
Mushoku Tensei

– Isekai Ittara Honki Dasu –

– Volume 21 –

Young Man Period

~ Cliff Chapter ~

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Chapter 1

Cliff's Return Home

Part 1

We arrived at the capital of the Holy Kingdom of Milis.

I've finally come back to this city after such a long time.

Although I visited Milis when I installed the teleportation circle, I didn't visit the capital. So, this is only the second time in my life.

Even now I remember the scene I saw when I was approaching the city from the north. The river flowing from the Blue Dragon Mountain into the lake, the pure white palace floating in its center, the golden cathedral along the riverside, and the silver Adventurers' Guild.

The seven towers encircling the city, surrounded by a vast meadow.

... Ah.

"Dignity and harmony, It exemplifies the two; making it the most beautiful city in the world."

I think that was it.

Even though it was so long ago, I still remember that line.

How nostalgic, that book.

Ah yes, [Walking the World] by Adventurer Bloody Count.

It's an amazing name, I wonder what kind of person would have that kind of name.

While traveling, I never heard of an adventurer by that name.

He might be from a considerably long time ago.

I wonder why Paul had such a book.

Well it's fine.

Milishion is beautiful from the south as well.

You can't see anything unnecessary thanks to the high towers and walls.

Only a pure silver-like palace glistening in the light.

The beauty of that palace stands out, the walls conceal everything else.

Simplicity is best.

"Yeah, this city is the most beautiful in the world."

Cliff said with a sigh.

He seems to have overheard.

"But surely its contents are the dirtiest in the world."

In Cliff's eyes, only the white palace had been reflected.

Now, that beautiful palace might be intimidating.

From now on, this city is a battlefield. Thinking so would only be natural.

Actually, I think Asura kingdom is dirtier.

Ariel, and the other nobles, are pretty sleazy.

In Asura Kingdom, you could say, the dirty parts were on the outside.

I'm not trying to sugarcoat the Holy Kingdom of Milis.

In certain aspects, surely Milis is dirty as well.

"...Cliff-senpai."

"Still, I'm no longer a senpai?"

"Cliff... If something happens, please tell me."

This time, I'm in a casual position.

Even so, I want to help Cliff.

But it's only at the level of going to buy juice at a convenience store, which is all right.^[1]

"Well then, for the time being... let's take a carriage to my family's estate."

"Ussu, by the future Archbishop's command."

On this day, Cliff returned to Milishion.

After about 10 years.

Part 2

There are four entrances to Milishion.

Last time, we entered from the Adventurer's District.

That's because when an outsider uses any other entrance it becomes a troublesome thing.

Anyway, as we went around the wall, I remembered that lively entrance.

It's the same this time.

However, because Cliff is here, there's no need to wait at the entrance.

The entrance to the Adventurers' District on the south side was the closest.

Though in truth, it matters little when we're this close.^[2]

Rather than passing through the center of town, it might be faster to avoid the traffic by following a side street. Cliff should want to hurry.^[3]

However, Cliff spoke.

"I want to see the town again for the first time after such a long time."

Ahh.

After all, being away for so long, it's his first time back in 10 years.

Though he'll likely be here for many years to come, today is a special day.

The road home, remembering it from the old days, is soaked in nostalgia.

There won't be a lot of opportunities, now's his chance.

"Alright."

So, at Cliff's request, we rode in the front of the carriage.

"I've missed this..."

Cliff said that to himself as we passed under the gate, and looked back out at Milis.

Cliff was born in the Religious District, I've heard that he rarely visited the Adventurers' District.

Yet, looking out from the gate at the Adventurers' District, he smiled.

Hmm, I wonder what memories he'd have here.

When I last came here, I only stayed for around a week.

The only memory I have here is Paul.

If I remember it too deeply, tears start to come out, it's an unforgettable memory.

So, looking around, I can't help but think of the future.

From here on, I'll be working on opening a mercenary branch-office in this town.

Around us, adventurers are strolling about.

Compared to Asura Kingdom there are a lot of Beast Race and Elves.

Adventurers' ranks vary, but you can guess from their clothes.

15-16 year old boys and girls wearing second-hand equipment are obviously fledglings.

Wearing new equipment, beginners are around 18 years old.

Adventurers in their 20s wearing a mix of new and worn-out equipment are mid-level.

Although their equipment can look worn out at first glance, veterans can be seen wearing various magic items, which are some of the highest-grade gear.

Though their professions vary, in the capital of Milis' religious community, there are many magicians who specialize in healing but few in offense.

In the Magic City Sharia, you'd see veteran warriors and swordsmen, and lots of fledgling magicians.

The dream of being an adventurer sprouts for magicians at the Magic University, and veterans come to scout them.

There were mostly humans and Beast Race.

Well regarding the Beast Race, they may have just followed Rinia and Pursena then ended up staying.

In Asura's capital Ars, you would only see fledglings.

Because there's so much schooling, there's a bit of a professional bias.

Also, there were only humans.

Other races, and most experienced or veteran adventurers, don't linger in the capital.

There are probably so many different races and skilled adventurers in Milis because the Great Forest is so close.

The Beast, Elf, and Hobbit races come from the Great Forest, and Dwarves from the south. After piling up experience in central Milis, adventurers head north to fight stronger demons in the Great Forest.

But, because there's no Adventurers' Guild in the Great Forest, they use Milishion as a base.

Some adventurers familiar with Milis will spend the year traveling between Milishion and Saint Port.

As a result, in this city, which headquarters the Adventurers' Guild, adventurers are treated without bias.

Well, in this situation, I wonder how it would be best to launch the mercenary branch. In Asura Kingdom, I had Ariel's connections, so things advanced easily.

There were disenfranchised swordsmen, merchants, and nobles who all welcomed the work in Asura.

Swordsmen who were raised in dojos without the dream of becoming an adventurer, or the connections to become a tutor.

Merchants' sons, who studied all their lives to be merchants, only to have the family shop taken over by the eldest son and forced into independence.

And, although they were all educated, there were also the third and fourth sons of the lower nobility who wouldn't receive any inheritance and couldn't be married off.

We attracted talent, and presto, we gained influence in every district, and started taking on the work that the country's soldiers couldn't.

Ultimately, Ariel introduced the fifth son of a senior aristocrat to become the branch chief.

Iya, I had a long interview with that guy before I acknowledged him, but I was happy with his results.

While wearing sunglasses Aisha asked something like, [You, for those two years after you left home, what were you doing?]

He replied [I hid my identity and interacted with the commoners. By doing so, and at the same time learning the differences in culture, I was able to learn the importance of knowing each fellow worker well.]

His reply was articulate and thoughtful, [Oh, this guy] is what I thought.

In fact, he was good at bringing people together.

He was familiar with the differences between the social classes, so when disputes occurred, he was a guy who could easily understand and resolve it.

He didn't have charisma, but he wasn't dislikable.

Well that settled it.

He's better suited to this than me.

Well, that's just an aside.

Now, I want to launch a good mercenary branch in this country.

I need human resources and a branch manager.

And directionality for the mercenaries.

Aisha seems to have written something like a memo, but we can only start making decisions after seeing what we have to work with.

Therefore she's looking around restlessly like me.

But, it's still too premature to decide everything now.

Though there are a lot of adventurers in the adventurers' district, there's also the religious district, the shopping district, and the residential district.

Not just adventurers, we should try to include the other locals as well.

After seeing the religious district and the residential district we should be able to draft a plan.

"I didn't notice last time... but there are a lot of different races here."

"Because the Great Forest is nearby."

I keep looking around while I answer.

Really, there are a lot of races.

A group of dwarves that must be around 10 years old, a group of elves with thin limbs that look almost like dead trees.

There are also a lot of different beast races. Dog, cat, rabbit, deer, rat, tiger, wolf, sheep, bear...

Incidentally I thought, when looking at livestock like pigs and cattle, do these guys think nothing of it?...

No, even if I see a monkey kept at a zoo, I don't particularly feel a sense of camaraderie. They're different creatures.

"Oh, oh...!"

"Ah, it's dangerous if you stand...!"

Looking back, I suddenly saw Zenith standing up on the horse-drawn carriage.

Aisha panicked and tried to sit Zenith back down in a hurry while she staggered and pointed at something from the shaking carriage.

Beyond her finger, it's a monkey.

Iya that's rude.

It's a man with a face like a monkey.

That reminds me, there isn't a monkey-like tribe in the beast race.

Well, I wonder if monkeys are rare in this world.

Zenith is happily pointing at him.

Nuu, that monkey, I've seen him somewhere before.

That said, it's not someone from the beast race...

"... Oh."

"Ooh!? Hey Zenith-senpai! What are you doing in a place like this!"

It's a demon race (Gisu).

Part 3

"Geez, I never expected to see you in a place like this."

Gisu spotted us and immediately jumped onto the carriage.

There was no hesitation at all.

But I'm not about to cast an acquaintance aside.^[4]

"What amazing luck! How should I put it, this is once in a lifetime luck!"

Gisu seems exceptionally happy to meet us.

He's got a full-face smile.

Seeing that puts me in a good mood too.

"Half the work, half the house."^[5]

"Yeah yeah, by the way, I haven't seen any tears of joy--"

Gisu wasn't listening, and began telling us about what happened after we parted in Sharia.

Gisu, Talhand, Vera, and Shera arrived on schedule in Asura Kingdom.

There, they sold the magic stones for a fortune.

Vera and Shera retired from being adventurers with their share.

They returned to their hometown.

Sometime after, because they had so much money, Gisu thought it would be smart to start doing some kind of business.

Well, about Gisu, how should I put it, he's addicted to gambling.

I don't know much about it, but in Asura Kingdom there's a so-called gambling town.

Gisu can normally handle himself gambling, but with that much money he couldn't help but lose control.

After just a few months Gisu had lost everything and then some.

"Well, everything fell apart, all I had left were the clothes on my person, so I put that life behind me and ended up here."

Surely, if you'd kept going like that, you would have ended up at the bottom of the ocean with concrete boots.

Talhand prevented that.

As he was about to leave on his next adventure, he stopped by to greet Gisu, and saw him in that state.

Although Talhand was disgusted, he sold off a pair of gauntlets he had made to help Gisu out.

Those gauntlets were made with the magic absorbing stone, apparently Talhand spent his entire fortune on development costs.

Thanks to Gisu two people were broke.

Those two couldn't afford Asura Kingdom's high prices, so they journeyed south.

If it were me, I'd still help a friend in a rough spot, but to that extent and then starting a journey together, I wonder if it's because they've known each other for so long that this kind of thing is just a mutual understanding.

Talhand helped Gisu, so Gisu helped Talhand.

Well, that's friendship.

Just like that, those two left behind Shirone with its bloody civil war, ignored the Kingdom of the Dragon King rumored to be complicit, and returned to Milis.^[6]

They came back to their old home.

Afterwards, Talhand returned to his hometown, and Gisu became a party of one.

"That bastard, doing something like going back to his hometown, what's with that."

Gisu was complaining, but somehow I understood.

After such a long journey, it's normal to start missing your family and want to meet them. He's homesick.

It's Nanahoshi's chronic disease.

"Gisu didn't want to go home?"

"Me? That's stupid. There's nothing interesting at all about returning to such a remote place."

Is that so.

I always miss my home.

Just touching Sylphy's chest restores my strength, even Roxy's chest will rise to the occasion, and it feels like hours fly by with Eris. All under one roof.

"That bastard, even though there were so many unpleasant memories."

"Well then, maybe he wanted to go fix some of those unpleasant memories."

No matter what happened, if time passes, things change.

Even if something is unforgivable as a teenager, in the 20s it becomes something understandable, and in the 50s it doesn't even matter anymore.

Talhand too, in his heart, might want to reconsider things.

"Maa, Talhand aside, I'm resuming my career as an adventurer here."

After Gisu separated with Talhand he seems to have resumed adventuring.

However, he doesn't seem to be able to find any work.

Well he's a demon race and has no combat ability.

"So what is Senpai doing here?"

"With mother in such a state, I received a summons from her parents' house. I took the opportunity to travel here with a friend, and make an appearance."

"Huh... Zenith's parents' place..."

Gisu saw Zenith's sorry state.

Although Zenith normally has a blank look, she seems to be in a good mood.

I wonder if it's because of Gisu.

"Well, I've heard about Zenith's home somehow, too... that seems, pleasant...?"

"... What have you heard?"

"I don't know the details, but they say it's a stubborn house."

Gisu shrugged.

Information like that, I heard it before coming.

But, there's no choice but to go.

"We're almost at the district's boundary. It's too bad, but I should get off here. If a demon race enters the religious district it'll cause trouble."

At Gisu's word, I stopped the carriage.

Gisu immediately jumped down.

"Well, it was short, but we should meet again sometime. Stay strong, Senpai!"

Gisu waved and walked into an alley...

As he was leaving, he looked back.

"Senpai! Would you listen to a request!?"

"What is it?"

"What Paul said in the labyrinth, do you remember?"

What he said in the labyrinth.

Even though a lot has happened, I still remember those words.

Probably, it's that.

"Yeah."

At that, Gisu nodded with satisfaction, and turned to leave.

A sudden meeting, and an abrupt departure.

It really was a chance reunion.

Even so, although it was by chance, it was nice to see a familiar face in such a tense atmosphere.

While thinking that, we entered the religious district.

Part 4

By the time we got to Cliff's house, the sun was already setting.

Cliff's house was more ordinary than I expected.

An ordinary single family home, it looks like it could fit a family of three or four, it's snug.

It looks just like the neighboring house.

How should I put it, in the religious district, the houses are all uniform.

Because it's the Pope's house I expected something similar to Ariel's estate, it's kind of anticlimactic.

"It's unexpectedly small."

"Housing for the clergy is provided by the religious headquarters. However, because grandfather has a room at the headquarters, this house isn't used."

Cliff explained to me, without getting angry at my rude comment.

To put it simply, it's like corporate housing.

"Since we're already here... It's late, please stay."

At Cliff's suggestion, I suddenly had a thought.

Zenith's family home, it's in the residential area.

That's right, it wouldn't take long...

Although I have a hunch they wouldn't want us visiting so late.

Visiting in travel wear, that might not be a good idea.

We could set up an appointment to visit them, but we'll be staying in the adventurers' district... so we'd have to come all the way back here.

"Well, thank you."

I decided to accept Cliff's offer.

We unloaded the luggage, stabled the horses, stored the carriage, and brought everything inside.

But, while I was dealing with the carriage, I noticed a white cloud of dust.

"Gah!"

The dust had an acrid smell, Aisha let out a cute sneeze.

"Keho... terrible... Jiisan, doesn't seem to have cleaned..."

Cliff held a cloth over his nose, swearing.

He probably didn't expect Cliff to be back yet and left the house unattended.

In any case, the house is really dusty.

"To thank you for letting us stay here, we'll help you out with the cleaning... Aisha."

"Ah, sor...ry?"

"Eh, me?"

Aisha said in disarray, and Zenith gave a reproachful look.

No, Zenith is expressionless.

However I can feel it from her eyes.

Aisha also gave me that kind of look.

Wasn't I supposed to entrust the cleaning to you?

Wasn't that it. Every time. Something like, [Leave it to me!]

We have to express our gratitude...

"Of course it's a joke? I'll help too?"

"Of course."

And so we began a night of housecleaning.

We fully opened all the windows, even with wind magic it was rough, so we finished up by sweeping.

After that, we wiped everything down.

Since nothing had been used in several years, I used hot air to clear any bugs out of the beds and blankets.

The kitchen was also considerably dirty, but Aisha somehow managed it.

Meanwhile, Cliff and I gave the living room a rough cleaning.

We finished in three times the normal speed.

The Red Comet Aisha.^[7]

Then, using the food leftover from the journey, we had a light dinner.

"Cliff-senpai. Congratulations on your return."

"It's still too early. I have to meet with Grandfather."

While toasting with cups of water, we enjoyed a meal of dried meat and soup.

As food goes, it's a little bland, but it's fine.

I was troubled over how many ingredients we had left, so I had an underlying motive to finish them.

"Rudeus, what are your plans for tomorrow?"

"For the time being, I will visit the Latreia house."

"I see, do you plan to stay there?"

"I think that will probably happen."

Even if they have a bad reputation, they're Zenith's family.

Even if we stay for awhile, it shouldn't be a problem.

For establishing the mercenary branch and assisting Cliff when the time comes, staying in the Latreia house may limit my freedom to act... but I won't know until I try.

Well, after the greetings, I could always stay somewhere else.

"So, I'll need to hire someone to do the housework..."

"If you'd like, every couple of days I could send Aisha over?"

"No, that's fine. You guys are going to be busy too, it's just something to think about."

Cliff said with a shrug.

Part 5

We slept in the guest room.

Three people in a small room. The family, sleeping shoulder to shoulder like the 川 character.

... And, Aisha's body is already that of an adult.

The bed is small, it can't fit three adults side by side.

So we left the bed to Zenith, Aisha and I slept on the floor.

We made a makeshift bed out of blankets and cushions we borrowed from Cliff.

Because there's carpet on the floor, it isn't exactly camping out.

It's time to go to sleep.

Then, I noticed Aisha looking at me.

"Ehehe, Oniichan, I wonder if Sylphy-ane would be jealous..."

"Well, during this journey, it was fine right."

"Yeah, but somehow, ehehe..."

Aisha laughed and huddled next to me.

She has a cute smile.

If it were Sylphy, I would already be past my limit.

Sylphy, too, would have...

But I don't feel that way about Aisha, and she doesn't particularly draw close to me too.

I like Aisha, but it's a familial love.

But, it's fine without physical contact.

It's a strange feeling.

She's still cute...

"I have an abrupt question, you, about what Lilia said, what do you think now?"

"Okaasan has said a lot of things?"

"To be a maid, and work for me, stuff like that."

When I asked that, Aisha had a blank look.

Then, she put her hand on her chin and had a look like she was thinking intently.

"Hmm, it's not disagreeable... but, perhaps, for Sylphy-ane, it's different. Something like this... I wonder if it's selfish..."

"No, I understand. It's different."

It was a fuzzy conversation, but something clicked.

It felt alright.

"Nfufu, well it's a given, that Oniichan is loved."

While saying that, Aisha curled next to me and pressed against my body.

Warm and soft.

A good holding pillow.

"... Someday, when you find someone you love, you can start a family of your own."

As I said that while enjoying my new pillow, Aisha suddenly sat up.

She seems to have taken my comment seriously.

"So. Have you given it any thought?"

"What kind of person would that be I wonder..."

Aisha's lover.

It's hard to imagine.

An excellent-type, or an unreliable-type.

Aisha can choose who she wants, but I don't like the idea of arranging a match.

Aisha normally hangs out with a certain crowd.

The mercenaries... there are a lot from the Beast race.

Would one of those guys fall for Aisha?

My little sister isn't a bone for some dog to chase after!

If I ask Orsted, he should be able to tell me about the type of guy that Aisha marries...

Now now, let's just forget about that.

If I heard something like she's single for the rest of her life, it would be pitiable.

Oh, that's right.

I need to confirm something before going to sleep.

"Aisha, tomorrow, when I bring Zenith to her parents' house... what do you want to do?"

"....."

Aisha inched away from my arm.

But returned.

"I will go. Okaasan, because she asked me to earnestly."

"I see..."

"Yeah."

Hearing Aisha's reassuring reply, I was also relieved.

Tomorrow we visit Zenith's house.

That's the plan, but I don't know how it will go...

Going alone to a house with such a high status, I'm a bit uneasy.

Afterwards, I'll work on installing a mercenary branch.

If I can establish a good connection with the Latreia house, things should go smoothly.

We need to adapt to the environment.

"Well, I'll be in your care."

"I understand. Leave it to me."

"Really, I appreciate it. Cleaning today too, thanks... Well, goodnight."

"Don't mention it... good night..."

While listening to Aisha's sleepy voice, I fell asleep.

Chapter 2

Latreia Residence

Part 1

Zenith's parent's house was huge.

Just as I had imagined it to be.

A large gate, two lion statues standing on both sides, a long stone-paved path leading from the gate to the entrance, a fountain in the middle of the path, and a green lawn cut in a strange form.

And inside, as if enshrined a white beautiful mansion was honorably standing.

It really feels like an aristocrat's house.

If I imagine one, this is exactly what it feels like.

Aristocratic district, the location of the residence.

Among other things, this location especially is lined up with buildings of high class noble people.

The atmosphere here bears resemblance to that of the Asura's aristocratic district.

Nevertheless, it's a huge house.

Cliff's house was a disappointment but Zenith's house was as expected.

Although, I for one also possess something like this mansion in the Asura Kingdom.

Since it was something I received from Ariel, I can't be too boastful about it.

At least I possess something like this mansion.

In a way it holds an atmosphere of integrity, but it should be identical in extravagance.

Therefore, it's nothing to be afraid of.

I don't feel nervous.

"Haa....."

Next to me, Aisha just sighed.

She is looking towards the mansion with an unpleasant face.

Right now, we are standing in front of the gate and waiting.

Me dressed up in noble-like clothes and Aisha in a maid uniform brought from our home.

And Zenith put on a noble-ish attire as well, just like me.

We were apparently entrusted to the guards stationed at the gate entrance by a person.

I was trying to show the letter, but the moment the guards took a glance at Zenith's face they immediately hurried towards the mansion.

There are no signs of them returning yet.

"Listen, Onii-chan, I'll warn you in advance, Obaa-chan is a REALLY unpleasant person."

".....How many times have I heard this now?"

I'm afraid of this advice.

However, I think I am a typical individual who in a way possesses resistance against unpleasant people.

Because I myself was a low-life during my previous lifetime.

Compared to that, most people can be pardoned.

Therefore, it should be alright.

Even if the other party is rebellious and can't be endured.

Talking about Zenith's present state of mind, we can at least grieve and mourn the circumstances together. It might be impossible to do anything more than that, even though it's plenty enough.

"Ah."

While I was thinking, several men and women were approaching from the direction of the mansion. It's not just the previous guards.

But people with the appearance of a maid and a butler are also there.

A group of 12 people are approaching this way with a fast paced movement.

The maids, lined up in two rows along the edge of the path before the gate.

The butlers standing in the front, lined up evenly from shoulder to shoulder facing towards us.

It's just like an "honorable greeting formation" often seen in a manga of a rich system.

It was also done frequently in the Asura kingdom.

When the guards opened the gate, the butlers deeply lowered their heads.

Matching their rhythm, the maids also bowed their heads.

"Zenith-sama, welcome back on your return. We were all eagerly awaiting you in our hearts and minds."

They lowered their heads towards Zenith.

But Zenith being the same as usual, with an absent-minded face, as if they didn't even enter her field of vision.

"Well then, Rudeus-sama, Oku-sama is waiting. This way."

"Yes, please take care of us."

The butler didn't mind it and bowed to me and then turned around on his feet to guide us. Not a single word towards Aisha.

I wonder if that guy treats her as a maid while wearing a form of servant uniform himself.

In that case, I should have let Aisha wear a different type of cloth.

It's my younger sister-like dress.

A frills-type dress.

Part 2

While I was considering such things, passing the long paved path, we went inside the entry hall.

As expected, the inside was overflowing with elegant furniture and refined articles. Of course, it can't be compared to the Asura Royal Palace or Perugius' castle, but I think the hobby is not bad.

"Well then, please wait here."

The location we were guided to was the so-called drawing room.

The couch was facing towards a vase put at the end of the room. And a maid standing at the edge of the room.....

In spite of waiting for a long time, Oku-sama did not appear.

Even though I was strongly hoping and waiting for the trip to finally end, but now I wonder if I have to prepare to appear in front of the public.

Anyhow, first I let Zenith sit.

After that, I let myself sit next to her.

When I suddenly looked over, Aisha was standing at the side of the chair.

"Aisha sit down already."

"Eh? But, I think it should be good if I keep standing....."

"You're my little sister, this is a place for visitors. Sit down."

".....Yes."

After I said that, Aisha sat down next to Zenith.

"....."

Now, we wait without any conversation between the three of us.

This reminds me of the time when I went to Philip's place for the interview.

At that time, Sauros abruptly came and went all the while shouting.

It's nostalgic.

It would be fine to skillfully do it just like that time but.....

It was how things were done during Sauros's time.

Certainly, it was a kind of initiation when greeting oneself.

I thought in any kind of world the courtesy should have been giving oneself's name first.

For now, let's just proceed with that.

"Oku-sama, this way please."

While I was considering things, the door opened.

The one who entered was a nervous looking old lady with blonde hair mixed with white.

And a fat middle-aged man wearing a lab coat with a beard on his face.

I don't even have to ask who is the Oku-sama.

I immediately stood up, while holding my hand in front of my chest I made a light nod.

"Nice to meet you honorable grandmother, I am Rudeus Greyrat, today---"

"....."

The old woman did not even so much as glance at me.

She bypassed me while I was still greeting her and moved to a position where she can see Zenith's face.

And then, stopping one step away, she observed Zenith's face seriously.

What a deeply moving reunion.

.....Or so I thought, while harshly breathing Claire said in a cold voice.

"Certainly this is my daughter, Andel please."

As she said that, the bearded man moved.

While passing through my side, he took action and held Zenith's hand.

And then, touched her blank face with his hand.....

"Please wait a moment, what is this all of a sudden?"

I interrupted in a state of confusion.

"Ah, I am late in introducing myself. I am Claire-sama's physician in charge, My name is Andel Berkeley."

"Thank you for this politeness, I am Rudeus Greyrat. Are you the doctor?"

"Yes, today was actually Claire-sama's diagnostic day but her daughter came at just the right time for me to take a good look at her....."

I see.

So that's how it is.

Claire-obaachan, she came hurriedly in such a short time just to see Zenith.

I get it, I get it.

"If that's how it was, mother--"

"Who taught you that sitting here is a good thing!"

Just as I was about to say that, a reprimanding voice soared at the back.

I turned around to see a quivering Aisha get off the sofa in a hurry.

"Even though you're a mere maid, while the landlady is still standing you have the nerve to keep sitting! Just who taught you such a thing!"

"P-please forgive me."

Aisha was hanging her head down while looking like she was about to cry.

No no, wait wait.

How come? Just wait a moment.

This pace is too fast. Why are you ignoring me? Hey, I'll cry.

"I told her to sit there."

The moment I said that with a strong voice, Claire slowly faced towards me.

Ah, oh no. I've said it now....

Gah, the hell with it.

"Even though she is wearing a maid uniform, she is still my little sister, she only wore those clothes because it was easier to move around in it and made her look after mother to the utmost, it would be problematic if she is treated as a maid."

"People are identified on the basis of their clothes, in our house people wearing maid uniform will be treated as a maid."

It was also those kind of house rules.

"Then, what kind of treatment will people go through wearing clothes such as mine?"

"Of course, they will be treated suitably."

"This means that people with such an attire will be ignored, is this how this house works?"

While spreading my hands apart, I look down upon my clothes. The clothes doesn't look odd.....I think.

These clothes, I wonder where I bought them from. If I remember correctly, I think it was in Sharia.....

I wonder if I should have brought the Asura kingdom ones should it have sufficed?

But, those ones are for partying.....

"No, the reason I ignored you was because.....an unknown person suddenly called me grandmother. For many years, the number of imposters have increased here. Until the authenticity is verified, I judged it would be better to not reply."

".....I see."

Well, in this big of a house, if it turns out that the only one daughter had eloped with an unknown person,

people claiming to be of the same lineage will often come out to gain favor.

Although I was greeted, I was not told about anything like proving my identity.

Even these clothes are not really enrolled as the crest of the Greyrat's.

If one thinks about it, something like that can be prepared anywhere.

There are stripes going back and forth, though that doesn't indicate anything.

"This Zenith is the real one. Aisha over there, I remember her too. Do you have any evidence to prove that you are indeed my grandson?"

Evidence, to call for more proof.

I came together with Aisha and Zenith, and even handed over the letter.

Is there any more??

"Is it necessary?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have brought my mother.....Zenith and Aisha, I also brought the letter that came from you. Is it really necessary to show any more proof?"

As I said that, Claire shook with a twitch on her eye-brows.

"Then, I cannot acknowledge you as a member of the Latreia."

"I don't mind, I am a member of the Greyrat's....the present family head, today is my first time straddling around this household. I have no intention whatsoever of being a member of the Latreia household."

The feeling to curry favor exists.

It's also for the sake of the mercenary group.

However, if the opposite side is that vigilant of it, there is no need to reveal the front.

For now, the purpose of Zenith's homecoming exists.

Whether Claire is somewhat amused or not, with her eyebrows twitching and her body quivering a little, she approaches me with a glare.

"For the actual head of the Greyrat family, you sure are surprisingly cheap-looking. After all, the Latreia are a distinguished family of earls.....while the Greyrat are only a large part of the four feudal lords of Asura. Moreover, rather than the earl himself, to introduce yourself to the Madam Earl herself while lowering your head is....."

"Indeed I have inherited the kinship of a large part of the four feudal lords of Asura but I'm not the main root of the feudal lords, in the first place it doesn't mean that I hold a rank of

nobility. Even though I am the family head, I am no more than the backbone of my family living among the general population. In addition, even if I had possessed a higher social standing, meeting my grandmother for the first time and bowing to her as a greeting is natural to consider. Right."

".....Ho."

It looked like, Claire's mood changed and she was gazing towards me with a look of despise. No, it might be my imagination.....

Anyway, it seems this person is of a high pedigree.

This is bothersome....

For the time being, I'll keep them in check.

"Apart from me being a noble, I have a personal fellowship with Her Majesty Ariel who was crowned just last year, I myself am the subordinate of 『Dragon God』 Orsted who is ranked second of the Seven Major World Powers. It would be acceptable to not make light of that."

It's okay if it's neglected, but Aisha's aforementioned matter also exists.

To the bitter end, I made it explicitly clear that this position is as close to it as a matter of fact.

Listening to my words, while closing her mouth to form a straight line, Claire rose her chin up.

As if evaluating, she observed me with a scrutinizing look.

"This here is the proof of being a Dragon God's subordinate."

I showed her the bracelet containing the crest of the Dragon God.

After Claire looked at it for a few seconds, unaware of the butler standing at my side I heard him saying something in a low voice.

While nodding the butler said. "Certainly, This is the Dragon God's--".

I don't think it's very much popular but, that butler, he seems to know about this crest.

Something like this can be forged as many times as it takes.....it would be troublesome to say something like that.

"I see.....I understand."

While saying that, Claire quickly pulled down her chin, with both hands on the side of her abdomen matching the rhythm.

And then, in a natural manner lowered her head.

"My name is Claire Latreia.

Wife of Temple knight party ・ Sword group 『Battalion chief (Large Leader)』 Count Carlyle Latreia.

Currently, I have received administration-ship of this estate.

Please humbly pardon my previous impoliteness."

Was I able to prove my social position.

Or was my attitude able to crossover some kind of hurdle.

I can't comprehend it but Claire was lowering her head and was apologizing.

Nevertheless, 『Battalion Chief』 of Temple knight party.

Zenith's younger sister, Therese was also a member of the Temple knight party, this house has probably a profound relationship with the Temple knight party.

"Well then, once again.

I am Rudeus Greyrat.

Son of Paul Greyrat and Zenith Greyrat.

Currently, I am working under 『Dragon God』 Orsted-sama.

Please don't mind about the previous matter. I as well didn't give enough forethought to my preparation. It is obviously natural that you would be so vigilant."

Part 3

While both of us lowered our heads, this matter came to a conclusion.

Phew.

With this I took a breath of rest.

Only the greetings ended up taking an extremely roundabout way, somehow it's managed now.

"Then, by all means, please take a seat."

"Yes, please excuse me."

I prompted her to take a seat on the couch.

"First of all about your long journey, thank you for your hard work. I thought it may take you several years more but I give you my gratitude on acting so quickly."

Claire made a pop noise while clapping her hands, and the door opened.

From the door, a maid pushing a cart entered.

Above the cart in plain view was a tea set.

Tea ceremony, huh.

All right, I'll show you my tea skills that I forged in the sky fortress.

Oh right, before that I'll let Aisha sit.

She is not a maid, but my little sister.

It would be troublesome if she is not treated as a guest.

In that case, if they are insistent I'll rather leave a place like this.

"Aisha, sit down already."

"Eh? But....."

"Today, you're not a maid, but you're here as my relative, sit down now."

While looking intermittently towards Claire, Aisha quickly dropped her lower body.

Claire who said nothing, only her eyebrows twitched.

For now, she seems to have allowed it.

Taking a glance at Zenith's direction.

She was still being examined by the doctor.

Things like tongue and eyes were being looked at.

Well, seeing those places, I can't expect to do anything.....

Apart from Claire too, rather than hearing about the message of memory not recovering, showing her to a doctor that she can trust should be understandable.

"Mother is.....we tried with our greatest effort to cure her but we were not able to find any methods."

".....In a far away village, the means to remove this curse might be limited."

Ah, with a 'clank' the words came.

To call my hometown village-like!

.....But you know, I perfectly anticipated that you would say something like that.

This is well within my scope of expectations.

"Certainly, Millis is advanced in healing magic as compared to Sharia but.....I was able to request help from Orsted-sama who has the knowledge of every single piece of magic and Perugius-sama who is well informed about summoning magic."

"Perugius? One of the three heroes?it's hard to believe such an abrupt story."

But it is.

I can understand not believing such a story.

But I can't lead her astray now after coming this far.

Well, I am going to live in Millishion for a few months anyway.

In the meantime, Claire will realize that curing Zenith might just be impossible.

Well, it would be problematic if she is subjected to unreasonable medical treatment.....

"By the way, how is Norn doing."

While I was thinking of talking a bit more concerning this strange topic, the topic somehow abruptly changed.

Norn?

"She is enrolled in Ranoa Magic University. Since it would have affected her studies, I left her behind."

"Is that so, I thought she was not able to score much results, is she doing firmly?"

"Yes, she is right now standing at the top of the school as the student council president."

While I exaggerated a bit, Claire seemed to have an unexpectedly surprising face.

Inside her mind, Norn must have been a no good child.

Well, if she is compared with Aisha, that will happen.

"Is that so.....when will her graduation complete?"

"It's not yet decided."

"What about marriage?"

"Any state of love affairs are still unidentified."

So to say, Claire frowned.

I wonder what I said to make her annoyed.

"Then, bring her here after graduation."

Not able to say yes or no to the reply that was a commanding tone.

Did she not take into account the distance between here and Sharia.

Even though it takes 4 years for a round trip.....

Well, in reality there is the Teleportation Magic Square, coming and going back can be made in a week's time.

"That is no problem but....."

"A satisfactory companion cannot be found in something like a back country that is Ranoa kingdom, I will choose one at my own discretion."

Eh?

What is she talking about?

Choose one at her own discretion?

"Are you going to make Norn marry someone?"

"That's right, if there are not going to be any marriage proposals from the present heads of the family, I will take it upon myself to guide her towards the non-existent path."

"No no, please wait a moment, isn't that something for Norn to decide....."

"What are you talking about? Marrying a girl of this house is the duty of the head of the family."

.....eh?

So what?

While thinking that, I look at Aisha.

She just shrugged her shoulders. With an attitude of "Isn't it so?".

Possibly, in the nobility of this Milis sacred country, it might be common sense.

Right, that's right.

In the previous world as well, the parents had the decision to choose a suitable partner for their kids.

Only I did not come nicely, it's a surprisingly common idea.

However, we don't have such a rule in our house.

Norn if you want to marry someone, Nii-san will readily accept that person, only if you bring him to a joint party with several students so that I can express his approval.

".....I will make sure to take responsibility about Norn's circumstances."

For the time being, it would be better to say this.

"Is that so, I understand.....being the head of the family you ought to be more reliable."

I was reprimanded by my superior.

It has been like this since a little while ago.

It feels like I am being looked down upon.

But, let's calm down for now.

This is well within my exceptions.

I understood that this person being unpleasant was not a joke.

In the first place our way of thinking is different, only objection and quarrel will take place side-by-side if this keeps on.

Today is our first time meeting each other.

First of all, it is necessary to start with knowing each other.

The demands come after that.

"----It seems to be over."

While I took a deep breath, Mr. Andel returned with Zenith.

Aisha immediately stood up and helped her sit down on the sofa.

"How was it?"

"The body itself is healthy, she looks much younger than her actual age."

Or so he said.

You did it, Zenith.

Even though you didn't make yourself look younger they are approving you as a young woman!

.....Or, is it the opposite?

Would it be fine to think of it as a bad thing?

Whether it is the influence of the curse....or the like.

"Is it alright if I wanted to ask some questions regarding the family?"

"Of course, you can ask anything."

"Well then----."

The contents of the question spanned many divergences.

What is her usual diet, in what amount, to which degree she exercises, and whether menstruation was taking place or not.

From questions regarding physical health,

To what degree she is able to live her everyday life, her usual behavior, and whether she has a wound in her heart.

To questions regarding mental health.

I fluently answered all the doctor-like questions.

Some things that I didn't know of, Aisha was there to answer them.

Lilia might have been able to give a detailed explanation about all this, since she is not here it can't be helped.

"I see, I understand."

After writing down the answers in a small memo, he bowed.

And then, went towards Claire and started consultation while muttering.

"How is it?"

"Let's see. I don't think there are any problems. There is always one maid looking after her in constant attendance. There aren't any illness or injury on her. Even her mind seems to be stable."

"What about children?"

"Menstruation is taking place, that being the case to give birth..... If several people are nursing her in constant attendance it is possible."

"Alright."

What is 'alright' with this.

It feels like you have yet to give me the remainder of the story.....

"It feels as if the conversation is going towards mother's second marriage."

I said that with the intention of a joke.

But, I got a cold-hearted look coming from Claire's direction instead.

A mighty terrifying look.

Without even saying anything, I can feel her enforcing intention from that glance.

".....In this holy country of Millis a woman's worth is regarded based upon her ability to give birth. If a child is born, the possibility of being ignored as a human can't exist."

I just want you to wait for a moment.

Can't be ignored.....Really?

No, calm down.

Even if it's not ignored, it's still not confirmed.

She is just reciting the general knowledge of this country.

I don't believe that there is such a thing whether a woman's worth is based upon her ability to give birth, if this is something obaa-chan has decided by herself, then she might be under the impression that this is the truth.

"Ah, that's right. You should cut your bonds with the Priest of the Pope's faction."

"Eh?"

"I am well aware of your friendship with the Priest of the Pope's faction."

Yet again an abrupt change of subject, confusion is about to be born.

I was not able to seize authority to lead the conversation, I think it's because Claire has been speaking with a strong voice for a while now.

Or, I wonder if I have failed in initiating my response.

It's the former.

"Certainly, I get along well with Cliff... but why is it necessary to cut my ties with him?"

"Currently, the Latreia have started to move as the Cardinal's faction, any person working under the Pope's faction is not allowed to be associated with."

The Cardinal's faction, it might be about the demon race's ostracism.

I think the Cardinal is at the top right now.

"Not particularly... I don't have any intention of supporting the Pope's faction by myself, won't that suffice?"

"No, it can't be permitted, if you want to stay at this house you have to abide by the rules of this house."

Hmm.

Hmm.

Well, certainly, since Cliff's position as a Pope is more or less guaranteed, I'll end up getting completely backed by the pope's faction.

It's not like I don't understand such a strategy, if you comprehend it as such.

It's not that kind of a feeling.....

"Cliff has looked after me in school. He has also aided in Norn's growth.....shouldn't it be alright to at least associate with him as a friend?"

"It can't be done, if you want to associate with the Priest of the Pope's faction no matter what, you will not be permitted to stay at this house---"

It's hopeless.

Alright, I understand.

Then, it's fine.

For today, let's stay at a different place.

Alright, it's fine. I'm not angry. I'm not angry at all.

I'm perfectly calm. I'm the calm and clever Rudeus.

There is no reason to panic. I was aware that Claire was this kind of woman. I was prepared for this.

My relationship with a friend would become an interference was outside my scope of assumption but.....we were incompatible like oil and water.

At least without quarreling I'll give my greetings and leave this house----.

"----Leave Zenith here, and quickly depart."

My thoughts suspended.

"Just in case, from now on you will be permitted to straddle around the threshold of this house, apart from being a person of another house to the bitter end----"

"Leave this place? What do you mean by that?"

The words that came from me was a reply to the previous line.

My consciousness flowed away for several seconds.

While looking at me and giving me a cold stare she started saying.

"Now that we've come this far, there is no other choice. Even if this thing is able to give birth to a child then the path to marriage is still left."

It's dry inside my mouth.

My field of vision is getting covered by darkness.

It's like being inside a black fog.

"....."

What is that, somebody is shouting.

It's me.

I'm the one who is shouting.

No, I just said that only in a sense? No way, I said that seriously? Me.

However, the words did not come out.

My mouth was just flapping about.

"This young woman will be married to the nobility of the Cardinal faction. No matter how many times she gets divorced, there are no problems."

A person who can't even follow their own intention, just who are you pressuring her to marriage.

Calling your own daughter "this thing".

Treating her like an object.

"This healthy body is a blessing in disguise."

I have never once heard the sound of a blood vessel tearing.

It's not supposed to be heard.

It's just that kind of humor.

Whenever Eris gets angry there might exist some kind of auditory hallucination to be heard.

Usually after that I faint so I don't really remember anything.

Today was the first time for me to hear my blood vessel get teared.

Part 4

Before I realized it, I was walking while pulling along Zenith's arm in the middle of the evening.

I don't remember anything I said after that.

I just remembered shouting with a loud voice.

However, the contents are a little vague.

No doubt, the abuse that I ordinarily never use suddenly jumped out from me.

I remember Claire widening her eyes.

I remember the maids peeking at us with questioning faces.

I remember declaring to go back, taking Zenith's hand while she stood up, Claire bluntly saying "Zenith is no longer expected to be sane."

Those words poured oil onto my heart, losing myself in my rage, I used magic with my fist that was tightly clenched.

I remember.

There, "Go for it, Onii-chan!" Aisha's voice brought my mind back a little bit.

After that Claire called out for palace guards, I kicked them like leaflets, cutting my family ties with the Latreia, I rushed out of that house as it is.

"Fuu~~....."

Before I noticed, we already made it to the border of the holy district.

Because of my anger episode, my field of vision is turning round and round.

It becomes irritating if I recall it.

I never thought I would hear such disgusting words like that.

Ah, shit.

What healthy body is a blessing in disguise.

I shouldn't have come here, I didn't want to hear such words.

What was that? That self-centered baa-san.

No of course, It's fine to ignore the first greeting.

