plummeted to rock bottom.

Previously, only clouds had appeared. The priests could still control clouds if they gathered together, built a huge bonfire, and conducted a ritual. However, when the Lizardmen felt the chill kiss of this autumn-like wind, they realized how powerful their foe was to be able to manipulate such normally uncontrollable natural phenomena.

Even without Crusch's words, the constantly-blowing wind clearly illustrated just how powerful their upcoming opponent was.

“Cheh, they're making their move.”

Zaryusu gritted his teeth and suppressed the urge to swish his tail with sheer force of will. *So they're moving out now?* he thought.

The warrior Lizardmen panicked as the skeletal army advanced with steps with such regularity that they seemed to have been measured with a pace stick. Some of them even growled in warning. However, Zaryusu was baffled as he watched the skeletal army move.

That was not a prelude to battle.

Just as Zaryusu and Zenberu were about to ask the panicking Lizardmen to calm down—

“—Calm yourselves!”

A shout that swallowed the land and shattered the sky rang forth.

Everyone looked in the direction of the voice. Their eyes settled on Shasuryu.

“I say again, calm yourselves.”

The only thing that could be heard in this silent space was his confident, dignified voice, echoing in their ears.

“Also, do not be afraid, warriors. Do not disappoint the ancestors who stand behind you.”

Shasuryu passed through the quiet, now-calm Lizardmen, and came to Zaryusu’s side.

“Little brother, what’s the enemy done now?”

“Mm, Ani-ja. They’ve started moving ...but they don’t seem to be getting ready for a fight.”

“Muu.”

The five hundred skeletons who moved out formed up into ten ranks.

“What are they doing?”

As though waiting for that question, the skeletal army moved again.

With perfect coordination, they split in two from the center, leaving a space between them that was roughly twenty skeletons in size. Within that space was a figure.

It was not very large. Even at a distance of two hundred fifty meters, it was clearly smaller than Zaryusu.

It wore a black robe, and radiated a dreadful aura of evil. It looked similar to the Elder Lich they had fought yesterday, so it was probably a magic caster as well.

However, the key difference between the two was their power.

A chill ran up Zaryusu's spine as he saw it. His instincts told him that the difference between the being before him and the Elder Lich from yesterday was like the difference between a warrior and an infant.

Even at this range, he could feel the ice-cold and malevolent presence it emanated. In addition, its equipment was in a league of its own.

It was like an avatar of irresistible death — an absolute ruler.

“A ruler of death ...is it?”

The words which fell unbidden from Zaryusu's mouth perfectly described the monster before him.

Indeed, that person was a king that ruled death.

“...Oh!”

What did this ruler of death have in mind?

The Lizardmen panicked as one as they looked at that lord of extinction. Just then, a magic array roughly ten meters across expanded from around that magic caster in a hemisphere.

On the hemisphere were translucent sigils that resembled letters and symbols, glowing with a bluish-white light. These sigils shifted with bewildering speed, each different from one moment to the next.

The clear blue light changed shape continuously, illuminating the surroundings in phantasmagoric radiance. If this were not the work of an enemy, perhaps they might have been entranced by it, but right now they were not in the mood for such things.

Zaryusu, unable to understand what was going on, felt confused.

Most magic casters would not project magic arrays like that into the air when casting their spells. The enemy's actions were far beyond Zaryusu's knowledge. Therefore, Zaryusu asked the female who knew the most about magic:

“What *is* that?”

“I, I don't know. I don't know what that is either—”

Crusch's reply sounded a little afraid. It would seem her knowledge of magic made her even more frightened of this unknown phenomenon.

Just as Zaryusu was about to comfort her with a pat—

Perhaps the spell had cast, but the magic circle fragmented and transformed into countless motes of light, which flew to the sky. And then, they spread from the air, like an explosion —

—And the lake froze over.

Nobody had any idea what was going on.

There was the outstanding chief Shasuryu, the incredibly talented priestess Crusch, and the widely-travelled Zaryusu. Even these individuals, who were extraordinarily gifted in their respective fields, could not immediately comprehend what was happening at the moment.

They had no idea why their feet were stuck in the ice.

Soon — after their brains managed to parse what was going on — the cries of despair rang out.

Indeed, every Lizardman was wailing.

Even Zaryusu was doing so. Crusch, Shasuryu, and even Zenberu, the boldest of them all, was no exception. The terror which sprang from the deepest reaches of their souls drove them to cry out in fear.

The scene before their eyes was too horrific to bear. The lake which could never freeze, which had never frozen ever since they had been born, was now a solid sheet of ice.

The Lizardmen hurriedly raised their feet. Fortunately, the ice was not very thick and broke immediately, but the shattered portions immediately froze back over. The bone-chilling cold from below proved that this was no mirage.

In a panic, Zaryusu hurriedly scaled a dirt wall and looked around, and then he was dumbstruck by the ridiculous sight around him.

Everything, as far as his eyes could see, was frozen over.

It was impossible to imagine that such a huge lake could have frozen solid, yet the glittering ice before his eyes was reality.

Zaryusu feared for the fish farms, but now was not the time to worry about such things.

“No way ...”

Crusch, who had climbed up with Zaryusu to look around, was just as dumbfounded as he was. A despondent voice came from her gaping mouth.

Much like Zaryusu, she could not believe what she was seeing.

“Monster!”

He cursed loudly. At the same time, he hoped that the cursing would some-

what ameliorate the terror in his heart.

“Get them up here!” his brother Shasuryu bellowed.

Several Lizardmen had already collapsed. The warrior Lizardmen who could still move worked together to extricate their fallen friends from the frozen swamp.

The Lizardmen who had collapsed were ghastly pale and shook uncontrollably. Perhaps the cold had stolen their vitality.

“Ani-ja, I’ll go take a look around!”

With Frost Pain in hand, Zaryusu would not be affected by cold effects of that level.

“No ...don’t go!”

“Why, Ani-ja!?”

“The enemy ought to be making their move soon! I forbid you to leave this place! Grasp the situation and don’t let any information slip past you! You’ve travelled the world and accumulated all sorts of knowledge; you’re the only one who can handle that task!”

Shasuryu’s eyes left Zaryusu, and he spoke to the warriors around him.

“I will now cast a spell that will defend against the cold, 「Protection Energy - Ice」. Tell everyone in the village not to touch the ice.”

“I’ll help with the spells too.”

“Thank you! Crusch, you split up from me. Heal anyone in critical condition!”

Crusch and Shasuryu began casting spells on the now-safe Lizardmen.

Zaryusu remained on the dirt wall, his keen gaze intently focused on the enemy formation and taking in every move the enemy made. He had to carry out

the mission his elder brother had entrusted to him.

“There we go.”

Zenberu, who had climbed up beside him, leisurely regarded the enemy forces.

“Come on, loosen up a little. Your big bro’s counting on your knowledge, right? He won’t scold you if you miss something. What’s more important is that you don’t get overly focused and develop tunnel vision.”

Zenberu’s relaxed tone helped cool Zaryusu’s head down.

Much like how they had done in the battle with the Elder Lich, they could divide the load among themselves and work together, while he oversaw everything.

Zaryusu looked around and found that the warriors were climbing the dirt walls and observing the enemy. Indeed, he was not fighting alone, but with everyone.

It would seem he had been rattled by that overpowering force — by that spell.

Zaryusu exhaled, as if to expel the accumulated unclean air within himself.

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.”

“...That’s true, because you’re here too, Zenberu.”

“Haah, don’t look at me when it comes to brainwork.”

Their eyes met and they laughed. Then they turned their attention back on the enemy.

“Still, that’s one hell of a monster out there.”

“Yes, it’s on a completely different level.”

The King of Death regarded Zaryusu and the Lizardman village with a majestic gaze as he stood, like the ruler of this world and the next. What should have been a tiny object in the distance seemed to have expanded to dozens of times its actual size.

“...He ought to be that Supreme One they were talking about.”

“Most likely. I hope he’s the only one who can freeze a lake with magic like that.”

“Yeah, me too. We Lizardmen must look like tiny ants to someone who can pull off something like that. Damn, dammit! We’re nothing more than worms to him. Speaking of which ...they’re moving.”

The magic caster who had frozen the lake raised the hand which was not holding a staff and waved it at the village. *He must be giving an order*, Zaryusu’s instincts told him, and in the next moment his instincts were validated in a horrifying way.

“Ohhhhh!”

The voices came from everywhere in the village.

“What ...what is that!? What the hell is going on!?”

Zaryusu had thought he could no longer be surprised, but after seeing what was before him, he could not help but wail in response.

Before his eyes was a massive statue hewn of stone, with a pair of arms and legs.

Its sturdy, slab-like chest pulsed with red light, like a heartbeat. Its limbs were thick and stubby, and it looked almost adorable ...well, it would have been, if it were not over thirty meters tall.

This massive stone statue suddenly appeared from the forest. Calling it an illusion might actually have been easier to swallow.

The statue moved slowly, and produced a gigantic boulder out of nowhere.

And then, it tossed the boulder.

Zaryusu reflexively shielded his eyes. Certain death awaited anyone who was hit by that huge rock.

The earth shuddered and a tremendous crash assaulted Zaryusu in that world of darkness. The dirt wall shook violently.

After that was the sound of heavy rain — of the sand and debris which had been tossed up falling back to the earth. It was accompanied by surprised cries from the village.

They were prepared to die, but they were not prepared for this unimaginable terror. The shocking lesson from just now made even the veterans of that battle shriek like children.

Zaryusu breathed a sigh of relief as he realised that he was still alive. As he nervously opened his eyes, he saw the undead army on the move, and he noticed that the gigantic statue was nowhere to be seen.

The huge rock which had not been there before now stood between the two forces. The undead troops approached the rock, and then they fell to one knee after raising their shields as if to block the sky. The other skeletons jumped up on those shields, and after nimbly maintaining their balance, they raised their shields as well.

In the moment that Zaryusu realised what the enemy was doing, he trembled all over, as if he had been struck by lightning.

“Don’t tell me ...stairs? They’re using a legendary army like that as stairs!?”

The skeletons drew close to the giant rock with startling speed, and then the staircase formed by the undead army finally took shape.

Then, the other undead soldiers made their move. They looked more refined than the skeletons from earlier, and there were about a hundred of them. They

held lances with banners attached, of the kind that lancers might carry.

The bright red cloth — their banners — were embroidered with the same sigil.

Their capes rippling in the wind, these undead marched onto the marsh with immaculate coordination. They crunched the ice under their feet as they advanced in silence. Then, another group of skeletons marched onto the marsh with the same fluid movements, taking care to maintain the proper spacing from the first group. They crossed their lances with those of the warriors opposite them.

The crossed lances formed a passage which led to the huge rock.

“...Is that a king’s path?”

Zenberu was right.

The magic caster of death walked down the path made by the undead. The silhouettes of several people were visible behind it. Nobody had noticed their arrival.

At their head walked the magic caster of unfathomable might.

He was dressed in a black robe that seemed to be made of darkness itself, and an ebony radiance emanated from the staff he carried. That radiance shaped itself into the tormented faces of human beings, which dissolved and disappeared into nothing. Beneath the hood of his robe was a skeletal face, and within its empty eye sockets danced points of bright red light.

He was adorned with countless items of magical jewelry, the likes of which were beyond Zaryusu’s comprehension. He strode forth with the air of a monarch.

A pale-skinned female trailed behind the king of death. She resembled a human being, but she differed from them in one key respect — which would be the wings at her waist.

“Could she be a ...demon?”



Demons.

There were devils who destroyed with brute force and fiends who corrupted with intellect. These outsiders were collectively known as demons. They were said to be monsters of legendary cruelty and malice, who existed to destroy all intelligent beings of good alignment. Their names were a byword for evil.

Zaryusu had heard of demons during his travels.

He had heard of their fearsome nature. Apparently, two hundred years ago there was a monster who was a king of demons — the Demon God, who rallied demons to his banner and nearly destroyed the world.

The Demon God was finally defeated by the Thirteen Heroes, and the traces of that battle could still be seen to this day.

If the undead were monsters that hated the living, then demons were monsters who wanted to make the living suffer.

Behind the demoness was a pair of Dark Elf twins, and then a silver-haired girl. In addition, there was a sinister-looking monster which floated in mid-air, and finally a tailed being who resembled a human male.

The creepy monster alone did not seem very strong, but the tip of his tail began to twitch just by looking at each of them. His primal instincts screamed at him to flee with all his might.

The group advanced in silence, passing beneath the lances and banners, climbing the stairs leading up the huge rock. They trod the undead soldiers with no hesitation whatsoever, standing like kings and queens atop the massive boulder. The king of death at their head waved his hand.

In an instant, a high-backed throne which glowed with a black light appeared, and the undead king promptly sat upon it.

Behind them, the people who seemed to be his confidantes formed a line, looking at the village as though they were waiting for something. However, they did not do anything else beyond that.

What was going on?

Several Lizardmen looked uncomfortably at each other, and in the end they finally decided to let the wisest of their number do the talking.

“...Ah, could, could you tell us what we should do, Zaryusu-san? Should we prepare to run?”

That voice was utterly devoid of fighting spirit. The drooping tail spoke volumes about what was in his heart.

“No, there’s no need for that. Consider the Elder Lich from before. We now face a magic caster who vastly exceeds that Elder Lich, so it should be child’s play for him to launch an attack from a distance like this. In all likelihood ...he wants to tell us something.”

Looks of understanding dawned on the Lizardmen’s faces.

Through all of this, Zaryusu’s eyes had been firmly fixed on the group before them. He was like a peasant looking up to his king as he ceaselessly examined the monsters atop that huge rock.

He did this so he would not miss anything about them.

Now that they were so close, he could examine them in great detail, and they could even meet each other’s eyes.

Was that king of death observing the Lizardmen from his place atop his throne? The Dark Elves did not seem particularly hostile. The silver-haired girl had a mocking smile on her face. The demoness’s gentle expression was paradoxically spine-chilling. The creepy monster’s expression was unreadable. The tailed man’s eyes were devoid of any emotion.

After they studied each other for a while, the undead king once more raised

his free hand to his chest. Several Lizardmen saw this, and their tails thrashed violently.

“—Don’t be afraid. Don’t disgrace us in front of our opponents.”

Zaryusu’s razor-edged criticism drove all the Lizardmen to stand up straight and thrust out their chests.

