
Mushoku Tensei

– Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu –

– Volume 20 –

Young Man Period
~ Zanoba Chapter ~

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Chapter 1

Zanoba's Resolve

Previously: Zanoba received orders to return to Shirone.

Part 1

Sharia Magic University, Research Building.

Zanoba's research lab.

Six individuals are in a circle around a table.

Zanoba, Cliff, and I are sitting; Elinalise, Julie, and Ginger standing as if to surround us.

Elinalise is holding her baby, so really 7 people are present.

Zanoba looks very troubled, and Cliff agitated. Julie also looks troubled, and Ginger looks ready to burst in tears.

Even Elinalise looks flabbergasted.

An unhappy mood permeates the air.

"Zanoba, calm down, can you start again from the top, this time with details?"

".... Okay."

Zanoba is expressionless, which is terrifying since he usually has a smile on his face. It's like he's a different person entirely.

"This morning, a soldier from Shirone delivered a letter to yours truly."

He already showed us the letters, which I'm currently holding. I take it out again to read. The envelope is sealed with the Shirone Kingdom crest and Pax's signature, with three letters sealed within.

The first details the political turmoil in Shirone Kingdom in the last half a year. The gist of it was about how the Seventh Prince Pax, who was sent off to study abroad at Kingdom of Dragon King, gained their backing, and returned to Shirone Kingdom. Then he initiated a coup, murdered King Shirone, as well as rest of the royal family, and became the new king of Shirone Kingdom. The contents seem to prattle on with praise for Pax.

The second letter concerns what happened after the coup. It's mainly about how most of the country's ministers and generals were replaced or escaped from Shirone. As the population declined in Shirone, its effective combat force declined as well. Once they realize this, countries in the North will likely take advantage of the situation and attack. Because Shirone lacks the force necessary to defend itself, a plan was hatched to recall the miko Zanoba to defend his home nation. The letter is written with a [political change is necessary, so Pax did nothing wrong] tone.

The third letter is an official letter to recall Zanoba. It includes a cancellation of the previous king's order and an order to return home. It even has the seal of King Shirone stamped on it, very official looking.

Basically the three letters are [Pax's Heroic Tales], [Excuse], and [Draft Letter].

The coup led to a decline in their fighting force. Reinforcements are necessary to stave off enemy attacks. It sounds like a bunch of excuses, but they kind of make sense. Of course, a question remains about how useful Zanoba is in combat. But Zanoba is quite famous in Shirone, so recalling him alone should at least help with the troops morale.

But considering that they have the backings of the Kingdom of Dragon King, why not leave national defense to them?

I don't know the situation on the ground, so maybe there are reasons why that's not possible.

No alliance is set in stone.

If the letter didn't mention protection from the Kingdom of Dragon King, it probably isn't possible.

Pax and Zanoba had a history together.

Eight years ago, with Zanoba's help, I destroyed Pax's scheme.

As a result, Pax was sent off to study abroad in the Kingdom of Dragon King, and Zanoba was sent off to study abroad in Ranoa Kingdom.

If Pax still holds a grudge, he won't let Zanoba off that easily.

So maybe this draft letter is really a trap for Zanoba.

Well, leaving that aside. The problem now is what to do? What will Zanoba choose?

"Then, given the situation, what will you do?"

"I'll follow the order to return to Shirone and join the battle."

Here's the problem.

No matter if it's Cliff or Ginger, they all disagree.

They could understand if Zanoba wanted to return to avenge the previous king.

They could also understand if Zanoba chose to disobey the order too.

But Zanoba did neither.

Even though it's obviously a trap, he's going to comply.

With Pax.

With the usurper.

"You have no reason to go."

That's what Cliff said.

He thinks the chance of a trap is high.

Or rather, he already decided that this is a trap.

"You want to take a chance, but this is obviously a trap for your life."

"Um."

"In a coup, the most obvious thing to do is to eliminate the entire royal family, to avoid problems down the line."

Cliff himself has been affected by the political struggles underway at Holy Kingdom of Milis. If his father the pope loses, his life will be in danger.

Eliminate an enemy by killing his entire clan. It's only natural.

"And even if the enemy attack is real, what good will you do on your own?"

"Um... Maybe not much. Regardless, I'm a miko after all."

"So what?"

Frustrated, Cliff slams the table with a bang.

Zanoba lets it pass.

"Even if you beat back the enemy, have you considered what Pax has planned for you?"

Cliff knew about why Zanoba was sent out of the country.

When was he told? Probably when I was telling him about how Zanoba and I first met.

That's why he knows what kind of person Pax is.

Maybe his opinion was biased, but I can appreciate why he's so adamantly opposed.

"He'll probably get rid of you after he's finished using you!"

That's why he was saying this.

But I agree with Cliff on this one.

Assuming that war is really on the horizon because other countries are invading.

Assuming that Pax really wants Zanoba's power.

Assuming that Zanoba returns to Shirone, using his miko power, solves the crisis.

Then what?

As royalty, Third Prince Zanoba, what kind of existence is he for Pax?

When enemies attack, Zanoba has value.

He might even be considered the savior of a nation.

He might even become really popular among the soldiers that he saves.

What would Pax think about someone like that, with the same royal blood flowing in his veins?

No doubt he'll be a hindrance.

A potential threat to his position and survival.

When Pax considers this, what will he do?

That's obvious.

"Zanoba, I think so too."

"... It's highly probable."

After I concur with Cliff's opinion, Zanoba nods seriously.

He should know well that Pax still holds a grudge and might make an attempt on his life.

"But I must go."

Even though Zanoba agrees with us, he still thinks he needs to go.

Why? I don't get it at all.

"... Why?"

"Because this is an official order of the kingdom."

Zanoba replied.

True, the stationary has the king's stamp.

Forget the previous king's order, immediately drop out of school, and return home -- that's the order.

"But that order comes from Pax, right? The king has changed. There's no need for you to comply?"

"Shisho, if everyone disobeys their orders just because the king has changed, then the country cannot survive."

"Even if you say so, he didn't become king through the proper channel... isn't he just a usurper?"

"No matter how he did it, the reality that Pax is the king does not change."

Is that so?

Yeah, in my previous life this happened in many countries as well...

What would the ministers of a country do in this situation...

Would they keep working even under the usurper...

"Zanoba, you really want to work for Pax?"

"That's not the case."

Slowly, Zanoba shakes his head.

There's nothing we can do.

Zanoba refuses to listen, regardless of what we say.

Realizing that frustrates me.

"T-Then why?"

I unconsciously raised my voice.

"Even though you know you'll be killed, and you don't plan to follow him, then there's no reason for you to go. Why are you so stubborn?"

Or is he afraid of the consequences?

If Zanoba refuses a direct order, Shirone Kingdom might retaliate.

But this is Ranoa Kingdom, it'll take at least half a year to rush here from Shirone.

If I ask Ariel for a favor, he should be safe as a refugee in Asura Kingdom. [Due to the coup in Shirone Kingdom, to escape the danger I'm exiled to Asura Kingdom.] But I don't know whether that excuse of exile will work...

"My reason?"

Zanoba laughs at my confusion.

A different laugh from his usual, natural one.

A forced laughter.

"Shishou, you're aware, that for Shirone Kingdom I'm considered a nuisance."

"Not really, since you're a miko?"

"Yes, but, I'm a miko that murdered royal blood because of my lack of self-control."

Hearing this, I suddenly recall Zanoba's nickname back at Shirone Kingdom.

[The Head Ripping Prince.]

He ripped off the head of princess escort's newborn - his own brother - a mad prince.

It doesn't need to be said, killing his own relative without reason, even royalty can't escape that unpunished.

But, Zanoba himself was left untouched for that, even though his own mother was forced out of the country.

"I was forgiven, because I am a miko. Because they believe one day I can be of use."

A bit shaken, Cliff looks nervously at my direction.

Maybe he hasn't heard about this before.

"After that, I even ripped the head of my own wife, which precipitated a civil war."

Zanoba has married before.

A politically motivated royal wedding, and on their wedding night he ripped her head off. This caused a crisis in the kingdom.

"Even though she said some unforgivable things, which I never plan to forgive, but punishing me for the resulting conflict would not be unreasonable."

Zanoba looks at me as he says this.

"But I was not punished."

Then, he sighs, and as matter-of-fact he continues.

"Shisho, do you know why the kingdom let me live?"

"..."

I have no answer.

Zanoba continues.

"After that, I met Shisho, and the country kicks this troublesome me out of the country. It would be perfectly reasonable to sentence me to death then, but I was merely send abroad. I wasn't just exiled, but instead sent to Sharia. The kingdom even spent heavily for my living expenses. What do you think is the reason?"

I know where Zanoba is going with this.

I get why the kingdom left Zanoba alive.

"So at the moment of crisis, I can save the kingdom."

I have no answer to Zanoba's strong reasons.

Even Cliff can only stare.

Only Ginger looks understanding, pained.

"Fighting for my kingdom is my duty. This is why I'm left alive. It's for this reason my nation forgave my transgressions. That's why, I must go. Otherwise, if I wait for the kingdom to be attacked, it'll already be too late. Rather, the enemy might already be attacking. That's why I must make haste."

He's right.

As repayment for nurturing him, letting him live, he has to repay his kingdom.

A debt must be repaid, that's only natural.

Perhaps, he thought he should have headed back during Pax's coup.

But what's past is past.

Right now if he starts another insurrection, it will further degrade the nation's combat strength, Shirone Kingdom might really face destruction.

That's why he will obey Pax, and become the protector of Shirone Kingdom.

I get it.

But, Zanoba.

This isn't like you.

Weren't you a more free, selfish person?

Shouldn't you be saying, [This has nothing to do with me. More importantly, look at this doll! Look at these exquisite details!] Aren't you that kind of character?

.... But I can't say that.

That's not right.

Honestly, I want to tell Zanoba [You can let this slide.]

But, that's not right.

"... You will get killed."

I only have this to say.

Zanoba replies.

"If the motherland wants me dead, then I can only die."

Resolutely, he answers.

Maybe if you ask the warriors of the old, the soldiers of the old Japanese army, they might answer the same.

But, I need to stop him.

I don't want Zanoba to die.

But, I can't just be straightforward and reject him.

Because Zanoba right now is looking straight at me.

Or maybe I have changed.

I have nothing to say.

I don't know what to say.

"Shisho, Cliff, please don't look like that."

Zanoba shows a happy smile.

His usual smile.

"When I was in Shirone, duty was never a thing on my mind. But after meeting Shisho, meeting Cliff, meeting Nanahoshi, after living here, I thought about a lot of things. About what my purpose in life is..."

And that's how, his conclusion became [protect motherland?]

How did he connect the time we spent together with protecting motherland?

I don't get it at all.

"Ha, that might sound presumptuous, even I don't really know how that came about! Ha ha ha!"

Zanoba laughs, but I can't.

I don't want to argue about his conclusion.

Whether it's right or wrong, it's only up to him to decide.

I can only respect his choice.

The only thing is, what happens with that choice, that is, if Zanoba dies... I don't want that to happen.

Zanoba is my dear friend.

Thinking back, he has always been by my side.

He is the one that came to my aid in Shirone.

When I came to the university, if I hadn't met him, I might not have the friends I have now.

Meeting Rinia and Pursena, that was because of Zanoba's dolls.

Without Zanoba, Cliff and I might not have got along like we are right now.
When we went to the Magic Continent together, he single-handedly held back Atofe.
The Magic Armor as well, without him, making it would be impossible.
Now that I think about it, he has always come to my aid.
Moreover, when we make dolls together, those are always happy moments.
I'm really happy.
He always puts me on a pedestal, no matter what I do he showers me with praises.
Just being with him alone is comforting.
Maybe others think differently, but for me, without a doubt, it's very comforting.

And it's him, in my future diary, that stood by my side till the end.
I can't just stand by and watch Zanoba march to his death.
Rudeus Greyrat can't let Zanoba Shirone die.

... Oh?

Wait.

Future diary?

Suddenly, I realize something.

"Zanoba."

"What is it, Shisho?"

As if only natural I follow up with.

"I'm going too."

How Zanoba reacts, the mix of anxiety and happiness on his face, leaves a strong impression on me.

Part 2

After that talk, I head over to Orsted's place.

I spend the day there thinking about the situation.

First, Zanoba summoned by his motherland. That never happened in the diary.

Zanoba was always in Sharia.

Right? I don't know for sure, but according to the diary he's always by my side.

The diary never mentions any draft notice.

Maybe Pax's coup failed? No, rather a coup probably never took place.

Either way, this differs from the diary.

In that case, maybe... Hitogami is up to something again.

Now I think about it, for the past year and a half, I have yet to see another 3 Hitogami apostles appear together.

If Pax is an Apostle, then it's reasonable to expect that he has been working in the background during this time.

Orsted has said, [Wait for the opportunity], maybe this is the opportunity he speaks of.

Um, this is it.

It shouldn't be wrong.

I have been training for this exact moment.

To help Zanoba.

"Orsted-sama!"

Orsted is his usual self, busy writing something on a high class table.

"Ah, Rudeus, what is it?"

I explain the situation to Orsted, who looks scary as usual.

That Zanoba has received a draft notice, which didn't happen to Zanoba in the diary.

"Isn't this Hitogami's doing?"

"..."

I said full of confidence, but Orsted just stares at me with his scary face.

Eh?

Weird.

Did I make a mistake?

"According to the history I'm aware of, Shirone Kingdom will be destroyed due to Pax Shirone's coup in thirty years."

Orsted, looking terribly scary, answers the troubled me.

Wait no, he looks no scarier than usual...

".... Thirty years?"

"Right."

Orsted explains to me what's supposed to happen.

The original history.

In other words, when the Metastasis Event never occur and where I was never involved with Shirone Kingdom.

In that history, Pax took advantage of the kingdom's slave market to gain allies and a war chest, taking hostages against his enemies.

And finally, initiates a coup.

The coup was a success, and Pax became king.

But by then, Pax has lost his drive and burned out.

After becoming king and gaining complete freedom, Pax starts questioning his kingship.

He vacated the throne and proposed a republic.

Thus, the Shirone Republic was born.

Shirone Republic went on to become a powerful nation.

It managed to swallow about half of the current strife zone.

Thus, Shirone Republic became the fourth power of the world and a hindrance to Hitogami.

"Hitogami hates that, thus he manipulated you to head to Shirone Kingdom, and used you to exile Pax from Shirone Kingdom. But..."

Because I followed Hitogami's advice, the situation in Shirone Kingdom changed.

Both of them were exiled from the country, and the cause of Pax's kingship disappeared.

Shirone Republic won't be born.

"If Pax becomes king, it'll give birth to a republic."

Orsted looks troubled.

In other words, this is exactly opposite of what Hitogami wished for.

"This time with Kingdom of Dragon King as his backing, maybe he won't propose forming a republic?"

"No, that won't change. I have seen similar situations before, in the end Pax always made that proposal."

Regardless of history, as long as Pax becomes king, he'll propose a republic, and Shirone Kingdom will become Shirone Republic.

Kind of like Ariel's situation.

The conclusion is destined by fate.

As soon as he's king, the rest is set in stone.

"Huh? What about Pax in the future diary?"

"Perhaps Pax did not initiate a coup, like Hitogami originally intended, and Shirone Kingdom remains a small nation."

In other words.

Past timeline: [Pax coups, becomes king, gives birth to a republic.]

Diary timeline: [Because of Hitogami's manipulation, Pax loses the kingship, the republic becomes stillborn.]

This timeline: [Pax coups, becomes king, likely gives birth to a republic.]

Something like that?

In other words, this time Hitogami is purposely changing the scenario to what it supposed to be.

"Why would he?"

"It's a trap."

Orsted's words add another layer of fog on the situation.

"Maybe Hitogami is willing to trade-off returning to the original situation to kill you off."

Like in mahjong where you break your own hand to ruin the opponent's. ^[1]

Something like that?

"Thus, if you go, Hitogami will likely have a sure-kill trap set for you."

"Can his target be Orsted-sama?"

"That is a possibility, but Zanoba Shirone is your friend, so he's the bait."

"..."

Pax summons Zanoba home.

It's pretty much confirmed to be a trap, but Zanoba resolves to go regardless.

Even though Hitogami shouldn't be able to predict whether I would go or not, but I'll probably take the bait if Zanoba has a high chance of death.

Hitogami really knows me well.

... Hitogami is rather clever this time.

"Zanoba makes your equipment. Even if you don't go to Shirone, Hitogami probably thinks getting rid of him would help him down the line."

Two birds, one stone.

If I come, he'll take care of both of us.

If not, just one is fine.

"Chances of Zanoba as an apostle?"

"Unlikely in this scenario. He's pretty much a nobody in the history of Shirone Kingdom."

Quiet, you!

He's very important to me!

Right now, I'm ready to take the bait willingly for him.

"Then, what should we do?"

"Just like before, wreck his plans straight up."

"... Ah, right."

If Orsted comes along, it should be easy.

Just like what happened with Ariel.

It doesn't matter if there's a trap.

Even if I'm drawn in like a moth to a flame, I can always just say [Please mister.]

Like the light on an angler-fish, he can rush to my aid and easily strike down my enemies.

Recently I've been called [Dragon's Underling] or [Dragon's Claw], but truth be told I'm really [Dragon's Lantern.]

"But, it's possible too that Hitogami isn't involved."

"... Explain?"

"Since this was supposed to happen."

Ah.

This was supposed to happen.

"What we talked about so far, truthfully are mere guesses. The diary never did mention what happened around this time. Maybe Zanoba Shirone did go home, then returned safely."

Without Hitogami's interference, it happened anyways.

Zanoba like the previous was recalled to Shirone Kingdom, did his job, and returned home safely.

Is... this... possible?

".... Em."

"Zanoba in the diary had a bounty on his head due to Milis. Considering that, Shirone would likely bar him from return. Or maybe Zanoba himself rejected the draft notice, or maybe Ginger discarded it for him..."

That makes sense.

If I calm down and think about it, the diary situation is already different than now.

Even if Pax succeeded in his coup in the future diary, Zanoba still had a bounty on his head. Ignoring the existence of a person wanted by the Holy Kingdom of Milis makes a lot of sense too.

Holy Kingdom of Milis has mercenary knights.

If Zanoba returned, those knights would likely consider Shirone an enemy state.

The possibilities are basically endless.

"But didn't Hitogami already use me to change the history of Shirone Kingdom? Will Shirone still become a Republic in this situation?"

"He wants to change it but failed. That possibility exists. Your fate might be strong, but even you aren't strong enough to change everything."

Oh, even I can't change history as I please.

"Oh..."

Just now, Orsted realized something.

He's in his thinking pose, with his hand on his chin.

"W-what is it?"

"Wait... Pax was in the Kingdom of the Dragon King before, correct?"

"Right."

"In that case, the possibility that the King there led the coup is high."

"Ah, that's right."

Ah, that's the case.

Pax was in Kingdom of Dragon King.

In other words, the possibility exists that Pax was manipulated by another apostle there.

Thus the possibility exists that Pax isn't an apostle.

Rather, someone else at Kingdom of Dragon King is Hitogami's apostle.

This person is the actual person manipulating from the shadows this time.

"Alright, I shall head to Kingdom of Dragon King and check for apostles there."

Eh?

You're not coming with me?

"B-but, if Shirone Kingdom really is Hitogami's trap... then what should I do?"

"... If you're scared, then don't go."

In other words, leave Zanoba to die this time?

Well, as Orsted mentioned, maybe Zanoba won't be asked to do anything important.

Orsted promised to protect my family, even though Zanoba is my dear friend, he isn't family.

Ah, then I should just make him family.

Ask one of my family members to marry him...

Wait, no, that's not right.

If it's Zanoba, I won't mind leaving one of my sisters in his care, but that's not right.

"Zanoba has helped me. In the diary, even till the end, he always helped me."

"..."

"I won't leave him to die."

Question is, will I alone be enough to help Zanoba?

No, I don't have to go alone.

Who can I send to help Zanoba?

Eris has contacts with Holy Land of Swords, knows some Sword Saints, maybe I can arrange Zanoba a bodyguard army or something.

No, I can't let outsiders know about the magic teleport circles.

My mercenary army isn't ready to mobilize yet...

"Then you go to Shirone, I to Kingdom of Dragon King, and we will destroy Hitogami's plans. That's that."

"Okay."

Thinking about it, all sorts of possibilities exist.

We definitely need to look for clues and investigate.

"Say, I forgot to mention, when you head to Shirone, promise me one thing."

"Oh."

A promise?

Definitely don't die on me, something like that?

If he said that, I might get nervous...

"Don't kill Pax Shirone, even if he's an apostle."

"... Eh?"

"Don't kill Pax Shirone."

It's that important? That you have to tell me twice?

Ah no, it's because I didn't react the first time.

Don't kill Pax...

Why.... Oh, I get it.

Because if Pax is killed, Shirone can't become a Republic.

OK BOSS.

Even if Pax considers us an enemy, I will let him know beforehand that I won't kill him.

"Got it."

But the difficulty has been raised.

If Pax wants us killed, but we can't kill him.

In that case... all I can do is try to avoid getting killed.

And bring Zanoba back with me.

Eh?

Say, what must Zanoba do before he returns to Sharia?

What does Zanoba want?

National defense?

Then how far does he have to go before he feels satisfied?

Well, forget it.

All in all, I'll go first, and try to convince him when the opportunity arises.

"Thank you very much, Orsted-sama."

"No need to thank me."

I make a deep bow towards Orsted and leave the office.

Part 3

But, a Hitogami trap.

Zanoba had no complaints about me coming along.

But, if I told him it's a trap, he might reconsider.

And if he reconsiders?

Suppose he refuses, should I tell him?

In order to kill me off, Hitogami set a trap using Shirone Kingdom.

Using you as a bait to kill me off.

That's why you shouldn't go, etc...

No, that won't do.

He'll just say [Even if that's the case, I must go] in response.

In that case,

... then I'll stay quiet for now.

Zanoba might end up hating me this time.

Chapter 2

Foreboding

Part 1

After I went home, I gave a report to my family.

Recently there is a lot about my business trips that I can't talk about.
But since this time it might take a while, I feel I owe them more details.

First, our office doesn't have a magic teleport circle directed at Shirone Kingdom.
Instead, I'll purchase a horse carriage at the Kingdom of Dragon King then travel to the Shirone Kingdom from there.

Last time it took almost four months for me to get from the Kingdom of Dragon King to Shirone.

Including investigating on the way, at best I can cut travel time to two months or so.
Two months.

In other words, travel alone will take four months.

Considering that Eris will give birth in about three, there's no way for me to get back in time.

Of course, if I ask Perugia for the favor, we can head directly to Shirone Kingdom instead.
Zanoba and Perugia got along well. Zanoba would often bring new paintings or dolls he found in the market to Perugia and have an art show together, just the two of them.

If anything caught Perugia's eyes, Zanoba would happily offer it to him.

Since they get along so well, if Zanoba asks for a favor, he probably won't refuse.

Still, even if we cut the trip back and forth to under one month, we don't know how long Zanoba will spend in Shirone itself.

So I still don't know how to proceed right now.

It'd be easy if all I need is to kick someone's ass and go home, but Pax cannot be killed.

The alternatives will probably take a lot more time.

"That's why, I don't know when I will get back."

After dinner, I said.

Norn isn't home tonight, but that's typical. It can't be helped.

Still, the whole family is present, including Sylphy and Zenith. ^[2]

Besides how long it takes, I also gave them the gist of the situation, but I didn't mention the possibility that it's a trap by Hitogami.

It's only a possibility, after all. It'll be troublesome if Eris insists on coming.

It might be selfish of me, but because of that they didn't raise any objections.

"I'm fine with this."

They all look toward Eris.

Eris looks comfortable in the center of attention, with her hands wrapped around her ever growing tummy.

"Well, it can't be helped."

How easygoing, nothing compared to how nervous Sylphy was.

"Hey Eris, aren't you too indifferent?"

"Even if Rudeus isn't here, the baby will be born."

"But, this is important!"

"I know, but all Rudeus would do is hold my hand, right?"

"It's true, but..."

Finding no retort, Sylphy shrinks back.

Roxy folds her hands with a [She's right, you know] look on her face.

But the person with personal experience still believes how important my hand's warmth is during birth.

"Rudeus isn't necessary when it comes to childbirth."

Eris said that with a raised voice.

I feel a little sad to hear that I'm not a necessity.

But with Lilia and Aisha here, my lack of necessity is a matter of fact.

"It's fine as long as Rudeus praises me for giving him a wonderful son, once he gets back."

Eris sure is direct today, how manly. She's probably doing this to leave me without worries.

Eris is starting to become considerate of others. I feel proud, but also a little lonesome.

[You only need one to birth a baby], as a husband, should that be what I hope the wife to say?

Well, I'm not the one going to give birth.

"... By the way, have you picked a name already?"

"Yes, a great name, just look forward to it!"

But didn't you say you only thought of names for boys?

What if you end up giving birth to a girl while I was away?

Do you really plan to name her and raise her as a boy?

"Eris... If the baby's a girl, please give her your mother's name, Hilda."

"No, I'm not gonna give her an old lady's name!"

Denied.

Do you have to call her an old lady...

Hilda-san is probably crying from the beyond right now.

"Ara ara, just let Eris-ane do what she wants. Just follow Slyphy-ane's example, Onii-chan, and support her quietly from behind."

With Aisha's input, the discussion is over.

Indeed, Sylphy really has always been supporting me from the shadows.

As expected as the captain of the wife's corp.

I can count on her.

I'd worry if Eris was left by herself, but I have my other trustworthy wives here, and sisters and mothers too.

No matter what happens, I can count on them.

"I'm more worried about Rudeus going on his own again, so honestly I wanted to come along!"

On the other hand.

Honestly I'm the one worrying them.

Indeed, this time has some elements of danger. Basically, I'll likely fall for one of Hitogami's traps.

Ugh, now I start to feel rather uneasy.

Will I come back alive this time...

No, worrying alone won't help.

I got to do what I got to do, and take down any enemy that comes my way.

Take things one at a time, I'll just do that.

"Rudi, you look uneasy."

Roxy asked, seeing how troubled I look.

She's her usual self, holding Lara to her bosom, looking towards me with fatigued eyes.

"Um, yeah, it might devolve into war this time..."

Let's go with that first.

Roxy raises her head and studies me with a serious expression on her face.

"To be honest, I think it might be my fault this time."

"Eh? Why?"

"Because the one tasked to educate the young Prince Pax was me."

Now that she mentioned it, Roxy has spent a long time at Shirone Kingdom.

"No one blames a home tutor for what the student does in the future. You can't teach him everything."

"That may be, but his twisted personality happened under my watch."

That's not your fault, Roxy.

How could a person turn twisted from Roxy's brilliant teaching be possible in this world?
I know that for sure.

That's what I want to say, but honestly speaking I know nothing about this Pax person...
According to Orsted, even if it's via a coup, he seems to have what it takes to be king, so perhaps he did grow a bit under Roxy's tutelage.

No, impossible.

How can it be possible.

Even the worst of human scum can learn greatest under Roxy's teachings.

Definitely not your fault, Roxy.

Definitely another reason.

"Sensei, it's not your fault."

"... Rudi, did you ever notice, how creepy you look when you call me Sensei?"

Eh?

Really?

That's impossible.

I only call Roxy Sensei out of utter respect.

How can me looking creepy be possible?

It's true that we have teacher-student play at times, but that's only a game between husband and wife.

I definitely do not have any ulterior motive.

I'm innocent!

"I have mixed feelings about this... but I might just add fuel to the fire if I go this time..."

Roxy glanced at Lara as she said this.

Lara looks at me with her sleepy face.

As if wanting to say something she stares straight at me.

Roxy looks somewhat troubled.

Maybe if there wasn't school or a kid, Roxy might want to come along with me.

"No, Roxy, it's definitely not your fault."

That's all I can say for now.

I don't know if Roxy would have become Pax's home tutor, if I didn't reincarnate in this world. Yet Pax would still become a king through a coup.

Moreover, the chances are high this time that Hitogami is behind this.

If Pax was educated by Roxy, even if he received a different education than other timelines, I doubt the situation would be any different.

That's why, this crisis is definitely not Roxy's fault.

"Pax has been manipulated by Hitogami."

"But... No, right, I get it."

Roxy still has her reservations, but in the end she dropped her objections.

She probably is still bothered that one of her students did a bad thing.

Suddenly I look at Sylphy.

She isn't my student, but the one that taught her magic foundations was me, and I think I taught her many other things as well.

If after the Metastasis Event she didn't end up with Ariel, but instead used the magic I taught her to kill and steal. What would I think?

I definitely would have thought, [I taught her wrong], [I'm responsible], [I need to stop her], [I need to get her to listen to me], and etc.

"Eh, Rudi, what is it?"

"Nothing, I just realize that Sylphy had always listened to everything I said."

"That came out of no where, haven't I been doing that even now? Only recently, Rudi was so pushy, even though I was reluctant, and forced me..."

"Hey, there's children present."

"Ah, right."

Lucy, who's sitting besides her, looks back and forth at me and Sylphy.

Her face reads, [What are you talking about.]

How cute.

It's too early for her, too early to learn about night time wrestling strategies.

Let's end this family meeting here, on a positive note.

"Alright, everyone, I'll leave the rest..."

"Ah! Ah-!"

Crying suddenly.

Looking over, the usually quiet Lara is bursting in tears in Roxy's bosom.

She's looking towards me, crying, with her tiny hands outstretch.

"Kya! Aah-!"

"Lara, what wrong? Be good..."

Roxy nervously tries to comfort her, but she just keeps crying.

I think this is the first time Lara ever had an outburst like this.

Maybe she couldn't handle the heavy mood.

She just keeps looking, with her hands outstretched towards me, crying a river.

"Rudi..."

"Oh."

I take Lara from Roxy's hands, carrying her in my arms.

Lara instantly stops crying as soon as she grabs hold of me.
She grasps tightly on my shoulder, glued on me like a cicada.
Maybe she can sense that I'll soon be far away.
If she was crying because of that, it bothers me a bit...
But this never happened previously.
Maybe because the mood feels different this time, she sensed something?

"Well, papa will go away for a while, so be a good girl, okay?"

Oh, she should be fine if she stopped crying.
I lightly pat her back before handing her back to Roxy.
I tried to hand her over.
But couldn't.
Lara refuses to let go.
She grabs my cloak and clings on like a rhinoceros beetle.

"Kya-! Aah-!"

Just when I try to pry her away, Lara starts crying loudly and refuses to leave.
I'm actually very happy that Lara wants to be with papa so much.
Be a good girl, when papa comes home, I'll take a bath-bath with you.

"Well, Roxy, I'll leave her to you."

"Eh? Ah, okay."

Well, I said that I can't pry her off, but she's still a baby, after all.
I easily toss her over to Roxy.

"Aah---! Kya-----!"

Right away, Lara cries out like she's at death's door.
Almost as loud as Eris, nothing like how quiet she usually was.
I feel a little guilty, like I'm abusing her somehow.

"Then, while I'm away..."

"Maa--! Baa----! Aaa--!"

No, papa, stay.

That's what I imagine she said.

I feel like being held back.

But I must go.

I can't leave my dear friend alone.

"Bya--! Aaa--! Aaa--!"

I glance at Lara, crying like she saw a ghost, she reaches out in fear towards me.

This is the first time I've ever seen Lara like this.

Everyone else looks dumbfounded at Lara, all wondering [What's going on.]

"Be good... What's going on. Why all the sudden... Lilia, do you know about this?"

"No, this is the first time I've seen this as well..."

Regardless of what Roxy does, she can't seem to calm Lara down.

I suddenly feel anxious.

Is there nothing strange going on?

Will it be alright if I go?

Lara is chosen by Holy Beast Leo as the savior of the world!

Even though I don't know how she will save the world, but maybe she has some special ability.

Like premonition.

Or she sees a dead man walking.

Eh... Am I, going to die?

"Aaa---! Bya---!"

The sorrow in her cries echoes through the room.

This only adds to my unease.

"Okay, I get it, Lara."

In the midst of her cries, a person picks up the crying Lara and embraces her. Raising her to her own eye level, with exchanged glances she said.

"I'll go with papa and protect him."

Like the warm sun basking the earth this gentlewoman says.
Only that.

Instantly Lara stops crying.

Part 2

I tried to stop her.

It's really dangerous this time.

The chances that it's a Hitogami trap is high.

Roxy will just get in the way once the fight starts.

Perugius doesn't allow Magic race in the Sky Castle.

Teaching is Roxy's dream job, she can't just go on vacation for a few months without a heads up.

She might get fired.

Babies cry all the time. Now that she stopped, just forget about it.

I spoke rather harshly, making up all sorts of excuses on why Roxy shouldn't come.

But Roxy looks unmoved.

"If it's a trap, then that explains why Lara started crying."

"Even if I'm a hindrance in fights, I might come in handy elsewhere!"

"If I can't go along, then I will just find my own way there."

"Teaching is my dream, but it doesn't matter when my husband's life is at stake."

"It's a mother's duty when her daughter cries."

Roxy counters my every excuse, leaving me lost for words.

Not a single member of my family are with me on this one.

For sure, none of them think it's okay if Roxy dies.

Rather, as soon as they heard [This is Hitogami's trap], all of them had [So that's what it is] written all over their faces.

[Why didn't you tell us], they admonish me.

Then Eris demands to come along, with Sylphy trying to stop her.

Even Sylphy starts to speak about whether she should come as well.

An out-of-ordinary unease clings to everyone's hearts.

Will I really be alright on my own?
Really?
This is what they mean by bad omen?
Something will happen to Rudi?

Everyone's anxiety rests squarely on Roxy.
That's why she decides to go with me as the family's representative.
Because of Roxy's words, even Sylphy and Eris want to come along.
As expected of Roxy, but I have mixed emotions about praising her for that.

I'm in a bad spot as well.
I'm the kind that wants to treasure the things that are important to me.
Roxy, my special treasure, if possible I want to keep her safe in the most secure of treasure chests.
But, Roxy is stubborn.
Even if I stop her now, she'll definitely go off to Shirone Kingdom on her own.

Knowing this, I have no choice but let her come with me.
It's easier to protect her with her by my side.

But I'm also starting to feel anxious.
Facing a trap that Hitogami set, and I can't count on Orsted coming to my rescue this time.
I haven't even figured out how to convince Zanoba to come back with me yet.
Only dark clouds cover the path before me, how foreboding.

Roxy is coming along during my predicament.
The one I respect the most of this world by my side.
There's nothing more reassuring than that.

Part 3

Next day we begin preparations for the journey to Shirone Kingdom.

Preparing everything that we need for the trip.

First, equipment for Zanoba.

It goes without saying that I don't want Zanoba to die.

Because of that, I pick a few choice armor out of the office armory for Zanoba to use.

First is a rather hefty full body armor.

It is augmented with [Increase fire resistance] magic tools.

A perfect match for Zanoba, who's weak against fire.

Even though Zanoba seems vulnerable to fire, but that's more or less true for all humans.

Next is a weapon.

Orsted said, there's no weapon tough enough for the strength of a miko like Zanoba.

Regardless of how special the sword is, it will break like a twig in his hands.

That's why I made Zanoba a bat.

A stone bat, hardened with my magic.

It's shaped like a racket.

It's deceptively heavy, so much that even a grown man can't lift it.

But Zanoba pinches it, holding it like a twig. If a single swing from that lands, it's basically instant kill.

It's like attaching lasers on sharks. ^[3]

Even though Zanoba has ridiculous strength, he has plenty of weaknesses.

He isn't fast, but I have just the thing for that.

A magic item called [Net of Overfishing].

For reasons unknown, as soon as it's cast, as if it has a mind of its own it will automatically chase and tie up the opponent.

Taking advantage of Zanoba's strength, it can instantly cripple an opponent, and drag him within Zanoba's striking range.