Well, even if an unknown person suddenly calls you obaa-chan, you can just draw away from them because of their actions.

I can understand if you bring Norn's fiancée to talk things over.

Even in the previous life, I heard distinguished families had something like that.

They are operating by abiding those ways of general knowledge.

Yeah, I understand.

But, Zenith is no good!

She has memory loss and can't even live properly by herself.

For what reason someone would even consider to make her a bride granted her condition!

Moreover, her body is healthy? Being able to give birth to children is a blessing in disguise considering menstruation?

The married Zenith will receive nursing at daytime and will get embraced by her husband at night?

I know what that is called.

A dutch-wife.

And what if she gets pregnant? Will you bear it? Will you consider bearing it?

Even if she does give birth, what about Zenith's intention?

What about my feelings? What do you think will become of the children that are left behind?

What do you know about a person's mother!

What do you know about your own daughter!

Substantially, what's up with this function!

Means of treatment?

A machine to give birth?

Don't joke around!

She came back here for the first time in a long time!

What about Claire!

But make the cream stew! [8]

"Fuu....."

The last strange word that came out finally calmed me down a little.

My stomach was making a "guruguru" sound.

That's right, I am hungry.

I didn't eat anything at noon.

I want to eat anything other than stew.

"O-onii-chan....."

I turned around on being called.

Aisha was fidgeting.

With a troubled face and considering what to say.

"Aisha."

I immediately reached out my hand in silence and hugged her.

She didn't resist me but rather completely settled within my arms.

I understood the reason why Aisha or Norn, even Lilia had spoken so ambiguously.

That's right.

About such a painful meeting.

I don't know what kind of things that person said to Aisha and Norn while they were being raised.

But, it must have been an undoubtedly unpleasant experience.

"Sorry for bringing you along."

"No. It's fine. But we weren't able to make a connection." [9]

Knead? [10]

Rice? [11]

Rice-plant? [12]

Connection. ^[13]

Ah, that's right.

I was thinking of borrowing the assistance of the Latreia's to my side in order to form the mercenary group.

"Well it's alright, I don't want to borrow such assistance."

I'll make a different connection.

I'll ask Cliff to try and see if trust can be formed with his grandfather.....

It might not do to ask so much of an influential person like Cliff... well, it's fine.

If that doesn't work out, we'll just have to go along without any connections.

No matter what, I'm tired for today.

Let's return back and take a rest...

But, even if I return, there is no place to stay at.

Right now if I choose to lodge at the adventurer's district it will be late night by the time we reach there, Zenith will also have to walk till there somehow.....

Alright, let's lodge at Cliff's house again.

While thinking that, I turned towards Cliff's house.

Chapter 3

Milis Church Headquarters

Part 1

After the encounter with Claire, I returned to Cliff's house with a dejected heart.
Right before me, an unbelievable scene was unfolding.

Wow, inside the house Cliff was hugging an unfamiliar woman.

A plain looking woman.

Bright chest-nut colored short hair, freckles on face, short height.

Though she typically looks thin overall, she seems to have a trace of rotundity because of her bashful impression.

She doesn't resemble Elinalize at all.

If Elinalize is like a cat in heat, this person is a castrated dog.

Certainly, there is no resemblance.

It's a lie.

Cliff-senpai.

What, seriously, the person who so strongly lectured me.....

The reason you didn't bring Elinalize along was for the sake of meeting that person?

Were you playing with Elinalize all along?

Even though you have a erotic partner, she still gave birth to your child....don't you feel anything in your heart?

Please say that this is a lie, Cliff-senpai.

After continuing from what happened at the Latreia, if even Cliff-senpai does such a thing, I'll stop believing in anything anymore.

Ah.

Dammit, where is the love.

Sylphy, Roxy, Eris.

Anyone's fine, hold me tight and whisper love to me.

Then I'll be able to persevere for just a bit longer.

"Ah, Rudeus, at the right place. Hey, can you get the box on the top of that shelf? With my height, I can't reach it even if I use a stool."

"Ah, yeah."

By the time it took me to notice, Cliff had already separated from the girl.

It didn't particularly feel like they were blushing.

Only the feeling of supporting someone who has fallen off from the stool.

"Wendy, did you twist your ankle?"

"No, it's fine, thank you."

While hearing such conversation I took down the box that was on top of the shelf.

The dust which wasn't able to shake off during the cleaning the other day was blown off and the box was handed over to Cliff.

"Sorry.....I think this is probably it.....alright. I'm glad, with this I can somehow make it tomorrow."

Cliff took out some kind of crest from inside the box.

It's a crest of the Milis Church.

For the work, I guess?

"So Rudeus, what is it? Weren't you supposed to stay at the Latreia House for today?"

While listening to that I set myself on sail.

I really wanted Cliff to listen to today's story.

"Yeah, about that, listen to me will you-----"

Part 2

While entrusting my anger to him, I explained to Cliff regarding my circumstances.

About the thing that took place at the Latreia House.

About Claire's speech and conduct.

About me not being able to stand it and leaving the house in a fit of rage.

About how I'm a little calm right now but my anger yet to subside.

Recalling it all irritates me.

".....Well"

Listening to my story, Cliff frowned.

For a saint like Cliff to not keep up his straight face, he might be able to understand listening to the current story.

".....Certainly, in the nobility of Milis there exists a custom where the parents get to decide about marriage, there also exists the saying about woman giving birth but.....Still I think that letting a person who can't converse with oneself tying the marriage knot is an idea of it's own."

"You don't agree?"

You ungrateful fellow. You meanie.

Even I can't support it that much.

I can't believe such a person as her is Zenith's mother.

"Further, Miss Claire might be a little confused. Her daughter is suddenly like that. Try to think about your own children as an example.....understand?"

Cliff said that to me while persuading me.

The feeling of him getting angry together with me exists.

However, from Cliff's standpoint he's listening to the story from only my side.

He might be calmly considering things from the opposite standpoint as well.

I'll give it a little bit of thought as well.

My own children.....

About Lucy.....it's difficult to imagine something like that yet.

Let's predict about Norn then.

Norn goes out on a journey at the same time of her coming-of-age ceremony, finally returns back only to find out that she is now crippled.

Even that, coming with an unfamiliar man and a child and a concubine's child at that who is not related to you by blood.

Certainly, there would be confusion.

You would somehow think that but.....

"Granted the confusion in what way will it conclude to marriage?"

".....Unexpectedly, might it not be comprehensible if you think about it? Leaving aside the talk about children, if she gets married into nobility, she'll be able to receive assistance."

I didn't think about that.

Since the function already left, it felt like a waste that you reused it without discarding it.

You're a parent of a person.

After taking great pains to come here it's your own daughter.

What is that.

Dammit.

I remembered Claire's face when I was acting violently in the mansion.

While I was kicking and scattering the guards blasting them with the Rock Cannon, she had a cold-hearted face.

As if saying that she had done absolutely nothing wrong yet why is this person acting so violently, so to say it was a face like that.

But then again, the filter presently inside my eyesight is at stake.

It could be that Claire's feet were cowering and her face had a stiff expression.

Even if that is the case, the words that came out of her mouth can't change.

"In any case, I understand such circumstances. Please make use of my house to your heart's content."

"Thank you very much."

"This land is under the Pope's ownership, even if the Latreia who have been trying to do something, can't interfere here."

After listening to that, I suddenly noticed that I did not realize the possibility that a person of Latreia could do something.

I separated with Claire.

We shall never have to meet again.

I will believe that but the other side might not.

For the sake of regaining Zenith, there is the possibility of some kind of trick to exist. Then, it should be fine to send Zenith back to Sharia.

"Even for your mother, after finally returning to her hometown to be sent back immediately is a bit pitiable."

"Mu."

Mills is Zenith's hometown.

If you say it like that, certainly even she would want to see and visit several places for a bit longer.

I also have the feeling to take her to visit several places after I find some free time.

"But, you know...."

"While going outside, it's fine to entrust Wendy to look after you. She is a little bit clumsy but a trusting companion."

While saying that Cliff looked toward the unfamiliar woman.

".....Cliff-senpai, who is she?"

"Ah, forgive me. I'm late in introducing her. She is Wendy. If I have to say it.....that's right, her connection with me is just like you and Sylphy."

"I understand, I have acknowledged the details."

The connection like me and Slyphy.....

I understand, so that's how it is.

The entire mystery is now solved.

For one thing, old geezer's reputation is the same as always.

"I'll keep this a secret from Elinalize-san."

"No wait, just wait a minute, don't just assume things, it isn't like that."

A panicked Cliff ended up explaining things.

It seems today formalities are to take place in the Church Headquarters, simultaneously after this, in order to continue living here some provisions are necessary.

For one thing, they seem to have decided to hire a Maid.

So Cliff visited the orphanage on his own foot where he had lived in his former days.

In the orphanage, as a kind of vocational training for children, they have been taught housework and even cooking.

Such orphans were recruited for assistance for a cheap price.

"Wendy is the first senior among them all, very soon the orphanage will no longer be able to let her live there after she ages.

Therefore for that reasoning, for a short while, I have accepted to help her out in her commuting from there.

This will also give actual results out if she is to do housework at my place."

The point is, that girl was finally hired as a teaching practice-like flow.

Working at Cliff's house who was the Pope's grandchild meant trust could be made apart from producing results.

An advantageous employment find.

"My name is Wendy. I can do ordinary housework and the like. Please give me your regards."

The same as Sylphy.

To say it like that, I thought she was an addition to his relationship but.....

In other words, she is just a childhood friend that he played with during his former days.

However, I can't figure out how old Wendy is, I hope misunderstandings don't occur while living together with a girl this young.

No, it's fine if it's Cliff.

I can live on my own as well, so it's fine.

"....."

Part 3

Anyway, the moment I rushed out of the Latreia house the plan ended up as a failure. If it's become like this, I think it should be a good move to return Zenith to the house at once.

But at the bare minimum, I wanted to let Zenith look around the town, since I felt indignant about Claire's treatment toward her.

Still... I'm thinking carelessly.

It would be better to aid Cliff in his growth to adulthood by completely repressing the Latreia.

But such a future is not the only one that may come to be.

"Aisha, what do you think?"

".....Eh?"

I'm troubled, I need consultation.

Let's listen to Aisha's opinion.

"Do you think it should be good to send mother back to home at once?

Or else, it might be good to stay at this house for a short while, showing her around the town and visiting several places when there's free time?"

After listening to that, Aisha started thoroughly considering it while crossing her arms. However, she immediately raised her face up and looked towards Cliff.

"Is this house really safe?"

"Yeah. It's a small house, but it's unlikely that the Latreia could simply interfere here. It would become a big problem if they did."

"Assuming they were willing to cause such an incident, what's the likelihood of the Latreia interfering?"

"It should be almost non-existent. Since their household would also be put in that position."

Position, huh.

That old woman is a person who gives priority to her pedigree, probably taking such things into consideration.

She is stubborn and an unpleasant person to deal with but her mind is not the one at fault.

"I think it's fine that way."

With her arms still folded, she said that.

"But perhaps for that house... that person, Zenith's mother, to become like that, they no longer value her... I think."

Certainly.

For the Latreia, Zenith's utility value should have been low.

That is why Cliff frowned that time, it's just how people accept the common knowledge of this country even if it's something like getting married to a partner who can't even talk.

When such a thing is forced, I'd think the relationship after marriage would be frail.

If you think about it, it might become possible to get your hands on the original source of support from the Fittoa Region search party...^[14]

That being the case, if such a request was made, I wouldn't think it was worth the asking price.

An affectionate relationship isn't needed, as long as they're good looking.

Treating someone like that should not exist.^[15]

"This one time they discovered how scary onii-chan can get, they didn't even give chase to us just now... I don't think they have such an obsession with Zenith."

Yeah, that's right.

After leaving the Latreia house, I returned back while leisurely walking but no one was pursuing us.

I thought the guards would at least be able to pursue us in order to report back.

I can't understand whether they might be afraid of me, or they just simply gave up.

But, she was aware of my friendship with Cliff.

I don't know where she got that information from but.....anyhow, now that we've come this far, if it's found out that I've taken refuge here I'll leave it as is.

"I think it should be alright to live in a place of power where we can be protected from the opposition rather than being able to live in a nearby place in some way or other."

"I see."

The risk is great but the return is little.

That means it's unlikely that they will regain the higher-hand.

As expected of Aisha.

She considered things nicely.

"If that's how it is, Rudeus."

And then Cliff interposed with his mouth.

"Tomorrow, I'll be meeting my grandfather, won't you come with me? The problem regarding the Latreia is now raised, it will become difficult to move around in this country from now on... you're in need of a connection, right?"

"Is it fine?"

"Of course, it's up to you whether you want to become a shield for my grandfather's back. I'll just introduce you two and won't interfere anymore."

"I see."

Cliff should hate me intervening.

I also had no intention to come to Cliff's assistance.

However, I haven't grasped how much of my existence has been acknowledged.

After the introduction, if I can incorporate him in the ally camp, it will end up becoming Cliff's achievement.

If I can put up with that, he can get me introduced to the Pope.

I must advance the progress of the mercenary group and not just only Zenith.

Regarding being a shield for the Pope's back, those two functions can be done effectively.

Apart from that, it's not necessary for the Pope to protect Zenith.

Furthermore, just by having some form of connection, the opposition will have more difficulty interfering.

"...Please take care of me."

While calculating my thoughts, I bowed my head towards Cliff.

Well, there are still some things to consider.

Let's regain our spirit and proceed.

Part 4

The next day.

After eating breakfast we started proceeding towards the Church Headquarters.

Aisha stayed behind to take care of Zenith.

The Church Headquarters was standing out as a golden building with an onion mounted on the top of it.^[16]

The holy country of Mills, with the motto of peace, was overflowing with white and silver color.

In such a country, only this building had an exterior that was clownish and gaudy in its gilded splendor.

The onion mounted at the top is in bad taste, it really feels so out of place.

The moment you see it from far way it looks fine.

An isolated gold is accented within silver and white.

But, if you look closely you won't continue in any way.

Here's just another world.

However, it's different for the people living inside a house with such bad taste.

At any rate, this is the Milis Church Headquarters.

It's a place bustling with upwards-compatible types of people like Cliff.

It looks like a building with bad taste but the holy men have decided to inhabit there...

Of course, there is no way I can understand that.

Even in my previous era, the political and religious leaders were estimated to be dirtied by gold.

It seems to be generally the same for this society as well.

It's not necessary for people holding political power to smooth over the outward appearances to a degree, ultimately they won't even say beautiful things.

Well, it's no problem if I associate with those guys at the surface level too.
I'll set my mind to become well-known as well.
By appealing to my profound relationship with both Orsted and Ariel, I'll make myself big.
It was strangely effective in the Latreia house.
Therefore, it might come to light that Claire took such a thing too lightly.
I'm big, a big man. Not your average run-of-the-mill person.

For that reason, I wore my robe today.
This is my uniform.
I'm 『Dragon God's right-hand man』 Rudeus Greyrat.

I was enthusiastic about it too, and yet.

"I'm extremely sorry but people without any license are not allowed to pass here."

I was stopped at the entrance of the building.

"Really? Will it not work with only my license? I thought people with company could enter some time ago..."

"Since the former days, the rules count for only one person."

"Is that so. Well... in the former days, because there were kids they were overlooked...?"

While looking at the crest that I found yesterday Cliff made a troubled face.

It pretty much seems to be a license.

By the way, today he is dressed in official clothing as the priest of the Mills Church.
It seems he was sewing the priest clothes to attach the crest at the chest area during last night.

"If father Cliff has a license, I think a temporary license can be issued from the inside.
Although it takes a little time."

"...Ah, that's right. Forgive me Rudeus. I'll come back right away with a license so just wait around here."

Cliff said that while apologizing to me.

"I understand. There is no need to rush, please go at your own pace."

I obediently saw off Cliff going into the rest of the way inside.

Crushed from the outset...

But, it was not like I was turned away from the gate.

For the moment let's stroll around the grounds.

Part 5

The grounds within were wide, the building was huge as well.
It seemed to be lightly 4 times that of the Latreia house.

The building has four storeys, if you look at it from above, it looks like a structure piled up with □ and ◇.

□ is inside ◇.

It was not like an eight mountain star but rather a square was inside a square.^[17]

At the external part of □ lies the office of the headquarters.

An office worker related to the organization and a typical reverend father perform business-like procedures.

Besides that, permission to enter the faith and funeral arrangements are also accepted, it seems something like marketing of symbols is also carried out.

As one must expect from a headquarters, everything performed here is under the influence of the Milis Church.

Inside the ◇ exists residence wards and office rooms for the staff and what seems to be an idol shrine.

Typical standard of permitting only the important people and no one else.

It seems even an office worker is not informed as to what is performed inside.

So to speak, it's the center department of the Milis Church.

It's evident a license is necessary.

While I was looking around several places the sun ended up rising high.

I got hungry.

Nevertheless, it might have been a failure.

Cliff should not have finished the feedback report yet.

He personally took an appointment for the Pope during yesterday, he might be able to effectively adapt to him since the Pope is a member of the family.

However, I am a stranger.

When the grandchild abruptly comes home, hurriedly reporting that he wants you to meet with a strange guy, it would be natural to be wary.

The matter concerning Zenith was a somewhat unpleasant experience but I have not forgotten about Elinalize's request as well.

I want to avoid pulling Cliff's leg as best as I can.

"Taking a few more days, I ought to have made my own appointment if that was possible..."

While walking and considering such things, I arrived at the courtyard.

There are four courtyards in the headquarters.

□ and ◇ that can be piled up at the time, it was the triangular part of the four corners.

There seemed to be many trees planted to match the rhythm of the four seasons respectively.

Spring is the present season, I reached the spring garden by coincidence as well.

In the garden of spring, multicolored flowers were blooming in profusion.

Particularly, yellow to white, bright shades of pink flowers are numerous.

While observing that I proceeded to walk at ease.

In the former days I used to check up the names of the flowers with the plant dictionary on one hand but I still can't figure out this strange plant at all.

No wait, I recognize this pink flowering tree.

Since it was a sakura-like name it remains in my memory.

I heard about it from someone the other day too, what was it.

"Look, the Saraku are in full bloom!"^[18]

Right, right. It's Saraku.

In the northern part of the Asura kingdom, inhabiting the trees on the mountainside. During the beginning of spring this plant makes pink colored flowers bloom, it's known as the 『Spring summoning tree』 in the Asura kingdom.

It's also popular among nobles because of the unique aroma coming from its wood. But because it is a tree that inhabits the mountainside, it's expensive.

Currently the Asura royal family has managed the cultivation of Saraku forest and have also exported to foreign countries.

And I was taught all this by Ariel the other day, in the Asura kingdom.

"Yes, it looks really beautiful!"

"The Saraku really suits Miko-sama!"

"Do you know? These Saraku were dispatched from the Asura Kingdom during the current Pope's enthronement..."

"Oh, hah. Miko-sama is always so simple-minded."

I heard the voice with a bad feeling.

While thinking what was going on I tried to look in the direction of the voice.

"Here, look look, it's like being inside a rain of Saraku!"

"Miko-sama who is standing within those flower petals....looks like a fairy."

"It's beautiful!"

There stood the otaku princess.

While fluttery dancing within the falling flower petals, a woman wearing a frill dress on herself just like a princess was going round and round with her palms facing upwards.

It might be good to call her a young lady.....since she is probably around 20 years old.

Her looks are pretty but she is a little bit plump.

Wendy also looked a little plump but her arms and legs were slender, this person has some thickness in places like her upper arm and thigh.

Both of which gives off a feeling of poor health, Wendy has Calorie deficiency whereas this person lacks exercise.

Men are swarming around such a woman.

There are 7 men.

A fitting number for an omen.

Those men are affirming and giving high praise to the girl each time she says something.

Thus, having such an ingratiating attitude.

It might as well be good to call her an ordinary princess.

It kind of looks like an otaku circle since there aren't any handsome men around.

It's just some guys having a sense of intimacy with excited faces.

They are all wearing blue cuirass(chest armor) which doesn't look otaku-like.^[19]

".....Aare?"

However, they are excited with a sense of intimacy but a sense of relief doesn't come forth at all.

The atmosphere feels like a tingling sensation at the back of the neck.

Blood thirst?

No, it's natural.

If you naturally think about it, that princess is the real deal or she is possibly an excellent person to follow.

And, those guards as well, are not just simply otakus.

Looking at their demeanor and muscle count, it's clear that they have a remarkable set of ability.

They seem to be Advanced rank in sword play, almost to the extent of Saint class.

And then, they might have finally noticed me.

Just in case for today I prepared the Magic Armor 『Mk. II』 and wore it beneath my robe.

It doesn't look like I have any weapon or a staff on me but the appearance is decently insecure.

They might be vigilant.

But, what is it.

This feeling.

Uneasiness, it's more like a noisy(zawazawa) feeling. ^[20]

I can't explain it well.

This feeling of uneasiness.

.....It's possible that one of them within the group is an apostle of Hitogami.

Shall I try to investigate a little bit?

No wait, think about it.

Think about my 『Incident rate during the word 'Hitogami' getting out of my mouth』 .

Don't let the word Hitogami out of my mouth.

I'll ask a very leading question.....

"Ara? You're an unfamiliar face. Are you entering the faith?"

Puzzled over what to say, the other side ended up talking first.

"Ah....."

The young lady is looking this way with an innocent face.

With her upturned eyes while linking her arms behind her back and leaning her front.

The pose which breaks down all my reason when Sylphy does it.

Roxy doesn't do this pose.

If Eris does it, I won't be able to move about just like how a frog is stared down by a snake.

A resolution to die will be necessary.

"What is the matter?"

Ah, what do I do. There's no time to think about such things.

Um, um.

I'm not entering the faith.....um.

Asking a very leading question about Hitogami, um.

"Do you believe in god?"

It was in an instant.

In an instant three of them among the otaku unsheathed their swords and thrust at me.
The remaining four brought the princess back and hid her behind them.

This is no longer an otaku-like atmosphere.

Right now it's an atmosphere of mercenaries in a battlefield.

Their stagnant pupils are floating with a glaring stare.

Scary.

Dangerous, these guys are dangerous.

I shouldn't have said something.

No, I don't think I chipped them.

"God exists."

"Milis-sama itself is a God."

"Why can't you comply with such an obvious thing?"

"Could it be that you don't believe in Milis-sama?"

"You don't believe in god?"

"Infidel....?"

"Heretic!"

While the otakus said that with each of their mouths, those eyes were steadily becoming muddy.

Not good, at this rate I'll be mistaken as a witch.

"S-Sorry... I accidentally blurted out something strange while I was deep in thought... please forgive me."

Let's apologize for now.

That's right.

Here is the Milis Church Headquarters.

Milis is called as the place where only believers of god exists.

At such a place, that thing is unheard of.

I was a suspicious person.

Please forgive me in someway or another.

"Grave, what to do?"

"It's fine for you to decide, Dust."

"Then let's kill him. He's probably a heretic. He's strangely calm... that's not it either, he has sinned by indoctrinating such a ridiculous thing to Miko-sama."

"Alright that's fine, let's kill him."

An amazingly quick decision.

Preparedness is a virtue.

I would have hesitated if it was me.

"No no, please wait, calm down, please listen to my story first..."

If I act violently here, it'll become troublesome for Cliff, this beautiful garden will become awful as well.

You don't want to see the Saraku tree blown off into small pieces. Right?

Mutual crisis is not beneficial, you'll understand if we talk.

Even though I believe that, my consciousness suddenly shifted.

My foresight eye suddenly opened and showed me the moment the sword is thrust at me.

I started pouring magic in my magic armor.

I want to avoid battling but I don't have any hesitation since they didn't forgive me even though I apologized.

I'm in a bad mood since yesterday.

"...Are you seriously planning on doing that?"

When I said that those guys suddenly shook and their eyes flared up.

My foresight eye displayed the swelling up strength in their body and filling their limbs with power.

Here it comes.

"Wait!"

A dignified voice reverberated.

Only for a short while, it's a nostalgic voice.

Whether that voice held some coercion power, those guys' powers were drawn out in an instant.

"What are you doing!"

One woman knight was approaching here.

Her age is approximately in the middle of 30s.

Wearing the same garments as the otakus, a blue chest armor.

A harsh looking face that gives off a brave yet calm impression.

However, that face is a face I recognize.

"Captain, this heretic was inflicting danger to Miko-sama."

One of the otakus nonchalantly said it.

Don't tell a lie.

"That's false accusations, I just wanted to see the Saraku..."

"You be silent."

While thrusting a sword at me one of them said that in a low voice.

I think there is no reason for me to be silent.

"Heretic...?"

And then finally the knight woman looked towards me.

"Ah!"

And then finally noticed.

With a broad smile on her face.

"Rudeus! Is it Rudeus? Wow, it's been a long time!"

Thus while looking at the swords thrust at me, she raised her voice.

"Put down your swords, he is my nephew!"

While the otakus put down their swords with a surprised face I closed my foresight eye.

Part 6

Therese Latreia.

Zenith's younger sister and my aunt.

The person who assisted me during my voyage from the Milis Continent to the Central Continent.

It seems Therese is the leader of those guys.

On her command, the otakus drew back their swords in a flash.

For the time being they also apologized although it had a sense of reluctance.

I again apologized for blurting out such a strange thing but they looked dissatisfied because of their killing intent towards the changed me.

Now they just took the Princess at a distance and are on their guards.

"Do you remember me? Did you forgot because we only met once?"

"Of course I remember. You were really a great help concerning the voyage."

Well, leaving those guys aside for now I started chatting with Therese.

It's really nostalgic.

"Nevertheless, I had heard the stories that you showed yourself at the head house but to think you would come to the headquarters as well. Ah, did you possibly come to meet me?"

"No, an acquaintance of mine is willing to introduce me to the top brass.....Therese-san, I see you came back here."

Certainly, the last time we met I heard about her transfer to the West Port City.

It's been 10 years since then.

It wouldn't be strange if she had returned.

"Ah, well, various things happened."

Therese shrugged her shoulders with a wry smile.
It's probably something hard to talk about.
I won't pry into personal matters.
But there was something else I wanted to hear about.

"That story about me showing up at the head house, is it being circulated?"

"Ah, it didn't seem like the quarrel with mother is."

"Quarrel... that was a quarrel alright."

"I also heard that mother made you angry. Anyway, it's like her. I guess she ordered you to do this and that?"

"That's right! Please listen to me!"

The aunt that I encountered after a long time.

I thought for an instant whether she is an ally or not but my slippery mouth can't stop.

Before I realized it, I ended up talking about everything that happened yesterday.

As I thought, I still have much more anger left within me.

Or seeing a face similar to Zenith with a bright smile on it, I might be feeling relief.

"I wonder if they let this kind of thing be overlooked in this country?"

"No, it's not possible no matter what... even if it's mother, that... I think she might be mistaken... but, well... Rudeus-kun, couldn't it have been something you said that angered mother? That woman, because she was told something unreasonable, she responded unreasonably in kind, tit-for-tat..."

"...What about it. I wanted to endure it as much as possible and talk things through without getting angry."

"Hmm."

Therese crossed her arms for a little while and groaned with a gallant face.

It wasn't even a tit-for-tat feeling.

It felt like it was decided from the get go.

"Well, if the next time you went to the head house listen to the matter very carefully. Mother is a bit stubborn but she's not a bad person. Most likely, it's a trifling misunderstanding."

"....."

Therese unceremoniously said so.

Even if it's really a misunderstanding, myself getting angry was certain.

I don't want to talk about mediating the relationship.

It's been a while since I thought about something like not even socializing on the surface with a person.

Well, if it's truly a misunderstanding, after I receive a sincere and faithful apology, I'll also apologize regarding the fact that I suddenly raged.

"At any rate, Rudeus-kun has grown big! Ah, no, it would be better to say that you matured as a man... are you around 20 years old right now?"

Therese changed the topic by effectively making use of her nature.

I don't want to keep talking about Claire as well.

"Yes, I'm already 22 years old."

"I see! It's already been 10 years after all... ah, that's right, How is Eris-sama? Is she doing well? Since she has an amazing vitality!"

Therese is in high spirits just like a child.

The gallant behavior she had just some time ago is now nowhere to be found.

That gallant face before had a close resemblance to Claire-baasan, but...

No no, let's stop that.

"Eris is healthy as well. Last year, she gave birth to a child."

"Child...? Ah, I see, you two got married! Congratulations!"

"Thank you very much."

"Is she here as well?"

"No, she is house-sitting in Sharia. Because of the child rearing."

"I see I see, though it's a difficult matter, do your best by uniting the strengths from the both of you."

Both of...

Ah, that's right, this person is a Milis believer as well.

It should be better if I keep the matter aside concerning me being married to three wives.

Well, I'll be silent for now.

I don't want to throw water on this long-awaited happy moment.

"I see, marriage huh... that little Rudeus-kun and Eris-sama are now married... haa..."

Or so I thought, but suddenly Therese has a dejected spirit.

It seems the word called marriage is a NG word.

Looking at this reaction, she is probably still unmarried.

Or possibly divorced.

Um, how old was this person again.

Zenith being around 38 years old, since she is younger... somewhere around 35, perhaps.

In this world people become adults at the age of 15, from there if you consider most people getting married until reaching the age of 20...

Um.

"Is your direction towards work going well?"

It should be better to stop talking about marriage.

"Uh? Ah! This and that happened but I returned back to being the Miko-sama's escort. For now, I manage those guys."

Therese said that while glancing at the group.

Among the group of seven, two of them are vigilant of this side and the remaining are reduced to following the princess.

They are peaceful guys if you see it like this.

"They are a scary bunch."

"Ah... since an assassination attempt was incurred, the guys within the Temple Knight Party having particular high battle ability ended up becoming guards, it's appropriate for a short while, to have them en masse, sort of..."

Previously, Therese stated that the Temple Knight Party is a gathering of fanatics. In that sense, it probably meant "seeming".

From my faux pas to "let's kill him" was an instant change.

It was formerly Orsted's way of doing things.

"Well, they just have a little insistence on their doctrine, they aren't such bad guys... since everyone likes Miko-sama very much."

That's scary.

I get the concern for their belief in god but don't end up not looking around the surroundings because of that.

Even the God of you all guys will be generous.

"Say, Therese? Can I also join in the conversation?"

That time, an abrupt voice came from the back.

The otaku princess was peeking in this direction.

It looked like the entourage behind her would unsheathe their swords anytime.

"Just now, I heard the name called Eris, are you perhaps an acquaintance of that red-haired Eris-sama? That swordswoman?"

She is the Miko, huh.

They just call her Miko Miko but I wonder what her real name is. Is it Nurse.^[21]

Let's try to ask... no, I'll give my name.

I was called cheap when I gave my name to Claire before but saying your name like that is the courtesy of a warrior.

"I'm late in my introduction. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.

I have taken on the task of serving the 『Dragon God』 Orsted, the Sword King Eris Greyrat is my wife."

Dragon God and Sword King.

Hearing those two words increased the insecurity of the entourage.

Reacting to the matter regarding Dragon God, as I thought an apostle is mixed within them.

No but it's seven all in all, it might not be relevant.

"Wow! Is that how it was! Eris-sama is the benefactor who saved my life 10 years ago!"

If it's 10 years ago, then that means during the time I came to Milishion.

Certainly, I also remember that story.

The story of how Eris set out for Goblin extermination but ended up exterminating an assassination.

"Can Eris-sama be seen here?"

"Unfortunately no, because she has to look after the child she is house-sitting."

"That's regrettable."

When the princess displayed a sad expression the entirety of the circle's eyes hanged down.
It's a little charming.

These guys really do like her.

But wait, even though I gave my name no name is coming back.

I wonder if I can just call her Miko-sama.

"But, in that case it will become something like... I was saved by 『Dragon God』 Orsted-sama."

"What?"

That is not related.

Me and Eris as well, that time we didn't know about Orsted's full name.

However, right now I'm a subordinate of Orsted, Eris accepts that and assists me.
It can be said that Eris is Orsted's subordinate as well only just barely.
About that thing, I wonder if Orsted coming to my help will become a thing.
...Can't be.
Let's stop telling lies that can be easily exposed.

"No, at that time me and Eris as well were not acquainted with Orsted-sama.
However, if Miko-sama were to bestow her sense of obligation,
Then in the future, when Orsted-sama will be able to hold back his hostility he will gratefully receive it."
"...? A person I haven't even met holds hostility?"
"It's because Orsted-sama is cursed as such."

When I said that the princess approached me looking at my eyes fixedly.
Round and cute eyes exists within that plump face.
Both eyes don't particularly differ each other in color.
She probably doesn't have a demon eye.
However, it came to me like an intuition.

She is doing something.

I can't understand what she is doing.
I didn't seem to be fixed in place because of her, nor did I bear the feeling of being suffocated.
But the feeling that she was doing something remained.

"...It seems like you are telling the truth."

For a short while, the princess nodded with a serious look.

"Do you get it?"
"Yes, I understand."

While looking at Therese and the followers, their faces don't look like as if a miracle has happened.

That means, this is this child's 『Ability as a Miko』 .

Similar to Zanoba's 『Superhuman strength and defensive power』 ...

Ability to see through a lie just by eye contact...

No, something like reading the thoughts of the other party.

Or else, it might be a distinction.

"...Is that your power?"

"Yes, that's right."

I wanted to hear the details but the entourage is scary.

It's safe not to hear it.

What to do.

Orsted didn't said anything regarding this Miko.

"Hee..."

This is bad.

I noticed that something happened, it feels like a dangerous sign has been put up in my direction.

No matter what I heard, it feels like the entourage is ready to attack me anytime.

But, it's also a waste to not hear it.

I can't meet her again.

I must ask her and hear it.

"Suu... fuu..."

Firstly a deep breath.

"Miko-sama. Pardon my impoliteness, is it fine if I ask just one thing?"

I'll take permission before inquiry.

Such steps are important.

Above that, it's not investigation and extraction, it's only just one question.

"Yes, by all means."

"Recently, does a person calling himself a god come out in your dreams and leave something like an oracle?"

"No, recently, of course, and in the time until now, that has never happened. And surely, after this, I'd think it will remain impossible."

The princess spoke flatly.

Looking at me, listening to my words.

Not until now, and not afterwards.

For some reason I believe it.

That means this is somehow related to her power.

Possibly an ability to deny Hitogami to meet her.

As I thought, "reading someone's mind", is it?

Hitogami, even more than me, would likely be troubled by having a mind reader on hand.

"Thank you very much."

I drew out the energy from my shoulders.

It's fine if she is not an enemy for now.

Even if Miko-sama is lying, I'll believe for now.

"Now it's my turn!"

"...! Yes, by all means, anything."

More than this what do you want to hear?

If you can read minds then is it not necessary to hear?

For now, it looks like that ability can't be usually invoked.

It can't be invoked no matter what without direct eye-contact.

Then the other person should just stop looking... or something like that?

"Please inform me more regarding Eris-sama!"

"...Yes."

Such a thing.

Well fine.

Anyway, she's not an enemy, if she is not involved with Hitogami, isn't it fine to believe her.

In addition, let's follow along about how good a guy President Orsted is.

The company insurance even covers Mikopre-existing conditions.

In the 80-years to come your peace of mind is guaranteed, when the accident occurs, the excellent staff of our company will help you.

In addition, we are recruiting for excellent staff at any time...

No, from now on when I want to become the back shield of the Pope, would it be bad if I appoint Miko's hand guards?

"Rudeus! Rudeus, are you not here!"

When I was considering what to do, a voice could be heard from far calling out to me.

It's Cliff's voice.

It seems like he finally obtained a license.

"Ah... Forgive me Miko-sama. It's time."

"Eeh! Seriously..."

The princess lowered her eyebrows followed by the entourage's eyebrows hanging down as well and gives rise to my sin of bad habit.

Amusing.

And of great interest.

Even I am a person who wants to talk a bit more.

However, for now let's look forward to the future.

"I'll be staying in this town for a while, so we'll talk again about Eris next time..."

"It's a promise!"

I bowed to the princess and entrusted a message to Therese.

"With that Therese-san, if you are going to the head house, tell Claire that 「I'll carry the responsibility for my mother's problem so interference is futile」 please convey that for me... also, if the Fittoa Region Search Party needs collateral for their support, they will be paid in gold given the suggested amount of money."

"...Got it, I'll convey that for now."

"Please do."

After bowing to Therese as well, also greeting the entourage with my eyes, I left from that place.

Nevertheless, a miko.

At first glance she looks like a burriko in the box.^[22]

Possibly she was a otaku princess but I felt something that was not bottomless.

Clearly, I said that she is not an enemy,
it looked like she knew about Hitogami's circumstances.
Let's keep at it and be vigilant.

Ah, I forgot to ask her full name...

Well it's fine.

While I was thinking that, with the license now in my possession I moved towards Cliff's place.

Chapter 4

Meeting with the Pope, and...

Part 1

"I will store your luggage."

Before entering, we were searched.

I guess they were looking for weapons to confiscate.

From my favorite knife, to my scrolls, I had to leave everything behind.

However, my armor itself wasn't considered a weapon, so I didn't have to undress.

Cliff didn't say anything, probably because he trusts me.

In good faith, I also deposited my left gauntlet with the mana absorbing stone and my right gauntlet equipped with the shotgun.

The center of the building was like a labyrinth.

There weren't any straight passageways, every passage was curved.

Moreover, because the passages are all painted white, it's hard to discern what's ahead.

Naturally, this is the heart of the Milis religious community.

Just like a fortress, it was probably designed to withstand enemy attacks.

Following Cliff's swift pace, we quickly arrived at the Pope's office.

The office was guarded by two knights and protected by a barrier.

"I'll tell you now, you won't be able to use magic past this barrier."

"Yes."

The barrier must be at least saint or king ranked.

I wonder if these knights can match saint or king ranked skills.
I'm not sure, they might just be here to buy time in the event of a battle.

"Your eminence, greetings."

Cliff's grandfather Harry Grimoire, on the other side of the transparent barrier.
He looked like the good-natured old man I imagined from the letter.
He had a long white beard, and wore bishop-like robes with gold embroidery.

"Yes, thank you."

His voice was powerful like Sauros, but not sharp like Reida.
He had the aura of an exceptional person.

But, he seemed to be conscientious of his own power.
I see, so this is the Pope, I understand, something...
It wasn't his aura, it was his hat.^{[23][24]}
Just kidding.

"Allow me to introduce Rudeus Greyrat.
We studied together at the Ranoa magic university, he was my kouhai.
His talent for magic surpasses my own, he is an extremely skilled person.
Because of our longstanding association, I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce him to your eminence."

As Cliff made my introductions, the Pope slowly nodded with a gentle expression.
I should probably handle any further explanations.
Cliff introduced me as a friend, the rest is up to me.
We discussed this last night.

"I see, so...
Rudeus-dono, for what reason have you come to me?
Permissions for your mercenary company?
Or, is it for permission to sell your Supard race dolls?

Or perhaps for counsel on behalf of Dragon God Orsted?"

It's different.

Cliff, well it's already too late.

My purpose, the reason I came to this country...

It's fine, it would have come up sooner or later.

Well, it would have been better to end this without an outright explanation.

...Huh?

Cliff was looking between us with a surprised face.

"As one would expect from someone called the Dragon God's right arm.

Without even shifting an eyebrow... So it's like this Cliff?"

I was too slow to notice.

The Pope concluded his misunderstanding in an instant.

"I'm sorry, but I investigated a bit in advance."

He started to read a document with a smile.

"Rudeus Greyrat.

Of the distinguished Notus Greyrat family.

Son of Paul Greyrat, disciple of Sword King Ghyslaine Dedorudia.

After being involved in the Metastasis Event, returned on his own after three years.

Attended the magic university, became acquaintances with Princess Ariel.

Several years later, fought Dragon God Orsted and lost, then joined his camp.

Behind the scenes in Asura Kingdom, orchestrated the defeat of Water God Reida and North Emperor Auber.

Propelled current king Ariel Anemoi Asura to her current position.

Then, while organizing his own private army in various places, appealed for various influential people to cooperate with Dragon God Orsted...

Have I missed anything?"

That was pretty thorough.

But, that wasn't exactly private information.

You could get that sort of information by just asking around.

The person before my eyes is obviously trying to discern what kind of person I am,

It's essential that I'm forthright.

It's not surprising.

There are mistakes.

"There are three mistakes.

From the Demon continent, I did not return on my own.

I borrowed the power of a warrior from the Supard race, Ruijerd.

Furthermore I did not defeat the Water God Reida or Auber alone, Sword King Ghyslaine and Sword King Eris aided me.

And, most importantly, I am the disciple of water king-ranked Roxy Migurdia."

"Hou, this is an honest one."

The Pope nodded with a [Fumufumu], and jotted something down on the paper in his hand.

I don't know what you're writing, but at the very least add that I'm Roxy's disciple.

"So when it comes to your reason for selling the Supard race dolls, it's to repay that debt?

It's not a scheme to overthrow the government by increasing the literacy rate?"

"Correct."

"Hou"

Even if the literacy rate rose, why would the government be overthrown...

I guess that's the same theory as a cooper putting holes in his barrels, so he can repair them later for a profit.^[25]

"Then, appealing for cooperation with Orsted-sama, is there a reason?"

"Around 80 years from now, the Demon God Laplace will be revived, it is to ready the world for that time."

Even at that, the Pope didn't change his expression in the slightest.
He just nodded in consent.

"I see. So, by using Cliff as a connection, you have come to request my cooperation. In other words you want me to join the Dragon God's camp, is that it..."

"No, it's different."

Somehow, talking with this Ojiichan, I already feel like I'm in negotiation mode.

Well that's fine.

Negotiations are necessary.

I guess I'll start.

"I am here to support my ally, Cliff."

"Hou. Supporting Cliff from behind, is that it?"

"No... certainly that was my intent at first, but Cliff said [I want to see how far I can climb with my own power.]

At least, until he is known as Cliff-dono here, I will not be participating."

The Pope's lips curled into a smile as I said that.

He had the face of a grandpa whose grandchild scored 100 on a test.

"Is that so, Cliff said such a thing..."

"Yes. So, today, Rudeus is here as a subordinate of the Dragon God."

He said it honestly.

The other side seems to be studying us.

We may have glazed over some information, but our responses were generally correct.

Well, he might think differently, I don't know yet.

We haven't told any lies.

An honest person may be a fool, but people don't hate honesty.

"I have two requests, your backing for my mercenary company, and permission to sell the Supard dolls."