Numerous clouds of black fog appeared before the king of death — twenty of them in total. They whirled ceaselessly, growing larger and larger, until they formed a single cloud of black fog about one hundred fifty centimeters in size. Soon, countless frightening faces appeared in the fog.

“That’s ...”

Zaryusu recalled the monsters who had come to the villages as messengers, and the undead creatures he had seen during his travels.

Crusch had already explained this once in the village, but it was very difficult to harm incorporeal monsters without the aid of enchanted weapons, weapons made of special metals, magic, or specialized martial arts.

Even if one put all the Lizardman tribes together, they would only have a few magic weapons. In other words. Just defeating one would be very challenging.

To think that their foe could casually summon twenty such monsters with a wave of his hand.

“...So this is what they mean when they say one can control death.”

Our enemy is an incredibly powerful monster, one whom that powerful Elder Lich would pledge his loyalty to, Zaryusu thought despondently.

The king of the dead muttered something, and then cast his hand out, like he was ordering an attack. The monsters then flew over to encircle the village, and they began to recite in unison:

“We hereby relay the will of the Supreme One.”

“The Supreme One requests a dialogue. Dispatch your representatives forthwith.”

“Any delays will only incur the wrath of the Supreme One.”

After their monologue, the incorporeal undead returned to their master’s side.

“Wha? ...Don’t tell me ...that’s it?” Zaryusu asked, with a stupid look on his face.

He sent such powerful undead just to pass on a message?

However, the more unbelievable thing was what came next. After receiving directions from the ruler of death, the silver-haired girl behind him clapped forcefully.

With that clap — all those undead were annihilated.

“What!?”

Zaryusu could not hold back his cry of shock.

Those summoned monsters had not been recalled, but destroyed.

Clerics could destroy the undead. While just banishing them was hard enough, with a sufficient disparity in power levels, a cleric could not only turn undead, but outright destroy them. However, doing so to many undead at once was an arduous task.

In other words, the silver-haired girl was a follower who was as powerful as the king of death. That being the case, the people beside her might well be similarly puissant.

“Hahahaha—”

Zaryusu could not stop himself from laughing.

That was only to be expected. What else could he do but laugh? They were so

much more powerful—

“Brother!”

“—Ah, Ani-ja!”

Zaryusu looked down in response to the call from below and found that Shasuryu and Crusch were at the foot of the wall. The two of them climbed the dirt wall and together they looked at the magic caster.

Crusch forced herself into the space between Zaryusu and Zenberu, almost making Zenberu fall. However, that should still have been forgivable.

“Is that the enemy general? He feels so powerful that I’m getting chills down my spine just looking at him. While he looks like the Elder Lich you defeated ...there’s no comparing their strength, is there ...”

“...Ani-ja, are you done on your side?”

“Muu. It’s over for the most part. Crusch and I have exhausted our mana. And after hearing those messengers ...we felt that it would be better to settle this matter first. As for what those messengers said ...Zaryusu, would you be willing to come with me?”

Zaryusu looked silently at Shasuryu, and then nodded deeply. Shasuryu looked briefly uncomfortable, but resumed his usual expression right away, so quickly that nobody had realized he had ever looked that way.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry, Ani-ja.”

Shasuryu jumped off the dirt wall with that apology, landing with a splash as he broke through the narrow ice of the marsh.

“Then, I’ll be going.”

“Be careful.”

Zaryusu hugged Crusch tightly, and then he jumped off into the marsh after Zaryusu.

Zaryusu and Shasuryu trod the thin ice on the surface of the lake underfoot as they set forth together. After leaving the main gate, Zaryusu could sense the undead king's entourage eying them, as though their gazes were exerting an actual physical pressure. He could also sense the uneasy looks from behind him, and the most worried of them probably belonged to Crusch.

Zaryusu fought the urge to stay with her.

Just then, Shasuryu spoke.

“...I'm sorry.”

“...What are you sorry for, Ani-ja?”

“...If negotiations break down, they might kill us as an example to the others.”

Zaryusu had been prepared for this. That was why he had hugged Crusch tightly before going.

“...Given their numbers, I couldn't let you go alone, Ani-ja. If only one person went, they'd probably think we were snubbing them.”

Zaryusu was a famous individual among the Lizardmen and he was ideal for negotiations. However, he was a traveler, and his death would not harm the unity of the Lizardmen. From that point of view, there would be no regrets if he died.

Even if a hero died, the tribe could still keep fighting as long as there were other chiefs around. The shame would be the loss of the Frost Pain he carried; without it, they would be unable to withstand the cold of the lake.

The two of them walked forward in silence, every step taking them closer to death.

They reached the stairway of undead which led to the throne, and raised their

voices. If the throne had been set further back, perhaps they might have been allowed to climb up, but given that it was situated at the edge of the rock, it probably meant that they did not want to let the Lizardmen climb up.

Kings had to have a commanding vantage, after all.

There was no such rule among the Lizardmen, but many species had the practice of superior beings overlooking inferior ones. Granted, this would be very rude if they had come to conduct a dialogue.

In other words, this was a dialogue in name only. There was no intention to speak to them on even terms.

Instead, actually expecting equal treatment was a sign of their ignorance. Zaryusu and the others might have won the earlier battle, but after seeing the array of the enemy's top people upon the huge rock, even they would be forced to conclude that their prior victory held no meaning whatsoever. It was nothing more than child's play.

"We have arrived! I am Shasuryu Shasha, representative of the Lizardmen, and this is the greatest hero of the lizardmen!"

"I am Zaryusu Shasha!"

Even so, there was no flattery in their strident voices. They knew it was a foolish gesture, but it was the last inch of dignity they possessed. The earlier battle might have been a sideshow in the eyes of their opponents, but they could not abandon the pride of the warriors who had fallen on that battlefield.

There was no response. The king of death merely swiveled his head to regard them from atop his throne, eyeing them with no reservation whatsoever. There was no sign that he was going to do anything at all.

The person who answered them was the demoness who sprouted black wings from her waist.

"Our master feels you have not adopted a sufficiently respectful listening posture."

“...What?”

After hearing their doubt-filled voices, she called on the tailed being who looked like a human male.

“—Demiurge.”

“『Kneel』 .”

Zaryusu and Shasuryu suddenly fell to their knees, their heads sinking into the marsh. It seemed like a perfectly natural motion to onlookers.

The cold mud caked their bodies, and the shattered ice immediately froze over once more.

They could not stand. No matter how hard they tried, their bodies would not budge an inch. It was as though a pair of huge, invisible hands were pressing down on them and taking the freedom from their bodies.

“『Do not resist』 .”

In the instant that voice filtered into their ears again, Zaryusu and Shasuryu felt as though their bodies had suddenly grown an additional brain — an organ that received commands from others, and which their bodies obeyed.

After seeing their powerless bodies kneeling pathetically in the mud, the demoness seemed quite pleased as she reported to her master:

“Ainz-sama, they are now ready to listen to you.”

“Thank you — raise your heads.”

“『You are permitted to raise your heads』 .”

Zaryusu and Shasuryu turned their heads, the sole part of their bodies they could move, and looked up like they were desperate to see their king.

“I am ...Ainz Ooal Gown, master of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

Firstly, I would like to thank you for helping me complete an experiment.”

An experiment? You killed so many of us (the Lizardmen) and you dare call it an experiment!?

His resentment fanned the flames of anger in his heart, but he resisted it. After all, now was not the time to make a scene.

“Well then, let’s get to the point ...submit to my rule.”

The magic caster Ainz raised his hand, silencing Shasuryu, who was about to speak.

Shasuryu knew that trying to speak anyway would not be wise, so he could only keep his mouth shut.

“—However, you have just defeated us, and you are unwilling to be ruled by me. Therefore, we will attack again in four hours. If you can still win, I shall no longer act against you. In fact, I guarantee that I will pay you the appropriate reparations.”

“...May I ask a question?”

“That is fine. Ask away.”

“Will you be the one leading the attack ...Gown-dono?”

The silver-haired girl behind him frowned, while the demoness’s smile only grew wider. Perhaps they were displeased by the addition of that honorific. However, they did not do anything out of the ordinary, possibly because their master had not brought it up either.

Ainz ignored them, and continued speaking.

“Hardly. I will not be making a move. The attacker shall be one of my trusted aides ...and only him. His name is Cocytus.”

As Zaryusu heard this, a deep seated sense of despair filled him, like it was the

end of the world.

If Ainz attacked with an army, the Lizardmen might have a chance of victory. In other words, he would be hoping to prolong that distasteful war he called an experiment. In that case, they might have a scant, fleeting chance of victory.

However, he was not dispatching an army.

Only one person would be attacking.

An army which had been defeated had arrayed its troops in a grand display, yet they were only sending one person to attack. Unless this was a punishment, what Ainz's words meant was that he was absolutely confident in that person.

A person who had the trust of that unbelievably powerful king of death. Then, the only answer was that the person in question was also incredibly powerful, to the point where the Lizardmen had no hope of victory.

“We choose to surrender ...”

“It would be too boring to surrender without a fight. Do put up some token resistance. We would like to enjoy our victory.”

Ainz interrupted Shasuryu, preventing him from speaking further.

So you're going to make an example of us, you bastard!? Zaryusu cursed in his heart.

The reality was that the strong would use slaughter to wash away the stain of defeat.

In other words, they were going to carry out a live sacrifice. This would be a show of utter dominion, designed to wipe out any trace of rebellion within the Lizardmen.

“That is all I wish to say. Then, I shall look forward to the events of four hour's time.”

“A moment please — will this ice melt?”

Whether they won or lost, it would be very hard for the Lizardmen to survive if the lake was frozen over.

“...Ah, I almost forgot,” Ainz replied casually. “I merely wished to avoid staining my robes in the marsh. I will dispel the magic once I return to the shore.”

What!?

Zaryusu and Shasuryu were so shocked that they could not speak. In fact, they wondered if they had misheard him.

He froze the lake just because he didn't want to get dirty?

This was no longer merely unbelievable. They were going up against someone with such shocking power, who could easily bend the world to his whims, and for such a pointless little reason to boot.

So this was the kind of mighty being who was their opponent. Zaryusu and Shasuryu felt a terror they had experienced when they were alone by themselves as children.

“Then, see you later, Lizardmen — 「Gate」.”

Having said his piece, Ainz waved his hand, and a hemisphere of darkness appeared in front of the throne. He then stepped into the darkness.

“Farewell, Lizardmen.”

“Goodbye, Lizardman-sans.”

“Seeya, Lizardmen.”

The two women and the Dark Elf boy attending Ainz bade farewell to the lizardmen in a disinterested tone before stepping into the darkness as well.

“Er, erm, then, ah, bye bye, take care.”

“Kcab og ot evah uoy. (Goodbye, then.)”

The creepy monster vanished into the darkness after the Dark Elf girl.

“『Releasing control』 . Then, do enjoy yourselves, Lizardmen.”

Finally, the tailed man stepped into the darkness. There was a gentle sound, and the force binding the two of them vanished with him.

Zaryusu and Shasuryu remained kneeling in the mud where they had been abandoned, without the strength to stand up.

They did not even pay attention to the continuous pain which came from the freezing cold filtering up into them. That was because the shock they had just experienced far exceeded any physical pain they might have felt.

“Bastards ...”

That uncharacteristic curse from Shasuryu was filled with a complex blend of emotions.



They were greeted by the various chiefs, who had climbed up onto the dirt walls to avoid the cold. There were no other Lizardmen around.

They had probably done so because they were looking forward to discussing matters in private. Sensing this, Shasuryu decided not to mince words and told them the events of the dialogue that was not a dialogue.

There was no great reaction to Shasuryu’s somber narrative, only mild surprise. It was probably because they had expected a conclusion like that.

“I see ...but will the ice melt? If it doesn’t, we won’t even be able to fight.”

“It’ll be fine. They said they would melt the ice.”

“Did you bargain for it?”

Shasuryu did not answer the question from the Small Fang Tribe’s chief, merely smiling by way of reply. The chief knew what that meant, and shook his head in resignation.

“While you were heading out for those talks, we looked around ...and we found traces of the enemy in the lake. probably skeletal troops. In all likelihood, they were surrounding us and awaiting orders.

“Don’t think ...enemy ...will let us go.”

“They seem quite serious about this, which means ...”

“It’s probably as you’re guessing.”

The four chiefs who did not take part sighed deeply. They had probably reached the conclusion that what awaited them was a live sacrifice.

“Then, what should we do?”

“...Mobilize all the warrior Lizardmen, and ...the ones present ...”

“Ani-ja ...can you allow only five people to take part?”

Zaryusu glanced at the baffled Crusch from the corner of his eye, and pleaded with all the males present.

“If the enemy’s aim is to demonstrate his power, they will probably not exterminate the Lizardmen. That being the case, we ought to have someone who can lead the surviving Lizardmen. If all of us here perish, it will be a great blow to the future of the Lizardmen.”

“...He’s got a point, doesn’t he, Shasuryu?”

“Mm, Zaryusu ...you’re right.”

The two chiefs looked at Zaryusu and Crusch, and nodded.

“—That’s fine. I approve of it.”

After receiving the approval of Zenberu, the last chief, Shasuryu could no longer find any reason to deny his younger brother’s request.

“Then it’s decided. I also thought that someone would have to stay alive to lead the united tribes — Crusch ought to be good for that duty. Perhaps her albinism might affect her duties, but her priestly powers are irreplaceable.”

“Please wait, I want to fight too!” Crusch shouted as she protested her exclusion at this juncture.

“Besides, if one of us has to stay behind, wouldn’t it be better if it was Shasuryu? He’s the chief that everyone trusts most!”

“It’s for precisely that reason that we can’t spare him. The enemy wants to fill us with despair and make us tractable with a show of overwhelming force. However, do you think they would spare a Lizardman who could inspire hope like him? I don’t think so.. right?”

“Also ...Crusch is the least popular of the chiefs due to her albinism.”

Crusch was speechless. It was an unarguable fact that others thought poorly of her because of her condition. Crusch knew she could not persuade the others, and instead turned to Zaryusu.

“I want to go too. When you called me here, I had already prepared myself. Why are you still saying something like this?”

“...At that time, I thought we might all die, but now there’s a chance that one of us might live.”

“Are you kidding me!?”

The air trembled, as if in response to Crusch’s anger. The sound of slapping resounded from the dirt wall, as Crusch’s tail thrashed wildly in the grip of her emotions.