I'll just leave these three pieces of equipment with Zanoba for now.

He doesn't really like wearing full armor, but he's more than happy with the rest of them.

I also prepared equipment for Roxy.

Of course her safety is my top concern.

So I mostly picked equipment that can adequately protect her.

Of course, Roxy isn't very strong, so I can't exactly dress her up in full body armor like Zanoba.

She has plenty of combat experience, so wearing unfamiliar equipment might just become an hindrance for her instead.

That's why I picked for her a barrier ring for physical attacks and a scapegoat ring that can prevent one lethal attack.

She'll use her usual staff and robe.

That's all the equipment for Roxy.

It makes me uneasy.

But all I can do is do my best to protect her.

We don't know what kind of trap awaits us, but we will make headway on that front.

On the school front, Zanoba dropped out, and Roxy also filed a leave of absence.

I don't want Roxy fired, so I asked Zanoba to write a notice of recall, requesting Roxy to return to her post as court magician of Shirone palace.

Of course the school objects.

So it ended up becoming a sit-down negotiation between the principal and Zanoba.

Roxy has become that important a personnel to the school.

That's only natural.

If I were the principal, I'd do the same.

"Roxy-dono was court magician for Shirone to begin with. Only for various reasons did she quit, but she has plenty of ability, thus I wish to bring her back and again grant her the position of court magician of Shirone Kingdom."

Zanoba negotiates aggressively, while Roxy complains [I don't want to be a court magician...]

The principal, taking advantage of Roxy's words, declared [Roxy belongs to the Magic University.]

An hour into negotiation, Zanoba finally budes.

He'll bring her with him, since she's involved this time, afterwards he'll return her to the University... that's the deal.

Put up unreasonable demands first, then coming back down.

That's the art of negotiation.

And that's how Roxy managed to hold onto her teaching position when she returns.

Finally, I checked my own equipment.

When it comes to my equipment, it's the same as usual.

Magic Armor Mk-I, Magic Armor Mk-IIB, and the Shotgun Cannon; just these three.

It's been a long time since I last used my old companion Aqua Hartia.^[4]

I feel a little guilty towards Eris, but she responds [Isn't it great that you found a better weapon?]

I kind of wish she would treasure the symbol of our shared memory more.

Even though it encapsulates the memory of our tenth together... Or does she want to forget the past?

Yet I still remember fondly how her boobs felt back then...

For now, my friend Aqua Hartia currently sits as decoration in my room.

Maybe it's better to let Sylphy have it?

Unlike Eris, Sylphy never stopped using the magic wand I gave her.

If I give her my companion Aqua Hartia, she definitely will use it happily.

But I'm not sure how girls feel about being regifted a present from another woman.

But Sylphy's current wand was a present from Roxy as well...

Regardless, like usual, my primary equipment will be Magic Armor Mk-IIB.

Only when a strong enemy appears would I need the bulky Magic Armor Mk-I.

It's fine. Even if a strong enemy appears, I have long planned for that scenario.
It'll work.

I plan to disassemble the bulky Magic Armor Mk-I and ship it over, then reassemble it there.

Hitogami knows about the existence of Magic Armor.

To avoid giving him a chance to deal with it, it's better if I keep the Magic Armor hidden. Unlike Mk-IIB, I can't wear Mk-I at all times. Keeping armored core dissembled when not-in-use is common sense.

With the equipments set, all that's left is how to get there.

For that, Zanoba and I went together to bow our heads to Perugius.

Part 4

When we reached the Sky Castle, we were brought to a particularly upscale room. One I have never been in before.

The room feels particularly personalized.

Paintings cover the walls, hand-sized sculptures line the shelves.

The pieces here looks exceptional even compared to all the others on display in the Sky Castle.

All the works on display in the hallway looks [expensive], but the ones here all look [exquisitely crafted] or [particularly tasteful.]

In other words, money can't buy taste.

"This place is amazing."

"Oh, is this Shisho's first time here?"

I start murmuring to myself without realizing it. Unexpectedly Zanoba replies.

"Yeah, I'm usually at the guest room or courtyards..."

"Only those recognized by Perugius-sama are allowed here."

Sylvaril speaks sternly, standing by the entryway.

Hidden in her tones is [And you're not.]

Recently I've started to think that she really hates me.

Or more precisely, hates the one behind me, Orsted.

"Sylvaril-dono, can you not speak as if my Shisho somehow is beneath me?"

Without turning around, Zanoba raises his objection.

Hey, at least look at people when you speak to them.

"But, the only one Perugius-sama recognizes and granted permission to enter is Zanoba-sama. I don't know why you're so insistent about bringing both over..."

Listening to Sylvaril's calm reply, Zanoba turns around like he saw a ghost.

"Indeed, Shisho rarely has a chance to make dolls during Perugius-sama's presence, so I can understand why he may not yet to be recognized. But, Shisho's work has a depth far beyond my own understandings. They're truly excellent."

"But Perugius-sama..."

"Rudeus Greyrat is my Shishou. Indeed, he may be less informed than Perugius-sama and yours truly. But without Shisho's guidance, the Zanoba Shirone who has been recognized by Perugius-sama himself may not exist!"

"..."

Sylvaril falls silent.

She seems disinterested.

Well, I can't tell behind that mask.

Even though I'm used to Zanoba's flattery by now, I still feel rather moved this time. I have a little know-how about figures from the other world, it's not that big of a deal.

"Understood, please accept my apology, Zanoba-sama."

"It's fine, Sylvaril-dono."

Sylvaril bows her head, and candidly Zanoba pardons her.

Honestly, I don't really care how she treats me.

"Zanoba, you're back."

Just now, the door to the interior opens.

It's Perugius.

Maybe reading the mood, he glanced back and forth at Sylvaril and Zanoba.

"... What is it, has Sylvaril been negligent in some way."

"No, Shisho has never been in this room before, and we're talking about that."

Zanoba happily replies.

He did not complain to the master. He's a good man.

"Rudeus... Indeed, he never had a chance to come here. What do you think of this room, my pride and joy?"

"It's truly impressive. Even more than those in the hallway, they truly capture the essence of good taste."

"Oh--?"

Not knowing what to say in details, I gave some ambiguous praises, but that seems to put Perugius in a good mood.

"If those on the hallway outside are what's considered first rate, then these here are the premium goods that Perugius-sama loves. Aren't they?"

"Exactly."

Perugius smiles with a smirk on his face and sits down.

I muddled through this time.

Maybe my appraisal ability hasn't completely been forgotten.

Even Sylvaril looks shocked... I think.

Even though I can't see under that mask.

Regardless, Zanoba and I rushed to sit down after Perugius's invitation.

It becomes an interview between us three.

"Well then, what shall it be today? Have you found another interesting doll somewhere?"

Perugius asks merrily.

Zanoba happily replies.

"No, Perugius-sama, I'm heading home, so I come to say my goodbyes."

"Oh..."

Perugius frowns, staring at Zanoba.

Then slowly his happiness subsides.

In details Zanoba explains the draft summon he received from Shirone Kingdom.

Perugius listens without interrupting, only looking straight at Zanoba.

Zanoba finishes his monologue.

And after a moment of silence, Perugius finally speaks.

"... Zanoba, have you the resolve to die?"

Instead of waiting for anything else he has to say, Perugius asked.

Zanoba looks blankly back at Perugius.

"Why are you so certain?"

"I can see it in your face, the look you wear, I've seen it on many men in my lifetime."

Perugius unhappily said.

Even though I wonder how he knew from just looking at Zanoba, but if Perugius wants to stop him, I concur.

It's perfect if he tells Zanoba not to go to Shirone Kingdom.

If that happens, then I won't fall for Hitogami's trap.

"If that's true, what will you do?"

Zanoba keeps his poker face. Perugius smiles lightly.

"If you need to fight someone, I'll happily give you a hand. Discussing art with you is important to me. If someone gets in the way of that, I'll get rid of them. A... false king, for example."

"That won't be necessary."

"Ah, of course."

Perugius suddenly checks his surroundings, before stopping on me.

Am I supposed to say something?

This is what they call exchanging a glance, right?

While I'm thinking, Perugius has already looked away and continues his conversation with Zanoba.

"Zanoba... going to your death, does he know of it?"

"No, he just wants to come along--"

"Oh, and you didn't refuse him?"

"Because once Shisho sets his mind on something, even if I refuse he will come to Shirone Kingdom."

When I said I'm coming, Zanoba didn't particularly object.

I guess he realized objecting won't do any good.

Well, it's true.

"Rudeus will protect your life like his own."

"Haha, what are you talking about, Perugius-sama."

Zanoba laughs like he heard a joke.

But his smile is forced.

"Shisho will have another baby soon. There are things he must do. When it comes to it, certainly he will save himself first."

"Are you the student of someone who would watch his friend cornered and leave him to die?"

"Of course not! Shisho is an amazing man. He will definitely come to my aid and survive as well!"

I'm no superman.

Well, leaving aside whether Zanoba seriously thinks I'm superman or not...

Zanoba and Perugius's meeting has been going smoothly.

But [Don't go to Shirone] doesn't seem to be an option here.

Perugius seems to realize something.

Losing interest rapidly, he props himself up, and sighs with a face of boredom.

"Well then, you shouldn't be here just to say goodbye, what can I be of help with?"

Zanoba nods before answering.

"I wish to borrow your magic teleport circles to Shirone Kingdom, for permission to bring the Magic Armor to the castle, as well as... permission for Shisho's wife, the Magic Race Roxy Migurdia."

"I can prepare a magic teleport circle for you, and permit entry for the Magic Armor... but Magic Race are not allowed in this castle."

Perugius replies with a frown.

Previously Arumanfi had also denied entry for Roxy, also because Perugius refused to allow Magic Race from entering the Sky Castle.

"Even if this, Zanoba Shirone, asks you as a once-in-a-lifetime favor?"

"Zanoba Shirone, you said this, so you think you're that important to me?"

"I am a rare friend who can discuss art at your level with you."

"So you said this Armor Dragon King Perugius Dola has befriended some prince from a little kingdom like yourself?"

"Excuse my impudence, but when it comes to art, race and stature are irrelevant."

Perugius stares down Zanoba.

Zanoba fearlessly returns the favor.

Sylvaril also glares at Zanoba.

Only my eyesight wanders back and forth.

The situation is tense.

If it's me, I'd start apologizing.

"Ha!"

Perugius raise his chin and laughs.

"Fine, I'll permit that Magic Race's entry."

"Thank you very much for your consideration."

"But, I have conditions."

Afterwards, Perugius lays out his ground rules.

Roxy is barred from speaking, touching anything, from appearing before him, inside the castle...

Basically, she's only allowed to use the castle as a way station. I accept the conditions.

"Then, Sylvaril, prepare the magic circle for them."

"Yes!"

After giving Syvaril instructions, Perugius looks back at Zanoba with disinterest.

A cold glance, but in there somehow I saw he has resigned himself.

"Zanoba Shirone."

"Yes."

"It's a pity."

Perugius and Zanoba stand up together.

Towards the Perugius's back, Zanoba bows quietly.

Perugius's outline looks particularly lonesome, but perhaps that's just an illusion.

Part 5

After the Magic Armor has been disassembled, it was sent to Shirone Kingdom via the magic circle.

Afterwards Ginger contacted a craftsman she knew to encase the Magic Armor in stone blocks as camouflage, and had it sent to a warehouse near the capital.

I didn't go along.

But I did instruct her to also start investigating the situation inside Shirone Kingdom.

If the north invading turns out false, that gives me a good reason to dissuade Zanoba from going.

Even though, the northern Kingdom of Bista really looks poised for attack.

Bista has mobilized for war, with large number of mercenaries and hoodlums inside its borders.

"King Pax seems to have brought 10 able knights from the Kingdom of Dragon King with him, and used them to rid the country of rebels."

10 able knights.

Just 10?

Well, including Pax, the coup has eleven members, but the coup's success are no doubt the doing of these ten individuals.

In that case, they might be the trap set by Hitogami.

"Ginger-san, did you learn of the names of these 10 knights?"

"No, unfortunately I haven't got that far with my investigation... Only that it's rumored King Pax has a man with a skull-looking face by his side. Also the rumor that man is among the Seven Great World Powers, the Death God."

"I see."

Yikes, another one of the Seven Great World Powers...

Well, I hope that the Kingdom of Dragon King won't bother to lend Pax one of the Seven. Maybe that skull guy is someone else. Either way I should report this to Orsted.

"Oh, if the northern kingdom is ready to invade, then we have to hurry."

Hearing this, Zanoba looks anxious to immediately head out.

He is ready to go.

His tone is like usual, but I can sense his unease.

Nothing I can do to dissuade Zanoba now, so we will set out in a few days.

The party will be me, Zanoba, Ginger, and Roxy. Four members.

Julie is temporarily left with my family.

Chapter 3

To Shirone Again

Part 1

Eve of our departure.

He came.

After making love to Sylphy, I headed downstairs before going to sleep.

Abruptly, Leo starts barking.

Moment later, Eris rushes out her room, full of bloodlust.

What's going on?

"Enemy attack!"

"What?"

Who would attack here?

I went to my room to grab my staff, and take a glance out the window with a lantern.

In the darkness, the outlines of a man I recognize standing in front of the gate.

"Eris, that isn't an enemy."

"Oh... fine."

Eris looks out the window as well, before answering, still fired up.

I put aside my staff and walk out the hallway.

I hush the rest of the family back into their rooms, who're wondering about the commotion, and head to the gate.

Outside the door.

Stands Orsted.

Currently entangled by the wooden pillars at the gate, Beat. It's tentacle play.

"Sorry for coming so late."

"It's fine... Beat, stop it."

"This is an emergency. Do you have time?"

"Ah, yes."

With a few swooshes, Orsted untangles himself from Beat and disappears into the darkness.

I applied some healing magic on Beat, briefly inform Eris that I'll be out, and rush to catch up to him.

There are no 24-hour shops in the city.

So we met at a nearby clearing instead.

A moonless light.

Only the lantern I brought from home illuminates the empty field.

Somehow we always meet in such dark locales, when Orsted and I speak privately.

And when we speak in such dark locales, it feels like we're scheming something.

I should add more lights to the office...

"So, what is it?"

"About the pawns Hitogami has prepared this time."

Orsted has read Ginger's intel.

Because he wasn't around when I visited, I left a memo.

"I'll give you my predictions based on Ginger York's report, and the strategies to deal with them."

Predictions?

It would be better if we have more time to collect information.

Should I hold Zanoba back to collect more intel?

No, at this crucial moment I can't trouble Zanoba.

This is rough.

"First, about the ten knights. Nine of them are probably small fries."

"Right."

"But the last one, the skull-faced man, I remember him."

The guy always staying by Pax's side.

"Knight of Kingdom of Dragon King, with a face of a skull, and outstanding skills. There's only one possible candidate."

"And that is?"

Orsted sharply glares at me (I think).

"Ranked fifth on the Seven Great World Powers, Death God Randolph Marianne."

Seven Great World Powers.

Number 5. Death God.

Those three phrases hit me head on.

So the rumors are true..?

"The trump card of Kingdom of Dragon King."

"... Trump card? Why would he be involved in the political dispute of another country?"

"I don't know, but assuming Hitogami's involved, that's typical of him."

Ah, of course if I think about it.

I asked something pointless again.

"Why Kingdom of Dragon King would rent out the Death God is hard to imagine, but someone else can worry about that... Right now we don't have any information about any other pawns involved who would be capable of assassinating you or I. For now, I want to discuss how to deal with the Death God with you."

Perhaps that skull-faced man isn't the Death God.

But better safe than sorry, and be prepared for the worst.

"That Death God Randolph does not belong to any school in particular, he's a self-styled warrior."

"Self-styled?"

"Indeed, no set style. He would do anything for victory."

In other words, like Ruijerd?

I'm no good against someone like that.

"But his best skill is [Sword of Bewitching]."

Sword of Bewitching.

I can imagine from the name alone.

A skill like Engetsu Sappou. ^[5]

"[Sword of Bewitching] is a meld of [Sword of Luring] and [Sword of Hesitation]."

"What do they each do?"

"[Sword of Luring] entices an enemy to attack when he should retreat. [Sword of Hesitation] forces an enemy to retreat when he should attack."

Eh?

I don't get it.

"In battle, he manipulates the opponent, making him attack when he shouldn't, defend when he shouldn't. It messes with your timing, so be prepared."

"But I don't really know what I'm supposed to do then, hearing that."

"Attack when you thought to guard, guard when you thought to attack. But there are also times to defend, and times to attack."

How rhetorical.

Confusing.

"Don't let his theatrics get to you, just overpower him."

In that case, then Orsted can go take care of him.

I briefly entertained that precocious thought, before shooing it away.

Orsted is heading to Kingdom of Dragon King.

"Can I overpower him..."

"He's fifth on the Seven Great World Powers, so he's master class, and has plenty of counters against magic. A difficult opponent indeed... but a man long absent from the battlefield. Right now, he's probably a distant second to any of the heads of three great sword styles. Once you figure out [Sword of Bewitching], understand how it works, and steady your resolve, even you should suffice against him."

Really?

Honestly, I don't have any confidence against someone of God Rank.

But I did beat North Emperor Auber that time, so maybe I can. Probably?

"Sounds like that Death God uses tactics similar to North God Style."

"Indeed, that man was the original candidate for North God."

Ah, really?

So he was a candidate, but he's not the North God, so he failed?

Yet he's ranked above even the current North God?

I think North God is ranked seventh, and Death God fifth.^[6]

"Then how did he become the Death God?"

Orsted gave me the details about Death God when I asked.

Randolph Marianne.

Grandson of the second North God.^[7]

For a while since birth, he trained alongside the third generation and current North God, under the second generation's tutelage.

But when he came of age, he had a fall out with the second generation.

Leaving the second generation North God, he went on to develop his own techniques. Afterwards, he managed to defeat one of the Seven Great World Powers in the Magic Continent.

Randolph ended up gaining the title of Death God after beating the original.

But from that day forth, endless hoards would challenge him, vying for a place among the Seven Great World Powers.

One fight after another.

Endless battles against those that care for nothing but the battlefield.

After spending ten years fighting those fights, Randolph was fed up.

He decided to retire.

He returned to his hometown at Kingdom of Dragon King and studied to become a chef.

Then he took over a relative's troubled restaurant.

Thus a new chapter of the Legend of the Death God began.

But that legend had a rather inglorious end.

The restaurant folded due to financial difficulties.

He had talent has a warrior, but none as a chef.

Buried in debt and wandering the street, he was picked up by a general of Kingdom of Dragon King, and became a knight of the kingdom.

No one knows how old he is, but that's the story of Death God Randolph.

What an interesting tale.

"As long as your tactics are sound, he isn't a hard counter against you. If Death God Randolph does appear, use guerilla tactics. Attack from a distance, just like you did with me."

"Got it."

Death God Randolph.

Carving the name of my new enemy deep into my memory, towards Orsted I took a bow.

"Then... come back alive."

"Okay. Thank you."

Knowledge of a potential hard fight ahead.

We head out tomorrow.

How suffocating.

Part 2

The day of departure.

My entire family came to see me off at the gate.

Sylphy, with Lara in tow, Eris, Aisha, Norn, Lilia, Zenith, Lucy, Leo, and Jirou.

"Well, Rudi, be careful. It's fine since it's Rudi, but don't get careless. Come back safe."

"Sylphy, take care of the family."

"Em. I will."

I gave Sylphy a hug.

And rubbed her butt while I'm at it.

Do I really have to say goodbye to this cute butt also?

"Eris, no rigorous exercise until the baby is born."

"Got it."

"And if the baby is a girl, please give her a girl's name."

I caution Eris just in case.

Knowing her, even if it's a girl, she might give her a boy's name.

And raise her as a boy anyways.

That makes for a fun story, but it's obviously a pretty awful thing to do to a girl.

"Well then, Onii-chan. Work hard. Expect the mercenary group to be even bigger by the time you get back."

"Alright, but nothing too shady, okay?"

"Hey!"

I also caution Aisha just in case.

The mercenary group is on the right track, but don't forget, they're a group of hoodlums.

Look away from the wheel for a second, and they'll turn back to a bunch of good-for-nothings.

The only thing we can do is keep them as spotless as possible.

"Nii-san, I was in his care while his highness Zanoba was in school. If possible, do your best to prevent the worst from happening."

"Yes, count on me."

"Well then, you take care too, Nii-san."

"Norn, work hard for the student council too."

Going out of her way to come today, Norn is rather strict.

Her days will only get harder, now that she's the student council president.

"Master, may the fortune of war be with you."

"Yes, I'll return safe this time as well."

Lilia tries to light a fire under me. ^[8]

She's approaching retirement age.

Well, she still has some youth in her, but now's not the time for this conversation, so I can only bow for now. ^[9]

"..."

Zenith rubs me on the head.

Perhaps Lilia can't just leave her alone, with Zenith the way she is?

Somehow I feel that my family might have robbed Lilia of her path in life.

But, this is the path Lilia chose, probably.

"Hey Lucy, tell papa to stay safe."

"... Have a safe trip."

"I'm leaving now, Lucy."

Lucy fidgets by Sylphy's legs.

As if struggling about something.

Finally, with her mind made, she looks towards me.

"... Papa, hug."

"! Come here... okay, good, be a good girl now!"

"Mm..."

Given a rare chance to spoil her, I gave her an eskimo kiss.^[10]

Maybe because I shaved this time, she didn't resist.

I let her off after charging my fill.

Finally, I speak to Julie, who's left in my family's care.

"Julie."

"Yes, grandmaster."

"You might be a slave, but you're also a guest of Zanoba, as well as my student. No one here will treat you like a slave. Consider yourself family and make yourself comfortable."

"Yes. I will do my best to not be a bother too."

Julie always took my lessons to heart.

She is fluent in human language, and has even become quite good with etiquette.

Now that I think about it, it's been 5, no, 6 years since we bought her.

Her figure remains roughly the same, though, but Ginger trained her well. She even got her period already.

She is already a respectable adult.

Should I have expected this?

"And... please take care of master."

"Yes. Of course."

Julie seems quite concerned for Zanoba.

That's how it is.

I would worry as well.

That's why I'm going.

"Leo, same as always. Not just Lara, please protect the rest of the family as well."

"Woofu!"

And finally, I ask guard dog #2 to guard in my stead. ^[11]

"Well, let's go."

"I'm going now."

With luggages in tow, we head out.

Roxy also says her goodbyes with the family, and we leave them behind together.

Part 3

Afterwards, we meet up with Zanoba at the city entrance.

Basically, most of our baggage has already been sent to Shirone Kingdom. We're traveling light.

Just a change of clothes.

As courtesy, I'm also carrying Roxy's luggage.

There are roughly seven holy relics^[12] among them.

They must be carried with the utmost respect.

Cliff also came to the city entrance to see us off.

"Sorry, Rudeus... I really want to go, but..."

Cliff wants to come, but he has a family to look after.

I can understand.

Also he's not like me, always globetrotting like I already dropped out of school.

"Cliff-senpai... Please help out if my family is in need."

"Em. Rudeus, take care of Zanoba."

"I will."

With that said, Cliff turns to face Zanoba.

"Zanoba. I thought about your patriotism."

"Well, it's not really patriotism."

"... But Zanoba, please listen carefully. Milis-sama once said..."

Then Cliff went on and on preaching to Zanoba in the typical Milis style.

Is it fair to call him preachy?

I was on the receiving end of that often too.

But this is a life and death situation, so I can understand.

Zanoba can only listen and smile wryly.

In one ear and out the other.

I glance around while pretending to listen, and saw Elinalise and Roxy talking among themselves.

"Roxy. Please take care of Rudi. That kid can crumble under pressure..."

"You don't have to tell me."

Worrying about me?

I can understand worrying about Lara crying.

But besides that I can't think of any other reason to worry about me.

"When he gets depressed, push him down like last time. Don't forget."

"Oh, well... I don't think Rudi will repeat a mistake like that."

"Well, this journey could be a good educational opportunity. You're still producing milk, right? Try some new plays while your body's still different, it could be... hot." ^[13]

"Rudi might like it, but I won't."

I trust Roxy with her words, but...

Sorry, I'm the kind that repeats my mistakes.

If, hypothetically, Zanoba dies, it's not impossible that I'll fall apart again. ^[14]

Well, maybe Elinalise is just joking around to loosen Roxy up.

Yeah, I'll go with that.

Elinalise is the same as always, even after giving birth.

Only dirty jokes whenever she speaks.

Hopefully she'll restrain herself when educating her child.

"Well, I'm going."

"Ah, come back safe."

Part 4

A half day's travel to the citadel ruins before we teleport inside the Sky Castle.

Roxy also managed to enter the Sky Castle.

Arumanfi looks in disgust as he explains the conditions for Roxy's entry.

Immediately upon our arrival, Sylvaril and two of Perugius's other familiars surround the magic circle.

Tight security for only one individual, Roxy.

"Rudeus-sama. This time Perugius-sama was too generous to permit this Magic race from entering the castle..."

"Yeah, thanks."

"..."

I go through the motions, but Roxy can only silently look down.

Condition Number One.

Roxy must remain silent when inside the castle.

Also, don't touch anything.

And don't come within sight of Perugius.

Only then would she be allowed passage.

Roxy understands this.

"..."

Only that, Roxy looks dreamily towards the breathtaking Sky Castle.

Gawking like a country bumpkin at the castle standing before her and pulling my sleeves.

Even though I just explained how Roxy has been barred from the castle.

I pat her shoulders to stop her.

From under her hat she looks up to me, slightly red-faced.

Really looks like an embarrassed bumpkin.

"Cough."

Sylvaril coughs at our playfulness.

Isn't it fine as long as she doesn't talk?

Though Perugius might be known for his magnanimity. If you show too much prejudice against Roxy, bad rumors might spread about his underlings.

The ones that would spread them would be my dog and cat.

"Well, this way."

Sylvaril leads the way. Flanked by the other familiars, we head underground.

No sightseeing, but, it can't be helped. I'm the one asking for a favor.

Bringing in a Magic race that Perugius abhors.

I don't know why it's such a big deal, but he must really favor Zanoba to permit her passage.

Perugius really wants to keep Zanoba alive.

"... Sylvaril-san."

"What is it?"

"Please give Perugius-sama my thanks again."

"Certainly."

A reply, as matter of course.

Nanahoshi awaits us at the teleport chamber.

She stands behind the already activated magic teleport circle.

Speaking of which, I forgot to mention our trip to her.

Maybe she heard about it from somewhere and came to send us off?

"Zanoba... I heard you're going home, but..."

Nanahoshi might have heard of the situation, but doesn't really know what she should say.

With her arms crossed in front of her, she looks troubled.

Slowly Zanoba approaches her.

"Yes, Nanahoshi-dono. I'm going home first."

"..."

Nanahoshi makes a complicated expression.

Looks a bit jealous, but also a bit sad.

"Nanahoshi-dono, your day to go home will come one day as well."

Zanoba wasn't trying to put on airs.

For Nanahoshi, whose ability to return is undetermined, that might sound like an insult.

"Yeah, I hope so."

"Nanahoshi-dono, don't give up. You'll return one day, but you can't if that home is gone."

With that said, Zanoba wraps his arms around Nanahoshi, and gently pats her back.

"I might be far away then, but I'll pray for Nanahoshi-dono's safe passage home."

If this was Japan, that might be considered sexual harrassment.

But Nanahoshi doesn't show aversion. Frigidly, she also wraps her arms around Zanoba as well.

A sparkle hidden at the edge of her eyes.

"Well, then, thank you, Zanoba, em your highness..."

"No need for courtesy now. Each day I spent with Nanahoshi-dono and Cliff researching were all irreplaceable memories. Thanks are unnecessary. Or rather, I should be the one that owes you thanks."

Say, did Zanoba and Cliff grow close because of what happened with Nanahoshi?

Assisting Nanahoshi with her research together also deepened their bond.

How nostalgic.

"No, thank you, if I... without your highness Zanoba's presence, my research would certainly not have reached its current stage."

"Rather, without Nanahoshi-dono, I would have never met Perugius-sama, and missed such a convenient method for returning home. So we're even! Hahaha!"

Still smiling, Zanoba separates himself from Nanahoshi.

"Well then, Nanahoshi-dono. In case we don't meet again... take care."

"Yes..."

Nanahoshi looks towards me with unease.

(This sounds like a last goodbye, but isn't it an easy return with teleport magic?)

Of course, this won't be a last goodbye.

Zanoba is just visiting home for a while.

All I do now is simply nod.

"Well, Shisho, let's go."

Following Zanoba's lead, we head inside the magic circle.

Part 5

The magic circle destination is a ruin.

The usual teleportation ruin.

This ruin lays on the edge of Shirone Kingdom, inside the eastern forests.

It's about five days journey to the capital.

"Phew..."

Roxy lets out a sigh with her ban lifted.

Also, she looks incredulously at the magic circle she arrived with.

"I always had some interest in magic teleport circles."

"I'm used to it by now."

"If I memorize how the magic circle looks, I might be able to draw one myself..."

"... Can you?"

Hearing my response, Roxy shakes her head.

"No. Perugius-sama already said he doesn't want Magic race in the castle. Probably because when Laplace revives, it would be troublesome if there are Magic race capable of teleport magic, I imagine. If I memorize it, he'd have me killed."

Really?

That might not be the main reason, but it might be one of them.

But Laplace should know of magic teleport circles himself, so that might be pointless.

"Quit the chit-chat. Come on. We still need to pick up our baggage."

That was Zanoba. Thus we head out of the ruins.

We found a small hut by the forest, and collect the luggage that was left there for us.

Then we head to the capital.

Part 6

By the time we reached the capital city of Shirone, Latakia, it's already sunset.
When Zanoba passed the city gates, he looks deeply moved.
It also been a long time since I visited this place.

The scenery doesn't look very different from how I remember it.
There are plenty of adventurers on the streets, ready to challenge a labyrinth.
But, well?
It feels rather tense since our arrival, and the streets more unkempt.
Not just the adventurers, it feels like a lot more hoodlums and suspicious types are about.

"Mm, the number of mercenaries have grown since I have been away. Looks like war is coming."

Zanoba sounds a bit happy in his voice.
How can he sound so happy with war approaching?
Somehow I feel he isn't just putting on a brave face.

"You look happy."
"Shisho, that's because battle raises your spirit."
"Does it."
"Yes. It's what it means to be a man. Isn't that the same for everyone?"

I don't really get it.
Like the excitement from seeing a robot in person?

Regardless, we head to the residence Ginger prepared for us.
We'll stay here for a night, then change tomorrow to announce our return and have an audience with the king.
We didn't cross the border, so it's a bit sketchy, but we have an excuse prepared.
If he didn't ask, all the better.

"Zanoba-sama, I'd like to lie low in the city and collect more information."

Ginger said and takes her leave.

Zanoba stops her.

"Eh? Ginger, you're a knight. Shouldn't you come with me tomorrow to report to his highness of our return?"

"... No. While I may be a knight, I'm also Zanoba-sama's royal guard. I sense something amiss in the city."

"Well, do that then."

"Yes!"

While taking her bow, Ginger shoots me a glance.

As if to tell me to please take care of Zanoba-sama.

I nod in return.

Well then, from now on this is the real deal.

Only Zanoba and I will have an audience with Pax.

From there, we'll gain some idea of what Hitogami's up to.

Alternatively, that might become our battlefield against the Death God.

In that case, I'll grab Zanoba and run.

With Roxy covering us from outside, we'll retreat outside of the city.

From there I can use the Magic Armor and do battle with the Death God, or make a run for it.

Those are Orsted's instructions. For battle, attack from a distance.

Assuming it's [Sword of Bewitching], I should have the advantage in a ranged battle with the Magic Armor.

If a fight does not happen...

I'm afraid Zanoba will march to war.

A battle against the northern kingdom, I don't know how it'll turn out, but..

Also, I don't know what will satisfy Zanoba.

How will I bring Zanoba back?

What do I have to say in order to persuade Zanoba?

If Pax is aiming to take Zanoba's life, will Zanoba reconsider?

Well, let's think about this again after our audience.

Honestly, I hate the fact of just walking into an obvious trap.

It's easier if I can just blow up Pax and the castle from a distance.

But I know that's impossible.

Orsted bars it, and even if he didn't, Zanoba wouldn't let me.

The castle is the symbol of a nation, and if suddenly destroyed, so goes the kingdom.

It would only entice the enemy from the north to attack.

Basically, it's impossible.

An uneasy future.

All I can do is sigh.

First, let's take care of the audience.

Then we'll figure out what we need to do.

"Rudi."

In the midst of my thought, someone taps on my shoulder.

I turn around to see Roxy standing there.

"Aren't you a little tense there."

"Am I?"

"Yes. How about relaxing a little. You can't be careless, but if you're so stiff, you'll find it hard to move during crucial moments."

Roxy began rubbing my shoulders as she spoke.

With her small, but strong hands.

For a while, I sat there and savour those sensual hands.

Indeed.

I need to be flexible.

Just decide on a target for now, then go with the flow.

At worst, it's fine as long as Zanoba and Roxy live.

Including my own life, that's three.

Let's set that as our baseline.

Then, let's add Ginger on top of that, so four.

The survival of us four, and a safe return.

Can I do it?

"Thank you. I feel a weight taken off of my shoulders because of you."

I turn around after saying that.

Roxy is her usual self, her sleepy eyes.

But somehow gentler than usual.

"No, the usual Rudi would be more playful when relaxed."

"... Like?"

"Like saying, [Roxy, how about massage my front this time, starting here] and ripping your pants off..."

"B-But that's only when we're at home..."

"Yes. At home all Rudi wants to do is dirty stuff."

Roxy said as she caresses my face.

Feel like I'm being reprimanded.

Sexy stuff is no good?

On the eve of the battle, with her around, anyone would want the same.

Not just me.

"Just kidding. Doesn't that help you loosen up?"

"... Ah, yeah. It did."

Indeed, my shoulders have loosened up.

With enough tension to remain right for the situation.

Relaxed, but still focused.

It's just right.

"Well, I'll rest up for the audience tomorrow. Thank you."

"Yes, good night, Rudi."

Do my best.

With only that on my mind, I slept.

Chapter 4

King Pax

Part 1

We arrive at the entrance to the royal castle.

At first, the soldiers on guard look at Zanoba with suspicion.

They didn't expect him to come. He never made any contact.

At least he should arrive on horseback.

But instead he's on foot.

Even his only royal guard Ginger is nowhere to be seen.

Everything looks too suspicious, but after a few questions to test and confirm Zanoba's identity, they immediately straighten up and make way for us.

From their actions, I can appreciate how much this kingdom puts its royalties up on a pedestal, including this one here.

Maybe they're especially sensitive, given the recent purge of the royal bloodline?

Regardless, we asked for an audience and were brought to a waiting room.

There we wait for about an hour or so.

Our request was granted, and we're allowed into the audience room.

Part 2

Shirone Royal Castle.

Audience Room.

Inside are five individuals.

Only five.

With not a single soldier standing guard.

In the center.

Seated on the throne is someone I recognize.

At least, on the outside he hasn't changed much.

He hasn't grown much.

Nonchalantly he leans back on the throne.

Pax Shirone.

A little more mature looking, a little more daunting, but more or less the same as before.

A beautiful girl sits beside him.

Looks like a middle schooler. She's wearing a white dress. Her hair has a dash of aqua blue.

The color is similar to Migurdia Tribe's, yet not the same as Roxy's.

Maybe from another tribe?

She has vacant eyes.

Wearing a coronet, is she the Queen?

Pax's hand motions behind her.

At a glance, it looks like he's rubbing her back, but...

I know that he's touching her butt.

He thinks no one can tell?

Sigh, treating her like a sex slave.

I turn my sight away from that girl, towards the man standing by the other side of the throne.

He looks around 40 or so.

Buff looking, with a sword on his waist, but he's lightly armored.