As for the matter of the Latreia house, I'll leave that aside for the time being.
That's a personal matter, I'll show restraint, it should be possible to form a connection.

"Hmm."

The Pope watched me with a soft smile,
I guess that's his poker face.
Even if he's laughing, his expression won't change.

"I don't think the relationships between people are something easily broken."

The Pope said that as if stating a fact.
Perhaps that's a warning.
I don't plan to abandon Cliff.
I don't think Cliff would abandon me either.

"So, in deference to your ties with Cliff... I will support your mercenary company."

He said that readily.
I expected some kind of quid-pro-quo, but I guess not.
This is probably out of consideration for my friendship with Cliff.
At any rate if Cliff plays his part, it will bring great benefits to the Pope's faction.
For the Pope, this might be a downpayment.

"However, permission for the Supard dolls is difficult."

"Why?"

"I am in the pro-demon race faction, and the pope.
However, recently the anti-demon race faction has grown powerful within the church.
In the present situation, I do not have enough clout to permit the sale of the Supard dolls
as an arbitrary decision.
The next pope, surely, will be selected from the anti-demon race faction... or?"

The Pope said so, while watching me.

I wonder if he's trying to imply I should say something like [Then I will crush the anti-faction forthwith!]

I wonder.

I could move easily as the Pope's subordinate.

I've already cut ties with the Latreia house, and with the current flow they'll probably be openly hostile towards me.

If that's the case, it would be unfortunate if I had to crush Therese along with the rest of the anti-demon race faction.

But, that would probably count as helping Cliff.

It's a little ambiguous.

If Cliff were to take over as Pope, they would be his opponent.

I guess I'd be clearing his path if I crushed them.

No, in the first place, if I even cooperate with the religious organization, it's because of Cliff.

I wonder if that's OK.

Hmm...

"... For the time being, I take it that I have your support regarding my mercenary company?"

"Yes."

"Then, for today, with your support for the mercenary company, I am satisfied."

I'll keep you on hold regarding the other matter.

It shouldn't be a problem that requires an immediate response.

Originally, I planned to leave the Supard doll sales off the table.

I only came here with the intention to get permission to launch the mercenary branch.

I won't act greedily here.

"Is that so, it's a shame."

The Pope said so with a smile and a laugh.

Part 2

Cliff still had things to do, so I left the headquarters alone.

"Phew..."

The moment I was out, I let out a big sigh.

That was tiring...

The Shrine Maiden and the Pope.

I met two interesting people today.

Both of them left interesting impressions.

Nevertheless, they each lead different factions.

The pro-demon race faction led by the Pope.

And the anti-demon race faction led by the Shrine Maiden.

The Temple Knights are part of the anti-faction.

The Latreia house as well.

Even good-natured people like Therese,

I would have expected them all to be fanatics.

If I'm asked who I support, needless to say it's the pro-faction, the Pope's faction.

Be that as it may, Therese has helped me twice.

Even though I hate the Latreia house, I'm not ungrateful towards her.

Apart from her followers, the Shrine Maiden herself doesn't seem detestable.

So, being reserved isn't wrong... I think.

As I originally planned, if possible, I want to maintain a neutral position.

A lofty ideal.

Anyway, I should probably plan for more contact with that shrine maiden.
I'm curious about her ability.
Whether or not she's one of Hitogami's apostles... that possibility still exists.
It's difficult as always to discern apostles.

At least, I didn't run into Hitogami's interference setting up the mercenary branch in Asura Kingdom.

Are my actions harmful to Hitogami or not...
At the present, I don't know. It's useless to think about.

So, for the time being, I'll be grateful that I haven't run into any obstacles and act as I always have.

The moment there's a disturbance, when you feel something out of place, is the moment to look for an apostle.

I have to keep my eyes open for suspicious people.

The Shrine Maiden, or Claire.

But, if I'm too focused on them, I'm bound to make a mistake.

For the sake of establishing a mercenary branch as soon as possible, it would be nice to get in touch with Orsted by installing a communication lithograph.

Yeah.

For the time being, I have the Pope's cooperation in this matter.

So, I should get started.

First, to purchase a suitable building for the mercenary branch.

Then set up a communication lithograph, and a magic teleportation circle in case of emergency.

And, report to Orsted.

"Okay. The first step is to select a building."

The next step has been decided.

It would be good to leave selecting the building up to Aisha.

Whether we set up in the adventurer district or the commercial district, she'll know what's best.

Aisha should have a good understanding of the area by now.

Having a trusted business partner, it's really reliable.

The problem is Zenith.

With Aisha out, we won't have anyone to look after her.

Perhaps Wendy could be taught to care for her...

Well, at this point such a thing can't be helped.

Let's have a discussion about it back at home.

Part 3

I left through town on the carriage and returned to Cliff's house in the religious district.
It's dusk.

My stomach is empty, I'm looking forward to dinner.

I hope there are fresh eggs around here.

Boiled eggs, fried eggs, omelette...

There's bread too, so fried pork cutlets are also possible.

With just an egg, a whole new realm of foods open up, to increase my enjoyment.

Our cook (Aisha) is really skilled.

"Here I am. With an empty stomach--"

"Not coming back until now, what's with that!?"

The second I returned, I heard Aisha's shout.

I hurried inside the house.

There, was the figure of my sister next to Wendy.

"Why did you go out!"^[26]

"I-, I mean, isn't it OK."

"Why is the person who went out to be believed!?"

Yesterday, you heard it too right!?"

Why didn't you explain the circumstances!?"

Yet you went out the next day like nothing happened!?"

We were waiting, you should have come back sooner!

I needed to talk to you Oniichan!"

"Eh, even so, then, I, after what happened yesterday, didn't understand it well, but it's all right--"

"I just said it! It's not 'all right'! You, you should have taken us with you!?"

Aisha went to throw a punch, but Wendy held her back...

Aisha is enraged, this is rare.

While thinking that, I caught Aisha's next punch.

"Aisha, calm down a little."

"Fine!"

She shook me off.

But, Aisha seems to have become a bit more aware of herself.

"Ah, Oniichan... I'm sorry..."

She clasped her hands and looked down.

"What happened?"

For the time being I'll ask that.

If I raise my voice now, then I'm just as at fault.

However, Aisha looks down with a blue face, and doesn't answer.

She's normally a child who answers quickly.

"Well..."

As if she couldn't stand it any longer, Wendy answered.

"During the day, Gisu appeared..."

"Gisu...?"

"He came to see Zenith-san, and said it was unfortunate she was cooped up even after her long-awaited return home--"

Aisha answered this time.

"--didn't come back."

Those words were dripping with animosity.

What?

This feeling...

"Aisha, calm down, from the start, explain it to me. You can do that right?"

"Yeah..."

Aisha began to speak.

During the day, Gisu seems to have come over to visit.

He's Zenith's friend, he's allowed to visit.

Aisha didn't see his face, but from his speech, the contents of the story, and his clothes, the description matches Gisu.

At that time, Aisha and I were absent.

"Why was Aisha out...?"

"I thought we would need various things if we were going to stay here, so I went out to purchase everything... Wendy, she seemed able to handle things, I'm sorry..."

"Ah, no, it's okay."

Aisha made a mistake in judgment.

It's unusual, but I guess it's possible.

Anyway.

For a while, Gisu chatted with Wendy and Zenith, it was something like a conversation between three people.

But, then, Gisu made a suggestion.

[Isn't holing Zenith up here after her long awaited return to her hometown unfortunate. I'll take Zenith outside and show her the town.]

Wendy consented.

As for her consent, Wendy seemed to be a bit worried about it.

I haven't heard anything about yesterday, either.

Regardless, it's not just Wendy's fault.

She wasn't informed about the unpleasantness of the Latreia house.

I feel like there's something more.

After all, that really is Gisu's wild horse way of speaking.

Somehow, that guy is really good at persuading others.

I wanted to take Zenith to see the town too.

They were supposed to come back within an hour, even if they were careless, it can't be helped.

"I, I immediately went out to look, but I couldn't find them..."

Aisha immediately went out looking for them, but no luck.

She couldn't find them.

The day passed, and they were nowhere to be found even after dusk.

Perhaps they were delayed, but they still haven't turned up.

Aisha was at the end of her rope and couldn't really blame Wendy, then I returned... That's why.

"What should I do Oniichan, because I thought it was all right... This, it's my fault right...? What should I do... What do I do!"

Aisha is unusually upset, she's on the brink of tears.

For now, calming her down is top priority.

"Try to calm down. It's Gisu's usual carelessness, perhaps everything is fine."

"But, now, Zenith-okaasan is missing!?"

"Please be calm."

I'm starting to feel impatient too.

But, Gisu took her out.

That guy has no fighting ability, but he's a competent man to rely on.

That provides a sense of security.

Well, thinking of Gisu...

He might have done something unnecessary, like taking her out for dinner.

He's the kind of guy who returns unexpectedly, saying something like [Sorry sorry, I ran into an old acquaintance and hit it off] while laughing.

"For the time being, let's wait a little longer."

I decided.

Part 4

The sun has completely set.

Cliff returned with a tired expression.

Zenith and Gisu have not returned.

But, during this time, Aisha and I have regained our composure.

"I'm sorry... but, please don't blame Wendy too much, it's my fault..."

Cliff also went to rebuke Wendy, but Aisha came to her defense.

He probably didn't expect this kind of situation.

Originally, he called for the maid.

Moreover, because he called for a maid at the last minute, he should understand that it wouldn't be a professional.

You can't blame someone's lack of ability.

But blame follows failure.

"I will go out to search. Cliff-senpai, please wait on standby."

"Ah, right..."

Even though I made that decision, it's already dinner time.

Waiting until now to start searching, it might be too late.

But, allow me to make an excuse,

If Zenith were out alone, I would have started searching immediately.

Gisu took her out.

If Wendy's story is true, she should be with Gisu.

That monkey bastard may not be able to fight, but he can do anything else.

From information collection, mapping, shopping, cooking, equipment maintenance, to managing the party's health.

His only fatal flaw as an adventurer is that he's useless in combat.

So, I felt a sense of confidence since Zenith was with Gisu.

But, if I think about it, being useless in combat can be fatal.

If he were caught up in some kind of incident, he might not have the power to protect Zenith,

Gisu should have a high ability to avoid being caught up in those types of incidents though. But, his skill might not be perfect.

Zenith stepping on some belligerent old man's foot or something, that kind of scenario is possible too.

Passing each other, they make eye contact, and then he socks her in the face.

She's also with a demon race.

If someone from the Latreia house saw them, what would they think seeing Gisu and Zenith together.

They would probably try to bring her back home.

In a quick attack, they might try to take Zenith back.

After all, she's still a member of the Latreia house.

If it's the Latreia house, it's also possible that that Gisu was a fake.

Similar looks and a similar height, teaching him how to talk like Gisu, then pretending to be Gisu to convince Wendy... or something like that.

Although you don't really see those types of guys around.

Also, I don't want to think this, but it's possible that Gisu is one of Hitogami's apostles.

Gisu had been reluctant to enter the religious district, why would he come back here.

That's something to consider, he could be acting on Hitogami's advice...

Worrying won't do anything.

There's no use hesitating.

Regret won't help either.

We've already lost a lot of time.

I have to make a move.

I put on the MK-II and left the house.

"First of all, where should we search? Should we divide the work?"

Aisha followed as a matter of course.

Zenith is still missing... We're both becoming impatient.

If she starts becoming flustered, I have to calm her down.

"No, if you were kidnapped it would just add to the trouble. Let's search together."

"Y-, yeah. Understood..."

Hearing the word kidnapped, Aisha held her breath.

She was probably considering the possibility of Zenith being kidnapped.

Kidnapping in this world, is commonplace...

But it's unlikely.

To kidnap Zenith they would have to go through Gisu, an S-class adventurer, it wouldn't be easy.

If it were me, I would look for a more defenseless target.

"..."

I took a few more steps, then suddenly stopped.

First of all, where should we start looking?

That's not good, I need to compose myself.

Calm down, everything's fine, I need to calm down.

Deep breaths.

"Suu... Haa..."

I have someone smarter than me at my side.

I should consult with her.

"Aisha... Where do you think Gisu would be?"

"Err... the adventurer district?"

"Why's that?"

"Gisu doesn't like being around St. Milis followers, and they tend to stay around the religious district.

That leaves the commercial district and the adventurer district, and since Gisu is an adventurer, it seems likely he'd be in the adventurer district."

"Okay, lets start by searching the adventurer district."

As expected of Aisha, thinking carefully in this kind of situation.

We have to strike while the iron is hot.

"Let's hurry."

"Yeah, oh, that's right. Should we take horses? Or use the carriage?"

"Hmm?"

Horses...

I still can't ride a horse.

Though that doesn't mean I'm incapable of riding a horse.

I've had a little practice, I also know how to drive the horse-drawn carriage.

But we won't be able to move as freely with a carriage in an emergency situation.

But that's no problem.

If I'm serious, I can run as fast as a horse.

"I don't need a horse."

"Eh?"

I picked Aisha up in a princess carry.

Then fed mana to the MK-II.

And bent my legs.

I've practiced softening the impact.

"Aisha, please hold on tight."

"Eh...? Ah!"

Aisha stiffened and tightly gripped my robe.

I held Aisha firmly in place.

"... Ah, ah! That's no good! Stop!"

I almost thought I heard something as I leapt into the night sky.

Chapter 5

Playing Dumb

Part 1

We arrived at the adventurer district, after a mere ten minutes.
Aisha's body was trembling, and she sank down to the ground.
Her legs seem to have given out.

Aisha might be weak to heights.
My bad.

"Oniichan, at least, travel on the ground..."

A lot of my family and acquaintances seem to be bad with heights.
Sylphy's also afraid of heights, and I'm not so good with them either.
Only Eris seems to like high places.

"I would have gotten into an accident running on the ground. Now, let's quickly find mother."

"Uu... can't walk."

"Don't worry, I can give you a piggyback ride."

"No more jumping?"

"No jumping."

With Aisha settled on my back, we began the search.
That said, the adventurer district is big.
Where should we start...

"Oniichan, we should check the taverns. It's dinnertime, we might find them eating somewhere."

"Ah, that's right."

In response to Aisha's advice, I began trotting down the street.

We checked the taverns down the street, looking for Zenith or Gisu.

Because it's dinnertime, the taverns are crowded.

However, it's unnecessary to check every person one by one.

By asking the tavern keepers, we can check quickly.

A woman with a blank expression with a monkey-faced demon race man.

They should stand out.

Even this late, the adventurer district is still crowded.

Adventurers were returning from requests with their spoils.

Merchants were busy doing business with the adventurers.

After work, the adventurers were flocking to eat.

Tavern keepers were herding hungry adventurers into their bars.

Occasionally the sounds of a fight between adventurers or mercenaries rang out.

Probably because of the late hour, there are few carriages on the road.

So the possibility of Zenith being run over as she's walking about is low.

With that I feel a little relieved.

"Monkey face? Ah, Gisu?

That guy, doesn't he stay at the [Spring's Eve]?"

We've already checked three inns.

Gisu has been in this country for awhile.

So just about everyone has seen him around.

"Did you see him with a woman?"

"A woman...? Hmm...?"

The clerk tilted his head.

But, I'll know after I check.

I asked the clerk for directions to [Spring's Eve].

After tossing him a copper coin, we hurried to [Spring's Eve].

I have a bad feeling.

Part 2

The [Spring's Eve] inn was on skid row.

Prostitutes lined the streets, while men with vulgar expressions passed by.

The red light district is probably nearby.

This is Milishion, there shouldn't be such a thing...

Even so, men were watching us with curiosity.

A serene silence follows us, I wonder if we're floating.

"Haha! Wha! What kind of play is that?"

"Oniichan, it's embarrassing put me down!"

Nope.

They were staring at me piggybacking Aisha.

I let Aisha down, and the stares stopped.

[Spring's Eve]

It has a normal front, but there's a lot of tough looking guys coming and going.

Well, after coming to this world, I've become pretty tough as well.

I can enter this kind of place without being afraid.

Frankly, those guys at the Rudo-Mercenary office in Sharia are more intimidating.

The idea that Zenith might be in such a place makes me anxious though.

Gisu, what are you thinking...

If, that guy playfully says something like he sold Zenith to a brothel, I won't forgive him.

I'll have two fists waiting for him.

"Ra~ssha~!"

As we came through the entrance, we heard the hustle and bustle of the bartenders along with energetic voices.

It's not a particularly bad atmosphere.

It looks bad from the outside, but there's a bright atmosphere inside.

As for the class of visitors, there aren't only bad looking guys, there are also a lot of ordinary adventurers.

Immediately after confirming the room, I went to pull aside the nearest clerk--

"But I was too clever for that, so I said [These three magic circles might be traps, what if there's another passage?]"

There.

Towards the back of the bar, a monkey-faced man, bragging proudly to a group of young adventurers.

It felt like a familiar scene.

There was one boy with spiked hair.

The other boy had a nose piercing.

And an honest-looking girl.

Three people.

Zenith isn't with them.

I don't see Zenith anywhere around here.

"Then, just as I suspected, we searched the floor, and there it was, the hidden passage to the boss room..."

Gisu noticed me as I approached the table.

He had an [Ah] face.

"Gisu."

"Y-, Yo senpai. I was just talking about you. You guys, this is [Quagmire]."

Three people with frightened faces,

Like girls, they cowered in their seats.

What...

What kind of reaction is that.

Forget it.

That kind of thing, there are more important things to hear.

What first...

Alright, first, I should determine if Hitogami is involved.

"Gisu... that's bad luck. To become my enemy."

"Haa? What?"

"You've heard it, haven't you? A revelation, from that guy. Now that it's come to this, what to do..."

"Whoa, dream? What?"

I pointed my finger at Gisu's laughing monkey face and started pouring in mana.

Stone cannon, high-speed rotation.

I kept increasing the speed until a high pitched [Kyuuiin] sound could be heard, like a drill.

The startled young adventurers started to get up.

"Don't move."

They instantly froze.

Then, I met Gisu's eyes, and asked again.

"What were you told, tell me everything. Tell me and I'll spare your life."

"Oi, o-, oi seri-, seriously, st-, stop it... th-that's no good! I-, I don't know, I was bad, stop, don't bring it any closer!"

I inched the tip of my finger towards Gisu's head.

Then Gisu leapt up from his chair and prostrated himself on the spot.

And, without an ounce of shame, began apologizing.

"I-, I did something wrong! And for that I'm sorry! I have angered Rudeus! But I don't know what I did! Please tell me! I did something bad, I'm sorry! I am truly sorry!"

What's this?

This, this isn't what I expected.

It left me dumbfounded.

I guess he's not Hitogami's apostle...?

I don't know.

However, after all this... I feel like I'm the one who should apologize.

"... What happened to mother?"

"Ah?"

Gisu raised his face with a puzzled look.

He was red-faced and drunk, staring with a blank look of confusion.

If this is an act, it's amazing.

"My mother. Zenith."

"...? No, after showing her around town, she was taken home?"

"She didn't come back, that's why I'm here."

I crossed my arms, and one of the boys let out a laugh.

I looked over, and Aisha was in the same pose nodding.

This isn't the time for jokes, it happened by chance.

I gave the kid a scowl, and he stiffened up with a [Hii].

"Eh... but... I definitely sent her home?"

"How?"

"We were near the edge of the adventurer district. Then, we met up with that guy from your house, and I entrusted Zenith to him."

.... What?

I sent someone?

My house?

Cliff and I were at the at the religious headquarters.

Aisha was out shopping, Wendy was at the house...

No, that's not it.

It's not MY house.

"Was it, someone from the Latreia house...?"

"Yeah yeah, I checked their coat of arms? Without a doubt, they were from the Latreia house."

My heart's starting to race.

The Latreia house, Zenith, was taken.

Calm down, focus.

First, Gisu took out Zenith.

But why?

"In the first place, why did you take mother out?"

"Even if you ask why, I haven't seen Zenith and Senpai in such a long time, I just wanted to try talking for a bit..."

He did it on a whim.

Okay. That seems like the normal Gisu...

No wait, that's strange.

"You, why did you know where to find Cliff's house?"

"I asked by the Latreia house first.

Well, I didn't really want to go, but I thought it would be okay because of Senpai...

Then, I heard you and Zenith were staying somewhere else, so I asked for directions."

"I thought you hated entering the religious district?"

"Yeah I don't like to go without a reason, but that doesn't mean I'd never go."

Gisu's excuse was a little airy.

Vague.

Well he's been drinking, it's no wonder the story is confusing.

"...."

I get it.

I understand what happened.

In other words, the story was something like this.

Yesterday, I left the Latreia house in a rage.

But, we returned to Cliff's house on foot, so we could have been tailed.

Careless, I never noticed, they must have found out where we were staying.

The Latreia and Grimoire houses are in opposing factions.

They probably wanted to 'save' Zenith, it's not hard to imagine.

That said, it would be difficult for them to attack the Grimoire house.

Their faction may have the upper hand, but a scandal like that could take them down.

So, the Latreia house used Gisu.

A man from a demon race who nonchalantly introduced himself as my friend.

Normally, they would turn someone like that away.

But, despite being part of the anti-demon race faction, they must have come up with a plan to use him.

They used him to get Zenith outside the house.

Gisu didn't immediately bring Zenith out, and they had to take into account any other escorts.

However, there were no other escorts.

I was out, and Aisha had left with bad timing.

Those Latreia guys lucked out, and were able to smoothly secure Zenith.

After all that, they'll probably just play dumb.

As for Gisu?

They'll probably pretend not to recognize him.

They'll say something like [There's no way we would associate with a filthy demon race.]

Zenith has been kidnapped, they must be holding her somewhere.
She must have a caretaker or someone I can follow.

"O-, oi, Senpai, what's wrong...?"

".... Never mind that. You, when you went to the Latreia house, what did they say?"

"Eh? Ah, something like Zenith would miss seeing her hometown since she just came back and that I should take her out..."

It's not Gisu's fault then.

He didn't know anything.

He went to the Latreia house because I was the one who said I'd be staying there.

He thought that was my house, and they answered his questions, so he had no reason to doubt them.

In such a situation, it can't be helped that he became a puppet.

It was my own carelessness.

I should have checked on Zenith today.

Because of that single mistake things had become like this.

After all this, I wish I had stealthily taken Zenith out to see the town.

Regrets are useless.

I need to rescue Zenith.

"Gisu... Actually--"

After hearing the story from Gisu, I decided to ask for his cooperation.

In this kind of situation, I'd like to have Gisu's support.

Even so, this guy is also responsible.

I don't think he's one of Hitogami's apostles.

"... Seriously?"

When I finished my explanation, Gisu had a bitter face.

"I see, yeah, I thought it was a little weird. Senpai wasn't staying at the Latreia house... I thought Senpai was just... taking her out, something like that..."

A discrepancy in information.

A weakness was shown, and the opponent exploited it.

But anyone could have made that mistake.

It's time to save Zenith.

"I understand. I want to cooperate."

"Yeah."

With Gisu, we decided to immediately go confront the Latreia house.

Even though it might be useless.

Part 3

By the time we arrived at the Latreia house, the town had already fallen silent.

Dinner has passed, it's evening, people are probably preparing to go to sleep.

I intended to rush over here, but I had two passengers.

There's no helping that it slowed me down.

Aisha was half in tears muttering something like [Oniichan's a fibber.][²⁷]

"We're here."

Now then, the Latreia house still had their lights on.

But there was nobody at the gate.

There's no doorbell either.

I need to call someone over to let us in.

Should I yell?

... If I were a normal visitor, what would I do.

No, if I were a normal visitor, I would probably turn around and leave.

What do I care.

"It's Rudeus! Get out here!"

I let out a shout while I banged on the gate.

I don't care about disturbing the neighbors.

They may not think it's a great cause, but the justification is there.

They abducted Zenith, they're in the wrong.

But if the person who claimed to be from the Latreia house and took Zenith from Gisu was a fake, then Zenith really was kidnapped.

Even though I intended to cut my ties with the Latreia house, this is their problem too.

"...."

There's no answer.

I continued banging on the gate and shouting.

The metal gate started to warp from being hit by the MK-II.

"I want to have a chat about a matter concerning my mother!"

Still no answer.

Better yet I'll just break the gate.

"This gate is going to break if you don't send someone out!"

Nothing, they seem to have declined my offer, so I started packing mana into my right hand.

It's a mistake if you think you can stop me with a gate of this caliber.

"O-, oi Senpai wait! That's no good!"

I was stopped.

The blood seemed to be rushing to my head.

But, we're in a rush.

The other day, Claire was talking about marrying Zenith off to have kids.

Find a partner, hold a wedding, decided a house, start a family...

I guess that kind of thing would take time.

And if I investigate the Latreia house, then sooner or later I'll find traces of Zenith.

But there's one thing.

If the only goal is making children, then presto.

All you have to do is prepare a man and a woman, throw them in bed for half an hour, and it's done.

There's the idea of [Fait Accompli] in this world too.^[28]

When we find Zenith, it might already be too late, she might already be despondent.

I don't think that old woman would do something like that to her own daughter.
I want to hope so, but I have no idea what that old woman is thinking, wanting to marry off her invalid daughter.
So we need to act quickly.

But breaking down the gate might be hasty.
Even one shot from my Stone Cannon would be loud enough to wake the neighborhood.
I don't know about the laws in this country, but destroying the gate would probably be frowned upon.
If people gather and call the guards... If we're labeled as criminals, it will only end up causing trouble for Cliff and the Pope.
I need to think this through, I can't act rashly.

"Alright. Then let's sneak in, I'll unlock the gate with earth magic--"

"Sneak in? What are you going to do?"

A voice from the other side of the gate.

Before I had noticed, five men and women had gathered on the other side of the gate.
Three soldiers, one butler.
And, dressed in elegant attire, one old woman.

"At this late hour, what business do you have with this family?"

"...."

Claire Latreia.

I guess she heard me yelling.
Or, did she prepare to meet me beforehand...

"Claire-san... isn't your method a little too underhanded?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You used Gisu, to kidnap my mother."

As I said that, Claire looked at Gisu and lowered her eyebrows.

"Kidnapped? I know of no such thing."

"Going senile, eh? I guess this was to be expected..."

I winked at Gisu.

He returned a nod, and signaled at one of the guards.

"That guy. He came to pick her up."

"..."

He pointed at the guard.

That guy quickly put on a befuddled expression and shrugged.

He's trying to pretend he doesn't know.

"In this house, I have strictly forbidden associating with demon races.

Dealing with such such a filthy demon race, such a thing is impossible."

Claire gave Gisu a cold stare and said it flatly.

"If Zenith has been kidnapped, then we will send out a search party.

Of course, this demon race may be lying,

So I intend to hear his story in full detail..."

"Ugh..."

Gisu let out a groan and edged back.

Then silence.

Gisu is probably thinking that he might not survive tonight.

If that happens, then I probably won't be able to find Zenith.^[29]

I should make the first move.

"Then, you, even after all this, intend to deny knowing my mother's whereabouts?"

"We know no such thing. Even if there was, we would have no obligation to share such information with someone who has cut ties with this house."

Saying one disagreeable thing after another, this old lady...

Is it strategy?

What's the point of provoking me?

Perhaps, this fellow, could be one of Hitogami's apostles.

I can't read Hitogami's intent...

Possibly, she really might not know?

If it comes down to that, has Gisu been telling lies?

Why would Gisu lie?

Well he is a liar, but he doesn't tell the kind of lies that get people hurt.

"Claire-san..."

"What is it, Rudeus-san. If you still believe I am lying, would you like to search my estate?"

Claire let out a snort and sent me a cold look.

She's certainly confident.

She might have already moved Zenith to another location.

"When you search and don't find anything, please leave it at that. After all, you don't have any relation to the Latreia house, now do you?"

"...."

I probably have a bitter expression.

Even though this suspicious person is in front of me, I have no way to tell if she's speaking the truth.

I need to keep talking, but words aren't coming out.

I'm worried about Zenith.

But, judging from this old woman's eyes, I don't feel like I can get Zenith's location.

Rather, I could abduct Claire, and force the location out of her.

No, that's no good, let's not.

I have no evidence.

Only Gisu's word.

But, if it's true she was abducted by the Latreia house...

Wait, wait, calm down.

First of all, I need to focus on this conversation.

I knew she would play dumb from the start.

"Mother... what relationship does she have with the Latreia house..."

"That child is my daughter. As her mother, I have a duty to take care of my daughter who has strayed from the path."

"That! By marrying her off without considering her own will!?"

"...."

"I am Zenith's son. My father told me to [Protect my mother even if it costs my life]. I have a duty. Until I die, it is my responsibility to look after her. So please, return mother..."^[30]

"....."

Claire did not answer.

But she averted her gaze like she was unable to bear looking at me.

Why are you making such a face.

What is she thinking?^[31]

She's losing her composure.^[32]

Even Therese didn't say she was a bad person.

She's just difficult.^[33]

That's right.

Yeah.

I have to endure it, I have to keep her talking, and figure out her intention...

"The palace guards have arrived."

It was different.

Claire didn't avert her eyes.

She was looking behind us, out into the street.

There, guards, with lamps in hand, were running towards us.

"That is enough, piling up accusations in such a place, will I have to report you?"

I glared at Claire.

I gave a cold glare to this stubborn old woman who wouldn't listen to a word I said.

In my head, a vision of holding this old woman hostage and demanding she return Zenith flashed.

This gate is virtually nothing to me.

I could burst through the gate, hoist the old hag by the neck, and shout [Bring Zenith, NOW!] to those guys.

It wouldn't even take two seconds.

Only an instant.

But, would that bring Zenith back?

Looking at this old woman's cold-hearted face...

The other day, I went on a rampage.

From what I heard later, I blew away 6 or 7 guards.

Now there are twice as many guards surrounding me, and probably more on their way.

But, the only thing separating us is the gate.

"... Even if I have to take you hostage, I will find Zenith."

"Then do it. If you think that will bring Zenith back."

Arrogant.

Where does she get the courage to say that?

She should understand, I won't hesitate to act violently.

Don't you care about what happens to you?

Why do such a thing?

Shit, I can't read her intent.

Do you want me to go on a rampage...?

In front of the palace guards?

"Claire-san, could it be, you have been receiving divine revelations in your dreams?"

"... Ha? Asking that so suddenly? Divine revelation?"

Claire, for a moment, broke her cold expression.
She had a blank face. Completely, without any idea.
Gisu had a similar face earlier.
This, no.
She's not one of Hitogami's apostles.

However, that expression only lasted for a moment.

"... Hmph."

She averted her gaze, and focused on the approaching palace guards.

"Temple Knights [Bow Division] of the city guard! We heard reports of a loud noise, what has happened?"

"These people--"

"--I understand. We will withdraw for today."

Saying that took my last ounce of reason.

Part 4

It's time to return.

While feeling depressed, I walked down the street of the residential area.

My thoughts are running in circles.

I understand that I am not calm.

It's hopeless, anger and frustration are consuming my thoughts.

"...."

I have no idea where Zenith is.

But, after that exchange.

In the face of that silent response.

I am convinced.

Claire took advantage of Gisu to kidnap Zenith.

I have no doubt.

Though I was also at fault... But without even coming to talk, to abduct her one-sidedly, feign ignorance, and then send me away...

Damn...

"That went badly... I'm no good in those types of situations."

"No, Gisu. You're not bad. You were thinking of mother, and even went to the religious district for her, didn't you?"

"A-, Ah..."

Gisu isn't a bad guy.

He was just used.

Although I think the timing was too good.

"Gisu... Mother, can you find her?"

"It's possible, but it might not go well?"

"I guess..."

Gisu is a demon race.

Just walking through the residential area, he attracts the eyes of passing soldiers.

Searching the religious district would be next to impossible.

I need to search for Zenith.

"..."

But, even indirectly, he can be useful.

I don't care about the methods as long as we can find the place.

I also have an idea.

Rudeus Greyrat is the enemy of the anti-demon race faction starting today.

Claire-baasan, you caused this.

I'll do it...

"Aisha, Gisu... This may be a little dangerous, but please help me."

"Of course... Oniichan... what do we need to do?"

Aisha asked in an uneasy voice.

I calmly looked down at Aisha and said...

"Kidnap the Shrine Maiden."

Gisu lurched up.

"Huh!? What kind of crazy stuff are you saying without warning!?"

Then came up to me and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"What the hell!"

"The Latreia house has deep ties with the Temple Knights. The Temple Knights are part of the Cardinal faction. The Cardinal faction is led by the Shrine Maiden, shouldn't she have the most influence here? So she'll be the most effective hostage. With her, we can definitely get mother back..."

I mean, using the Shrine Maiden in a hostage exchange is just an idea.

If our opponents have resorted to kidnapping, then it would be suitable as revenge.

"Yeah it might be effective, but think about the consequences! Even if Zenith is returned safely, the entire country of Milis could become your enemy!?"

Milis doesn't matter.

If it comes down to it I have Orsted's power and Ariel's authority.

I can give up my activities in this country.

Zenith is more important.

Fighting against Hitogami is also important, but I won't let that stop me from protecting my family.

"Senpai might be able to manage somehow, but I'm a demon race! I'll be killed just for knowing you!"

Gisu sounds pitiful.

Hearing the word 'killed' cooled my head a bit. I need to calm down.

The Latreia house, as well as the Temple Knights, would certainly become my enemy, but everyone around me would also be put in danger.

The army corp meeting at noon today was massive.

I don't know what to do.

The Pope won't take much heat, but Cliff would be targeted.

Thinking back, Aisha and Zanoba were killed by knights from Milis in the future diary.

In other words, if Milis becomes my enemy, I won't be safe even if I return to Sharia.

Moreover, it would definitely turn into an obstacle later on.

There are Milis followers all over the central continent.

The mercenary company's activities may be hindered.

Originally, I came here to become an ally of Milis.

If they're still hostile when Laplace revives...

That would definitely benefit Hitogami...

No, Hitogami couldn't predict that I would kidnap the Shrine Maiden.

This is just paranoia.

In any case, kidnapping the Shrine Maiden, it's a bad move.

No.... Wait.

Kidnapping the Shrine Maiden, didn't the Pope imply something like that.

If it goes well, then I might be able to rescue Zenith while crushing the Latreia house and the Cardinal faction.

I wouldn't mind siding with the Pope.

Anyway, if I want to sell the Ruijerd dolls, it's unavoidable.

Cliff should be able to understand.

It's regrettable about Therese.

Therese is the captain of the Shrine Maiden's escorts.

I'll be repaying the kindness of the woman who helped me twice, 10 years ago and yesterday, with enmity.

... Shit.

"Aisha, what do you think?"

I should ask for Aisha's opinion.

She was looking down with a serious and troubled face, but looked up at my words.

"Kidnapping the Shrine Maiden, I think that's going too far."

"I see."

"This isn't like my Oniichan who's calm and composed all the time... I think."

Your oniichan definitely isn't calm.

But, well, I see what she means, just now, that definitely wasn't calm.

If I don't calm down, it will be too easy to make errors in judgment.

Yeah...

Alright, calm down... I need to calm down and think.

First of all, blaming everything on Hitogami right now might be over-thinking it.

Thinking that guy is involved just leads to paranoia,

This is a problem between me and the Latreia house.

For now, that is.

Although I think the possibility is low from her reaction, but it's possible Claire is trying to bait me into a conflict with the Cardinal faction...

Anyway, I'm a man of the Pope's faction.

Doing that kind of thing to a man from the Pope's faction would be effective.

Claire's actions have had the opposite effect.

In the present situation, even if I suspect Hitogami's involvement, my only option is to annihilate any potential apostles.

This time, I can't just go around killing people,^[34]

And, like I learned in Shirone, the suspicious guys probably won't appear before me.

There's no use worrying over it.

So, for the time being, I'll act without assuming Hitogami's involvement.

"Alright. Kidnapping the Shrine Maiden is overkill. I'll stop."

It's not necessary to take a hard line yet.

I already have the Pope's backing.

Even Therese was friendly today.

If I speak with those two, I may be able to mediate a solution.

Before resorting to force, there are other things to try.

I went to the religious headquarters today for this kind of reason.

Even if that stubborn old woman has some plan, and arranged some strange man for Zenith, there wasn't a feeling of *fait accompli*.

Whatever the circumstances may be, kidnapping is just a means to an end, I need to put all of my actions to good use.

If that's the case, I will not hesitate to reduce the Latreia house to a vacant lot... No, calm down. Use of force is a last resort.

"I need to discuss this with various people. First of all, let's ask around. Someone should know about the Latreia house's movements."

As I said that, Gisu and Aisha had a look of relief.

With that answer, I seem to have been able to calm down.

"But, just in case, Gisu I want you to search for mother's whereabouts. Searching may be difficult... If you'd like, you can employ someone to help. I have money."

"Ah. Okay."

"What about me? What should I do?"

Aisha gripped her fist tightly and asked that while I was speaking to Gisu. She might feel responsible too.

"... Well, Aisha, please keep looking for a suitable location for the mercenary branch."

"EH!? What about Zenith-okaasan?"

"Installing the communication lithograph and setting up a teleportation circle is an urgent priority. I need to consult with Orsted-sama about Hitogami's involvement."

"Oh, I see... That's right. And then?"

"Please assist Gisu in locating mother."

"Okay!"

Aisha nodded vigorously.

It may be difficult for Gisu as a lone demon race, but with Aisha they should form a strong team.

I have confidence in them.

"... But, if mother is in a dangerous situation, I will move regardless of the consequences. So both of you, be prepared to leave at a moment's notice."

"Ah."

"Understood."

They both gave a powerful nod.

Tomorrow I'll visit the religious headquarters again.

Chapter 6

Chess Problem

Part 1

The next day.

I went into the room protected with the barrier once again, and met with the Pope. Cliff was standing to the side.

"Your eminence, I am pleased to meet you in good health."^[35]

Cliff is also aware of last night's events.

I've fully explained to him the reasons I didn't return with Zenith.

As he showed indignation towards the Latreia house's reckless actions, I asked him to help me borrow the power of the Pope.

As a result, I was granted an audience for the second day in a row.

Since the Pope is very busy, it took some time before I was allowed to meet him.

"You seem weary, Rudeus-sama."

"You can tell?"

I touched my cheek.

Although I just shaved, I can feel some remaining whiskers.

I got angry remembering Claire's speech and conduct and couldn't sleep last night, as well. I'm sure my face is a horrible mess.

"Yes. Is today's audience concerning that matter?"

The Pope's behavior suggests that he has seen through me.

The details of Zenith's case may have already reached him.

"To tell the truth, my mother was kidnapped last night."

"I see. Who is the perpetrator?"

The Pope looked at me with a slight smile on his face.

Looking at how he asked me who here, he most likely already knows.

I'd like to think that there's no chance of the Pope having been pulling the strings, but...

"It was the Latreia house."

After I told him the details concerning yesterday's events, the Pope squinted slightly.

"So you wanted to ask me to help you in your search?"

"Frankly, yes."

The pope stroked his beard as if he were pondering.

Scratching his Santa Claus-like beard.

Then, he looked at me.

His face held a slight smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Well then, what shall I have you do..."

"Your eminence?"

Cliff let out a baffled voice in response to the Pope's words.

"He is my friend. This isn't about the faction, it's about family. I don't think it is right to bring up bargaining points..."

"That is why I bring them up, Cliff."

The Pope admonished Cliff in a gentle tone of voice.

"This is a problem of the Latreia house. It's not as if we can't intervene, but we shouldn't interfere with matters of other houses. If the Grimoire house were to meddle in their

affairs, the Latreia house won't take kindly to it. But if we were to treat it as mediation by the Pope, we can get them to listen. This is an issue between mother, daughter, and grandchild. If we were to force ourselves in, the Grimoire house will owe a large debt to the Latreia house."

From the Latreia house's viewpoint, it would be like using a shrimp to fish up a sea bream. To the sea bream, it won't be worth it if it doesn't get anything substantial.^[36]

"Does your eminence have anything he desires from me?"

"Let's see, it would be quite simple to put it into words, but... It sounds like too good of a story for me. For the [Right Hand of the Dragon God] to come to me while troubled and ask for assistance... In the first place why would the Latreia house purposefully make an enemy of you, who is called the [Right Hand of the Dragon God]?"

"... I don't know. Maybe they aren't aware of that fact?"

Thinking back, Claire seemed to have been looking down on me from the very beginning. Even though she acknowledged Aisha, she ignored my initial greeting, after all.

"Despite appearances, Count Latreia excels at gathering information. I'm certain he wouldn't miss information on someone as powerful as you, and I don't think he would make light of it."

By Count, he's not referring to Claire.

He's talking about Claire's husband, Carlyle.

"... I've never met the Count, who's the head of the family. It could be the uninformed Countess acting on her own."

Even if Claire heard the information, people have their own senses of values.

I'm not a noble, nor do I hold an important office in any country.

Even if she hears that I am the underling of some warrior who she only knows is called the Dragon God, she wouldn't really understand.

Even if I say I have connections with Ariel, she wouldn't know how close a relationship we hold.

She may think I'm simply a powerless person borrowing someone else's authority.
From the view of Claire's common sense, I may not have any merit.

"The Latreia house's Claire-dono certainly sometimes stresses pedigree too much...
Thinking of it that way, it may be possible..."

The Pope thought while stroking his beard, and nodded.

"Well, I suppose it's fine. There is the saying 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', after all.
Then, Rudeus-dono... what can you do, specifically?"

What can I do, huh?

In other words, he probably means [How far are you willing to go].
Basically, how strong my sincerity is.

"Let's see..."

What came to mind is what I suddenly thought of yesterday.
The plan I suddenly thought of that was naturally shot down.
However, it's a possibility.

"I could do something like kidnapping the miko-sama."

As soon as he heard those words, Cliff cried out.

"Kidnapping!? What the hell are you saying, Rudeus!?"

"Basically, I'm saying I can strike at the vitals of the anti-Demon Race faction."

"That's not it! If you go through with this you may completely destroy the Latreia house!
You're saying that you intend to destroy your own house!"

I slowly turned to face Cliff.

"I have nothing to do with that house."

I turned my gaze away from the speechless Cliff.

The Pope had a smile on his face.

"Of course, that's only in terms of what I'm willing to do for your eminence. If I wanted to, I could reduce a town to ashes or make a forest into a vacant lot."

I lay out all my cards.

However, the Pope stroked his beard again.

It may seem like too good of a story for him.

He may think that it's someone's trap.

I don't mind if you're cautious of me.