“—Zaryusu, go convince her. See you in four hours.”

Shasuryu strode off after leaving those words behind. Then, there was the sound of ice cracking and water splashing. The other three chiefs leapt off the dirt wall, following behind Shasuryu. Zenberu waved to the two who remained as he left. After watching them leave, Zaryusu turned to Crusch.

“Crusch, please understand.”

“What’s there to understand!? Besides, you might not lose! If I contributed with my priestly powers, we might win!”

How hollow those words sounded. Even Crusch, who had spoken them, could not bring herself to believe what she had just said.

“I don’t want the female I love to die. Please grant the last wish of this foolish male.”

Crusch embraced Zaryusu, a pained expression on her face.

“You’re too selfish!”

“I’m sorry...”

“You’re probably going to die ...”

“Mm ...”

Indeed, his chances of survival were very slim. No, he could conclude that they were nonexistent.

“In just a week you won my heart, and now you want me to watch you die?”

“Mm ...”

“Meeting you was my fortune, and also my misfortune.”

Crusch poured her strength into the arms embracing Zaryusu, as though she

never wanted to let go.

Zaryusu could not speak.

What should he say?

What could he say?

His mind revolved around the same question.

After some time, Crusch raised her head, her face filled with determination.

A wave of unease washed over Zaryusu. He had the feeling that Crusch would insist on following him. Then, Crusch issued a simple and forceful ultimatum to Zaryusu.

“—Get me pregnant.”

“—What?”

“Hurry!”

Chapter 5| The Freezing God

Overlord Volume 4

CHAPTER 5: THE FREEZING GOD

1

Ainz's headquarters was the same as the place Cocytus used yesterday — the fortress which Aura was building. If one listened closely, one could hear the faint sounds of work in progress coming from the distance.

Once they entered the room, the hitherto silent Victim suddenly spoke to Ainz:

“Emoh gniog m'I ,syug uoy wercs. (Then, I shall take my leave now, Ainz-sama.)”

“Thank you for your hard work. Please take care of Nazarick's First Floor for me before we get back.”

“Kek esiarp. (Understood.)”

“「Gate」.”

Victim passed through the door of darkness which Ainz had conjured. It led to the First Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

After watching that Guardian — whose death would activate a powerful movement restriction skill — leave through the 「Gate」, Ainz turned back to the rest of the room. At the same time, he sensed Aura behind him, her head bowed.

It would seem she had done her best to pretty the room up to welcome Ainz. It was quite moving to see the signs of her hard work that could be seen in every corner of the room. However, this room was far plainer than Nazarick. Perhaps Aura felt ashamed of that.

It's not like it's that bad...

Ainz had originally been a plebeian, so he did not really mind. While his room as the master of Nazarick was not a bad thing, sometimes excessive luxury made him feel uncomfortable. He could relax a little in this place, so it was pretty good.

I want an eight tatami room. Maybe I should secretly set one up somewhere. Ah, I need to reward my subordinates. I need to tell Aura that I'm pleased with her hard work.

People had to thank and rely on others for their hard work in order to succeed.

Ainz remembered when he had been running an errand at a certain company, and had overheard something from the director's room. He did not know who had said it, but it was a truly wonderful line. It made him think that it was how an ideal superior should be.

You need to express the gratitude in your heart. If you don't praise your people, they won't work ...something like that?

“Forgive me for keeping you here, Aura. I am not displeased in the slightest. I am very satisfied with your hard work, and it is the equivalent of Nazarick because you decorated it for me.”

“...Yes.”

Aura's eyes widened slightly. Ainz did not know if that counted as comforting her, but he was out of ideas. All he could do was try and bluff his way through by looking around.

The room still smelled of wood.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been better to return to Nazarick than stay in this nearly indefensible place. That was because without the application of defensive spells, this location was little more than a house of papier-mache. On the other hand, this was a very good spot to use oneself as bait to lure out a big fish.

It was quite far from the lake, so anyone who could pursue them here — if

there were any — would probably be an YGGDRASIL player or people of comparable power to them.

In other words, this place had been built to take the attack of a powerful opponent.

It was dangerous, of course. But Ainz felt that one could not seize the tiger's cubs without entering its den.

So they still haven't come. Or is it that ...this operation failed as well? Still ...what is that?

“...Aura, a question for you. What is that thing over there?”

Ainz's gaze fell on a white-colored chair within the room. It had a high back and looked very solid. Due to the exquisite craftsmanship that had gone into its construction, it easily qualified as a work of art. Well, as long as one did not dwell on its sole fault.

“It is a little plain, but it is a throne that was specially made for you.”

One of the subordinates behind him — Demiurge — confidently responded on Aura's behalf. Having anticipated that, Ainz continued asking:

“...And whose bones went into its construction?”

“They came from all sorts of animals. I selected choice bones from Griffins and Wyverns.”

“...I see... Is that so...”

This throne of bone was not furniture from Nazarick, so it was probably something Demiurge had made outside before bringing it here. Also, the throne's construction seemed to use a lot of human or demihuman bones. While it was not stained with blood or flesh and was completely made out of pure white bones, he still imagined that he could smell the gore.

Slightly revolted, Ainz hesitated over whether or not to take a seat on it. How-

ever, it would be hard to simply ignore a chair which had been specially made for him. That said, if he had a good reason, it would be a different matter—

Ainz thought about the matter, and then he suddenly brought his hands together.

“...Shalltear, I believe I said I would punish you earlier? I shall now mete it out. Yes ...I shall humiliate you.”

“Yes!”

Shalltear seemed a little startled at having been mentioned.

“Kneel there and lower your head. Get on your hands and knees.”

“Yes!”

Confused, Shalltear went to the place Ainz indicated — the center of the room — before getting into a supplicatory position.

After moving to Shalltear’s side, Ainz immediately sat upon her slender back.

“—Ai-Ainz-sama!”

Shalltear’s off-key cry of surprise come out as something like “Heinzsh-sama.” She seemed panicked, but she remained still, because Ainz was seated on her back.

“You are here to be my chair, understand?”

“Yes!”

Ainz turned from the abnormally happy Shalltear to look at Demiurge.

“—Forgive me, Demiurge. That’s how it is.”

“I see! How remarkable! To think you would sit upon a Guardian! Indeed, that is a chair which nobody can make — in other words, a proper seat for a

Supreme Being. Ainz-sama, you have surpassed my expectations once more, as is befitting of yourself!”

“Is, is that so ...”

Demiurge was beaming as he radiated his loyalty to his master. Ainz had no idea why he was smiling so brightly and turned away uneasily. Then, a beautiful woman who was all smiles addressed Ainz.

“Forgive me, Ainz-sama, may I be excused for a moment? I will be back soon.”

“What’s the matter, Albedo? Never mind, it’s all right. Go, then.”

After thanking Ainz, Albedo left the room. After that, there was a feminine voice going “DORYAAAAA—!” from outside the room, followed by a tremendous impact against the wall, which made the house shake violently.

About a minute later, Albedo returned to the silent room, with her usual gentle smile on her face.

“I’m back, Ainz-sama. Oh yes, Aura, I accidentally bumped into the wall on my way out, and there seems to be some damage. Could you fix it later? Sorry about that.”

“Ah, er, all right ...okay~ I’ll go fix it.”

Ainz sighed, swallowing a lot of the things he wanted to say. He recalled his gaze that had nearly drifted away and focused it on the staff which radiated an evil aura.

Obviously, he would not bring the true Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown to such a dangerous place. This was an experimental specimen that had been built in imitation of the Guild Weapon. After fitting it with magic items used for special effects testing in the Treasury, it looked almost like the real thing, and it made for a good decoy.

The guild would disband if the Guild Weapon was destroyed. Therefore, he could not casually carry it with him. It was currently in the care of the Guardian

of the Sakura Sanctuary on the Eighth Floor.

I've considered countermeasures against the Ring being stolen as well, but I just can't find a place where I can conduct the experiment ...

As Ainz thought about this, Shalltear's body suddenly twitched. That movement seemed like an adjustment so Ainz could sit more comfortably. A bizarre sense of unease drove Ainz to look at the back of Shalltear's head.

She was panting.

He was probably too heavy for her. Shalltear's back that he sat upon was about as slender as that of a fourteen year old girl's and it was quite slender. To think an adult would be sitting on such a slender back. Ainz was deeply convinced that he was a shamelessly cruel pervert, and had gone too far.

Shalltear was an NPC made by one of his friends from the past, Peroroncino. In all likelihood, he had not expected Shalltear would have ended up being tormented like this. Since this was essentially an action which cast shame upon his former comrades, Ainz believed that this was a form of punishment for himself as well. However, he now realized that he was foolish for having thought so.

To think I'm actually torturing Shalltear like this ...I'm beyond saving.

"Shalltear, is it uncomfortable?"

If it is, then I'll stop it — just as Ainz was about to say that, Shalltear looked back, staring at Ainz. Her face was flushed, and her eyes burned brightly.

"Not at all! In fact, I feel this is practically a reward!"

Every word she spoke carried the heat brewing within her body, and her glazed eyes reflected Ainz's face. Her bright red tongue licked at her lips, leaving a seductive sheen. The way her body writhed ever so slightly was reminiscent of a snake.

There was no mistaking this for anything other than carnal desire.

“...Uwah ...”

It made him want to run away.

Ainz almost stood up.

I can't, how could I do that?

This was a punishment for Shalltear, and Shalltear's mistake had been because of Ainz's miscalculation. Therefore, resisting the urge to stand up was also a way of punishing himself.

Ainz crushed the rising tide of complex emotions within him.

He tried his best to bear with the squirming, panting chair beneath him. Even so, he could not help but wonder *How perverted did Peroroncino make her, anyway?*

“...Then, let's talk business. Are the Lizardmen as frightened as expected?”

“Indeed, Ainz-sama.”

“That's right, just look at the Lizardmen's faces.”

Ainz laughed as he heard the Guardians' responses. In truth, he could hardly tell how the Lizardmen's expressions had changed. While Lizardmen looked more like humans than reptiles, their facial expressions were completely different from those of humans.

“Really now. Then, we can consider the first part of the impression which Cocytus is going to make a success.”

Ainz sighed in relief.

He had expected at least that much from super tier spells, which could only be used four times a day. Ainz had gone out of his way to use one of them — 「The Creation」 — and if that failed to impress, then all he could say was that it was sad.

“Then, Demiurge, when will you finish tallying the information on how far the lake was frozen?”

“We are still gathering the relevant data, but the radius of freezing was larger than expected, which presents some difficulties. If possible, I hope we might be given a bit more time.”

Ainz reached out to stop Demiurge from kneeling, and then cupped his jaw with a skeletal hand, before settling into contemplation. It would seem the spell’s effective radius had been larger than he imagined, but as a magical experiment, it was quite a success.

「The Creation」 was a super tier spell that could change terrain special effects. In YGGDRASIL, one would use it to ward off the heat in hot regions or to suppress the freezing chill of icy areas.

In truth, he could have awed them into submission without using a super tier spell.

However, he had used it anyway because he wanted to conduct an experiment on how large a spell’s radius could be. In YGGDRASIL, 「The Creation」 could affect quite a large area, and when they tested it in Nazarick, it managed to cover the whole of the Eighth Floor. However, they did not know how it would fare outdoors.

In YGGDRASIL, it could cover one area, but he wanted to know how large that zone was in this world. It would be too much if he cast it on a plain and it covered the entire plain.

Similarly, it would be too much if it covered the entire lake. It would seem he had to be very careful when using super tier magic.

“Then, Aura, what about our security net?”

“Yes! We’ve dispatched the undead we borrowed from you to patrol within a two kilometer radius, but we haven’t picked up any exceptional intrusions. Also, I’ve sent out some of my magical beasts who are adept at reconnaissance to patrol a four kilometer radius around us, but there haven’t been reports of

anything suspicious so far.”

“Is that so ...Our foe might make their approach by some perfectly undetectable means. Have you prepared against that yet?”

“It’ll be fine. Shalltear was helping me out, so we’ve also deployed undead which are good at surveillance.”

“Very good.”

Aura was all smiles after Ainz’s praise. Her previous depression was nowhere to be seen.

“Still, has the person who used the World Class Item on Shalltear still not made a move even after we’ve exposed ourselves like this?”

All eyes were on Ainz as he asked that question again, but he was not directing it at anyone in particular.

“Why isn’t the opposition spying on this place and Nazarick?”

“Could it be that the enemy is keeping an eye on us with a World Class Item which renders him immune to regular surveillance?”

Ainz tilted his head in confusion after Demiurge answered with his question.

“...I used Momon because I thought they might use such means ...if the enemy uses World Class Items to spy on us, they won’t be able to observe Momon, since he also possesses a World Class Item. Therefore, I’ve been operating on the assumption that they’ll be using physical or direct observation ...well, it might be magical too, but in short, I’ve been assuming that they’ll use more conventional methods to keep an eye on us ...”

Ainz sensed that the Guardians around him seemed puzzled, and he realised that his explanation was not sufficiently clear.

“Well ...how shall I put this ...in the past, we once owned a mine that produced a rare metal. The price went through the roof because we monopolized it, so

a group of people schemed to steal it from us. Back then, our opposition used 「o v」. *That was one of the World Class Items known as The Twenty.*”

(TL Note: Ouroboros)

Ainz narrowed his eyes.

He had been furious when the mine had been stolen away, but thinking back on it now, it was a good memory. It held true even as he recalled how they had been hunted and lost quite a few rare pieces of gear.

“What!? Someone actually dared seize territory which had been claimed by the Supreme Beings? Unforgivable! Please order us to retake it at once!”

Ainz hurriedly shifted his gaze as he heard Albedo vent her anger.

He saw all the Guardians seething with hostility and murderous intent. Even the ever-serene Demiurge had a savage expression on his face. That was not all; Ainz could glimpse the determination to take it back on Mare’s shy and retiring face.

Incidentally, Ainz could not see Shalltear’s expression on account of her being a chair, but he could feel her body tense up, sending her iron will travelling up through his rump.

“Calm down! That’s in the past.”

Ainz raised a hand to order the Guardians to cool their heads. While it looked as though they had somewhat regained their composure, they still seemed unstable, as though magma were flowing beneath the surface. Ainz decided to pick up the previous topic to change the subject.