He doesn't look particularly strong or dangerous.

A person that I won't feel guarded towards if we cross paths normally.

But on his head.

A grim face with prominent cheekbones.

An eyepatch covers his right eye. His left eye looks sunken and lifeless. His face is shaded like a zombie.

He looks like a pirate captain straight out of old movies.

If I have to describe him in a single phrase.

It would be a skull-faced man.

Indeed.

No doubt he's the Death God Randolph Marianne.

"Your majesty. Zanoba Shirone has received your summons and rushed back from Magic City Sharia."

Zanoba walks up the audience room and immediately kneels down.

Without any reservations he pays his respect to Pax and bows his head.

I imitate his motions, but just in case, beneath my robes I take aim at Pax.

Pax spies at the kneeling Zanoba and withdraws his hand from the girl's buttocks.

While slurping that hand, he speaks.

"... Aren't you early."

"I hurried given the state of emergency."

"Or perhaps, you've been in hiding somewhere in the country the whole time. After all, there's no news of you crossing the border."

It took us about a month to reach Shirone Kingdom, after the letter arrived.

It's a year's travel by normal methods.

Our pace definitely looks impossible.

"To avoid attacks from enemy nations, we kept our identities hidden during the journey here."

"Even after you crossed the border?"

"Especially after we crossed the border."

"I see."

Pax humphs.

Doesn't sound like he'll bother to ask how we got here so fast.

Well, we'll just lie about it, but...

Pax straightens up and points towards me.

"Then, what about him?"

"Your majesty knows him as well. He's Rudeus Greyrat."

"I'm aware."

"Then, what is it?"

"I'm asking why is he here."

"War is coming, so I thought it would be ideal to bring a strong magician along."

It's decisive.

In this world, magicians have critical importance on the field of battle.

Advanced Rank magicians, even intermediate ranked ones, are very handy for tactical positioning.

In single confrontations, swordsmen generally have the upper hand. But in numbers, when individual battles are less crucial, magicians become the focus.

Saint and King Rank magicians are indispensable commodities for kings of nations during wartime.

But Pax snickers in response.

With a sullen smile, his glance shuffles between Zanoba and I.

"Oh, really? Are you sure he isn't a pawn you brought to kill me."

When Pax said that, bloodthirst can be felt from two individuals that appear suddenly beside the Death God.

I guess those two are knights from Kingdom of Dragon King?

There should be ten in all.

Including the Death God, three are accounted for.

Where might the other seven be?

Honestly, they don't look too strong.

"How could you say that... I have no intention of making enemies with your majesty."

"Huh, you'll forgive the usurper?"

"Certainly. It's not like I ever swore loyalty to the previous king."

"Then, do you plan to swear loyalty to me?"

"..."

Zanoba did not reply.

Pax snorts, unamused by the non-response.

The attitude might be considered seditious, but Pax seemed to overlook it.

"Just as well. Brother ^[15]... no, Zanoba. What you actually think is irrelevant."

Pax nods towards the knights standing behind him.

"Look, these are the knights I brought from the Kingdom of Dragon King."

Hearing Pax, the knights lower their heads.

But the Death God yawns.

"And this one here, is a rather big deal. Ranked fifth of the Seven Great Powers, Death God Randolph Marianne."

The Death God straightens up when he heard his introduction.

He steps up looking rather uncomfortable.

A dry cough.

"Thank you for the introduction. I'm Randolph Marianne. Magic Continent born, mixed race. Human, elf, immortal, and a few others. I work as a knight under the command of General Generalissimo Chagall Gargantis of Kingdom of Dragon King, Order of Black Knights. My main job is killing. I can kill anyone. I don't belong to a particular school, but was formerly trained in North God and Water God Style. People think that the Death God is just a serial killer, but that's a misunderstanding. My hobby is cooking. I'm really a nice guy. I hope we can get along."

After that well practiced speech, he fakes a grim smile, and steps back.

"He might not look it, but he's really strong. After all, he took out all of brother's royal guards in a blink of an eye, he's the crucial character that made me king."

He soloed the whole thing?

As expected of one of the Seven Great Powers.

I heard he's rusty, but I guess not that rusty.

"How about it, Zanoba. How about we let them fight it out and see who's stronger?"

That's how it's going to be?

So Pax really is a Hitogami apostle?

This time he sent the Death God to kill me...

For a trap, this seems awfully straight forward.

"Surely you jest. Exhausting our forces right before war with the north..."

I can see beads of cold sweat forming on Zanoba's temples.

I suppose he's trying to protect me.

On the other hand, Pax is looking rather bemused by the way Zanoba acts.

Finding joy in cornering someone with mere words and watching him panic.

This reminds me of that time when he had me caught.

He really enjoys gaining the higher ground.

Finally, his face turns, as if to show that's he's just kidding.

If via Pax, Hitogami intends to force me to fight the Death God.

I'm ready to fight.

I have made my resolve.

Should I preempt the attack?

Death God looks full of openings.

Oh...

My opponent is among the Seven Great Powers. Certainly he won't have any obvious openings.

If I just attack the first opening I see, it'll certainly be countered.

Orsted said that is the Death God's expertise.

While I was thinking, Pax suddenly stretches his arm.

"Ha, just kidding. Don't be so serious."

A simple reproach.

That's it?

It's not happening?

Randolph looks totally unenthusiastic from the start, yawning again.

Yawning like he only had two hours of sleep last night.

Or maybe he's just bored.

"I have heard of rumors of Rudeus Greyrat. In Asura Kingdom, even though he had help from Armor Dragon King Perugius, he still took down Water God Reida and the Three Swords of North God? Randolph is a treasure his majesty Kingdragon^[16] lent to me. I don't think he would lose. But if he's hurt, I would lose face."

Pax shrugs.

Then, straightening up again, he looks back at Zanoba.

"Say, brother, you look rather guarded."

"Well, your majesty and I left on bad terms."

"That is true... but, I don't intend to keep on fighting my brother."

Pax crosses his legs and rests his chin on his hands.

Looking rather arrogant.

"So, let bygones be bygones."

"Thank you for your generosity."

"Sure."

Pax grins as Zanoba takes a bow.

A satisfied grin.

The grin of a winner.

Not a winner in battle, but a smile for having the upper hand. ^[17]

"Rather, I should be the one thanking you."

"?"

"Because of what happened, I was able to change for the better."

He changed?

That short and chubby Pax doesn't look much different.

Well, looking more carefully, he seems to have slimmed down.

I can see his jawline and abs now. His neck has thickened too. Has he gained muscles?

He can no longer be considered chubby.

No... it's what's inside that counts. ^[18]

"Certainly, I shed my share of tears when I was sent off as hostage to Kingdom of Dragon King. Towards brother and Rudeus Greyrat... I felt only hate in those dark days."

"..."

"But, I changed."

Pax glances at the girl beside him.

That girl notices his glance.

The glance they exchange conveys a certain trust between them.

"Let me tell you a little story."

"..."

"When I arrived at Kingdom of Dragon King, nobody cared for me. While wandering around aimlessly, I happened upon a girl."

Pax begins his tale without waiting for our reply.

Well, no reason to stop him.

Maybe he'll incidentally mention something about Hitogami.

"That girl was alone in the garden. Just by herself, having nothing to do and bored out of her mind. No one would talk to her, and she would talk to no one. Even when I approached and asked, she wouldn't respond."

Somehow Pax became interested in that girl.

Everyday he would approach her in the garden to make conversation.

That girl talks little, but at least she would respond to Pax.

She's just a clueless girl, but she seems happy to listen to Pax talk.

Pax also finds joy in this, always seeking new topics to discuss with her.

"Soon the rumor spread, that the good-for-nothing from Shirone has hooked up with the good-for-nothing from Kingdom of Dragon King."

A pair of good-for-nothings.

And if they do the deed, a good-for-nothing will be born.

How terrible, soon the palace will be filled with good-for-nothings.

So goes the rumors.

"I want to behead the ones that spread those rumors."

If it was Shirone, even drunks wouldn't dare to speak such slander.

But it wasn't.

"Because in Kingdom of Dragon King, I have nothing."

This weighed heavily on him.

He wanted to make them pay.

But all Pax could do was hide in his bed and soak his pillows with tears of frustration.

He thought that when he got tired of crying, he would just dismiss them as a bunch of idiots...

-- But that didn't happen.

From that day since, Pax changed. He turned away from wanton lifestyle and became diligent.

"Even I don't know why that happened. I was not really dumb in the first place. Maybe I just want to prove that I'm more than a good-for-nothing."

In a different environment, meeting different people, learning different emotions, and forging a different path.

It's a change of heart.

I understand.

Because I too, was like that when I came to this world.

Anyways, Pax put in the effort.

He diligently studied magic.

Because of his physiques, he had no talent in swordsmanship and exercise. But looking at him now, he didn't slack off on physical training either.

A year and half later.

Kingdom of Dragon King held a scholarly convention - Pax posted great results in a mock trial of sorts.

That's where he caught the eye of the king.

The king said, [Even though he was sent as a hostage, his never-give-up attitude is praiseworthy.]

There was even an offer of reward.

Basically, he was recognized.

Pax was summoned to the audience room, and the king asks.

Do you want wealth? Or perhaps rank?

If you want, you can defect from Shirone Kingdom and become a citizen of mine.

Despite the king's generous offers, Pax replies.

"The Eighteenth Princess."

Eighteenth Princess Benedict^[19] Kingdragon.

Born of a Magic Race mother from unknown origins. The king used her as a plaything, and she was born of that plaything.

She has no succession right, even though she held the title as Eighteenth Princess, no one recognizes her as royalty.

An apathetic girl, the good-for-nothing princess.

Yet Pax asked for the hand of this princess.

The king was hesitant, but Pax was relentless.

"Other daughters are fine too, what a shame you asked for Benedict. Though, even if it's only in name, Benedict is still a princess. You'll need a stature to match that."

Thus the king of Kingdom of Dragon King permits Pax to temporarily return to Shirone Kingdom.

So he can find a suitable station in Shirone before returning to wed the princess.

Also to ask for another prince as hostage.

A necessary step to save face.

But Shirone Kingdom tactfully refused.

Pax always caused trouble in Shirone.

That's why King Shirone sent him to Kingdom of Dragon King.

Wouldn't it be a pity to send another prince as hostage in his place?

This enrages the Dragonking.

How dare a vassal state like Shirone refuse an order from the Dragonking!

To show his wrath, the king sent his most able knights, Death God Randolph and the Order of Black Knights, with Pax to initiate a coup.

They murdered the rest of the royal family, and installed Pax on that still bloody throne.

"... And that's how I gained everything. Rank, fame, a woman's love, and the strongest pawn."

Pax wraps an arm around the girl beside him as he said, and shoots a glance at the Death God beside him.

That girl blushes. The Death God can only shrug.

Oh, so that girl is Benedict?

Eh?

So far he has yet to mention Hitogami.

Maybe Pax heard the word of god and did nothing with it? ^[20]

Well, his change of heart is a bit suspicious, but...

"That's why, I have no reason to hate you anymore."

"I see, how respectable."

As if truly grateful, Zanoba takes a deep bow.

Then he asks.

"Since you now wield the strongest pawn, is there a reason to recall yours truly?"

"Ha, about that."

Pax snorts and laughs.

Zanoba and him both like to use I ^[21] to refer to themselves, it's a little confusing.

"Indeed, if I ask Randolph, he can handle the northern incursion on his own. But despite calling him my pawn, ultimately, he's just a loan. Who knows when he will return to his majesty Kingdragon. To assume borrowed power alone can protect the motherland would be a mistake. I don't want to disappoint his majesty after finally earning his approval."

Because he was recognized, Pax was made king of Shirone.

So he has to show his worth.

"What good am I, if I don't show my resourcefulness once a while?"

How self-aware.

I often try to make myself useful to Orsted as well.

"So, that's why, brother... no, Zanoba. You might have expected revenge when I summoned you, but... that was never my intention. It's as just the letter said. Due to the coup, our country has a moment of weakness, and is now under attack from the north. Right now, the country needs a warrior like Zanoba. So let water under the bridge, and lend me your power."

When he said that, Pax lowers his head.

Not really a bow, but it's lowered.

Not asking Zanoba as his brother, but as his king.

"Of course, your majesty. It's for this that I live."

Zanoba nods.

There's no hesitation there.

His lack of hesitation probably unnerves Pax.

Thus he asks.

"Brother... even though I'm an usurper. You're fine with that?"

Pax fears that Zanoba might plot mutiny?

Perhaps he just wants to lay it all out there first.

He did kill the rest of their brothers.

He said he doesn't harbor hate anymore, but Zanoba still might.

It's not unfathomable to think that Zanoba came back to avenge them.

"..."

Zanoba raises his head when he heard those words. A moment of confusion, then bows down again.

With Zanoba unresponsive, Pax raises his chin and speaks up.

"Speak freely."

Dependent on his answer, I might have to fight the Death God.

The Death God may look unenthusiastic now, but if things turn serious, he'll certainly come at me with breathtaking speed.

I will put up a distraction and break a wall to escape.

While I'm on alert, Zanoba speaks.

"No matter the king, no matter his politics, the fact that I live to protect the kingdom remains unchanged."

Silence permeates the audience room.

That wasn't the question.

But, it's clear that he means [I don't plan to betray you] in those words.

Pax looks troubled.

I wonder if it's a difficult decision.

Whether to consider Zanoba friend or foe.

"Ha, well, do as you please."

He mutters as if he gave up.

But as if resolved himself, he loudly declares.

"Zanoba Shirone. I give you command of Fort Karon. Your soldiers are already deployed. Take over as commander there and stop the northern incursion."

"Yes sir!"

Zanoba takes a gracious bow.

With that, the audience concluded.

Feeling like I dodged a bullet, I left the audience room.

Part 3

Afterwards, we're led to a room inside the Shirone Castle.

Zanoba's room is no longer there, so a guest room on the second floor is used instead.

Our guard seems to be a knight of Kingdom of Dragon King.

Instead of guarding us, I'm afraid we're under watch instead.

Pax is wary of Zanoba.

Tomorrow we head north towards Fort Karon.

I want to give Roxy the heads up, but we're under watch.

It's better if we don't make unnecessary movements, so we'll just meet up tomorrow before heading north.

Zanoba and I are sitting on a sofa together, like a couple.

"Pax is surprisingly a great king."

Zanoba is the first to break the ice.

In his usual tone, but he seems rather happy.

"Is he?"

"He's trying to protect Shirone with our own people. For that, he even lowered his head towards a former enemy. Isn't that spectacular?"

Em. If you look at it that way, it is very impressive.

I nod slightly, still...

"Shisho looks concerned, but people change. What happened was a mistake."

"Right."

"Pax did handle it poorly. He made mistakes. But I feel that he's trying his best right now."

Indeed hasn't Pax become... stronger, than how I remember him?

I can't say for sure whether he's doing his best.

But that's not for me to decide.

"This may also be manipulation by an evil god."

"The evil god Shisho said you're fighting against?"

My joke backfired, and I got a serious response instead.

"What? Did I say that?"

"Before, when we had that dinner with Cliff."

Ah, my heart-to-heart with Cliff?

I guess Zanoba wasn't as drunk as he seemed.

"Of course back then, I thought it was a joke."

"..."

"Asking Cliff-san to create a anti-curse device to weaken Orsted's curse, along with other work Shisho has done with Orsted, I start to connect the dots that they all have to do with that evil god."

Really?

You did?

Is it time to fess up?

After all, Zanoba is part of it this time.

"Alright, I'll talk."

"Please, Shisho."

I tell Zanoba about Hitogami.

Roughly all that has happened.

Also the rough situation this time.

And the possibility of Pax being manipulated by Hitogami.

"Umm... But Pax never mentioned Hitogami at all. Maybe maybe not?"

"Hitogami deceived me too. How he works in the background can't be easily fathomed."

If Pax isn't an apostle, then maybe the Death God, even Benedict is a possibility.

Right now the prime suspect is the King of Kingdom of Dragon King.

Unfortunately, there's more than one apostle.

Considering Hitogami's motives, there should be one in Shirone Kingdom as well.

"Deceive... so Shisho fought Orsted, because Hitogami deceived you?"

"Indeed."

"Hypothetically, if Hitogami has deceived Pax, a possibility exists that I may have to fight with Shisho."

Zanoba presses his hands against his chin, taking a moment to think.

Then slowly, those words trickle out.

"Since in that hypothesis, I must protect Pax."

Oh?

"... In that case, we might become enemies?"

"Eh? No no, that won't happen. There's no way I can become enemies with Shisho. Didn't Shisho just say that Pax must not be killed?"

"But, right now..."

"By protect, I meant [protect him from Hitogami]."

Whew.

What a shock.

I thought Zanoba was saying he would go to the other side.

I have no clue what I would do if that actually happens.

What a relief.

Why did the word protect suddenly pop up?

"I thought you didn't care about Pax."

When I thoughtlessly say that, Zanoba is stuck in a daze.
Again putting a hand under his chin, considering for a while.

"Well, certainly it was like that up until now. It didn't have anything to do with me."

With a troubled expression, he murmurs.

"... Unexpectedly, Pax is depending on me, this is a first for me!"

Zanoba says, flashing a bright smile.

Rather than rely upon, he's more like being used.

But Zanoba seems quite happy to be depended upon.

I guess the desire to [Protect the Kingdom] and the actions to protect its king, Pax, often line up. ^[22]

I still can't read Hitogami's intentions.

I don't know who the apostles are.

I can't see any signs of it being a trap to kill me.

I get the feeling that I missed something, that there's something I didn't notice.

It would be nice if a trap was just Orsted overthinking things, but it's best not to be too optimistic.

There may be a trap somewhere, and I just didn't notice it.

Well, my doubts remain, but right now there's too many things I don't know, so there's no helping it.

Also, convincing Zanoba seems impossible.

Pax acts as if he's welcoming Zanoba.

No killing intent.

There's a feeling that if it's what Zanoba wants, it may be alright to let him stay here.

If Pax shows now intentions of killing Zanoba, the reasons for making him return are on thin ice.

If there's no chance of him being killed, its like finding employment at your hometown when your family is in trouble.^[23]

Though a company run by Pax doesn't seem like it would treat its employees well, I should respect Zanoba's decisions.

But the possibility remains that Pax will have a change of heart and try to kill Zanoba. Mentioning that here would just sound like an excuse, but my doubts won't disappear just like that.

Not to mention, it would be too late once Pax really acts to take out Zanoba. Before that happens, I'd like to find proof somewhere that Pax really wants Zanoba dead.

But where can I find that evidence?

In the first place, even if there's no intention to kill him now, Pax may be thinking about killing Zanoba if he ever becomes a nuisance in the future.

Damn it.

I'm going in circles.

This stress will make me bald...

I won't get any answers just worrying on my own.

I'll go discuss it with Roxy tomorrow.

Chapter 5

Fort Karon

Part 1

The day after the audience.

I left preparations for departure to Zanoba and came back to the inn.

I meet up with Roxy.

Roxy was waiting in our room, armed to the teeth. ^[24]

She seemed to be stiff and rushed up to me as soon as I entered.

"Was it alright? I was worried because there was no contact but..."

"Yeah, nothing happened."

Because she had not had breakfast yet, we ate on the first floor of the inn while I told her about the contents of the audience:

The possibility that Pax is an apostle of Hitogami is low.

That it is difficult to discern the intent of Hitogami.

That the king of Kingdom of Dragon King is suspicious.

I told her everything along with my worries.

"...Hmm"

While making a difficult face, her soup spoon clicking against her bowl, Roxy listened to my story.

"Honestly, my head isn't working very well right now due to lack of sleep..."

"Right."

You can see bags beneath her eyes, and her overall movements are dull.

It would be wrong to think of it as an all nighter, after all we had kept moving the entire day before.

Even an adventurer will become tired if they remain at attention for so long.

"There was no fight. Prince Pax was rational. The name Hitogami did not come up. Thus, I wasn't able to determine anything."

Roxy could not think of anything either, but maybe my explanation was lacking.

"If there was not going to be a fight I should have went as well."

"Why you?"

"I may have been able to figure something out if I could have heard it with my own ears."

Ah, there might have been something like that.

During the audience I was thinking only of Hitogami's possible traps and the Death God. Over the course of events there may have been something outside of my expectations which I missed.

Another head with different expectations may have been necessary.

That head may have been Roxy's.

Well, there is nothing I can do about what's already past.

"... Somewhere there will be a trap created by Hitogami."

"Hmmm, could it be that the trap is only in Orsted's imagination, and there is nothing?"

"We should assume the worst and move accordingly. It may be that, right now, there is an invisible noose drawing around our family."

The fact that Lara, who has become the savior, cried like that has made me nervous.

For now there is no sign of Hitogami, but we might just be missing it.

It could be anything.

"Well, it was a careless remark."

Roxy lowered her head apologetically. ^[25]

"If Pax summoned us here to spring a trap, then he won't announce anything, I think he's hiding something."

"For example...?"

"For example, this morning Ginger-san brought me some information."

"Oh?"

Although I haven't seen Ginger, she must be moving behind the scenes.

"Her report says that 500 soldiers are at Fort Karon."

"500?"

If only a number is told, I won't understand if that's too little or a lot.

By her way of speaking it sounds like that isn't much.

"The enemy force seems to number nearly 5000."

That's horrible.

If there is a difference of 10 times, there doesn't seem to be a chance of victory.

"Did you hear about that?"

"... No."

I didn't hear about that at all, I was only told to go.

"Ginger also told me this:

Prince Pax is keeping the forces protecting Fort Karon to a minimum,

The rumor is that in the background mercenaries are gathering for an ambush.

Did you hear anything about the strategy?"

"... No."

I had not heard any of that.

But, yeah, it would be possible to throw away Fort Karon.

On the outside he could be welcoming Zanoba, but his intention could be to use him and then throw him away.

While Zanoba holds the enemy at bay with his life, he would be able to consolidate his fighting force.

If I suppose that Pax thinks of Zanoba as a liability, then that would be killing two birds with one stone.

"In addition it could be that getting Rudy was the intention all along."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have never been to war myself, but I have read an account of a single Saint class magician who was able to hold off 1000 soldiers by himself."

Is there such a record?

A warrior worth a thousand men.

I had not really thought about the scale of Saint class magic.

"I am King ranked, Rudy is the equivalent of emperor rank. If it's the two of us, we should be able to hold a fort for a considerable amount of time."

Hmmm.

It might be difficult to annihilate a 5,000 strong force.

If it's me, though, and I come at the entire force with the intention of killing them...

But even just being there, the other side should know about it.

Information that a King and Emperor class magician are present should leak out somehow.

It would be the height of foolishness to just plunge into such a well defended fortress.

Or possibly, if an attack came...

Out of those 5000 soldiers there may be a considerable number of magicians.

If it is a full assault by such magicians, even someone Saint ranked could be overwhelmed and destroyed no matter how much more powerful they are.

No, in an all or nothing battle it would only take one good blow to be disabled.

"However there is a limit to magical power. Eventually you'll become exhausted."

I can't imagine running out of magic power myself, but while fighting fatigue will accumulate.

Magic power is also not infinite, it will decrease by the amount you use.

"If the Death God is sent to us when we are exhausted from battle... possibly that could be his aim. Do you think it seems like that kind of trap?"

"Ah, it's certainly possible."

"Also..."

Roxy raised her spoon between her fingers: the pose of a teacher.

"There are only three apostles?"

"Yes"

"The king of Kingdom of Dragon King making Pax king feels kind of forced. At this point it's kind of hard to tell whether an enemy attack is coming, isn't it? Rudy, who do you believe the apostles should be?"

Who would I make as the apostles...

Ah, the enemy nation!

Shirone is kind of like a vassal state to the KDK.

There would be a risk involved when invading.

A dissenting opinion should appear in the country.

An apostle would be needed to push past that.

Perhaps a member of the royal family from the enemy country...

No, maybe someone like a general.

"While getting advice from Hitogami, bringing us to ruin reliably in a pincer attack with the Death God... surely."

Thanks to Roxy's insight, my thoughts were coming together.

There are two people with a high possibility of being Hitogami's apostles.

One is the king of Kingdom of Dragon King.

The other person should be an outstanding person from the group attacking Fort Karon.

As to the third person, I wonder who it could be?

In the Asura kingdom it was... Luke's turn.

To be honest, this casts some doubt onto Zanoba.

However from the talk yesterday he did not feel like an apostle.

Then there is Ginger.

Given their organization in the Asura Kingdom, the Death God is suspicious.

Or there is the possibility that it is the Princess who was beside Pax.

Until now Hitogami has not attacked with more than two pawns.

That is to say, if there are only two people this time then the other one is possibly moving towards the next goal in another location.

In other words, there is likely no third apostle here.

There are numerous possibilities.

The third apostle cannot be determined yet.

However the general identities of two apostles have been solidified.

Roxy is once again reliable.

"For argument's sake, what will you do if going to Fort Karon becomes like climbing into the lion's mouth?" [26]

"Well... for now I think it's important that we don't speculate too heavily about the other party."

"I strongly believe we should not go to Fort Karon."

But Zanoba is raring to go already.

He'll go even if we stay.

He'll go even by himself.

But Pax is sending Zanoba to a location with a mere 500 troops, with that knowledge I could try to persuade him.

Pax you are trying to kill Zanoba... You are heartless enough to say, [Even if you don't want to, go there even if you die.]

It is that you are going to use him and throw him away.

That reason alone will not stop Zanoba.

Zanoba will just set out with, [It is my duty to protect my country.]

In that case, if someone said to retreat during an enemy attack he would not just nod his head and listen.

Wait... If somehow the enemy is 5000, might that satisfy Zanoba?

While Fort Karon is holding out against the enemy Pax can gather more forces.

In other words, while Fort Karon is protected the country is stable.

I wonder if they are just pretending to defend the country.

".... We'll go to Fort Karon to save Zanoba."

"I understand."

"The problem is, there is still a trap."

Roxy made a bitter face when I said that.

For the time being I had better bring Mk-1.

I wonder if it is possible to beat it head on...

"Well there is some time before we go to Fort Karon. We can consider various things."

"Yes, Sensei."

Then, around the time we were finishing our conversation, a horse drawn carriage arrived carrying Zanoba.

Part 2

Zanoba did not change his expression even after hearing about only having 500 soldiers.

Rather he just happy nodded with a, [Oh, is that the case.]

His attitude was indifferent.

Suddenly I realized, this guy maybe doesn't consider the difference in strength between himself and his opponents.

"Listen to this Zanoba, [If the difference is 10 times then it's a siege. If it's 5 times it's an attack. Once it is doubled there is a difference. If there is an enemy, then fight well. If there is an attack, then escape. If there is a siege then avoid it.] When you get right down to it a fight with a large difference in numbers is disadvantageous."

The place is a fort, but if the strength difference is 10 times it will be difficult to endure. After my roundabout explanation Zanoba just tilted his head and gave a blank stare.

"How do we know that in this case it is disadvantageous?"

"How can you take a difference of 10 fold lightly? It's 10 times more."

"Seriously Shisho, can you not think of a way in which we are not outnumbered 10 fold?"

Somehow not 10 times...

Is this guy serious?

Can he not even do basic arithmetic?

"We have 500, doesn't the opponent have 5000? Ten times 500 is 5000. Are you feeling okay?"

"Fumu... Shisho, I wonder if you are testing me?"

Zanabo sighed and let out a laughed.

It's the kind of laughter that a fool might make.

All the while he had a tense face. ^[27]

"Look at it this way, Shisho:"

Then he began to explain.

"In that calculation Roxy-dono and Shishou are not included.

It is said that a Saint ranked magician can be equal to 1000 soldiers in the right situation.

I view the forces we have here as at least worth 2500 soldiers.

Considering Roxy-dono is king rank and Shisho is Emperor, I imagine that it is closer to 3000 or more.

Convention says that it should take forces in excess of 3 times an occupying force to storm a castle.

Fort Karon is an ideal place to defend in this manner.

Therefore the enemy will require more troops.

Additionally Shisho has a surplus when it comes to aggregate magical power."

"

I was speechless.

The answer I got back exceeded my expectations.

This guy, I mean, it was really unexpected.

"T-that was surprisingly detailed Zanoba-kun."

"Ever since early childhood I was forced to study military tactics for when I would become a leader within the country."

He had been kept alive in order to protect the country.

Just for this time he had been allowed to remain on the payroll.

That's exactly the case.

And unless you just want him to mindlessly rampage across the battlefield then you better teach him well things that will increase his judgment.

"This is Shisho's first battle... but please don't worry. In the past, just for a little, I have entered the field. As long as there is Shisho and Roxy-dono, the enemy will not enter the fortress."

He's brimming with confidence.

I wonder if it's really alright.

I don't feel like it is.

Still, it's best under the present conditions not to go to Fort Karon.

I'll try to persuade him, just a bit.

"But Pax was going to place you at that fort without, at the very least, knowing about Roxy."

"Well I would still go."

"If it's about my tremendous aggregate magical power, then Pax should not know of it."

"Shisho, what are you trying to say?"

I took my time with the preface, but I'll get right to the conclusion.

I'll just be frank.

"You don't feel like you are being thrown away?"

"

Zanoba made a face like a dove shot with a bb-gun.

But to Zanoba any gun would be like a bb-gun, huh.

"Pax surely might not feel bitter towards you anymore, but he may still expect you to die."

"... Well, that could be."

Zanoba waits for me to speak while scratching his cheek. ^[28]

"Is there really a need to follow this order?"

Zanoba sighed and let out a laugh.

It's an expression that asks, [Just what are you trying to say?]

"In war, there are times when someone must be sacrificed. Soldiers must become the first casualty, but also sometimes the royal family bares this burden. There may be a time when I must die."

"But is it necessary to clean up after Pax? He killed the rest of the royal family. Do you really have an obligation to him after that?"

"What is important is the serious matter before us, not past blunders. Doesn't Shisho often say the same?"

It's the normal Zanoba, but if you look close he seems to be a little uneasy.
Outside the window mercenaries mingle alongside the regular merchants.
It's also normal out there, but if you look closely it's a little uneasy.

Zanoba has said he is going.

To go to war with other countries is his duty.

In that case, that Pax is king, or the relationship between Zanoba and Pax, those things don't matter.

... As I thought, right now persuasion is impossible.

"I get it, It was wrong of me to say that."

"No, I understand that Shisho is just showing his concern for me."

"If we are going to Fort Karon, then, because I am an amateur, I will follow your orders. Feel free to say anything."

For the sake of Zanoba that had to be said.

"Ah thank you! If Shisho is there then it's very reassuring."

Okay.

We'll go and hold the northern Fort Karon for the time being.

By doing that Pax will be able to consolidate his strength. Also the enemy might not even attack.

Over time the country will stabilize.

The country's defense will be bolstered, Zanoba can protect his homeland, the result should be satisfactory.

The rest is Pax and DRK job.

Wait?

From the current situation where Shirone is a vassal state of Kingdom of Dragon King, how will Pax turn it into a Republic?

Hmmm....

No, Orsted says that is a story that won't happen for 30 years.

Also some other incident is likely to happen between now and then. ^[29]

If he turns out to be an apostle then the king of Kingdom of Dragon King will certainly meet his death in the near future.

It isn't necessary to put everything in order all at once.

After we bring Zanoba back home, I'll have to consult Orsted about it again.

『I'll bring Zanoba back alive.』

That's the reason I'm here this time.

I will not forget this.

Part 3

Three members head towards the fort: Roxy, Zanoba, and myself.

Ginger remains at the capitol. ^[30]

When she heard that Zanoba was going to the fort she seemed troubled a bit, but she had decided to remain and continue to collect intelligence.

It seems certain there is something she is anxious about.

With an earnest request, she entrusted the rest to the prince. ^[31]

At any rate, we are only three people.

This is, you would say a departure for the front, no a farewell escort, not even that but maybe unique reinforcements.

One of Shirone's soldiers is driving the carriage, but he is formal and distant.

It seems like Pax plans to make Zanoba a sacrificial pawn after all.

As for the Magic Armor Mk-I, just like Zanoba's dolls, it has been disassembled so that we could transport the parts separately. ^[32]

It will arrive after us.

The transportation in this world is sloppy unlike the shipping industry in modern Japan.

The magic armor's destination is the same as mine, but...

Something could still happen in the meantime.

I'm worried about that.

The only part of the Mk-I that we have with us is it's large gatling gun.

I'm so worried that I have even considered equipping it.

I remembered that during my fight with Orsted I became half dead by running through all my magical power.

As much as possible I need to preserve my magic for the Magic Armor.

In any case, our departure was underway.

Part 4

There was no large road leading to the battlefield.

We rode along in a horse drawn carriage earnestly moving forward down a small road like the footpath between rice fields.

As we head north we move from small towns, to farming villages, and then sometimes we end up camping.

" "

Along the way I began to think about other things, not just Hitogami.

Because of everything I'm now going to war.

As soon as I thought that, anxiety reared its ugly head.

My body became stiff.

War.

After coming to this world I still only have just some experience with killing other people.

However... war.

There is an unspeakable fear from that word.

To kill or be killed.

Just from the idea of war there is fear.

Or rather... I pray for victory.

Because of the explanation the other day, I now know there is likely to be battle.

I'm going to war for the first time.

I'm anxious.

"Shisho look. There is a group of adventurers, but I wonder what they plan to do lugging all of their heavy equipment way out here."

Despite my unease, Zanoba seemed to be having fun.

Every time he discovers something he comes to me, smiling, to report it.

His cheerfulness is amazing.

So much so, you would not believe that he is headed to war right now.

"That is a party set out to explore labyrinths. There are not a lot of labyrinths around here, but plenty can be found out away from towns. A party that is serious about doing labyrinths, those kinds of people will move the last stretch out from their location on foot."

Roxy is calm too.

Zanoba is cheerful as usual.

I am going to war for the first time timidly.

"Oh, Roxy-dono is indeed knowledgeable."

"At one time I also dived into a labyrinth in this area."

I'm the only one that's blue.

I wonder how these two people are so composed.

Somehow only I seem be missing the materials to have a peace of mind.

For them, I wonder what those materials are.

Perhaps my anxiety does not show on the surface.

"Come to think of it, it was because Roxy-dono completed a labyrinth on her own that she was asked to become the court magician of our country."

"Yes, that's a nostalgic story."

"You never hear of someone challenging a labyrinth alone, that is not an ordinary feat. I had thought that it is, of course, only natural of Shisho's shisho, but why did you do something so excessive?"

"Eh? I mean let's see, that is a search for, it is something beautiful... It was an error caused by a youth's passion."

"Ho, I wonder if you discovered what you were searching for ?"

"It was not found at that time, but at a later date I finally got my hands on it."

From under her hat Roxy looked at me with sparkles in her eyes.

Ah, it's that kind of story.

Roxy went into the labyrinth looking for a lover, or something.

"I see, this blue haired genius magician entered a labyrinth in search of a husband."

"Please don't clearly say such embarrassing things."

"Isn't it great? Since before Shisho has entered school he has been yearning for Roxy-dono."

"Is that true? Would he be in a loving relationship with Sylphy if it were?"

"No, it is true. At first I wasn't aware that Roxy-dono was his shisho."

Zanoba and Roxy have fun recounting an old story.

If it is like usual times this might be where Zanoba's jealousy would show.

At this time I have become accustomed to it.

"Well the Rudy back then and I... Rudy? What's wrong?"

I became aware of Roxy looking straight at me.

Her face is close.

I thought about trying to kiss her, but I didn't.

"Hey, Zanoba I think you are having quite a bit of fun considering we are going to war."

"HAHAHA, I am a man too! My heart will dance when I am preparing to enter a duel with my life on the line."

"....."

I'm uneasy.

Part 5

Nine days pass.

Fort Karon was a more splendid fort than I had imagined.

Its appearance, when viewed from a distance, was of a small sized stone fortress.

It was a kind of place you could see anywhere, with a somewhat undependable atmosphere.