At the very least, I don't have a hidden agenda.

I'm only thinking of saving Zenith.

"I'm against this!"

Cliff suddenly cried out.

"Kidnapping is a crime. No matter how much they are opposed to you, Grandfather, if you step in, the situation can be resolved!"

"..."

"Rudeus, you as well! Why would you want to stoop to their level!? This isn't like you... isn't the blood rushing to your head?"

Blood rushing to my head?

That's certainly the case.

I'm completely fed up with Claire's way of doing things.

I'm angry at Claire Latreia.

It's a miracle that I haven't resorted to violence.

If it wasn't Zenith, I wouldn't be this enraged.

When Eris was wounded by the North Emperor or Roxy was almost killed by the Death God, I wasn't infuriated.

They had determination.

They followed me of their own will, and had resolve.

If they ended up dying, I would certainly mourn.

I would respect their will, and grieve over their lack of strength.

However, currently Zenith doesn't have that determination.

When we were called over by the letter, I took her along without her saying whether or not she will go.

On top of that, she may be wed to some man she doesn't know and made to bear his children.

If, for argument's sake, Zenith had that determination, and came here of her own will, the story would be different.

If in refusal she fought and lost, and ended up like that. That I could still pardon.

Although I say 'pardon', I only meant that [I wouldn't become enraged].

If it came to that, feelings that would make me want to kill myself would enter my heart.

Something other than wrath.

Misery, or some other sort of sense of helplessness.

Rather than anger, a much more bitter emotion.

That's right.

I want to give Claire those feelings.

It's your fault the miko was kidnapped.

After being blamed and told to take responsibility, a troubled and helpless Claire.

I want to see that.

In short, I want revenge.

... I'm despicable, aren't I.

"Rudeus, it's not too late, you can still talk this over with them. If you want I could be there with you."

"Cliff-senpai..."

"The Latreia house offered to help you search for your mother, didn't they? That should have been out of consideration for your mother and sisters. Couldn't it be that in this case you are simply misunderstanding each other, and if you share your thoughts with each other you can come to an understanding?"

Listening to Cliff's words, I was slightly moved.

However, I immediately reverted.

Even I want to talk it over, if possible.

However, that old woman won't even listen to anything I say.

I don't feel like I can reconcile with that old woman at all.

Our ways of thinking and senses of values are too different.

It's almost as if we weren't even speaking the same language.

"... You may be right."

However, I think it over after having calmed down slightly.

It's only a difference between mine and Claire's senses of values.

Just as Cliff said, if start from the beginning with a third party present, we may be able to come up with a solution.

The Pope is not a candidate, due to his standing.

Mediation will turn into the trading of favors.

Cliff also isn't very suitable.

He still doesn't have much standing in this country.

Claire likely won't listen to anything he says.

However, there's still someone who I can consult with.

Someone who will likely be heard by Claire, and can't trade favors between the factions.

Rather than the Pope, I should have consulted with that person first.

"I'll try consulting with Therese-san... Your eminence, my deepest apologies, please forget about the kidnapping matter."

"That's probably best."

The Pope said that and smiled softly.

"Among the knights of the Order of the Temple, she has an particularly respectable way of thinking. She'll surely lend her assistance to you..."

At the Pope's words I bowed my head, and Cliff let out a sigh of relief.

Part 2

Starting the next day, I began consulting with Therese.

However, there was a slight problem.

She's the leader of the miko's guards.

She's the [Middle Leader^[37]] of the Order of the Temple's Shield Group.

She normally stays together with the miko and protects her.

As for what that miko, she normally doesn't do much of anything at all.

Like the Pope, the miko is normally confined to the center of the church headquarters.

She seems to have frequently gone out in the past, but since the assassination attempt, she doesn't leave the headquarters unless on church business.

Staying in the headquarters are a number of Temple Knights and users of exorcism or barrier magic, and the miko herself has a little under ten people as her personal guard.

She's in an extremely secure position.

Meeting Therese who is always with that miko is quite difficult.

Letters won't reach her, and she won't come out even when called.

It's almost at the point where I wish I had gotten the Pope's help instead.

Of course, it's not like meeting is impossible.

According to the Pope's information, she's not trapped inside her room year-round.

Once every several days, for just a short time, she's allowed to go out as far as the park inside of the headquarters.

It's the miko's free time.

She goes out to the park that's open to all believers, looks at the trees and flowers, has silly conversations with her guards, and listens to the occasional commoner.

To the miko that lives an extremely confined lifestyle, it's the one and only thing she has to look forward to.

I'll aim for there and meet Therese.

Be that as it may, openly waiting there for them to come out will arouse unnecessary suspicion.

The miko is a VIP, after all.

Regardless of whether I have business with Therese, if I prowl around after her the Order of the Temple will naturally have their eyes on me.

As such, I wander the park nearly everyday.

As if it were only natural, I escort Cliff to the headquarters, and as if it were only natural I pass the time in the park.

My surface reason will be that I am there since I like the Sarak^[38] trees.

Furthermore, I bring a canvas with me and draw pictures.

The pictures can't be finished in a single day, so it becomes an excuse to visit every day.

At the same time, Aisha and Gisu are moving on their own.

Aisha is searching for a building at max speed.

Gisu is searching for Zenith while his hires are observing the Latreia house's servants.

Of course, there are no results yet.

While doing such, I ran into the miko on her free day.

"Ah, Rudeus-sama! You have come today as well!"

When the miko saw me, she rushed straight at me.

"You promised me! Please tell me about Eris!"

As she wished, I talked to her about Eris.

Eris had many interesting episodes, and the miko listened to me talk with a delighted expression.

Her guards were vigilant towards me.

Their jobs are to keep suspicious people away from the miko.

Of course, I'm not a suspicious person.

My identity as Cliff's friend is known, and I'm acquainted with Therese, the leader of the guards.

After talking with the miko, I consulted with Therese.

She seems to have heard about Zenith being kidnapped.

She earnestly advised me.

"I can't imagine mother being that high-handed... Anyway, I'll have a day off soon. During that time, I'll talk with mother. Don't worry, Zenith isn't going to be married off to some other man while you aren't aware."

Therese said that while thumping her chest, which is just as large as Zenith's.

How reliable.

"However, mother was strongly opposed to me joining the knights, so she may not listen to what I have to say."

"... What should we do if that's the case?"

"At that time, I can go to father or brother^[39], there are many people I can consult with. Just leave it to me."

Truly reliable.

Part 3

Several days passed.

Zenith still hasn't been found.

According to Gisu, none of the servants have been showing suspicious movements.

There weren't any trying to make contact with someone outside, either.

Of course, there were no signs of Zenith entering or leaving.

Therefore, Gisu assessed that the probability of Zenith being inside the estate is high.

The building for the mercenary company has been secured.

It's a former bar near the commerce district.

Aisha is currently in the process of preparing preserved food and clothes for the company branch.^[40]

I'm setting up a communication lithograph and emergency teleportation circle in the basement.

The teleportation circle is the type that uses magic crystals, and since it connects to the scroll I carry with me, it can only be used once.

Well, I probably won't ever use it.

Anyway, using the communication lithograph, I immediately consulted with Orsted.

I told Orsted about the circumstances, and was given some information, as well as his conjectures on Hitogami's intentions.

First, about the miko.

She has no name, and is simply referred to as the miko.

When she was taken as a miko by the church, her name was discarded.

From then on, she was treated as an important person in public, and a tool in private.

That miko's power is [Memory Reading].

By looking into someone's eyes, she can see their memories.

Her job is interrogation.

She is called upon during interrogations within the church and trials by the country, and examines the suspect's memories.

Bishops and nobles who committed what should have been a perfect crime can be convicted on her words alone.

She is a powerful lie detector, and her power is acknowledged by the king.

This strengthens the cardinal's faction, and weakens the Pope's.

However, seeing memories...

She can only see them, but I still had my hopes.

That maybe she can recover Zenith's memories.

According to Orsted, her power only allows her to see them so it's impossible, but...

If I get a chance, I'll try to get her to examine Zenith.

However, it doesn't seem like the miko's power can be used by outsiders.

The church, or rather the cardinal's faction, have a monopoly on her power, so permission is needed in order to use it.

Even for the royal family or the pope, without the cardinal's permission they cannot receive her help.

Just because I get along with her, it doesn't mean I can ask her to come with me to the Latreia residence and expose Claire's falsehood.

By the way, about this powerful miko.

She seems to be fated to have an extremely short life. ^[41]

It seems that no matter which loop, she usually would die around age 10, and would never live to see age 30.

Whether you consider her fate or power, her chance of being Hitogami's apostle is close to zero, according to Orsted.

Now, as for the Latreia house.

Currently, there are 4 people in the Latreia house that have reached adulthood, excluding Zenith.

The current head of the family, Count Carlyle Latreia.

His wife, Countess Claire Latreia.

The eldest son, Temple Knight Edgar Latreia.

The third daughter, Temple Knight Therese Latreia.

The eldest daughter Anise has married into the family of Marquis Birnkrant.^[42]

The household of Marquis Birnkrant is around one day to the west of Milishion.

Hence, she is currently not in Milishion.

The same goes for the eldest son Edgar.

As a platoon leader in the Order of the Temple, he seems to have moved to the same town as Anise.

The head of the family, Carlyle, is a battalion commander in the Order of the Temple.

It's quite a busy post, so he usually stays at the Order's lodging house while working, and only returns to the household around once every 10 days.

As I found out the other day, Therese usually stays at the headquarters as the miko's guard. She basically doesn't even return home for holidays.

In other words, Claire is essentially managing the estate on her own.

I also asked Orsted about Claire.

Claire Latreia:

Eldest daughter of the Latreia family; stubborn from the moment she was born; the house's education raised her to be a person strict with both herself and others; once she decides something, she will never yield and will keep the same opinion until the day she dies.

Her husband Carlyle married into the family.

She has one son, and three daughters.

As far as Orsted knows, she doesn't particularly leave her name in history and doesn't have any large accomplishments, just a regular noblewoman you can find anywhere.

She likes people that are fair and righteous, and hates crimes.

Orsted also judged her not to be someone who would kidnap someone by force.

Furthermore, he gave me the details about the power struggle in the Church of Milis.

As I already knew, the Church of Milis is split into the Pope's faction and the Cardinal's faction.

They split around 300 years ago.

Until then the Church of Milis followed the scripture saying that 'all Demons should be destroyed' and rejected the Demon Race.

However, when a certain priest read the scripture that said 'all races are equal under Milis', he said 'then are the Demon Race equal as well?' and caused a division in the clergy.

Ever since, the Demon Race Acceptance faction and Demon Race Expulsion faction have been continually in conflict.

Presently, it's something like this:

- The Pope's faction: the Demon Race Acceptance faction. Currently the larger faction. Cliff's grandfather is the Pope. The majority of the general populace in the Kingdom of Milis and the Order of Instruction belong to this faction. (The Pope's faction, the Acceptance faction)
- The Cardinal's faction: the Demon Race Expulsion faction. The faction that the miko belongs to. The Latreia house and the majority of the other old noble families and the Order of the Temple belong to this faction.

The royalty and the Order of the Church are neutral.

Until 50 years ago, the Expulsion faction was in control, and non-human races in Milishion were strongly oppressed, and there were many quarrels with the inhabitants of the Great Forest.

However, after they put an end to the escalating conflicts with the Beast Race, the Acceptance faction's influence rose.

For the following 30 years, the Acceptance faction had complete control, but then the miko was born, and gave her support to the Expulsion faction. The archbishop that was part of the Expulsion faction rose to Cardinal, and the Expulsion faction is currently rising back up.

That about sums it up.

Lastly, about Hitogami's involvement.

From what Orsted said, there don't seem to be any people of importance currently in Milis. No matter how much the Kingdom of Milis falls, they won't side with the Demon Race when Laplace starts a war.

To both Hitogami and Orsted, which faction wins out doesn't matter at all.

But then, the most ideal situation for me is if Cliff becomes Pope.

There is the possibility of Hitogami acting to prevent that.

However, even considering that the recent development is strange.

I can't see the meaning in kidnapping Zenith.

Honestly, it seems fine to consider Hitogami's involvement to be minimal.

"If you're not sure about someone, kill them. It may thwart Hitogami's predictions."^[43]

is what Orsted always says.

This time, I'm starting to get the feeling that I should really do that.

So far, that's all we have.

I probably should have gathered this much information beforehand.

Well, this visit to Milis was rather abrupt, and I was optimistically thinking that I would just arrive, give my greetings and shortly depart.

When I go to the Kingdom of the Dragon King, I'll make sure to do a better job preparing.

Part 4

Another few days pass.

Therese came bearing good news.

"Mother implicitly confessed to confining Zenith."

"Ooooh!"

Therese used one of her few vacation days to meet with Claire.

While being cross-examined, it seems she indirectly admitted to using her subordinates to deceive Gisu and kidnap Zenith.

Thus, she is definitely confining Zenith somewhere.

"However, as I expected mother seemed a little off... it's like she's hiding something, or is conflicted. I don't think she's seriously considering marrying Zenith off, but..."

"I see... so, where is she being confined?"

"Sorry, I couldn't get that out of her."

Therese's expression became gloomy.

She tried to get Claire to cough up Zenith's location, but failed.

After that, she tried to persuade Claire to return Zenith to me.

Something like, I'm not sure what Zenith's current condition is, but I'm sure you won't be able to easily find a marriage partner for a widow with a mental condition.

Something like, I'm sure you don't acknowledge Rudeus, but he is in a position to immediately be granted audience with the Pope, you should interact with him more seriously.^[44]

Something like, that kind of person said that he'll care for Zenith until he dies, so isn't it fine to entrust her to him?

However, Claire gave some meaningless reply and evaded the topic.

"She ended up moving the topic to asking me when I'll finally get married... Sorry. When she says that it always turns into a fight..."

"..."

Gisu said that after the kidnapping, there have been no suspicious movements.

Claire was acting as if she were hiding something, or conflicted.

The information from Orsted that she's not the type of person to forcibly kidnap someone. Something may be going on after all.

...Even if something's going on, I don't have any obligation to take that into consideration.

She didn't take my circumstances into consideration, after all.

She was making light of me.

"Well, the Latreia house wasn't even able to arrange a marriage partner for me. I'm sure that they won't be able to quickly find one for Zenith."

"Huh? Ah, that's right. That's definitely the case."

I don't really understand the logic there, but if Therese says so then it's certainly true.

"Anyways, mother is just being stubborn. Next I'll close in on her from her surroundings. I've already passed the story on to father, and I've called brother and sister back from the countryside. Although she's like that, mother respects the opinions of men. If father or brother talks to her, she will definitely listen."

"You've been taking care of everything... I can't thank you enough."

"You don't need to thank me. Mother's in the wrong, after all."

Therese is handling things well.

To the point that I wonder why she's so devoted.

Even though we've only met once or twice...

"Therese! Is your conversation over?"

When the conversation came to a pause, the miko came over.

"Yes, miko-sama! I express my humblest apologies for taking time for personal matters while on duty!"

"It's fine. He's Eris-sama's husband, after all. Favors must be repaid. Milis-sama is always watching over us, after all."

I see, Therese working so hard to help me is also because of Eris.

I get the feeling that this is the first time that someone was thankful for something Eris had done.

Alright, once the children are a little bigger, I'll come back with Eris.

"Miko-sama, it is almost time."

"Let us return to your room."

"Rudeus-dono, thank you as always."

Recently, the miko's followers have become lenient around me.

Certainly at the beginning, since I had connections to someone from the Pope's faction, the guards made preparations to strike me down several times, but recently they haven't really been flaring up at me.

They still remain vigilant, but since I'm more or less neutral in regards to the power struggle, they have been thinking of me as a safe person to associate with.

No, I've been giving it my best as well.

I never showed any intention to harm the miko, I haven't been strangely humbling myself in front of the miko,^[45] and I've always been trying to entertain the miko with humorous stories.

Whenever she's with me, the miko is always in a good mood.

After she returns to her room, she seems to look forward to my next visit.

It's the result of my efforts.

Furthermore, there's also the fact that Theresethe Guard Commander^[46] treats me cordially.

When the commander isn't at all vigilant, it may seem silly to be on guard.

Honestly, I'd like them to be more on guard.
Like this, kidnapping the miko would be a piece of cake.

However, there's a chance that Therese's efforts prove fruitless, and Zenith doesn't return.
If my back is against the wall, and there's nothing else I can do, I'll do it.
Whether it's kidnapping the miko or raiding the Latreia house, I'll do whatever it takes.
My number one priority is Zenith.
If I don't rescue her, I won't be able to face the dead Paul, or Lilia who I left Sylphy in the care of.

Based on that, I avoid eye contact with the miko.
I don't know to what extent her ability to read memories will let her read someone's thoughts.
If I meet eyes with her, she may not be able to tell that I'll resort to kidnapping her if necessary.
However, I don't want to take any chances.
Whatever the case, I'll make sure not to initiate eye contact with her.

I don't think any of the guards noticed that I'm avoiding eye contact.
Even if they did, the headquarters seem to be full of people who avoid eye contact with the miko.
Anybody would find it unpleasant to have their memories read.
Nobody should find it strange to avoid eye contact with her.

Kidnapping her would be easy.
All I would need to do is hide a scroll with a teleportation circle on it in the ground underneath the chair she's always sitting in.
To carry out the kidnapping, I just need to put magic power into the magic circle behind the guard's backs.
When the miko disappears before my eyes, I'll surely be doubted.
However, they won't be able to prove it.
The ink would disappear, leaving only the paper.
Save rare cases, nobody would notice that I used a teleportation circle.

The teleportation circle connects with the mercenary company's branch office. That area is filled with food and clothing to establish the mercenary company. While carrying out negotiations, Aisha will watch over the miko.

However, I'd like to avoid this if at all possible.

That would be inexcusable to Therese, who is in charge of guarding the miko.

She has truly been treating me warmly.

She felt indignation at Claire's high-handed methods.

To help with persuasion, she got in touch with her siblings in a town away from Milishion.

Although I still don't know what Lord Carlyle who should be nearby thinks...

In any case, Therese is seriously trying to persuade Claire.

I don't want to take advantage of her and carry out the kidnapping.

"Therese-san. If you have time, please introduce me to Lord Carlyle, aunt, and uncle. Not only should I give them my greetings, I'd like to personally ask them for their assistance as well."

"Sure."

However, even with that.

If necessary, I'll act on my own.

Even if it's dishonorable, I want to fulfill the promises I made to Paul and Lilia.

If it comes to that, though, I'd like to sever my ties with Therese beforehand.

When I am sure that Therese will not be able to persuade her, I'd at least like to not use any cowardly tricks, and beat down the guards from the front to kidnap the miko.

It's opposite of what I prepared for.^[47]

"Instead of Zenith who has such a magnificent son, why can't they try to find a partner for me?... *sigh*"

To the Therese who was grumbling while departing, I once again bowed my head.

I'm really not that magnificent.

Part 5

Another few days pass.

It's been 14, maybe 15 days since I came to this country.

New information arrived from Gisu and Aisha, who participated in the search after securing a base.

Yesterday, someone from a clothing store came and went from the Latreia house.

When Aisha and her helpers tied her up, they found out that she had received an order for a wedding dress, and took measurements for it from a woman in the Latreia household.

Since the woman was described as slightly past her prime with a vacant look in her eyes, it's definitely Zenith.

Furthermore, Claire seems to have had her butler go out in secret yesterday to contact someone in the church.

From the course of events, I guess a marriage partner has been found.

If that's the case, we're almost out of time.

However, we shouldn't rush.

Currently, the Latreia house's eldest son and eldest daughter are headed here after receiving Therese's call.

According to the contents of the letter that previously arrived, they are going to tell Claire "No matter how you look at it, there's no way you should marry off a daughter that can't even speak."

I still haven't met Lord Carlyle.

As a battalion commander, I'm sure he's very busy.

But then, according to Therese "He's not the type of person to permit Claire's current actions."

Aisha also remembered that "The head of the family treated me kindly."

I don't know what he's going to say regarding this case, but I would like to meet him soon.^[48]

If the whole family including the head are opposed, Claire can't simply do what she wants.
Even if she manages the household, she's not the head.
Even if she tries to do something, it's just a matter of time.
You could call it, checkmate.
I can't be thankful enough to Therese who quickly changed the situation.

Even if that doesn't work, we already know Zenith's whereabouts, and I've grasped the estate's combat potential.
If we go to Therese beforehand, we can get a rough sketch of the mansion and a conjecture on where Zenith's being held.
Of course, if the family head becomes an ally, it won't reach the level where we need to perform a raid.
Just slightly forcefully find Zenith and censure Claire.
If it's like that, it will end as merely a problem between me and the Latreia house.

Good.
Somehow, it seems we can put an end to it simply as a problem between me and the house.
Without causing trouble for Cliff or the Pope, we can use the whole Latreia family besides Claire as intermediaries.
There have been twists and turns, but it looks like it will settle into the ideal form.

Yup.
It's a good thing I didn't rampage back there after all.
If I properly consult with my surroundings and remove the obstacles, there's no problem at all.
There was no need to kidnap the miko.
Back then, I wasn't thinking straight.
If you try to find a way to break through everything in one shot, you may end up doing something outrageous.

Steadily taking care of everything one by one.
If you do that, then look, you can properly corner the villain.
I can't get revenge, but she won't be able to continue.

"..."

While thinking such things, I headed for the headquarters' courtyard.
During these 14, 15 days all these Sarak trees' blossoms have fallen.

However, in my picture they are in full bloom.
Let's let the pink petals fall today as well.

That picture will also be finished soon.
Even I think that it's an awful drawing.

In the beginning, the miko's cronies were making fun of me to their hearts' extent.
However, when I added in the miko wearing a white one-piece dress, they changed their opinions in an instant.
It was a storm of praises.
They are a simple lot.

The miko also said that she'd like to have the picture when it's done.
If my pictures are fine with you, you can have as many as you want.

Incidentally, I'm also thinking about secretly making a figure to show her.
Now that I think about it, even without weakening the Demon Race Expulsion faction's fighting power to raise the Pope's faction's influence, if the miko uses her authority to say "I approve of the sale of these figures!", it will probably be enough.
At first I won't sell Demon Race figures, but if I sell more and more figures and then make a Demon Race one as part of the series...

No, it's still impossible.

The miko doesn't seem to have that much authority.

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, I felt something was out of place at the entrance.
I can feel people's presence.

"...Have they already arrived?"

Normally, a while after I enter the park a number of guards will enter the garden and patrol, and then the miko will come out.

There usually isn't anyone there around this time, I wonder if they started the patrol early. Or maybe, it's someone else entirely.

I stepped foot inside the garden.

The completely flowerless Sarak trees.

Set up underneath that, my easel and canvas.

I can't see the figures of any people.

I thought I felt their presence, but I guess it was my imagination.

Since when I think about it, it's not like I have an eye like Ruijerd's.

"Hm?"

In that one place, there's something I don't remember.

On top of the easel.

On top of the easel is a burning candle.

Standing alone, a single candle.

The flame was slowly dancing in the light of the sun.

Now that I get a closer look, I can see footprints in the flowerbed.

One set of footprints.

They lead to the other side of the Sarak tree.

Someone seems to be hiding behind its trunk.

"...Therese-san?"

While calling out, I opened the eye of foresight.

No reply.

Something's wrong.

"Is someone there!?"

While letting out a stronger voice, I instill the Magic Armor with mana.

Ready for battle.

While distributing my attention to all my surroundings, I approach the Sarak tree.

If they don't come out then it's fine.

While keeping my distance, I'll attack with magic once I reach a blind spot.

So I don't damage the tree that the miko likes... Wind magic.

Victory goes to he who strikes first.

"Huh?"

The mana I'm pouring into my right hand is dispersing.

Something's not right.

Once I noticed that, it was already too late.

When I took a large back-step, I slammed into the wall behind me.

When I looked back, there is nothing there.

No, there was an invisible wall.

"...!"

I immediately look to my feet.

There, hidden in the light of the morning sun, is a magic circle that's faintly glowing with a pale blue light.

"...A barrier, huh."

It's a barrier magic circle that I remember seeing before.

When you try to leave the area cordoned off by the magic circle, an invisible wall obstructs you.

When you try to use magic within the bounds of the magic circle, it disperses.

"It's a King Ranked barrier, Rudeus-kun."

A voice could be heard from behind the tree.

Slowly emerging from the tree's shadow is a woman clad in blue armor.

A head that resembles Zenith's is hidden behind a boorish helmet.

Not just her.

From the shadows of other trees in the thicket, men covered in armor are appearing one after another.

The ones who gather around the otaku princess,^[49] otakus.

Also known as the Order of the Temple.

Or at least I think so, but their faces are covered by helmets with weird shapes.

"Sorry, but... we received information that you were attempting to kidnap the miko-sama."

I was astonished.

The knights were circling the barrier to surround me.

The only one who gave away her whereabouts, Therese, spoke from right in front of me.

"Therefore, we will now begin the Inquisition."

The men wearing helmets stabbed their swords into the ground, scabbard and all.

A strange sound echoed throughout the surroundings.^[50]

Chapter 7

Turning Over and Picking Up the King Piece

Part 1

Hello everyone.

Rudeus Greyrat here.

Presently, I'm surrounded by those guys.

You know, those guys in polished blue armor. Eight knights were closing in around me.

Today I think I'll take a moment to introduce them one by one.

Knight #1, Therese, directly in front of me.

Therese Latreia.

Yep.

My aunt, one of Latreia's lot.

Out of all the Temple Knights in the expulsion faction, she has a slightly different nature.

She was sympathetic to me despite my ties to the demon race...

Rather, demons and humans, we're really not all that different, are we?

You'd normally show me a kindhearted face, but what kind of expression are you wearing now?

Your face is hidden by a helmet, so I can't tell.

Let's proceed clockwise, to the right.

And, on Therese's right...

A man wearing a skull-like helmet.

The side of his breastplate is cracked.

That injury looks familiar.

I don't know his name, but he looks like a knight with a name like [Skull Ash].

He's a skull-head, no doubt.

Next to him...

A man wearing a garbage can-like helmet you'd see on the street corners of Milis.

Out of the 7 other people here, only you chose to wear a red cloak.

The Miko really likes that cloak, she would always wipe her dirty hands on it.

I think his name was [Dust Box].

And to his right...

A man wearing a smooth helmet with the words [Sleep Peacefully] engraved in it.

He's probably over two meters tall.

Once I'd seen the Miko ride on top of his shoulders to pick fruits off the trees in the garden.

His name was something like [Grave Keeper].

Number four...

He's wearing a helmet like a bamboo broom on his head.^[51]

His armor is featureless.

Well...

Broom... cleaning...

Ah, perhaps this guy was called [Trash Sweeper].

Three remaining.

Honestly I can barely tell them apart, I won't be able to remember them.

If I'm not mistaken, they should have names like [Death] or [Grave].

Whenever the Miko would call out to them, they would proudly puff out their chests.

They were code names that made my back itch.

Oh, that's right.

[Black Coffin].

[Burial Garment].

[Cortege Head].^[52]

It was something like that.

The team name... what was it... um...

"It is time to commence the inquisition! Inquisition Chief of the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)], Therese Latreia initiating!"

"Hah!"

The seven knights surrounding me stabbed their swords into the ground.

That's right, they were called the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)].
I think Therese told me that once.

"Then I shall begin questioning the accused. Are there any objections!?"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"Objection! Movement for immediate execution!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"Objections dismissed!"

Aw, Dust-san looks depressed.

That's right, finding out the facts incidentally, after passing judgement with a smirk and no investigation, that's no good.

... Ah, it's my turn.

"Rudeus Greyrat stands as the accused!"

Um... Please wait a moment.

I can't swallow this situation.

Somebody, give me a hint.

Here's what happened...

In order to rescue Zenith I met with Therese, the captain of the Miko's guard, at the religious headquarters, to lay the groundwork for negotiations, and was captured in a king-class barrier.

According to their story, I'm apparently suspected of being a heretic plotting to kidnap the Miko.

Ah, that's right, thank you inner monologue.

Okay.

Yeah, I might have considered kidnapping the Miko once or twice.

However I gave up on that, I came here to ask Therese to help negotiate for Zenith's release.

In other words, this situation is some kind of mistake.

Has somebody been spreading false rumors?

I haven't told my kidnapping idea to that many people.

Aisha, Gisu, Cliff... and the Pope?

The Pope is the most likely suspect.

Or, maybe Gisu was caught, and spilled everything after being tortured.

... Is Aisha safe?

"The trial has begun! Defendant Rudeus, you are required to answer all questions honestly."

"... Yes."

I don't understand the situation.

For the time being I should settle down and listen.

If I start acting violently here it will only send me back to square one.

"Defendant Rudeus Greyrat.

Have you or have you not been distributing books claiming that demon races are not evil, in order to seduce the hearts of believers?"

They seem to have been investigating me.

Well, the Pope also knew.

I wonder if they have a database somewhere.

"No."

"Please answer honestly. Are you claiming that our investigation was misinformed?"

"I'm not freely distributing the books, I'm properly making money."

"That can't be possible, selling them at such a cheap price."

Well, I guess it is cheap.

I'm more focused on volume than profit margins.

"Therese you should also understand, I--"

"The defendant is not permitted to speak outside of directly answering questions."

I just want you to listen for a moment.

I have a reason, to help Ruijerd.

Even you should know that Therese.

We've spoken about this in the past.

"Defendant Rudeus Greyrat.

Do you worship the demon race and revere them as God?"

"..."

There's no use answering these kinds of questions.

"No, I do not believe in God."

"Unbelievable!"

"The accused has lied!"

"It's a lie!"

"Liar!"

"He must be lying!"

"It is my judgment that the defendant is lying!"

"That's a lie!"

"According to the majority vote, it is concluded to be a lie."

It was concluded.

A majority vote, how democratic.

That's right.

I guess an inquisition is this kind of thing.

"This is the last question.

Defendant Rudeus Greyrat.

Have you planned to kidnap the Miko, the symbol of the Milis religion?"

"No. I may have said as much as a joke, but it never reached the level of creating a plan."

Well when I said it, it certainly wasn't a joke...

But that doesn't mean I'd made preparations.

Take it with a grain of salt... it was a joke.

"Lie!"

"The accused has lied!"

"It's a lie!"

"He's lying!"

"It's a lie!"

"It is my judgment that the defendant is lying!"

"That is a lie!"

Right.

Well this is an interesting turn.

I absolutely can't start laughing at my own inquisition.

That's no way to determine if someone is lying, but laughing at this farce won't help.^[53]

However, that was the last question...

"According to the majority, it is concluded to be a lie."

At Therese's solemn words, the seven knights struck their swords.

Wow, that's intimidating.

If I hadn't been observing their substance this past month, it might have gotten to me.

"As a result of the trial, the defendant Rudeus Greyrat is hereby recognized as a heretic."

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"I object, such a judgment is unnecessary! I recommend sending the defendant home to tend to his rice harvest!"

"... No objection!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

"No objection!"

When I butted in with my objection, they glared at me for a moment.

I'm sorry, it was Trash-san's turn.

"The inquisition has been concluded. For the crime of attempted kidnapping, the judgment is capital punishment!"

"What, is that like the death penalty?"

I don't really expect an answer, but I decided to ask anyway.

"No... your life will not be taken.

Your hands will be cut off to prevent the use of magic, then your arms will be sealed within a barrier and encased in earth."

I got my answer.

Well, this isn't a situation to mess around in, what should I do...

Their goal is to confine me.

I'll have plenty of opportunities to attack later.

However, they plan to seal me.

They plan to cut off my hands, and me in a barrier.

Furthermore they plan to encase my arms in earth.

If that's the case, I won't be capable of magic or swordsmanship.

I guess that's the meaning behind being [sealed].

If you do that, I won't be able to touch my wives' breasts.

I'd have to go back to using artificial arms...

Zariff's prosthetic hand doesn't have a bad sense of touch, but it doesn't feel very good for the person being massaged.

After all, a human hand should be warm and soft, and there's no warmth in a prosthetic hand.

"Therese-san, do you like to cripple people as a hobby?"

"... Isn't it a good hobby not to kill people?"

I feel like I've gotten a glance at her true nature.

I wonder if she really thinks that way.

The hands are used to kill people if they're allowed freedom...

Even though it's the opposite... I need these hands for love, not war.

"Er, but if I embrace my wife without any hands, won't I look stupid?"

"Ha? What...?"

"Eh, ah, for example, embracing my wife... pleasurably, you know."

"Che!"

After being told such an embarrassing thing twice, she finally got it and clicked her tongue at me.

What for...

Meh.

Even if you catch me being ero, it's not like I need your approval.

"Well in that case, I guess you guys aren't just going to let me escape?"

"That's right."

"That trial was a joke, are you serious?"

"That's right."

"If you called over Miko-sama, I could prove my innocence... Certainly Miko-sama should be at such a trial?"

"... A gathering of seven Temple Knights has more than enough authority to convict a simple heretic."

"In other words, you do not plan to call Miko-sama over."

"That... is correct."

I can't see Therese's expression under her helmet.

But her voice was trembling, just a little.

"You've been kind to me up until now, was that all an act leading to this moment?"

"... No, we, even Miko-sama had accepted you. This is your betrayal Rudeus-kun."

"This is not my betrayal, I trusted you Therese, and came to get along with Miko-sama who is important to you."

"..."

No answer.

She should have heard me.

Ha...

It's a pity.

It's really a shame.

This time, I really intended to get along with both sides.

I tried to restrain myself, I denied my rage, I was going to try to rescue Zenith peacefully.

"Therese, what will become of my mother?"

".... I will take responsibility in persuading Claire. But at this time, that is irrelevant."

Fumu.

Judging from her answer, it doesn't seem that Therese is the main culprit.

"I am certainly not a Milis believer, though I do have a connection with the Pope... But you understood that from the beginning, didn't you? So why--"

"Haven't you asked enough questions?"

My question was cut off by a cold voice.

No sign of an answer.

Though I suppose this wasn't a 'give and take' in the first place.

"Then allow me to ask a final question, was this information given to you as a divine revelation in a dream?"

"No. This information is from a credible source. We would not trust the words of an incredible person."

"Even if the God in the dream calls himself Milis?"

The moment I said that, the knights around me began shouting protests.

"Milis is not an oracle!"

"That is why Milis is God."

"Even if there was a divine revelation, such a thing would not be given to lowly knights such as ourselves!"

"Only Miko-sama could be worthy of receiving such a revelation."

"That's right! Milis-sama doesn't even call out to the Miko!"

"Milis is God!"

"Those who doubt God are the devil!"

Then, surrounded by those voices, Therese proudly said...

"Yes, that's right. Well said everyone... Rudeus-kun, our faith is absolute."

"... I am relieved to hear that."

For the time being I may be surrounded by fanatics, but there doesn't seem to be an apostle of Hitogami among them.

Everyone here seems to be a pious Milis believer.

It's enough evidence just listening to them.

"...."

I lifted my hands out of the sleeves of my robe.

The sound reverberated through the cool air.^[54]

My left hand is equipped to deal with this kind of situation.

"[Absorption]"

I activated the magic absorbing stone in my palm.

The barrier at my feet disappeared without a sound.

The Temple Knights' eyes opened wide.

"Well then, shall we begin the fight?"

Part 2

"All hands! Spread out!"

At Therese's command, the Temple Knights jumped back.

I sidestepped towards the Temple Knights as they were trying to take distance, and started generating rock bullets with both hands.

Speed and hardness so-so.

Only to the degree that they might die if I hit them in the vitals.

Firing.

You're up first, Dust Box!

"Support!"

"Goodbye!"

The two rock bullets I fired towards Dust were deflected by the Temple Knights at his sides.

In their hands were something like translucent shields.

Elementary ranked barrier magic, [Magic Shield].

... Is that really elementary ranked? I was stopped by an elementary ranked spell?

"Dust, Grave, Skull right flank!

Trash, Coffin, Burial take the left!

Cortege and I will act as a mobile unit!"

Three people on each side fired magic off in unison.

Fire, water, and earth.

Three different attributes, not that it matters.

"[Absorption]"

While dissolving the magic with my gauntlet, I fired rock bullets to counter.

But, they were repelled.

The guy casting the barrier magic seems to be defending from behind.

"--With your blessing the small ember becomes a searing flame! [Flamethrower]!"

"--Bring down your majestic sword of ice, and strike! [Icicle Break]!"

At the same time magic was fired off from the other side.

Fire and water.

That's not it! The third one had his hands on the ground.

An Earth Lance!

"[Absorption]!"

I dissolved the fire and water magic simultaneously.

At the same time I countered the Earth Lance by creating a quagmire to disable it.

Oops, I was too slow.

I can't fire a counter.

But my legs still work.

I instantly back-stepped to avoid the magic flying at me from the other side.

Only one spell.

Only a fire spell. It looked like a normal [Fire Ball]?

Only one?

There are three enemies on that side, why not three?

I don't have time to think about that.

I aimed my hands at both their left and right flanks.

"[Stone Cannon]!"

Because I had gained some distance stepping back, I saw it well.

The Temple Knights' formation had three people on each side.

Among them, two people had translucent shields, and jumped to defend from my rock bullets.

Well played.

Though I'd increased the speed and mass of the rock bullets from earlier, they easily deflected them.

That style looks familiar.

The Water God Style.

I see, it can even be used in conjunction with barrier magic. That's amazing.

"Spirits of the earth! Answer my call and rise fourth to pierce the heavens! [Earth Lance]!"

"Magnificent spirits of the water, I appeal to the Emperor of Thunder! Bring down your majestic sword of ice, and strike! [Icicle Break]!"

In that moment, two of the Knights without the shields fired off spells.

Naturally, I dissolved them... Now, what to do.

The enemy has separated into a left flank and a right flank with three people each.

Among those three people, two use barriers to deflect my magic.

Because I've only been firing two bullets at a time, their two barrier strategy has been serving them well.

The third person counters by firing off an attack spell.

Then the flank that I didn't attack momentarily drops their shields.

And, when I'm defenseless, they fire off three spells.

They were able to fire off spells with three different attributes because they didn't leave two on defense.

I guess they're a bit short on information about me, since they're unaware that my magic absorption stone can simultaneously negate all magic.

At first they were only able to use magic to attack me from one side, probably because of the distance.

At that distance I was able to break into the core of their formation.
It should be possible to get an attack in while they're chanting...
They should be particularly vulnerable while their shields are down...
But, it won't work unless I break into their formation.

... That might not be a good idea.
Well, let's see how you like this?

"[Fireball]!"

While deliberately shouting loudly, I started packing mana into the spell.
Enough to generate a fire ball about two meters in diameter.
It had the size and heat of an advanced ranked spell.
But compared to the rock bullet's speed, it's slow.
Gently, I threw it like a slowball.
Aiming for both flanks.

"Support!"

Two knights stepped forward with barriers to block.
But, the magic barrier has a weakness.

"Ran Ma [Disturb Magic]!"

"!?"

I dissolved their barriers with [Ran Ma].
Both of the barriers protecting the left flank fell simultaneously.

Barrier magic, like most spells, continues to consume mana as you use it.
It's the same even for elementary ranked barrier magic.
In other words, even if they aren't chanting, I can negate it with [Ran Ma].

The right flank will still be protected, but, this is their loss.

"...!"

And the moment I thought that, something came flying at me from behind.
While looking back, I brought my right arm up to defend.
With a loud [Ga~an], something broke into pieces and shattered.

A brown rock, flying towards my face, was reduced to debris.
I received some of the impact around my elbow.
It was a rock bullet.
This was the first time my opponents have used that spell.

"Rudeus can use magic with both hands!
Two people are on defense, if an attack comes switch.
There's no room for mistakes!"

Therese and another person had snuck up behind me.
Now, I have to defend from the rear as well.

"...."

Before I noticed it, I had been surrounded.
I'm beginning to fall behind, that was a blunder.
No, I wonder what kind of countermeasures they have for close-combat.

The knights who received the fireball earlier are alive and well, with the exception of some smoke coming off their armor.

"Rudeus-kun. We are the strongest in the Temple Knights. You have no chance of winning."

"Really?"

"In the past ten days we have investigated your fighting style.
Thanks to your fame, we were able to arrange countermeasures."

Fumu.

Then, why haven't you drawn your swords?

I only use magic.

No, in the current situation, they may not be able to avoid my magic in close-combat.

Of course, I still have some tricks up my sleeves.

They might be weary of that, and avoiding close-quarters combat as a precaution.

Given my present situation, their strategy could be called effective.

But, if this becomes a fight of attrition, then I will have the upper hand.

They might have more countermeasures...

Then, it's about time I made my next move.

"Rudeus-kun, please surrender! You may have been able to use your magic tool to escape our barrier, but this is your loss, give up!"

"Hou?"

"The entrance to the garden is blocked by barrier magic! Help will not come!"

Is that right.

If you say it like that, then it's perfect.

They must have carefully devised this strategy to capture me.

I can't win with half-assed tactics.

I have to be thorough.

I might have to experiment in order to break through.

But, if I lose as a result, that would be disastrous.

"...[Quagmire]."

It's time to get serious.

Part 3

--- Therese's Perspective ---

At the same time Rudeus let out that murmur, my feet sunk into mud.

We were given information about this magic as well.

It's the same as Rudeus Greyrat's nickname, [Quagmire].

Normally, this magic would just produce a slick puddle at your opponents' feet.

But, as expected, this is a massive spell.

The entirety of this huge garden has become a muddy swamp.

Miko-sama's beloved Saraku trees and Balta trees began to creak as they started to sink into the mud.^[55]

But, you can't stop us with something like this.

Trash has already started the chant to counter it.

"...[Dense Fog]."

In the next instant, we were swallowed by a vast white fog.

This is bad!

"Stay alert! First we'll counter the quagmire, do not accidentally attack your comrades in the fog!"

The next moment, purple lightning leapt over the ground.

It was too fast, in an instant I heard a sharp [kii~] and the sound of an explosion.

"Do not panic! Our armor is resistant to [Electric]! Make sure he doesn't escape! Go!"

[OK!] echoed out from the fog.

All right.

According to our information, Rudeus is weak in close combat.

All of the members of [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)] are advanced rank or higher swordsmen, and capable of all advanced rank attack and barrier magic.

Even standing alone we are powerful, we are all well-versed in one on one combat, the fight is still in our favor.

Though I'm only around the intermediate rank in the Water God Style, Cortege is nearly saint ranked.

Even if Rudeus has power on par with an emperor ranked magician, it will not be possible for him to break through our defense.