“Our enemy used 「o v」 and made it impossible for us to enter the world where the mine was. Th

They had fought recklessly to retake the mine and a great deal of the guild members had died at least once, but Ainz resisted the urge to speak of that.

“Then, this is the point I wanted to make. While I said the world was sealed,

people with World Class items could still enter that world during that time. Therefore, it should be impossible for them to spot us even if they use World Class Items for surveillance.

As Ainz listened to the gasps of enlightenment from his subordinates, he wondered if that was really the case.

It was very likely, but there was no proof that they could not be found.

When 「Five Element Progression」— one of the Twenty, just like 「οὐροβόρος」— had been used, the game company sent a message to all World Class Item holders. In addition to an apology, they also included an item as compensation. The apology went: “Dear holders of World Class Items, you should not have been affected by changes in the world, but we have learned that keeping your data unaffected will be a very difficult task for the system. Therefore, we are making a special exception and changing your data as well.”

Therefore, he could not conclude that it was a perfect defense. Still, that incident had been a special case.

In particular, one of the World Class Items defending Nazarick had the effect of protecting against divination spells. If it could not block surveillance from World Class Items, then it would be meaningless.

“Therefore, I feel the enemy will try to approach Momon ...but the ones who have come to him are all mothers clutching their newborn children or adventurers.”

The ones who came forward begged him to touch their children’s heads in the hope that they would grow up strong, or they asked to shake hands with him in the hopes of becoming stronger themselves. None of them had asked to speak with him in private.

Therefore, Ainz had created many openings like this on purpose, waiting for the enemy to make a move.

Not giving Cocytus a World Class Item was part of that plan. Ainz intended to use him as bait to draw out the opposition. Their foe was fearsome precisely

because he did not know their identity. That being the case, learning about their opponent would probably help them find a way to deal with them.

“May I share my humble opinion on this matter?”

“What is it, Albedo?”

“Ainz-sama, as you have said just now, your aim is to divine the enemy’s identity and learn more about them. In that case, is it not possible that the enemy is unwilling to get close because they have not been exposed yet?”

...Ah.

“It ...it’s fine, Albedo. I have considered that point as well.”

As if. Ainz had already assumed that his enemy was like himself, and would want to learn about their opposition.

...What a gaffe. What if I’ve been going about it all wrong from the start?

“Forgive me. Also ...”

Albedo, could you please stop — Ainz could not bring himself to beg that of her. He felt like he had finished a multiple choice exam, and then, when he went through his work one more time, he found that all his answers were incorrectly shifted one space down.

“There’s the matter of announcing that Shalltear was defeated by a magic item ...”

“Yes. I reported as much to the Guild. That was in order to avoid people fearing Momon’s strength. Spell-sealing crystals are extremely rare items, so breaking one for an experiment should be difficult. Therefore, saying that the spell-sealing crystal went out of control — that the monster was defeated through the use of a magic item — is more convincing and it means fewer people will be on guard against Momon.”

“Indeed, it is as you say. It would work well against people who think spell-

sealing crystals are rare items.”

Albedo’s subtle qualification of her statement made Ainz feel very uneasy.

“...However, what if our enemy had multiple such crystals like yourself, Ainz-sama?”

“...Hm? Ah, so that’s what you mean.”

Ainz put on a show of sudden realization, but he had no idea what she meant.

So what if the opposition had many spell-sealing crystals? The fact was that they were very valuable items in this world. Was Albedo worried that someone would break a crystal as an experiment?

Still, it did not feel like that.

A sense of foreboding filled Ainz’s heart. He wanted Albedo to explain herself, but he resented having the pretense of knowledge he had put on just now.

Come to think of it, is it really all right if I act as a ruler and decide the direction of Nazarick? What if I end up steering us into an iceberg?

He wanted to run away from all of this and be done with it.

Unable to bear the strain of leadership — which was only amplified when he messed up — he wept within his soul.

However, he could not just run off. Since he had called himself Ainz Ooal Gown, he could not abandon the things — the NPCs and the treasures of Nazarick — that his friends had made. The most important thing was that he did not want to become a deadbeat father.

I sometimes worry if you’ll betray, abandon, or give up on me. However, that just means I have to be the Ainz Ooal Gown you expect and believe in.

Therefore, Ainz put on a confident front, the pose of a ruler with utmost confidence in himself, which he had practiced in the mirror.

“It’s fine. However, I understand your unease.”

Then, Ainz looked around.

“Albedo ...share your worries with the other Guardians.”

“Ah, yes! If the opposition possesses multiple crystals like you do, Ainz-sama ...anyone who knows their abilities will probably see through that news immediately. In other words, they will believe that Shalltear was not defeated by the crystal. Although the enemy might not know if Shalltear fought with all her strength, anyone with a World Class Item would probably think that Shalltear and Momon were of equivalent strength. Therefore, they would probably consider Momon — a mysterious warrior who suddenly appeared in E-Rantel — a threat, no? In addition, the opposition might also suspect something about the link between Shalltear and Momon ...”

“...Albedo, and the Guardians. What do you think the enemy will do next?”

“Permit me to answer, then. I feel that if our enemy intends to oppose you, Ainz-sama, they will respond by spreading rumors of Momon and the Vampire being in league with each other — even if there is no basis to them — and lash out at him. Our opposition will surely not want Momon to become more and more famous.”

Uwah, Ainz groaned internally.

His original aim of going to E-Rantel was to gather information, but his main objective was to make the character Momon famous — that, and he also wanted to get away from all this. The original plan was to turn Momon into a great hero and then reveal his true identity, whereupon the fame and glory he had accumulated would be transferred to Ainz Ooal Gown, and resound throughout the world.

In addition, it would also serve to show that a former PK guild had changed its image, fighting injustice through the name of Momon. But now, those plans were little more than soap bubbles vanishing in the wind.

“Oh? Demiurge, I’ve got a question. Wouldn’t it be more damaging to spread

the rumors of working with that Vampire *after* he became famous?”

“Aura, doing so at that time would be a poor move. Once Ainz-sama is sufficiently famous, people would discount those rumors as malicious gossip. That reputation must be eliminated before it grows and becomes widespread.”

“A very astute observation, Demiurge.”

Ainz nodded magnanimously in response to Demiurge’s bow, as though he had been thinking the same thing as well.

“Then, I have another question. If that is the case, why has the enemy not spread these rumors yet?”

Demiurge raised a finger after hearing Ainz’s question.

“Firstly, the enemy has not completed their investigation into Momon-sama. If it turned out that Momon-sama defeated Shalltear in open combat, they would wish to avoid incurring his ire, or perhaps they would like to recruit him to their side. Secondly—”

He raised another finger.

“What if the opposition only ran into Shalltear by chance? Or what if they encountered her on the way to another objective, and they were a completely unrelated third party?”

“That’s not possible now, is it, Demiurge. How unlikely would that be ...”

Ainz said that, but in his heart, he realized that it was not impossible.

He was dead set on the idea that this was an attack targeted at Shalltear — or the personnel of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. However, Shalltear had been attacked shortly after they had all been brought to this new world. Under those circumstances, it would require preternatural precision to target and attack Shalltear.

Was he being overly paranoid of some hidden mastermind?

Ainz narrowed his eyes — the points of red light in his eye sockets.

Ultimately, the lack of information remained a problem. He did not have enough manpower and he needed more strength.

In any case, the biggest problem right now is our lack of an intelligence-gathering network.

Currently, he had ordered Sebas to handle this sort of work. However, there was a limit to how much intelligence that limited numbers of intelligence personnel could gather. At first, he had only wanted to learn the basic facts of this world, but they were now at a stage where such information was no longer sufficient.

They could not learn what they wanted to know by going through adventurers and traders alone. It was similar to how an average citizen and a high ranking government official had access to information of differing importance.

In addition, he had no idea what sort of person could analyze the data they had gathered and determine whether or not any particular piece of information was important.

“Good grief. In any case, our main challenge now is a lack of information. Our hands are tied because we have to be wary of an unseen foe ...”

Demiurge flashed Ainz a conspiratorial smile as he heard Ainz mumble.

“In that case, why not seek a nation to support you?”

After a brief silence, Albedo went “Oh” to indicate that she understood. Soon, Ainz made the same noise.

“I see, Demiurge. So that was what you meant.”

However, the other three Guardians still looked quite confused. After that, Aura came out and asked:

“Ainz-sama, what’s this all about?”

As Aura asked that question, Ainz gave thanks that he did not have any facial expressions.

“Honestly ...Mare, Shalltear, do you not understand what Demiurge was trying to say?”

The two of them shook their heads in unison.

“I see. Then it can’t be helped. Tell them, Demiurge.”

“Yes, I understand. Now then, everyone. Ainz-sama is worried about the existence of a hidden, powerful enemy. I feel that if we encounter said enemy and they are hostile to us, we need to have some kind of leverage that we can use during negotiations.”

Sensei, I don’t get it — that look appeared on the faces of three students and one adult. Demiurge-sensei seemed to realise that his explanation was too complicated and decided to continue explaining after dumbing himself down to match the students.

“What would you do if Ainz-sama was dominated by some World Class Item?”

“I’d kill the bastard who did it.”

“...No, that’s not what I mean, Aura. What I’m trying to say is, don’t you think the very fact that being mind controlled would count as an alibi? The fact is that there are people out there who really can dominate their opposition with World Class Items, so we can convincingly say that Ainz-sama was controlled by a World Class Item.”

Assistant Teacher Albedo supplemented Head Teacher Demiurge’s lecture:

“In other words, by pretending to support another country, we have an excuse for any action which Nazarick takes. By saying that we were ordered to do so by that country and we had no choice but to obey, we could use that to deflect blame from ourselves, assuming there was an enemy on our level. Also, if the other party does not want an open conflict, they will have no choice but to bear with it.”

“I see ...so even if someone wasn’t happy with what we did, as long as we had a good reason, we could drag a third party into becoming an ally ...so that’s what it is, as expected of Ainz-sama ...”

Ainz reached out and stroked the head of Shalltear the chair. It was like a mob boss stroking a Siamese cat

“Demiurge came up with that scheme, not me, so your thanks should go to him.”

“No, it’s not true. It would seem you already came to the same answer, Ainz-sama.”

“Ah, er ...um. It feels like I’m taking credit for your hard work. Sorry about that. Also ...I believe it will be easier to obtain information if we support another country.”

A country would probably have the intelligence-gathering network that they were struggling to build. That being the case, infiltrating them with Nazarick’s people ought to be much better for gathering usable information.

Demiurge smiled at the thought that his suggestion had been useful on something which had bothered Ainz, and at Ainz’s words, which seemed to validate his and Albedo’s opinions.

“Indeed.”

Ainz was aware of the subtext: “*You picked up on it as well, Ainz-sama.*”

“Ah, indeed. As expected of Ainz-sama — to think you had such clear insights ...in that case, even inferior lifeforms like human beings could prove surprisingly useful.”

After Albedo spoke up, the other Guardians — including Shalltear the chair — looked at Ainz with sparkly eyes filled with pure loyalty.

Ainz felt very uncomfortable, but he consoled himself with the fact that the two of them had given him their approval.

“Then ...let’s find a country to infiltrate. Which country will it be?”

“If we pick from the neighboring countries, we would have the Kingdom, the Empire, and the Theocracy.”

“How, how about a country that was further away? Like say, the Council Alliance or the Holy Kingdom ...”

“I would rather not select a distant country, and I would prefer not to make contact with the Theocracy before we learn enough about them. That leaves the Kingdom and the Empire ...judging by Sebas’s report, the Kingdom is not particularly interesting. However ...this matter requires further study. Anyway—”

Ainz interrupted the conversation by extending his hand to the mirror.

“We’ve given the Lizardmen some time. Let’s see if they’ve done anything unexpected.”

A bird’s eye view of the Lizardmen’s village appeared on the Mirror of Remote Viewing.

Ainz reached out to the mirror and with a subtle shift of his hand, he changed the scenery it showed.

Naturally, he began by zooming in the image.

In this way, they could see every detail of the Lizardmen’s preparations for battle.

“Such futile effort,” Demiurge muttered gently to the Lizardmen.

Let’s see, where are they? It’s hard to tell one Lizardman from another.

Ainz frowned as he searched for the six Lizardmen he had seen earlier.

“Oh — there’s the armor. Is this the rock-throwing fellow? And then, the one with the greatsword is here. The differences are really fine. Maybe color, gear,

or obvious physical variations would be good ways to tell them apart ...ah, there's a distinctive one."

After that, Ainz moved the mirror's image around in confusion.

"...I don't see that white Lizardman and the one with a magic weapon."

"Hm ...is his name Zaryusu?"

"Ah, that's right, that's his name."

After Aura reminded him, Ainz remembered the name of the Lizardman who had stepped forward to negotiate with him.

"Could he be in his house?"

"Perhaps."

The Mirror of Remote Viewing could not peer into structures. However, that was only under normal circumstances.

"Demiurge, fetch me the Infinite Haversack."

"Understood."

With a bow, Demiurge picked up the Infinite Backpack which lay on the table which had been shifted to the corner of the room before courteously presenting it to Ainz. Ainz took a scroll out of it.

After that, he cast the spell inscribed within it.

The spell produced an invisible and incorporeal sensor. It could not penetrate magical barriers, but it could pass through conventional walls regardless of their thickness. If it could not pass through said walls, that would imply there was a powerful foe present, and they had to be wary.

He linked the sensor to the Mirror of Remote Viewing, so the Guardians could see what Ainz could see. Then he moved the eye-like, floating sensor.

“Let’s see what’s inside this house.”

Ainz selected one of the nearest houses — a pretty run-down affair — and sent the sensor inside. Despite the darkness of the interior, it appeared as bright as day through the eyes of the sensor.

The white Lizardman was pressed against the floor of the house. Her tail was tucked up and there was a black Lizardman mounted on her.

Ainz was utterly confused.

For a moment, he had no idea what was going on. In the next moment, he had no idea why they would be doing something like that at a time like this.

After that, Ainz silently steered the sensor outside.

“ ... ”

Ainz grabbed his head in a moment of infinite weakness. The Guardians around him had no idea what to say, and looked at the ground with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“—What a displeasing lot. Cocytus will be attacking any moment now and they’re still indulging themselves!”

“Exactly!”

“Er, ah, a-about that ...”

“Demiurge’s right! We need to make those two suffer!”

“I’m so jealous ...”

Ainz waved his hand to silence the Guardians.