However its location was excellent.

It was constructed on a delta between the mouths of two rivers.

Indeed, the famous Sunomata overnight Castle was built in a place like this.^[33]

In addition there is a forest spread before the river.

Coming in and out of the Shirone kingdom through this forest is simple enough, but leading an army through it would be difficult.

In this world, especially, demons will be lurking in the forests.

While held in place fighting demons, before too long more will come down the other side of the path and flank you.

There is nothing you can do about it.

That guy who called this place a strong position was correct.

Once I got a better look I realized it was more imposing than I had initially thought. Something like a trebuchet was installed on the roof of a watchtower.

Because I heard that only 500 people were lodged here I had assumed it would be rather small, but it was a respectable size.

However the number of soldiers moving around was few and their countenance was gloomy.

After hearing of the overwhelming enemy, their spirits probably plummeted.

"Shisho, Roxy-dono, this way."

We were led over by Zanoba where we inquired about the officer who is currently responsible for the fort.

We found the commanding officer in a place that looked like a strategy meeting room. Him and some vice captains were huddled over some maps with their heads together.

"Who is it?"

"It is the third Prince of the Shirone kingdom: Zanoba Shirone."

" ! "

When we entered they all looked over at us with blank suspicion, but the moment Zanoba gave his name they dropped down on one knee.

"Shirone Knight, Garrick Babiliti, Karon Fortress Defense Corps captain." [34]

"Yes, thank you for your work until now. I think a message was sent by the king but... "

"Yes Sir, I received it just the other day."

"If possible let's speak quickly. I will take over command of this fortress starting tomorrow, is that clear?"

"...Yes Sir."

I could sense a slight bit of dissatisfaction from Garrick.

Rather than being bothered by being removed from the top, is he troubled over whether to give command to this guy here?

I wonder if he has been proud to be in charge of this fort until now.

Once we join together with these guys, we don't want to leave any questions about discord under the surface.

"That said, It has been a long time since this one has stood on the battlefield. Therefore, to that end, I will put myself into an aid-like position and rely on Garrick when it comes to real world problems. Will that suffice?"

"Yes Sir!"

And, before I said anything, Zanoba followed through.

Yeah, it's best to leave such matters to a veteran.

"Well then, without any delay, Garrick, I want to raise the troops' morale. Please gather all the troops in this fort."

"Yes, sir!"

On Zanoba's orders we prepared to greet the remaining soldiers in the fort.

An hour later.

Before a balcony which was set up for appearances outside the fort, an army of armored figures totaling nearly 400 were lined up. ^[35]

On top of the fortress were 50 people, part of the watch.

The remaining 50 troops were occupied outside the fort with reconnaissance or as part of the transportation corps.

The soldiers in formation are all strong brazen looking guys with tough faces.

Everyone appears more fearless than I expected; it's spectacular.

I had thought that 500 was a small amount, but once I saw them all lined up that was no longer the case.

With this many it feels like we could do it.

No, with an opponent 10 times larger, I wonder if this even amounts to anything.

On the dais Zanoba was standing with his suspicious looking face.

Everyone's moral is low.

Standing before them is a member of the royal family so there is a lot of whispering and chatting between the men.

"I am Shirone kingdom's third prince, Zanoba Shirone."

"Your Highness Zanoba! Every man present is honored by the chance to fight with you!"

The commanding officer standing in the front sticks out his chest as he compliments Zanoba.

He does this even though I do not think he feels like welcoming Zanoba himself.

His face is asking Zanoba why he is even here.

"Yes."

Zanoba looks down on the soldiers while nodding in an exaggerated fashion.

Perhaps because of his full body armor or the club I had made for him, but Zanoba had become something else entirely.

"First, explain the situation!"

"Yes Sir! Currently skirmishes with the enemy side are continuing. It has become clear from questioning captives that we will soon be facing a large offensive."

"I see, then we don't have much time to prepare."

Zanoba nodded with an [Umu].

The commanding officer's face looked a little uneasy.

You can tell a lot from his face.

Zanoba, from deep in his chest, raises his voice.

"First of all, gentlemen, allow me to introduce your reinforcements."

Just hearing the word reinforcements caused the soldiers faces to lighten a bit.

It is easy to understand how quickly morale increased in that moment.

However, just where could those reinforcements be?

At least, there has been nothing from Pax.

Just when I'm thinking of this Zanoba looks our way.

Roxy and I go up on the stage when prompted.

"Hey there."

"Up front... another."

"But surely..."

The soldiers began to murmur.

I feel like some people are looking mainly toward Roxy.

There are few women on the battlefield and I wonder if she is rousing the beast in them.

Yes fellows I know that Roxy is awe-inspiring and beautiful and cute but...

There are female soldiers looking at Roxy too.

Hold on, men and women, you are all looking at a living person like an object.

It's all people in their 30s and 40s.

"Gentlemen!

There are many enemies but few allies.

We also are expecting a large offense from the other side.

Everyone surely is feeling anxiety.

However from the magic city Sharia now,

I have called up some very powerful reinforcements."

Zanoba gave a wink.

Certainly, we are those reinforcements.

That's right, Saint rank or higher is a match for a thousand.

Roxy and I together are 2000 men in power.

"Thanks."

Taking off her hat, Roxy greeted them.

The men's commotion increases.

"I thought so! That was the court magician..."

"The king ranked magician - "

"The one who developed some of the basics we use in drills..."

While making that dogai face, Zanoba starts to explain about Roxy. ^[36]

"This is Roxy Migurdia.

She is a person who was at one time the court magician to our Shirone kingdom.

Although I think many of you know this, she is also the person who developed the foundations of our modern paired magical training. ^[37]

And this is Rudeus Greyrat, her disciple. ^[38]

These two are both resourceful magicians of King class or higher."

The place came alive with oohs and ahhs.

I see.

At one time Roxy was the court magician for this country.

Among these soldiers there will be those who had been around in those days.

But that's not like you Zanoba.

Right now Roxy is Roxy Greyrat, not Migurdia.

Just how did you make such a blunder?

Well perhaps Migurdia is required to evoke her reputation.

"I'm sure you will have heard the story that Saint class magicians power is worth 1000 men.

In that case King class magic could be any kind of thing... !

Not many people know this, but in fact there is also a story from the Laplace campaign in the distant past where a single King class magician successfully repelled an army 100,000 strong!"

The entire place fell silent.

100,000 is probably too much of an exaggeration.

I have never heard such a story...

But there are some guys looking at me with yearning in their eyes. Apparently they believe it.

"In addition to these two people with King class or higher magic, myself, with the nickname Head Ripping Prince and a miko, will be leading from the front lines!"

After hearing that he is a miko and also the Head Ripping Prince the soldiers expectations soar.

In Shirone kingdom there is a miko called the Head Ripping Prince and even though he has a detestable nickname, when you put him on the battlefield he becomes reliable.

"Gentlemen, I will promise victory to you."

As soon as Zanoba said this he raised his fist into the air.

The soldiers also raised their fists and yelled out loudly.

"Whooooooooa!"

Their morale is excellent.

By no means was it a bad speech.

Surprisingly I wonder if Zanoba has the necessary talents for leadership.

I had never once thought such a thing, even just a bit, until now.

Talent isn't enough to become a king, but it might be enough to make someone a general.

So, in addition to this fort that seems hard to attack, we have two king class magicians.

To attack from here might not work, but defending it should be easy.

Zanoba is full of confidence and the soldier are cheering for him, it's that kind of story.

As I watched those soldiers saluting my anxiety faded.

I've trained myself properly.

I will do my best.

Chapter 6

Preparations for War

Part 1

The following day I went on a date with Zanoba.

The location we chose was the prairie north of Fort Karon, which will likely become the battlefield.

It's not actually a date of course.

If it was a date I would have brought Roxy.

I don't dislike you Zanoba, but I already have two wives and one husband^[39].

I cannot answer your feelings.

Let's set aside the jokes for now.

Early this morning Zanoba came to me saying, [I want you to come with me for a little bit.] and brought me out here.

Honestly, I'm scared.

This is a rough neighborhood. ^[40]

We could encounter the enemy at any time here.

"Hey, is it safe out here?"

"Hmmm, Shisho, are you being timid?"

"Well, isn't it possible we might be discovered by the enemy at any time... because the main attack should be coming soon?"

"We will be fine if you just defeat whatever shows up. Those don't seem like the words of my valiant Shisho who challenged one of the world powers, Dragon God Orsted."

Valiant is an unsuitable word for me.

Eris is the one who is valiant.

Well, with the Mk-II Magic Armor I'm probably over dressed to handle small fries even if we are ambushed...

"Ah, well enemy scouts should not come here where they can be seen from the fortress."

"Shouldn't it be the opposite? If they don't position themselves where they can see the fort how can they achieve anything as a scout?"

"There is a bit of truth in that, but Commander Garrick has said that once the enemy arrives here they are already cut off from their main party. One or two people might come in hiding but you won't see any formations this close."

Alright then, that's good.

If the enemy forces in the area are known then there are no worries.

"I mean, Zanoba, why did you bring me out to a place like this? A love confession?"

"Haha, I like you Shisho, but I'm not into sodomy. I'm not like those Asura nobles... Oh sorry, actually, Shisho is descended from Asura nobles."

"... Our family tree is perfectly ordinary."

I'm not interested in men.

Or else would you want to embrace me?

Neither of us would feel good about that?

"Joking aside, when this becomes a battlefield the enemy will be arrayed in about this position."

"Ooh."

Now that he mentions that I look around.

It's just an empty field;

rolling plains with bundles of tall grass and a few idle stones.

In addition there is also a slope.

If you look towards Fort Karon you would be looking up.

As you move away the slope gradually lessens.

The river flows from south to north as well.

"It is an advantageous position, but the enemies bows will still reach."

"Oh..."

I think we have plenty of distance but...

Something could still get through.

Still the arrows from this place will arrive more or less.

So, I suppose we should do something about the terrain in this area.

"So that we don't have to worry about this position I would like to change the topography here."

"I see."

If we change the terrain, then the enemy won't be able to deploy as close to us.

In that case they will have to move their formation to a spot before here.

If we can use that kind of method then their arrows won't reach us.

If their advance becomes more difficult, it becomes possible to pick them off before they even get to the fort.

This is definitely an ideal first step.

"Well then, Shisho, if you would."

"Affirmative. What kind of feeling do you want?"

"How about a mountain or a valley."

"Then how about a valley which won't be passable without building a bridge."

We spent the entire day altering the terrain of the battlefield.

Out on the prairie we also created some trenches, 10 meters deep, 5 meters wide, and 20 meters long.

While we were at it we disguised some of them to make pitfalls.

Like this they are easy to fill, so we even installed a trebuchet to increase our range.

In addition I crafted a moat and some stone walls along the outside of the river surrounding the fort.

In this way it would be difficult for the enemy to construct a position near the fort.

Even if they assault from the pitfall zone they will find it difficult to advance on the fort.

Everything was completed.

Setting it all up took half a day, but with this the enemy won't have an easy time with their advance.

The field took a form where we will be able to attack unilaterally.

"This scene gives me a peace of mind."

"No no, Shisho, couldn't you destroy this fort with magic from the other side of our traps?"

"It's possible."

If I could see it then that would be enough.

"The other side's magicians, it would be a good idea to assume their magic will reach."

I do not know what kind of range a regular magician has.

But if there is one person (ME) who can, then you had better assume others can as well.

I think the possibility that Hitogami has prepared a Saint to King ranked magician is good.

"Also, it's possible that a magician from the other side will be able to fill our traps."

This time I made pitfalls the focus.

But they are pitfalls after all.

If you are up against an earth saint magician then they will be filled in one shot.

"I expect that, in the main phase of the battle, Roxy-dono and Shisho will be tasked with resisting that kind of magic."

"I see."

Even if it turns out like that, we have two Saint ranked magicians over here.

If their goal is terrain destruction I should be able to resist.

I'll counterspell.

"I'll get the details at a later date, but for now there is meaning in making today's traps."

Hmmm.

Looking at the traps from the enemy's perspective, what would I do to surmount them?

I could either use a magician, or if not that then human wave tactics.

I will resist them if they use magic, if they use humans then the fort's archers.

This way, I have peace of mind.

We won't be taken by storm.

If it's me, then I should have some flexibility.

Part 2

And then three days went by.

My magic armor arrived and I got busy assembling it.

It is fundamentally designed for close combat so I won't be able to really use it until the fort is infiltrated.

Magic consumption is also large and I can only go one battle inside of it, so I will fight without wearing it for now.

I must not forget that there is a possibility that I will have to fight one of the 7 major powers.

After I completed the assembly of the magic armor, I participated in reinforcing the fort with Zanoba.

I block openings and strengthen walls.

If only to this degree, consumption of magic is insignificant so there isn't a problem.

While I was doing that, Roxy was teaching magic to some of the soldiers in the fort.

She wasn't only teaching magic to the soldiers, but also the rank and file.

In a pinch, having the use of elementary magic could be the difference between life and death.

Within the fort Roxy was popular, but I found myself being avoided.

They aren't hostile toward me.

In short, they are afraid.

This seems to have happened because I rearranged the battled field in one day.

Soldiers in front of me get out of my way in a hurry, and if I ask for something then it will be answered with a polite and respectful tone.

On the other hand, the soldiers do not approach me to talk.

I'm a little alienated.

Even though Roxy and Zanoba are already being accepted by the soldiers...

Could it be a difference in communication skills?

If I went and spoke with them more, would it be good I wonder?

No no, I didn't come here to make friends. I'll be fine.

The soldiers are cold and distant towards me, but there is rice.

This is because the Kingdom of Dragon King is backing this war.

They may not have sent reinforcements, but they have sent supplies.

In particular, they have sent food.

Sanachia rice is eaten on a daily basis in the Kingdom of Dragon King.

It is also eaten in the Shirone kingdom.

As such it has become a staple in this fort.

The taste is a little different from the rice that Aisha is breeding back home.

Aisha has been diligently attempting many different things to meet my preference.

When it comes to taste, I prefer Aisha's rice.

But originally it's the same rice.

If I can eat this rice every day then I am fine becoming a soldier of the Shirone kingdom.

While thinking that, I feel a moment of bliss.

However, I'll pass on the idea of working under Pax.

Then on the fourth day:

From an allied scout, we were told that the enemy troops have departed for the front.

Part 3

The enemy will come soon.

Traveling from the enemy's fort to here, it will take around five days to arrive with their forces.

I do not know how many days it would take for a scout to complete a round trip, but they won't make a five day trip in only a single day.

Neither will they make it on the third or the second day.

The enemy will be here in the blink of an eye.

The inside of the fort became an uproar.

Zanoba with Garrick began to reorganize the troops, meanwhile Roxy started writing magic circles on the roof of the fort.

Sharpening weapons; refurbishing armor; the soldiers of the fort were even counting their arrows.

Among them were even guys writing wills for the event that the enemy sacks the fort.

I became bored.

There didn't seem to be anything for me to do.

I had already finished everything that I could do over the last few days.

At best the only thing I can help with is writing magic circles with Roxy.

According to Roxy these circles are for the Saint rank magic [Flashover].

Roxy did not learn this spell formally.

Controlling it is difficult if you are not good with fire magic.

However it seems she is able to with the assistance of magic circles.

Nevertheless these magic circles are not set up for Roxy's use.

These are set up so that multiple soldiers can pour magic power into them at the same time.

Roxy will likely use water saint rank magic exclusively.

Fire magic is not used on demon foes.

It has high power but inside a labyrinth it can cause oxygen deprivation and also possesses a high probability of splash damage. For these reasons it is not preferred.

However it is very effective on human opponents.

After all, there are no human beings who are not weak to fire.

When the battle begins, along with Roxy, I will be commencing magical bombardment of the enemy from the roof of the fort.

We have a detailed plan, but fundamentally I'll just be bombarding the enemy.

That is my role.

However there is one concern.

Will I actually be able to fire?

Every single time since I have come to this world I have hesitated when faced with killing a person.

It's too late, I am already guilty of murder, I won't pretend to be a good little boy.

In the future, I don't plan on becoming an unreasonable adult by telling kids that killing is never justified.

Now that I think about it, I once told Ruijerd not to kill people.

In the past I have killed a man once.

Senior Minister Darius.

As far as that goes, Auber as well.

I did not deliver the finishing blow, but I was the one who cornered and killed him.

It left a bad aftertaste.

However he was someone that had to be brought down.

This time, though, the opponent is relatively innocent.

Yet I'll have to kill them.

This is no just cause.

When you come right down to it, I am only here for Zanoba...

Regardless, I will be killing many people from a distance with my magic.

Unlike my fight with Auber, this is going to be one sided.

If you ask whether I can or can't, then I can.

If you ask whether I will or I won't, then I will.

But when it is over, will I be okay?

I wonder if I'll feel sick and retch and vomit.

Then if the Death God attacks, will I be able to fight properly...

" "

"How are you doing, Rudy?"

Roxy is looking up at my troubled face.

She has ink on her cheek.

Come to think of it, she has been pretty calm considering this is war.

Because Roxy spent her time as an adventurer she should not have experienced war before.

I wonder if she has killed anyone in the past.

I certainly haven't heard that kind of story from her.

"Roxy... well, it's kind of like this."

But I hesitate to ask.

Have you ever killed a person?

In my previous life it's the kind of remark that might cause [Did you mean this fellow...] to be blurted out.

"Aah... I understand. It absolutely can't be helped."

"Eh?"

"I hear that before a fight, a man should embrace a woman to quiet his troubled heart. If its so much that I can no longer stand then I will be troubled, but since I am Rudy's wife I can take care of that."

"No no no, it's not that kind of thing."

"It's... something different?"

Even I can't get into a pink frame of mind during such a time.

I mean, Roxy, that's a little disappointing.

If Roxy wants to do it, I am pleased...

No, let's set that aside.

Alright, I'll have her listen to me.

"Roxy... have you ever had times like this when you had to kill people?"

"There has been."

She replied frankly.

I was taken back.

Roxy, that Roxy who was immediately able to befriend the soldiers of this fort...

"Since I had spent a long time as an adventurer it should not be that surprising."

"Huh... but who was the opponent?"

"The first party I was in... back when I was an adventurer on the magic continent. At that time I was still only a child and, because of a fight where one of the members tried to cheat us, it became a situation where we tried to kill one another."

The situation just naturally escalated, it should be that kind of thing.

"Just that?"

"When I was adventuring alone... there were several more times... Ah, when I would go on trips alone often I would be targeted by kidnappers. It is because I have such an appearance of someone who would be an easy target for kidnapping. When all of their members were together I turned the tables on them and wiped them out."

Oh, is that the case.

This is that kind of world.

No one living here can be completely clean.

"Roxy may have settled down... but is this your first time experiencing war?"

"Yes, but I have stared death in the eyes many times until now."

The answer was decisive.

"Here you won't likely have to face the enemies you kill. You can also take refuge in the rear. I can handle it."

"And just run?"

"Yes. If it comes down to it just run away and I will take over your responsibilities. I came here in order to protect Rudy."

Roxy raised the hand that was holding the brush and posed while flexing her bicep.

Her upper arm is soft.

It's still nice and reliable...

"Rudy, are you afraid to kill people?"

"Yes, I'm scared."

"How come?"

"I don't know..."

Roxy nodded with an, [I see.] and wiped the sweat from her brow with her sleeve.

The ink that had gotten on her sleeve when she took her pose is now smeared across her forehead.

"Even in the past Rudy was timid, but you can ride a horse even if you are scared."

Ah.

That reminds me, 15 years ago I was too scared to even go outside.

How nostalgic.

"Do you have something you are having trouble with? Then please talk to me about it."

Like that, Roxy was teaching me for the first time in a long while.

"If there is a situation where you hesitate to kill a person. Don't worry about it, I will take care of it."

"Just don't worry about it? Is that really okay?"

Why?

I would not be troubled if I understood it.

But I think it would be bad to just not worry about it.

Until recently I never thought about killing people.

"... I have been adjusting my magic since the time I traveled the Magic continent so that I could decide when to kill and when not to kill."

Originally I began to adjust the power of my stone cannon so that Eris could have experience fighting demons.

That experience allowed me to continue to adjust the power so that I wouldn't have to kill human opponents.

The reason was because of Rujerd.... the party of [Dead End] was a group that could not kill.

"At that time our party decided that we would not kill people. Because I was the leader I had to set a good example like that. Somehow I've continued on in that manner and it has become ingrained behavior."

Precisely because I was like that for so long, deep inside the habit of hesitating has rooted. Just like someone rigidly trained as a child, I continue experiencing this repellant feeling even into adulthood.

It's a kind of trauma.

It's been that way through my entire journey, maybe there's no reason to worry about it after all this time.

I have made it all the way here with good results.

"I see."

Roxy brushed the bangs from her forehead.

Ink has now also spread to the tip of her nose.

"What do you think about the hesitation yourself? Do you want to do something about it somehow?"

"... No. I am thinking about the people who would be lost."

In this world I have power.

It is such a force that an opponent can be killed at the snap of my fingertips.

Killing my opponent disturbs me.

Furthermore it is the kind of power to kill multiple opponents without rebuke.

That is if there is no hesitation.

Like in my future self's diary, I could become someone who has no concern for murdering anyone.

I find that... disturbing.

"Then isn't it fine?"

Sure I guess.

But on into the future it could become troubling.

"Look here. Let's say, [Because Rudy let this guy live he has went on to kill Prince Zanoba another time.] This will provoke Rudy's anger."

" "

In war, murdering people is sanctioned by the country.

The organization called the country bears the responsibility for it.

So the number of people I kill in this war doesn't matter.

It becomes the responsibility of Zanoba, or Pax, entirely.

This is not just an excuse.

"This time, if Rudy is unable to use magic, I will do my best. If this causes me to run out of magic please put me on your shoulders and escape."

"... Well, with Roxy on my shoulders, the place we escape to might be pretty nice."

"Oh yeah?"

While laughing at my remark, Roxy picks up another jar of ink.

Seeing the ink stain on her sleeve, she frowns.

"Rudy, is there some ink stuck to my face?"

"Yes, enough that your face might just produce some magic."

When I said that Roxy took a handkerchief from her breast pocket and rubbed her face roughly.

Her face is bright red.

A blush came out instead of magic.

"Did I get it all?"

"It's on the tip of your nose, your forehead, and cheeks."

"... Please wipe me. In this state, I don't look like a proper wife."

"Alright, here I go."

I take the handkerchief from Roxy and wet it with water magic.

Roxy raised her face up and closed her eyes.

I wiped her forehead and the tip of her nose, but her cheek I kissed.

" ... "

" "

Unnoticed by me Roxy had opened her eyes and was glaring at me reproachfully.

Her face was waiting unchanged.

"I still have some more magic circles to write. After I'm done, let's take our time and continue with that."

"Yes."

It seems I'll be able to continue.

I waited like a dog while Roxy finished writing the magic circles.

After that the two of us, alone back in our room, became soaking wet.

This war.

I do not know what kind of things I'll be able to do.

But it will be fine so long as Roxy is here.

Part 4

The next day.

A report that the main enemy force will arrive by the end of today came in.

Everyone in the fort became tense; we had everyone take up their positions.

I also took my place on the roof of the fort.

The job given to Roxy and me is to fire off magic attacks while taking orders from the magic soldier commander.

Until the enemy gets here I just have to wait patiently.

I am currently wearing the 『Magic Armor MK-II』 .

I set 『MK-I』 up so that it's sitting down over the back of the fort.

It's setup and ready for me to jump in and go.

Even now, Hitogami has yet to show his hand.

Will he do something when this battle is over?

Or will he somehow come and take advantage of this battle?

Could there be apostles among the enemy?

Might there even already be an apostle in the fort?

Will Pax come from behind as the true enemy?

While I was feeling uneasy something moved within the edge of my view.

"Hmn?"

The back of the fort.

From the opposite side of the enemy's advance.

A group of armored figures separated from the fort. They seem to have moved into the woods across the river.

Somewhere around 100 people.

No way, it couldn't be deserters.

"Excuse me, do you know what is going on over there?"

"Yes sir!"

I try to ask Mr. Billy, the company commander.

Then he nodded at the group outside the fort dressed in armor.

"It is a military unit that was formed around his highness Zanoba. Their task is to kill enemy soldiers who attempt to escape through the forest, to launch a surprise attack on the enemy in certain situations, and to take the head of the enemy general."

"Eh!?"

What was that?

"What!"

"Yes sir.... No, with Rudeus-sama's arrival the need for us to protect the fort has weakened."

"No, I don't think I make that much of a difference."

"I think we are very lucky, and along with Rudeus-dono came Roxy-dono."

Well yeah, I'm grateful for your consideration, I understand what you want to say.

It would surely become that when Zanoba leads a small unit away from the fort I would yell, [This is exactly the form Hitogami's trap would take!]. ^[41]

Roxy might have also reacted in the same way, given the situation.

From the forest I do not think I can do as much, depending on the situation.

I understand the reasoning.

But then this didn't have any meaning.

Because of that guy's thinking I have come here for nothing.

I only came along to protect Zanoba.

You could at least say goodbye before your departure.

What would we have done if I had accidentally nuked you?

I mean, what if our opponent knew that our supreme commander was just sitting in the woods? Wouldn't that be dangerous?

Right now I should give chase...

"Tsk!"

However, before I could take action the tension in the fort spiked.

The bell to announce the enemy attack resounded with a [Kan Kan].

Everyone's eyes looked toward the same place.

Ahead of us, the horizon is blurred by a cloud of dust.

The enemy had come.

Chapter 7

War

Part 1

Zanoba has run off somewhere.

Apparently he's gone to take the head of the enemy's commander.

I have no idea why.

I don't understand, but I cannot afford to leave my post either.

However Zanoba had made arrangement with his commanding officers in advance.

I can't just recklessly take off and leave Roxy to take care of the magical offensive alone.

I need to think carefully.

Even if I left now, Zanoba who is in the forest, won't be found easily.

He's not alone. Since he took 100 people then it's a military maneuver.

It's obvious that I should just do what I was told.

"... Phew~"

I need to calm down.

Zanoba will have done all this as part of a military strategy.

Therefore, I also need to move as planned.

"Whew... haa...."

Okay, calmed down.

Now that I'm calm I take a look at the enemy.

While my thoughts were in disorder the enemy has set up an encampment in the area before our traps.

Just as planned.

From that position the opponent's magic should not hit us.

Well, for us it doesn't just barely reach.

When it becomes a full battle, at that point half of the enemy should enter the pitfall zone.

"As expected, there are a lot."

"It looks like there is about 3000."

"All that is missing is their rear guard."

That is what the men are talking about.

In order to count the number of soldiers all you have to do is look at the number of banners.

"Rudy! Please resist this!"

"Eeh?"

Roxy suddenly cried out.

I look towards the enemy.

From around the center of the enemy formation, something like a tornado is rising into the sky.

"They are trying to fill the traps you made with earth magic all at once!"

Ah, they are using earth saint ranked magic [Sandstorm].

I see.

The presence of our pitfall traps must have been confirmed by enemy scouts.

In that case they are trying to fill the traps up with a large amount of earth.

However we prepared for that as well.

"I understand. I'll resist with Violent Storm[Hurricane]."

As I said that I raised my hand up towards the forming cloud of dust.

I use wind magic.

Wind Saint magic, Violent Storm[Hurricane]

The name attached to this magic is a little overboard, simply speaking it's a magic to create a strong wind.

However I don't possess the title of a saint ranked magician just for show.

Water Saint magic, [Cumulonimbus]

Earth Saint magic, [Sand Storm]

Both of them are similar kinds of blended magic, 'a wind with additional attributes'.

It is just that this wind magic only causes wind.

Even though they both use similar amounts of magic power, the power is put completely into the wind.

Its power is tremendous enough that the effects of an Earth Saint rank spell are blown away.

It's also very effective against demons flying in the sky.

Nevertheless the power of the spell is felt much more by those in the air than those on the ground.

The reason for this is that things like trees will dampen the power of the wind as it races across the ground.

According to one source it was created in order to counter weather changing magic in the event that they were used for war.

Although that is just one theory.

Even with its power dampened, if I pour enough magical power into it, it becomes strong enough to pull trees out of the ground.

Generally there isn't as much power felt on the ground, but in the air it rages unobstructed. It is a thing that seems like it could have been developed to knock a flying dragon out of the sky.

Though if you consider that they can fly in the air with such huge bodies, dragon's must be using air magic and fighting spirit.

According to another theory I'll go bald if I use it too much.

The reason seems to be that the strong wind will even uproot hair.

They say the principal of the magic university lost his hair like this, but there is no credibility to that rumor.

Okay okay, I'm calm now.

"YEAH!"

The soldiers around us break out in cheer.

However, because of the great distance, there was no damage to the ground.

The wind that blew away a sandstorm would normally leave some kind of trace on the ground but...

Perhaps it did not because it was highly directional;

or because it was directed at the sky above;

or because magic was somehow involved;

or did I make a mistake with my magic again?

Oh well.

That's just how it is...

"Rudy, they are trying again!"

"Eh? Again?"

Although I think it's useless no matter how many times they try.

Ah, no, it's useless.

Normally, someone's magic power would run out.

It's possible the enemy is using a magic formation in the same way we are.

In other words, multiple people are pouring magic into magic circles, it doesn't have to be a lone saint class magician.

Because they have a force ten times the size of ours, they should have ten times the number of magicians.

It's not unreasonable for them to believe that if they continue to spam magic, we will become depleted first.

Wait a minute?

If I think about it, doesn't that mean there is not one of Hitogami's apostles over there?
Having an apostle among them, they would be aware of me and won't show this kind of behavior.

It's a waste of magicians.

"For now I'll just resist them until they give up. That'll be good, right?"

"Ah, yes. With that kind of magic... will you be alright?"

"I'll be fine."

The sub commander looked at me with eyes filled with fear now.

Only my total aggregate magical power is large.

Even if I stop ten of those saint rank attacks I would still have power to spare.

They used sandstorm five more times, all of which I resisted.

If I used Ran ma then I could limit my power consumption but...

It would absolutely fail at this distance.

" "

For now, the movement of the enemy has been stopped.

Did they no longer have magicians which could power saint ranked magic?

Or perhaps all of the magic circles they had prepared were used up.

Maybe they just realized it was a waste...

"I wonder if they'll attack."

"They will."

Looking towards the enemy sub commander, Billy spoke with a stern look,

"If I was the enemy's commander, I would not just charge recklessly into a battlefield that is littered with traps.

I would pull back.

You can misread the power of your opponent in the opening stages so it's best to pull back and re-examine their forces.

If it was me that is what I would do."

"Oh... it seems that they are coming."

When I look, I see that the enemy encampment has started moving.

They dragged themselves along and moved towards us, slowly leaving a trail behind them.

Well, anyway.

They probably carefully held a strategy meeting and then came after forming a variety of plans.

Pulling back would use up food and supplies and could also harm the morale of the troops.

It may not be necessary to withdraw just because you were shamed in the opening maneuvers.

In normal exchanges, our magicians would have used up magical power as well.

In that case they would be able to pass through the pitfall zone unmolested.

That is probably what they are thinking.

"Archers at the ready!"

In response to the orders from the sub commander, bowmen came to the front.

Any enemy attempting to cross the pitfall zone will be targeted by arrows.

"Fire!"

In response to the sub commander's orders, arrows fly.

We have 50 bowmen at the most.

The enemy number 5000.

Their effect on the charge will be meager.

The enemy commanders probably think the same way.

After a brief pause a horn sounded.

The enemies' advance hastened at the same time.

One group of enemies slowly pick their way through, another constructs a bridge, others occasionally falling into a pit or detouring around one. In this way they advance a tiny bit at a time.

Having seen the archer's attack they now advance boldly without fear of a magic attack.
Well, that should be enough.

"Magic troop prepare."

The sub commander issues his order and magic soldiers holding wands step forward.
We have 20 magic soldiers in total.
From that number, eight move to the edge of the roof.
The other eight stand ready in the back.
The remaining four come out to use the magic circle that Roxy drew.

The magic soldiers on the roof ready their wands.
Also Roxy, who I hadn't been watching, was out holding her wand.
I should join in as well.
Okay.
And so I make a tight fist while psyching myself up.

Most of the enemy have entered the pitfall zone.

"Commence chanting!"

The eight people in the front begin to chant fire magic in unison.
When they had gotten half way through their chant, the eight soldiers in the back began to chant as well.

" ~ Fireball Bullet [Fireball] ! "

From the eight members of the vanguard, fireball was cast.
The fireballs flew in an arc and landed in the center of the enemy formation.
Several people transformed into something charred black.

The ones who had fired immediately retreated and began chanting again.

" ~ Fireball Bullet [Fireball] ! "

The eight people in the back then released their delayed fireballs.

While maintaining a time difference of half a chant, they continued to rain down fireballs.

However, countless balls of water started to fly from the enemy in groups of four.

They can't reach us at the fort, but if they hit a fireball then it is undone.

I'll resist them.

In the previous skirmish, it was not the case that the enemy used all of its magic power.

Of course they didn't.

"Roxy-dono, there is a banner with a scorpion on the right side of the battlefield."

"Yes, I see it."

The words of the sub commander cause Roxy to turn this way.

The banner with a scorpion on it is raised on the enemy's right side.

Around that point is where the water bullets are flying from.

In that area the magician corps of the enemy should be huddled.

In other words, if I can smash that group the possibility that the enemy can resist our magic will be lowered.

"Um, Rudy... should I do it?"

"No, I can."

"Alright then."

Roxy made a thin smile before she began chanting.

I also became ready and poured magic into both of my hands.

And then...

I killed them.

Part 2

After that, it became one sided.

They were no longer able to resist any of our magic.

Most of the remaining enemy had no method to defend themselves from the saint ranked fire magic our soldiers shot out.

The defeated enemy could not even easily withdraw because of the pitfalls.

Over the course of their retreat their chain of command dissolved and their movements became erratic.

To be sure, Roxy and I then attacked with Saint ranked magic.

They became like ants trapped in a heavy storm.

They panicked and ran about wildly.

Inside the pandemonium they fell into pitfalls and were struck by lightning.

One after another they died.

Now I understand what that person meant.

People are garbage.

However not everyone was in a panic.

Some of them escaped the pitfall zone, some were outside the range of our saint ranked magic.

There were not many, but some got within range and attacked with magic.

Almost all of them were resisted, but a few hits landed on the fort killing some of our men.

Enemy archers took up swords and possessed the fort.

Only 300 defenders were left to meet them.

Of course from the roof we cast magic on them like a rain of stones.

Finally, we had worn the enemy combatants down to only a few.

Some had lost the will to fight, others were still struggling.

Some of them were taken as prisoner of War and some of them were killed.

I do not know the statistics involved.

Our losses number relatively few.

This was something that might be called a historic victory; the enemy withdrew.

When the battle ended commander Garrick raised a shout of victory.

The magic soldiers, archers, and I also broke out in cheer, our faces beaming.

I also cried.

I did not know whether I was pleased or not.

My awareness of having killed people was lacking, but so was the sense that we had won.

It was my surroundings that become filled with cheer and excitement.

Those soldiers that previously had feared and avoided me ran up and clapped me on the back.

Some were patting shoulders, others embracing.

One of those was a young female archer.

It's thanks to you, you did it, thank you.

When told this delight overflowed from me.

Finally there was Roxy.

Roxy leaped into my arms.

She was so excited that I got an uncommon Roxy initiated kiss.

The men around us whistled and raised cheers and jeers at us.

I'm happy, just happy.

The source of my happiness isn't that I'm being embraced by a woman.

It might be the effect of what they call group psychology.

The wild enthusiasm has certainly paralyzed my heart.

It's not bad.

I couldn't think about the people I had killed with my own hand or anything else.

I am good.

Anyway we won with almost no damage on our side.

I should be happy about it.

So to say that I don't have to think about it is fine.