We have not made a mistake in our strategy.

"--We are countering the [Quagmire]!"

"[Shifting sand]!"

As Cortege finished his chant, Trash's voice was heard.

The mud at our feet quickly turned to sand, and we freed our feet.

I'm sorry, Rudeus-kun.

[Quagmire] can be countered with the advanced rank magic [Shifting Sand].

But this isn't something they would have taught at the magic university.

Research for countering melded magic is still in its infancy...

I wonder if this is the first time his quagmire has been countered?

I don't know what you were planning, but this is checkmate.

Of course, I don't believe you were plotting to kidnap Miko-sama.

Miko-sama truly treasured your friendship.

You were sincerely worried about Zenith, and asked for my help...

I understand that was all you wanted.

But, it can't be helped.

Because these are instructions directly from the Cardinal.

Regardless of the authenticity of the information, we have to follow our orders.

Only Dust was truly enraged, because he earnestly loves Miko-sama...

At the very least, your life won't be taken.

I give you my word.

To be labeled by the Cardinal as a heretic and only deprived of your hands is an incredibly lenient judgment.

Therefore, we aren't even using poisoned swords.

It's all right, Rudeus-kun.

Although you are still young, don't you have a good bride?

With Eris supporting you, you'll be able to survive even without hands.

Moreover, you're even the Dragon God's subordinate.

I heard about it when I was a child, the Dragon Tribe has a mysterious power.

By some chance, it might be able to break our seal.

You can live out the rest of your life in a place our eyes cannot reach.

And, as for Zenith, I'll manage somehow.

But even though I told you that...

"--Resist the [Dense Fog]."

Cortege's voice brought me back out of my thoughts.

At the same time, I suddenly had a sense of discomfort.

... Something's strange.

What is it?

Nothing has happened.

That's it. After creating the dense fog, Rudeus hasn't moved an inch.

Will he try to escape? Or continue to fight?

However, even if I can't see more than a meter ahead, I should still be able to hear him.

After the initial [Electric], there was nothing.

Has he already escaped?

A [Quagmire], followed by [Dense Fog] and then [Electric] certainly stopped our advance.
Using so many different magics, but it's already too--

--[Wind Blast]!"

The wind magic cleared the fog in an instant.

"..."

"..."

"..... Eh?"

I can hardly believe my eyes.

After the fog lifted, Rudeus was gone.

All that was left was a torn, crumpled scroll.

And a huge... rock?

A statue?

Armor?

"... Summoning magic?"

I muttered those words to myself... Then, in the next moment...

The huge armor began to move.

This is beyond imagination, huge. It was moving at a tremendous speed.

Part 4

--- Rudeus' Perspective ---

I may have been at a disadvantage, but it's time to take the kid gloves off.

The fog is rapidly clearing.

Those guys are dumbfounded, they weren't prepared for this.

While opening my foresight eye I confirmed the positions of the guys with the barriers, one shot, two shots, three shots.

I easily penetrated their defenses.

Then smashed them with the MK-I's shield.

Of course, I went easy on them.

I only knocked them out.

They probably aren't dead.

At the same time I took another three down with the Gatling gun.

I swung my left arm in a wide arc.

There was a sound like a loud hum as my Gatling gun spat out a stream of rock bullets.

The three folded like twigs as my rock bullets crushed their shins.

I took care not to blow their legs off.

I also avoided their vitals, they shouldn't be dead, just stunned.

But, just in case, I nailed each of them in the head with another rock bullet to make sure they were out cold.

Two left.

I took a step back before turning around, like Orsted taught me to.

If an enemy attacks from behind, you have to use quick footwork to avoid them.

I didn't feel an attack coming, but it was just to make sure.

When I turned around, Therese was in front of me.

Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was hanging open, watching me.
The one next to her started to unsheathe his sword to defend her.

But, too late.

You're too slow.

If it had been Eris, she would have cut him down ten times before he had drawn his sword.

With the MK-I I can easily deal with this level of speed.

These guys can't compare to my training.

Before he could unsheathe his sword, I swatted him away with my fist.

He was blown away before he could make a sound, and crashed into the wall of the headquarters, stunned.

There she was still standing there with a frozen look of amazement.

She had a face as if she had no idea what had happened.

"W-, what..."

To her, I gave my minimum considerations, and knocked her out with a rock bullet rather than my fist.

Done.

After all, the MK-I can only be described as overwhelming.

I was able to finish off my opponents before they had a single opportunity to attack, and unceremoniously broke through all of their defenses.

I wonder if I'm being immature?

There she was, and the other Temple Knights, were scattered on the ground around me.

Nobody died.

Unless I find one of Hitogami's apostles, I'd like to avoid killing as much as possible.

That's my rule.

I was able to afford it this time.

"Haah~... I feel refreshed."

Recently, perhaps because I've had so much frustration accumulating, that was awfully refreshing.

After all, it's no good if you don't go on a rampage once in awhile.

At least according to Eris...

No, that's too violent.

However, what should I do now?

After all this, the Temple Knights will undoubtedly turn into my enemy.

To begin with, who was I betrayed by?

The only ones who knew about the kidnapping idea were me, Aisha, Gisu... also Cliff and the Pope?

What about that girl in Cliff's house?

First of all, it absolutely wasn't Aisha.

If she wanted to betray me, she wouldn't need to do such a thing.

It would be something like [Oniichan, give me a piggyback ride!] and then, while I was enjoying the feeling of her breasts on my back... she'd slit my throat.

Or she could just mix some poison into my drink.

Cliff and Gisu are also unlikely.

They're in similar positions.

They wouldn't need to use such a roundabout way to get rid of me when my back is exposed.

Then, is it the Pope?

Would the Pope try to kill me off with this timing?

What would he gain?

No, maybe it's the opposite.

Perhaps he simply wanted me to remove a few Temple Knights from the board.

From the Pope's perspective, even though I gave him my support, I never actually did anything to support him.

Perhaps this was his plan to put me to use.

And then, while I stall her escorts, the Pope has the perfect opportunity to kidnap the Miko...

Wait wait.

Therese said that the information came from a credible source.

For her, would the Pope be a trustworthy source?

The Pope is her enemy.

Above anyone else, wouldn't he be an untrustworthy source?

In the first place, there's also the possibility that accusing me of plotting to kidnap the Miko is just a coincidence.

Although there's a grain of truth, someone could have just made it up.

Wait.

Rather than thinking this is an accident, I should consider Hitogami's involvement.

Once again, it's possible that one of Hitogami's apostles is lurking behind the scenes.

Yeah, compared to a betrayal, it seems likely that guy was involved.

What is Hitogami's intent?

I can't see the future, I have no idea.

Everything bad happens because of that guy.

"...."

I have no idea who the culprit is.

Thinking about it is useless.

I have more immediate problems.

The problem is determining who my enemies are.

Currently, I don't know what has happened to the Miko.

But the Temple Knights guarding her are already in this state...

From this, I can assume the Cardinal's faction will start moving against me.

First of all, they tried to arrest me for attempting to kidnap the Miko.

From here on out, they'll probably go after Cliff who brought me here, and Cliff's grandfather the Pope.

Ara?

I guess that means this wasn't the Pope's plan?

Uugh, it's troublesome to even come up with potential culprits.

What should I do...

What can I do...

I could gather everyone and escape from the capital?

No, what about Zenith?

I can't leave without Zenith.

I need to go to the Latreia house and rescue Zenith...

But, what if she isn't there?

If they're carrying out this kind of strategy, wouldn't they move Zenith to another location?

Still, do I just keep fighting with these knights until Milis is destroyed?

That seems like something Hitogami would want.

Meh.

Still...

I could do it...

For the time being, I'll evacuate Aisha, Cliff, and Gisu.

Then I'll go to the Latreia house to rescue Zenith.

If that doesn't work, I can always go up to the palace and capture one of the royal family to use in a hostage exchange.

That could also work.

It's all good.

I'm tired of thinking.

"... Ah."

Suddenly, a voice.

Someone looking out from the edge of the garden warped by my quagmire...

In front of a door in the headquarters that could only be unlocked with a special key, a lone girl stood.

Standing there, key in hand.

Alone.

"..."

It felt like she was looking into my eyes.

I tried to look away, but it was too late.

She had a look like she saw through me, and smiled.

Then opened her arms towards me.

I recognize that gesture...

It may have been intuition...

It was a split-second decision...

I kidnapped the Miko.

Chapter 8

Bullish Negotiations

Part 1

If eating poison, finish up the plate.^[56]

That's a saying.

If eating poison, don't forget to eat the plate.

That saying came about back when hard baked bread was used instead of a dish.

The hard bread would absorb flavor from the main dish, like meat, and then you could tear off pieces and dip it into soup to soften it up before eating.

So eating the plate means eating everything.

Swallowing everything despite the fear of poison.

It's the spirit of a feast.

... No, that's a lie.

The truth is, since he'll die anyway, he might as well keep looking forward and finish his meal, rather than die with an empty stomach.

I don't usually eat plates.

If the poison is going to kill me anyway, then there's no sense in eating porcelain and ripping apart my mouth.

But that's also a lie.

Well...

I'm currently sitting in the property that Aisha prepared for the new mercenary branch office.

It's in the commercial district, in the basement of an old tavern that went out of business. Barrels of preserved food were littered about, and there was a row of half-finished black cloaks.

I used a teleport scroll to get here.

Bi-directional travel.

That's why I set up this magic formation.

And, there's a girl standing in front of me.

A usually cutesy girl with childish gestures.

But her actual age is over 20.

"Truly, this is a quaint office."

The Miko girl sat down.

I didn't do anything like tie her up.

She sat with a [plop] on the dusty stone floor.

In the end, that's what happened, I took the Miko with me.

"What is your intention?"

"Huh?"

"Coming out with such timing, you didn't even try to run away..."

Thinking about it, the Miko came out with perfect timing.

Her timing was so perfect, it was almost as if she was waiting to make her appearance.

And then she was obediently caught.

"... I came out by chance. I didn't know there would be a fight... I was surprised because the garden was suddenly covered by a fog."

That's an unexpectedly hasty decision.

"Are you lying?"

"Yes, it's a lie. I read the memories of my caretakers, and found out that Therese was going to do something to you, so I came out."

"Ho~o... so you came to help me?"

"Yes. So, I went out, and once I saw your eyes, I realized it."

The moment she met with my eyes, she read my memories.

She was able to see right through the MK-I.

The abilities of Mikos really are mysterious things...

I don't even really understand the principle behind Zanoba's superhuman strength.

"We are friends. I want to help."

"..."

I silently turned my fingertip towards the Miko.

That's the poison dish.

I've already kidnapped you, there's no going back.

There's no backup plan.

I have to make a move.

I have two cards here.

Myself, and this person.

That's it, I have to assume the worst case scenario.

The Pope, the Cardinal, Therese, and Claire are my enemies.

Cliff, Aisha, and Gisu are already in Hitogami's clutches.

Although only an hour has passed, the Temple Knights must have mobilized.

Even though I didn't think anyone saw me teleport, I have to assume that I was seen and that the Temple Knights will arrive here at any moment.

Since there's no time to reset the MK-I's summoning setup, I already used a bog to hide it underground.

That would be the worst case scenario.

Just thinking about it makes me feel helpless.

All I have on hand is my own power, and the Miko.

With these two cards, I have to overcome this situation.

"Miko, before I can trust you, please answer my questions."

"Of course."

I need to question the Miko.

She did say she wanted to help me.

But before I put my trust in her, I need information.

"Please describe your ability as a Miko."

"Don't you already know?"

"I would like to hear it again directly from you."

It may be different from Orsted's information.

I need to reconfirm it.

"I can see the surface of a person's memories."

"Surface?"

"Yes. I can see a little bit of what a person is thinking and the memories associated with it."

"Isn't that the same as being able to read minds?"

"No, I can only see the past, the longer I look into someone's eyes the farther back I can see..."

She can see a person's memories...

But she can only see memories related to a person's present thoughts.

That kind of thing.

"Can you only look?"

"Yes, I can only look."

"It's not possible for you to return a person who lost their mind to their original state?"

"I cannot. If I used my power in conjunction with healing magic, it might be possible to come up with some kind of way..."

She can't restore Zenith's memories.

"... So you're not able to freely read your target's mind."

"Well, I can guess as much."

So she can only see memories related to what her target is thinking.

However, it's not like someone can just stop thinking in the middle of a conversation.

If someone asks [What did you have for breakfast?] then that's obviously going to be their next thought.

"Then as a guy with a shady background, I'd like to avoid making eye contact with you."

She's basically a human lie detector.

She can condemn anyone she doesn't like.

All she needs to do is make eye contact.

Even if she were to tell a lie, nobody would know...

It wouldn't matter.

The Miko is that kind of existence.

I understood as much by watching Zanoba.

Someone like that is of incredible political importance.

"But Rudeus-sama never looked away before."

"Because I wasn't doing anything shady."

Before, I wouldn't avert my eyes from the Miko.

But I'm getting desperate.

If she can see my memories just by looking into my eyes, then it would save time explaining everything.

"Oh? Is that okay? If you look into my eyes like that, I'll see everything..."

"...."

"Huh, Orsted-sama has such a curse... I see, Hitogami... His first advice... Ara?"

The Miko suddenly blushed.

What's wrong?

Did you see something erotic?

Well, if you were at my inquisition, you would have seen something like that anyway.

You've probably seen stuff like Milis priests' affairs before.

"So, two people at the same time... being in love with two people... Ah, an altar... eh? EH?"

At last, the Miko finally looked away.

She broke out into a cold sweat.

Her breathing was also rough.

She seems to have seen something she shouldn't have.

"What did you see?"

"Impure memories... And, a book, one that isn't allowed by the Milis religion, and... a strange ritual..."^[57]

"Then you have seen into my soul."

"Y-, yes."

The Miko retreated a little bit and adjusted her skirt to cover herself.

I have my peace of mind.

Roxyism may not be as white as the Milis religion, but it's still a beautiful blue.

It's not something out of an ero-doujinshi.

"Let's return to the discussion."

"Yes..."

I cleared my throat.

I'm sure I should be embarrassed right now.

In any other situation I would certainly feel ashamed.

Like getting caught being intimate, or suddenly blurting out some dirty line.^[58]

But this is different.

I didn't suddenly blurt anything out.

I have restraint...

Anyway, let's continue the talk.

"First of all, why did this happen. Miko-sama, who do you think the person behind this is?"

"The Cardinal, or perhaps the Pope trying to frame him. I do not think Hitogami is involved."

In other words, it's the head of Milis' Expulsion faction.

The Latreia house isn't involved...?

Then I might be able to launch a surprise attack...

"You don't think the Latreia house was involved?"

"Possibly, but I don't think they were the mastermind."

So it's unrelated to Zenith being kidnapped.

That's good.

Anyway, it's either the Pope or the Cardinal.

Both of those guys are suspicious.

"Why don't you think Hitogami is involved?"

"If his eminence followed the advice of Hitogami, he would not be a true Milis believer. Even though his eminence is a bad person, he is a pious Milis believer."

"But, what proof do you have?"

"If I look into someone's eyes, I will know."

I guess that was a stupid question.

But, can I believe her...

"If you cannot trust me, then use me as a hostage to exchange for what you want."

"As a card alone, you are not enough. The Temple Knights should already be prepared for that. If I tried to initiate a trade, in the end--"

"I am the will of the Temple Knights."

The Miko interrupted me and said that.

Then continued with an airy smile.

"The Temple Knights... rather, the entire Expulsion faction will lose their chance at victory if I die."

"In other words, you're confident that the other side will negotiate?"

"I take my value to them as a point of pride."

Really...

I don't want to see something like Aisha being cut down before my eyes.

"Even the Temple Knights wouldn't be that stupid and incompetent.

By now they could have captured Aisha and started looking for this location.

No, it's not even necessary to capture her. If they had been watching me, then this location should be known.

Even if I try to initiate negotiations, there's also the possibility that the Temple Knights try to rescue you."

"Then, I'll go with you when you start the negotiations."

"That's a bold idea, but if we're surrounded on the way, then it may become an all-out-war."

"If Rudeus-sama is there, wouldn't it be possible to brush them aside?

After all, you were even able to hold your own against people like Orsted and Auber."

You saw that too?

Well, it's possible.

I'm not bragging, they're small fries, I've gone up against far worse odds.

As long as I don't hold back.

If I fought with the intent to kill, then even those guys I just defeated awhile ago could have been wiped out instantly.

"If we were to be attacked, I think it would be by the Pope's faction rather than the Temple Knights."

"Why's that?"

"The Temple Knights do not want to risk my death.

However the Pope's faction would."

The Pope's faction would ostensibly move to protect the Miko.

But, even if she's killed during the confusion of a fight, they would profit.

"The Temple Knights could just use barrier magic or something to recapture you though."

"Out of all the Temple Knights, you have already defeated their strongest group.

If you consider the nature of the Temple Knights, they won't be able to come up with a stronger force.

Acting against you would be too dangerous."

... The strongest in the Temple Knights, were those guys?

Come to think of it, they did say they were the strongest.

Yeah they had good coordination, but...

No, I can't call them weak.

They were able to parry my rock bullets with barrier magic, and counter in rapid succession.

Even against the MK-I, they still tried to fight without being daunted.

They seemed to be around the advanced rank in the Sword God Style and Water God Style for the most part, and were capable of a minimum of intermediate attack, barrier, and probably healing magic too; taking that into consideration, they were a considerably high spec party.

Their individual strength might not be that high, but with the seven of them together, I can understand them being called the strongest group.

Therese didn't have much combat potential, but she had a good head for battle, her command was admirable.

I don't think I would have lost, even without the MK-I.

But, they could have managed to pull something.

Anyway, I've already defeated the strongest guys, so certainly...

No, but they were only the strongest Temple Knights.

"What about the Knights of the Order of Instruction, and I think I've heard there's an Order of the Church too?"

"The Order of the Church is the only other group of knights currently in Milis.

Although they act within the church, they don't interfere in these kinds of matters.

The Knights of the Order of Instruction are not currently in this country."^[59]

That's reassuring.

Hearing that gave me a confidence boost.

I can just take the hostage, and brazenly go out demanding negotiations.

This one is Orsted's subordinate! What do I have to worry about by being attacked!?"^[60]

The fact that the Miko hasn't already been ripped apart limb from limb and tossed in front of the church is only because of THIS ONE's generosity."^[61]

Maybe, if you get on your knees to apologize and meet my demands, I'll spare the Miko's life.

While I go through that act I'll just have the Miko cooperate and determine who Hitogami's apostles are.

Of course, a few bad weeds might end up being overlooked...

Depending on how the negotiations go, I should be able to get out of the country safely.

I'd have to give up opening a mercenary branch here.

In a few years, if Cliff gains influence, I might be able to ask again.

But depending on the flow, if the Pope is one of Hitogami's apostles for example, Cliff might have to give up gaining influence in this country...

It can't be helped.

Sorry Cliff, there's no choice.

"If you're worried about the other knights, it would be good to move quickly. If Rudeus-sama's friends have been captured, then time is not on our side."

"That's right..."

Still, it's only been about an hour since the kidnapping.

Even considering the worst case scenario, if Aisha or Gisu is caught and tortured... No, it's still too early.

However if I keep hiding myself, the other side will become impatient.

When you don't know what to do, you get impatient, everyone is the same.

Alright.

From here, it's a gamble.

It's no good if someone dies in exchange for the Miko.

I need to be prepared.

I need to want it.

Even if I can't have it...

I need some sort of trump card.

"... I wonder, Miko-sama."

"What is it?"

"Why are you siding with me? Allowing yourself to be captured so easily..."

The Miko gave me a puzzled look.

Then smiled softly.

It was a smile worthy of the symbol of the Milis religion.

"I am only alive now thanks to you and your Supard friend."

Is that what she understood from my memories?

Or did she see Eris's memories in the past?

I don't quite get it, but I guess Ruijerd and I did bring Eris to Milis.

However that answer is slightly suspicious.

"Since you're still not convinced, it's because I'm really angry that my subordinates tried to kill the first friend I've made in such a long time."

"...."

"Telling me all sorts of fun stories, even drawing me a picture, Milis-sama said [Thou shalt not be discourteous. Thou shalt not forget kindness.]"

"....."

"Originally, if you asked me for help with your mother's matter, I had planned to lend you my power in secret... But, you never asked."

When I remained silent, the Miko started to make a pouting face and sulk.

"Generally, Rudeus-sama, wouldn't someone in your position normally consider someone like me an enemy at first glance, and not hesitate to kidnap them?"

"Yeah..."

I never really considered you an enemy.

That's why I wanted to hear your story after kidnapping you.

Alright.

In any case, what's done is done.

I fell behind, and ended up in this situation.

Thinking about what could have been won't improve my current situation.

In the next act, I need to take a dominant position and make my stand, otherwise I won't be able to accomplish my goals.

My goals are as follows...

First, rescue Zenith.

Second, ensure the safety of Aisha, Gisu, and Cliff.

Third, try not to trouble Cliff.

Fourth, install a mercenary branch.

Fifth, permission for Ruijerd doll sales.

Sixth, establish Milis as an ally.

For now I'll focus on the first two.

Alright, then it's time to make my next move.

I now have a card in hand.

I have a very strong card in hand, the Miko.

I'm also a strong card in my own way.

If possible, I would have liked to have someone else.

Someone unrelated to this situation, someone who could make preparations.

I need to turn things around, this is the time for a pre-emptive attack.

"This mess would have been settled leaving nothing but a grudge if I'd just brought Eris along..."

"Yeah, I would have liked to see her again."

Then, it's time to begin.

Part 2

I returned to the religious headquarters.

It's been two, maybe three hours since that fight started.

I didn't see a single Temple Knight in town, like a charm.

At the same time I determined that Gisu and Cliff hadn't informed on me.

We initially escaped using a teleport scroll.

The existence of that type of teleport magic is not generally known.

With that in mind, it would make sense for the Temple Knights to blockade the entrances to the headquarters, thinking that I should still be inside.

After about an hour, the field commander might judge that I could have escaped the area. In order to search the city, they would probably request the main force of the Temple Knights, and take another hour organizing the search corps.

It wouldn't be strange for some sort of delay to occur, so that adds another hour...

Though the entrances to the city might already be blockaded, but they shouldn't be moving in full scale yet.

Mobilizing such a large organization is always difficult.

Cliff and Gisu, only those two know about the teleportation magic.

Gisu was present when I installed the magic circle in case we needed to make an emergency escape.

And Cliff even helped me draw the magic circles in the office's basement back in Sharia.

If they had betrayed me, then the Temple Knights would have known exactly where to start looking.

So I immediately discarded that suspicion.

But, it wouldn't be funny if the Pope or the Cardinal guessed that I'd used teleport magic. They might be able to obtain that kind of information.

Or Hitogami could be informing them from behind the scenes.

... When I think about that, I have a strange feeling.

It's been two hours, I feel like my opponents are falling behind...

Could Therese have been moving at her own discretion?

While thinking that, we approached the religious headquarters.

Then, guys wearing blue armor poured out in droves.

"Miko-sama has..."

"Rudeus has appeared with Miko-sama!"

"Call for support!"

Droves of knights were pouring out in a stream.

Not just from the headquarters, from the surrounding area too.

I was quickly surrounded.

Will it really be all right?

"Rudeus-sama, do not separate from me."

"...."

I grabbed onto the Miko's arm like it was my lifeline.

Although it's not like I'm holding a knife to her throat, some of the Temple Knights started to stir.

But they didn't attack.

The Miko was right.

"Treating Miko-sama that violently...!"

"You, Rudeus... Even I have not touched the miko like that..."

"Taking Miko-sama hostage, you are a disgrace to all Milis believers! Impermissible!"

One of those seems like a slightly strange thing to get angry about...

However they seem to have decided that I'm holding her hostage before I even said anything.

Well, naturally.

I annihilated her escorts and whisked her away.

What else could it be.

Even the mastermind behind this whole incident would see it that way.

"Captain, let's do it...! After fighting the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)] he can't have much mana left!"

"Wait, even so, he might still have enough strength left to harm Miko-sama."

"It's okay, if we all attack in unison, even that guy would defend himself instead of harming Miko-sama...!"

There's only one guy arguing.

I wonder, is he a direct pawn of the mastermind behind this incident...

"Miko-sama, there, whose underling is that? Is he being manipulated by Hitogami?"

"No, that is one of the Pope's underlings. Hitogami is uninvolved. He doesn't even seem to know the details."

I asked her in a whisper, and she whispered back a response.

Well, without knowing any details, I can understand thinking that.

Alright.

For the time being, I should start.

"I demand to speak with his eminence the Pope! Clear a path!"

I shouted as loudly as I could.

The knights started to stir again hearing me act so arrogantly.

"What did you say!"

"You bastard, how dare you ask for an audience with the Pope!"

"Release Miko-sama now, and receive judgment!"

Several people had already drawn their swords.

But, when the Miko started trembling in my grasp, the knights hesitated and returned their swords to their sheathes.

Ahh, wow, so that's the power of a Miko.

After watching those guys from the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)] I started to understand...

This girl is more like an idol than a princess.

Well then... let's start the script.

"My name is Rudeus Greyrat!

A representative of the Dragon God Orsted!

In the name of my lord, I do not intend to harm the Miko, the symbol of the Milis religion!"

I raised my right hand.

The bracelet I got from Orsted shone brilliantly on my wrist.

It may be weak as an ID card, but it should at least work in a bluff.

"But, if you do not meet my demands, I will make no such guarantee!

By making enemies of me, know that you are turning the entire Milis religion into an enemy of the Dragon God and his subordinates!"

I decided to open the negotiations aggressively.

I properly prepared my lines.

I used Orsted's name without permission, but it's no problem.

He doesn't really have any other subordinates, but it's no problem.

"...!"

The Temple Knights winced, and took a step back.

With that they should understand that I'm not some random kidnapper, I'm a big wig in the organization.

As long as they understand that, I'm OK.

"I demand an explanation of my matter directly from his Holiness!

This is a demand directly from the Dragon God's representative!

I demand to know where my mother is being detained!

The fate of the Miko's life is dependent on the answer!"

I just want to talk in the end.

Suddenly, being accused of kidnapping, and then convicted in a farce of a trial.

I'm angry.

I'll demand an apology and reparations.

I'll take that opportunity to make Zenith's matter the entire Milis religious organization's problem.

"..."

"What...?"

"Taking Miko-sama hostage for such a reason is..."

However the Temple Knights didn't clear a path.

Slow.

Can you not let me through because there's no one important enough here to make the decision?

If I wait a bit, will a commander come out?

"Open the way!"

"Move!"

"Do you intend to let Miko-sama die!?"

While I was thinking, the back suddenly became noisy, and a group of four men and women appeared.

Among them, three looked familiar.

They were members of the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)].

Their armor looked like it had some painful dents in it.

There she was with them.

When she saw me, she lowered her eyes apologetically.

Another person was with them, a man in what looked to be his late fifties with a white beard.

Although he had deep wrinkles on his face, he had sharp eyes, his age had not weakened him.

I don't recognize him.

He's wearing the same blue armor as everyone else, so he should be a Temple Knight.

But, his armor's design is a little more elaborate.

It felt like it was an upgrade from Therese's armor.

Presently, I'm surrounded by normal Temple Knights.

Only a short distance away are the rest of the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)].

And Therese, the commander of the elite Temple Knights, is with them.

This guy seems to be something like the king of the Temple Knights then.

"Temple Knights, Sword Group [Battalion Commander] Carlyle Latreia."^[62]

... Ah.

This person... is Carlyle.

My grandfather...

"Despite our current situation... Nice to meet you, Rudeus Greyrat, son of Zenith Greyrat."

I got my answer in an instant, as Carlyle focused in on me.

His gaze is sharper than Claire's.

Can a married couple really be that similar?

This might be troublesome...

"Is that right?"

".... No."

I thought upon his meaning for a moment, then shook my head after remembering my interaction with Claire.

I am here as Orsted's subordinate.

I am Zenith's son as well... but I'm not here in that position.

If you don't insist on equal footing, then it's impossible to negotiate on equal footing.

"I am the Dragon God Orsted's representative, Rudeus Greyrat. I demand an audience with his Holiness."

"Hm."

I stuck out my chest, lifted my chin, and struck Eris's pose to answer.

For a fraction of a second, it looked like Carlyle showed a gentle smile.

However his expression immediately stiffened.

"Very well, I will guide you there."

While keeping a tough face, Carlyle turned heel.

Therese was making a difficult face, and followed Carlyle.

"... What about them, Miko-sama?"

".... Therese only followed the Cardinal's orders. Carlyle did not make eye contact, so I do not know."

I consulted the Miko again in a whisper.

Convenient.

Carlyle is undetermined.

He doesn't feel like an enemy, but he gives off an odd feeling, I'll keep my eye on him.

Disregarding the other Temple Knights, I followed after them.

Part 3

We were guided straight into the center.

I was in the middle, there were members of the [Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)] to my front, back, left, and right.

They aren't wearing their helmets anymore.

They're all firmly walking on two feet, they must have received healing magic.

Although I remain on guard, it doesn't seem like they intend to attack me.

I easily broke through the king class barrier they boasted about.

Then, crushed them head on.

But I didn't kill anyone, they should clearly understand that I was holding back.

The difference in strength was obvious.

Moreover, I have the Miko.

They shouldn't be stupid enough to challenge an opponent they lost to only a few hours ago and jeopardize the Miko.

I mean, these guys should be completely embarrassed.

Especially Mr. Dust.

He's been deliberately avoiding eye contact for awhile now.

But I don't sense any malice.

No hostility either.

He doesn't even seem that guarded towards me.

Rather, he's positioning himself as if he were protecting me.

"..."

We've been walking through the center for a few minutes.

Before I noticed it, I lost my sense of direction.

The passages almost felt circular, but we also went around a few 70 degree turns...

When I came here before, I thought these passages were tricky.
They're like a labyrinth.

"It's like a maze."

"Yes. In case of emergency, these halls were designed so people like the Pope and I could easily escape."

The Miko answered.

The walls also seem to be covered in a kind of barrier.

For a moment, it was almost quiet enough that you could fall asleep.^[63]

"Yes!"

"Miko-sama knows all these passageways!"

"We used to run through here playing tag!"

Then all at once, her lackeys started boasting.

So, it really was designed to let important people escape.

However, I can't help but feel lost.

There's no way I could find my way out of here...

I'd probably have to blow a hole through the ceiling.

The walls... since they're covered in a barrier, I wonder if the magic absorbing stone would work?

Yeah.

I may have come in here nonchalantly, but I'll be OK.

"We're still not there? I'll be troubled if we have to go much further."

"Only a little further."

Carlyle responded without looking back.

Really?

This doesn't feel like a trap.

I'll be cautious, I'm keeping an eye on the guys behind me as well.

Then, suddenly, those guys start shouting.

"Carlyle! Don't be impolite! At the very least look at him when you speak!"

"Rudeus is holding Miko-sama's arm!"

"What if he becomes angry and harms Miko-sama!"

"Please look, look at the dents in this armor! Only someone with superhuman strength could do this to the Temple Knights' armor!"

"Even if he becomes a little displeased, if Miko-sama is bruised..."

"Everyone be quiet!"

Therese had to scold them to shut them up.

At the same time, Carlyle paused and faced me.

"It is only a little further."

"... Very well."

I nodded again, and resumed following him.

It couldn't have been more than ten steps later...

Carlyle stopped in front of a door and knocked.

"We have brought Rudeus Greyrat."

It really was just a little more.

Sorry, I didn't mean to rush you.

Come to think of it, even though I completely lost my sense of direction, we only made two turns.

I might be able to find my way back.

"Please, enter."

I heard the Pope's voice from within the room.

Carlyle murmured a light prayer towards the door, and then opened it.

While holding the door open, he motioned to invite me inside.

"Please enter."

"Yes, excuse me."

I entered the room holding the Miko's arm.

Well, I kind of feel like I should have let go of her arm by now...

No, no.

I can't relax my guard.

"..."

I entered something like a conference room.

There was a long table, with ten or so seats arranged so you could sit face to face.

The Pope was there, Cliff too.

There was another person who looked similar to the Pope, wearing an expensive looking vestment. I wonder if that's the Cardinal?

Aside from Carlyle, there was another guy wearing an expensive looking set of armor.

White armor.^[64]

Behind them stood seven knights, with their arms crossed.

Two of them had familiar faces.

They were the Pope's bodyguards.

Everyone was facing me.

It looks like I interrupted a heated debate.

Holding their breath, silently, they were watching me.

And, at a somewhat secluded place at the table.

There were two people sitting alone.

One person, an old woman with her lips tightly closed.

She was glaring at me.

Claire Latreia.

And, next to her.

It was...

Finally...

A woman absentmindedly looking up at the ceiling.

Just under 40 years old.

The woman my father loved more than anyone else.

My mother.

Zenith was sitting there.

Ara?

Wait.

... Why are these two here?

What is this?

I still haven't made any demands.

I didn't tell them to bring Zenith.

[Bang].

That sound broke the silence.

The door closed behind us.

The Temple Knights arranged themselves as to protect the door.

They stood opposite the other knights in the back of the room.

Only Therese was seated.

"Well then, now that all the actors are on the stage, let's commence."

The Pope sat back and said that.

Apparently, in the last few hours, something seems to have changed.

I thought I took the first move, but was I beaten to the punch?
Hmph.

"Rudeus-sama, Miko-sama, would you please take your seats?"

I wonder if I've fallen behind.

But, this situation, it's not bad.

I can work with this.

Chapter 9

What am I Wavering Over?

Part 1

When seeing Zenith and Claire, I don't think I let my trembling show.^[65]

I wasn't sure I could win.

I wasn't confident everything would go well.

However, I believed that I can at least do something at this moment.

I finished simulating escaping with Zenith in an instant.

I can't use the teleport circle with this many people around.

However, I've already grasped the capabilities of the Temple Knights here.

I'm not sure how strong the Temple Knights behind the Pope are, but if I believe the miko's words, there is no way they surpass the members of [Anastasia Keep].

I am certain I can retrieve Zenith.

Now that the situation has become like this, I've essentially completed one of my goals.

I can rescue Zenith.

I can also protect Cliff.

I can even secure Aisha and Gisu.

I'll just escape like that.

I'm a little worried about Aisha and Gisu, but I can get information on them in this conversation.

Anyways, while thinking about it, I boldly take my seat.

I escorted the miko to the neighboring seat, and forced her into the seat while holding her arm.

Before seating myself, I spoke out in a very calm voice.

"You've really saved me a lot of trouble by gathering here."

It slid right off my tongue.

I haven't had that sort of feeling in a long time.

"Since there are many here who I am meeting for the first time, I would like to start with self-introductions. I am Rudeus Greyrat, representative of [Dragon God] Orsted-sama and have given up on forming a friendship with the Church of Milis."

At the mention of the Dragon God, the surrounding people were slightly bewildered for a moment.

Nobody here has met Orsted in person.

Naturally, none of them know Orsted's goals or what he is fighting against.

Possibly, there may be some who have never heard of the Seven Major World Powers.

However, there are none who are unfamiliar with the term [Dragon God].

That is a title that is just as well known as [Demon God].

"Presently, for certain reasons I have taken the miko-sama's life into my hands."

I pointed at the miko with the index finger of my right hand.

Tension filled the surroundings as I gathered mana and created a small flame like a lighter.

"It is extremely regretful that the situation has come to this. I didn't think that I would have to take a prisoner and sully the name of the overwhelming super-being Orsted. However this is for my own protection, and the safety of those under me, and a necessary measure for the following negotiations, so I hope you understand."

"Overwhelming, super...?"

"Ahem."

I made a slip of the tongue.

I didn't intend to joke around.

"Now then, as for why I had to aim for the miko's life and disgrace my master..."

I looked around my surroundings...

Suddenly, my gaze stopped on Claire.

She wrinkled up her eyebrows.

"I would be grateful if someone gave me a proper explanation. Otherwise, the [Dragon God] Orsted and his subordinates, including me, will truly become the enemies of the Church of Milis."

It's not a threat.

It's in the case that the top brass of the Church of Milis are being manipulated by Hitogami. I need to take that case into consideration.

"..."

At my words, the conference became deadly silent.

Nobody returned my words.

None of them told me to bring it on.

I wonder if it was because of the battle earlier.

Or maybe I said something strange.

I'm sure I took on a pose that showed that I am angry.

"I can understand Rudeus-sama's fury."

The one who answered is the one who is sitting directly across from me.

The man who is sitting the furthest from the door.

With Cliff by his side, the most important man present.

The Pope, Harry Grimoire.

"However, as Rudeus-sama said earlier, there are many here who he has never met. I would like to go through introductions one by one, is that alright with you?"

"..."

"It won't take much time."

I think about his intentions.

Is he stalling for time?

Are they currently moving to secure Aisha?

No, there aren't that many people here.

It won't be bad to know the others in the room with me.

To make demands, the proper sequence must be followed.

In order to be heard, preparations must be taken.

Simply shouting whatever I want at them has no meaning if the other party isn't prepared to listen.

"I don't mind. I was getting too impatient."

"Thank you... Cliff, if you would."

"Yes. Everyone, I am Cliff Grimoire, grandson of Pope Harry Grimoire."

Cliff stood up and said that, then took a step backwards.

It seems he is in charge of progressing the discussions.

"Then, if Cardinal Leblanc would please start."

At Cliff's words, one person stood up.

A man wearing vestments that look just as expensive as the Pope's.

If I were to describe his face in one word, it would be 'fat'.

A perfectly circular face, like a certain hero with Anpan for a head.^[66]

However, this man is in charge of the Demon Race Expulsion faction...

"I am Cardinal Leblanc McFarlane. I manage the Order of the Temple and assist his eminence the Pope."

So this man is Number Two^[67] of the Church of Milis.

If I'm not mistaken, his job is to assist the Pope... so it's kind of like a King and his Prime Minister.

Of course, the Pope and Cardinal seem a little different from the religious organizations I'm familiar with, so it may be something else.
But this Pope and Cardinal are certainly fighting.
They're aiming to be the next Pope.
Although I don't know if they do anything like an election every few years or something...

While I was thinking that, the Cardinal immediately returned to his seat.
So by introductions, they're just giving their names and positions.

"...Sir Belmondo."

At Cliff's call, the man in white armor sitting next to Leblanc stood up.
A one-eyed man with scars on his face.
He looks around 40 years old.
Since he's wearing white armor, he's probably in the Order of the Church.
But his facial expression can only be described as grim.
If I remember correctly, the Order of the Church are the chief knights protecting the country.
He's probably angry at me for causing a disturbance in town.

"Lieutenant Commander of the [Arrow Group] of the Order of the Church, Belmondo Nash Venick."

The man said that and sat down.
I get the feeling I've heard that somewhere before.
He's glaring fixedly at me.
However, he's not saying anything else.
That's probably his natural look. Like Orsted or Ruijerd...

Ah, I remember now.
If I remember right, the knight that Ruijerd knew had that kind of name.
That's right, Galgard. Galgard Nash Venick.
Gouache for short.

"Are you perhaps related to Galgard-san?"

"...I'm his son."

"A while back, I was in the care of your father."

I see.

Even though the father is in the Order of Instruction, the son doesn't always enter the same Order.

Nonetheless, it's not like he's an incompetent son, his position of Lieutenant Commander is proof of that.

"... Sir Reilbard."^[68]

After that was another knight in white armor.

It was an unfamiliar name, but he named himself as a Battalion Commander of the [Arrow Group].

This something group is like a regiment of the army.

A Battalion Commander is basically the next most important post after Commander, Lieutenant Commander, and Regimental Commander.

"... Sir Carlyle."

"Please forgive me for my rudeness earlier, I didn't intend to ignore you."^[69]

Carlyle Latreia excused himself from an introduction.

I wasn't sure if that was alright, but now that I think about it the Pope and Cliff didn't introduce themselves either.

If that's the case, I wonder if Claire will go without an introduction as well.

As I thought that, the introductions continued.

The archbishop and the Group LeaderRegimental Commander.

For the time being, I'll remember their names.

I'm not sure whether or not there's a need to remember them, but there's no harm in knowing their names.

However, if possible I would like to have exchanged business cards...

"...Claire-dono."

Claire's name was called.

I wonder why she's among these dignitaries.

She may have been called as a suspect.

Or maybe she was the one who spread the rumor of me planning to kidnap the miko.

Why did she bring Zenith?

There are many things I want to know right away, but I get the feeling that an explanation is coming.

I'll be patient for now.

"Countess of the Latreia house, Claire Latreia. This is my daughter Zenith. She's in this state because of an illness, so I beg your pardon."

Claire said that with a prim face and took her seat.

For now, this is everyone.

The knights acting as guards didn't introduce themselves, but I guess this means they have no right to participate in the discussion.

"Well then, let us begin. Taking turns with Rudeus-sama, let's describe what has happened."

At the Pope's words, the conference started.

Part 2

"Well then, Rudeus-sama, first I would like to make the context clear, is that fine?"

"I don't mind. I also want to know what has happened."

Since the Pope worded it like that, they probably only became aware of the circumstances a moment ago.

It's been a few hours since the disturbance.

To gather up the cardinal and the top members of each knight order, the circumstance seems a little too good.

However, although I say 'top', the leaders of the orders are not present.

The people gathered here are probably all the members that could quickly come after the miko's kidnapping.

Nevertheless, for the related Order of the Temple to not be present feels odd.

"Well then, where should we start... at any rate, I've also only just heard the circumstances. I still haven't been able to put it all in order."

After the Pope said that while scratching his brow, one man raised his hand.

Belmondo.

It's Besh-san.^[70]

"We're probably the ones with the least information. We simply came here following the cardinal's summons. In order to collect the corpse of the person who killed the miko and caused damage to the country."

Damaged the country.

That is to say, a [Miko] is one of a country's most important possessions, as can be seen from Zanoba's case.

Even if she is managed and appropriated by the Church of Milis, she's an existence that would trouble the country if she were to go missing.

At the very least, she's important enough that they couldn't disregard the summons.

"However, upon coming here we learned that the guards were merely knocked out and the miko kidnapped. On top of that, the kidnapper returned to the scene of the crime while infuriated, and claimed that he was in the right."

Saying that, Besh scowled at the cardinal.

"The summons we received do not match the current situation. As such, we will be adopting a stance of neutrality."

Besh said that and returned to his seat.

While smiling, the Pope directed his vision to the cardinal.

"Cardinal-dono, please detail your reasons for sending such a summons. Not to me, but to Rudeus-sama."