“...Forget it, they’ll all be dead soon. I once saw a movie which said that situations like these stimulate the desire to propagate the species.”

Ainz nodded, certain of his opinion.

“Indeed, it is so!”

“Well, if that’s all, we should probably let them off the hook.”

“Exactly!”

“Er, ah, a-about that ...”

“I agree with Demiurge-sama ...”

“...Quiet, all of you.”

After the Guardians had fallen silent, Ainz sighed.

“...Well, there goes my motivation. Never mind, there’s probably nobody to worry about in the Lizardman village. Still, we can’t be careless, because someone might be heading for us right now. Aura ...”

Ainz froze, and looked at the twins.

Crap! What should I do now!? Those two haven’t been given sex education yet ...no, it’s too early for that!

Ainz suddenly understood what it was like for a father to see a lewd scene on the television during a family gathering.

Dammit, how would a father or mother answer if they were asked where babies came from!? This is bad! I can’t believe I let Bukubukuchagama’s children see that — though, it shouldn’t be too bad. Let’s not consider Albedo, and Demiurge ...he’d probably teach them from a clinical perspective. Shalltear ...not too bad either. Let’s handle this another day.

After pushing the question to the back of his mind, Ainz coughed and asked:

“If the security net picks up anything, all the Guardians — myself included — will move out together.”

If there were any other players around, he would not adhere to his agreement of sparing the Lizardmen. If they would not become allies, then they would have to be terminated with extreme prejudice to avoid any information leaks. When they happened, they would destroy the village, even if they had to draw on all the forces of the Eighth Floor to do so.

Ainz thrust aside the guilt he felt at violating his promise to Cocytus. A little white lie would be preferable if it was for a good reason.

“...Now then, the show’s about to begin ...let’s enjoy watching Cocytus in action.”

2

The four hours passed in a flash.

The frozen marsh had long since melted, and the warriors were gathered there — at the main gate of the village. After the intense battle several days ago, there were precious few of them who had survived to fight in this battle.

There were three hundred and sixteen of them in total.

Nobody but the warriors would participate in this battle, because Shasuryu had said, “The enemy is few in number, so too many people on our part will just get in the way.”

That seemed like a logical enough explanation, but that was not all.

Zaryusu stood some distance ahead of the Lizardmen and looked on the warriors.

Everyone was painted with markings which showed that the ancestors had descended upon them. Their iron will was readily apparent on their faces, and they looked confident of victory.

The Lizardmen around them were cheering their warriors on. Still, he could see quite a few worried-looking people in the crowd.

Zaryusu strove to keep a nonchalant expression in order to keep his uneasiness from showing on his face. He did not want the other Lizardmen to know that this battle was essentially a live sacrifice to the king of death.

Indeed, this was a battle that was intended to demonstrate the undead king's power to the Lizardmen. Its purpose was to thoroughly eradicate the very possibility of rebellion among the Lizardmen. They had no chance of surviving, which meant that the subtext behind Shasuryu's words was "so that we can reduce casualties to the minimum."

Zaryusu looked away from the Lizardmen, and he turned his keen gaze on the enemy formation.

The skeletal army remained where it was. There was no sign of the monster called Cocytus among them. Zaryusu doubted that it was a skeleton. As a trusted subordinate of that king of death, how could he be a mook like that? He must be some being whose strength was apparent at a glance.

A loud splashing came from behind the worried Zaryusu—

"—Hey, Zaryusu."

—And Zenberu greeted him as casually as always. He was the same person even when he was headed for certain death.

"Morale's at its peak."

"Well, it would be nice if it could stay that way when we faced that Cocytus fellow ..."

"Yup. Oh, is it time?"

Shasuryu was at the main gate, and all the Lizardmen's eyes were on the two Swamp Elementals by his side.

Crusch was not here because she had spent all her mana on summoning the elementals. The drain of that, on top of casting a plethora of long-duration defensive spells on Zaryusu, had left her almost immobile. In fact, when they had left their house, Crusch had already told him that she would be passing out from using too much mana, and they would never see each other again.

Alone now, Zaryusu looked towards the place where Crusch was. The way she had looked when they had parted made Zaryusu feel like he had been stabbed in the heart.

“Warriors, let’s go!”

With a rousing cry, Shasuryu stoked the flames of the Lizardmen’s fighting spirit, and the air was filled with eager tension.

He had to think like a warrior again. Zaryusu reined in his rampaging thoughts.

The Lizardmen advanced slowly, led by Shasuryu and the two Swamp Elementals.

They were leaving the village so it would not be caught up in the fighting.

Zaryusu and Zenberu followed behind them.

Just then, Zaryusu suddenly looked back to the village. There were the broken-down dirt walls, the worried Lizardmen watching them go, and—

Zaryusu sighed quietly, and cast all his worries away as he strode forward. He did not speak the name of the female which was on his lips.



The Lizardmen marched into the marsh, and formed up at the region between the skeletal army and the village.

That said, they had no formation to speak of. They simply sprawled themselves out to wait for the fight. At their head were the various tribal chiefs and

the two Swamp Elementals.

The skeletal army had probably been waiting for their arrival. They banged on their shields and stomped.

The many small delays between footfalls would normally make an army's march sound like a shower of bird droppings. However, the undead army marched with perfect coordination, producing a harmonious sound. If the circumstances were any different, it would be worthy of applause.

Just as the Lizardmen were drawn in by the sound of their movements, several trees fell — behind the skeletal army.

There was only one reason why those gigantic trees would fall — because someone had cut them down.

This sparked a commotion among the Lizardmen.

Since nobody was visible yet, it was reasonable to assume that several people had worked together to fell those trees. However, if that were the case, then the trees were falling with far too much uniformity. Granted, after seeing the unity of the skeletal army, an observer might think that they could chop down trees with such precision, but none of the Lizardmen felt that way.

A bizarre thought ran through their minds — that all this had been done by one person.

That was because there was no sound of blades striking wood before the trees fell. In other words, it might be possible (however surprising it was) that some incredibly strong person had chopped the trees down with one swing.

How strong an arm and how mighty a weapon would be needed to cut a massive tree in half with a single stroke?

The earthshaking tremors of the falling trees blended with the sound of the skeletons pounding on their shields, and both crept closer to the Lizardmen.

Anxiety began to brew. That was only to be expected — who could remain

calm under such circumstances? Even Zenberu — who was prepared to die — was shaken, though he tried to hide it.

Soon, the creature which had cleaved a path through the forest finally appeared. At the same time, the pounding on the shields suddenly stopped.

In the preternatural silence, the first thing they saw was a mass of glossy blue light. How much more brightly would it have shone had the sky not been overcast?

It looked like a two-legged insect, its massive body standing around two hundred fifty centimeters high. It resembled an ant or a mantis, and it looked like some hybrid made by an utterly depraved fiend.

Its hard exoskeleton was wreathed in freezing cold, and it glittered like diamond dust.

It had a savage tail that was as long as its body and studded with countless spikes. Its mighty jaws looked like they could easily bite a man's hands clean off.

It had four arms tipped in razor-sharp claws, each of which was sheathed in a shiny gauntlet. It wore a disc-like amulet on a golden necklace and platinum rings around its ankles.

This was how the being of matchless might, follower of the king of death, made its entrance.



Was he Cocytus?

Zaryusu's heart pounded. Unconsciously, his breathing had grown faster.

None of the Lizardmen spoke. Everyone's attention was drawn to the monster that had shown itself, and they were so frightened that they could not tear their eyes away.

They had begun backing away slowly without realizing it. Be they Lizardman warriors who had come in high spirits, or Zaryusu and the others who had come here prepared to die, all of them were shocked to the core by the appearance of this unimaginably powerful entity.

I know the king of death didn't use his full strength on us, but even so, I didn't expect the warrior he sent to fight in earnest to be so frightening.

Even with a spell that removed his fear, the impulse to run away still surged within Zaryusu's heart. It was a miracle that the warriors, who were not protected by such magic, were not already trampling each other as they fled.

Cocytus slowly drew closer.

He strode proudly into the marsh, past the skeletal army—

—And then Cocytus stopped, roughly thirty meters away from the Lizardmen. After that, his insectoid face swiveled atop his slender neck, as though looking for someone.

Zaryusu had the feeling that Cocytus's eyes were on him.

“—All right. Since. Ainz-sama. Is. Watching. I Shall. Ensure. You. Get. A. Chance. To. Shine. However. Before. That. 「Ice Pillar」.”

As the spell activated, two pillars of ice erupted from the water between the Lizardmen and Cocytus, about twenty meters apart.

“This. Might. Be. Rude. To. Warriors. Who. Are. Ready. To. Give. Their. Lives. But. I. Must. Inform. You. That. My. Side. Of. These. Pillars. Will. Be. Your. Grave. Any. Who. Cross. It. Shall. Die.”

Cocytus folded his arms, as though to say, *The choice is yours.*

“Oi oi oi, he doesn't look like it but he's a pretty decent chap, isn't he?”

Zaryusu nodded deeply at Zenberu's words.

Then, he stepped forward. Zenberu and the other two chiefs followed him.

Shasuryu looked back, at the warriors who were about to follow him.

“You should stay here ...no, return to the village. Otherwise ...you’ll die with us.”

“What!? We want to fight too! It’s scary, but ...even if it’s scary, we still want to fight!”

“Retreat is not cowardice. Living is true courage.”

“Then—”

“There’s some of us who can’t fall back either. Besides, as chiefs, we can’t accept other people ruling us without a fight, no?”

“We still want to fight, Chief.”

“Hold on a second! Get out of here, young ones! This is a job for us old folks!”

The Lizardmen who shoved their way forward were all advanced in years, but none of them was old enough to be considered elderly. There were fifty seven of them, and none of the others could say anything after seeing their faces.

Perhaps if they looked like they were resolved to die or had given up on themselves, they would have asked to come along. However, their expressions were a plea for the younger Lizardmen to live on and celebrate the miracle of life.

With nothing left to say, the rest of the warriors turned back.

Shasuryu turned to face Cocytus once more.

“...Sorry for the wait, Cocytus.”

Cocytus extended a hand to the Lizardmen and curled it towards him. “*Bring it,*” the gesture seemed to say. In response to this taunt, Shasuryu shouted:



“CHARGE—!”

“Ohhhhh!”

Fully resolved to die, the Lizardmen gave voice to a cry from the depths of their souls, a roar which seemed to split the very sky, and rushed at Cocytus.

Cocytus calmly regarded the warriors charging him.

“...This. Might. Be. A. Bit. Disrespectful. To. Warriors. Like. You. But. I. Shall. Cull. Your. Numbers.”

Cocytus was sure that he would not be defeated even if all of the warriors reached him, but still, he had to weed his opponents out.

Personally speaking, Cocytus would have liked to allow his foes to reach a range where they could fight. However, he had received far more largesse than he deserved, and allowing this ragtag band of misfits to do battle with a Guardian of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick would be disrespectful to Ainz-sama.

Thus, he unleashed his aura.

It was a skill derived from the Knight of Niflheim class — 「Frost Aura」. This special ability damaged and slowed the foe through the use of extreme cold temperatures. At full power, it could even engulf the Lizardmen spectating from the sides.

So he had to suppress its power.

He had to narrow its radius and reduce its damage.

“This ought to do it ...”

A wave of freezing cold expanded from Cocytus, instantly filling a radius of twenty five meters across.

The temperature plummeted upon exposure to the intense cold, and the very

air seemed to groan.

“...Hm. That. Ought. To. Do.”

He drew back his aura.

The momentary exposure meant that the savage, blizzard like snap-frost had vanished like it had never been. However, it was no illusion or trick of the senses. The best proof of that was the fifty seven Lizardman corpses that covered the marsh.

Only five more still remained. However, they were the five strongest Lizardmen. Unfazed by Cocytus's might or the deaths of their comrades, they moved out as one.

A stone flew through the air. The armored Lizardman led the charge, followed by two more behind it. In addition, the two Swamp Elementals had cracks all over them after the cold attack, and lagged behind the Lizardmen because they were slower. The one at the rear incanted spell after spell.



The first strike was a stone, which was aimed at Cocytus's throat. However, it was completely meaningless, because—

“—We. Guardians. Are. Equipped. With. Items. That. Resist. Ranged. Attacks.”

—An invisible barrier which appeared to cover his body deflected the stone.

It was followed by a charging Lizardman. The armor he wore was an ancestral heirloom, one of the Four Treasures — the White Dragon Bone. It was strong enough to deflect Frost Pain, itself one of the Four Treasures, and it was hailed as the hardest armor among the Lizardmen.

Facing it was a sword which Cocytus drew out of nothing, as though it had been sheathed in the air.

The sword Cocytus unsheathed was an odachi — its blade over one hundred eighty centimeters long, named God-Slaying Slash Emperor. It was the sharpest of the twenty one weapons which Cocytus possessed.

Then, he swung it at the incoming Lizardman.

The fluid cut whooshed quietly through the air. If not for the present situation, it would have been a sound which people would want to listen for.

After that sound, the chief's body and his armor split into two halves from head to tail, which fell to the left and right, into the marsh.

God-Slaying Slash Emperor was unscathed despite cleaving through the strongest armor of the Lizardmen.

The other two Lizardmen did not seem affected by the death of their comrade. They raised their weapons and executed a pincer attack.

“Yeeart!”

On the right, Zenberu sent a karate chop at Cocytus's face, having enhanced it with 「Iron Natural Weapon」 and 「Iron Skin」.

“Guoooooh—!”

On the left was Frost Pain, stabbing at the belly.

This attack was calculated to exploit the fact that long weapons were unwieldy in melee combat.



Of course, that only applied to regular people.

Cocytus shifted slightly and intercepted Zenberu's arm with the blade of God-Slaying Slash Emperor. His preternatural movements made it seem as though the weapon in his hand was an extension of his limbs.

Zenberu's skin could rival the hardness of steel under the effects of Iron Skin, but the armor from just now had already proven the sharpness of God-Slaying Slash Emperor.

The blade which entered Zenberu's arm carved it off like it was going through water.

“Guwaaargh—!”

As Zenberu's severed right arm sprayed fresh arterial blood, Cocytus's other hand casually gripped Frost Pain, which was headed at his belly.

“—Oh. I. See. This. Is. A. Pretty. Good. Sword.”

“Waaah!”