I'm fine.

I did it for the first time; surprisingly it may not have been that big of a deal.

This is how it is living in this world.

It isn't necessary to forever be bound by the ethics of my previous life or to the rules I'd established in my youth.

There is a time for the spear and a time to hold back.

I should no longer hesitate if I need to kill a person.

I am in control.

"Prince Zanoba has returned!"

This was said by a messenger who had come from the lower floor.

During the chaos of the battle I had forgotten completely about Zanoba.

I ran downstairs in the blink of a eye.

But the scene at the bottom of the stairs was frightening.

A group of people with clearly different hair color is surrounded by ten of our soldiers.

They were filthy with leaves, dirt, soil, soot, sweat and blood.

One of our men, a ferociousness man in splendid armor raised his voice to greet me.

"Ah, Shishou!"

Who was this?

I thought I knew who it was.

Who was this with his victim's blood in his hair?

There was damage all over his armor.

Even his glasses were smeared with blood.

"Zanoba?"

Zanoba is Zanoba.

He looked like a different person who looks exactly like Zanoba.

It was so much so that I wanted to complain.

I just couldn't make the connection between this man and Zanoba in my head.

"You are..."

When I approached the crowd split in two.

So I swallowed my words.

At Zanoba's feet was a kneeling figure.

This guy tied up in a net was also covered in mud.

It is a net that I recognize.

It is the magical item that I had lent to Zanoba.

"Thanks to Shishou, the surprise attack was a success, we caught the enemy's commander."

"Ah, ummm..."

The soldiers around the fort are praising the dozen or so muddy warriors.

The eyes they turn towards Zanoba are different than when we first came to the fort.

They are different from those eyes filled with suspicion.

They are eyes full of respect.

I mean, only ten men.

Why are there so few?

When they left there should have been almost 100.

"Um... where are the others?"

"They were killed. They died honorably in battle."

Oh, I see.

If you raid that huge army with 100 people it becomes like this.

But isn't it strange?

Wouldn't we have won this battle even without making this raid?

They shouldn't have had to make a desperate raid like that.

"Just what... did you win something from the raid that would be worth the lives of 90 men?"

"Of course we did. This person is a member of the enemy's royal family. If we negotiate with him as a hostage the war should end."

Oh, I see...

I get it.

Yeah.

I understand now.

If that's the case then the raid was necessary.

This put everything in perspective, this battle was a complete victory.

Zanaba created a victory with a desperate charge.

If you think about it, this may have been a worthy way to sacrifice 90 men.

It's a rather small sacrifice for ending a war.

No wait, I shouldn't be deceived.

This time we delivered a crippling blow to the enemy.

1000 or 2000.

Or even 3000.

Any commander with his head straight on isn't going to attack us anymore.

"I can't keep Shishou stuck in this fort too long. This was a fine success."

Smiling, Zanoba laughed.

It was that kind of thing.

I guess it isn't necessary that the enemy would be stopped by just this defeat.

There is the possibility that the enemies commander doesn't have a good head on his shoulders.

Even though we severely wounded them today, our enemy has the advantage in numbers.

Meanwhile, without Roxy or I, the fort could easily fall.

Neither of us can afford to stay here one or two years.

But with the capture of an enemy royal, once a cease fire agreement is signed, the war is over.

Having gotten a hold of someone from the leadership, we can finish this surely.

Without that guy's methods, this wouldn't have been possible.

For example, if I was in the enemy's fort...

No, even if Roxy hadn't helped me get over my hesitation and fear of killing, wouldn't things have still taken their course?

"Iya. However just as expected.

That saint ranked magic of Shishou and Roxy-dono...

In addition, this [casting net of overfishing].

I thought that I would be able to capture the enemy's commander eventually, but I did not expect it to go so well."

Anyway, under the cover of the mess created by Cumulonimbus, Zanoba successfully captured the enemy's head.

Like picking up a chestnut from the fire.

If you make a bet, you have to win it.

He created a method using Roxy and myself, while just barely scraping by, got the best results from this single large battle.

"Iya-haha, but there sure is a large difference between being inside that saint rank magic and seeing it from a distance!"

"Ah, uuuh, Yeah, that it is."

Suddenly a chill ran down my spine.

The range of Cumulonimbus is wide.

It's the kind of attack that will strike the enemy in a large scope.

That would mean...

"Ah, that is, Zanoba... did I hit your group with lightning?"

"Hmmm....."

Zanoba placed his hand on his chin and made a pose like he was thinking.

He said with a straight face, "Shishou... there are always sacrifices in war."

I was right.

Roxy and my lightning struck them.

We were safe in the fort.

Alternatively, they could have also been blown by the strong winds into our own pitfalls.

It might have been a guy I was eating my rice next to.

It might have been a guy Roxy had taught magic to.

Even though I didn't get very involved with the men, I notice that faces I had gotten used to seeing over the last several days were missing.

"And, those men's fate are the sole responsibility of the commander. Shishou, you shouldn't worry about it."

Even if you say that, I feel like I've done something irreparable.

"Shishou, you must be tired. Please rest well for the remainder of the day."

While saying that, Zanoba hit me lightly with a pop, and then gently patted my shoulder. Then he took the prisoners and disappeared into the fort, while saying one thing or another to soldiers he passed.

I just stood there stunned.

Words would not come out anymore.

" "

Ah, I see.

We must prepare for an attack by the Death God.

There is no time to be stunned.

I don't have the time to be resting.

I should be near the MK-I.

Then let the enemy come.

Part 3

That evening an assailant came.

However, he was not the Death God.

Neither was I his target.

He came to rescue the royal family member we had taken hostage early today.

I did not have to kill him.

He was weak.

I stunned him and handed him over to a soldier of the fort.

I don't know what happened to him after that.

My restraint is functioning at least.

I'm alright. I'm going to be okay.

I am unstable, but I'm in control.

I am able to control my power.

So I'm okay.

I continue to tell myself this all night.

The Death God did not come.

I was not attacked.

Part 4

The next morning I joined in questioning the hostage with Zanoba.
He's part of the royal family of the aforementioned North Country.

Whether or not they know the existence of Hitogami: No.

Whether or not there was a guy in their country who made a remark or claimed to foresee the future: No.

Then how did they perform the invasion collecting 5000 soldiers in such a short period of time?

They had been eyeing the Shirone kingdom for some time, working towards an invasion slowly.

So then, the north country is clean.

There was no relationship with Hitogami.

Or, it could be that the general idea to invade Shirone came from Hitogami... but this guy is not an apostle, certainly.

This guy who became our hostage, he is just a moronic commander like you could see anywhere.

Still no attack from the Death God.

The North Country is clean.

My expectations are defeated.

It's been a long time since I felt like I was just earnestly spinning my wheels.

It seems that I have misunderstood something fundamental here.

For example, perhaps in this particular case, there was no trap from the beginning.

Far from a trap, maybe Hitogami has nothing to do with these events.

Even while I think this, I remain vigilant.

Partly, I may have misunderstood some meaningless thing, it's better to be prepared.

Then on the tenth day, the situation changed.

Chapter 8

Emergency Situation, Zanova True Motive

Part 1

Ten days have passed since the battle.

Thanks to our hostage, the enemy has put forward an offer of truce to Zanova.

We sent a message back to the capital.

We wrote about our victory, taking the hostage, and the possible truce.

It's been proven after the fact that there is no force left which can make all out war on Shirone now.

If Pax doesn't act like a total moron, I won't complain.

Well, we haven't received a reply yet, so I feel a bit uneasy.

Everyone inside the fort is wildly enthusiastic about the battle.

To them Roxy and my magic was amazing, Zanova, who cut through the enemy was also amazing.

This place has been filled with relaxed excitement.

Thanks to my part in the success of the battle, or perhaps because I captured the assailant, the soldiers of the fort have softened towards me.

Even so, the excessive courtesy they had shown me is still there.

But I think their facial expressions aren't as stiff.

They have started to smile at me recently and when they come to talk they do it with a bright expression.

The magician who they didn't know may have become a fellow soldier to them.

At least there wasn't a single man that came to blame me for the death of those who were caught in my saint ranked magic.

Thanks to things like the attitude of the men,
the day to day counseling with Roxy,
and my concern for Zanoba, my mental state was recovered.
I am able to believe that I did not make a mistake; my actions were not at fault.

It's better to not focus on the past's troubles.
Here in this world I am a subordinate of Orsted.
In order to protect my family I have made an enemy of a god.
A time like this was bound to come some day; I should have prepared.
It's a fragile calm but this is the path I've chosen.

However, in the future, I probably won't participate in war even if I'm begged.
In this other world, how should I say it... It's another universe.

At the same time, perhaps I'll have to kill again.
It is tiring if I dwell on each person one by one.
If I can avoid killing, then that's what I'll do. This is my decision.
It won't pay to worry for days about each person I may have to kill, it would just cause unnecessary mental damage.

Well, let's reorder my thoughts.
Even though I have been wary these last ten days, nothing has happened.
Both my mental state and my magic have made a full recovery.
I'm in perfect condition.
The Magic Armor MK-I is still setup and I remain vigilant.
I am in a better position now than at the audience with Pax; the Death God should have attacked then if he was going to.

After all, Hitogami may have had nothing to do with this affair.
It must be as Orsted said.
This event originally happened but was not recorded in the diary.
Even without me Zanoba must have somehow handled this.
Perhaps he wasn't even summoned.

This may have been a waste of time.

However that isn't something I should say.

There is still a possibility that Zanoba could have died this time.

Regardless, the war is over.

There is no longer an enemy country arrayed against the Shirone kingdom.

Zanoba should also be satisfied.

I should be able to persuaded him to come home to Sharia now.

Thinking of him staying close to Pax is repugnant.

Part 2

"Mmmnnn ... !"

I stretched myself out in the morning sun.

Hitogami is unrelated... probably, I think.

If he's done nothing here, then the possibility of a trap is as low as possible.

After I thought about it like that I slept soundly for the first time in a long while.

And nothing happened while I was sleeping like a log.

So, it's not a trap after all.

With this new refreshed attitude, I decided to go wash my face in the nearby river.

I could also use water magic, but it isn't the same kind of feeling.

At the river the soldiers were washing their faces and brushing their teeth in groups of two and three.

"Oh look, it's Rudeus-sama."

"Thank you for your good work at watch every night!"

"Iya, I thought that doll must surely be part of Zanoba's hobby, but it was a magic tool after all!"

I had quickly become surrounded.

I'm a very popular person.

Being pampered day after day like this, it may be my first time.

At any rate, the soldiers of Shirone wear a light brown pair of shirt and shorts outside of combat.

The uniform is the same for both sexes.

Moreover the women do not seem to wear a bra when they go to bed.

The young archer girl who had hugged me is here; potchi rises up a bit.

I'm seeing something precious, it's a sight for sore eyes.

"I wondered what caused this crowd to gather, it's Shishou."

So Zanoba also comes here.

Also this guy, from head to toe is dressed just like the soldiers.

There is no hint of royalty here.

Because of his skinny limbs and underdeveloped muscles, he gives off the impression of a NEET.

"Zanoba-sama!"

As it is, the soldiers dropped down on one knee for Zanoba.

"Alright, go back to washing your faces."

"B, but..."

"Generally, you don't need to place me on a pedestal. I am the same as you Gentlemen, I'm just sleepily getting up."

While saying so Zanoba makes a deep yawn.

Over the last few days Zanoba has been busy with the cleanup after the battle.

I don't know the details, but after a large scale battle there are a number of troublesome things that have to be dealt with.

By the way, the dead bodies left on the battlefield had been neglected.

During the last few days a bunch of men dressed like bandits appeared out of nowhere, stripping equipment, they slipped away unnoticed.

People who specialize in that kind of thing will be drawn to the battlefield.

Occupation: looter.

I was mulling all this over while kneeling by the riverside with Zanoba.

"... So, how is the truce proceeding? Is it coming along well?"

Initial persuasion: light jab.

If a truce is struck, then there won't be a need for you to be in such a place Zanoba.

The war is at an end.

"Yes, Yesterday we got a reply.

The rules have not been hammered out yet, but it will all be concluded in time.

Now, there will not be another attack for three years at the least."

After hearing Zanoba's words a soldier uttered, "Oh."

This might not have been something that should have been heard in a place like this.

Since it is good news though, it shouldn't be a problem.

Even so, in three years...

In other words, the North Country, despite it's crushing defeat, has not given up completely on their invasion.

If it is assumed that the current commander will be let go because of his complete defeat, who will his successor be?

How do they intend to supplement their diminished troops?

Will they just break the recently agreed upon truce without an honorable justification?

Various factors are entangled over those three years.

At a minimum it would take three years.

So, in reality it will take longer.

"But that's good. In three years time Shirone should be able to rebuild itself."

I see. This could also be seen as stalling.

Certainly if its just buying time, that should be more then enough.

"Can he do it, that King Pax?"

"Even I could do it."

Zanoba answered so proudly.

I don't know about it myself, but perhaps there is already a plan.

In any case, I've seen the end of this war.

The whole thing was unsatisfying.

"Anyway, it should quickly become peaceful."

"Yes, it should."

Zanoba said so happily, but his face was sad.

Well outside of wartime this guy has no role to serve.

Well now, how to convince him?

"Zanoba, now that this battle is over, what will you do?"

Second jab.

Accidentally, it came out like a death flag.

This is like the method you would use to break the ice before you propose to your lover.

It's already far too late to buy the bouquet. Even I don't have that much self confidence.

"I will return to the capital for now and make ready to receive word from His Majesty.

I do not know if I will continue to be assigned to this fort as it is..."

"You intend to remain in this country then?"

"Haha.. Isn't it obvious?"

The magical armor has not been completed.

Research of the automatic doll, also has stopped before completion.

Our plans to sell dolls with Julie was also just able to finally get a foothold.

Won't there be all of those kinds of regrets?

No, there definitely should be.

"Zanoba."

"What?"

"Once the truce is signed don't you intend to come back to the Magic City Sharia with me and continue to make dolls just as always?"

Now I've turned it into some kind of marriage proposal.

I should have bought that bouquet.

But well, I think it's okay if I say that kind of proposal.

We're not getting married.

I'm just asking him to discard his country and pick me instead.

With a wet face Zanoba looks at me.

He's expressionless.

It's hard to believe that until now there was a fun atmosphere.

This is bad.

I'll be turned down.

I've failed.

I confessed right from the start without setting the right mood.

This is regrettable.

This atmosphere says I'm dumped.

Oh ah.

"Shishou, could it be.... ummm..?"

"Ummm?"

Right then noise suddenly rose up from the fort.

The sound of horses running, clip-clap, can also be heard.

We don't have cavalry in this fort.

Who is making that sound then?

As I thought that, I looked around the edge of the fort and spied a person coming at us on horseback.

"Fumu, that's a messenger from the capital."

At those words from Zanoba I also stand up.

"Probably Pax has sent us a statement about the truce."

"What could it be. Maybe it is a message that instructs us to invade and destroy the enemy nation."

"Oh yeah? But I also feel like we could do it if you are there Shishou."

We wait for the approaching horse while joking.

As we watch it approach, we notice that the rider is a familiar person.

It's a person I also know.

"Ginger ~ ?"

Ginger rode up to us on the horse with a desperate look.

I wonder what's going on.

As soon as Ginger sees us she cranks her neck in our direction and proceeds straight at us.

The soldiers form a wall to protect us.

Then Zanoba cried out,

"She is my imperial guard! Open the way!"

With those words from Zanoba, the soldiers give way quickly.

Before Zanoba can make a move Ginger falls from her horse with a relieved expression.

"Ginger, what happened!?"

"Ha.... haa..."

Zanoba picks up on it as well, Ginger's deep distress.

She isn't hurt, but has the dark complexion of sever fatigue.

Perhaps she has been riding her horse for 24 hours straight.

"Oh, there is trouble in the imperial city Latakia.

The former warlord Jade has become the focal point for an uprising in the name of the 11th prince.

They have surrounded the Imperial castle with their forces...."

As she said that, Ginger began to choke and then fainted.

"The 11th prince? Ridiculous, that boy should have had only 10 people within the Shirone royal guard... Ginger! We need a more detailed description... oi!"

"Calm down Zanoba, let her rest first."

I get Zanoba to stop shaking Ginger.

Then, for the time being, we carry her into a room.

Part 3

11th Prince Haruha Shirone

Three years of age

He is the child that former king Palton Shirone sired in his later years.

His mother was the daughter of farmers and, as such, he wasn't originally in a social position where he could become king.

Therefore Haruha was treated as if he did not exist.

He was given an estate in the corner of the Shirone kingdom with his mother, and had been living quietly under the name of a local feudal lord.

There was externally little to know about his existence.

The former King Palton Shirone, at the same time, had a sister who is the warlord Jade's mother.

Both of whom were killed during Pax's great purge.

That only leaves the warlord Jade.

He had formerly sworn allegiance to the king.

Jade, in spite of only possessing farmers, was able to raise them up. Because of his talent with tactics in this regard he was allowed the position of warlord.

Thanks to Jade becoming a warlord, the family is no longer hungry; a wealthy life was possible.

There was one important factor.

The king expected this position to be repaid with Jade's younger sisters when called upon, it was that kind of obligation.

At the time of Pax's coup, Jade had been stationed at Fort Karon.

At that time there were nearly 1000 people defending Fort Karon.

Jade led 500 of those and went to the capital Latakia.

However, it was too late when he arrived. The king had already died.

The royal family was waiting with reports of that massacre.

The forces defending that capital at that time numbered 2000.

As he marched forth with his soldiers, Jade's force swelled to 1500 with reinforcements from local feudal lords.

Factoring in Jade's reputation as a tactician, fighting and winning would be possible considering the numbers.

That is if you only looked at the numbers...

The army of Jade, with its increasing number of commanders, split in two.

The reason is that Pax had promised to treat the local lords in the same manner as always. Some of those local lords had rushed in at the spur of the moment. Some were not happy with the former king, some lost their nerve, and some actually agreed with King Pax.

Looking at the noble's disagreement, Jade realized that he could not win.

He surrendered to Pax and swore allegiance.

Of course even though Jade took such an action, there were dealings behind the scene.

His sister's child, the 11th Prince Haruha Shirone, was alive and he had learned of it. He would endure it for now.

Under the banner of Haruha, he would wipe clean his regrets towards the deceased previous king.

This was his vow.

Then, under the surface, Jade began to move.

He collected dissidents behind closed doors and shored up his forces.

He organized the rebels who had been eagerly awaiting a chance since Pax's uprising.

Now there was a chance for success.

And then the time came.

The northern country showed signs of invasion and Pax was forced to move military power into the north to meet them.

Because of Jade's head hunting and the after effects of the coup, the Shirone kingdom's troops had dwindled.

There would be no reinforcements from the KDK.

I do not know if it would fall, but Shirone's strength would now be inferior to the northernland.

If Fort Karon is penetrated then Pax will be forced to send away his treasure, the Death God.

This is what Jade was thinking.

He had miscalculated; the third prince Zanoba Shirone had returned.

He had also brought with him the return of Roxy Migurudia who was once court magician, and Rudeus Greyrat who had overthrown the Water God Reida and North Emperor Auber at Asura kingdom.

Jade had also planned to contact Zanoba in the event that he had returned to have vengeance upon Pax.

However, Zanoba bowed down to Pax and headed to Fort Karon.

Jade's calculations went amiss.

Fort Karon fought off the enemy with a historic victory and so the Death God never had to leave for the front.

The declining military power was also on its way to a full recovery.

The force gathered at the north would also likely return to the capital soon.

This may have been his last opportunity.

Considering this, Jade launched his coup.

He gathered up all of the soldiers he had left in waiting and took up to occupy the capital.

He surrounded the royal capital.

This was the summary that Ginger, who woke up after several hours, told us.

Ginger was in town at the time, but escaped by taking advantage of the confusion caused by the revolt.

She came straight to Zanoba without stopping.

Part 4

"When I left the capital, the King seemed to have shut himself up in the castle with a handful of guards... but I don't know the details or the current situation."

In a calm voice Ginger finished telling us everything she knew.

Apparently Pax is under siege.

It's been a few days since the revolt happened.

It won't be funny if Pax dies or even if the royal palace is occupied.

But the Death God is one of his troops.

It wouldn't be surprising if the rebels were annihilated instead.

Breaking through the siege shouldn't be hard if he intends to escape.

Why a siege?

There is a lot I don't understand.

This time we need to be careful of the situation.

"We need to immediately get to the capitol and see things for ourselves."

Zanoba said so as if it was just a walk to the general store then stood up. Ginger made a relieved expression.

However after hearing the next words her expression froze stiff.

"I will rescue His Majesty and help him escape here to Fort Karon. If that isn't possible then I will invade using a secret royal path and come to the aid of His Majesty."

"Please, please wait!"

Ginger's body shot up from her resting position.

She restrained Zanoba with a desperate look.

In regards to this girl, she was entrusted with Zanoba and that's exactly what her expression says.

"What now? Don't worry your little head, Ginger. Just stay here and rest your body."

"No, do you... Do you really have to go to King Pax as an ally?"

Ginger says this in a tone you wouldn't believe.

Zanoba turns back.

He's making an unspeakable expression.

"Naturally I will. To begin with, I don't even know the 11th Prince's face or anything other than he was born. It's suspicious, we can't truly even know if he has inherited the blood of my Father."

He has a point.

Finding Pax to be unbearable, the warlord Jade may have created the 11th prince as a puppet.

His younger sister may have been pulling a shell game on the King.

Ginger's eyebrows are bent like the character ㄥ.

It's an expression that is impossible to understand.

"Once you are committed to King Pax as an ally, what will you do then?"

"Things like that, I will leave to His Majesty. If he says so I will crush the rebels."

"How.... How can you come to the aid of a person like that?!"

Zanoba's eyebrows move, twitching.

It's an expression of anger.

" 'A person like that'? Ginger, you, just who do you think you are talking about?"

"I know it's disrespectful, but Zanoba, you surely know what Prince Pax did?"

"Just what did he do!?"

"I, my entire family, they were taken hostage!"

Zanoba's eyebrows move, fluttering.

Come to think of it I experienced the same thing.
I had nearly forgotten it was so long ago.
Well it's sure to be an unpleasant memory for anyone.
The side that was bullied will not forget the fact.

"I can't can't think much of a king who has to take his own bodyguards family as hostage...
I do not think that king is worth being protected!"

It's the kind of line the feudal lords of the Edo period from my former life needed to hear.
But certainly, in this country, the ability to win royal guards was supposed to be a measure of power within the royal family.
The greater the number of royal guards, the closer to the throne you became; there was that kind of system.
They aren't just simple subordinates, they are vassals.
Forced to take hostages to keep them, that may be taboo.

"Haha, Ginger, allow me ask you the contraposition: This Zanoba Shirone... why do you serve him?"

"That is because..."

"I, in the past sold you. That isn't an act worthy of a member of the royal family. Why does Ginger still follow me?"

The reason why Ginger was in a situation where her family were taken hostage, it should have been because Zanoba sold her.
He traded her in exchange for the Roxy doll that Pax had bought.
Just why has this person stuck with Zanoba...
Ah, Zanoba's mother, it was a promise to her.

"That is, Zanoba-sama is an extremely wise person..."

However, Ginger did not say it.
Well, she may value this and that because of the royal family.
'I'm here because your mother asked me to be', will not be said.

"Is Pax not also a resourceful and competent man?"

"I want to do it, and then doing it without thinking of the consequences, that is His Imperial Highness Pax. It's not wisdom, he is just clever... doing such a thing, he is plainly a fool."

"I'm just a fool with a doll fixation. Pax and myself are exactly the same kind of person."

"It is different."

Kneeling, Ginger looks up toward Zanoba.

"Zanoba is a miko. You have so much power that if you were not wise many more people would have been killed by you up until now. It could be that you pretend to be foolish... I wonder?"

She has a point.

Zanoba sometimes says some deep things.

He read and understood the ancient documents of the automatic doll and even made the Magic Armor.

This time he saw through the situation immediately and his grasp of the battlefield was fast as well.

His insight in the past has also been remarkable.

It seems like he could just be acting and speaking the part of the fool.

However, his love of dolls would be true; that's not acting.

Nevertheless, he does not make a wise appearance in public.

"I am originally a fool. I just have a thing that I love and want to do excessively."

"Then let's go back to the magic city Sharia. There Zanoba, you can do what you love for the rest of your life."

"I won't go. The doll only moves after it is handled."

"Wh... what..?"

Ginger then turns her head to me, she is looking towards me.

Her eyes say, 'Please also say the same to him.'

Certainly I think what Pax did is unforgivable.

He captured Lilia and Aisha to lure me in and then set a trap to make Roxy his sex slave. There is also the matter that he struck Lilia forcefully. Recently I had not thought about it and so I could remain calm, but now that I've been reminded my guts boil over with rage.

"Hey, Zanoba, I also disagree."

"Shishou..."

"Pax certainly might have changed a bit since going to the KDK, but Pax is not a companion that you should bet your life for."

With an angry face Zanoba turned toward me.

"Like I told you before Shishou.... I am a servant of my country. The country belongs to the king... If the king is not safe isn't that a problem?."

"Didn't you say, 'My duty is to engage in war with other countries. It is because I am reliable in this manner that I was permitted to live.'?"

Zanoba remains silent.

I remember word for word.

"Whether the king is Pax or the 11th Prince, does it matter either way? Your work is not to settle the troubles between the royal family. Once the war with the Northern country is over and the truce is signed, haven't you achieved your duty magnificently. Isn't that how it is?"

"Shishou..."

"Wouldn't it be a nice ending? To continue living normally in Sharia. Let's go home together, eh?"

"Fumu."

Zanoba places a hand on his chin and looks toward the sky.

Now I am watching him closely.

"That is an attractive proposal but.... it is not possible for me to accept it."

"Why?"

I'm not calm.

For persuasion I should remain calm.

This opponent won't change his opinion even if I raise my voice.

I can also see that there is a hole in my logic.

Just because the job is over doesn't mean he can say hello-goodbye to his position in the royal family.

I see.

Yeah, I get it.

But it would still be good to go back with that kind of excuse.

"Let me ask you why."

"Well... it's unexpected, but even you don't understand."

Of course I don't understand!

No, I need to calm down.

Patiently, be patient.

Surely there is a reason that Zanoba has become obstinate.

I'll stay here and listen patiently until I can unravel his motives.

"...Zanoba, Pax should be afraid of you."

"So what?"

"Because of something like that, that fellow annihilated the rest of the royal family."

Even if Zanoba doesn't hold a grudge against Pax, the other side is underhanded.

It's only natural to be suspicious of someone with such a shady past.

"He could easily have the Death God help him take care of you."

" "

"Let's put whether to rescue Pax or not aside.

Even if you help Pax now,

Pax won't come to trust you.

He'll just betray you.

At any rate, once he has a chance he'll kill you.
That isn't the kind of place you should want to rush into."

Zanoba said nothing.
He just looked at me with a sullen face.

"You... Before you said the country would die and there was nothing I could do.
I understand that I could die during war,
but the idea that I will die because Pax is jumping at shadows is laughable.
After all, I am only here because I was called to the service of my country."

" "

Zanoba closed his eyes and was silent.
I breath in slowly to prepare my next words with care.

"It's that, Pax is my younger brother... he's my last blood relation."

Younger brother...
Blood relation...
Because of those words I lost my ability to speak with a single blow.
There is nothing I can say anymore.
Despite this Zanoba continued his arguments.

"Just now, I wanted to try to say that kind of thing. I don't know if you can understand
but... but Pax is my little brother."

Zanoba is staring blankly at me.
His face has no color in it.
He isn't trying to express anything, not with his face, hand gestures, crying, laughter,
nothing.
This is the real Zanoba, looking straight at me.

"Haa..."

Involuntarily, a sigh escaped my lips.

If he's doing this for his brother, and his family, how can I be so strongly opposed?

I can understand why Zanoba is so stubborn about this.

If it was me, and Aisha killed Norn, or possibly the other way around, the first thing I would do is remonstrate her.

But I would have to forgive her.

If the relationship between the both were to become so thin.

The one who survives may have just been at the mercy of some great fate.

Even if you make the wrong action you can still try to move forward.

Even while remonstrating I would still cooperate.

"I understand."

Zanoba doesn't intend to return home with us.

I can understand it.

Is it because his brother lies or is truthful? I do not know.

But, for me, I understand wanting to protect your own blood.

It's not the kind of intention that can be bent.

I'm sorry, Cliff, Julie.

It doesn't seem like it is possible for me to bring Zanoba back with us.

I will, however, follow Zanoba until I'm sure he is able to create a relationship of mutual trust with Pax.

I'll support him in this.

"Honestly, my original intention was to get down on the ground, and half crying, beg you to come back with us, but now, if that is the case, I'll follow you a little longer."

"...Thank very much. As expected of Shishou, if you had begged and cried I wouldn't have been able to go through with it."

"Then I should have done that first."

"Good joke."

Zanoba and I, our voices broke into laughter.

I don't know what I'll say to Cliff.

Julie... if you wish to follow Zanoba, then I will escort you to him.

I'll just have to start from scratch on a new sales plan for the Ruijerd dolls.

We had gotten permission from Pergius and the cooperation of Ariel, and then we had begun to look for talent with Aisha....

For all this preparation over the years, there is a sense of loss.

But it's okay.

If Zanoba has to do this for his family, then I have no choice.

I have nothing I can say.

As for Zanoba and Pax... well, it's not a relationship that I can say is close at the moment.

However, after this, there is no reason that it couldn't improve.

Apologizing for the past, forgiving and being forgiven: that could happen.

Over a long time that can nurture their relationship slowly.

They can repair their mistakes.

I think Pax is a jackass.

But he should be able to change; I've changed.

There isn't anyone who cannot change.

"So it's like that."

Ginger had become pale.

Now that I think about it, she hasn't had a chance to really see Pax since he became king.

To her, Pax is probably still the same as he was in the past.

He is still the old repugnant Pax.

"Ginger, I'm sorry. If it's this kind of thing, then I'm going to have to respect Zanoba's feelings."

Well, in this situation, Pax seems like he will continue to grow into his role as king.
Well whatever, nothing will happen if we don't go to Pax.
If we just come to help on our own, unexpectedly, Pax may change his view of Zanoba.

"It's like that Ginger. Our troubles keep multiplying."

Zanoba patted Ginger's shoulder as he went past her.

"Ah, oh, please wait."

Ginger came tumbling out of the bed after him.
Without even standing up, she clung to Zanoba's feet.
Ginger pleaded desperately.

"Zanoba-sama, I understand that I can't stop you, but please, just one. Just listen to my one request!"

"Go ahead."

"Even if King Pax orders you to, please do not die!"

They were awkward words.
It was probably said on the spur-of-the-moment.
But I understood Ginger's desire.
She only wants Zanoba to live.
It's just that alone.

"Haha, well but..."

"I understand Ginger. I'll bring Zanoba back alive by any means."

In Zanoba's place, I replied.
I'll help satisfy Zanoba's obligation towards Pax.
I won't let him die.
If there relationship is twisted and seems to be hopeless,
I'll take responsibility and return with Zanoba.

The original purpose that had drove me to come all this way with Zanoba was the same.
I have to accomplish that original intention.
It's not something I can forget.

"Thank you Rudeus-dono, I am very grateful."

Ginger bowed deeply to me.

Chapter 9

To Pax's Side

Part 1

I decided to wear the Magic Armor during our trip.

It is a pain to move the Magic Armor, which has to be disassembled and re-assembled every time.

If there is a battle going on in the capital it is best to take it along.

I'll just have to turn a blind eye to the magic power I'm expending by just wearing it.

My initial plan was to run with the others on my shoulders, but that proved to be far too uncomfortable for everyone but me. As expected, the vibration seems to be terrible.

Since it is not a distance that cannot be traveled on foot in a single day, we had to come up with some method of transportation.

The method I came up with took the form of a drawn carriage.

With the Magic Armor, I pulled the carriage, which had been modified with earth magic so that it would be more stable.

It certainly would have been simpler to just use horses and the ride would have been more bearable.

Zanoba was retching and vomiting, Roxy also had turned pale in the face.

But we got to the capital in five days.

I do not know how much of my magic power remains.

My body feels just slightly listless, so I can tell that I'm not completely recovered.

I had thought that because I wasn't using it for combat that I would arrive with a surplus, but still...

My magic power is at the level where it would be impossible to even think of fighting against someone like Orsted.

This time we'll go to Pax's aid.

I'm pretty sure that the Death God is our ally, but I do not know what will happen.

I'm prepared.

Part 2

The Imperial Capital Latakia had been blockaded.

The capital gate stood firmly shut and soldiers who seemed like they were the rebel army stood upon it's ramparts.

Outside the castle walls stood the people who had been barred from entry, piled up in great number.

They were merchants, mercenaries, and adventurers.

In addition there were camps of the country's soldiers.

It seems that they may have come from a different city, or perhaps been outside the castle on some task when everything went down.

"It would seem they intend to keep out any new obstacles until they are finished."

"So in other words, Pax is still alive."

It's been ten days since the coup.

The Imperial castle has not yet fallen.

I do not know what their difference in arms is, but they have unexpectedly held out.

Well, I'm sure it's thanks to the aid of one of the Seven Major Powers.

It's also possible that Pax is already dead, and they are blocking the gate for some other reason.

"We can bypass the gate through a secret passage along the riverside."

Following Zanoba's instruction we advanced along the river.

For a second I considered squashing the rebels with a frontal attack, but it was a fleeting thought.

It isn't good to just bust into things without knowing the situation.

Also that would just be adding a bunch of unknowns to my list of worries.

I also want to know just why this all took the form of a siege.

We avoided the people outside the castle perimeter.

It would cause an uproar if they noticed Zanoba was the Prince.
The warlord Jade should have recognized Zanoba as an ally of Pax.
So it's better if we aren't discovered.

" "

It was pretty quiet at the riverside.
And so I chose to suspend the Magic Armor there.
I couldn't imagine a fight breaking out in that place.
I wonder where the boundaries between war and peace are?

"I think this is it."

Moving along the river we had come to a single building and water mill.
I placed the Magic Armor in there.
Zanoba and Roxy came down from the carriage.
Both of them were ghastly pale and Roxy had to go over and vomit into the river.
This trip hasn't been kind to those two.

"Somewhere in this watermill there should be an underground passage."

Zanoba is speaking cheerfully, but his face is still a deep blue.
Seasickness can be repressed with healing magic, but it won't bring back lost stamina.
Zanoba still has all his power, but his stamina is shot.

"Perhaps we should take a small rest break?"

"No, we may be in a situation where we don't have a moment to lose. Let's enter right away."

We do not know what has happened inside of the imperial palace.
This watermill might be our last chance to rest.
The MK-1 will not fit through this underground passage. I would like to prepare as much as possible.

My magic power will not be able to recover, but I think that Zanoba and Roxy should allow their strength to return.

"Zanoba, calm down. This is the best place to take a break and get our breath back. Besides, you and Roxy look ragged."

"Muh...."

"Those who hurry make mistakes, is how the expression goes."

"I've never heard of that expression... but I understand."

Zanoba nodded reluctantly.

Good.

We don't want our travel fatigue to blunt us.

"Before that, someone should confirm that there actually is a passage here."

"Oh, certainly."

Following Roxy's advice, I go confirm our path under the watermill.

I found it under a pile of barrels and crates which had been crammed inside the mill.

It was in a place like a storeroom.

Zanoba and I beat on the floors and the walls looking for the path.

Then we reach the far side of the mill.

There we found the path, hidden in the bottom of a wooden box.

It was covered by a metal plate.

It doesn't exactly look like a door, but something like a door knob is definitely there.

"Is this it?"

"Wait, don't jump to conclusions, this may be some part of the warehouse."

While saying the opposite of what I was thinking, I start to examine the suspected door.

I wonder how it is opened?