The cardinal stood up expressionlessly.

From that conversation, it seems the attack was the cardinal's doing.

"I received a notice from a member of the Latreia household. That there was someone who made dangerous proclamations about kidnapping the miko while on the roadside..."

Someone from the Latreia house, on the roadside...

Ah, it could be that I was followed while on my way back from my second visit to Claire's house.

I didn't notice at all, but I was causing such an uproar when I left.

They may have sent someone to make sure I didn't do anything.

Even if that's not the case, I had that conversation on the roadside.

It wouldn't be strange for someone to overhear it.

It wouldn't be unlikely for that to have reached the ears of the Latreia house.

The walls have ears, honest Mary.^[71]

There are traitorous Mary's everywhere.

"When we investigated who made that remark, we came across Rudeus Greyrat-dono. My subordinates discovered that Rudeus-dono was using his relationship with Therese to skillfully draw close to the miko-sama."

According to the cardinal, it would usually be fine to ignore that kind of remark. That type of prank is an everyday occurrence, the Order of the Temple doesn't have enough spare time to mobilize based on every insult that is spoken on the streets.

However, he has a close relationships with demons, and is close friends with the grandson of his eminence the Pope, who pushes for the acceptance of the Demon Race. In addition, he separated from the Latreia house over some issue. Furthermore, shortly after quarreling with the Latreia house, Rudeus quickly approached the miko. And to top it off, Rudeus has more than enough power to kidnap the miko behind the backs of her guards, and murder her. Both motive and ability were present.

"Thus, I forestalled him."

"I see... However, that differs from the testimony of the Order of the Church. There's a large difference between kidnapping and murder."

"Most likely, the people we sent to contact them exaggerated a bit."

The cardinal spoke nonchalantly.

However, looking at the situation, his intentions are obvious.

He wanted to frame me as having attempted to murder the miko, and make it seem as if the Pope was manipulating things in the background.

However, I'm sorry to say that your treasured Temple Knights were defeated.

Let alone the miko, it was plainly shown that I didn't even intend to kill the Temple Knights.

"Now then, as for the Latreia house... before we hear Sir Carlyle's story... let's hear from Rudeus-sama. Is that alright with you?"

"..."

For a moment, I considered rejecting that.

However, thinking it over carefully, there is no need for me to lie.

There's nothing for me to feel guilty for.

"Certainly, I did propose kidnapping the miko, but that was purely because of the blood rushing to my head. I didn't mention it again after that, and didn't put it into practice."

"Then why did you draw close to the miko?"

"In order to resolve the issue with the Latreia house, I was consulting with my aunt Therese. I suppose that looked like drawing close to the miko."

"I see. However, if that is the case then why did you actually kidnap the miko?"

The contents of his speech sounded like a cross-examination, but the pope's voice is just as kind as usual.

As if to say that everything will be fine if I reply honestly.

"I said it earlier, but it was only to ensure my own safety and protect the people important to me. Naturally, I got Miko-sama's permission as well."

"Is that true?"

"Yes. When I looked into his eyes, I could see that Rudeus-sama has done nothing to feel guilty over."

The miko said that and scanned the surroundings, and the pope and cardinal casually averted their eyes.

It must be difficult for people who have done nothing but things to feel guilty for.

"However, if that's the case, why annihilate the guards? Couldn't you have persuaded them with words?"

"I was suddenly trapped in a barrier, given a farce of a trial that I had no right to speak in, and was told both arms would be cut off. There was no reason not to resist."

However, looking back, there certainly wasn't any need to completely annihilate them. It would have been smarter to leave only Therese standing and smoothly persuade her. The miko was just about to come out, after all.

When she saw that I didn't act even with the miko in front of me, surely even Therese would...

Nope, impossible.

I had no way of knowing that the miko was about to come out, and if I remember the atmosphere back then, I don't get the feeling that it would have been possible to persuade them by talking it over.

It was a trial with a predetermined result.

In my previous world as well, I've been bullied that way before.

"I see... Then..."

The Pope slowly spoke, cutting to the heart of the matter.

"In the first place, what kind of issue was it that you had with the Latreia house?"

Claire's body shook with a start.

Seeing that, the gloomy feelings within me resurfaced.

Claire's egotistical speech and conduct from that time were revived in my mind.

I can endure anything being done to me.

However, those words about Aisha.

Those words about Zenith.

That cruelty towards Gisu.

"That countess, abducted my mother, who is standing over there, and confined her in a place beyond my sight."

As I spoke, my irritation gradually rose.

"She tried to force my mother who couldn't even speak to marry some unknown man against her will, and make her bear his children."

My voice is getting rougher.

"When I opposed that, she used cowardly methods to kidnap her, and pretended to know nothing when I questioned her!"

Those around us shuddered in fear.

Therese and the other Temple Knights wore grim faces and had their hands on their swords.

The miko was grimacing slightly.

It seems I was grasping her too tightly.

"... Well, that's how it was."

My words suspiciously cut off, and my story was left unfinished.

However, my fury seems to have been passed on to the listeners.

Their gazes closed in on the Latreia house from all directions.

They glared at Carlyle and Claire, and sent pitying eyes towards Zenith, who was blankly staring at the ceiling.

"Then, Sir Carlyle, Madam Claire. From those words, the fault for this case seems to lie with you. Let us hear your views."

Carlyle and Claire exchanged glances for a moment.

I wonder what they're planning.

At the very least, there's no sign of the cardinal intending to help them.

"My wife did that of her own accord, I had no knowledge of it."

Carlyle said that with an unruffled expression.

He's casting her away.

This man is casting away his own wife.

No, if Claire normally acts that way and Carlyle's irritation grew day by day, isn't it natural to cast her aside in this situation?

If it was me, no matter how many problems Eris causes with her violence, I wouldn't cast her aside or abandon her.

I can't say with confidence that after a long married life I won't come to dislike the parts of her that are disagreeable.

However, I would definitely never cast her aside or abandon her.

This bothers me a bit.

I remember something Cliff said long ago.

In Milis, when a woman gets married, her family gives the groom a betrothal gift, but in exchange, he will definitely provide aid should something ever happen to the bride's household.

Of course, what is meant by household isn't clear, but is Carlyle seriously considering forsaking Claire...?

"Of course, I fully intend to take responsibility as the head of the family, but I would like to make known that this matter was not done with the full consensus of the Latreia house."

I wonder if adding that on is part of his sense of responsibility.

"I see. Then madam Claire, how about you?"

"..."

Claire doesn't answer.

She simply presses her lips together in a straight line and remains silent, like a pouting child.

"I will take your silence to be a confirmation."

The pope said that and looked over the listeners.

Then, before anyone could say anything, he raised his voice again.

"Then, the perpetrator of this incident was Madam Claire. Sir Carlyle will share responsibility. I would like to end this with Madam Claire receiving punishment and Sir Carlyle taking responsibility. Are there any objections?"

I get the feeling that something is being distorted.

That the topic was being manipulated.

That the conclusion was decided from the start, and the conversation smoothly flowed towards that.

"No objections!"

The cardinal responded faster than anyone else.

"... No objections!"

"No objections!"

When everyone was nodding in agreement with the cardinal's words, Claire's face became blue, but it didn't lose its primness.

I wonder if she's not going to say anything.

An excuse, or something.

Well, I'd get in a bad mood if she gave some poor excuse, so it's fine.

As for me, as long as Zenith is returned, it's fine.

I'll never approach the Latreia house again. I won't let Zenith, Norn, or Aisha approach it ever again.

That's the end of that.

"Is that okay with you, Rudeus-sama? This incident was caused against our intents. We had no intention of harming Rudeus-sama, or making enemies of Orsted-sama, and would like to maintain an amicable relationship."

I looked at the pope.

His smiling face hasn't changed.

I looked at the cardinal.

When our gazes met, he let out a squeak and started pouring sweat.

"O-, of course we don't desire conflict with Orsted-sama either. No matter how Orsted-sama knows of Laplace's coming return, we have no intentions on sparing our cooperation in defeating him. We would like to put off the matter of the sale of Demon Race figures until a later conference, though..."

After that exchange, I somehow grasped the flow of the situation.

In this case, the mastermind was the pope.

Most likely, the ones who leaked the matter of the miko's kidnapping was the pope's underlings.

Using the Latreia house's name, he manipulated the cardinal's faction into suspecting me of attempting to murder the miko.

Or possibly there are spies from the pope's faction in the Latreia house, and used the fact that I was in fact heard by their servants, it doesn't matter either way.

He couldn't be sure whether the cardinal would move or not.

However, from the cardinal's viewpoint, I must have been a troublesome existence.

I'm friends with the pope's grandson Cliff, and am the subordinate of the Dragon God.

It must have looked that I had an issue with the Latreia house, and the pope used that as a pretext to send me as an assassin and draw close to the miko.

It's no wonder he thought that he had to get rid of me.

That he didn't mobilize the entire Order of the Temple was either because he was underestimating me, or that he predicted things would turn out this way.

The pope knew I wasn't going to kill the miko.

Either that, or he didn't mind even if I did.

Naturally, even if I couldn't win against the Order of the Temple and was killed, there would be no demerit for him.

I may be Cliff's friend, but I'm not part of the pope's faction.

The pope didn't have to dirty his hands, or agree with the kidnapping.

He had confidence that even if he were questioned by the miko and his plan were discovered, in the worst case he could use Cliff as a scapegoat.

Furthermore, if Orsted came, he could proclaim that I fell for the trap of the Demon Race Expulsion faction.

He must have been thinking that if it came to that, he could establish a cooperative relationship with Orsted on his own.

And then, this situation.

The conclusion that he can punish the Latreia house.

I'm sure that both the pope and the cardinal thought that it didn't matter who was sacrificed.

The decision to make an example out of Claire was surely because of the fury I held towards her.

If I can get revenge on Claire then I'm satisfied.

The pope is overjoyed that he can damage the Latreia housecardinal's faction.

Only the cardinal's faction is upset.

I get the feeling that I was dancing on the palm of his hand, but...

Well, that's fine.

I can get Zenith back.

I can get revenge on Claire.

And following this flow, it seems I'll be able to establish a mercenary corps as planned.

"I don't mind."

"Then according to convention, Claire Latreia will be sentenced to 10 years in prison for the crime of treason."

"Fue!?"

I let out a strange sound.

"Do you have any objections, Rudeus-dono?"

"... 10 years?"

"Of course. She abducted the family of Rudeus-dono, who is a close associate of the Dragon God-sama, and incited the attack on the miko."

"But, that's..."

"Not dealing properly with people that possess power invites this kind of disturbance. If Rudeus-dono wasn't someone with such good sense, the miko-sama would have lost her life long ago. Thinking of it that way, 10 years is still too short."

Is that... the case?

But that's right.

It became such a situation that this many people needed to be gathered.

I'm sure there are other people who will be receiving punishment, but Claire gets 10 years of imprisonment.

10 years...

It's by no means short.

10 years ago I had just separated from Eris.

So, it's not short at all.

Be that as it may, there's no helping it.

In the first place, Claire's methods were dirty.

If she hadn't kidnapped Zenith like that, it wouldn't have turned into this.

"..."

"Since you seem to have no objections, by this informal trial with the presence of at least three bishops and at least three Battalion Commanders, Countess Claire Latreia is hereby sentenced to 10 years in prison for the crime of treason. Sir Carlyle's sentence will be decided later in a formal trial."

"No objections."

"No objections."

The cardinal, archbishop, and knights solemnly declared such.

"Then, Belmondo-dono, please have the Latreia couple restrained by the neutral Order of the Church. The other involved parties will be judged later with due form."

The pope exchanged looks with the Order of the Church, and raised his hands.
Besh and the other two immediately stood, and briskly circled the table to where Claire and Carlyle were seated.
When they passed in front of Therese, she furrowed her brow for a moment.
One of the Order of the Church produced something similar to manacles from his breast pocket, and shackled Carlyle.
Carlyle silently complied, and followed the Church Knight to the exit.

Claire didn't move.
As she stood up, her whole body was shaking.
Her facial expression was unchanged, but she was trembling from head to toe.

"Now then, Madam Claire."

"I-, I am..."

The Order of the Church were slowly approaching Claire.
Claire will be arrested, and put in jail.
It has a bad aftertaste to it, but I guess with this the case is closed.

"..."

Suddenly, I met eyes with Cliff.
He was looking at me with a flustered, bewildered expression.

Why are you making that kind of face?
Certainly, even I find it a little hard to stomach.
With this kind of vigilante justice, she's sentenced to 10 years.
I think it's too overbearing.
However, isn't this your society's rule?
I received a similar treatment from the Order of the Temple.
In that case, isn't this due process according to your people's rules?

"Now then, Madam Claire."

So as not to incite Claire, Belmondo slowly reached out.
While fearfully looking at those hands, Claire tried to escape...

"Hn!"

The next instant, Belmondo was pushed away.

While his heavy armor vibrated with a clang,^[72] he stumbled a step backwards.
Belmond immediately lowered his stance, and prepared to draw his sword.

The one who resisted, wasn't Claire.
It was the woman who sat between Claire and Carlyle.

Zenith was standing before Claire.
She spread her arms as if to block the way.
She was looking at Belmondo with a blank face, yet hostility could clearly be felt from her actions.

She protected Claire.

"...!"

I was even more confused.
Why was Zenith protecting Claire?
Was it a spontaneous action?

However, up until now she had moved on her own in certain circumstances.
Whenever she moved like this, she was acting for her family.
Did she have no idea what was going on, and reflexively protected her mother?

"..."

I have the feeling I'm missing something.

At times like these, I was always mistaken.

If I calm down, and think things over carefully, I may discover what I was overlooking.

However, there's no time.

Belmondo will momentarily push aside Zenith, and take Claire away.

Should I stay out of it?

Is it okay to stop him without thinking of the consequences?

Wouldn't it be better if I asked questions first?

But, Claire, to Zenith...

"Please wait!"

While looking back at the perplexed me, someone raised a voice to stop Belmondo.

A person of small stature interposed himself in front of Zenith.

Someone who was looking at me with eyes of criticism until just now.

It was Cliff.

"These overbearing methods aren't right."

He stood in front of Belmondo to cover Zenith.

"Forcing an old woman against the wall and making her into a sacrifice like this will not be forgiven by Milis-sama!"

"A mere priest dares to object to an official Church decision and proclaim himself as a spokesman for Milis-sama!?"

The cardinal speaks up in a loud voice.

"Then, do you think Milis-sama will forgive such actions, Cardinal!? When the husband has abandoned his wife and only the child is standing to protect her mother, ganging up on the mother to take her into custody!?"

"You say child, but she is merely an adult who has lost her mind!"

"Age has nothing to do with it!"

The cardinal made an indignant face to Cliff who was expressing flat refusal. He immediately turned to face his subordinates, the Temple Knights. A face as if to say to shut this man up. However, the one he was looking towards was Therese. Cliff as well, looked at Therese.

"Middle Leader of the [Shield Group] of the Order of the Temple, Therese Latreia-dono! She is your mother as well! Is this okay? Milis-sama said [A knight must never forget his loyalty. However, there are times in which the ones whom one loves must take precedence]. To you, is your mother someone not deserving of your love? Did you feel no love for her as she raised you into who you are today? Even if you haven't, do you feel no debt to her when you think back on your past?"

Therese made an agonizing face and turned away. While maintaining his infuriated expression, Cliff moved his line of sight. His eyes stopped on me.

"You too, Rudeus!"

Just as usual, he pierced me with a completely unwavering gaze.

"Doing things like this, are you satisfied? Doing something unlike yourself like taking the miko hostage and trapping your own grandmother, throwing her into jail, are you satisfied with that!?"

"..."

Hearing that, I fell silent. Cliff's way of speaking is strange. I didn't intend to take the miko hostage. The one who sentenced Claire to prison wasn't me.

In the first place, it's undeniable that Claire was in the wrong. Isn't it natural to be punished?

It's not something that should be overturned with those emotional words.

"Certainly you may have been quarreling with her, but don't you always reach a solution considerate of the others' feelings when disputing with your family? I heard it from Norn-kun. Even though she was so cruel to you, you came to help her when she was down, without letting the past get between you. This time as well, you put in so much effort to conclude things peacefully. You consulted with grandfather and Sir Therese, and were about to reach a peaceful solution. Is it really okay like this?"

It looks like he's misunderstanding something.

Trying to find a peaceable solution was for the sake of the mercenary corps and Cliff.

It wasn't out of consideration for her as part of my family.

But Cliff probably doesn't want to hear that kind of fault-finding.

"..."

"Answer me! Rudeus Greyrat! Is this okay with you or not!? Depending on your answer, you may receive my scorn!"

For some reason that resounds in my heart.

Something that pierces through me.

Why is that?

Certainly, I don't think it's good for my family to be imprisoned.

But, Claire is different.

She never tried to see me as part of her family.

She is different.

She isn't family.

"..."

However, there's still something bothering me.

I don't know what it is.

However, if I don't take care of it, I can't answer.

"Cliff-senpai... Before I answer that, can I ask Claire-san a question?"

"...?"

Without waiting for Cliff's reply, I turned to face Claire.

With an attitude that was mixed with fear, but full of resolution, she caught my gaze.

"Why, did you kidnap my mother...?"

Claire didn't change her expression.

She simply answered as a matter of course.

"For the sake of my daughter, and the house."

"Do you really think that forcing your daughter who is in this state to marry is for her own sake?"

"Depending on the time and circumstances."

Without realizing it, I was clenching my hands into fists.

I was putting power into my hands, and grinding my teeth.

Why is this person like this?

Even though if she said that she wasn't thinking, that she was mistaken, she may be able to escape this situation.

"..."

The others looked to me as if waiting for my decision.

As if I'm the one who has the right to decide.

No, I have it, don't I?

I'm still holding the miko's arm.

The playing field was never level from the beginning.

"Which is more important to you, your daughter or your house?"

"They are both just as important."

My irritation rose at her non-committal answer.

Why doesn't she try to persuade me?

She should understand that I have the advantage in this situation.

If she says she wants my forgiveness, I'd stand down.

No, I won't completely stand down, but she won't be stuck in prison for 10 years.

No one died, so I would be satisfied with a lesser sentence.

That's why.

Just do it.

Stop fooling around.

Just apologize...

At my hesitation, Claire snorted roughly.

"You don't need to force yourself. I don't expect to receive your help. If doing something for my daughter is deserving of punishment, then I shall accept it gratefully."

"...!"^[73]

You, Wh-... Ah... Shit, I don't give a damn anymore.

Zenith covered for her, Cliff covered for her.

After that, that is what you say...

I can't forgive you anymore.

"If that's what you're going to say, I won't... Hm?"

As I started to say that, I felt a prod on my shoulder.

When I looked over, the miko placed the hand of the arm I wasn't grasping on my shoulder.

"Rudeus-sama."

"What is it?"

The miko wasn't wearing her usual naïve face, but was expressionless.

She was expressionless, but I could see something behind that expression.

She was giving off the atmosphere of a saint.

"Please help her."

"Why?"

I won't be deceived by the atmosphere.

I no longer have any intention of forgiving Claire.

At least, she never had any intention of reconciling with me.

She's just a worthless mother who tried to take control of her daughter.

She probably couldn't stand the grandson who tried to get in the way of that.

When things didn't go her way, she threw a tantrum like a spoiled child.

"Claire-sama is truly only thinking of her daughter and her house."

"If it's just thinking, anyone can do it."

There's no point unless you consider the standpoint of the other person.

Even if you have good intentions, you have no business forcing someone against their wishes.

Furthermore, this time you were forcing things in an undeniably wrong direction.

Nobody would wish for that.

"Rudeus-sama, you are included in the [house] she was thinking about."

"What do you mean by that?"

"She was also thinking about you while doing this."

About me.

If that's the case, then why did this happen?

How did it turn out like this?

I don't get it.

Someone explain this to me.

"Please believe me. I understand from looking into her eyes."

Right.

Her power as a miko.

By looking into someone's eyes, she can see their memories.

In other words, Claire had a reason for doing this.
I don't know what that reason could possibly be, though.

"Claire-san, about Miko-sama's words, could you please explain? I don't understand your reasons."

"There's nothing to explain, I have no idea what she's talking about. I'm sure even Miko-sama tells lies. I've never given someone like you any thought at all."

A standoffish attitude.

That's it.

Cliff, Miko-sama.

No matter how much you try to cover for her, even I can't give in to that.

Certainly, there are a few things I'm reluctant about...

However, let's just put an end to this.

"I have no intention of reconciling with someone who never tried to get along with me from the very beginning..."

As I said that with a sigh, Claire once again nodded with a prim face.

Cliff looked at me with a painful face, and the miko put on a sorrowful expression.

Therese gave Claire a glance, Belmondo began to move, Zenith---

---Before I realized it, Zenith was standing in front of me.

"..."

She slapped me on the cheek.

There was no power in it.

A weak strike that left no marks.

"Huh?"

However, for some reason it hurt.

It feels like the place I was struck is heating up.

"...!"

Tears suddenly started gushing out.

Before I could understand why, Zenith had passed by my side.

When I turned around, there was the handcuffed Carlyle, who was watching over the course of events before leaving the room.

Since he was behind me, I never saw his facial expression until now.

However, on his face was a complicated expression mixing worry, impatience, and regret.

He was also struck.

As expected, a powerless open-handed slap.

Zenith walked with an unsteady and unreliable gait.

Nobody stopped her.

Not the Church Knights, not the Temple Knights, nobody.

Zenith walked the room in which time had stopped.

Finally, she stood in front of Claire.

She slowly raised her hand, and with an open hand...

No, it wasn't a slap.

She was touching Claire's cheeks with both hands.

As if trying to look through it, she stared at Claire's face from close up.

From my position, I can't perceive Zenith's facial expression.

However, Claire who could see Zenith's face underwent a dramatic change.

First, she opened her eyes wide.

After that, her lips quivered.

Her cheeks, her shoulders, her body, all trembled.

When the shivering reached her fingertips, as if slowly being moved by those trembles, both of Claire's hands rose, and grasped Zenith's hands as if to envelop them.

"O... A... Aa... Aaaaah..."

From Claire's mouth, a wail that was neither a cry nor a groan escaped.

Claire brought Zenith's hands up to her face as if to kiss them.

From her eyes, tears spilled out one after another.

At the same time, as if unable to withstand the trembling, Claire crumbled from the knees.

"Ah"

At the same time as I heard a voice from behind me, someone quickly passed by my side. It was Carlyle.

With both hands bound, he ran up to Claire.

Then, while sitting by her, he spoke.

"Claire, let's stop being obstinate."

"A... Aaah, dear... Zenith is... Zenith is..."

Claire clung to Carlyle while crying with a disheveled face.

Carlyle looked as if he were going to try to hug Claire's shoulder's, but after looking at his handcuffs and deciding it was impossible, instead laid his hands upon Claire's, that were still covering Zenith's.

"It's okay. Even if you don't strain yourself, it'll be okay."^[74]

Carlyle said that and stood up.

While scanning the room echoing with Claire's cries, he spoke.

"I beg your pardon. We will explain everything now. May I ask for the verdict to be postponed until afterwards?"

At Carlyle's words, the room that was frozen in time began to move once more.
I think his words were directed to everyone present.
However, the pope, the cardinal, Cliff, Belmondo, Therese, and the members of Anastasia Keep, were all looking towards me.

The miko was tugging on my sleeve.
Tugging with both hands.
At some point unknown to me, I had released her hand.

"... I understand."

I reseated myself as if collapsing.
The cheek that Zenith slapped still felt hot.

Chapter 10

For the House, For my Daughter

Part 1

From birth, Claire Latreia had a vain and stubborn personality. She was a child who didn't acknowledge her own mistakes, and refused to apologize.

To that child, her mother, who would become Rudeus's great-grandmother, Melody Latreia, said this:

"Become an upstanding person."^[75]

That can be called mistaken education.

Claire was stubborn and couldn't recognize her own mistakes.

If she doesn't make any mistakes, there's no problem with being stubborn.

That's what one may think, but there can't possibly be a person who never makes a single mistake throughout one's life.

Regardless, the education was a success.

Claire became a strict person.

Not upright, but strict.

Someone strict both to herself and others.

Through her education, she came to realize that she couldn't live her life without making mistakes.

Thus, in order to not make mistakes, she aimed to be a person who disciplined herself harshly.

However, there was a side effect.

She became someone who also treated others strictly.

Strict with both others and herself.
That is the person called Claire Latreia.

However, even if the education was a success, she wasn't cured of her vanity or stubbornness.

Whenever the strict Claire faced hardships, she answered with effort.
However, the vain Claire would never let others see the effort and struggles of her suffering or agonizing self.
The strict Claire came to expect the same from the people around her.
However, the obstinate Claire would not change that even when circumstances called out for it.

A truly unpleasant person.

In the eyes of others, she succeeds in most things without trying, yet compels others to show the same results as her, and rebukes them for complaining.
If you pointed out her mistakes, she would never apologize.
A cold person who doesn't care for the hardships of others, and doesn't try to understand their feelings.

Of course, there were those who could see through to her true nature.
People who recognized the efforts she put in behind the scenes.

However, that was it.
Even if they could see her efforts, they didn't tell others about it.
Compassionate people told her, "I recognize your efforts, but others won't unless you stop hiding it."
However, she didn't change.
"My mother's education, my own way of doing things, they're not mistaken, so there's no need to change", is what she thought.

As a result, upon her graduation from the Milis Holy Kingdom's school for nobles, she was valedictorian, and thoroughly disliked by her peers.

Even upon reaching adulthood, she couldn't become a bride.

As the eldest daughter of the Latreia house, she did receive a number of proposals, but all the noblemen who came face-to-face with her and saw her strictness and stubbornness would leave as if running away.

"If I can't become a wife, I can simply become a nun."

Upon reaching 18 years of age, Claire said such.

As a lady of the Latreia house, instead of receiving the label of spinster and bringing shame to her house, that was preferable.

It was a common way of thinking among women of the Holy Kingdom of Milis at the time.

Part 2

There was a young man named Carlyle Granz.

Carlyle was a beginner Temple Knight, and a direct subordinate of Claire's father, Order of the Temple [Sword Group] Middle Leader, Ralkan Latreia.

One night, Claire's father came home drunk.

He was normally an austere person.

Mostly to himself, but also to Claire and Claire's mother, he was always severe and strict.

Thus, for him, returning in that state was a rare occurrence.

Of course, it wasn't the first time.

To her husband, coming home in this untidy state, Claire's mother would lend her shoulder.

She would strip him of his armor, give him water to drink, and beautifully lend him her shoulder, before carrying him to bed.^[76]

At times like these, Claire's mother didn't reprimand her husband.

She understood that being a Temple Knight was a stressful job.

Unfortunately, that night Claire's mother had business at her parents' home.

Claire saw her father's weaknesses for the first time.

Claire reprimanded her father.

"As the head of the Latreia house, what kind of conduct is this, are your lessons to us just words?" and such.

This drunk father, to the daughter who saw his weaknesses for the first time, could say nothing.

At that time, the one who butted into the conversation was Carlyle, who carried Claire's father home.

"There's a reason the captain was drinking today. One of our knights fell in battle. It wasn't anyone's fault. However, we were drinking in mourning. The captain was drinking heavily, but that was out of regret for the one who perished. Even if you are the captain's daughter, I won't permit you to slight his feelings."

At those words, Claire fell silent.

She could think of nothing to say.

However, she didn't get angry.

She silently assisted her father.

She gave water and lent her shoulder to her apologizing father, but couldn't support him on her own, and Carlyle helped her in carrying him to his room, changed his clothes, and put him to bed.

And the whole time, Claire didn't say a single word.

She knew she was mistaken, but couldn't apologize to her father or Carlyle.

Her obstinacy wouldn't permit her to apologize.

However, Carlyle saw through her.

He saw her acknowledgment of her own mistake hidden in that sullen face of hers.

"You are a kind person."

Carlyle said that as he departed.

At that time, Claire couldn't understand what was being said to her.

However, she realized that the youth in front of her, probably one or two years her junior, saw through her.

After that, Carlyle was invited to the Latreia house at every opportunity, and was eventually taken in as Claire's groom.

Part 3

The two of them had 5 children altogether, one boy and four girls.

Claire raised them strictly.

She gave them a harsh education, just like she had received herself.

The eldest son became a Temple Knight.

The eldest daughter married into a marquis' family.

The two fulfilled Claire's expectations.

They became a fine gentleman and lady that wouldn't bring shame to their family no matter where they were shown in the country of Milis.

Claire had the most expectations for the second daughter, who was born slightly late.

She was superior, even compared to her two older siblings.

No matter how you looked at her, she was beautiful and pure, a specimen one could be proud of.

Zenith Latreia.

She ran away from home.

Betraying Claire's expectations, she fled from home to become an adventurer, and cut off all contact.

Claire would call her a [stupid daughter].

"She made the most foolish decision possible, so make sure that you don't turn out like her", she would spit out in anger to her other children.

That was the first time in her life she showed that much emotion.

The daughter she favored the most became her greatest disappointment.

That was a greater shock to her than anyone else.

The third daughter, Saura, also was a disappointment.

She got married to a certain baron.

However, that baron lost in a power struggle. Saura got caught up in that struggle, and lost her life.

It's rare in the country of Milis, that excels in healing magic, for wounds to be fatal, but that's how it turned out.

The Latreia house made sure that the person who killed her saw a fitting end.

However, Saura won't return.

Claire mourned.

She mourned just as much as anyone else.

As if unrelated to Claire's sorrow, the fourth daughter, Therese, also went contrary to her wishes.

Unbefitting of a woman, she joined the Order of the Temple.

Claire also spoke out against her in abuse.

"There's no way a girl like you can get by in the Order of the Temple.

Even though if you had properly done as I told you and become a fitting lady, you would have married and become happy" and such.

Therese scornfully said "Dying in a power struggle is happiness?" and caused a big fight.

Claire said "Never set foot in this household again!" and threw her out.

At this time, Claire didn't think she had misspoken, not even with a single particle of her being.

Neither Zenith or Therese will last for long.

She was certain they would return to her, begging and in tears.

Part 4

Ten years passed.

Zenith still hadn't gotten in touch.

Before anyone noticed, Therese experienced exceptional success and became the captain of the miko's guard.

"It's simply that the miko is a woman, and so needed a capable female guard."

That's what Claire thought, and she wasn't wrong.

Therese had high practical skills and commanding abilities, but as a knight her power was only average.

But, whenever she attended parties with her husband, Claire would be showered with words such as "As expected of someone from the Latreia house, she can experience great success in any field."

Even though she is stubborn, Claire is strict with herself.

If she understands she is mistaken, though she won't apologize, she will revise her way of thinking.

All the more if the daughter she thought was mistaken had been showing great results.

Claire forgave Therese, and reconciled with her.

Be that as it may, whenever meeting face-to-face with Therese, what came out of Claire's mouth was not an apology, but haughty words such as "I'll specially forgive you."

If Therese hadn't gotten used to interacting with people with disagreeable dispositions in her job as a Middle Leader of the Order of the Temple, or if she hadn't grown with siblings used to her mother's personality, they would have gotten into another fight.

At this time, Claire still had not forgiven Zenith.

"However, if Zenith were to show up, I might allow her to talk it over with me" thought Claire.^[77]

Part 5

A few years later, Paul came to the Latreia house seeking assistance.

There was a magical disaster in the Asura Kingdom.

A teleportation incident affecting the Fedoa region.

Paul came as the captain of the missing people's search squad, and requested assistance from the Latreia house.

When Zenith was revealed as one of the missing people, Claire naturally gave her approval.

Arguing down Carlyle, she produced both money and personnel.

She wanted to find Zenith quickly, and tell her "You see? This happened because you disobeyed me!"

However, Zenith couldn't be found.

One year, two years passed, yet her whereabouts were still undiscovered.

During that time, her husband Paul began to waste away.

Without even trying to hide his suffering, he drank even with his daughter present.

Claire thought that before Zenith, she should do something for her granddaughter, Norn.

She considered sheltering Norn in the household, and tearing her apart from her father.

And then, providing her with proper education to make her into a fine lady.

Claire believed that would be for the best.

Of course, Carlyle opposed, thus she couldn't forcibly separate Norn from Paul.

Claire impatiently passed the days while watching over Norn.

While she was doing so, Paul recovered.

From Therese's story, it seems that his eldest son, Rudeus, struck down Paul and corrected him.

Then, Claire grew interested in the person called Rudeus.

But then, taking into account the fact that he didn't even show up at their place to give his greetings, she looked down upon him, thinking such a thing to be expected of Paul's son.

After that, Paul was confirmed as a bigamist.^[78]

His mistress, Lilia, and her daughter, Aisha, came to Milis.

Claire is a follower of Milis.

Taking in two wives, she didn't think such a thing could be forgiven.

However, Paul wasn't an adherent of Milis, and Claire knew better than to force her religious beliefs on others.

Several times a month, she had Paul's daughters show themselves at the Latreia residence and receive education.

Studies in good manners and customs.

To Claire, such things were a necessity, and it was only natural to study them.

Norn couldn't surpass Aisha, and was constantly sulking.

Claire hated that attitude.

It wasn't that Norn quickly gave up on things that could be done with effort.

She was afraid of losing to Aisha, and would skip crucial steps.

Seeing that, Claire said to Norn that there was no need to beat Aisha.

She instructed her to simply aim for a level of ability befitting a lady of the Latreia house.

It was Claire's way of motivation.

However, it didn't work on Norn at all.

Claire tried to motivate her in every way, but nothing worked.

The mistress's daughter, Aisha, made fun of Norn, and that angered Claire.

The angry Claire became emotional, and mistreated both Aisha and Lilia.

In the end, both Norn and Aisha left her without becoming what she wanted them to.

Part 6

A few more years passed.

No news of Zenith's discovery arrived, and Claire remembered the days with her grandchildren.

Her grandchildren from her eldest son and daughter reached adulthood one after another. They were all raised to be fine Milis nobles that wouldn't bring shame to their family no matter where they were to be shown.

Already, there were no children to be found in her surroundings, and her grandchildren have all become independent.

Norn and Aisha.

The two of them should be reaching adulthood soon.

"I wonder what happened to them.

Thinking back, only those two turned out differently than what I wanted.

As expected of Zenith's daughters.

I wonder what kind of education Zenith was giving them..."

While thinking that, Claire immediately halted her train of thought.

After all, Zenith had no chance to educate her daughters.

Almost immediately after they were born, when they were still only one or two years old, the teleportation incident happened.^[79]

Zenith was never given the chance to provide education to her daughters once they had become aware of their surroundings.

Norn was raised only by her father.

Aisha as well, because of the teleportation incident, was never given a proper education and taught to be respectful to the daughter of the legal wife.

Whatever else Zenith was, she was diligent in her studies.

At one point she was even called the ideal daughter of Milis, a splendid lady.
"Even if she became an adventurer, had she been able to teach them properly..."

The truth is, Claire missed Zenith very much.

She wanted to meet her.

She was sure that even if they met, only words of rebuke would come to mind, and Zenith would find her a nuisance, but even so, she wanted to meet her.

She got a chance to do so.

News of Zenith's rescue arrived from Rudeus.

News that Zenith had lost her memories and had effectively become a cripple, but even so, was still alive.

The contents of the letter were brief, stating where she was found and what happened there in a concise writing style.

In an excessively concise manner, it stated the matter of Paul's death.

It declared his intent to find a cure, but it made no mention of bringing her back.

Claire replied to the letter immediately.

No matter what, she wanted to see Zenith again.

Part 7

A few more years went by.

During that time, Claire searched for methods to cure Zenith.

She spoke with doctors and healing magicians throughout Milis, and visited the library of the Church of Milis a countless number of times.

She even researched in the books left behind by the Demon Races.

Normally such a thing would not be forgiven, but she believed that looking through the whole, long history of the country, precedents could be found.

And then, she found it.

It was quite suspicious, and she wasn't sure whether or not it was true.

A completely unbelievable, nauseating method.

However, there had certainly been a successful case in the past.

It wasn't a demon remedy.

There seems to have been a similar case among the elves.

A woman appeared in a mindless state, but after having carnal relations with many men, she reclaimed her spirit.

A completely untrustworthy description.

That's not something that should be attempted.

However, after carefully searching for evidence, she found it.

It seems that person really did exist.

To this day, she still needs to have carnal relationships with men.

Claire was troubled.

Would it be okay to try it?

Zenith would surely hate it.

But, even so.

If there is no other method...

Just as she was done convincing herself, Rudeus came with Zenith.

Zenith came with her son Rudeus and the mistress's daughter, Aisha.

Only the three of them.

It was only 3 years after sending the letter.

Claire wasn't used to sending letters over long distances, but she knew that Rudeus hurried over.

"First, I'll greet him with words of gratitude.

Then, I'll confirm the progress of her current treatments and the plans from here on out.

If there's time, then we'll talk about Norn and Aisha's current circumstances."

As soon as she saw Zenith, all those thoughts were blown away.

The minute that Claire entered the room, saw Zenith's face, and drawing close, saw her vacant gaze, she was overcome with emotions so strong that it felt as if her heart was being torn apart, and entrusted Zenith to the family doctor, An del, with a sigh.^[80]

An del is the family doctor entrusted with Claire's own deteriorating health, and has been told the general outline of Claire's discovered healing method.

Claire regretted ignoring Rudeus due to seeing Zenith again after a long time, and turned to face him.

Suddenly, she noticed the young woman in maid clothes huddled at the end of the couch.

A young woman with dark brown hair.

She hadn't forgotten her.

However, what immediately caught Claire's eye was her appearance.

A maid outfit.

"Aisha-san, it has been a while. Today... what have you come to do?"

"Eh? Ummm... That is, I came to take care of Zenith-okaasama."

At that reply, without thinking Claire's voice grew rough.

Taking care of her.

In other words, she came as a maid.

If that is the case, then there is no reason for her to be sitting while Zenith and Rudeus, the heads of the household, are standing.

Claire naturally intended to rebuke her.

However, Rudeus cut in.

Naturally.

Claire had messed up on the order of things.

The Rudeus who she met for the first time was a youth who closely resembled Paul.

Whether she wanted to or not, his face brought Paul's to her mind.

That drunkard Paul, who didn't even have a fragment of character.

That Paul.

If it weren't for him, Zenith may not have fallen into this state.

In Claire's mind, those emotions welled up.

As a result, in the following exchange with Rudeus, all of her bad side was on full display.

With a vain and stubborn personality, while ignoring the mistakes she committed in his presence, she took on a haughty attitude.

But Rudeus stayed sincere.

To Claire's sarcastic words, he answered with sound reasoning.

That fair-and-square attitude improved Claire's evaluation of him.

Their conversation went just as Claire had originally hoped it would.

The current progress of Zenith's treatment and Norn's current circumstances.

As far as Aisha went, the earlier reprimand made things awkward, and Claire stayed silent.

Rudeus seemed a little estranged from Milis's common sense, but he had self-awareness as the head of the household, and declared he would properly care for Norn.

Claire re-evaluated him.

He was still young, but he was a wonderful youth with awareness as the head of the household.

That's how he was reflected in Claire's eyes.

Claire didn't know what to make of his position as the subordinate of Dragon God Orsted. Claire wasn't very knowledgeable about military affairs.

However, if he has a friendship with the Queen of Asura Kingdom, he certainly holds a good pedigree, emergent though it may be.

With great pedigree comes great responsibility and achievements.

Claire could perceive that the man in front of her is probably even more important than she is aware of.

Such a man is the son of that Zenith.

Thinking of that, Claire experienced a complicated feeling of being both vexed and proud.

However, that brings about a problem.

The method for treatment she was about to try is something that will undoubtedly bring about rumors.

To have a woman be slept with by a great number of men isn't something that can be forgiven.

Would Rudeus really accept that method of treatment?

When she hinted at it, his anger exploded.

He loves Zenith, even more now that she has fallen into this condition.

Naturally.

And Claire thought that he surely doesn't know of that method, and has not tried it.

Should she tell him?

About the remedy.

About how the source may be questionable, but it still gives a hope for treatment.

Or maybe, if she told him of the method in detail, she could get approval.

"However..." -thought Claire.

The youth in front of her has a future.

From what she's heard, he's friends with a priest from the Pope's faction.

At the same time, she's also heard rumors of the Pope's grandson returning to Milishion.

Since it's such a long trip, it wouldn't be strange at all for them to come together.

Honestly, Claire couldn't care less about that power struggle.

However, if Rudeus is moving as part of the Pope's faction.

Not as the Latreia house, but as the Greyrat house.

If he intends to join the Pope's faction as the subordinate of Orsted.

If he intends to take action here in Milishion.

That treatment method will become a ball and chain for him.

Trying out that remedy on his own mother will undoubtedly become a scandal.

Everyone in this country will be talking about him behind his back.

He won't be able to keep on living in this country.

"Should I tell him about that treatment?

Should I let him participate?"

Nay, concluded Claire.

It's best for him to be unaware of it.

He shouldn't be told of his mother being forced to have relations with many men.

It's best if he stays unrelated.

It's something Claire did on her own.

It's not related to Rudeus, who has nothing to do with the Latreia house.

It's probably best to keep it that way.

Not trying out the treatment wasn't an option.

In any event, Claire had already waited 20 years.

She waited 20 years to meet her daughter, and talk with her.

And so, Claire began mobilizing.

She intended to bear all the consequences herself.

She intentionally angered Rudeus, and drove him from the Latreia house.
Using her servants, she kidnapped Zenith.

However, her actions stopped there.

The Zenith that was brought to the house.

The Zenith that has grown, and is starting to become old.

Her daughter that is still beautiful, and usable as a woman.

Is it really alright to let an unknown number of men sleep with her?

Of course it isn't.

There's no way it could be.

However, even Zenith wouldn't want to be in these conditions, where she is a continuous burden to her son.

If she could talk, surely she would beg to be cured.

Claire rationalized it that way.

A rationalization that made even Claire herself sick to her stomach.

She wanted someone to stop her.

Right now, she's trying to do something she mustn't do.

But she can't stop herself anymore.

She worried.

She suffered.

She spent the entire day in the room with Zenith, at wit's end.

This Zenith, which kept wasting away day after day, would occasionally show a human-like response, further hurting Claire's heart. ^[81]

The one who stopped her was Carlyle.

Carlyle heard the current state of affairs from Therese, and the rest from the family doctor, Andel.