Zaryusu gave up on pulling back the immovable Frost Pain, and immediately lashed out at Cocytus's knee with a kick. Cocytus did not dodge it; he simply took the blow. In the end, when Zaryusu's foot connected with Cocytus's knee, it was Zaryusu who felt the pain.

It felt just like kicking an iron wall with all his might.

“「Over Magic - Mass Light Cure Wounds」.”

Through the use of prodigious amounts of mana, one could forcibly cast a spell that should not have been normally usable. Aided by this metamagic enhancement, Shasuryu cast a spell that healed everyone's wounds.

“Oh ...”

Cocytus looked at Shasuryu with interest as the latter used a metamagic tech-

nique he had never heard of before. However, the two Swamp Elementals blocked his line of sight. While Zenberu's arm gradually resumed its original form, the two Swamp Elementals attacked Cocytus with their tentacles. However, Cocytus had already slashed at the Swamp Elementals' bodies.

Just as the the Swamp Elementals dissolved into clumps of mud, Zaryusu punched at Cocytus's compound eyes, his belly, and his chest. Naturally, it was Zaryusu who was hurt instead. The skin on his knuckles split and wept tears of fresh blood.

"How. Bothersome."

Cocytus swatted at Zaryusu's chest with his spiked tail.



"Guaargh!"

Zaryusu flew into the distance like he had been hit by a baseball bat, accompanied by the sound of cracking. In the end, he hit the marsh, rolling several times before coming to a halt. However, the agony in his chest and the bright red blood he was coughing up made it hard for Zaryusu to breathe.

The broken ribs had probably pierced his lungs, because he could not take air in no matter how hard he tried to breathe. It felt as though he were in water. The hot fluid pouring into his throat made him want to vomit. He looked down at his chest, and the wound — which looked like someone had stabbed him with a sharp blade — was gushing with blood.

—Just one hit had reduced Zaryusu to this pitiful state.

Zaryusu glared at Cocytus, the fighting spirit still burning in his eyes even as he struggled to keep breathing.

"So. You. Still. Wish. To. Fight. Then. I. Shall. Return. This. To. You."

After casually tossing Frost Pain back to the fallen Zaryusu, Cocytus ignored

him and turned to the remaining Lizardmen.

Shasuryu cast a healing spell on Zenberu, who had regrown his arm, but whose health had been greatly depleted.

Just as Cocytus was about to reach them, another stone flew at him, attempting to divert his attention — however, the attack was useless, and was easily deflected.

“—How. Annoying,” Cocytus grumbled, and then extended his hand at the Small Fang’s chief.

“「Piercing Icicle」.”

Several dozen razor-sharp icicles, each the size of an arm, showered down on a large area.

One of the Lizardmen was within the attack radius and the icicles pierced him instantly.

He took one in the chest, two in the belly, and one in the right thigh — each of them easily penetrated his body

The Small Fang chief — the best ranger among the Lizardmen, crumpled to the swamp like a puppet whose strings had been cut, where he expired.

“Uoooooh—!”

“「Over Magic - Mass Light Cure Wounds」 !”

Zenberu charged ahead while Shasuryu cast a healing spell again. Zenberu was trying to buy time for Zaryusu’s wounds to mend.

He knew this was a reckless course of action, and that he was nothing before the might of Cocytus. Even so, Zenberu sprinted ahead without a moment’s hesitation.

Cocytus swung lightly at Zenberu, who had entered his attack range.

The swing was faster than Zenberu could see—

Its speed was beyond Zenberu's dexterity—

The blade sheared easily through Zenberu's flesh—

The decapitated corpse of Zenberu spurted blood like a geyser as it collapsed gently to the marshlands. Shortly after that, his head joined it on the sod.

“...Now. Only. The. Two. Of. You. Are. Left ...I. Had. Heard. Of. Your. Strength. From. Ainz-sama. But. In. The. End. Only. The. Two. Of. You. Remained.”

Cocytus — who had not moved so much as an inch since the battle had started — studied the two of them, and flicked his sword. There was no trace of blood or fat on the gleaming white blade. That beautiful movement looked like it could sweep everything away in a single stroke.

Facing it was Zaryusu, who had recovered to the point where he could barely stand, and Shasuryu, who had drawn his greatsword. The two of them flanked Cocytus front and rear. Zaryusu dabbed his fingers in the blood flowing from his chest and smeared it on his face.

The way he applied the blood to himself made it seem as though he was summoning the ancestral spirits down upon himself.

“—Zaryusu, how are your wounds?”

“Not good. It's still aching. Still, I can take a few more swings.”

“Really now ...that should be enough, right? Frankly speaking, I'm almost out of mana. If I'm not careful, I might keel over.”

Shasuryu's teeth ground against each other. Perhaps he was laughing. As Zaryusu heard this, his expression changed as well.

“...Oh, really? Ani-ja, you're pushing yourself pretty hard too.”

Zaryusu smiled, and then he sighed, relaxing his shoulders. His sword arm

sagged.

A torrent of pain erupted from near his chest, but Zaryusu fought to ignore it.

He would not give up until the last moment — Zaryusu intended to fight until the end.

From the beginning, he had known full well that victory was impossible.

Defeat was unavoidable, yet they could not accept it.

That was because it would be like lying to countless people, telling them that they could win. Since others had actually believed them, they could not accept the fact that they would be defeated.

They had to give everything they had until the final moment—

“Then swing that sword you’re wielding!!”

Zaryusu’s cry echoed throughout the surrounding area.

The sound of clacking came from Cocytus’s mandibles.

“A. Fine. Cry.”

Cocytus was probably laughing. But this was not the laughter of the strong mocking the weak, but a warrior laughing with a fellow fighter.

“Very well, Zaryusu. That’s it, then. I’ll fight with you to the bitter end as well.”

Shasuryu smiled as well.

“Then ...Sorry to keep you waiting, Cocytus-dono.”

Cocytus shrugged as Shasuryu said this.

“It. Is. Fine. I. Am. Not. So. Thoughtless. As. To. Interrupt. A. Farewell. Between. Brothers. Now. Prepare. To Meet. Your. Fate ...No. Pardon. Me. You.

Were. Ready. For. It. From. The. Start.”

As Zaryusu and Shasuryu began moving, Cocytus flourished God-Slaying Slash Emperor and asked:

“State. Your. Names.”

“Shasuryu Shasha.”

” Zaryusu Shasha.”

“...I. Will. Remember. You. Warriors. Also. I. Apologize. Ahead. Of. Time. For. Not. Using. The. Weapons. In. All. My. Hands. It. Is. Not. That. I. Wish. To. Scorn. You. But. You. Are. Simply. Not. Strong. Enough. To. Warrant. Their. Use.”

“What a shame.”

“Indeed — here I come!”



The two of them lunged at Cocytus, splashing across the marsh.

The uncoordinated timing of their attacks baffled Cocytus.

The two of them did not enter his range at the same time. Shasuryu was the first to do so. Sensing a scheme, Cocytus awaited their next move.

Since Shasuryu was the first to enter his strike zone, Cocytus carefully studied Shasuryu’s next move.

Shasuryu stopped just before Cocytus could reach him, and—

“「Earth Bind」 !”

—And cast a spell.

Countless chains formed of mud leapt at Cocytus, and Zaryusu broke into a wild sprint. He had even hidden Frost Pain behind his back so his opponent would not be able to gauge his attack range.

Shasuryu's declaration that "I'm almost out of mana," was merely a ruse to deceive Cocytus. If he had taken the bait, perhaps he might have been bound by the mystic chains and been hit by Zaryusu's charge from behind.

However tough their opponent's exoskeleton was, he should still be able to break through if he poured all his strength into the edge. With that in mind, Zaryusu had abandoned defense to focus on the attack, and the resulting strike should have been quite strong.

He seems quite confident in his sword.

Cocytus could understand how he felt, because much like him, Cocytus felt strongly about the weapons he owned. In particular, the sword he now wielded — which had once been used by his creator — was especially significant to him. Therefore, despite how lopsided it would make the battle, Cocytus insisted on doing battle with God-Slaying Slash Emperor in hand, as a sign of his supreme respect.

However, they had made a miscalculation; which was that their opponent was Cocytus, Guardian of the Fifth Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

"...My. Defenses. Cannot. Be. Breached. By. Someone. Whose. Level. Is. Below. Mine."

The chains of mud rebounded off Cocytus an instant before they reached him, reverting to regular dirt and sinking back into the mire. Low tier spells could not pierce Cocytus's magical defenses.

"— 「Icy Burst」 !"

As the shout rang out, a vortex of ivory fog swirled out and surrounded Cocytus.

A futile effort.

Cocytus was immune to cold damage, so as the gentle breeze of the super-cooled mist blew around him, he patiently waited for Zaryusu and Shasuryu to enter his attack range.

Soon enough, the moment he had been waiting for arrived. However, Cocytus hesitated briefly; he thought, *Can my foe be stopped just by cutting off his head?*

In the face of Zaryusu's full attack, Cocytus did not think that mere decapitation would stop his advance. The mental image of a headless body rushing him appeared in his mind.

In that case, he ought to chop his hands off first, and then his head.

No, that wouldn't be clean enough. Best to finish him off in one stroke.

Zaryusu charged with all his strength, devoting every fiber of his being to the attack, but he was still too slow for Cocytus.

A black shadow appeared amidst the white mist — Zaryusu thrust his sword, and Cocytus caught it lightly between his fingers, like before.

Cocytus did not feel any cold from his fingertips. Perhaps Zaryusu knew that Cocytus was immune to the cold and did not use the ability.

The charge was fast, but he had blocked it so easily. That puzzled Cocytus. However, those doubts faded in an instant. His foe's life would end with a swing of God-Slaying Slash Emperor, so there was nothing more to think about.

And then there would only be one of them left.

So it was just an unplanned charge, then...

Just as a somewhat disappointed Cocytus was about to strike, he changed his mind.

I. See...

“Ohhhhh!”

With a mighty roar, the greatsword hacked down through the freezing mist which hung in the air. Shasuryu's swing carried a gale in its wake, which dispersed the frozen fog.

The 「Earth Bind」, Zaryusu's charge, 「Icy Burst」, all of them were decoys.

While he had to be wary of Zaryusu stabbing him with Frost Pain, Shasuryu's overhead chop with the greatsword was more damaging, so that must have been their true intention. However—

“Surprise attacks ought to be conducted in silence.”

As long as they could not erase the sound they made as they ran across the marsh, it could not truly qualify as an unexpected attack. Cocytus was puzzled — was this really worth taking cold damage? Or was it just a meaningless struggle.

Still, it was true that his foe had entered his strike zone.

Now that Zaryusu's weapon was within his grasp, there was nothing to fear from him. Only the order in which they died would change. Having decided that, Cocytus swung God-Slaying Slash Emperor.

It struck.

Shasuryu was cloven in half along with his greatsword. Before the body could hit the ground, Cocytus withdrew his blade, planning to attack Zaryusu—



—And then, the fingers grasping Frost Pain slipped.

Surprised, Cocytus looked at his fingers to see what had made it slide forward.

He saw the bright red of blood amidst the white mist hanging in the air.

In an instant, Cocytus realised why his fingers had slipped.

—Blood?

He was confused.

He wondered when it had gotten there, and then as he saw Zaryusu's face through the mist, it suddenly dawned on him.

The blood smeared on his face was not to paint himself, but to coat his sword.

Neither had 「Icy Burst」 been intended to hurt Cocytus, or conceal Shasuryu's form. Its purpose had been to hide the blood coating the sword. So was keeping it behind his back.

When he blocked Zaryusu's attack, Cocytus had done so with his fingers. Zaryusu remembered it, and had bet on the slim chance that he would do it again. Thus he had gone to these lengths to set up the battlefield to pull it off. Just then, a flash of lightning surged through Cocytus's brain.

So that was why his thrust felt so weak! No wonder! There's no way the plan to lubricate the sword with blood so it could pierce through would work every time. In order to create this chance, he slowed his strike to make me think it was easy to catch!

The blade slowly slid over, inching towards Cocytus's pale blue body. Now that Zaryusu had thrown his full strength and even body weight into the thrust, not even Cocytus could stop it — not with two bloodstained fingers.

If he had grasped it further away from him, there might be something else he could do. But at this short range, he was out of options.

Cocytus was so moved that he trembled.

While it had relied on a bit of luck, this was an attack which had required multiple gambles, each of which had paid off. The most important thing was that without Shasuryu, none of this would have been possible.

Shasuryu should not have understood Zaryusu's gambit, but as an elder brother, he had placed all his trust in his younger brother, to the point of sacrificing his

own life. That pointless surprise attack and shouting were all to divert Cocytus's attention from his brother for just a moment.

A single moment.

And for just a single moment — as Zaryusu was forcing Frost Pain at him with all his might — Cocytus's mandibles trembled.

“Truly. Marvellous—”

And so the blade struck Cocytus's body — only to deflect lightly off. His body, which glowed a faint blue, did not have so much as a scratch on it.

This was the result of the impassable gulf that separated the highest level NPCs of Nazarick from mere Lizardmen.

“—Forgive. Me. But. I. Possess. A. Skill. Which. Briefly. Negates. Weakly-Enchanted. Weapon. Attacks. Once. I Activate. It. Your. Attack. Is. Useless.”

That blow had been well-struck, and Cocytus felt that leaving a scar as a mark of respect for these warriors would be appropriate. However, he was under the eyes of a Supreme Being, and he could not do so in his position as a Guardian.

Cocytus deliberately took one step back, splashing up the mud and staining his beautiful blue body.

It was just a single step.

There was no meaning to it. Backing up would not have made any difference to him. Zaryusu would still die, and Cocytus would still win.

However, that step back was a sign of praise from the strong — Cocytus — to the weak — Zaryusu.

Zaryusu smiled, in the way someone did when he knew full well what sort of fate was in store for him, yet ran towards it anyway. As he did, Cocytus swung his sword down—

“That was a spectacular battle,” Ainz said in praise to Cocytus, who was kneeling before him.

“Thank. You.”

“However, I trust you understand that while we we used the stick this time, you must employ the carrot in the future. You are not to rule them through fear.”

“I. Understand.”

After Ainz nodded, he looked to the other Guardians in the room.