No, it wouldn't be strange for an escape passage to not open from the outside.

I wonder if it is designed to only be pushed open from the other side.

"Oomph!"

After Zonaba peeled the metal plate up with brute force a pit with a ladder was revealed.
It doesn't seem like it could be a root cellar.

I used intermediate level fire magic to light up the inside.

After that we could see the bottom several meters below us.

While checking it out we made sure that the tunnel was aiming towards the capital.

However I didn't immediately discard the possibility that it was just some kind of cellar.

I dropped down and tried to light up the back of the cave.

The inside of this place was completely bare.

It was just a narrow passage which continued on into the darkness.

There is no doubt.

This is an underground passage.

"How is it down there?"

"Seems like this is definitely the place."

"So we will take a break?"

"Yeah."

After we rest I returned to the carriage and put on the MK-2 Magic Armor.

With the size of that passage it will be impossible to use the MK-1.

However, I should be able to perform well enough in the MK-2 as long as I don't have to fight one of the Seven Major Powers.

Now that Zanoba has regained his physical condition, we begin our invasion through the passage.

Part 3

The passage was so narrow that a person passing through would rub along the sides as they continued on endlessly.

There doesn't seem to be any lighting at all.

... An invasion through here shouldn't have entered anyone's mind.

We used the summoning scroll's light spirits for illumination.

They are just as convenient as always.

The passage was empty and dark.

It was a path that appeared to have been made only for the sake of moving through it.

We marched down the path with Zanoba in the lead, followed by myself, and then Roxy.

A rear guard is unnecessary.

Enemies will not come from behind in this place.

"Being in this narrow passage, it makes me remember some unpleasant things."

Roxy whispered this from behind me.

I went to respond but couldn't find the words.

All I ended up saying was, "Is that so?"

And so we continued moving silently down the passage.

We continued to walk for about an hour.

Then, ahead of us and down the passage, appeared a door.

It is a door made from a single sheet of metal.

There is no doorknob. There is, however, a small fixed window.

It is very similar to what was in the watermill.

It seems it is another door that is designed to only open from the other side.

"Muuhn!"

By inserting his fingertips between the wall and the door, Zanoba is able to pull it open.

It was a good idea to place him in the front.

"Ah... this is..."

However, after opening the door, Zanoba said something baffling.

When I looked around him I could see that the passage ahead had been blocked by earth and sand.

It was a dead end.

And there was nothing like a fork in the road.

With this, could the watermill have been a mistake... ?

"Perhaps this collapsed during an earthquake... or the warlord Jade knew about it and closed it up in advance."

This was Roxy's assessment.

Well, this is probably the place.

It's still possible that Pax was crushed at the time of the coup.

Anyway, one of the reasons Pax was unable to escape has been revealed.

"Shishou, this debris, could you somehow take care of it?"

"... Yeah, I'll give it a try."

Zanoba and I swapped places.

I didn't just dig out our office's basement for show.

This kind of sediment clearing is something I'm used to.

Fortunately, in this passage, there is nothing setup to inhibit my magic.

With magic I compress the soil to reduce the quantity while hardening the walls and ceilings.

It feels like making a pipe through stone.

It's an impromptu method this time, but it should reinforce the strength to the degree that it won't collapse.

It's something I'm used to dealing with.

We eventually come out the other side with a crash after an hour.
The distance was something along the lines of five meters.
So short, and yet so long.

However, that kind of thing doesn't matter.
A surprising scene awaited us upon our exit.

"What the hell."

There was a lateral tunnel.
It seems like it's a cave.
Its height is about 2 meters, its width 3.
A similarly sized passage ran right beside it.
Water is flowing through the ground, reinforced by masonry stones; it's a trickling stream but it doesn't feel like it's sewage.
The passage we just came through simply ends in this cave.
We are in a slightly higher position, there is about a one meter drop to the cave floor.

"Zanoba, do you know which way we should be going?"

"Well... I never heard anything about a fork in the road but... "

For the time being we'll just go down into the cave.
Even without the spirit of light, things are visible down here.
If you look, mushrooms growing on the wall of the cave are giving off light.
Just that small quantity of light makes me uneasy.
It's like an artificial cave, but also not like one.
It is a cave with a slightly strange feeling.
However, I feel like I've seen a cave like this before...

"Perhaps we should just go straight."

Roxy said this as she inspected the surrounding passages.
She jumped down while gripping her skirt and hat.

"Rudy, please just try and dig against the wall in line with the passage we came through."

"Okay."

I don't bother asking why.

Yeah, it's Roxy's instructions.

I'll just follow them.

"Roxy-dono, could you explain what is going on?"

In my place Zanoba asks.

Well not asking doesn't mean I don't want to know.

"This cave... has a similar feeling to the labyrinth I conquered in this country.

It probably has eroded the passage as it grew."

"I see."

"Well, it's just a guess.

If Rudy's digging doesn't turn anything up then we'll just have to take the right or left."

While I'm listening to them talk I'm also digging.

Ultra Digging.

I dig just like a dog.

No, I'm using my magic.

As I go another hours passes.

Then I finally hit the first pocket.

It was a passage similar to what we had went through with the spirits of light at first.

We did it.

"The path, it's here!"

"Then let's go."

I made stairs for them.

The stairs are also for the return.

But, if we leave this open like this, won't demons from the labyrinth enter...

Yeah, whatever.

Still, as expected of Roxy.

She looked at the cave, and in just a moment realized that it was a labyrinth.

This person who I respect is really something.

Part 4

Then another hour went by.

We've spent about four hours in total moving through the passage.

By the time we finally arrived at the exit Zanoba was beginning to show signs of fatigue.

We emptied out into a place that looked like a basement.

The space was six tatami.^[42]

The walls and ceiling were solidly constructed with masonry.

There were also candle stick like things placed upon the wall.

In the corner of the room there were stairs leading up.

Our exit way was a door hidden in the corner of that room.

I could tell immediately that we were in the palace of the Shirone kingdom.

At any rate this was a room I was familiar with.

Well I lived here for a while.

"... Zanoba, I think this is."

"Yes, Shishou, this is the room where we met for the first time."

It's a place of memories.

That's a nice way of putting it, but this is the place where I was imprisoned by Pax after he had tricked me.

I thought it was an empty room, but it was actually used for escaping.

This explains why that trick magic formation was here to begin with.

It was a now destroyed, barrier.

"How nostalgic. When I finally met with the producer of that doll I thought it was the high point in my life. Never did I dream of all the joyous day-to-day moments that would occur in the future."

"We can enjoy our sentimental moments later."

I try to stop Zanoba from monologuing like a documentary's interview so we can move forward.

We move up the stairs and down the hallway.

Everything was utterly silent.

The sun had set while we worked through the underground passage, outside the window everything is dark.

There don't seem to have been any maids to light the lamps in the hallway.

It's a stillness like in a hospital late at night.

I wonder if all of Pax's men are plugging up the perimeter; it seems that way.

"Where should Pax be?"

"He should probably be in the room that used to belong to my father."

By his father's room... he means the King's bed chamber.

Zanoba took the lead and started moving forward.

Of course someone is familiar with their own home.

This isn't something I want to particularly think about, so I walked forward ignoring it.

We followed him in silence.

Part 5

".... ah."

Suddenly Roxy stopped.

She just came to a complete halt in front of a certain room.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking that my old room was around here."

The door to the room was open.

Nobody was inside.

There is only a desk and an empty unmade bed.

This room's occupant must have fled in haste. The bed is in disarray, the desk and floor is also a mess.

It must have been passed on to someone else after Roxy departed.

It had a strange lived-in feel to it.

It was another person's room now.

But since Roxy had lived there for a while, it probably meant something to her.

It is probably like the room I had lived in when I was Eris's tutor.

"Shishou, Roxy-dono, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Roxy was just feeling a little sentimental after seeing her old room..."

"Didn't you just say we don't have time for sentimentality..."

Zanoba walked back to us with an amazed look on his face.

Then he stepped into the room with a 'fumu' and looked at Roxy.

"Roxy-dono had been living in the room next door back then."

"Ehh?"

A flustered Roxy opened the door to the room next to us.

When she compared this room with the one we had just looked at, she noticed something that made her blush.

"Heh, I made a mistake because of the darkness."

That Zanoba, he really humiliated Roxy there.

What is that guy even thinking?

If Roxy says that something is black, even if it is white, then it becomes Dark Matter.

"Shishou, why are you stepping on my foot?"

"My foot slipped a little."

"I know Shishou adores Roxy-dono, but it would not make sense to be immersed in sentimentally for another place all together."

You are the worst.

Stamping on your foot isn't going to be enough for me to forgive you.

However I am deeply moved hearing about a place where Roxy used to live.

If the metastasis event had never happened, could it have been that I would have just ended up settling in Shirone?

"Let's hurry ahead."

On Roxy's prompting we continued on.

Part 6

We did not encounter anyone inside the castle.

Not a single person.

For some reason there wasn't anyone.

The result of which was that Zanoba became rather talkative.

"There is an entrance to this castle on the second floor. This is the entrance used by outside guests, the third floor also has..."

He told us, matter-of-factly, about the castle.

Floor 1: the living area for soldiers and servants

Floor 2: the audience hall and various facilities used for diplomacy

Floor 3: other facilities such as conference rooms, internal affairs offices, and corridors that lead to the primary defense positions in the walls and towers

Floor 4: the living quarters for the princes and princesses as well as their bodyguards

The King's chamber is on the fifth floor.

It's a weird castle.

Wouldn't the royal family be annihilated if they failed to wake up during a fire on the lower floors?

Well, that royalty was already all but gone though...

Nothing on the first floor, the second floor, nor the third.

There was nobody.

When we entered the fourth floor I tried looking through the windows.

There were bonfires around the castle, it was easy to understand that a rebel army lay outside.

However the presence of Pax's men could not be seen.

Neither is there any sign that fighting has occurred.

I can't see a single person.

I feel like it isn't just that I can't see them in the darkness.

The castle is unmanned.

" "

This eeriness , Zanoba has noticed it as well.

When we entered the fourth floor,the conversation suddenly stopped.

Everyone's expression also became stiff.

Something is going on here in the castle.

While feeling this way, we climbed the final flight of stairs

Part 7

And then we arrived on the fifth floor.

The top floor of this building could also be called the castle tower.

It is the room which is literally at the top of the country: the King's chamber.

" "

Here at its entrance, the landing of its stairs, in front of the door sat that guy: the Death God, Randolph Marian.

For some reason he had propped a chair up against the door like he was on break, here he was setup on public display with his head bent forward.

His elbow was on his knee, and he was using that crossed posture to hold his head with his neck bent slightly.

He turned his weathered, eye patch wearing, death's head face toward us.

"Why does the king of this country have to put his bedroom in such a high place?"

[Death God], Randolph Marian

After spotting us, he suddenly said that kind of thing.

"It seems like it would be pretty inconvenient to construct a bedroom in a place like this.

Coming down into the office every day would be cumbersome. Even after having a meal made, it would have cooled a little by the time it made it up here.

Once your legs become weakened by old age, you would have a hard time climbing the stairs.

If there's a fire, it would surely delay your escape."

While cocking his gaunt face, he says all those things, and stares at us.

It's the attitude of an ordinary worn out old fart, but when he speaks it causes a chill to run down my spine.

"If it were my castle I'd place my room on the first floor.

Then it's a short distance to my office and I can eat my rice while it is still warm.

It would also be easy to go out...

That's what a regular guy like me would do."

Randolph punctuated his rant with a laugh, 'haha'.

With that laughing skull right in front of us, Roxy swallowed hard, gulp.

"Well there are certainly advantages to having it this way.

If you needed to barricade yourself in the castle then this is the ideal.

After all, this castle has a lot of magic resistant bricks.

This also offers good resistance to long range magic. There is also a defense point on each floor, so it's difficult to reach the top.

This is a pretty good castle for war time."

I wonder what Randolph is actually trying to say.

He's just sitting there.

Couldn't I pass through beside him?

Although, honestly, I don't want to get an inch closer to this guy.

"Randolph-dono."

While I'm confused Zanoba moved forward without hesitation.

Without changing his irreverent attitude, Randolph smiled at Zanoba.

It's a skeleton laughing in the middle of the night.

He's eerie.

"Your Imperial Highness Zanoba, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"May I know the state of the castle?"

"Yes, certainly, certainly, I'll tell you."

Randolph removed his eye patch while saying so.

Behind it lay a glowing red eye.

Inside of his pupil a pattern like a six-pointed star floated.

It's an eye only a devil could possess.

"For His Majesty's life, I used my [Absolute Void Eye] to construct a barrier around the entire castle.

With that power I'm still holding off the enemy's force."

It's a demon eye which I'm not familiar with.

Orsted has not told me about the existence of his magic eye.

That guy, he never tells me the important things.

But does he wear that eye patch because he is unable to control it?

Should I be wary now that he's removed it?

"I see. So where are the others?"

"Everyone who isn't dead has otherwise fled."

"So... where is His Majesty?"

"Behind me."

"So, you are currently protecting His Majesty."

Zanoba began to go past the side of Randolph while saying so.

However Randolph extended his arm and held him back.

"Why did you stop me?"

"His majesty has ordered me to let no one pass."

"However this is urgent business."

"His majesty is occupied now, even if you have come with pressing matters."

It seems like he is occupied with something or other.

What could he be doing with no subordinates in a place like this?

"Move aside please, I came all this way to save His Majesty."

"His Majesty, does not seem to be willing to leave this castle."

" "

He's being evasive.

Randolph continues to talk as if he is hiding something, and it's clearly frustrating Zanoba.

"I want to talk directly with His Majesty!"

Zanoba tried to force his way through, causing Randolph to stand.

He moved relaxedly.

His hollow face just suddenly appeared to jump up to our level, there was no sense of him standing.

"Now just give me a moment. His Majesty's heart is very distressed about the current situation."

"His heart?"

"Just take a goo~ood look at the state of the castle from here.

Enemy soldiers stare in at us with hostility.

Then our own soldiers are outside of the walls doing nothing, they just sit there watching..."

Randolph's eyes moved to our rear while he said this.

I involuntarily look back, and certainly, on the other side of those large windows in the landing, the state of the capital is very clearly seen.

Rebels surround the castle.

Outside the city walls, soldiers are stalled.

If you look at it from up here there appears to be an army which does nothing against the rebels.

But the majority of that army is actually travelers, adventurers, and merchants.

Those people can't be expected to help.

"Until the heart calms down, I won't move from this spot."

"When will that be?"

"Well then... I don't know how long that kind of thing will take. It takes however long it takes, eh?"

"Yea, talking to you is obviously pointless."

Tired of Randolph's slippery Q&A, Zanoba puts his hand on the man's shoulder and goes to push him away.

"Naaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Zanoba shouldn't be someone you can just blow off like that.

He rolled down the stairs, gorogorogoro, and smacked the back of his head against the wall.

The wall then collapsed with a loud crash.

"Let me say I'm sorry here, I'm sorry... you can't defeat me like this, so please just go along and leave."

Randolph unsheathed his sword while saying so.

In the darkness the blade glows green.

Surely that is a magic sword too.

Ah, this is bad.

Regrets, regrets.

Without the MK-1 a fight is no good.

"Zanoba, calm down, fighting here is dangerous."

"But Shishou..."

Hearing the story just now, it is obvious that Randolph is just guarding Pax.

Zanoba is also here to protect Pax.

We should not be enemies.

It would be another story if Randolph was an apostle of Hitogami but...

That possibility seems rather low.

The same with this all being a roundabout trap aimed at my life.

If he was trying to kill the future republic then, with the Death God, Pax could have been destroyed much earlier.

That could have been taken care of even back during the time he was in the KDK.

Anyway, I'll ask him just in case.

"Randolph, if you ask us to wait, we can wait...

Until then, there is one important thing I would like to discuss, okay?"

"What could that be?"

"Do you know of the existence of Hitogami?"

Randolf laughed at that, smirkingly.

It was a laugh fitting this castle, an eerie laugh.

"Yeah, and if I know it?"

With a rattling laugh, Randolph said so.

He declared it.

The reason to fight has been lit within me.

The Hitogami's apostle that we had been looking for, the apostle is this guy here.

I don't understand exactly what the scheme is, but something advantageous to Hitogami is bound to come out of the situation with this guy.

So, this guy is our enemy.

He's an enemy that has to be defeated.

I thought it would come to this.

My blood thirst rises.

"Ah, so that's how it is after all."

Randolph has his sword.

That blade which emits green light illuminates the hallway.

Zanoba is standing with his club poised, Roxy also has her wand out.

I go first.

Little by little the course of events was moving toward this.

A battle with one of the Seven Major Powers while only wearing the MK-II.

Chapter 10

Everything was for Naught

Part 1

The fight began slowly.

I hadn't intended to fight like this, but since it has started I can't afford to lose. My switch has been flipped.

"Uhaaaaaa!"

Zanoba was the first to make his move.

Our opponent is one of the Seven Major Powers, however Zanoba doesn't hesitate at all. Without any technique he just charged straight ahead, he's really too honest.

He pressed toward the Death God with his club raised roaring.

The Death God evaded it with room to spare.

But I already knew that Zanoba wouldn't land that attack.

A single blow from Zanoba is an instant kill.

He has a high critical chance but very low hit.

It's my job to setup that hit.

In the place the Death God will move when avoiding, I had already created a quagmire.

"Oops."

Then his foot sank into the quagmire and his stance broke.

" [Ice Strike] "

Then Roxy fired her magic into the fray.

The Death God's posture worsened as he effortlessly deflected her attack with his sword. Zanoba continued to press forward.

He possesses Herculean strength that can even hold down an immortal demon king. The blow which stemmed from that strength mercilessly punched a hole in the landing of the stairs.

As expected of the Death God, he avoided it.

At the same time we were stopping him from being able to go on the offensive.

He stumbled backwards, his feet left the ground.

The point of his sword is in an unexpected direction and his left hand is at his elbow.

Now is the time to attack.

The Death God's face shows a startled expression.

"No way, this shouldn't..."

After hearing him mutter that I judged that it was time for my attack.

I took a step forward and winked at Roxy.

Zanoba again rushed the Death God, trying to get in a decisive blow.

I turn both of my hand toward the Death God.

If I let Zanoba land a successful hit, then I'm good.

If the attack fails, then I need to determine the direction he'll dodge in with my foresight eye and electrocute him at that point.

While he's paralyzed I'll spam rock bullets at him with the magic tool in my left hand and finish it.

Even if he can evade all of that then Roxy can again break his posture, and we can begin anew.

It's not a planned strategy, but this impromptu co-operation should be fail proof.

That guy is like a mouse in a trap.

"Ahtsu!"

The Death God suffers a single blow from Zanoba.

If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it.

Oh man, he just tanked it.

That super human strength of Zanoba's: he stopped that club with his bare hands.

That is terrifying muscular strength. He's not a member of the Seven Major Powers for show.

But, look here.

The fact that his arm came away broken is clearly reflected in my eyes.

Checkmate.

"Zanoba, move!"

Zanoba, hearing my shout, snapped out of the way, and I sprung forward.

Purple lightning shot from my right hand.

With a hollow crack and a flash, the lightning licked the Death God.

Direct hit.

The Death God's body stiffens, and he folds over.

That death's head is looking right at me.

It's a face which doesn't understand what has just happened.

Even if you defend with fighting spirit, an electric shock will still paralyze you.

That's it.

I pour magic into my left arm and prepare to fire off a rock cannon.

"[Shotgun Trigger]"

I fire off a group of stone bullets, which people have said are between Emperor and King rank, at the Death God.

The stone cannon is a special move whose power was even recognized by Orsted.

It has power enough to even damage Orsted if it hits the mark.

With his posture and this timing, the Death God should not be able to avoid this, and even if it doesn't kill him, he won't escape damage.

I've won.

" eh?"

That's what I thought.

However, the next moment the stone bullets disappeared.

Something happened in an instant and the only thing between me and the Death god was some sand or dust.

I couldn't understand.

"Ah, so you've come to aid me! Death God-sama!"

Because Randolph said and glanced behind me.

"!!"

A new arrival!?

The Death God?

Well then who have I been fighting until just now!?

I turned to my rear.

There was nobody.

The only thing there was a staircase lit by moonlight.

"Rudy!"

By the time I heard Roxy cry out I was being pushed away.

I could see some blue hair down at my waist.

I was being pushed away by Roxy.

I don't know why, I didn't think about it, but I changed my posture and embraced Roxy in the mid flight.

As I fall down my back strikes the stairs.

The Magic Armor made a sound, 'Gakeen', as I struck the floor.

There was no damage.

"Ouch..."

I turned over and looked up the stairs.

There was Zanoba who still didn't understand what had happened, and the Death God standing as though he'd just swung his sword.

The Death God stood there as if nothing had happened.

Shouldn't he be paralyzed by my electric shock?

Didn't we break his stance?

That's funny, what's going on?

"Rudeus-dono, a god of death is always something that stands behind you."

His expression was composed; his words were composed.

Because of that comprehension overtook me.

It was a performance.

His reaction to the shock, his stance breaking, all of that was on purpose.

It was all to have me turn around...

Oh shit, that was my mistake.

Orsted had even warned me that Randolph fought in that kind of way.

Although I didn't intend to have been careless...

Even so that's what just happened.

My stone bullets were erased.

No, that seemed familiar.

That was the same phenomenon when we fought with Manatite Hydra.

That this was...

"Magic absorbing stone."

"Wow, that was discovered quickly.... As expected, you are someone to reckon with."

While saying that the Death God displayed his palms.

Magic absorbing stones were fitting into the palm section of his leather fencing gloves.

I did not notice earlier, but they might have been undone by those.

I had not heard that he possessed such gloves, but...

It could even be the very same magic absorbing stone I brought home from Begaritt...

It wouldn't be surprising of a knight of the KDK collected that kind of equipment.

Even Orsted didn't know about it.

Well it's fine.

It was a little careless of me to think we could defeat one of the Seven Major Powers so easily.

Just because magic doesn't work doesn't mean this battle has become more difficult; I know the properties of the magic absorbing stone.

If he turns his hand towards it he can nullify magic, but only after he puts the same amount of magic power into it.

In other words he has to turn his palm towards me for it to work.

He can't turn towards his backside.

The caveat is the small window of attack...

It should be possible to penetrate that with three people.

Looking at it that way, with only one magic absorbing stone glove, if Roxy and I fire off magic simultaneously while Zanoba pursues him...

No, it won't be that simple.

However if it doesn't work, we'll just try another method.

It'll be trail and error.

We'll continue until his defeat.

"Roxy, please move over to Zanoba's rear."

" "

There is no answer.

Now that I think about, Roxy hasn't moved since a moment ago.

Her hand is limp.

And then around her shoulder there is a strange feeling.

" ...hmm? "

What is this?

It's red.

"Roxy's.... b-blood... no way?"

Roxy's robe was cut, and then from under it blood was flowing.

My heart was pounding like a hammer.

Like a revolving lantern the scene replayed for me.

I saw the figure of that man that pushed me from the jaws of death.

That man who was struck and then stopped moving.

Paul.

He reached out to me in the end, Paul...

This is the same as with Paul.

Roxy...-!

You too?

This can't be.

"This isn't happening! Roxy!"

"... Because it's actually happening, please don't touch the wound, it hurts."

I finally noticed that Roxy's eyes were open.

"Oh, okay."

It seems she's alright.

Roxy separated from me, and then in a hushed tone chanted healing magic and cured herself.

I was relieved.

This is bad for my heart.

"Oh, that should have been a fatal wound but..."

Placing his hand on his chin, the Death God tilted his head in curiosity.

To say something horrifying like that, and in regards to Roxy, it makes me agitated.

That monkey seems to have done something from up in his tree.

It seems he thought he had killed Roxy and is disappointed.

The result was only that the shock shaved a few years off my life span.

Alright, the rematch starts here.

"Hmmm?"

There, the sound 'pikiri' came from Roxy's neck.

The necklace I gave her before our departure cracked and, when I looked, it crumbled apart and blew away.

After that, her fingers, the rings on them, they all shattered.

""

Well then.

That was a magic item to take the place of a single fatal wound, also magic rings that should protect from physical harm.

"Ah, I see... it was like that."

I was horrified.

I was struck with a chill so severe it felt like I had icicles running down my spine.

I experienced a pressure like a strong gale blowing from the Death God.

I know this feeling.

It's my usual cowardice.

I can't stop even if I understand it.

Involuntarily, I embrace Roxy tightly.

"R-Rudy... ?"

It's useless.

Only to this point.

My assumptions only came this far.

That necklace was something I had prepared in advance.

So it's not just luck.

Everything up until this point was within the scope of my predictions.

But, from now on, what?

The opponent came out with an instant kill with a single blow.

Trial and error?

With this guy as an opponent, we won't get many attempts.

There are not continues.

They have all been used up.

Someone will die if we continue with this guy any more than this.

We won't win.

It's not surprising that you can't challenge one of the Seven Major Powers from the front and win.

Why did I even think it was a good idea to challenge one of the Seven Major Powers directly?

Even Orsted said not to challenge him directly like this.
It was like that from the very beginning.

"Zanoba! It's no good. Try to retreat."

"Shishou!?"

"We can't win this round. We'll return for a rematch with the MK-I."

While still holding his club, Zanoba fell back two steps.
He came and looked at me over his shoulder.

"No no, we have a pretty good game going.
That thing a moment ago was particularly dangerous.
If you use it again, I don't have confidence I could prevent it.
You even made me use my trump card..."

The Death God murmurs.
A while ago I felt like he was honestly addressing us, but this is a lie.
Orsted also said it.
This guy is a provocateur.
He'll invite your attacks, he'll incite your defense.
His words right now are a dare.

No, is he serious?
Can he say that without having used his demon sword?
This time his words were too blatant.
He is deceiving us in an attempt to provoke us...
I don't care!

This guy, you can't believe anything that comes out of his mouth.
I understand one thing.
The me right now can't defeat the Death God.
In this moment that fact was carved into my heart.

However, Zanoba did not agree.

"In that case, Shishou, please look over me. I'll break through this one person and then meet with my little brother."

Zanoba charged in.

In my eyes it was reflected in slow motion.

Time slows down, sounds disappear, the rest of the world fades out.

Zanoba takes one step, then two.

In my foresight eye, the Death God is already running.

It didn't seem to be the speed from his earlier awkward movements.

It was a speed that isn't possible to be caught with your eyes.

Time returned.

A sword stroke flashed.

"Zanoba!"

The slash strikes Zanoba on the side, entering his upper shoulder

It's a reverse kasaya.

His armor is shattered and Zanoba is blown up to the ceiling.

Zanoba struck the ceiling forcefully and then fell at my feet.

He doesn't make a sound.

This all seems like a dream.

"Ha..... ha...."

My heart is screaming: severe palpitations.

Is he all right?

His armor is shattered.

That thick breastplate part and the shoulder are shattered like glass.

I have no idea what kind of slash can transform metal into this mess.

"No effect from the secret technique [Pulverizing Armor Slice]..."

With the Death God's words, sound returned to my world.

Definitely.

Definitely, there is no wound on Zanoba's body, even if I look closely.

The cloth under his armor has been cut, but his skin is only harmed to the degree of blue bruises.

"Ugh.... guuuu..."

Zanoba groaned as he sat up.

I glare at the Death God who stands at the top of the stairs.

"As expected of a Miko, that isn't enough to cut you."

While grinning like a skeleton, the Death God looks down at us.

Then he slowly returned his sword to its sheath.

"Well I'm not the Sword God, I don't have a fixation on killing with the sword... Fire magic might work? From His Majesty Pax, I have heard that kind of thing."

Oh, then this guy can also use magic.

However the outside of Zanoba's armor is resistant to fire...

No it's not.

I don't think that it will be able to produce that effect in such a ruined state.

"...."

Zanoba rises.

I don't know what he thinks he's doing, but he picks up his club and puts his foot on the stairs.

Roxy has also risen.

As if protecting me, she readies her wand and steps forward to cover Zanoba.

I also stood up.

Zanoba is stubborn.

He might continue to fight until his death.

Naturally, I can't allow him to do that.

Roxy as well.

I'll die if she dies.

My spirit would die.

"Will you go on?"

Randolph looks down on us with a blank expression.

He has taken no stance, nor has he begun to chant magic.

He is just standing still, composed.

He doesn't seem to want to initiate the attack.

Shit, this is just a game to him.

Rather there is even a sense like he is going easy on us.

This guy has sealed my stone cannon.

He had a way to disable magic from the beginning.

Anyway, I don't have anything other than magic with which to catch this guy with.

And still he might have another hidden trump card beside what we've seen.

What had Orsted said?

When it seems like I should attack, defend; and when it seems like I should defend, attack?

Well then, if I believe that, then this guy can anticipate the present flow of battle?

I don't know.

I don't know how to move at all.

There is no necklace.

There is no armor.

We don't know what the opponent has up his sleeves and his attacks are fatal.

There is no guarantee that it is possible to prevent this guy's attacks from breaking the Magic Armor MK-II.

It's no good.

It's not good no matter how much I think about it.

We must withdraw at once.

But how to convince Zanoba?

If he can't be convinced, then stunning him from behind and making him faint.

Then we can retreat to where the MK-I is and fight from there.

"Zanoba, do you understand now? He can't be killed with a head on assault."

"But, Shishou, Pax is..."

"The Death God was waiting. There should still be time for us to secure a certain victory."

I could see the hesitation in Zanoba's movements.

He also seems to have realized that we cannot win.

"Are you leaving now?"

Well, I wonder if it's possible ... his majesty might be finished quite soon?"

It's a trap.

I don't need to hear it.

"Ah, let's try to make a fresh start once more."

I question whether he'll really let us go.

"I apologize about suddenly attacking you. Therefore, will you please overlook our behavior?"

This may have started out poorly, but maybe I can change the direction if I try a modest approach.

If things continue and we can flee while fighting, there is always the Magic Armor.

After that it's a rematch.

If he doesn't give chase, that would also be good.

"Huh, it doesn't matter, but..."

Ah, is that so?

This is somehow anticlimactic.

I cannot read the intention of the Death God for the life of me.

What exactly is this guy's purpose?

I can't figure it out.

"Death God-san, you, are you getting instructions from Hitogami?"

"What kind of instructions would I get? Especially from someone I haven't ever met."

Eeh?

"But just a moment ago you said, you knew him."

"Someone related to me once met him so I've heard his name... it's only to that point. Myself, I haven't encountered Hitogami, let alone talked to him."

This has turned into what kind of story?

"That would mean that you, you aren't an apostle of Hitogami?"

"I don't know anything about apostles... so that's correct."

Oh we jumped the gun!

Ah, dammit!

Recently there is way too much fruitless effort!

"Then you aren't an enemy of King Pax?"

"Yes. I am veerry mu~ch a supporter of King Pax and the Queen Consort Benedict. At any rate, those two are the only ones to praise my cooking...."

"In other words there isn't some dubious ritual going on in the room behind us and you aren't delaying us to buy time?"

"Yeah, well it's the kind of ritual that you might not want to talk about in front of a small girl."

The Death God glanced at Roxy while saying so.

Roxy was called a small girl, so she looked depressed.

She surely doesn't look like a mother from her appearance.

Even so, I see.

We didn't even have to fight.

Yeah...

I'll apologize.

It's my fault for jumping to conclusions.

"So.... I'm very sorry.

We are not King Pax's enemy.

That sudden attack, please let me apologize again."

"No, I also didn't explain it well. Sorry."

Conversely, he lowered his head.

He, he is very polite...

Oh wait.

Actually, this could just be us playing into the hands of the Death God.

In fact, he could have been preparing instant death skills the entire time we were talking...

What exactly should I believe...

Ah, this is such a mess; I have no idea.

If this is the Death God's trick, then I have already completely fallen into it.

And, then

"Oh?"

Randolph, laughed with a 'pha' and relaxed the force he was emitting.

But I don't relax.

This guy will not show an opening.

"Seems like it's ended."

What has happened?

What's to become of us?

"Oh, please don't worry so much.

Because I don't really want to kill any of you guys."

"...Liar, just a moment ago you tried to deliver a fatal injury."

"Haha, Certainly... Rudeus, you are interesting."

That skeleton laughed at me.

He just said that I was interesting.

"I was ordered by King Pax to not let anyone through until the end. The thing is finished, so that order has been followed through to its end."

Randolph re-sheathed his sword while saying so.

Then, while sighing with a 'phew', he sat back down into his chair.

"Well, as you please then."

I wonder if this is a trap.

The moment I show my back I may be dealt a single deadly stroke.

"I can go somewhere else if you hate the idea of showing me your back."

"No that's fine, I'll believe you."

Zanoba, so manly, put his club away and began to walk.

I stowed my weapon as well.

Thus the battle ended.

Part 2

The top floor of the royal palace.

In the King's chambers.

The Shirone kingdom's most luxurious place: the best suite.

Paintings lined the walls, a desk with beautiful sculptures sat to the side.

In the back room there was a 5 meter wide canopy bed.

A girl sits at the center of the bed, wrapped in the disturbed bed sheets.

You could hear the quiet sleeping breath of that blue haired girl.

It was Queen Benedict.

Cloths are scattered around, suggesting that she is naked inside the bed.

Also, a familiar smell permeates the room.

It's the smell from when a man and woman do ~that~.

And there is something sitting in front of that little girl.

Until just now Pax and his Queen were in the middle of it.

This country is in a serious situation.

Even though Zanoba has come here so desperately, they are doing something so carefree.

There was Pax on the balcony.

From the railing of the balcony he was looking out.

Stubby limbs, big head, and short childlike body.

It could be that his ugliness comes from his mother's side.

He's only wearing a single pair of underpants.

His back is wiry enough that it can't be said that he has never trained his body.

In addition, there were many scars, and after that, bruises and cuts.

All of this speaks about his life up until now.

"Was I so noisy that my older brother had to come and check on me?"

When Pax looked back at us I forgot about my initial impression 'carefree'.

His face was tired.

His face was banged up.

He was also somber.

Randoph had said, 'Until the heart calms down.'

He was probably being literal.

I've had similar experience.

After working things out, your mind will calm down.

"Your Majesty, I have come to your assistance.

Let's forget about this castle and retreat to Fort Karon."

Zanoba went to the front of the balcony and held out his hand to Pax.

Pax faced Zanoba and, looking at his hand, laughed through his nose.

"Help? Fort Karon? Just what are you saying?"

"The best plan would be to surrender the castle this once, and then to go wait in another place and sharpen our fangs.

Once we gather troops regaining the castle should be easy."

"... and now you just repeat the same shit, why?"

Pax glared right at Zanoba.

Those cold eyes were enough to make me shudder.

With eyes like that, if you told me this guy was the Death God I would believe you.

"Repeating myself?"

Zanoba questions him.

Pax laughs through his nose.

I don't understand but he begins muttering something then casts a side long glance out over the balcony.

"I had intended to try my best even until this.

I replaced all of father's corrupt ministers with other people.

I hired mercenaries in preparation for war. Security was worse but certainly...

I had fixed my sights on the futures of this country."

Pax leaned back against the hand rail of the balcony and looked right at Zanoba.

"I permitted my older brother to return home.

I also heard the unreasonable wishes of that brother.

Moreover I took those wishes into consideration.

Honestly, I dislike you Brother, but I have to recognize your strength as a miko."

"I know. The amount that Your Majesty has had to rack his brains over this Zanoba is clear to me."

Zanoba is obviously trying his best to remain calm and speak well.

It seems to have touched a nerve with Pax.

He scowled at Zanoba with vicious eyes while strongly clenching his fists.

"Just what do you know!

Does anything really reach you including my feelings?

Look at what's going on!"

Pax flailed his arms towards the scene on the other side of the balcony.

Although the rebel army's bonfire light is right under the scales the town is silent as death.

Outside the city walls there are signs of a large number of people.

There are bonfire lights and campsites setup.