About the unreliable treatment, and Claire's suffering over whether to try it.
His wife was forcing herself to do something unforgivable.
To that wife, he gently said this:

"... Before trying that method, let Miko-sama see her."

If they can see Zenith's memories, something may become apparent.
They may be able to steel their determination.
Alternatively, they may give up on that method.

Carlyle put forth a petition to get the miko to look at her memories.
Using his authority as a Large Leader of the Order of the Temple to its full potential, he got his petition approved while hiding Zenith's name and avoiding Rudeus's notice.
Plans were made to have the miko, who normally doesn't look at memories on personal reasons, check on Zenith.
That was for today.

Today was the day that Carlyle and Claire were to secretly bring Zenith to the Church's headquarters.

Then the kidnapping incident happened.

Part 8

--- Rudeus's Point of View ---

"And thus, we came here."

The story ended there.

Claire's eyes were deep red, Carlyle had a grave expression on his face.

The others had various reactions.

There were some who were grimacing, while others had their arms crossed with difficult expressions.

Therese covered her mouth in shock.

The miko was smiling as if to say she was aware from the very beginning.

Cliff... was expressionless.

Maybe he has heard all this before.

However, hearing that story, I could understand.

What Claire was trying to do is something unforgivable.

Even if she did it all just because she was "trying to help", that sort of thing, to her daughter, is unforgivable.

I can't forgive it, and neither can society.

The Milis doctrine can't forgive it.

I don't know if it is illegal in this country, but looking at the expressions of the audience, it is undoubtedly something that will besmirch the name of the house.

Certainly, had I participated in that, my objectives in this town would have been impossible.

That's why she didn't involve me.

She tried to do something about it on her own.

She worried on her own, and accepted the consequences on her own.

But, unfortunately, Claire was mistaken.

"That remedy... is from 200 years ago, correct?"

When I said that, Claire raised her face in surprise.

"Th- That's right! 200 years ago, a girl with the same symptoms was found..."

"And that girl was chased from her village as a result of those actions."

"... For you to know that, don't tell me you've already tried it?"

"Of course not."

That case.

It's probably Elinalise.

Of course, it differs from the truth.

From a similar state to Zenith's, it took her decades to regain her sanity.

She didn't become a bitch until later.^[82]

However, second-hand information is often incorrect.

It's not strange for second-hand information to be distorted.

"I haven't tried it, but I have spoken to that woman in person, and heard it from her."

I may not have written about Elinalise in the letter.

There were many things I was keeping secret at the time.

"Is... that so?"

Claire dropped her shoulders as if all her strength had left her.

However, her expression does look slightly relieved.

"Then, everything I was doing was meaningless..."

"That seems to be the case."

"... Is that so..."

If she had told me about the treatment method on the first day, I wouldn't have exploded like that.

"No, no, grandma, I've met that woman and it's completely different from the story.

That kind of thing won't cure her."

I would have laughed it off like that.

Yup. Probably.

"You should have told me."

"... If you hadn't known about the ineffectiveness of that method, would you have refused to try it?"^[83]

"..."

I couldn't answer.

I can't say no.

If Elinalise said, "I was cured by having sex," would I have tried it?

I probably wouldn't have tried it at first, and searched for another method.

However, several years have passed since then.

If no other methods came up, I wonder what I would have done.

After worrying, I wonder what kind of conclusion I would have come to.

"However, you already knew... How foolish I've been..."

Claire said that and once again let out tears.

Trying to do something inhuman to her own daughter, she probably couldn't bear to show her face in public.

There are still ill feelings left, probably.

Depression probably grasps her heart.

I feel refreshed.

I can finally understand her actions until now.

For her daughter, for the house.

There were no falsehoods in Claire's words.

Furthermore, this situation.

The situation where this case was attempted to be put to use in the power struggle.
She at least tried not to reveal what she was trying to do.
She wanted to bear the weight of this sin by herself.
That way she could at least protect the Latreia house.
To protect Therese and the uncle and aunt I still have not met.

Of course, the way she went about things was mistaken.
She can't deny that.
There should have been a better way to do it.
There should have been many other ways to approach the problem.

However, that was for mine and Zenith's sake.
For her daughter, for the house.
That's why me and Carlyle were struck by Zenith.

"Haaa..."

I let out a sigh.
Then, I turned to Cliff.
The Cliff who suddenly covered for Claire.

"When did Cliff-senpai hear about it? This story."
"This morning. I coincidentally ran into them at the headquarters."
"... Why didn't you stop them at the time? You also know about Elinalise-san's case, right?"
"As far as the specifics, I was only told that the method is something unforgivable as a person."

I guess that's the case.
She never told anyone before, even to Cliff she would be hesitant.

"I was planning to tell you sometime today, but... Sorry."

It was certainly impossible in this situation.

This is Cliff, after all.

I'm sure at that time he censured Claire and Carlyle.

"What you're doing is wrong.

Quickly return Zenith and apologize to Rudeus" and such.

Then, losing to that attitude, Carlyle explained the circumstances.

Hearing something unforgivable, he would have wavered in his own way.

Probably would have fallen silent, too.

That's why, when I didn't even ask for an explanation, he admonished me.^[84]

All he needed to do was to stop me here.

Just tell me that Claire was properly thinking about Zenith.

He thought he could once again see signs of a peaceful solution.

I can't say that his methods were good...

But he was sympathizing with Claire's and Carlyle's feelings.

You could certainly say it's like Cliff.

At any rate, I understand now.

I feel refreshed.

"Now then, I ask you once again."

As soon as I've settled my feelings, Cliff addressed the entire assemblage.

"This case is the result of a woman trying to save her daughter. Using this to gang up on and torment her, can you really say that is in accordance with Saint Milis's teachings?"

The pope was smiling.

The cardinal was sullen.

The Order of the Church and the Order of the Temple were making slightly relieved faces.

They all looked at Cliff.

"This case was merely an accident. Furthermore, it was an accident where fortunately not a single person passed away. Caused by a lone mother, a kind accident. It certainly took time and caused a disturbance. It temporarily brought about a foul mood, and there were those that were injured. However, what say you. Shouldn't we let this all be water under the bridge, and forgive her, and judge her with generosity?"

Cliff said that, and looked at me.

"Rudeus, you have the right to decide. You have been the most hurt by this, and won your battle."

I let go of the miko's hand long ago.

However, the miko has been sitting at my side all along, smiling.

As if saying she knew this would happen all along.

An attitude as if she had seen through everything.

This person.

"I think it's fine."

I said that calmly.

I still have a few reservations.

However, I just need to talk with Claire more in-depth later.

If I talk more with that person, my ill feelings will also vanish.

"However, let me present three conditions."

I have conditions.

Conditions for me releasing the miko.

It may be shameless, but three of them.

"First, for Miko-sama to look at my mother's memories to see if she can recover them."

"Of course it's fine. There were such plans in the first place."

I was talking to the cardinal, but the one who answered was the miko.

As if to say she already understood.

I wonder if she already knew that she was going to be examining Zenith today.

If she knew about it, then she let herself be abducted by me in order to guide me here.

It's possible.

"However, I can't recover memories, so I probably can't cure her..."

"But I'd still like you to try. Your holiness the Cardinal, do you mind?"

"Not at all."

The cardinal seems to be in a good mood.

Probably because it doesn't seem like the Latreia house that's in his faction will be receiving damage.

"Second, in exchange for this case being water under the bridge, you must provide your full assistance to [Dragon God] Orsted."

"Naturally, I have no objections."

"..... Same here."

The pope naturally gave his approval, and the cardinal nodded as well.

It looks like getting approval for the Ruijerd dolls will also be possible.

It may have been better if I struck the cardinal just now, but it seems like things will settle in an overall beneficial way to me, so I'll let it go at that.

"And then, for the last one."

I looked at Claire and Carlyle.

The two looked back at me stiffly.

"Please allow me to reconcile with the Latreia house."

At those words, first Therese made a relieved gesture.

Carlyle lowered his head apologetically.

Claire burst into tears.

She cried while making sobbing noises.

Cried while making a voice that seemed to say both "I'm sorry" and "Thank you."

Zenith gently stroked that Claire's face.

Thus, the curtain drew on the case in Milis.

Chapter 11

Results of Obligation

Part 1

Afterwards, a contract was written.

Let's take a moment to summarize it.

The full picture.

The Miko was safe thanks to Rudeus.

The Milis religious community was held responsible for the incident.

The church shouldered the responsibility, and proclaimed that they would fully cooperate with Dragon God Orsted and Rudeus Greyrat, and, moreover, support them.

There was no formal decision regarding the treatment of the demon race, that was left as a legal question to be settled at a later time.

It was that kind of thing.

The two principal offenders, the Pope and the Cardinal, naturally signed the contract.

The cold sweat running down the Cardinal's forehead was really cute.

The Miko was returned in exchange for the contract.

As for the parties responsible, it was decided that a trial would be held at a later date in order to have them take full responsibility for this incident.

I don't know how that will turn out, the Cardinal might flee before receiving his sentence.

Well, tracking people down is part of my job description.

If they're not one of Hitogami's lackeys, then they're just a minor nuisance.

Even if the Cardinal was taken out of the picture, the Expulsion Faction wouldn't disappear.

For the time being, everything has worked out.

The incident has been resolved.

Part 2

Afterwards, Zenith, Cliff, and I returned to the house.

On the way back, Cliff sighed and apologized.

"Sorry."

I looked back at him, puzzled.

"What's this, suddenly?"

"If you think about it, this kidnapping incident originated from my careless remarks.

Even though we reached a good resolution,

Taking credit for that would just be self-important lip service, I felt like I was just blundering about."

"I suppose."

It wasn't really like that though.

You acted following your beliefs, argued without reserve, and led us to that good resolution.

It's the usual Cliff-senpai.

"I'm not worried about it, we can reflect on this matter and make use of it next time."

"Ah, yes."

Cliff shrugged... Normally, in Cliff's position, someone would be more worried about their own situation.

Wendy was waiting for us when we arrived home.

Only Wendy.

"Ah, welcome back."

I suddenly started to worry about Aisha and Gisu, they're safe right?

While we were drawing up the contract, I asked the Cardinal and the Temple Knights but they just responded with [We don't know.]

Are they busy preparing some sort of trump card, or...

"Aisha-san, Gisu-san, it's safe!"

My worries were groundless.

Two people came out from under the floor.

"Phew, welcome home, Oniichan... and Zenith-okaasan."

The two of them let out a sigh of relief.

Hearing their circumstances,

Apparently Claire and Carlyle left for the religious headquarters early this morning, and after learning that, they immediately set out to inform me.

But, it was already too late.

By the time they arrived at the headquarters, the Temple Knights had already begun to move.

I had already moved to make contact with Therese, and Claire was already inside the headquarters.

With all these pieces moving, they knew something must have happened.

Thinking that, they remembered my instructions, and returned to Cliff's house.

They planned to wait until night, and then make their escape from the town.

"The Temple Knights came looking here several times, and I properly turned them away!"

Wendy seems to have done her job correctly this time.

However, the Cardinal was targeting Aisha and Gisu as I suspected.

Dangerous.

"Oniichan, since Okaasan has come home, that means...?"

"Ah, yes, it's over."

I explained the details to Aisha and Gisu.

After I'd finished explaining, Aisha's eyes were twinkling, and she started talking in a voice of admiration.

"Something like that, Oniichan, you're a hero!

Even with your back up against a wall,

You wrapped everything up in just a day!"

Saying something so absurd...

What kind of unsightly hero would I make.

Part 3

The next day.

I took Zenith to the religious headquarters for the Miko to give her a neurological exam.

Two people, Carlyle and Claire, came to pick us up at Cliff's house in a horse-drawn carriage.

While we were riding in the carriage, I was chatting with Carlyle.

He seems to deeply regret what had happened, and apologized profusely.

I don't intend to keep blaming him for that.

Even if he was a little at fault...

People make mistakes.

What's important is to reflect on it, learn from it, and move on.

Around here, it would be embarrassing for me to talk about the proper way to deal with one's problems; I'm hardly in a position to be whining about the failures of others.

You can't keep moving forward without overcoming failures.

He shouldn't be beholden to me to move on.

Although Carlyle was talkative, Claire hadn't spoken a word.

Out of the five people riding in the carriage, only she was silent.

I wonder what she's thinking about.

Should I ask her?

While I was procrastinating, we arrived at the headquarters.

I went through the normal formalities, and was granted an audience in the center of the headquarters.

We were brought to a room, this is probably the room the Miko normally uses.

Just like when I met with the Pope, it was a room divided by a transparent barrier with two chairs and a window.

It was a little dim, six escorts stood guard.

There she wasn't among them.

I wonder if she was replaced...

Anyway, it looks like the escorts are going to stay for the examination.

Well, I shouldn't need to be particularly cautious of them this time.

All of them had embarrassed expressions and avoided looking in my direction.

I don't need an apology.

You guys were just doing your jobs.

And I was just doing my job when I knocked you guys out, so we're even.

We were both just doing our jobs, so it's all good.^[85]

In any case, we should all try to get along.

If these guys hold a grudge, I'll have to watch my back.

So we should try to get along as well as we can.

"Then, I'll start."

Miko and Zenith were sitting in the two chairs, facing each other.

Dust held Zenith's head, and had her meet the Miko's eyes.

Then, the Miko brought her face closer and had a look.

It almost seems like an eye exam.

"...Oh."

Looking at the Miko, Zenith's eyes glistened.

Her eyes seemed brighter.

... Still no expression though.

As they were staring into each others eyes, it looked as if faint streaks of light were darting between them.

Until now, I'd never seen such a light.

"As one would expect of Miko-sama..."

"As divine as ever..."

Her lackeys were gushing under their breath.

Until now, such a light did not come out.

I wonder...

No, that light might only appear when she gets serious.

Like fire magic becoming hotter and brighter as more mana is used,

This kind of phenomenon might just be visible when the Miko seriously uses her abilities.

It really looks like a line of light...

"..."

Claire was tightly grasping her hands in front of her chest as she watched.

She had a pose like she was in prayer, I braced myself as well.

Right now, the Miko is looking into Zenith's memories.

The depths of the labyrinth...

Maybe a memory of being trapped in the magic crystal...

If she can find whatever caused this in Zenith's memories, then we might be able to figure out a cure.

Just give me a hint...

If we can just get a hint, maybe one of my knowledgeable acquaintances can figure something out.

Orsted, or Kishirika...

"... Ah."

The Miko raised a small voice, and trembled with a start.

Dust immediately let go of Zenith and put his hand on the Miko's shoulder to comfort her.

Download complete?

"...."

The Miko stood up, wide eyed.

Looking directly at me.

"Rudeus Greyrat."

"Yes."

I straightened myself up after hearing my full name being called.

"I have seen the memories of Zenith Greyrat."

"How is she?"

"Before the Metastasis Event, she lived in Buena village, part of the Fedoa Territory, raising Norn and Aisha while working in the village's clinic."

You're starting from there?

Well, yeah. Not speaking about what you've carefully observed. It seems appropriate to speak on it after all that.

"After she was separated from you, Zenith thought about you every day. Did Rudy eat properly, is he properly changing his clothes, how many girls has he called out to..."

Oi.

I'm sorry.

Well, it's not like I was really fooling around back then.

That was back when the government of the Rudeus Lower Continent was at peace.

That was still several years before the invasion of the defenseless Sylphy Country.

I can hardly remember a time before Sylphy.

"Her memory was dyed pure white in worry about you, and then it's temporarily interrupted."

The Metastasis Event.

I was an eye-witness to that moment.

But, most people didn't even survive long enough to comprehend what had happened, being teleported before they noticed...

Back then Paul was still in his prime, and so was Lilia.

"Afterwards, her memory becomes pitch black for a while."

"... For a while, what?"

"That's right. For a long time, like time passing by in a dream."

So there's no memory of becoming trapped.

That means she must have been teleported directly into the crystal in the labyrinth.

But something like that should be really unlikely...

However, it's still possible even if it's unlikely.

After a teleport, there's always the possibility of ending up buried in a wall somewhere.

Well that shouldn't happen if the magic circles are properly linked, but that's not the case for random teleportation circles...

That Metastasis Event really was a surprise attack.

If I remember correctly, it was caused because Nanahoshi was teleported to this world...

Well, that's already in the past.

Even as a person who was wrapped up in that incident, I don't think teleportation magic should be treated as a taboo, as long as it's properly managed.

If it were properly studied and implemented, then it would have been possible to deal with a disaster like the Metastasis Event more quickly.

Yeah.

I should advise Ariel about that.

If I submit a research report on teleportation, Ariel could probably figure something out.

... Ara?

But, then, how did Gisu find out about Zenith...

He's certainly good at collecting information, but how did he know about the Teleport Labyrinth...

...?

"Then, she had a dream."

I returned from my thoughts at the Miko's words.

For the time being, let's postpone Gisu's cross-examination.

"A dream?"

"Yes. A dream. In it, she had the sensation of being carried like a stuffed toy."

"... A stuffed toy."^[86]

"Yes, it was a pleasant dream."

Then, the Miko closed her eyes.

As if she were describing images on the backs of her eyelids, she began to speak fluidly.

"She had a dream of living comfortably in a strange house.

Spending time with Lilia, basking in the sun, caring for the garden..."

Then, the Miko's tone changed.

She began speaking from Zenith's perspective.

"Paul died, Rudy married Sylphy-chan and had a daughter.

But as I thought, Rudy brought home more women. First Roxy-chan, then Eris-chan... however, everyone, even Sylphy-chan, was happy.

Although Norn complained, she properly went to school and made friends, and she would never forget to say [Okaasan, see you later!].

In the meantime I got along well with Aisha. She really seems to like flowers. She would casually chat with me about things like [So does Zenith-sama like apples and daffodils too?]

I think it would be fine if she called me Okaasan too, but then Lilia would make a troubled face. Aisha is still sensitive about that topic.

Roxy-chan has started teaching at a school near the house.

According to Norn, she's a very popular teacher.

Even though she still looks like a child, she's from a demon race that doesn't age quickly and has already lived for many years... But, Rudy loves Roxy-chan very much, so age doesn't matter.

Then I met Eris-chan for the first time, she really loves Rudy as well.

When no one was looking, she came to me with a bright red face and said [I am still inexperienced, please treat me well!]

I couldn't help letting a smile out. I see why she didn't want to say that in front of Rudy; but being humble is good too.

Then, Eris-chan's face turned a deep red and she squeezed her arms.

She usually puts on such a brave face, so cute!"

Those were her memories from the past several years.

But, I remember it slightly differently...

Norn rarely called out to Zenith.

And even when Aisha talked with Zenith gardening, Zenith never reacted.

But, perhaps, from Zenith's perspective...

She seemed to be engaged in everyone's conversations.

"And then, Rudy's children.

Lucy is a precocious child. Though she's still small, she has to grow up to be a good Oneechan.

Sylphy-chan has been working hard to teach her, practicing magic with her every day on Rudy's behalf.

I used to be so exhausted raising my own children. I can't help but feel that I've lost, being surrounded by so many good mothers.

I'll be all right, even if my kids have all grown up, I can still try my best at other things.

Everyone doing their best is too adorable.^[87]

Lara really took a liking to me. From the moment she was born, she was able to talk. She would always call out to me.

[Obaachan, Obaachan!...] Then Leo would call out to me [It's serious! It's serious! Lara-sama has wet herself!]

These days, she enjoys sitting in my lap with Leo and basking in the sun. We would talk about things like my home town, or where her Papa grew up.

Arus loves breasts. He seems like Rudy when he was younger.
When I hold him, he really likes clinging to my chest.
I guess he's fine even with grandma's breasts.
It looks like he inherited something bad from Paul and Rudy.
Like Rudy, I'm worried that he might make a lot of good girls cry, but you'll make them happy in the end, right?"

Before I'd noticed, my eyes were starting to get hot.
Tears were falling like raindrops.
Lucy isn't really around Zenith much, and Lara doesn't speak.
More than half seems to be Zenith's own delusions.
Looking out through those vacant eyes...
At least the world Zenith sees is affectionate.

"Oh that's right, and speaking of Rudy, that child became the subordinate of an amazing person.

Dragon God Orsted.

A distant disciple of the Dragon God Urupen, one of the [Three Heroes who Vanquished the Demon God].^[88]

Apparently he's incredibly strong, and everyone is frightened of him, but he doesn't seem that scary to me.

He really just wants to get along with everyone, especially Rudy.

He often comes to check on the house.

Once in a while I try to talk to him but I'm not that good with talking to strangers. I become completely flustered.

But he's a kind person. Whenever Lucy is troubled in magic he teaches her some tricks... since they are difficult tricks Lucy generally isn't able to understand them.

When I let him try to hold Lara, though he nervously holds her in his arms, the way he does it looks very kind.

But, Leo and Arus aren't very good with him.

The other day, when Arus started crying very loudly, he ran away when he saw Eris-chan was coming.

Such a strong and gentle person. Becoming the subordinate of such an amazing person, I don't really understand it but I'm proud of it.

Even Paul would surely think so."

I wonder if any of this is true...

Something like Orsted visiting the house never happened...

Has he been checking on the house without me knowing...?

"Rudy has grown up splendidly.

Norn and Aisha have come of age, and Sylphy-chan is about to have another child.

Lilia becoming flustered not being able to look after me, foolishness.

Between caring for me and the children, shouldn't caring for the children be given priority?

I'll leave Lilia to care for Sylphy-chan, I'll be fine going to Okaasama's place.

You don't have to worry so much, I used to be an adventurer back in the old days after all.

I'll be with Rudy, Aisha, and Rudy's friend Cliff-kun...

Ufufu, going on a journey with Rudy, how exciting!"

Those seemed to be Zenith's more recent memories.

"Okaasama looks like such a granny now.

She's completely different from the old days. Rather than scold me, she just sobbed [Zenith, Zenith].

She was worried if I was hurt, or fell ill, and showed me to a doctor.

As you can see, I am very much alive.

She's so prone to worrying, showing me to the doctor almost every day.

That tough Okaasan, with a crying face, didn't scold me at all.

Every day she would come to see me with a worried face.

Ah yes, father came too.

Otousan seems to have grown a beard.

In the old days he never would have done such a thing, he seems to have had a long, successful career.

He said my condition didn't look good with a wry smile."

Claire suddenly buried her face in Carlyle's chest.

Carlyle was stroking his beard, also with tears in his eyes.

"It's just that, Okaasama and Rudy developed a bad relationship.

Rudy snapped and got into a fight with Okaasama.

I wish you would just reconcile...

Then, sure enough, Rudy managed to corner Okaasama.

He's just like Paul at that age, Rudy is really strong, he's not going to go easy on her...

So I had to properly mediate the situation!"

Then, the Miko opened her eyes.

That's it?

"Fuu..."

The Miko rubbed her eyes and sighed.

Then collapsed back into her seat.

Her lackeys immediately went to her side.

They gave her a cup of water and a hot towel, they must have prepared it beforehand.

Then massaged her shoulders and arms.

They're treating her just like an idol.

"I'm sorry, that was everything. Was it of any help?"

The Miko looked dead tired.

Using her ability must be really exhausting.

I'm worn out just from watching her.

Reading all of Zenith's memories, and downloading them into her brain.

Then watching an entire impromptu play of Zenith's life.

With that much information being processed in an instant, of course it's tiring.

I could also use a shoulder massage.

"No, but thank you very much."

I still don't know a method to treat Zenith.

But, I was able to understand Zenith's feelings.
That alone makes my trip to Milis worthwhile.

"At least I know that she's happy.
And that she remembers Paul, and that he has passed away.
I understand her present condition now."

Zenith understands what's happening around her.
She has thoughts.

Although the Miko's tone made it seem as though she was in a dream-like state, there were no contradictions in facts like the number of children.
Or their personalities... But Lara was slightly different.
Lara is certainly attached to Zenith.
In Zenith's eyes, Lara might be trying to convey something with all her might... possibly.

"I was also able to learn something else."

"...?"

"She... I don't know how, but she seems to be able to read peoples thoughts."

Read thoughts?

"Because she's in such a state I may not be reading her memories correctly, but there's something I have to tell you..."

The Miko said so in a hushed voice.
Then gestured to me to lend her my ear.
Her lackeys behind her immediately covered their ears.

I brought my ear close to the Miko.
Then, she spoke in a very quiet voice.

"Zenith is a [Miko]."

At those words, I nodded slowly.

I suspected as much.

It was very likely she had some sort of curse.

"If this becomes known, it will cause an uproar, so I recommend you keep this hidden."

"Of course. I swear, as Orsted's subordinate, I will defend her."

"Truly, as one would expect."

Well, after letting her get kidnapped, I might be a hypocrite for saying that.

But I intend to live on such a feeling.

However, I have learned two things.

One, Zenith's ability.

The ability to read thoughts.

It's still not clear, but at least it doesn't seem like an ability that could lead directly to her death.^[89]

That gives me a sense of relief.

The other thing, Gisu.

There's a discrepancy in something he said.

Come to think of it, that guy's movements have been strange throughout this entire mess.

Despite knowing the Latreia house is part of the Expulsion Faction, he approached them, then took Zenith out.

I'll have to question him thoroughly.

"Miko-sama, I am very glad that we were able to meet. There must be something I can do as thanks."

I still don't know how to cure Zenith.

But, she seems to be in a better state than I thought.

She is conscious.

Even if it's a feeling like watching a dream.

Perhaps she might suddenly wake up.

"Thank you. Then there are two things, is that okay?"

"What can I do for you?"

"Could I have that bracelet?"

"Bracelet?"

I looked down at my arm.

There, Orsted's bracelet was shining.

"Yes."

"... But, this bracelet is not something I can remove, and it wouldn't have any use to you?"

"It won't matter. People already know you are working for Orsted-sama at a glance."

I'm already identified as Orsted's subordinate pretty much everywhere.

So, in other words...

"Miko-sama, do you also want to join Orsted Co.?"

"Yes. If I die before I become 30, it will be unpleasant."

"I see."

Come to think of it, her fate was described as weak.

In that case, she's destined to die.

She could die of an illness, but she doesn't really have bad health, so she'll probably end up being assassinated.

But, under Orsted's protection,

Now that the Cardinal's position has been weakened,

And with the Pope as my ally, it would become difficult to interfere.

Though it's not absolute.

Hmm...

Well, that should work.

"Then, I'll make arrangements to provide a symbol of the Dragon God within a few days."

"Thank you! With this I'll make it past 50!"

I need to repay her for her help properly.

I'll get her something with the Dragon God's crest, I'll even throw in a free guardian beast summoning.

"And your other request?"

"Please commute Therese's sentence. As it is, she'll be demoted and sent far away."

"But, that can't be helped?"

Although she was just carrying out her orders, she failed to protect you.

"Eh, well... Because she was defeated by Rudeus, the Cardinal suffered a serious blow. If she's sent away, she may end up being killed. And she was always a kind-hearted guard."

She's already served her purpose.

If the Cardinal's faction killed Therese as revenge, that wouldn't be funny.

Even though it turned out like this...

She's still someone I'm indebted to.

She was used too, she had to follow her orders, being killed for something like that is too much.

"Okay."

"Thank you. Then please sign our petition."

One of her lackeys immediately produced official-looking documents.

Preparation is good.

I wonder if this was their intention from the beginning.

"Well then, Rudeus-sama. I look forward to working with you?"

Thus, the Miko became one of Orsted's subordinates.

Part 4

"Rudeus-sama."

Afterwards, while we were waiting in the carriage, Claire spoke.
She no longer wore that cold, stubborn expression.
This must be her nervous face.

"Although this may not be an appropriate place to hold such a conversation, when I calmed down, I realized we would likely be too busy to speak after this, so let's talk now. Will that be all right?"

I nodded in silence.
Did she find out... Is she angry that I have three wives?
Even if it's all right with two people, three people might be...
It's not something that would be permitted in the Milis religion.

"It's about what I did."

"Okay."

It was different.
It seems to be something about herself.
Yeah.
She's not trying to denounce me, or blame me.
No, she might still be difficult.

Without changing her expression, she started speaking.

"What I was attempting to do... was not something permissible as a human being."

"Yeah..."

Even if it was to help Zenith, that was going to far.

After all this, I don't want to have a carefree chat about it in a place like this.

"So, please give me penance."

"Penance...?"

"Yes, penance. I took Zenith away from you, and tried to do something awful, such a crime requires a suitable punishment."

"I think your apology was enough?"

"Such a thing is not enough. The punishment must fit the crime."

I can understand that.

If everything could be settled with an apology, the police would be unnecessary.

In an incident like this, the perpetrator would normally receive severe corporal punishment.

But, I don't blame Claire.

Even though Claire might not be satisfied with that.

"... What kind of punishment would be fitting?"

"To be whipped, or to have both arms cut off... Even death would not be an unfitting punishment."

Err...

That seems like overkill.

"After listening to Zenith's story, how could I act so selfishly? Even considering doing something like that to my own daughter, I deserve to burn in hell. Such a stupid person only deserves the hammer of judgment."

Her fist was trembling.

Were we listening to the same story?

I never heard such a thing.

I heard something else.

Zenith forgave her.

I didn't understand it at the time.

But, she could sense Claire's anguish.

Now I properly understood.

Claire, at that trial, without a single ally, when you were trying to bear the brunt of the blame yourself, you were forgiven.

That's why Zenith slapped Carlyle and I, but didn't slap Claire.

Although I thought something like that was too far-fetched at the time...

It wasn't.

Well, Claire still needs a reasonable punishment.

Claire herself, rather than forgiveness, wants a punishment.

Until she receives one, she won't budge an inch.

Hmm.

I mean, I wonder what I should do with someone so stubborn.

Alright.

"I understand... well then..."

"...."

Claire looked tense.

I'm bad, let's go in a selfish direction.

"Please convert."

"You mean, to your religion? A faith of the demon race?"

That's not it.

I didn't mean a religious conversion.

I'd be too embarrassed if you converted to Roxyism.

In this case, what should I say?

Well, the phrasing isn't worth worrying about.

"No, I don't mean stop being a Milis believer. I'd just be thankful if you left the Demon Race Expulsion faction."

"You mean, the Latreia house as a whole?"

"Only Claire-san is fine. My wife is actually a demon race, so describing them as [filthy] is no good. And I'd like you to accept the differences in our beliefs and education policies."

"...."

"Ah, and next time, if something happens please consult me. I should be able to find a solution... I think."

Claire watched me with a blank look of amazement.

Then nodded immediately.

"Yes, of course."

Claire didn't look like she needed anymore convincing.

Does she understand that's the punishment?

I can't tell.

But, she seems to have given it some thought, and nodded again.

"Henceforth, Claire Latreia is of the Demon Race Acceptance faction, and will act as such. I will trust you, and won't interfere in your religion or educational policies."

"Thank you in advance... But, don't overdo it. Forcing yourself too much is bad."

"... Of course."

For the time being, if this Baachan becomes a little more lenient, she shouldn't cause any trouble with my wives and daughters.

Right now she seems fine, but she might just be restraining herself.

The next time we meet... Well, if we quarrel, then I apologize in advance.

"Then it's settled."

"... For your kindness, thank you."

Claire was silent at first, but nodded with a serious face.

That's an awkward way to apologize.

Part 5

After that, I returned to Cliff's house.

I've arranged to stop by the Latreia house some other time, my first priority is Gisu.

There's a lot I need to hear.

Regarding this matter, and others.

Thinking back, that guy's timing was always too good.

It's about time I heard everything in detail.

"Well then, I'm going to go look for Gisu."

I left Aisha and Zenith in the house.

Then immediately left to find Gisu.

"Oniichan, wait for a moment!"

I was stopped by Aisha.

She sounded urgent, and held something out to me in her hand.

"This!"

In her hand, she was holding a letter.

A letter with a wax seal.

On the front was written [To Rudeus].

"As soon as Oniichan departed, Gisu-san came and left this letter with Wendy!"

I silently received it.

Leaving it with that timing...

I have a bad feeling.

I tore off the seal and immediately began reading its contents.

"To Rudeus.^[90]

Yo, Senpai.

After returning from listening to the Miko, now that you're reading this letter, you've probably figured it out.

Did you figure it out?

Hey, you figured it out, right?

If you still haven't figured it out, then this letter is my mistake... Oh well.

Now, Senpai probably has doubts.

About how I found Zenith's location.

About why I took Zenith out at such a convenient time.

About way back when I first met with Senpai.

About how I coincidentally met Senpai in the Dorudia tribe's village.

You're probably wondering about that.

However, that much could only be expected from the S-class adventurer Gisu-sama.

Let me explain.

Everything, all of it, was on Hitogami-sama's instructions.

Hitogami-sama gives me advice, and I follow it.

In short, I guess that makes me one of [Hitogami's Apostles].

So I deceived Senpai.

Are you surprised?

After all this, what do you think?

Or, are you mad?

You're probably mad.

Ha, that's natural.

But, ever since I was a child, I've only been able to survive thanks to God-sama's advice.

When I was half-dead, whenever I was in a pinch, I would be saved if I could just hear His voice.

For someone like me, who doesn't have the power to fight, that voice was salvation.

It was like that for Senpai too, right?

You were able to return from the Demon Continent because of Hitogami-sama's help.

You were able to meet Ruijerd-danna, obtain a demon eye,

Have me sent to get you out of jail, and rescue your younger sister.

Hitogami-sama even helped find Zenith.

After all that, Senpai.

You betrayed Hitogami-sama.

Why would you do something like that?

Hitogami-sama is a good God.

He gives us advice for our own sake.

Senpai brought God's wrath down upon himself.

Senpai betrayed God.^[91]

Even if we were used, we recieved his favor, and we remain because of that.

Well, I'm not good with letters.

At least, before my hometown was destroyed, I thought so.

Hitogami-sama used me to destroy my hometown.

Hitogami-sama just laughed in the end. You and I were used like that, huh.

Of course I was angry?

I was deceived, I was taken advantage of, stop screwing around.

Nevertheless, at that moment, Hitogami-sama called out to me.

He said something like "I've been helping you until now, so a thing like this should be okay."

Maybe he was just trying to stir me up.

It was like pouring oil on a fire, I wonder if he felt good sneering at me.

But, I thought, it was already a sunk cost.

That's right.

If I thought about it, this was just a trade for all the help I'd been given until now.

Honestly, even I bear a grudge with every fiber of my being... But that doesn't matter.

I guess Senpai doesn't think the same way.

While reading, you're probably thinking something like [Oi newbie, what are you thinking?]

However, even if Senpai disagrees, it was different for me.

From my perspective, Senpai is ungrateful.

Turning fangs towards your benefactor.

So Senpai, you might hate me, but I've chosen my side.^[92]

This time, I played wait-and-see.

In order to measure Senpai's ability, I set a trap using the Temple Knights.

Although you easily cut your way through...

Anyway, that's just like Senpai.

But, it was a failure that you had to show your trump card.^[93]

I'll gather more war potential for next time, face you magnificently from the front, and make a declaration of war.

Then take your head.

I resent you Senpai.

We had fun in jail, and I won't forget traveling together on the Holy Sword Highway.

Exploring the labyrinth as well, I hadn't been that excited in a long time.

That's just an indiscretion.

That's all.

There are grudges and there are debts.

Even if I resent Hitogami-sama, I'm still in His debt.

Even if there's a grudge, I return favors.

It's my jinx.

From Gisu Nukadia]

I immediately rushed out of the house.

"Gisu!"

Gisu was an enemy the entire time.

He even saw me fight using the MK-I.

He said he's gathering war potential.

That guy, what does he mean?

He said that the next time will come from the front.

Believing that is difficult.

I don't know.

If that's true, I have to stop him.

No, not stop him, I have to kill Gisu.

First of all, I have to go to the commercial district.

I leapt over to the mercenary branch office.

I immediately sent Orsted a summary of the letter, Gisu is Hitogami's Apostle.

Then, without waiting for a reply, went to chase after Gisu.

But I have no idea where to start looking.

I won't even be fucking efficient searching alone.

Thinking so, I leapt to the religious headquarters, and put Gisu on the wanted list.

Furthermore, I asked to mobilize the Temple Knights to search Milishion and its periphery.

That bastard is an Apostle of Hitogami.

Gisu knows the future.

He's a man who became an S-class adventurer with no combat capability.

There's no way I can catch him.

Chapter 12

The Traitor Escaped

Part 1

Gisu Nukadia.

The last survivor of the race called Nuka tribe.

Combat experience is weak.

Has a specialty in other things.

Even though he doesn't stick to using magic or sword he has continued being an adventurer; currently his rank is S-class.

That was the man named Gisu known to Orsted.

『...Until now, Gisu's movements never changed no matter what action I took. Therefore, I thought he was not an apostle.』 [94]

Orsted.

He came to understand how this world and people operated with his own actions, from there he somehow located apostles and the like.

The history which he interferes with, the history which is not interfered with.

While knowing all of it, Gisu's movement looked consistent in whichever loop he went back and forth.

He lived as an adventurer and died as an adventurer.

No matter what occurred around his surroundings, there weren't any odd movements at all.

Orsted has a specialty in seeking out the hidden apostles of Hitogami.

Just like Gisu, people not having high combat strength exists; those who are going to keep secretly watching are among those who have heard about the fight with Dragon God from Hitogami.

They don't operate publicly and move just like shadows, they help a different apostle in need when necessary.

Such apostles were all but killed by Orsted.

Because his loop exists, it was easier to find and kill them.

But Gisu was the only distinction.

It was only Gisu, there was never a point where he was particularly dubious much less about him being Hitogami's apostle was not even suspected once.

That guy couldn't take up action appropriate for an apostle of Hitogami no matter what.

For example, even on the verge of getting killed, he didn't.

『But that guy is an apostle in all of the patterns, he kept it hidden and stuck through it.』

Regarding the loops until now,

Gisu claiming himself as an apostle is a nonexistent event.

Though doubtful, there was also the thing it said about killing.

But, even if he was about to die, even in the midst of getting killed, it meant that he never once opened his mouth until his final moments.

『And thus I, that the history that I was following was a delusion....that's why I couldn't win....』

With the exchange of only that sentence, it could be seen that Orsted was downhearted.

He didn't realize the possibility of Gisu being an apostle up till now.

If it's Hitogami, he might not be able to hold back his laughter.

That guy, if only he hadn't noticed Gisu then.

Well, it might be that he didn't consider him as an important piece at first.

『However, you've done well.』

But, we can't imagine how many of such apostles exist.
At any rate, Orsted can loop in time but Hitogami can't.
Even if he wants to create a similar apostle, it shouldn't go all too well.

『That guy is Hitogami's trump card. Next time there won't be any.』

Therefore, I think the possibility of Gisu being Hitogami's trump card, the final stronghold, is enough.

The final apostle Hitogami was hiding.

That Gisu... if it's him saying it, a poor pin won't come.^[95]

Orsted thinks with this he has gained victory.

That might be.

He has his loop in place.

Even if he loses this time, it will be fine to just kill Gisu the next time.

If that happens, he will once again be closer to victory.

But, I am in dismay.

I don't know what Gisu will try to do.

No matter what, since he seems like such a chivalrous man that I am in dismay.

"I want to win in this loop."

With the anxiety in my chest I wrote the letters and send it off, 『It means that that guy doesn't have anymore tricks left.』 and such were the content of the letter received.

With such a clumsy excuse I laughed a little bit.

Part 2

One month has passed since Gisu was detected as an apostle.

I have been searching for Gisu ever since.

The chivalric orders were mobilized and the Milis continent was searched.

Both the Milis Church and Latreia House are also actively cooperating.

Although the hands of investigation are only expanding, he has probably been able to get away.

Of course, it's not only just Milis.

I immediately contacted the Dorudia tribe and asked them to put him on the wanted list in the Great Forest.

I also informed Ariel to have him on the wanted list in the Asura Kingdom.

I requested Roxy to circulate the demand in the Ranoa Kingdom.^[96]

Although, it doesn't feel like he will be captured that easily with only that much.

In the southern and north-eastern part of the Central Continent.

Begaritt Continent, Demon Continent, Heaven Continent.

Many places where my hands cannot reach, the world is vast.

It's also not known in which direction he escaped to.

Is it the north or the west?

If only I had some influence in the Kingdom of the Dragon King, but if it was concluded that he escaped in the direction of the Demon Continent...^[97]

With the death of the king the Kingdom of the Dragon King is facing various difficulties.

The Demon tribe is inconspicuous in the vast Demon continent.

If Gisu is moving while using the Teleportation Magic Square behind my back, the possibility that it's neither of the two also exists.

Gisu is left at large.

Nothing but unpleasant premonitions.

Honestly, arresting him had to happen at this timing.

I considered self-defense when I realized that he can't be caught.

He said this time would be fair and square in his letter.

With the war potential to be able to defeat me.

It's an unbelievable story.

Gisu's words are filled with lies and deception. How can I believe it.

Or so I usually think, but...

If I try to consider it, Gisu should have been easily able to kill me this time.

Since I trusted him and also showed him my defenseless back.

But that guy didn't mess around.

To the bitter end he screwed me around in his trap with his ingenuity.

It's true that the trap was destroyed afterwards.

The fact that Gisu could have kidnapped Aisha was also true.

Since she is average in her usage of sword styles and magic, he might have determined it as impossible.

Even so he should have gotten a chance, but he didn't do it.

Then isn't it fine to believe in the contents of the letter.

Despite the instructions of Hitogami, it may be that it is Gisu's way of doing things to be dignified to the last.

It will be a failure if a perfect measure is not chosen when it's time to kill someone.

It's a jinx.

Although it lets you believe something like that but in reality it's the opposite.

While hiding in a closet in Cliff's residence with a poison knife in his hands, while I am asleep and then *shluk*, such a possibility also exists. [98]

It might be his goal to make me not notice something by trapping me in a maze of such thoughts.

It can't be helped even if I think about it.

For now, we were not attacked.

It's not that Gisu had assembled his war potential in advance.

Right about now, he might be assembling the war potential capable of defeating me.

That's what I would like to think but I don't know when we will be attacked, that feeling doesn't disappear.

Scary.

Part 3

Now then, while I was searching for Gisu, Aisha had steadily formed a branch of Mercenary Group.

Selection of branch chief, recruiting group members, establishing the direction of the work. Originally it was something that couldn't be done unless I was consulted with but Aisha did all of it herself.

The thing about the Latreia who are taking care of Zenith also exist, it's an overwhelming performance.

Such an Aisha, she might be making a smart move considering the situation.

Approximately one month has passed after Gisu's disappearance.

Eris came here after being dispatched by the Holy Kingdom of Milis.