“Very good. Now then, listen well, you Guardians. Like I said earlier in the Throne Room, Cocytus will administer the Lizardman village. If he needs help, I hope you will give it to him. Cocytus, I hope you will foster a deeply-rooted loyalty to Nazarick in the Lizardmen. I also hope that you will cultivate the growth of talented members of their species. I will leave these tasks to you. If you need 「Wings of Ascension」 or other special items, let me know. I will also lend you a 「Powered Suit」 for the time being.”

Players could change their character races in YGGDRASIL, but that did not imply that one could freely change race. Some requirements had to be met for the change, and the changes were irreversible.

Part of the requirements were items. Someone who wanted to become an Elder Lich would need a 「Book of the Dead」. Someone who wanted to become an Imp would need a 「Fallen Seed」. The 「Angel Wing」 item which Ainz had mentioned was used for becoming an Angel.

Ainz had mentioned it because he thought that it might be possible to change races in that manner.

“I. Shall. Count. On. You. When. The. Time. Comes. Ainz-sama. May. I. Know. How. You. Wish. To. Deal. With. Those. Lizardmen?”

“Those Lizardmen?”

“Yes. The. Ones. Called. Zaryusu. And. Shasuryu.”

The two who fought to the end. Their corpses should still be in the marsh. However, why did he bring them up?

“Hmm ...Recover their corpses and use them for raw materials when I’m not making undead with my skills.”

“—That. Would. Be. A. Bit. Of. A. Waste.”

“Oh? Why is that? Are they that valuable?”

Ainz had watched the battle through the Mirror of Remote Viewing and saw an overwhelming victory. Nothing about them recommended themselves to his eye.

“...They. Might. Be. Weak. However. I. Saw. Their. Fearless. Warrior. Spirit. Turning. Them. Into. Raw. Materials. Is. A. Bit. Of. A. Waste. I. Feel. That. They. Could. Become. Stronger. Perhaps. Even. Exceeding. Our. Expectations. Ainz-sama. I. Believe. You. Have. Not. Yet. Conducted. Any. Practical. Experiments. With. Resurrecting. The. Dead. Could. You. Not. Do. So. With. Them?”

...Does he like those Lizardmen?

In all honesty, Ainz did not feel anything when he heard things like “warrior spirit.” He had heard of terms like “killing intent” in manga and light novels, but he thought nothing of them. It was kind of like how Narberal responded with, “Ah, so that’s what it is, oh~” and so on while he was lecturing her. Similarly, Ainz had no idea what this warrior’s empathy business was about.

That was because Ainz had originally been a normal salaryman, despite his current state. An average citizen who actually knew about a warrior’s spirit or killing intent would probably be considered dangerous. Now, he could understand something like a bureaucrat’s spirit instead.

“I see ...So it would be a shame, then?”

However, when Ainz heard about Cocytus's approval of the Lizardmen, his true thoughts were, Well, you might call it a shame, but I have no idea what that means.

Still, when he thought about it, Cocytus's words made a lot of sense.

He had wanted to find a place to experiment with resurrection anyway, and Ainz felt that using them for those experiments would be very beneficial. In addition, unlike how Cocytus had been waffling around in the Throne Room, he had now proposed a useful solution for them. If that was a sign of improvement, then he had passed with flying colors.

He paused briefly to think, and then Ainz thought of his other exceptional subordinates.

He thought of them as they stood around him, in a suitably subservient posture — silent and unmoving.

“Albedo, what is your opinion?”

“It would be the same as yours, Ainz-sama.”

“...What do you think, Demiurge?”

“I feel whatever you decide would be best, Ainz-sama.”

“...How about you, Shalltear?”

“Like Demiurge, I shall abide by your ruling, Ainz-sama.”

“...Aura?”

“Yeah, I'm with everyone else.”

“...Mare.”

“Ah, ah, ah ...yes. I think so too.”

They might as well not have answered at all. Ainz’s head ached.

Ainz thought hard, and finally realized something — perhaps the Guardians did not think it was a big deal. In other words, no matter how he decided, they did not feel there would be any major benefits or drawbacks.

Of course, he had to consider their respective situations. Sometimes, problems might arise due to their varying circumstances.

Simply put, when a rich person said, “Oh, that sum’s not a problem,” one would immediately doubt the truth of those words. In other words, it was the result of differing values and priorities.

I wasted my time asking ...still, that means resurrecting the Lizardmen should be fine, right? I was planning to think carefully on this, because I’ve made too many mistakes recently.

With no recourse, Ainz had to ponder the merits and demerits of the situation by himself.

“...We have decided to subordinate the Lizardman village to our rule, but is there a suitable candidate for leader? Do they have a group that manages the entire village?”

“No, but there is a person who is suitable to be the village’s representative.”

“Oh? Who is that?”

“It. Is. The. White. Lizardman. Who. Did. Not. Take. Part. In. The. Fighting. She. Appears. To. Have. Druidic. Powers.”

“Her, then! Hm, well, that is workable...”

She should be worth using, Ainz thought. *We could also use her to keep an eye on the others.*

However, having her execute Ainz's plan might undermine Cocytus's plan to administer the village. That being the case, what should he do?

At this point, a flash of inspiration struck Ainz.

...Wouldn't it be faster to ask her directly? Granted, I didn't get any usable answers just now...

Ainz shared his plans with Cocytus, who replied in the affirmative.

Given Cocytus's reaction, the fact that he might be caving in to his master's wishes could not be ruled out. However, after glancing at Demiurge and Albedo, he noted that neither of them seemed to be acting out of the ordinary, which reassured Ainz that he was doing the right thing.

"Very well. How soon before she can be brought here?"

"Forgive. Me. If. I. Have. Overstepped. Myself. But. I. Sensed. That. You. Might. Wish. To. See. Her. And. So. I. Ordered. Her. To. Wait. In. A. Nearby. Room."

Ainz glanced at Demiurge, who shook his head.

Nicely done indeed. He's settled the matter without anyone's instructions and it doesn't look like someone else gave him the idea.

Ainz wondered if this was how a superior felt when he saw his subordinate grow as a person. He was all smiles — although one could not tell his expression given that he was a skeleton.

"No no no, you've done well, Cocytus. Wasting time is foolish, and your judgment was correct. All right, bring her in, then."

"Ah, please wait!"

"What's the matter, Aura?"

"While they are not strangers, meeting them in an unremarkable place like

this will damage your reputation, Ainz-sama. I feel you should receive her in Nazarick's Throne Room."

The other Guardians nodded, with the exception of Mare.

"...My. Apologies. I. Had. Not. Considered. That. Please. Forgive. Me!"

"Hm ..."

I hadn't thought of that at all. With that in mind, Ainz wondered how he should resolve this problem. At that moment, he remembered the words from back then. In that case —

"—Aura."

"Yes!"

"Did you not once say that you built this place in imitation of Nazarick? You were right. Cocytus, bring her over. I shall meet her here."

"Ai—Ainz-sama!"

"Aura, that's enough."

"Albedo!"

Not knowing why she had been told to stand down, Aura looked at Albedo, her face red with protest. However, Albedo merely glanced at her and then paid her no heed, looking at the main door instead. It was Demiurge who answered the angry Aura.

"...Ainz-sama would not make a mistake. That being the case, if Ainz-sama says this place is as good as Nazarick, then—"

"—It can't be wrong," Shalltear continued.

Well, I don't think I'm totally correct, and I hope they don't think that way ...Still, it ended up helping me out here.

“Aura, I shall say it again. I feel that this place — built by you, one of my most trusted subordinates — is as good as Nazarick, even if it is still a work in progress ...Do you understand?”

“...Thank you, Ainz-sama!”

Aura bowed in gratitude, and so did the other Guardians.

There's no need to be so moved, I guess ...I feel so embarrassed now.

“In that case, bring her over, Cocytus.”

“At. Once!”



Cocytus immediately brought the white Lizardman to the room. She knelt with her head bowed before Ainz.

“What is your name?”

“I am Crusch Lulu, representative of the Lizardmen, oh Supreme Overlord of Death, Ainz Ooal Gown-sama.”

Well, that's pretty far-fetched. Ainz wondered who had come up with that title, but in the end he decided to adopt the calm, poised attitude of a king.

“...Mm, welcome.”

“Thank you, Gown-sama. Please accept the utmost loyalty of we, the Lizardmen.”

“Hm ...”

Ainz studied Crusch carefully.

These scales are beautiful. They glittered under the light of the magical lighting.

CHAPTER 5: THE FREEZING GOD

I wonder how they'd feel, Ainz wondered out of curiosity.

Just as Ainz lost himself in his thoughts, he realised that Crusch's shoulders were trembling. Cocytus should have disabled his cold-emanating skills, so it was probably due to some other reason.

As he thought on the matter, Ainz realised that her shuddering made perfect sense.

If Ainz said that he was displeased with the Lizardmen, every single one of them would be deprived of their heads. Therefore, Crusch was hanging on to every word Ainz said. Given that she was jumpy and nervous as it was, Ainz's unnatural silence would have filled her with terror.

Ainz was not the sort of person who amused himself by tormenting the weak. He could commit atrocities for the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, but his mental state had not degraded to the point where he would perform such acts as part of daily life.

“The Lizardmen shall live under my banner from this day forth. However, Cocytus will be ruling you in my place. I trust there are no problems with that?”

“—No.”

“That's it, then. You may return.”

“Eh? May I?” Crusch exclaimed in surprise from where she was bowing. She had thought Ainz would demand the moon from her, so this utter betrayal of her expectations brought that reaction forth from her.

“You may go back for the time being, Crusch Lulu. The Lizardmen will soon enter a period of prosperity. Your future generations will give thanks with all their hearts that they were allowed to swear themselves to me.”

“You are too kind. We are already deeply grateful for the mercy you have shown us despite our opposition to a supreme being like yourself.”

Ainz slowly rose from his throne, and then approached Crusch. He knelt down,

and put a hand on her shoulder.

Surprised, Crusch shuddered, and the vibration travelled up Ainz's hand.

“Also, I have a special request for you.”

“May I know what it is? If it is within my power, then I shall strive to fulfill your desires as your faithful servant, Gown-dono ...”

“The idea was not originally mine — but if you agree, I shall restore Zaryusu to life in exchange.”

As he spoke the name he had heard from Cocytus, Crusch suddenly raised her head, the very picture of shock.

Ainz smugly studied Crusch's face. She seemed to be trying to hide her feelings, but her expression changed by the moment. Lizardmen and humans had very different facial expressions, so Ainz could not be certain what was there, but at the very least he could pick out joy, anger, and sorrow.

“Is that even possible ...?”

“I possess power over life and death. Death is nothing more than a state of being to me.”

After hearing Crusch's almost imperceptible words, Ainz continued:

“It is like being sick or poisoned, but I cannot extend one's lifespan.”

Perhaps it would be impossible to do so through conventional means, but it might be possible with 「Wish Upon A Star」 ... but now was not the time for such things.

“...Then, what do you wish of your loyal slave? ...My body, perhaps?”

Ainz was dumbfounded.

“No, that's a bit too ...”

As if! Even if I did desire that sort of thing, it's not as though I'd go so far as to breed with a reptile ... Having nearly said that, Ainz struggled to maintain his image.

He decided to ignore the sound of grinding teeth that came from nearby.

“Ahem! Of course not. It is simple — I want you to observe the Lizardmen and see if any of them are going to betray me.”

“No Lizardman will betray you.”

After hearing Crusch's firm reply, Ainz smiled coldly to her.

“I am not nearly stupid enough to believe that. Indeed, I am not mighty enough to know what every Lizardman thinks, but if they are sufficiently human-like, treachery will be common enough. Therefore, I would like someone to quietly keep an eye on them.”

Crusch resumed her blank expression, which made Ainz worry that he had phrased it poorly. While he had wanted to resurrect Zaryusu from the beginning, Ainz wanted her to ask for it and thus bind her to him with chains of obligation. What should he do if she refused?

If I'd known, I shouldn't have been so greedy ... Well, I guess there's no point crying over spilt milk.

“...A miracle hangs before you right now, but it will not last forever. If you do not seize the moment, it will be gone forever.”

Crusch's face seemed to be twitching.

“It is not as though I am going to conduct some horrific ceremony. Does resurrection magic not exist in this world? I am simply going to use a spell like that.”

“That's legendary ...”

As Crusch hesitated over whether or not to speak, Ainz spoke to her in tender

tones, but with an arrogant attitude.

“Crusch, I would like you to think about what is most important to *you*.”

Ainz watched Crusch’s eyes as his words slowly got to her. It felt like he was about to clinch a sale.

After this, Ainz would need to impress upon Crusch that the miracle he provided did not come free of charge. After all, people would suspect free things, but their suspicions would be eased if there was a reasonable fee attached to them.

“I want you to secretly observe your fellow Lizardmen. Depending on how things turn out, you may be faced with a dangerous choice. In addition, to guard against your treachery, I will cast a certain spell on Zaryusu when I resurrect him. It is a spell that will instantly kill Zaryusu if I judge that you have betrayed me. It might be hard on you, but it ought to be worth it if you can get Zaryusu back, am I wrong?”

That said, there’s no such spell.

Ainz stood up, as though to say that he had said his piece, and then he spread his arms.

Crusch looked at Ainz with a tormented expression in her eyes.

“Ah, yes, when Zaryusu is resurrected, I will tell him that he was recalled to life because he was useful to me. I can guarantee that your name will not come up. Well then, Crusch Lulu, make your choice. This is the last chance you have to return your beloved Zaryusu to your side. What will you do? Will you seize this opportunity, or abandon it? Decide.”

Ainz slowly extended a hand to Crusch as he looked to the Guardians and said:

“If she refuses, none of you are to do anything. Well then, Crusch Lulu, what is your answer?”

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

A gentle sensation filled his body. It was as though a hand were trying to drag him up through deep water, but Zaryusu shrugged it off. That was because he felt something disgusting from that frightening hand.

After what seemed like an instant and an eternity had passed, he felt the hand reaching for him again. Zaryusu wanted to brush it off once more, but he stopped. That was because he heard a voice coming from beside him, that of the female he loved.

He hesitated.

And hesitated.

And still hesitated.

In this world where time might not have existed at all, Zaryusu waffled, and then, however reluctantly, he reached out to take that hand.

After that, someone pulled him up forcefully, dragging him into a brilliantly white world.

He felt powerless.

He felt like his innards were a sack of mud.

He felt incredibly tired. Even intense physical activity had never left him this exhausted before.

Zaryusu struggled to open his heavy-lidded eyes.