If you look from here a large army seems to have surrounded the capital.

"Even though there are so many soldiers there is no sign that they are trying to stop the rebels!"

"Your Majesty, those are not soldiers, most of them are just various civilians. They are adventurers, merchants, and others gathered together waiting for the city to reopen."

"Is that so? So what! That doesn't change the fact that I have been abandoned by the entire country!"

He slammed his fist onto the railing of the balcony, Pax was screaming.
I was just looking on without a word.
It's not my place to interfere.
I have a feeling that this is something that Zanoba has to handle.

"Your Majesty, that is absolutely not the case. By no means has everyone abandoned you."
"What is the difference!? The fact is you only brought three people.
You should have brought a lot more soldiers!
Three men!
You did not bring help, those two over there are just your own bodyguards!"

"That is..."

That's not the case.
I was against helping Pax.
I wanted to discover what was the real motive of the Shirone kingdom.
I don't want Zanoba to die so I've come with him.

"It's just like the old days.
Even if I make a large effort, no one recognizes it.
Even though I created good results, everything backfired immediately!
It's all ruined. It seems like it's always like this!"

While screaming loudly, Pax pointed to Roxy next.
Roxy's body stiffens in confusion.

"Roxy! Do you remember it, or is it too long ago?"
"Eeh?"

"The time when I was able to use intermediate magic for the first time!"

Roxy rolls her eyes in confusion.

"I studied diligently myself.

I trained! Once I finally succeeded in intermediate magic,
just what kind of reaction did you show!?"

"Um... Thats.."

Glancing at Roxy, she was obviously in a panic.

Does she remember?

Has she forgotten?

Me, I don't know.

"You just sighed!"

"eh...."

"I came and excitedly showed you, don't you forget, you returned a sigh!"

"No, that's just..."

"It was a sigh that said, 'He finally got this far.' Oh how you wounded me!"

With wide eyes, Roxy bit her lower lip.

It's inconceivable, she wouldn't sigh like that.

My Roxy?

That Roxy who gave me a compliment every time I was successful in something?

"That's how it was! I adored you!

You were the only one in all of Shirone who accepted me!

So I was trying so hard to get your attention!

But it was useless!

You just absentmindedly treated me with apathy!

You corresponded with a man whom I did not know!

It was ludicrous!

Even though I made such an effort I wasn't recognized. Why did you keep telling me to do my best?

Then when I stopped putting in the effort, you just abandoned me unceremoniously!

You just left the country as if to say, that's enough!"

Pax pulled the hair from his head.

Remembering that time, his eyes are bloodshot, tears are pooling in his eyes.

"So, that is... excuse me, I'm sorry... back then I was..."

"Shut up! I do not want to hear your excuses!"

Roxy kept silent.

In her expression, deep regret was visible.

The thing called effort is something that you should be doing for your own sake.

But it isn't my place to make that kind of sermon.

I have always been recognized, at least since I came to this world.

All my effort returned results.

Even when my efforts proved futile, at those times people still recognized me.

So, I'm not qualified to preach to Pax.

"It's obvious... in reality, this is my limit."

Here Pax relaxed.

"The King of KDK gave myself Shirone, but it's in this state.

No one recognizes me as King; no one is coming.

On the contrary, the general of some person who may not have even inherited father's blood has created a revolt.

In the confusion, the knights whom I had received from His Majesty King of KDK also died.

His Majesty would certainly be disappointed in me."

Pax's restraint crumbled and tears poured heavily from his eyes.

"It is only Benedict who accepts me, after all.

Only she loves me for myself.

She says few words, but she smiles so very hard at me."

The strength of Pax's voice seems to have somehow or another carried down from the castle.

From the bonfires, voices and chatter could be heard.

From below, I wonder if Pax's figure is visible.

Pax looked down upon them as if they were unimportant.

"Hey Older Brother... in this situation, I wonder what I should do?"

"I don't know. But, when you killed our parents and siblings, you went too far."

"... That could be. But those brothers above us would have surely revolted just like this."

"Well, alright."

Zanoba just shook his head.

"However, in these things anyone can fail.

Reflect on it and decide whether or not to leave someone alive next time!"

The lively voice of Zanoba echoes off the top floor.

It's amazing that he can produce that kind of voice in this situation.

"I can't do that. I'm just that kind of guy.

Again and again I just repeat my mistakes."

Pax shook his head slowly.

The gesture was very similar to Zanoba's.

These two people look so different, only that gesture was similar.

Pax raised his face and looked behind me.

"Randolph"

"Yes, sir."

I was startled.

Imperceptibly, right behind me, stood Randolph.

A death god is at my back.

That's bad for the heart.

"That discussion we had before..."

"Your wish is my command."

"Good."

I wondered what they were talking about.

A moment passed while I thought about it.

Suddenly Pax moved over the handrail of the balcony.

"Ah."

This is the fifth floor.

He leapt.

Huh?

Jumped off!?

Eh?

"WAhhhhhhhhh!"

Zanoba ran.

Though there was no time, he ran with his arms outstretched.

He caught the handrail, destroying it as he went, and then fell.

"Za-Zanoba!"

I quickly turned heel and dashed from the room.

Part 3

Pax was dead in the garden.

Zanoba was stunned; on his knees, he embraced the corpse.

"Ah, Shishou, quickly, healing magic..."

Zanoba called out, dumbfounded.

I took out the scroll of healing magic from my breast pocket and pasted it on Zanoba.

Maybe because he just fell from the fifth floor, but there are bruises on this guy.

"No not on myself, on Pax..."

" "

I shook my head in silence.

Pax was already dead.

It looks like he landed on his head.

It is a tragedy.

I want to think that there wasn't much pain.

"Really...?"

"Yeah, it's a pity."

I did not expect him to abruptly jump off.

However, he might have decided so from the beginning.

He was surrounded by enemies.

It may be that he did not escape the castle because he believed he had no allies.

So, he was probably fretting for several days.

As a result, he came to realize that he had failed as King.

From the beginning, he was going to die.

"Shishou..."

While holding Pax's corpse, Zanoba, he looks up into the sky.
A beautiful full moon peered down over the back of the castle.
A castle without a King.
It's just an empty husk.

"I wonder what I should do..."

" "

"Perhaps, everything I've done has been for nothing?"

"Don't say that kind of thing. You've given it everything you had."

Nevertheless, Pax couldn't comprehend it.

Pax had said he wanted to be appreciated by others, but he was not able to appreciate those same people.

Oh, before that, it was a feeling like Zanoba didn't even appear in his vision.

Still, I wonder if he wouldn't have understood after some time.

I had thought that Pax was nothing but a hopeless guy, but
I wonder if perhaps Pax did acknowledge Zanoba.

"Why, why did it become such a thing?"

"... I don't know."

Zanoba was silent for a while.

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he looked up at my face.

"Could it be, this, this is also the work of Hitogami?"

I don't know this time, where the hand of Hitogami was.

After all, a guy claiming to be an apostle did not appear.

But originally, Pax, using various methods, should have made this country into a republic.
That is gone now.

In this case, our participation squashed that republics formation.

Alternatively, the the very beginning all the way up until now, Hitogami's target might have been Pax's life.

He can see the future.

He may have understood that if cornered mentally, Pax would commit suicide and would not need to be killed directly.

Even if that isn't the case.

This time, it's possible Hitogami isn't involved at all.

If I think back, I first came to this country on instruction from Hitogami.

Orsted had said that the Shirone Republic in the future would be a problem for Hitogami.

As a result of my actions, Pax went to the KDK.

Then, it's likely that Hitogami was somehow aiming at Pax back then.

"You could say that."

".... is that so?"

Zanoba slowly laid the corpse on the ground.

Then, slowly, he breathed in and out.

He looks like he could cry, but tears do not appear.

I would be crying, if it were me.

Finally, Zanoba said in a whisper,

"Let's return."

I did not need to hear anything beyond that and nodded firmly.

Chapter 11

Post War

Part 1

I went to take care of cremating Pax.

Bake him and bury him.

It's the common method for memorial service in this world.

However, Zanoba, shaking his head, stopped me.

Without Pax's body the revolt won't be settled.

In a flat voice he told me that, in order to take care of this internal turmoil, we should leave his corpse.

You shouldn't hand the body of your King over to the rebel army either.

That's what I thought, but Zanoba was incredibly coercive.

In the end, I cleaned Pax's body with water magic and then we carried him to the fifth floor.

When we reached the fifth floor we saw Randolph carrying the Queen Benedict on his back like luggage.

Roxy was helping.

Randolph seems to have relied on her.

She helped dress the naked Benedict and made a backpack from the sheets to carry her with.

Silently she worked to fill a bag with cloths from the closet.

"Your Majesty?" was the first thing Randolph said.

"The King is dead. I'll carry his body to the rebels to stop this chaos."

Zanoba's reply was indifferent.

Randolph's expression did not change.

It was like he immediately understood the plan.

"I have been tasked by His Majesty, to escape with his Queen, and then to escort her to KDK."

Randolph knew.

He knew Pax intended to commit suicide.

I can't say why he didn't have the decency to stop him.

"Then you should follow Myself."

"Yes sir, Your Highness Zanoba.... for your forethought, thank you."

At the end of that very short exchange, Randolph bowed.

That Randolph who had just been trying to kill us is now accompanying us.

Ordinarily I would be cautious of him.

That last battle may have just been the preamble of Hitogami's trap.

But I can't believe that is the case.

I feel that Randolph does not want to fight.

It's a strange sensation.

But, it's not like I can be sure.

He's the fifth ranked Seven Major Powers: Randolph Marian.

That man who I couldn't even compare to had such a tired look on his face.

However, Roxy and I, we both look just as tired.

Even if someone said, 'We have to fight Randolph here.' I would just weakly shake my head no.

Everyone was tired.

Even Zanoba was quiet as a mouse.

The four of us... no, it's five people once you include Benedict.

With heavy footsteps, we five escaped from the royal palace using the underground passage.

We came back into the watermill.

There was still time until the darkness makes way for daybreak.

When the spirit of light broke the darkness, I cheered up as the Magic Armor was illuminated.

I didn't have to use this for anything other than movement after all.

"This... could this be the Fighting God Armor?"

Randolph abruptly asked me.

He was gazing up at the Magic Armor with a stunned look on his face.

"No, this is a magic tool which Zanoba and I have made for decisive battles, it's the [Magic Armor]."

"I see... If you had employed this, I would have been in trouble."

"Is that so, but in the end I couldn't do anything about your [Bewitching Sword]."

Randolph responded to that with a 'Ha' kind of laugh.

"Well I was cornered before I used that."

"Eh?"

"My body was becoming worn out from your formation, and negating that Rock Cannon had used almost all of my magic power..."

He told me this as if he was comforting me.

Maybe, in that place, I would have had some more flexibility if I had not allowed myself to be intimidated by his talk, stance dancing, and bewitching sword.

If I had attacked him there, victory would have been possible... maybe?

No... anyway it's nothing to sigh about.

The correct answer was to not fight at all.

To win, to lose, in the end there wasn't any meaning to it.

"Now that I think about it, Randolph, you had said that you were aware of Hitogami."

I need to hear about this before I forget.

Someone who knows about Hitogami could be valuable.

We came here, but Pax died.

We failed to achieve results; it's pathetic.

"Yeah, but I do not know that much."

"Just in case, can you tell me what you know?"

"Sure thing... It's just about someone related to me, a long time ago I heard a story that they managed to fight against a powerful enemy with the help of Hitogami."

"A powerful enemy?"

"In order to protect his fiancée, he stole the Fighting God Armor at the suggestion of Hitogami, and it seems he fought in it. The person said to be the strongest at that time: the Dragon God Laplace.

In the end he failed to protect the fiancée, and the two struck one another down."

Randolph punctuated his story with, "Sounds fake, huh?" and then laughed.

But I've heard that story somewhere.

That's right, it's someone that both Orsted and Kishirika have said.

Dragon King and Fighting God battled...

"When I was younger, I was told this over drinks. Although it is probably a myth... thanks to growing up listening to that story, I am familiar with the name Hitogami."

No, this is valuable information.

If he says this, then it's a story about a former apostle of Hitogami.

Well, it's something Orsted likely already knows.

Our information may overlap to some extent.

"Could you tell me the name of that relative?"

"The Biegoya region Demon Lord, Badigadi."

Ah.

Well, huh.

If that's the case, then the story seems suspicious.

That Demon Lord-sama was a lighthearted and vague gentleman.

It could just be a tall tale.

Though I don't think that Orsted would lie...

Well, each person might tell a famous heroic saga differently; things are lost or added in retelling.

"Thank you very much..."

I suddenly felt worn out.

I lacked the energy to continue talking.

I was influenced by such a thing...

Haa.

Without thinking, I just want to go home and sleep in my own bed.

If I think about it, it's been a full day, I have not slept today.

"Randolph, what will you do now?"

After our conversation was concluded, Zanoba asked Randolph.

"I will go to the KDK from here."

"And then?"

"I will protect the Queen until her delivery and then teach the art of the sword, erudition, and cuisine to her child."

Childbirth, that would mean that Benedict is pregnant?

You can't tell by looking at her, but...

"Because I was told to raise it with praise, it might grow up to be a little selfish."

"Is that so."

Benedict bears it, and Randolph raises it.

Was Benedict aware of the fact that Pax was going to die?

Randolph is similar and won't say why he didn't stop it.

I should have stopped him.

It might be that these two people are the most miserable.

"Randolph-dono, would it be fine for me to hear one thing?"

Zanoba suddenly brings out a question.

In the darkness, a face like a skeleton cocks to the side.

"You, why did you follow Pax? Was it just on the orders of the King of the King Dragon Kingdom?"

Randolph faintly laughed.

"No. I liked him, that fellow."

"Well then... if that's true, you have my gratitude."

"Thanks huh. Your Highness Zanoba, you are an interesting person."

I could see the remains of a thin smile on the face Randolph presented towards me.

"Oh, that's right, Rudeus."

"Yes? What is it?"

"About that matter with Hitogami.

My relative had said too, to not make an enemy or a friend of him.

Neither would end with a good result."

I nodded.

I'm well aware of that.

Also, it's too late.

If possible, that's a thing I would have wanted to tell myself ten years ago.

"My relative, it seems like he also experienced something severe because of the influence of Hitogami."

Badigadi.

Come to think of it, he had talked like he might have known of Hitogami.

I have no idea where he is now but...

"Well then everyone, stay healthy."

"You as well Randolph-dono."

He shook hands with Zanoba, then finally turned heel.

That skeleton disappeared into the dark night.

" "

" "

Then, with nothing left to say, our group returned to the water mill.

I slept like a rock.

Part 2

We didn't wake up until around noon the next day.

Already, the royal palace had been occupied by the rebels.

The blockade at the gate seems to have been taken care of while we weren't looking.

[Absolute Void Eye]

The demon eye which Randolph possesses is that kind of thing.

I don't understand what kind of principle it works on, keeping the enemy from entering the royal palace.

However, the effect might have faded with the passage of time or when he left the royal palace.

Things like cooking smoke could be seen coming from the occupied royal palace.

A lively feeling could be felt from inside.

Like the soldiers from Fort Karon, I wonder if they are drunk on victory.

Anyway, you could feel their energy.

The reign of the foolish King has ended, and now their bright future can begin.

The strength of that feeling comes not just from the palace, I felt it from all over the town.

On the contrary, there is only one place in the entire town that isn't bright and vibrant.

It's the town square.

It's the place where the corpse of Pax has been displayed.

No one will pay homage to his dead body, it is naked with a cut across the shoulder for some reason.

When I last saw it there was no such wound.

They might want it to look like they defeated him themselves.

The story that the Warlord Jade is spreading seems to be, 'Pax was a foolish despot who I have punished while bringing you a true King as a replacement.'

It would be that kind of propaganda.

In fact, I don't know a thing about the politics here or whether Pax was a tyrant or a foolish king.

The Pax from the past surely seemed like a foolish tyrant, but recently?

Could that Pax really be called a stupid tyrant?

No, the only way he looks like a tyrant is if you focus on his massacre of the royal family.

Despite the rumors, even though they were thoroughly spread, the people who appeared to throw stones at Pax were the minority.

It's not like he was beloved, but neither was he hated.

He spent a long period away in a foreign country, his reign was short, because of this he might appear to be a sacrificial pawn; many people think this way.

Indifferent majority.

That's my impression.

" "

Looking over all this was a trembling Zanoba.

His eyes were wide and his tightly clenched fist was shaking.

Watching this scene, even I had something in my eye.

We should have just cremated him after all...

It seems to me that it should have been fine to not give the rebel army his body.

Once they occupied the castle I would think they would see it as their victory...

No, before that, I should have saved him.

I never even considered that he would jump off like that, or that Zanoba would leap after him, I could have used wind magic, possibly...

.... I quit.

I couldn't have known Pax would jump so easily.

I was just too late.

We should have noticed he was considering suicide at an earlier stage.

This, there is no need to dwell on it...

"I may have erred again."

As if lost in thought, Zanoba whispers.

I don't know what lies in his heart.

I can't understand just how seriously Zanoba thought of Pax as his little brother.

However, if you look at Zanoba's face, you can see that he indeed did have some feelings for Pax.

Their past which I don't know about, there may be something there.

"Well with this... but if I look at it this way, then the people who will defy the next King should have decreased. The country... will be stable, right?"

The 11th Prince.

What's his name?

I don't remember, but he's definitely only three.

Even if he orders something, it won't be necessary to follow him.

General Jade, you can handle it.

That's the idea.

It's just my suspicion though.

" "

After all, Jade, I wonder if he was Hitogami's apostle.

I wonder if it would have been better if we killed him.

But, we are beyond the point when we could have saved Pax.

Also, now that this is all over, it's likely that Hitogami is done with whoever his apostle was.

It's expected.

I've kept working fruitlessly until now.

At this time, anything I could do would be irrelevant no matter what I tried.

Or rather, I have no confidence in my judgment anymore.

As soon as we return, I had better get instruction from Orsted at once.

Pax's death also needs to be reported.

However I can't return without consulting Zanoba.

"Zanoba, I'll be returning to Sharia; what do you intend to do?"

"..... Shishou. Before returning, from here perhaps we still need to meet up with Ginger."

"Ah, that's right. I understand."

Regrettably, I had already completely forgotten Ginger.

That's right.

We'll need to join up with her.

We'll continue ahead after meeting up with her.

After reflecting a moment, we left that scene behind.

Part 3

Afterward, the three of us took lodging at an inn within the capital for three days.

The original plan was to move towards Fort Karon and there pick up Ginger, but we didn't manage to put that into action.

While I really wanted to get home as soon as possible, I also felt like I needed to monitor this country a bit longer.

Just being here a few days longer might allow me to see where this is all going.

For once I didn't slack off on collecting intelligence.

Yet I still haven't understood everything that is happening.

I couldn't afford to slack off on the Magic Armor's maintenance or general vigilance.

Inside the town is buzzing with rumors.

That the rebels surrounding the Imperial City had battled with the kingdom's army led by Pax.

That there was mortal combat between the Death God Randolph and the warlord Jade.

That the next era's King is wise and noble.

It's all fabricated.

It's a horrible means to win over the loyalist army.

Although it might not all be the warlord Jade's lies.

It's possible that it's just things that have been said in jest getting spread around.

If you look at the times where rumors spread the fastest its often like that.

Those rumors might have already been spreading while they were camped outside the castle.

Some people just prefer to see a more dramatic world.

Fact is stranger than fiction.

Reality is strange, helpless, and disappointing.

In the dining room of an inn, at the water cooler, in the market; lies, truths, and words that people might not understand are spread.

Someone also had said things like, the next King is selling half of Shirone to the northern country.

That reminds me: how will this effect the cease-fire negotiations?

Did the commanding officer of the fort take over for us?

As it is, I don't know.

We know nothing, but Zanoba appears well regardless.

Ever since we arrived at the inn, Zanoba has been absorbed in thought.

Day after day, he just sits in a chair absentminded.

Thinking about it, Zanoba has lost his whole family: his house, his father, his brother. He had said that this country was his home, but it might not be a home worth defending now that everyone is gone.

Although, he doesn't give off the impression that he is burying his depression.

Basically there is just many things for him to think about.

He's concerned about the future.

There is another person who is actually depressed.

It's Roxy.

She has been a person of few words these last several days, and she eats very lightly like she has no appetite.

In the evening, with a listless expression, she sits still, gazing into the fireplace.

Pax's death, I wonder if she is in shock over it.

I would be.

In his very last minute, Pax spewed out his grudge against Roxy.

It was like he was saying, she was to blame for his death.

That would really effect me, if I was her.

"I'm back."

".... Welcome back."

Today, Roxy is just holding her knees while looking into the fire.

I sit next to her as usual.

There are a lot of things I could say to cheer her up, but they are all hackneyed irresponsible things.

I cannot bring myself to say them.

Well, the person saying those kind of things might be trying to comfort Roxy, but...

"Certainly..."

She opened her mouth and whispered.

"Back then, I did sigh."

Roxy won't look at me.

However, she's talking to me.

As if making a confession, she continued to speak.

"One day Pax mastered intermediate magic.

He came to show me with great excitement and all I did was sigh.

I might have even said, 'Only to this degree' under my breath."

"It really hurt him, I guess."

When I said that Roxy clutched the end of my robe.

"I think that, honestly, when I was teaching Prince Pax, I was only comparing him to Rudy. When there was a problem Rudy, you, would immediately understand; Rudy learns magic so easily.

And then I moved directly to this child who was far below Rudy.

So, I might have been condescending."

I did quickly learn up to intermediate magic.

Roxy also probably learned it without difficulty.

But that doesn't mean that everyone else can learn it so easily.
Surely, Pax was giving it his best.
He made his best effort, studied, practiced, and finally learned it.

Then he wanted to show off to Roxy and be complimented, but only received a sigh.
Back when I was in Buena Village, if such a thing would have happened to me...
I would not have come to respect Roxy, and we might not have married.

"In those days I only looked towards the top.
I was thinking about learning King ranked magic and then aiming for further heights.
Perhaps it was arrogance.
It was enough to lead me to neglect the people under me"

Biting her lower lip, Roxy tightly hugged her knees.
I stroked her back.
Roxy was trembling slightly.

"I intended to repent.
After failing I would study well for the next time."

In that instant, tears swelled up in Roxy's eyes.

"But, I regret it, I failed.
Although I had vaguely thought about what I might have done wrong as a teacher,
I mostly just blamed the environment of the royal place; I had to justify myself."

Tears spill from Roxy's eyes.

"I didn't realize that my attitude had such an effect on Prince Pax.
Until the other day, when he told me from his own mouth, I hadn't even a clue."

She buried her face in her knees to catch all of the tears which were endlessly flowing down her face.

I stroked her small back in a circular fashion.

"For Prince Pax, there won't be a next time... "

Roxy simply cried.

I continued to stroke her back.

I had been doing so for a while.

However, I kept stroking her trembling back as she sobbed.

Eventually, Roxy's sobbing stopped.

She looked up at me with engorged bright red eyes.

"Rudy, now, how can I continue to be a teacher?"

" "

What should I say to that?

I don't know.

I'm not a teacher.

However there are words that I have heard in the past.

"Sensei"

These may be superficial words which I stole from a game or manga.

It's something said under pretense.

It may be no more than comfort.

I might just be cheating.

"Sensei, even if you fail, experience will still pile up."

I do not think it is wrong to just pay lip service.

"Assuming the teacher does not repeat the same mistakes, the students of the teacher will be brought up magnificently and find happiness like me."

" "

Roxy, she looked at me intently.

Her blue hair, her eyelashes, her small lips trembling.

It was something which I couldn't reach at one time, now it is different.

"Rudy, are you happy?"

"Yes, there have been painful things, but thanks to Roxy-sensei's teachings, I have been able to experience happiness."

"Rudy... always says that."

Quite right.

What I say won't change from day to day because it is the truth.

"I can't explain it well, but I was able to take my first step as a human being thanks to Sensei placing me on the horse."

"That's an exaggeration... since that was all such a long time ago I'm convinced it's that way."

"Certainly it might be an exaggeration, but I remember Roxy moving forward after failing some things, and there is no doubt that I've been encouraged by that."

I told her that seriously.

Indeed, by the teacher Roxy, the life of one student might have fallen a little out of order.

'Roxy, it's not your fault.' I'm not going to say that kind of consolation.

Beyond a sense of responsibility, she feels that she killed Pax herself.

But conversely, there is even a student that has been kept alive by Roxy.

It's me.

It isn't Roxy alone who has kept me alive so far.

But, the fact that Roxy deserves the credit doesn't change.

"I won't tell you to forget about this time.

Rather, not forgetting it might be best.

But also, don't forget that there are people like me who have been kept alive thanks to Roxy."

I'm aware that I said a self important thing there.

But that is my true feelings.

Roxy, you should not deny yourself the life of a teacher.

" "

Roxy gave me a blank stare.

She has a half opened mouth and wide red eyes.

What with her trembling body, she just then noticed her running nose, and flustered, hid it behind her knees.

"Rudy."

"Yeah."

"With Lara, surely I will get a chance to make amends for what happened with Prince Pax..."

I do not know the answer to that last question.

Only Lara will be able to answer it.

Hers may be different than my answer.

".... maybe, I can't say."

Afterwards, Roxy cried for a while.

She continued to stick to me.

From the next day on, Roxy regained her vitality.

Part 4

Five days passed from then.

The warlord Jade seems to be planning a coronation.

It's something that should be flashy, but there isn't room for that in this country.

However, it is important to show the rest of the world when the head of a country changes.

I heard the rumor after meeting up with Ginger.

After her stamina recovered she immediately left Fort Karon chasing us.

She was only a bit late because she rode her horse into the ground coming.

After seeing the state of the town, and listening to our story, she just said, 'Oh, is that so.' without changing her expression.

Still, when she heard about Pax's death, her face showed that she felt he deserved it; it was impossible to miss.

Well, because Pax did some terrible things to her, it can't be helped.

It can't be helped, I understand, but it's still sad.

"Thereupon, Zanoba-sama, how will we proceed from here?"

"Hmmm."

"Also... how do you plan to charm the country?"

I think when she heard about it, Ginger was calmed.

Pax is dead.

There should be no one left threatening the life of Zanoba.

The next king might view Zanoba as a risk.

But, Jade shouldn't kill the guy.

Unlike Pax, they should not harbor any personal resentment towards Zanoba.

They should also know the usefulness of a Miko.

It can't be said that he isn't dangerous, but both parties should be able to approach the situation reasonably.

But Zanoba shook his head helplessly.

"No, I'll go back to the magic city Sharia."

"... yes sir."

Ginger gave an exaggerated nod.

Just a bit, her face is a happy one.

I had thought that Ginger's hope was for Zanoba to become a respectable royal but...

More than that, she wants him to live.

I was honestly relieved by that.

If he remained in this country, it's likely he would be killed.

While I was thinking that, I looked at Zanoba's face and got a bad feeling.

"Ginger,"

For some reason, Zanoba had a face full of determination.

It's the face he made just before his journey to Shirone.

He's up to something, it's that kind of face.

"I... will discard this country for the moment."

"You're going to, discard the country..."

Ah, you mean you'll take refuge?

I think it's a good idea.

Ranoa, for us, would gladly accept the likes of Zanoba-sama.

With a word from Rudeus then even Asura would..."

"No, I will not go into exile."

Again, Zanoba shook his head.

And then, he looked down upon Ginger who had taken a knee to persuade him.

"I intend to abandon my position within the royal family.

At this time let them believe that I died during the rebellion. Rather than Shirone Kingdom's Third Prince Zanoba Shirone, I'll just become Zanoba and try to live a fulfilling life in the future."

Ginger's face is hard to read.

I wonder if she's disgusted.

Throwing away his social position, it's a feeling I'm familiar with.

I also have something like status which was thrown away.

"... I also think that it's a good idea."

However, Ginger did not stand against it.

The Zanoba back in Sharia, every day was having a good time.

Now that he has returned to Shirone too late, it becomes a humiliating thought.

Even taking exile in other countries is only an option available because he is a Miko.

If that's the case then why not throw away the position and lead an enjoyable life.

Without being part of the royal family money might be a problem... I can probably throw some work his way though.

Something like being the Magic Armor's full time mechanic with salary would be possible.

He could also do mercenary work if he finds that unpleasant.

"Yes. Ginger, I would like to thank you for your help so far."

"I am truly grateful for your words..."

Zanoba then nodded with a satisfied look.

Ginger's body relaxed and a feeling like relief spread over her face.

"So then, Ginger, after this, what do you intend to do?"

"... Of course, I plan to continue to serve you, Zanoba-sama, on into the future."

Ginger said that as if it was a matter of course.

But Zanoba frowned.

"However, although you have been this one's bodyguard as a knight of Shirone. If I am no longer part of the imperial family then you are left without a reason to serve."

"No, whether Zanoba-sama is a part of the royal family, for me, it is irrelevant."

"Hmmm. But I can not give remuneration for your labor and help. How would you continue to support your family?"

"They are all self-reliant adults already. I am no longer the bread winner."

Those two continued with questions and answers for a while.

Zanoba was reluctant, but Ginger had a hold of him.

And, as the questioning continued, Zanoba gradually lost ground.

"Furthermore, you are at a good place in your life; won't you miss your chance to marry?"

Zanoba's final question was this kind of thing.

Marriageable age...

Now that I think about it, that Ginger, I wonder about how old she is.

If I think about the normal marriageable age in this world, I feel she may have already missed it.

"The likes of marriage.... !"

At this point Ginger became impatient as well.

Violently, she raised her hands up in front of her face.

It turned into kneeling.

What happened was... she slammed her body heavily into the ground.

She was prostrating herself.

In Shirone Kingdom, I wonder if throwing your entire body on the ground is the way you show maximum respect?

Zanoba, he does it properly.

"I was asked by Minerva-sama directly, to look after Zanoba-sama!"

Even if Zanoba-sama is not royalty, it does not matter!

But, even if I'm not a guard, I would be fine as a mistress!

Please! If I think about my future there is only one place for me; I beg you, let me stay by your side!"

He did not hide his puzzled, surprised reaction.

The name Minerva, I wonder if that is Zanoba's mother's name...

"Hmmm"

Placing his hand on his chin, Zanoba squatted down.

"Ginger, I understand your thoughts. Raise your head."

" "

He lifted her upper body and exposed Ginger's tear filled face.

"I won't push the matter forcefully if you say it like that.

However, I won't take you as a follower.

You can stand by my side as someone who understands me, alright?"

Tears began to spill from Ginger's eyes.

"Yes sir!"

Then, she returned to throwing her entire body on the floor once again.

It's a beautiful scene... don't you agree?

Just by the looks of it, it's a little surreal.

Anyway, this is case closed now that Zanoba has decided to return with us.

I can't say that we settled the case well.

Nothing was really resolved.

Also the affair left a bad aftertaste.

We are left with only a sense of futility, defeat, and stress.

But it's done: the end.

Let's go home.

Chapter 12

Zanoba's Chosen Path

Part 1

--- Zanoba's Perspective ---

Formerly, I could not see the difference between humans and dolls.

Either they speak, or they do not.

I had thought the difference was only to this degree.

The distinction began to sink in as I grew up, but it did not change much.

Humans, their arms can be torn off, their heads can be removed.

I thought they were the same as those wooden dolls you can find everywhere.

No, of course I love dolls.

I only loved dolls.

There are exquisite dolls, and there are many flawed dolls; but even flawed dolls, I love them.

Human beings are, so to speak... a doll I did not care for.

They were dolls which complained and made demands for themselves: detestable dolls.

There was a change in my way of thinking after meeting with Shishou.

It did not change immediately.

I met with Shishou, and then went to the magic city Sharia. Then, after several years, I met with Shishou again.

Gradually, I found that I no longer disliked all human beings.

The starting point was when I accepted Julie.

She was a slave which I had purchased with Shishou and Sylphy-dono for the purpose of manufacturing dolls.

We could not speak a word to one another, and I could not leave a six year old to fend for herself.

She was a troublesome presence.

My existence as her master became a kind of charm for me.

It was troublesome, but a doll will not emerge from a block of wood if some of the wood is not shaved away.

Therefore, I took the task to heart and, one by one, instructed her in the things that she must do.

Before I realized it, Julie was no longer a hindrance.

I don't understand it.

She would listen obediently to what I said and quickly absorbed the techniques I taught her.

Until that day I had never met a human like that. I had begun to like and grow attached to that person, I did not discriminate against them at all.

Did this start from the time I began to live with the girl?

Other humans also, began to appear differently in my eyes.

I really noticed it when Ginger appeared.

Ginger was an existence that only scolded Myself.

I had misunderstood her because of trivial things; I failed to see the trees through the leaves.

The branches and roots are an essential part of the tree. The roots hold the tree down while the branches hold the leaves up, but this is something I never understood.

Honestly, she was an interfering presence.

When we reunited she was no longer a nuisance.

I do not know why, but she no longer felt like a hindrance anyway.

Even though her nagging did not diminish.

Why?

Why did I change like this?

Definitely, it is because of the influence of Shishou.

Shishou never abandoned me even once.

I am a man who is only good at power, and will clumsily break the doll he is trying to create.

With my magic power so small, I am a man that does not live up to the expectations of his Shishou.

Shishou worked hard to instill into Myself the secret of his doll making technique, but it was all a wasted effort.

I was ready to give up.

I cannot create dolls.

Even though I was abandoned by the doll making god,

I was happy.

A presence that would look after Myself to this extent, until now did not exist.

Therefore, without Shishou, the Ginger which always watched over me would not have been recognized.

Because of that, the stupid Me finally noticed.

Human beings and dolls, there is a difference.

I understood the importance of this.

The stupid Me did not understand why this was important, but I knew it was important nonetheless.

By no means did Shishou tell me these things directly from his mouth.

However he has shown them to me in his actions.

Through him I was granted a [Revelation].

For that alone I owe Shishou a debt of gratitude, for that I will always respect him.

I am proud that I was able to look up to such a person as my Shishou.

However, there was also the fact that stupid Myself didn't understand the actions of Shishou.

For example: that thing with Nanahoshi-dono.

Silent Seven Stars.

Nanahoshi Shizuka-dono.

She seems to be studying summoning magic in order to return to her homeland.

That home, I don't know it's name; I'm not interested in it.

For Myself, a homeland is a place devoid of pleasant memories.

No part of me could sympathize with Nanahoshi, who wanted to return home so strongly.

Shishou, he is from the Asura Kingdom, and has many unpleasant memories from there.

Even with that, Shishou was devoted to helping Nanahoshi-dono.

When Nanahoshi became heartbroken, he brought her back to his home and nursed her himself.

When Nanahoshi became ill with an incurable disease, he traveled to the magic continent looking for a cure.

I also helped.

For some reason, I did not mind.

If Shishou was doing it, then I would aid Shishou; I did not think of it as unpleasant.

However, I did not know what made Shishou help Nanahoshi-dono.

Meanwhile, there was a change in Myself.

Unconsciously, I had also begun to think of my homeland.

Because Nanahoshi's homeland was a home she wanted to return to, surely I became infected with the idea of Home.

That disagreeable Shirone Royal Palace, for some reason it became the case that I was longing for it.

Thereafter I continued to think about it.

Shirone Royal Palace.

When I received the request for aid from Pax, My conclusion was immediate: 'I will go.'

In fact I like my country.

I intend to defend my country in its time of need.

At this time I have to go.

My thoughts were like that.

It's different now.

At Fort Karon, when Shishou tried to persuade me to return with him, my heart wavered.

I intended to return.

The state of the country seemed to be good enough, and with Shishou I could indulge in making dolls and having fun to my heart's content.

But I could not return.

In my head, there was only the thought that I could not return.

[I want to help Pax because he is my brother.]

Instantly, that lie appeared.

Even so, there was the chance that I would have relented if Shishou had begged me.