She came from the Teleportation Magic Square to protect me.

She was perfectly armed.

Not in casual wear but two swords attached to the body coat of the Sword King.

With an appearance to be identified as a notorious swordswoman when anyone looked, with a dignified look she came over.

"Now that I've come, it's alright! I'll have everyone split in two!"

While getting cheered up Eris said that to me.

"That Gisu is an idiot, huh! To go against Rudeus! Despite saying 'I'm no match for Senpai, I'm no match for Senpai!' all the time.

While watching the cheerfully declaring Eris, my fear faded.

At least, the fight will occur in a few days, I don't think I'll be killed.

Or so I thought.

"Eris...."

The relieved me hugged Eris.

As I was rubbing her chest, I was beaten to death.

Within my fading consciousness, I understood.

That this was Gisu's strategy all along.

-FIN-

Part 4

Setting the joke aside.

I'll try to sort this out in a calm place.

Firstly, from the state of affairs 『Gisu will appear from right in front after assembling his war potential』 if we're to believe such a case, then from now on I have three courses of action.^[99]

1. Search for Gisu.
2. Strengthen the magic armor(myself).
3. Scout opposition war potential.

If I try to line it up, those things have not changed for the present.

Rather than focusing on the war potential 80 years later, the focus has just changed around several years later.

But, Gisu is not an ordinary guy.

Even if he calls it fair and square from right in front, it's not clear in what kind of form will it come.

Is he approaching with numbers or with quality.

According to Orsted, taking off with a complete set isn't enough to defeat me.^[100]

But, I experienced the violence of numbers just the other day.

Temple Knight Party are able to fight like that, there are several people with the talent of being a major world power class.

If such a thing can be prepared, at least my victory will be simple.

Just kidding.

However, assembling such talented people should take time.

And the amount is also not that much.

One year, two years.

It should be fine to look at it take around that much time at the least.

But, if the assembly is finished, I think I'll be defeated.
It's not like I won't be defeated by getting caught by such a trap that was prepared scrupulously taking several years.^[101]
Temple Knight Party was able to do just that after all.
I can't imagine Hitogami's apostles not being able to do more than that.

That's why, I consider obstructing it beforehand.
Go around each nation of the world to forestall the increase of their comrades.
If an opponent has already turned in, it's fine to crush each one of them.

In short, the business hereafter, I have to move with the possibility that everyone is an enemy.
At least, the possibility of Gisu residing in the Kingdom of the Dragon King and Demon Continent is high.

Particularly, the probability of the Demon Continent seems to be high.
Such as Atofe, it seems like she will delightfully lend her strength when she hears about defeating me.
Demon continent was scheduled to be the last but I must go there as soon as possible.

But, as order of preference goes, KDK should be good first.
There lives God of Death Randolph who won against me wearing the 『Mk. II』 .
He's a reliable chess piece.
I want to control it first.

The course of action was decided.
The Mercenary Group is not on track yet but I have the support of the Latreia and the Religious Organization.
While receiving work from two big-shots, I intend not to keep the matter to maintain itself.
I was able to do the bare minimum.

For once, let's return to headquarters(Sharia).
From there, concerning the movement hereafter, move closer to Orsted once again.

But, before that I intend to go to various places and address them.

Part 5

I proceeded to go towards the Latreia House, while introducing Eris I announced my repatriation.

"Is that so."

Claire's excess of manners were inadequate, even while looking at Eris she didn't frown. She might be abiding by that thing which I said. But she had an absolutely deplorable face.

"Of course about Zenith, will you be taking her back?"

"Yes, I will carry the duty and look after her."

"I understand."

Zenith has been looked after by the Latreia for this one month.

Since then Zenith has been looked after by the Latreia House in place of the busy me and Aisha.

It could be called that she missed the Latreia house since she frequently moved around there.

Strolling within the residence grounds, revolving around the garden.

Whenever there is the case of accompanying her with the housemaid she tries to leave to walk outside.

As usual, she remained in her blank state but I understood that she was fully enjoying her hometown after such a long time.

Looking at her, all the gentlemen and ladies of the Latreia house made a really sorrowful looking face.

Eldest son Edgar, eldest daughter Anise.....because of Gisu, I wasn't able to greet them.

But, for the time being, "The next time I come back I will definitely greet them" and entrusted this message.

"Finally, I just regret not being able to see Norn's face."

"I'll come again and bring Norn and my children as well."

There were some twists and turns but....

Claire is not a bad person.

She is an unpleasant person but she is not evil.

There is no problem if I just have to show her my wives' or children's faces.

This time for sure I'll get it over with just greetings.

"No, most likely, to call it from my age, it won't be strange even if this is the last parting of this life."

Last parting of this life.

Her age has already crossed over 60.

I don't know about this world's average lifespan but her able-body still has some ways to go.

But, the round trip from Sharia ranges approximately 4 years.

It's not a close distance.

And it's not like I would immediately return back after arriving, the next meeting might be slightly more than 10 years.

Claire will be about more than 70 around that time.

No matter what happens, there is nothing strange about aging.

Or so you would think.

It would be fine to just use the Teleportation Magic Square but.

I won't know from where the pressure gets hanged if it turns out that the Teleportation Magic Square is used in excess by the public.

Since it's a taboo in this world for once.

In Asura Kingdom, in the Kingdom of the Dragon King and perhaps even in the royal family of Milis, it might be that they have installed it to make use of it just in case.

But, it might be that the 3 large world nations are hiding them.

"Rudeus-sama. For taking Zenith and bringing her here. I truly thank you very much."

While saying that Claire lowered her head.

It seems just the other day she got on the carriage together with Zenith and went to watch something like a drama.

Claire had a frown the entire time but the maid said that she hasn't seen Oku-sama being this happy for the longest time.

"In the near future, I will come again."

When I realized I had already said those words.

"But....."

"I'll definitely come."

I said it with a strong force while packing my belly with strength.

Thereupon, Claire loosened up her face with a puff.

"Zenith possesses a truly good son."

Claire said that in the end.

Part 6

I also went to Miko's place to greet her.

I have two souvenirs.

A bracelet that is similar to mine and a scroll to summon a magical beast that came from Orsted.

This bracelet was made by a craftsmen of Milis who was requested by Aisha within this one month.

Normally a jewel is fixed in the pedestal but a stone is embedded into it.

The stone that I crafted with Earth Magic posses a black lustre and the crest of the Dragon God is carved into it.

Anyone who sees it, will be understood as a subordinate of the Dragon God.

While holding such things when I called out for the Miko, her entourage came out.

Within them Therese's figure was also there.

She had evaded a relegation.

The petition in which my name was written seemed to be useful.

Well, it was typically a demotion instead of relegation, she was not a captain anymore.^[102]

Under the captain that has been newly dispatched, she was settled down under the sub-captain position.

By the way, the new captain was not a very flexible person.

Bracelets aside, such a questionable thing like summoning magic being used within the Religious Organization was rejected as outrageous.

Not to mention, such an unreasonable thing was persisted by the entourage. "This is a gift towards the Miko from Dragon God Orsted-sama's subordinate(Rudeus) to defend her! How does a mere captain have the authority to deny it!!"

Mr. Captain at this rate you surely won't be able to have a successful career.

The animal that came out of the scroll was a silver colored owl.

Probably around 1 meter long.

It's small compared to Leo but it's existence is still there, with golden colored pupils it felt like divinity.

No one came out from Pergius's spirit series.

Those are ultra rare so they would probably not come.

This time it's gonna be dedicated to Miko so the pack would also be different.

In any case, it was nice that a sacred beast-like animal came out.

It could be that Mr. Captain would have been persistent in denying it on the spot if a thing like a huge spider with a black lustre had come out.

"I'll take care of it!"

Miko's eyes were sparking while looking at the owl.

When she stretched her hand to stroke it, the owl's eyes narrowed while feeling good.

The animal became emotionally attached to her immediately after it had been summoned, it looks like the Miko is very much honored with this summon.

"Well, please take care of it."

It's not a pet.

Therefore, it wants to obediently protect you.

"Well then, till next time."

"Yes, Rudeus-sama too, be in good health!"

Finally, I also bowed to the below mentioned Therese, 『Defense of the Holy Sepulcher (Anastasia Keep)』 .

I will meet both of them once again.

Part 7

Finally, it's Cliff.

If it's about Cliff, everything is going the favorable way for him from the start.

The incident the other day made Cliff well-known to both the parties of Pope's and Cardinal's.

"Cliff Grimoire persuaded the right hand of the Dragon God, Rudeus and rescued the Miko-sama."

"He talked about the justice within the quarrel between the Pope and Cardinal and made way for the path of righteousness."

"A model believer of Milis. A splendid man."

How the rumors were plausibly flowing.

The rumor has an interesting origin.

According to what I heard, it seems like the great commander of the Temple Knight party and the sub-captain of the Order of the Church or such spread the rumor.

Therefore underling of knights and priests seem to have recognized that as a credible source that for some reason the Pope got an amazing right-hand man.

And then, driven by such rumors, Cliff seems to have taken on the work himself.^[103]

A ceremonial occasion of great nobility.

No matter how much political strife exists the duty of a priest doesn't change.

And then, it can be said that Cliff also gained practical experience in Sharia some way or another.

Even though he is a rookie the things that he can do are numerous, it looks like he is viewed as an exceedingly superior man of talent.

Such a person like him is considered a nuisance by other people but.....

Well, it can't possibly be helped.

Suddenly an excellent person has entered not to mention the grandchild of the Pope.

It won't be strange even if there are people burning with the flames of jealousy.

Dealing with that in some way is Cliff's duty.

Even so there is no need to worry in surplus.

If it's the present Cliff.

That Cliff.

He will display a splendid overtake even if something happens.

But, there is only one concern.

"Then, Cliff-senpai. I'll be returning temporarily."

"Ah....take care of Lize for me."

"Of course. I'll make sure not to flirt."

It seems Cliff has not yet confided to anybody about him being married.

Although he has declared her to be her partner in his mind....

It's not like Cliff.

However, I can understand that proclaiming that he's married to Elinalize is difficult.

The rumor of Elinalize The Bitch are widespread even among the adventurers at this side.

Particularly, within the veterans that are now currently active, the children that were snatched away in the beginning also remain.

If it is a talk about such a marriage....it should be fine to not do it yet.

It will be alright to announce it when the talk behind the back grows big enough to be safe, that kind of form probably isn't poor.

At any rate.

It's not like he would consider hiding it until his last breath.

But, from now on, it's possible that the talk about formal marriage can come up in this case.

Even if it's Wendy, the maid who returns after night falls, a young man and woman under one roof is....

No, it's alright.

It's Cliff after all.

It's not my personal matter.

That person who preaches with such pride, it shouldn't be possible for him to have an affair.

Right, it's not about me.

....If it's like this I'll end up holding the flag and making sure of it.

Really, give it your all, Cliff-senpai.

"Cliff-senpai as well, make sure not to flirt repeatedly. Milis-sama is watching."

"I can't possibly do that. I don't have time to spare for such things."

Cliff has been really busy these days.

Work is on track, furthermore people have started acknowledging him as the Pope's right arm.

To see his worth influential people and nobles are also approaching Cliff.

"Is it really? Since senpai has been popular these days. If you were to accidentally push down Wendy-chan or the like."

"Wendy is like a little sister to me. If it was about you, would you meddle like that."

Even I don't meddle with my little sister!

You're being impolite.

When I made a face and became disappointed, Cliff dropped his glance with a sigh.

"Nevertheless.....I really wanted to perform with only my own power but."

I replied with a laugh.

"If this was not Cliff-senpai's own power then just what was it?"

"Haha."

I intended to say it in style but I was nose laughed.^[104]

Certainly, Cliff brought me along and he settled the problems I created for him.

It feels like it took the form of a match pump.^[105]

However, taking appropriate action by himself within such a thing, Cliff was recognized for that.

It's absolutely because of Cliff's strength.

".....Regardless, I give you my thanks. I think it was because of you that I was recognized a little bit."

"It should be me who should say that, because of you I got acquainted with Milis. I was able to establish the way of Mercenary group as well."

About the marketing of Ruijerd's dolls.....might be a little difficult for now.

It seems if we proceed to make progress in marketing now only a few people would buy it.

The Mercenary group is not yet stable and there are still numerous problems left but.....

Whatever, if a problem occurs, even so it would be fine to add it to Cliff's promotion.

"From this point on, I'll do it alone."

"Right, please give it your all."

The plans have changed a little bit but I should have been able to carry out Elinalize's promise.

Cliff is already safe.

I don't know in what form the other priests will come into contact.

However, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the start has been decided well.

This time, I'll leave it to Cliff.

The fight between the Pope's faction and the Cardinal's faction still has some way to go.

Within them, Cliff will try his best, I wish for him to raise results.

Well, if it doesn't work out, it will be fine to make him our company employee after he returns.

I want you to be at ease.

"In this one month, forgive me for not helping you out....."

"No, please don't mind it."

My fight is my own, Cliff has his own fight.

"However, if Hitogami's underlings try to do something, please message me at once through the lithograph. I will immediately come running."

"But of course."

Cliff gave a strong nod.

Even if he wasn't able to assist me he is still my comrade.

But, he should not be that weak if he is going to need my protection.

"Well then, Cliff-senpai, be in good health."

"Ah, you too be in good health."

"Or so we say, but we might be able to meet again after about a year."

"I want to be able to introduce Lize almost magnificently by that time."

Right right, there is the matter concerning Elinalize's curse.

It's not like we're parting for a very long time.

"...And then, you should be able to at least stop calling me senpai."

"Well, that has already become a habit, I think it's impossible to do that within my entire life."

When I said that, Cliff shrugged his shoulders and wore a bitter smile.

Thus, the battle in Milis was over.

The conflict of the Latreia house, the internal dispute of the Mills Religious Organization.
And Gisu's betrayal.....

Various things happened but, once again thanks to everyone my objective has been decided.

The next enemy is Gisu.

Side Story

The Mad Dog and the Child of God

The same time as Rudeus was saying goodbye to Cliff.

Two people were reuniting.

The location was the Church headquarters, the Spring park.

The beautiful garden where multicolored flowers will bloom in spring.

There are a number of trees slanting diagonally because of Rudeus's [Quagmire] the other day, but their life force hasn't weakened.

As proof, to replace the Sarak trees, the Balta trees are letting their flowers bloom.

In front of those trees, two women are facing each other.

One with blond hair, one with red.

Therese and Eris.

And then, behind Therese.

As if hiding behind her back, the miko stood.

While rubbing her knees together bashfully, she huddled behind Therese.

In addition, men wearing some kind of blue armor are standing in the background.

"Come on, Miko-sama. It's Eris-sama. Rudeus made time for us to meet."

Therese called out to the miko behind her back in a gentle voice.

However, the miko just bashfully curled herself up.

"Bu-, But... it's that Eris-sama."

For her, Eris is an object of admiration.

Ever since she was aware of her surroundings, and every time something happened and she was allowed to go outside, she had to look into the dirty memories of adults.

In a world with no freedom, she lived a life with no hope.

When she fell into a trap while travelling and was surrounded, she thought nothing except that it was scary, that she didn't want to die.

The one who appeared at that time was Eris.

An air of superiority.

Her movements were straightforward, yet no one could catch her, and what stuck in her memories was the afterimage of her fiery red hair.

It was striking.

At the time, the miko had no idea what had just happened.

It's good that the child is safe, said Eris.

The miko didn't realize that the said child was herself until after returning to the headquarters.

That was when she realized that she had been saved.

Then the miko remembered.

When looking into the fiery-haired woman's eyes, she learned the name of her savior.

Eris.

So her name is Eris.

While thinking that out loud, a strong admiration for Eris was born in her own memories.

Since then, the miko would imitate her.

Whenever she saw something she would loudly declare her impressions.

Whenever she decided something she would plainly declare it in a loud voice.

Whenever it was, she would use a bright and cheerful voice.

She wonders how much time has passed since she started that kind of conduct.

She didn't think she would ever meet Eris again.

She wanted to meet her, but she never said it out loud.

She understood that she didn't have that authority.

However, Eris came to Milishion.

When the miko heard that, she couldn't endure anymore.

To the cardinal, to the pope, she desperately begged to anyone she could.

Begged to meet Sword King Eris.

The Mad Dog Sword King is a dangerous person, but I still want to meet her.

I want to give her my thanks.

That small wish was easily granted.

The endeavor to let the extremely dangerous Mad Dog Sword King and the miko meet was allowed because Rudeus guaranteed that "If anything happens I'll take responsibility for it."

However, now that Eris is before her, she has no idea what to say.

Thinking that it would be rude to read her memories, she didn't meet her eyes.

"..."

Eris stood before the miko with her arms crossed.

She already finished naming herself.

She named herself as Rudeus's wife and one of the Sword Kings.

After Therese's following introduction and thanks for their first meeting, around five minutes have passed.

"Come on, there isn't much time."

Eris stood with good manners.

It's rare for this girl with a quick temper, but this time she was strictly ordered by Rudeus.

[The person you're meeting with is my savior. Please don't be rude... Well, you'll probably end up being arrogant, but just don't hit her.]

She will follow her instructions.

But as expected, this is getting on her nerves.

She hates waiting.

"Won't you hurry it up?"

"Ye-, Yes!"

At those words, the miko jumped with a start.

The worry that she was offending Eris won out against her shyness.

"Um, I'm the miko! Thank you so much for saving my life earlier!"

"Earlier...? I don't remember!"

"Eh?"

To the Eris that declared that in a loud voice, the miko reflexively looked into her eyes.

"... ah."

And then, seeing that there wasn't even the slightest trace of herself in Eris's memories, a saddened expression floated onto her face.

There's no helping it.

She knew it would be like this.

There's no way she would remember.

However, there were thoughts that it might be possible.

That it might be possible for her to remain in Eris's memories, even if just slightly.

That maybe she would say something like, "Oh, you're from that time? You've gotten big."

Those thoughts were lingering in the depths of her heart.

Since she longed for Eris so much.

However, looking at her face, hearing about that time, Eris didn't remember a thing.

Possibly, if she spent more time reading Eris's memories, she may find some traces in the corner of her mind...

But after hearing about the past, what lurked in the corner of Eris's mind was the memory of Therese hugging Rudeus as he sat in her lap and rubbing his head.

The miko is the [Miko of Memories].
She is aware that memories are that kind of thing.
However, that doesn't stop it from being a shock.

"However, you saved Rudeus! I'm grateful!"

With her arms crossed, the tall Eris let out a delightful voice.
After hearing that voice that seemed to blow away her shock, the miko shook her head as if to shake off her thoughts.

"No... It's only natural to save Eris-sama's husband."

Even if the one in front of me doesn't remember me, that doesn't change my admiration or gratitude.

To the miko who thought that, Eris hurled out words as if in pursuit.

"So then, tell me your name! Since Rudeus says he'll be in your care from now on as well, I'll remember it for you!"

"Eh?"

A name.

She doesn't have a name.

Until now, the miko didn't feel inconvenienced by that.

However, now that Eris says she'll remember the miko's name, she doesn't have one to give.

She's missing something important.

She finally gained an awareness of how big a loss that was.^[106]

"Ummm... That is..."

"Miko is that thing, right? The same as Zanoba?... That's not a name, is it?"

At the word 'Zanoba,' the miko once again looked into Eris's eyes.

It seems that mikos from other countries have names.

She couldn't see anything about that miko besides his name, since Eris didn't have much interest in him.

Still, it came as quite a shock.

"Why, you!"

"Miko-sama is Miko-sama!"

"Are you mocking her!?"

"A name is unnecessary!"

"Where is your god!?"

However, with the uproar in the background, she calmed down a little.

It didn't inconvenience her until now, and there's nothing that could be done if she doesn't have one.

It can be thought of that way.

"My deepest apologies. I don't have a name."

"Hnnn... Is that so?"

It didn't bother Eris.

The miko was relieved at that.

This is the first time in her life that she hesitated so much to look into someone's eyes.

"However, I'm surprised. I heard you won't be coming to Milis."

"Since Rudeus got scared again, I came over... Um, I hurried!"

The teleportation magic circles should be kept a secret.

Eris understood that as well.

Of course, the miko already knew about the teleportation magic circles, and was chuckling to herself.

"Is that so, as expected of Eris-sama!"

"Fufun, of course!"

Eris's mood improved, and the atmosphere of the area became gentler.

Seeing that, the miko started thinking.

I'll flatter Eris more, and improve the atmosphere even more, she thought.

It's something the miko would normally never think.

"Umm, that is, I've always admired Eris-sama!"

"I-, is that so?"

"Yes, how can I become like Eris-sama?"

At that, Eris looked down on the miko.

Fluffy cheeks.

Plump arms and legs.

An overall lacking in tightness, unhealthy body.

"You want to become like me?"

"Yes! I want to become cool like Eris-sama, not just in how I talk... Eh?"^[107]

Before anyone noticed.

Before anyone noticed, Eris had drawn her sword.

Of all the people present, only two of them were able to react.

The two who were especially gifted at swordplay among the Order of the Temple.

At the same time as they noticed, those two despaired.

Eris's sword was unsheathed.

They couldn't see her sword fly at all, but they could feel the sense that something, or someone, had been cut down.

Cut down.

Who was?

That much doesn't even need to be said.

"You!"

"How dare you--!"

What was severed was the miko's wrist... or rather, a branch around half it's width from the nearby Balta tree.^[108]

"..."

"....."

Seeing that, the Temple Knights returned to the background as if nothing happened.

Eris picked it up and quickly pruned the hindering twigs.

The miko looked at Eris's sword that was drawn at some point, thinking, that's a pretty good sword, huh, none of the Temple Knights have swords that good, and such while absentmindedly watching Eris's movements.

Before long, the twigs were all removed and the branch had become a wooden rod around 100 centimeters long.

"Here."

And then, Eris handed it over to the miko.

"...?"

To the miko who looked on in puzzlement, Eris turned sideways.

And then, changing her grip on her sword from one-handed to two, she held her sword aloft... and swung it.

A sound as if it were crushing evil rang as if to destroy the silence.

"Try it."

"...Eh? Ah, yes."

The miko imitated Eris and held up the wooden stick.

And then, with a small shout, she swung it down.

However, it was a 100cm stick.

It wasn't something used for drying clothes, it was slightly heavy with a strange center of gravity, and the miko unsteadily stumbled a step or two forward.

After seeing that, the background shouted, but we'll leave that aside.

"Ummm... by 'like Eris-sama' I meant..."

"Lower your hips more, let out the strength in your elbows, and be more aware of how you move your back. One more time."

"Ye-, Yes!"

Without really knowing what was going on, the miko continued to swing the stick. Each time the miko swung the stick, Eris gave advice.

"..."

"Call out each time you swing! One, two, one two!"

"One, two, one, two!"

The Temple Knights didn't stop this scene.

They weren't really sure what was going on, but they could tell that Eris didn't intend to harm the miko, and so they saw no need to stop it.

There was also the fact that the miko looked lovely swinging the stick around.

Only the captain tried to stop it and had to be held back by the other followers, but in the end it was simply the background scene.

"Haah... Haah... Eris-sama..."

Once she had repeated around 30 times, the miko let out a shaking voice.

"I can't... feel my arms..."

"I see. Then it's fine, you can stop now."

As she was told, the miko lowered the stick.

From her back to her wrists, her body was numbed with exhaustion.

It seems like if you were to put your ear close to her muscles, you would be able to hear them creaking.

"U, Ummm..."

The miko looked up at Eris with an uneasy expression.

She doesn't know why she was made to swing the stick around.

Eris may have simply been trying something out.

She must be disappointed.

She will probably scold me, saying "Do you think you can become me like this?"

Such sad feelings welled up in the miko.

"Starting tomorrow, do that every day. Also, doing it in this garden is fine, but start running."

"Eh?"

"If you don't know what to do, ask them."

Eris looked straight at the miko.

As if drawn into those eyes, the miko read Eris's memories.

What could be seen there was her severe daily training in the Holy Land of the Sword.

Sharpening herself through running and shouting without food or water.

"You can become like me."

Eris stated that definitively.

If Rudeus was here he may have said "No, that's definitely impossible..." with a wry smile.

However, Rudeus was nowhere to be found.

The miko turned around and looked into Therese's eyes.

Her own training was etched into her memories.

In the other Temple Knights as well, though it wasn't to the same level as Eris, there were memories of the effort they put in.

You can become like her.

It will probably be tough, it isn't easy for anyone.

However, you can become like her.

"I... wonder if I can do it?"

"I think it will be fine. We can't let you use a sword or magic, but as far as training your body... Everyone will teach you together."

The one who answered was Therese.

She looked around at the background while saying that, but quickly returned her gaze to the miko.

While looking into the miko's eyes, she gave her honest opinion.

"However, please promise not to raise a hand if assassins attack, even if we were to be completely wiped out."

In Therese's memories were nobles who had challenged opponents with crude tactics and perished.

This was Therese's kindness of asking not to become like them.

"Yes. I swear to Milis-sama."

The miko nodded delightedly.

A gentle atmosphere permeated that place.

Possibly lured in by that atmosphere, the silver owl that was wandering the garden returned.

It angled its head and looked up at the miko, and cried out "Hoo."

"Oh... what happened?"

When the miko bent down and extended her hand, the owl stuck out its forehead as if presenting the place that was itchy.

The miko stroked it with her fingernail, and the owl's fluffy feathers stood on end, and it narrowed its eyes in pleasure.

Seeing that, Eris became sorely tempted.

She loves the Beast Race.

However, that isn't limited to the Beast Race, she loves all fluffy creatures.

She has lots of opportunities to touch dogs and cats, but not birds.

She can cut down a flying bird, but it's rare to get this close to such a large bird without it getting vigilant.

"... Hey, can I touch it too?"

"Yes! Of course!"

Gaining permission, Eris crouched while breathing wildly.

Seeing that excitement, the silver owl winced and faltered backwards.

Eris stopped her movements.

"..."

I can't move too quickly here. Animals instinctively fear creatures faster and stronger than themselves.

They'll be obedient if you completely dominate them, but if you want to get along with them you have to make sure you aren't scary.

That's what she heard from the Rinia who she completely dominated in bed.

Eris slowly and carefully extended her hand, and touched the silver owl.

The silver owl's plumage that seems hard from afar were very soft, and increased Eris's excitement.

She wants to immediately hug it tightly and bury her face into its feathers, but she can't go that far.

If she were to do that it would run away, just like Leo, Rinia, and Pursena.

However, it's fine if she doesn't go that far.

While thinking that, Eris rubbed the silver owl all over.

The silver owl was frightened like an impala being tormented by a tiger, but none of the people there paid it any mind.

"Do you like it?"

"Birds are good, too."

After enjoying that softness for a while, Eris stood up with flushed cheeks.

Fur is nice, but feathers are extraordinary, thought Eris.

Suddenly, she noticed something.

"What's his name?"

"Eh? Name?"

The miko tilted her head at that question.

Well, a name...^[109]

"When keeping an animal, it's common sense to give it a name."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's what Rudeus said before, after all."

The miko was suddenly worried.

Not only has she never named anything before, she doesn't even have one herself.

She's not allowed to name herself, but it's certainly convenient to have one.

"A name..."

Seeing the deeply troubled miko, the background began to become flustered.

I'll decide it, no I will, but Miko-sama should decide it herself, and such.

"Eris, it's over."

At that time, Rudeus returned to the park.

He had finished saying goodbye to Cliff, and was feeling slightly sentimental.

However, there's no time to be immersed in sentimentality, a battle is coming up.

I am a robot. He stiffened his face while thinking that he has to move like a sentinel.^[110]

Seeing the miko in the park, he tilted his head.

"Ummm... is something wrong?"

"We ended up trying to decide on a name."

"A name..."

Rudeus looked around the park.

The troubled miko, the flustered followers.

The new captain who didn't seem like he could swallow the situation.

Therese who was simply wearing a wry smile.

He immediately understood the situation.

That's certainly troubling, he thought.

I'm sure Eris had no ill intentions, he thought.

"Ah, how about Rudeus-sama decides on a name?"

And then, the miko proposed that idea.

I can't decide myself, but there's no problem if Rudeus does it, she thought.

"Eh? Is it okay if I do it?"

"Yes, of course."

Being told so, Rudeus made a difficult face.

He looked between Eris and the miko.

He didn't want to choose a bad name, but since it was so sudden nothing is coming to mind.

"Then, how about... Nurse?"^[111]

"Nurse, huh? That's a good name! From today onwards, your name is now Nurse!"

The miko bent down and pet the silver owl at her feet.

Seeing that, Rudeus shouted "Ah!" in a small voice.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing."

Rudeus turned his gaze from the miko.

He turned his face away like someone with a guilty conscience.

She tilted her head at that, but the miko was satisfied.

She got to meet the Eris that she looked up to, and decided on a name for the owl. She even decided what she should be doing from tomorrow on.

She thought that today was truly a good day.

"Eris-sama. Thank you so much!"

"I'll come again someday. When I do, I'll come to see you again."

"Yes, please!"

Eris was also satisfied.

She was satisfied just being able to touch the owl.

The background was satisfied, as well.

They felt a bit of dread when Eris drew her sword, but they are satisfied that the miko looks satisfied.

They are looking forward to teaching her in detail on how to train her body from tomorrow on. All of them are.

Only Rudeus was turning away with a face that says "Oh, shit!"

Only Therese noticed that facial expression of Rudeus.

She noticed exactly who he was trying to name.

However, she didn't say it out loud.

She just smiled wryly.

The silver owl Nurse looked at that miko with its head tilted.

Thus, Eris was able to gain another disciple.

From the next day the miko became more and more slim, and the Temple Knights treated her more and more like an idol, but... that's a story for another time.

Translator's Notes and References

1. それこそ、コンビニにジュース買いに行くとか、そういうレベルでいいから。
Needs better TL
2. TLC
3. 急がばまわれってヤツだな。Bad TL last fragment of line. ((急がば回れ is "make haste slowly"? So maybe, "He's the 'slow and steady wins the race' type."))
4. 勝手知ったる自分の馬車とでも言わんばかりだ。Bad TL, possible reference or idiom.
5. 「半分は仕事、半分は家のことです」 Japanese idiom/expression?
6. Kingdom of Dragon King sounds awful, I replaced it with Ouryuu Kingdom which is the partially-untranslated name. I plan to use it from now on. || Changing an established name after 20 volumes is somehow a jackass move that only confuses people. Nothing wrong with the previously used name. ((Also, this way you get to say "King Kingdragon, King of the Kingdom of the Dragon King".))
7. Char Aznable, Mobile Suit Gundam Z reference.
8. I dunno. Reference maybe? Saying, "what a joke"?
9. Aisha is saying "kone[コネ]=connection" here which is what Rudi is trying to figure out
10. can be read as こね[kone]
11. can be read as こめ[kome]
12. can be read as いね[ine]
13. konekushon[コネクション]
14. When editing, this was a bit messy and I wasn't sure if it was simply talking about A) suitors marrying into the Latreia family's money (which the search party fiasco revealed to be considerable), or B) the family wanting some kind of recompense for putting all that money up and not getting their daughter back whole in the end. I

assumed it was the former at first from the context, but a translation check would be good.

15. TLC あるなら、あんなふうにモノ扱いなんてしない。
16. Onion dome
17. see pic related <http://a.pomf.se/boxbfm.jpg>
18. Saraku is an anagram for Sakura. So I left it as is.
19. Something like this in blue. <http://a.pomf.se/yemtae.jpg>
20. Probable reference to Kaiji
21. Miko Miko Nurse reference https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miko_Miko_Nurse
22. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=burriko>
23. Original: オーラを感じない代わりに、大らかさを感じ取ったってわけだ。 I have no idea what the joke is here. Please fix.
24. this is a reference to the catholic pope, or more specifically, his mitre <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitre>
25. Literal comparison. The Pope was suggesting Rudy would increase the literacy rate -> cause a rebellion -> fix the rebellion to sell Orsted's name/his own agenda.
26. Kinda weird IMO. This is how I think the conversation should have unfolded after I read the raw text: "Why did you allow her to go out?!" "Is, isn't it ok?" "Why did you believe the words of an outsider!? You listened to the conversation we had yesterday didn't you!? Why didn't you explain our circumstances!? Even if you were to wait for a day before going out, wouldn't it also be alright!? If you could have just waited a little bit more, I would've gotten back soon! You could have also consulted with Onii-chan first!" "Ev-, Even if you said all that, I.. I didn't really understand what you were talking about yesterday, and it should be alright if it's with that person." "I've been telling you all this time! It's not alright! You.. Could it be possible that you came to hinder us!?"
27. He was probably playing Superman again through the night sky, but it doesn't give specifics.
28. Fait Accompli - It's already done, so you have no choice but to accept it.

29. そうなると、俺はここまで来れなかった可能性も高い。 Unimportant, but bad tl. I don't know if he means he'll probably die too or Zenith or what, it just mentions high probability.
30. This line could use some bolding for emphasis.
31. やはり彼女にも、思う所があるのか？ Bad TL
32. 自分のやってることはおかしいという自覚が。 Bad TL
33. 少しすれ違いがあるだけなのだ。 Bad TL, this is probably a Japanese expression. I don't know what this or the previous line where he brought up Therese mean.
34. 今回、俺の周囲にいるのは殺しちゃいけない相手ばかりだし、I may have been a bit too extreme on this line.
35. Not quite sure here. 「猊下、ご機嫌麗しゅう」
36. Yeah, basically it's saying that the Latreia house would be giving up something small (shrimp i.e. Zenith) to get something big (sea bream i.e. favor from the Grimoire house). The Grimoire house isn't getting enough out of the deal to make it worthwhile. I couldn't really think of a good metaphor that could be used in English, so if someone has an idea, please by any means feel free to replace it.
37. Read "company commander", pronounced "middle leader".
38. Kaezar called it Saraku, but I think it's better like this.
39. All these familial titles that I translated are the less known formal versions, e.g. Chichiue or Anie. If it were to say something like Onii-chan, I won't translate it.
40. Not entirely sure on this one, TLC please.
41. Should this be referred to as weak fate instead? はかない運命
42. A google search for バークラント gave me the profile of Don H. Birnkrant, who filmed Red Flag: The Ultimate Game, so that's what I'll use for the name. By the way, a similar search for ラトレイア gave me the Catholic term 'Latria'.
43. I'm not sure if this sentence is about thwarting Hitogami or crushing his own doubts. 思惑を潰せる
44. Not too sure about acknowledge, the word that was used refers to actual feelings.

45. Unsure about this, TLC please. また神子ということで変にかしこまることもなく
46. Whenever I come across furigana like this, I'm tempted to use strikethroughs instead.
47. Okay, I really have no idea here. A completely opposite emotion from preparations? 準備とは真逆の感情だ。
48. Not sure, TLC please. 今回の一件でどういった意見を言うのかはわからないが、早く会いたいものである。
49. オタサーの姫 refers to a girl in a social circle that's mostly men, like an otaku circle.
50. A strange sound that combines a clang and a ザクリ (zakuri - stabbing sound effect that has no english equivalent).
51. Best picture I could find, it's the back of some lego-like doll's head http://blog-imgs-53.fc2.com/d/o/u/douzoukenkyu/CIMG0104_20121130030921.jpg
52. The guy who leads a funeral procession. Koruteji = Cortege(?) All of these names seem to require a direct translation for Rudy's explanations to make sense. Also they're pretty much pronounced the same as their English translations.
53. 普通の質問に対してありえない嘘を言って、笑ったヤツの頭の上にタライが落ちてくる感じで。 Bad TL, something about a tub falling on his head. ((Editor's note: I'm not familiar with any implications as an idiom, but I suppose that would have something to do with this slapstick trope that came up when I googled it?))
54. Unimportant バッと、自分でもかっこいいと思えるような音が響く。 Bad TL.
55. Saraku trees are a play on words, where 'ku' and 'ra' from Sakura trees (which are described as looking identical) were switched.
56. This is a literal Japanese saying.
57. The book Rudy wrote about Ruijerd.
58. 二人一緒にやった時の事を見られたってことは、俺が言ったあのセリフも聞かれたかもしれない。 Bad TL
59. Could someone check to make sure these names are consistent with previous chapters? I couldn't find anything. ((Editor note: They're first named in ch 49.5. Not sure if there's a difference in the Japanese between use of "Temple Knights" and

"Knights of the Order of the Temple", but otherwise the names have been consistent.))

60. Rudy uses oresama here, that royal "I" that Zanoba always uses. This is clearly meant to be Rudy going on a power trip, I've fudged it a bit so it gets through in English.
61. He's referring to himself as 我々 (wareware) now, which is an incredibly formal royal "we".
62. The romaji for this name is Karairu, machine translations may provide Carlisle, but Carlyle is the common version of the name (at least in the U.S.) and it's what I have chosen to translate it as.
63. ひとまず、唐突に眠らされたりする、という事もない、と思う。 Unimportant, Bad TL
64. This is either a line describing the guy's armor in the previous line, or a second Knight. Needs fact checking with chapter 225. ((In any case, Church armor is white, Temple is blue, Instruction is silver.))
65. TLC please, ゼニスとクレアの姿が見えても、俺は動揺を外には出さなかったと思う。
66. Anpanman
67. In English. ナンバーツー
68. レイルバード is the name of a Japanese racing horse.
69. I think this is what he said, considering what happened near the end of last chapter.
70. GAlgard naSH -> Gash -> Gouache. BElmondo naSH -> Besh.
71. Okay, this one was weird. I googled it and got a few questionable results, but the most reliable looking one said that 'honest Mary' refers to the Virgin Mary, so it's saying that you could be overheard by someone who will likely pass it on, or something.
72. I'm assuming that's what ガンシャリ means, but all my attempts to look it up turned out fruitless. If someone knows what it is, please tell me.
73. Ugh, there was a sound in there with no English equivalent that pretty much implied him snapping.

74. This was all in past tense, but I couldn't think of a way to do that in English without sounding weird.
75. The word used for 'upright' here could also mean correct, right, or perfect.
76. TLC please. 鎧を脱がせ、水を飲ませ、一見シャンとして見えるように肩を貸し、ベッドまで運んだ
77. Extremely unsure about this one. だが、もし顔を見せたら。あるいは話し合うぐらいの姿勢は見せてもいい、と思っていた。
78. Not the crime bigamy, but the state of having two wives.
79. Yes, I know they were four, and I'm pretty sure the author knows they were four, but Claire doesn't.
80. ??? クレアは部屋にはいるや否や、ゼニスの顔を見て、近づき、近づき切れず、定まらない視線を見て、心を掻きむしられるような気持ちになって、ため息をつくように、かかりつけの医者アンデルに託した。
81. Unsure, 何をするでもなく呆けていたゼニス、たまに、人間らしい反応をしてみせて、クレアはさらに悩んだ
82. 'Bitch' was in English. He didn't really mean it as an insult, but as a literal description. ((Note from an editor: I don't think it's so much literal as it is the Japanese use of the term taking on new meaning. See the footnote I left in Chapter 66] for more info. Again, something like "slutty girl" might be more apt.))
83. Not too sure, 「.....もしあなたが治療法を知らなかったとして、試さずにはいられませんか？」
84. I'm pretty much just guessing here, feel free to change it if you know what it means. だから、公の場で答えを口にする事は無く、俺を諭そうとしたのだ。
85. This may be referencing them being punished, but 226 isn't out so idk. Potential bad TL. 仕事に関する罰はまた別に受けるのだから、それで良しとしようじゃないか。
86. Talhand carrying her out of the labyrinth for those that don't remember.
87. そしたら、もうちょっと頑張るって言うのよ、すごく可愛い。Horrible TL

88. 魔神殺しの三英雄 is the title, I don't remember how it was referred to in previous chapters. TLC.
89. Referring to Elinalise dying if she doesn't get laid.
90. I had trouble translating Gisu's inflection in this letter, while the general TL is shouldn't be incorrect, it may be missing some nuance. If you're skilled with Japanese, I ask that you check this section carefully.
91. でも、全てひっくり返して裏切るこたあねえだろ。 Possible bad TL, inflection.
92. だからセンパイ、悪いが俺はこっち側につかせてもらう。 Bad TL, inflection.
93. MK-I summoning technique, probably.
94. Anything between 『』 are written in the communication Lithograph created by Orsted.
95. TLC それがギース.....というと、あまりピンとは来ないがね。 My guess is it means like a chess pin or wrestling pin or such, and is saying that Gisu wouldn't attack without preparing a winning strategy, but I dunno. The translation I replaced said "That is Gisu... then certainly, the remainder of the focus won't be growing." Couldn't make sense of it.
96. Author explained how Rudi was able to contact both the Dorudia and Ranoa Kingdom. It went something like this for Dorudia : Transmission slate -> Orsted -> Sharia mercenaries (Rinia, Pursena) -> office teleport circle -> Dordia village. And for Ranoa : Transmission slate -> Orsted -> Roxy -> Magic University -> Country ((This doesn't seem to appear within the Japanese text of the chapter, so where did the author explain it?))
97. TLC せめて王竜王国にツテがあれば、魔大陸方面に逃げたと断定できたのだが.....
。
98. ブスリ [busuri] is an onomatopoeia for stabbing hence shluk. I just used this one.
99. Probably Orsted's assumption written in the Lithograph.
100. TLC オルステッド曰く、一式に搭乗した俺に勝てる者は少ないという。
101. Yes, a double negative is used here.

102. Therese was about to be removed from the Miko's guard but because of the petition she was not removed but rather demoted
103. TLC そして、そんな噂に後押しされてか、クリフ自身、実際にお仕事の方も任せられるようになったようだ。
104. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=nose%20laugh>
105. マッチポンプ[wasei]: match pump, i.e. lighting a match and then putting it out with a water pump or stirring up trouble to get credit from the solution
106. I took a lot of liberties here, but I couldn't think of a way to word it in English without it sounding bland. それがとても、大きな喪失であるかのように思えた。
107. Not too sure about the part where the words were cut off. 「はい！ 私もエリス様みたいにかっこよくなりたいなって思ってて、言葉遣いとかも.....え？」
108. Untranslatable Japanese Jokes 101: ボトリと落ちたのは、神子の手首―――の、半分ほどの太さのバルタの木の枝だった。Feels like a "just kidding" should be thrown somewhere in there.
109. I know what this means, but not how to properly put it in English. はて、名前。
110. Pun, おセンチ(osenchi) = sentimental, センチネル(senchinel) = sentinel
111. Katakana ナース "nāsu" like the English word. He made a joke about her name being Nurse in chapter 219.