Light stabbed into his field of vision. Lizardmen's eyes could automatically adjust to ambient lighting, but they could not resist momentary flashes of light. Zaryusu blinked—

“Zaryusu!”

Someone was hugging him tightly.

“Cr-Crusch?”

Logically speaking, he should never have heard that voice again. But that was because he believed that he would never hear that female’s voice again.

As his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he looked on the female who embraced him.

She was the female he loved — Crusch Lulu.

Why? What was going on?

Zaryusu’s heart filled with doubt and unease. His final memory was — his head falling to the marsh. He should have been killed by Cocytus.

Yet, why was he alive? Unless—

“—Crusch, could it be you were killed too?”

“Eh?”

Zaryusu worked his mouth, which felt numb and thus hard to control, and then asked a question.

Yet the answer he received was a baffled look on Crusch’s face. As he saw it, Zaryusu breathed a sigh of relief, because he knew that Crusch was not dead. In that case, why was he still alive?

The voice from beside him supplied a hint.

“Hm ...he seems to have come back to life, but his thoughts still seem muddled, and he seems to have lost levels ...That being the case, it ought to be roughly the same as it was in YGGDRASIL.”

After realising who had said those words, Zaryusu looked to their source in surprise.

Before him stood the King of Death, a magic caster of extraordinary power.

In his hand was a thirty centimeter long wand, which radiated a holy air that was at odds with the undead monarch who held it. It was a beautiful wand which seemed to have been made of ivory and capped in gold, while its handle was inscribed with runes.

Zaryusu did not know this, but that wand was a Wand of Resurrection, a magic item which had recalled Zaryusu to life. Under normal circumstances, those who could not use clerical magic would not be able to use magic items imbued with cleric-type spells, but magic items of this type were an exception to that rule.

Zaryusu's gaze wandered, and he realised that he was in the Lizardman Village.

They were in the central square, and many Lizardmen were kneeling in a circle around them. Their unmoving stance displayed their tremendous respect.

“What on earth...?”

It was only natural to kneel when faced with such awesome power. However, it was not just respect he felt from the Lizardmen, but something more intense than that. The Lizardmen did not worship any gods, and strictly speaking, their faith lay in their ancestors.

Now, he sensed something like the reverence for a god from the surrounding Lizardmen.

“Mm, you may leave, Lizardmen. Someone will tell you when you can come into the village again.

Nobody spoke out against that order. More than that, they obeyed without a single sound of protest. The Lizardmen left the village in silence, the only sound being that of their bodies and their splashing across the marsh.

Perhaps their very wills had been shattered after seeing such tremendous power. Granted, that may have also been due to the Lizardman practice of obeying the strong.

In other words, everything was proceeding as Ainz had planned it.

“Aura, are they all gone?”

“Yes, they’ve all left.”

The person who answered was a Dark Elf girl. She had been standing behind Ainz all this time, which was partly why Zaryusu had not noticed her, but the main reason was because of how incredibly quiet she was.

“Really now. Then, Zaryusu Shasha, allow me to congratulate you on your resurrection.”

Resurrection.

It took a while for Zaryusu to parse the meaning of that word. As he realized it, an impulse flowed out from his heart that set his whole body trembling.

Resurrection — does that mean he brought me back to life?

He could not speak. All he could do was make gasping noises.

“What’s wrong? I doubt the Lizardmen despise resurrection, do they? Or have you forgotten how to speak?”

“Ruh-resurrection ...you ...you can bring the dead back to life ...?”

“Exactly. What, you thought I could not raise the dead?”

“Was ...was there a great ceremony of revival?”

“Great ceremony? What is that? I am more than sufficient for the task by myself.”

Zaryusu had nothing else to say after hearing that. Resurrection magic was a miracle which could only be performed by those legendary Lizardmen who bore the bloodline of the Dragon Lords.

And he could do it by himself.

Was he a monster? No, that was wrong.

Was he a magic caster of incredible power? No, that was wrong too.

Zaryusu fully understood now.

He led a legendary army, and was accompanied by demons.

In other words — the being before him was nothing less than a god.

Zaryusu shakily rose to his feet and prostrated himself before Ainz. Crusch hurriedly rushed to follow suit.

“Oh Supreme One.”

Zaryusu felt something like confusion in the gaze which looked down upon him, but he assumed that he had been mistaken.

“Please accept my eternal loyalty.”

“Very well. I promise you that in the name of Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“Please grant the Lizardmen prosperity.”

“Is that all? Of course I will guarantee the prosperity of all who serve under my flag.”

“You have my deepest thanks.”

“Come to think of it, you seem to have trouble speaking. After some rest, you ought to get used to it. For now, take time to recover. There are many things which need to be decided, and the most important thing is how to take care of

this village ...You may contact Cocytus about matters regarding that.”

After saying so, Ainz prepared to leave. However, Zaryusu still had something to ask, a question which needed to be answered right now.

“I pray you will wait, but what of Zenberu and my brother?”

“Their corpses should be nearby.”

Ainz indicated the outside of the village with a jerk of his chin, just as he was about to depart with Aura.

“May I ask you to resurrect them?”

“...Hm ...There does not seem to be any benefit in doing so.”

“Then, why did you resurrect me? Zenberu and my brother are strong. They will surely be able to help you.”

Ainz studied Zaryusu, and then shrugged.

“I shall think about it ...First, I shall preserve their bodies, and then I shall consider it.”

Ainz’s robe swished as he walked, indicating that the conversation was over. Aura’s voice trailed off as she said, “That Hydra is really cute~”

Zaryusu finally recovered from his prostration, and let his body go slack.

“I escaped with my life ...or perhaps I should say that I came back to life.”

He had no idea how they would be ruled in future. However, if they could show how useful the Lizardmen could be, it should not be too bad.

“Crusch, Ani-ja—”

“It’s fine. We’ll worry about that later, all right? For now, you need to rest and recover from your fatigue. It’ll be fine. I can still carry you.”

“Mm ...Please do.”

Zaryusu lay down and closed his eyes. The desire to sleep assaulted him, as though he was ready for bed after a long day's hard labor.

As he savored the gentle sensation stroking him, Zaryusu's mind sank into the darkness once more.

OVERLORD
Characters

キャラクター紹介





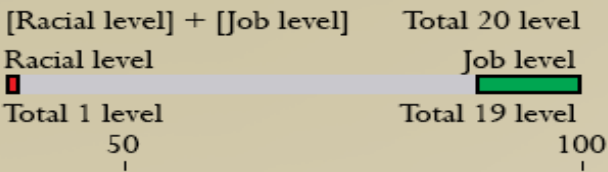
ザリユース・
シャシャ

Demi-Human
Race

zaryusu shasha

STRONGEST LIZARDMAN
WARRIOR

Job	Traveler		
Residence	One of the houses in the Green Claw Tribe		
Alignment	Good~Neutral	Sense of Justice:	100
Racial Level	Lizard Man		1 lv
Job Level	Fighter		10 lv
	Sword Master		6 lv
	Ranger		1 lv
	Sage		2 lv



status

A
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HP	<div></div>
MP	<div></div>
PHY. ATK	<div></div>
PHY. DEF	<div></div>
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SPECIAL	<div></div>



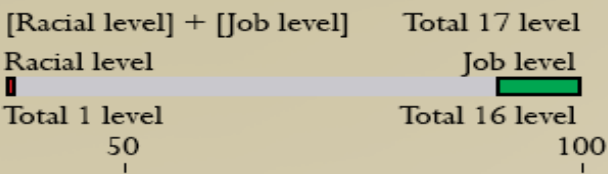
クルシュ・
ルルー

Demi-Human
Race

crusch lulu

BEAUTY WITH
WHITE SCALES

Job	Red Eye Tribe Acting Chief		
Residence	One of the houses in the Red Eye Tribe		
Alignment	Neutral	Sense of Justice:	50
Racial Level	Awakened Elder Blood Lizard Man		1 lv
Job Level	Druid		8 lv
	Mystic Shaman		5 lv
	Summoner		2 lv
	Dragon Adept		1 lv



status		0	50	100
ABILITY	C	HP	<div></div>	
	H	MP	<div></div>	
	A	PHY. ATK	<div></div>	
	R	PHY. DEF	<div></div>	
	T	AGILITY	<div></div>	
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		RESIST	<div></div>	
		SPECIAL	<div></div>	



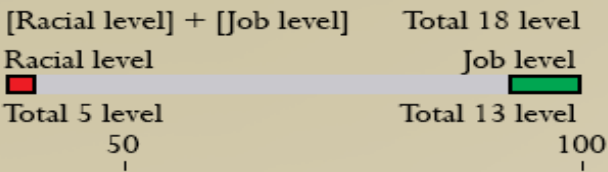
ゼンベル・
ググー

Demi-Human
Race

zenberu gugu

STRONG ARM BRUTE

Job	Dragon Tusk Tribal Chief		
Residence	Dragon Tusk Tribal Chief Residence		
Alignment	Neutral	Sense of Justice:	50
Racial Level	Lizard Man		5 lv
Job Level	Fighter		1 lv
	Monk		10 lv
	Single Brawler		1 lv
	Ki Master		1 lv



status		0	
ABILITY	C	HP	<div></div>
	H	MP	<div></div>
	A	PHY. ATK	<div></div>
	R	PHY. DEF	<div></div>
	T	AGILITY	<div></div>
		MAG. ATK	<div></div>
		MAG. DEF	<div></div>
		RESIST	<div></div>
		SPECIAL	<div></div>



イグヴァ=41

Heteromorphic
Race

iguvua=41

EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE
NO. 41

JobGuinea Pig

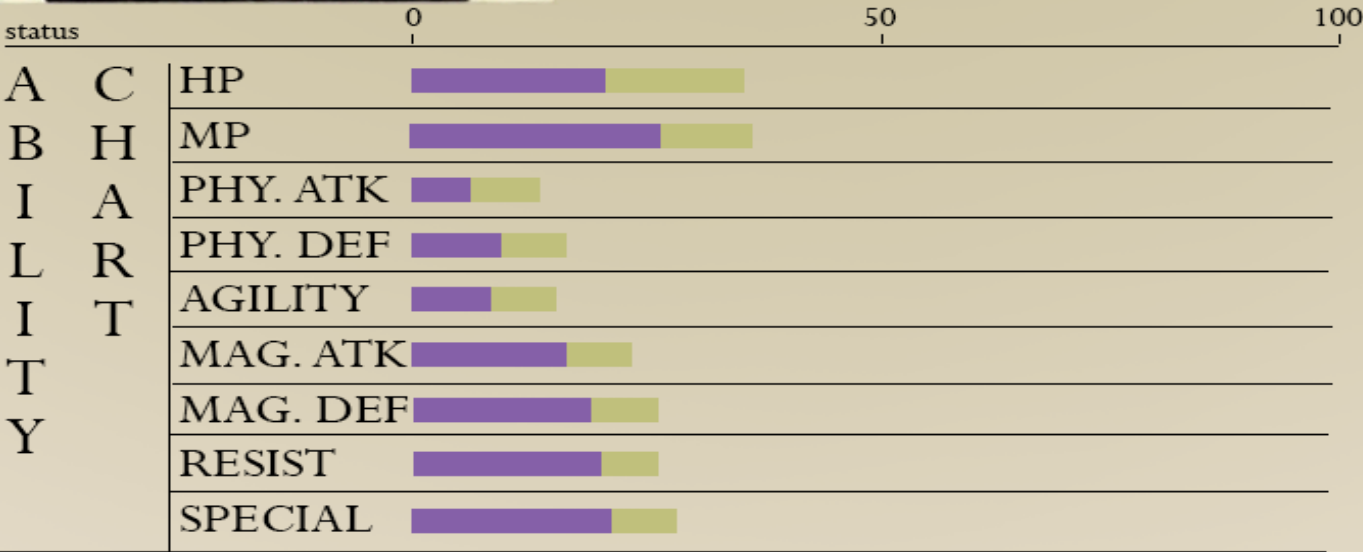
ResidenceNil

AlignmentExtreme EvilSense of Justice: -500

Racial LevelNil

*level 22 when he was just a monster
(Starting level before his ability was enhanced
with special skills)

Job LevelNil



AFTERWORD

I trust nobody here has started reading from this volume. Therefore — it's been a while, I'm Maruyama Kugane.

Then, like I mentioned in the previous volume's afterword, this volume is quite unique for a light novel, being entirely about the Lizardmen. That's pretty rare among light novels, right? Then again, perhaps I'm just ignorant, but I have the feeling that very few light novels write about the main character launching a one-sided attack on a peaceful village.

How did you find this volume, everyone?

I suppose opinions will tend towards two extremes. However, in future volumes, it is very likely that scenes of the strong trampling the weak will show up.

The main character of Overlord is not someone who only deals with problems and situations that he sees. He is the kind of person who takes action to achieve his own aims and to reap benefits for himself. In other words, he is not the type who only goes to rescue the female lead when he hears that she's in trouble, but he is the carnivorous type who goes out and finds the female lead when she's in a fix ...wait, that sounds kind of wrong.

Therefore, as you who play strategy games may know, the easiest way of achieving Ainz's aim of amassing military might is not to challenge the strong, but to subdue the weak to bulk up one's forces.

Therefore, I wanted to write this story from the less commonly-seen perspective of the invader, as opposed to the more common point of view of the invaded party. That said, a back and forth slugging match hardly counts as an invasion.

Next, I shall express my thanks.

So-bin-sama, your Crusch drawing was adorable and made me very excited. Chord Design Studio, your design of the cover, the spine, and the poster was really cool. Ohaku-sama, you are always meticulous in your proofreading. And then there is my editor F-da-sama, who has assisted me in many ways.

Thank you all.

Honey, thank you for the edits and I am grateful for all the cracks you made. Cleaning up really is troublesome.

Also, my deepest and sincerest thanks goes out to all your readers who bought this book. Thank you very much.

Then, I hope we'll be able to meet in the next volume.

See you.

As an aside, I have been looking for a way to put “death” into a chapter title in every book, but I'm starting to run out of ideas, so I will probably stop doing so from the next volume onwards. It was just amusement on my part, so missing it will not cause any problems ...however, things will be difficult if there are no tasteful names in this part! Sadness.

07/2013

Maruyama Kugane

*RUSTLE
*RUSTLE



Postscript by So-bin



LET'S MAKE A
CRUSCH FIGURINE そびん