However, things proceeded in that direction.

I did not know why.

Sometimes, lies told in the past have a way of transforming into the truth; I thought it was that kind of thing.

When Pax jumped off and I watched him die, the past incidentally flashed through my head.

It was the time when Brother, was called to a party hosted by the second prince.

What the party was about, I do not remember.

It was never the kind of thing where attendance was mandatory.

Why we were there, I do not remember.

The part I remember is that young Pax accidentally sat down in the seat next to Myself.

This all happened before Roxy-dono had came.
I think, at that time Pax had not yet reached the age of ten.

There was no conversation.
Simply, we just sat beside one another.
There was an atmosphere like Pax was trying to say something to Myself.
I thought it was all bothersome and did not even look at Pax.
To the very end Pax was unable to speak to me.
It was like he was ignored.
He didn't try to converse, but it was still ignoring.

When I lifted Pax's corpse up I suddenly had a thought.
Why, I wonder why, at that time, did we not speak to one another, huh?

Then everything became clear.
I understood.
The meaning of the actions Shishou took in regards to Nanahoshi-dono, that inexplicable behaviour, was found.

To Shishou, Nanahoshi-dono is probably like a sister.
I wonder why I did not notice.
Although Shishou also has real little sisters.
In particular, how Shishou interacts with Nanahosi-dono and his sisters, I think it seems very similar.
There are slight differences, but still it's very similar.
The way he watches over them and, if something happens, comes to their aid, it's very similar.
For Shishou, taking care of Nanahoshi-dono is like cherishing his sisters.

And why did Oneself help with it?
After I helped, why did it remind me of my home?
When the letter came from Pax, why did I decide to go back to my country over everyone's objections?

After the battle at Fort Karon, why did I think that I must go and rescue Pax?

Why was such a lie given instantly?

Why did the lie fit so snugly?

I understand.

I understand everything.

It was all connected.

But it was too late.

I should not have taken so long to notice.

Pax died.

I did not jump into action like Shishou.

Still, there was a thing that I could yet do.

--- Rudeus's Perspective ---

We set out for the magic city Sharia.

Breath: good, good. I was full of dread, but the trip home was smooth sailing.

I pulled the carriage with the Magic Armor.

Zanoba and I took it apart inside the forest, and then we prepared a teleport magic circle and entered the sky fortress.

Roxy had to pass through, but Zanoba and I stopped to greet Perugius.

After greeting us with an offhand attitude, "Okay," Perugius took us into the usual room.

"To be bound by a country is a foolish thing." we received that kind of admonishment.

Zanoba nodded obediently and explained that he had ceased being a part of the imperial family.

With those words, Perugius seemed satisfied.

Perugius even gave me praise for dealing with that 'trouble'.

Saying something or other about how his tea-drinking companion hasn't left him, he seems to be relieved.^[43]

By the way, I went and reported to Nanahoshi as well, but all I received was a sigh of 'Haaa' from her.

I suppose the farewell crying of a woman would ruin my impression of her.

I understand the feeling.

Well, Eris will also come to term soon.

At the time of the delivery, I must be by her side.

I need to go home...

However, there is work to be done before that.

I need to report to Orsted.

Part 2

This time I was taken care of.

There was no damage to me, but the Shirone Republic -- in the future it should have produced an important person for Orsted.

That is, it's kind of like we've had one of our stronger pieces taken.

Thinking about it, my return might have been premature.

If I had stayed in that country a while, could I have possibly pushed it towards becoming a republic...

No, if it was just about the republic Orsted would not have said, 'Reinforce Pax'.

Anyway, I should just honestly tell him what has happened.

Then, if there is something we can do, I'll do it.

"Then Roxy, I want to stop at the office. I need to store the Magic Armor."

"...okay. Be safe. I'll go to the family and let them know we've returned early."

I bid farewell to Roxy at the entrance to the city and headed toward the office.

Zanoba came with me for some reason.

"Something wrong Zanoba?"

"No, I was protected by this armor. I need to give Orsted my thanks, and an apology for letting it be destroyed."

"I see."

It seems unusual for Zanoba to thank Orsted.

Because of his curse, I would have thought such feelings would be impossible.

Could this be the results of Cliff's research?

Once you are close enough to look into Orsted's eyes, you should be struck hard by it, but if he controls his impulses maybe it will be fine.

Convinced of that, I went back to the office along with Zanoba.

There I stowed the Magic Armor in the armory.
After locking it I moved towards the main building.
We went past the unattended lobby towards the president's office.

"Suuuu...."

Before entering, I take a deep breath.
It's time to report my failure.
Until now, there has been several failures, but...
It's a large failure this time.
I may be subjected to some rebuke.

Perhaps he's absent.
No, it's still better to prepare an early report.
Okay.

First, let's knock.
A knock so a man can compose his heart.
It's a polite knock.
Lightly rapping with just the finger, tap-tap.

"Rudeus?"

Ah, he's not absent.
However, all of the details of the report need to be put in order.
Let's just go with sincerity.

"Excuse me! Rudeus Greyrat reporting, I have just arrived with news from the Shirone kingdom!"

I open the door with a bang, enter inside, and bend my waist into a bow.
Then I raised my face towards him.

"FuAaah!?"

Orsted was wearing a solid black face mask, I was startled.

This, could it be?

Cliff has produced a new revision of the mask... so it's a magic tool.

"It looks like you came back safely."

"...Y-yes."

I was unnerved at the start, but my heart is still in this.

I need to report in all sincerity that I failed.

That I did not achieve any results.

No, is that it?

"Reporting -- "

I reported straight forwardly this time.

What I was careful about, what I discovered.

So it'll be alright if there are any retorts later, one by one, calmly, carefully, I explain everything.

One at a time I went over: what I thought, my conclusions, who I consulted with, the actions that we took.

Then finally, I gave the results.

I told him about our conjecture about Hitogami's predictions, and what we thought the correct interpretation was.

Everything thereabout was reported at once.

"I am very sorry. I let Prince Pax die and was unable to accomplish my orders."

Finally, I bowed.

No matter how you gloss it over, failure is failure.

If there is a punishment, I'm resigned to my fate.

" "

Under the surface, Orsted gave off a heavy dull feeling.
His expression was incomprehensible for a minute, it's more frightening than usual.
Honestly, it's scarier for me with the helmet on.
Hell, why does he even have it on now?
Just take it off....

"King Dragon Kingdom's King, Leonard Kingdragon was an apostle of Hitogami. Probably, the warlord Jade or a Shirone kingdom general was also an apostle. By manipulating these two people, Hitogami cornered Pax and drove him to suicide."

This was Orsted's conclusion.

There were two apostles

First he manipulated the King of KDK to assist Pax.

By doing that he planted the 'awareness that he must meet the expectations of the King of KDK' in Pax.

Give him the Princess, give him the Death God, have him put the country into a good state.... then manipulate Jade to orchestrate his failure.

The flow should be something like that.

Since Hitogami can see the future, he would have easily understood who can force Pax toward suicide, it would have been obvious.

"... who was the final person?"

"The other person, Vista's King..... the probability is high."

"That reminds me. The Death God said something, and it seems there is a possibility that the Demon Lord Badigadi was once an apostle."

"..... If that demon lord was an apostle, he would have shown up by now, we would have seen him."

Ah, certainly.

That guy stands out...

Though in this case, my existence should be an anomaly for Hitogami.

For this reason I won't necessarily meet with a person who is an active apostle.

But, I wasn't able to notice the intent of Hitogami.

I'm pathetic.

"In the future, will we be destroying Jade... ?"

"It's too late."

Emotionlessly, Orsted spoke.

"For that, I'm very sorry."

"Before that, I had made an error in my predictions. After killing Leonard, I shouldn't have left everything to you. Thinking about it, I should have then went to the Shirone Kingdom... but still..."

After saying that much, Orsted went silent.

It feels like his motivation has run out.

This failure, is it that severe?

"Or maybe, there is someone who could substitute for Pax?"

"There is no substitute."

"There is nothing?"

" "

"Orsted-sama, are you alright?"

Then a voice called out from behind me.

There was Zanoba peering in from the rear.

From when did he arrive?

Perhaps he was here from the beginning.

Since he did not speak, I thought he was waiting outside.

"Zanoba Shirone...."

Orsted also seemed to have just noticed him now.

No, in reality, he really may have just noticed him now.

With that helmet, he shouldn't be able to see a thing.

... Also, I just noticed, but his voice is able make it through as well.

Which means he's able to breath as well.

Zanoba took a single step forward and bowed at the waist.

I have no idea what kind of expression Orsted is making.

But, thanks to the helmet, he should be giving off a slightly better impression.

Ah, then this was the reason he was already wearing the helmet when I came in.

He actually felt a sign of Zanoba before I entered and put it on in advance.

"You could have just expressed your gratitude to Rudeus. Wouldn't that have been fine?"

"No, there is more then that."

Just thanking him.

I thought that was all, but Zanoba is going a step further.

He doesn't seem to be completely daunted by Orsted.

"It is the case that I have heard the story from Shishou now, that Pax was swallowed up in the battle between Orsted-sama and a hostile force.... I wonder if that is correct?"

"You are not mistaken."

Does that mean, this time, Zanoba thinks everything was the fault of Orsted?

I that's the case, I had better stop him.

"However, Orsted-sama was trying to aid my younger brother behind the scenes, correct?"

"I wasn't trying to help. I needed a man who would have been born in the country Pax would have created."

"Created a country? Person born from... ?"

"I could try to explain, but you wouldn't understand."

Orsted is saying a lot of profound things today.

However, there is something I also want to know.

If we don't understand it, how are we going to recover from this?

"I think I would like you to explain in detail, if you could please, Orsted-sama."

" "

When asked, Orsted remained silent.

While the silence in the room stretched thin, breathing could be heard from within the helmet.

In this kind of tense situation, it's a sound that could be easily misunderstood.

But I totally hear those breaths as a sigh of anger, and my tension rises.

"... After becoming king, Pax would transform Shirone into a Republic."

Yeah.

I heard all this before.

I want to hear what comes after this.

"After Shirone becomes a republic, a man who was formerly a slave trader rises to power.

His name is Bolt Macedonias.

Pax gives this man an important post."

Bolt Macedonias.

He's a person of consequence?

"Bolt Macedonias becomes a man of influence in the country and sets his roots into Shirone."

"What does this person do?"

"Bolt Macedonias, himself, does nothing. However, from his descendants, the Demon God Laplace is born."

Laplace.

So he comes out here.

"Moreover, now that Pax has died, I no longer know where Laplace will be born."

In other words, without Pax founding the Republic, there is no flag set for the birth of Laplace.

"... No, wait. If, even now, we somehow create the Republic... or setup Bolt Macedonias with the partner who would have given birth to his children when he married..."

"It's useless. Do you think I haven't tried those things until now?"

In his long series of loops, Orsted also probably tried various methods.

Therefore, the nature of Laplace's birth must contain many random variables which need to be regulated.

Perhaps it's not just Shirone Republic. It is something that has been directed for over 100 years, to have Laplace born in a specific place. Additionally, there is the possibility that some of my work was also towards this cause.

With just one thing out of order, none of them are good anymore.

"In order to reach Hitogami, Laplace must be killed.

As for that guy, he'll resurrect, then, after a brief period to gather men, he'll wage war.

While I can defeat Laplace, to bring down that guy and his subordinates requires a great deal of magic and labor.

Then immediately after that, I am brought into a fight with Hitogami."

"Well... after defeating Laplace, is there no way for you to restore your magic power?"

"The time Laplace will revive is roughly determined.

It's far too close to the end of my loop.

I have tried creating a scenario where he is revived earlier, but it was impossible."

After a deep breath, Orsted continued.

"I can't reach Hitogami if I have to go through a war.

This loop, it's a failure."

Failure.

Those words rang in my head like an echo.

Then why didn't you come to Shirone?

Part of me wants to curse and scream, but nothing comes out of my mouth.

The work I was entrusted with, I failed.

Now, I wonder if I'm useless. This job really proved the measure of my worth.

I wonder if I'm a disappointment.

Orsted seems to have completely given up on the loop now.

If that's the case, I... what should I do now?

"Don't just assume this is a failure, it's too early."

And then Zanoba spoke up with a vibrant voice.

I wonder just how much of the story just now Zanoba understood.

Suddenly it was a story about the future, that didn't confuse you?

"When war breaks out, if you say you have to bring down Laplace and his subordinates. Starting now we can begin to prepare our own forces."

"...Ho?"

"Creating an army... even not going quite that far would be sufficient, don't you think? The forces to defeat Laplace, if we start gathering them now, we'll have plenty of companions when the time comes."

Ah, Zanoba said something good.

It's like that.

If using up his magic power is the problem, if Orsted doesn't have to fight then everything is fine.

"Orsted-dono, as your curse prevents you from collecting comrades, Shishou... and Myself, leave that to us."

Then Zanoba stepped forward and took a knee, lowering his head, before Orsted.

"The current proposal, it's just an idea based on my limited understanding. I'm not sure whether it's even relevant."

I don't know whether it can be realized, however it seems like a good idea.

The revival of Laplace... wasn't it not until 80 years from now?

If his revival is approximately set, then it should be within a several year time frame.

By that time we could have gathered plenty of strong allies like Perugia and the Death God, and be ready to strike when Laplace resurrects.

That way we can preserve Orsted's magical power.

"I do not know the detailed circumstances, but I have heard that you are fighting a two man war against Hitogami. And that Hitogami is -- "

There Zanoba abruptly stopped his speech, then raised his head to look at Orsted. After that he placed his hands on the ground.

"He is the adversary who killed my little brother."

Zanoba went prone.

He was prostrating himself with his head on the ground.

It's not the usual way in which he just throws his entire body on the ground.

Slowly, gracefully, he shows his respect.

"Would it be possible to, please, accept Myself as another subordinate under Orsted-sama."

" "

"I want to make our enemy pay!"

I think Orsted cast a glance in my direction.

His vision should have been blocked but...

But, does he want my opinion?

Well, am I even qualified to give an opinion?

"Because of Zanoba's addition, the Magic Armor was able to progress.

Also, just now, that idea seemed pretty good.

In this last job, without him, I would have faced much harsher challenges."

"I understand."

Orsted did not bother listening to the end.

He nodded, stood up, and looked down at Zanoba.

Then he declared,

"In that case, then you shall be attached under Rudeus, look to him for instructions. If you say you can gather allies, then show me what you can do."

"...Y-yes sir!"

Orsted is still wearing the helmet.

Zanoba remains fallen in the prone position.

Like that, Zanoba became my co-worker under Orsted.

Part 3

Pax died.

The Shirone Republic - it won't be born.

Orsted's plans have also significantly been thrown out of order.

It's a large loss.

It is the result of my inability to move well.

Instead, Zanoba has applied for a position as my companion.

The end results of this, we won't know yet.

If it's him, then at least we should be able to make improvements to the Magic Armor but...

Still, will I be able to turn my existence into something profitable for Orsted?

I was told that I had made considerable accomplishments until now, but I feel as if it has been canceled out by this job.

Alternatively, it could have become a net loss.

I hope that my work in the future will allow me to become more than just a detriment.

No, I must become more.

In exchange for all Orsted has done to protect me from Hitogami, I don't know what I can do.

Orsted may be able to just move freely into his next loop, but this is the only time for me.

It was a miracle that I was able to start my life over once already.

Miracles do not occur twice.

In this life, I must live more fully.

For example, if I lived the life of Rudeus Greyrat over and over.

If the current me continues to drag Orsted down, then I'll become a burden.

Far from useless, my existence itself might be problematic.

There is the possibility that I would be unceremoniously cut down, forget being saved.

I must do my best here, there won't be a next time.

If I'm detrimental to Orsted, the me in the next loop will be fooled by Hitogami in the same way, warned by the future me, and then... killed by Orsted after picking a fight.

Alternatively, I might be killed at an earlier stage:

during my childhood in Buena village, or during the time I was Eris's tutor.

He could also target me on the return journey to Asura.

It seems like what will happen depends on the circumstances from here on out...

Orsted has been kind to me.

He should have many reasons, but a large part of it should be cold calculation.

His kindness could just be a means to scope me out for a subsequent loop; I don't know how I'd feel about that.

That is a possibility, I must not forget it.

Still, I was spoiled up until now.

Somewhere in my heart I believed, that by becoming a follower of Orsted, that he would somehow get aid to me when I really needed it, somehow.

I was thinking like that.

I must not be such a child in relation to Orsted.

Let's take that to heart once again.

Chapter 13

It is Okay to Rejoice

Part 1

Now, the return report.

Eris also might have been naive concerning childbirth.

That is to say, she also has times when she goes into an emotional slump.

Zanoba and I moved towards my home.

Julie needs to be handed back over.

I could keep her at my home for a while, but Julie and Zanoba will be happy to be reunited.

By the way, Ginger has been busy trying to find Zanoba a place to sleep.

The dormitory of the university should be usable, but...

After giving notice of withdrawal, can he really return to school?

Graduation was only a few months away; what a waste.

I wonder if Jinas could do something if we asked him.

That fellow is reliable so he should be able to study at the university under a magic guild after graduation.

"Anyway, Zanoba, in the future, come to me if you need anything."

"It is I who should say that to you."

Just having Zanoba around in the foreseeable future, for my sake, I'm happy.

Development on the Magic Armor can continue and I will not need to give up on the doll sales project.

As for the matter with Zanoba being out of a home, I may lend him the money if he wishes.

Borrowing and loaning money can be a source of trouble, but I wouldn't regret even just giving it to him.

While I was lost in thought, we arrived at my house in no time.

With the treant entwined around the gatepost and the emerald green roof, it's a house overflowing with a natural LOHAS atmosphere.

As we approached the front gate, Beat opened it for me as usual.

"Well, I hope Julie hasn't been a bother to Shishou's family."

"Julie is fine. Her and Aisha are close friends..."

Whoosh!

The moment I enter the grounds I hear a particular sound made by the wind.

I immediately recognize that sound.

After all, it's a sound I've heard millions of times.

It's the sound of practice swings.

Has Norn returned to the house?

Whoosh!

No, anyway, that's a pretty good sound for Norn.

Although I haven't practiced the sword with her recently, when I was teaching her, it was a sound like whuhmp and wobble.

Now the sound is 'whoosh'.

It's the sound of a sword swinging straight.

Even I may not easily make such a good sound.

It's a sound like Eris --.

And, when I viewed the source of the sound, I could not believe my eyes.

There was a woman waving that stone practice sword I had made a long time ago.

The woman's hair was bright red, as if someone had thrown primary color paint onto it.

She was easily swinging that terribly heavy stone sword with one hand.
That woman who was expecting.
Eris.

"Oh, Rudeus, welcome back. You are late."
"Wa-wa-wa-wait! Eris! What are you doing!?"

I hastily ran up to her.
No good.
She's doing this despite being so close to her due date.
She's waving that awful heavy thing around like it's so light.
That's going to put a lot of stress on your stomach...
Her stomach.

"Wuh?"

Eris's stomach is slim.
She's slender.
Where's my Baby?

"Wuh?"

I try to touch it.
Oh, wow, it's a six pack.
And it's tight.
This is not the belly of any pregnant woman I have ever seen.

"Eh?"

What is this?
Perhaps the muscles of Eris's brawny six pack, perhaps they have permanently compressed
our baby into a tiny package...
What the hell.
No, I shouldn't panic yet.

Maybe it's just been pushed downward into her.

"Or maybe here?"

"What are you doing!?"

I was hit hard when I moved to grab her butt.

I look up at her from the ground.

With her feet spread apart shoulder length, her arms crossed, and her chin stuck out, Eris looked down at me.

She just bluntly said to me,

"I gave birth!"

"To what?"

I answered on reflex.

Even though there is only one correct answer.

"A child!"

"Who did?"

"Obviously I did!"

Eris.

Our child.

She gave birth.

" "

I sat up in the seiza position.

"Ah, then... it came, tell me about it, when...."

"It came ten days ago! It happened late in the night, but I somehow managed."

Ten days ago.

What was I doing?

Certainly, I would have been in Shirone.
In the Inn perhaps, that day with Roxy...

No, it doesn't matter.
In other words, it was that?

"I didn't.... make it back in time for the delivery... ?"
"Well, you ought to have come home a little earlier, it's a damn shame!"

Eris said that with a smirk.
Yeah, it was a voice that seemed to say "I can do it on my own."

What should I do?
I wonder if I should show a broad grin.
Though I don't really have that much of a reason to feel guilty.
Originally, we had considered such a possibility.
However, I am filled with regret.

"Hey, why... aren't you happy?"

As if confused, Eris frowned.
There is no reason to not be happy.

"Uuh, I'm happy, but also, it's a complicated feeling..."
"Ah! That's right, naturally it's a boy! He's named Arus, after the great hero of humanity."

But, I wonder if it is okay to be happy.
I failed Orsted's job.
Zanoba's brother Pax died.
There is some hope remaining, but I still failed.
In this situation, if I receive such happy news, then is it fine to be pleased?

"Master~!"

While I was lost in thought, the front entrance swung open.

A small orange haired figure came flying out of the front door.

That person ran straight past me to the shadowy figure at my rear.

She ran right for Zanoba.

While trying to leap towards Zanoba, she stumbled, and it became a scene where she was embracing his thighs.

"Ah, Julie, my disciple! I am back!"

Zanoba picked Julie up with both hands, and lifted her up so their eyes met.

Julie, tears pouring from her eyes, squeezed Zanoba's sleeve.

"Julie has been looking forward to your return Master!"

"Yes."

It's a deeply moving reunion.

She seems to have not been bullied by my family, it's obvious from such a moving scene.

A moment later, Julie said something jaw dropping.

"Julie, about master, adores him!"

"Ah, so that was the case. I hadn't noticed..."

"Again, please don't leave me again. Please let me be by your side when you die!"

She began to cry out her grief.

From the crying you can see that behind the scenes of this incident, Julie was incredibly worried about Zanoba.

Zanoba made a face like he was taken back and, before long, smiled softly.

"... Yes, be at peace. After this we will remain together."

"Mastaaaaaaaaaaaa~r"

When Julie began to cry, Zanoba gently pulled her head into his shoulder.

Zanoba seemed kind of delighted.

In the end,
Pax certainly died, the job was a failure, and we lost to Hitogami.
However we all came back alive.
Neither Zanoba, Roxy, Ginger, or I died.
We didn't lose a single person.

Let's celebrate.
I'll say it happily.

"Eris!"

I wasn't going to fight against the feelings that had suddenly started bubbling up inside of me.

I embraced Eris, and then kissed her.

Even though she was surprised, Eris responded well.

She returned the embrace, and I was kissed back.

Then I rubbed her ass and stroked her back, by the time I got to her shoulder, she was kissing me deeply.

When I moved my hand down and rubbed her chest I was allowed to kiss the ground after being hit.

"That was too much!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Whoa!"

I immediately got up and put Eris in a princess carry.

It was the only option.

I need to go see the face of my child.

"Hey, my boy, where is he?"

"In the house!"

Eris was unusually obedient and wrapped her arm around my neck.

Then, like that, we went toward the house.

"Yes.... Shishou!"

"What is it Zanoba!?"

"This is it for me today! In the future, I'll come and thank Roxy-dono!"

"Yeah!"

With that exchange, Zanoba left.

He likely doesn't want to intrude on our family's affair.

I also dash into the house.

Through the front door I entered the living room.

There, two girls there sitting on the couch, holding a baby.

"Look look, Norn-ane, he smiled, just now he smiled!"

"Aisha, Aisha, let me hold him too."

"Here, gently support his head and neck."

"I know that already, I've already helped Lucy and Lara... Ah, this child is groping my breasts, could he be hungry?"

"Here you go. That's just because he's our brother's child, right?"

"A baby won't do that kind of thing!"

Two 14 year old girls, holding my son; the youthful energy is overflowing.

My sisters, and my son.

Oh, it sound like I'm saying some indecent thing.

"... Eris, I'm going to set you down."

"Gotcha."

After I put Eris back down on the floor, the sisters notice me.

They look up at me, two people with smiling faces.

"Oh, nii-san, welcome back."

"Onii-chan, welcome home."

They are smiling.

Both of my sisters are here smiling.

Seeing that, suddenly, the face of Pax appeared in my mind.

I remember the self mocking smile of a man who had given up.

"I heard from Roxy-ane that it was a bad time."

"Now see here, Norn-ane."

"Oh, yes... that's right, Brother. This is Arus-kun, your son."

Norn handed me the baby.

This is Arus.

His hair is red. His eyes also look just like Eris's.

It's unreal.

I wonder if that's because I wasn't here when he was born.

An uneasy feeling welled up in me.

The baby watched me, and moving his tiny hand reached out and touched my chest.

He gently poked me, pat-pat, as if he was looking for something soft.

However, my chest is tight.

"Aaya~! Agyia~!"

He begins to cry immediately.

All of my anxiety was swept away at the same time, relief spread out from my heart.

There is no doubt.

This is my boy, Paul's grandson.

"Huh? Arus, this is your papa, okay? It is not a stranger, okay?"

"Ni-Nii-chan are you alright?"

Aisha and Norn cast anxious looks my way.

Those two people were holding my child and saying 'cute'.

They held him with a smile.

They love him.

Surely I love these two as part of my family.

Thinking about Pax.

He was killed.

Zanoba has no children, but Zanoba did have siblings.

His younger brother's children, his older brother's children.

They were massacred...

He wasn't able to love them.

He wasn't able to be loved by them.

They never mutually loved.

Ah.

Zanoba, he meant this.

I wonder if he wanted this kind of relationship with Pax.

" !"

The moment I realized it, tears came flowing out.

"Hold on! Why are you crying!?"

"Yeah, somehow my tears just fell."

"It can't be helped, I have an idea. You should stop crying if I embrace you..."

"Stop that..."

My baby's head bobbed around, I took him and sat down between Norn and Aisha.

For a while my baby and I were crying between those two.

Until that moment, why didn't I have any recognition for Pax?

I wonder why I didn't realize the feelings Zanoba had for Pax at an earlier stage?

If it's me, I should have been able to understand Pax's feelings.

Hearing my cries, footsteps sounded from upstairs.

Lucy and Sylphy appeared in the living room, and then after a brief moment, Roxy, holding Lara, followed them down.

Then from the kitchen, Zenith and Lilia came.

Sylphy should have heard from Roxy what had happened.

Looking at me blubbering, she just stroked my head without saying anything.

Lucy trying to imitate it, climbed on top of my knee, and gave me a pat.

"Rudeus is always such a crybaby..."

Finally, Eris patted my head.

Everyone is so kind.

"Aisha... Norn..."

Crying I called out to my two little sisters.

"I'll help you anytime you need... If you are in trouble, don't hesitate to rely on me... You might think I'm unreliable, but no matter what, I'll do everything in my power..."

Those two looked at one another.

Rather than helping them, maybe my crying face is troubling them instead.

I don't know.

Maybe they won't be able to rely on me in an emergency.

"Yeah, I know."

"Yes, I understand."

But, those two nodded.

That's good.

Everything is fine.

"Gusu~tsu."

While sniffing I look up at Roxy and Lara.

In her arms Lara is making her standard impudent face.

Certainly, this time, my life wasn't in danger.

However, without Roxy, it might have been critical.

Even though I have strengthened my determination, I am still weak.

If she had not been by my side, I may have folded at some point.

Once again, Roxy is dependable.

And then I wouldn't have even taken Roxy with us if it had not been for Lara.

Roxy and Lara.

This time, there's no way I can thank the both of them enough.

"Roxy, ...thank you for your hard work."

"Rudy too, thanks for your effort."

Anyway, it's over.

This time, it was a hard one.

I doubted things unnecessarily, to the point that I'm mentally worn out.

All I did was increase my stress, I couldn't manage Orsted's task.

I let Pax die.

It was a nightmare.

But now, it's all over.

There will be other things to do from tomorrow on.

Before waiting on the next incident, there are things that need to be discussed.

"Everyone, please pay attention to what I'm about to say."

That day, for the family, I explained about Hitogami.

Not only Hitogami, but also about Orsted.

Until now, it was the two of us fighting.

I told them that Lara might be the savior, why I cooperate with Orsted, and the other details.

Then when I was finished I asked for everyone's cooperation.

From now on, Orsted and my forces would need to increase.

The entire family nodded.

Sylphy and Eris, not to mention Roxy.

Even though Norn and Aisha seemed puzzled, they as well.

Lucy, without firmly understanding, made a serious face and also nodded.

It was refreshing.

Now the only secret I'm still holding onto is that I am reincarnated from another world.
I've returned to the start.

Part 2

Let's organize the information.

First up, how to defeat Hitogami.

To reach Hitogami, five treasures handed down through the Dragon Tribe are necessary. These five treasures were manufactured by the Dragon Tribe in ancient times. Respectively, each of the Five Dragon Generals holds a treasure, and the Dragon God possesses the secret skill necessary to open the world's door.

The me from the future realized that one of the treasures could no longer be acquired and fell into despair.

Perhaps that treasure was the one held by Laplace.

If I think about the words Orsted used, then he must be killed.

Then I should assume that the treasures can only be obtained by sacrificing the lives of the Five Dragon Generals.

Mad Chaos Dragon is already dead.

Probably Orsted's doing.

His treasure has been recovered.

Of the Five Dragon Generals, only four remain:

[Holy Dragon Emperor] Szilárd

[Dark Dragon King] Maxwell

[Armored Dragon King] Perugius

[Demon Dragon King] Laplace

Maxwell and Szilárd might already be dead.

Orsted has not said anything about them to me.

Still, that is killing your allies and harvesting them; it's something I need to think about, or perhaps just accept with a guilty conscience.

It doesn't seem like he's on bad terms with Perugius, after all...

Anyway.

In order to get the five treasures, the resurrection of Laplace is essential.

Laplace must be resurrected through reincarnation.

He'll be born as a baby.

Orsted specifically said that he had attempted to kill Laplace effortlessly as a baby.

However, that was a failure.

The resurrection takes place in an unknown location, from there Laplace gathers followers to wage war on humanity.

That way Laplace has to be killed during the war in order to get the treasure.

Even though Orsted can do it, it's tiring.

That becomes a major detriment in the fight against Hitogami thereafter.

Therefore, the current loop is a failure.

That's what Orsted said.

However, I did not feel resignation from him.

It felt like he was extremely disappointed, but I would not say he has given up.

If I think about it, it seems like this situation is still within Orsted's prediction.

For example, Ariel's affair.

Orsted had said that 100 years from now, Asura will fall into a crisis.

If Ariel became king, it would be possible to overcome.

Afterward, certain talented people would be born in Asura, is what he had said.

That this crisis is the war with the reborn Laplace is likely.

The Kingdom of Asura is the world's largest nation.

If it can resist for a long time, then Laplace's forces will wear down.

It will also aid in limiting Orsted's magic consumption.

Or perhaps, from the time Orsted became aware of my existence, he may have considered the possibility that Laplace won't come to be born in the same place as usual.

My presence may have been sufficient to disturb that relationship flag.

Why does Hitogami prevent it?

That question comes to mind, but I squash it instantly.

Thinking about it, although Hitogami cannot see the presence of Orsted, he regards the Dragon God as hostile.

For a long time, Laplace was an existence that waved the anti-Hitogami banner.

If Orsted works towards Laplace's revival, then he is up to something.

If Hitogami notices some pattern during the hundreds of years at the start of Orsted's loop, and decides he wants to obstruct that and interfere with him, then it's something I can understand.

The Dragon God's aims will only become harm for Hitogami.

In any case, this means that we'll be slightly diverging from the history which Orsted knows from here on.

This is the end of traveling the world on Orsted's orders setting flags.

Since the plan has been knocked out of order, such things are no longer important.

Laplace is reborn.

War occurs.

If Laplace isn't defeated, we can't reach Hitogami.

Hitogami can't be defeated by an Orsted who has been worn down.

So it becomes Zanoba's proposal.

I can collect companions.

Separate from Orsted, to enhance our strength, I'll gather allies while moving freely.

This is all in preparation for the war which will take place in 80 to 100 years.

I will organize the Anti-Hitogami faction, gathering men to defeat Laplace and support Orsted.

I'll create Orsted's armed forces.

Probably, I'll die before the battle takes place.

But Orsted will overthrow Hitogami for sure if I bequeath him an organization of companions.

With my life, I'll guide the future.

Translator's Notes and References

1. No clue: 一つ戻して、俺を殺す、か。
麻雀では相手にアガラせないために、自分の手を崩して降りる事もある。
それと一緒に.....。
2. Unsure: ともあれ、シルフィ以下、ゼニス以外の全員が揃っている。
3. Actually, giving tigers wings.
4. Aka Arrogant Water Dragon King, aka Charlene, aka the staff Eris gave him on his 10th birthday. ((I've switched the names around, since Aqua Hartia is the spoken name and Arrogant Water Dragon King is more of an image or implied meaning.))
5. Engetsu Sappou (Crescent Moon Killing Technique) is the special move of the MC of Nemuri Kyoushirou, an old novel series. He spins his sword around and it makes people dizzy or something.
6. The rankings were given in chapter 43, without providing the actual character names. The Sword God was sixth, and the Water God did not make the list.
7. According to chapter 151, this would make him the great grandson of the Demon Lord Atofe (Badigadi's sister) and Kalman I, the original North God. Not sure if that explains why he has a skull for a face, though.
8. unsure: リーリヤには発破を掛けられた。
9. Unsure: まだ若いのだから、と思う所はあるが口にはせず、頭を下げておく。
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eskimo_kissing
11. Unsure: 最後に、番犬その2に留守を頼み。
12. Panties
13. Unsure:
「あ、そうだ。旅先で二人目を仕込んでもらうのもいいですわね。今ちょうどお乳も出る頃でしょう？ 普段と違う体に普段と違うプレイ.....燃えますわよ？」

14. Unsure:

でも、もしザノバが死んでも、自暴自棄にはならないようにと戒めておこう。

15. In respectable tone, 兄上

16. This is a last name, like Zanoba Shirone, KDK would have Zanoba Kingdragon.

17. Unsure: 戦えば勝つけど、許してやろうっていう、上から目線の笑みだ。

18. Unsure,いや、内面の話だろうけど。

19. Katakana is Benedikuto. I guess it didn't seem like a male-gendered name to the author.

20. Unsure: パックスは神託とかをもらって動いてたんじゃないのだろうか。

21. 余: Archaic, dignified, elevated form of "I"

22. Unsure:

まあ、恐らく『国を守る』という意志と、王であるパックスを守るという行動が、よく似てるだからだろう。 --Changed it to something I think is right. I could be wrong, though.

23. Doesn't specify family, but I'm assuming that's what the author is referring to. He might mean chaos in the town, though.

24. 完全武装 : Completely Equipped?

25. I think はぺこり is literally kowtow, but I can't think of a way to phrase it right in English.

26. Some kind of expression, such as out of the frying pan into the fire.

27. He made a face like 'gununu', I don't know how to describe it but if you enter ぐぬぬ into Google you will see it.

28. ... with a pori pori sound. I have no idea what to do with some of these sound effects.

29. lit: within the next 30 years

30. Otomi? Castle Town?

31. TLC

32. I don't think this implies that Zanoba is bringing his dolls to war, but it would be funny if it did.

33. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunomata_Castle
34. What kind of name is Bability - I'm leaving the y as an i.
35. Podium is literally a balcony made for royalty - I have no idea what to call that in English. ((I shuffled the sentence around a bit. It's translated as "Balcony of Appearances" sometimes, but for western royalty it would probably be more natural to refer to the act itself as "making a balcony appearance".))
36. I'm tired of dogai face.
37. lit: drill
38. Student is probably a better translation but he IS a disciple of the Roxy faith so...
39. Eris
40. TL: this area is a battlefield
41. TLC
42. About 10 m².
43. TLC
なんだかんだ言って、茶飲み友達がいなくならなくて、ほっとしているのだろう。

