

1 『星巡る少年』

星空めてお
イラスト NOCO



Fate Requiem

フェイト/レクイエム



少年

エリセの前に現れた神秘的な少年。真名もクラスも不明のサーヴァント。



エリセ

Ericc

うつみ

宇津見エリセ。臨海都市《秋葉原》に暮らす14歳の少女。ただ一人「聖杯」を持たず、悪霊に取り憑かれている。サーヴァントたちからは「死神」と呼ばれ恐れられている。

鬼女紅葉

Kiyo Koyo

クラス バーサーカー

カリンのサーヴァント。

信州の「鬼女伝説」に伝わる鬼の姫。



カリン

Karin

エリセの親しい友人。14歳の少女。明るい性格でエリセを励まし、なにかと力になる。



コハル

Koharu

新世代の幼き魔術師。聖杯戦争トーナメントの
スター選手として名を馳せる。



ギャラハッド〔オルタ〕

Galahad (Alter)

クラス セイバー

コハルのサーヴァント。円卓の
騎士ギャラハッド。"最も聖なる
騎士"の信衆を捨てたオルタ。

★ WORLD ★ Fate Requiem

臨海都市《秋葉原》

海面上昇と聖杯戦争後の世界の再構成を受けて、現在のような
景観となった。モザイク市きってのリゾート都市。



ギターの音色をヴェールのようにまとい、カリンは舞う。
樂しげに、のびやかに。朽^く日^ひの縦^こじの詞^{ことば}に応え、彼女もまた
歌声を広場に響かせた。

—— 2章より





そして——私は、運命と出逢った。
「あい、あすく、ゆー」

——プロローグより

FATE / REQUIEM

VOLUME 01 - THE BOY AMONG THE STARS ***MASTERPOST***

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Prologue

People have taken to calling me “the Reaper”. Only once have I ever been thanked for my work.

—

This was awful. This had to have been one of the worst nights of my life.

My pursuers had grown in number once again. They were dividing, at an incredible rate. Monsters who lived only to separate humans by component parts; no matter how many I cut down, I couldn’t stem the tide.

The effects of the Body Augmentations I’d equipped to my own body had long faded. The fetish charms of which I’d prepared so many, into which I’d stockpiled so much mana, had all been expended. My heightened eyesight, my improved cardiopulmonary functions and all the rest were now ragged and exhausted, barely at the level of an ordinary human. All that I had left to rely on now was my own flesh and bone, my own blood and guts: the body that I’d somehow managed to keep intact for these fourteen years.

That, and the lessons that had been carved into my heart by a needle of regret.

The Material Barrier that coated every inch of my skin had dwindled to its base parameters. A single solid hit would be enough to blow me to pieces, like a plate dropped on the floor. But I had a strange premonition that all this was only a prelude to what was waiting for me; to what would really make this the worst night of my life.

—

I sprinted through alleyways, drenched in muddy water, covered in unreclaimed garbage. Once, worshippers would take this road to reach Kanda Shrine. I tumbled down one of the narrow, steep sets of stone stairs that split off into innumerable branches. As I did so, I landed a flying kick on the behinds of the two men ahead of me. The uninvited guests.

“Ugh, we still not at the harbour? My heart’s about to damn well burst, girl! I’m gonna drop dead right here!”

One of the men tilted his neck to look at me.

“You know damn well you aren’t! If you’re gonna live as long as you have, you should try to have the courtesy to scrape together a century or two’s worth of wisdom! Or if you can’t do that, at least just shut up and run!”

“Hey now, hey now! If I’m ever gonna put a sock in it, it’ll be when I go meet the Buddha! You could cut my head off right now and my mouth would still be chatterin’!”

“Like hell it would, because I’d tie it shut myself! With a good metre or two of wire!”

How many dozens of times had he made some dumb immortality gag? It had gone beyond getting on my nerves. He knew better than anyone that he could be carved to pieces or shot full of holes, and it still wouldn’t be enough to kill him. Although, for all that, he was in almost as sorry a state as I was right now.

Even in this day and age, when immortality was hardly a rarity, he was still making me listen to his nonsense. And what was he doing talking about meeting the Buddha anyway, when he was a Jew?

“Just shut up and keep moving!”

“...Understood.” The other man nodded. His partner skidded as he rounded a corner, almost toppling, and he reached out to grab his belt, righting him as naturally as if he were taking hold of a jib sheet.

“Once we reach the docks, they cannot best us.”

His wild black hair and unshaven beard carried the smell of the deep. It was something wholly unlike this town’s artificial landscapes: the scent of real sea breezes and real shafts of sunlight, carved deep into his soul.

“Understood. I’m counting on you, Captain.”

His response was silence.

The starkness of the difference between himself and his companion still took me aback. Could it be that sailors simply disliked wasting words? I didn't think so. He likely just didn't trust me yet. In any case, though, I was glad that I had not made an enemy of this strong, silent man of the sea. Things could have easily have gone differently.

And besides, I couldn't deny that I had found something unexpectedly endearing in the twin grey flames burning beneath his chiselled brow.

—

Needless to say, the captain's dominion was the sea; on land, he could not fully exercise his power. That was why we were now making haste to the harbour.

I was only collateral damage to the monsters pursuing us. Their real target was my companions: the two men whose protection constituted my current job. One was a Heroic Spirit, who had come in answer to a summons: a Servant. The zenith of necromantic magic. The other was human; was human, for he had abandoned his humanity a long time ago.

Any denizen of this city would have told you that Servants are safe and harmless; but peaceful and happy though this thought may be, only they believed it. That was why people like me existed: to maintain the illusions of their everyday, by doing the work that anyone else would revile. The work of killing Servants with our own two hands.

—

She, too, had been one - someone I had been assigned to dispose of appropriately.

Her name had been Kundry. A pagan woman, gone mad with love. The lingering fragrance of her loathing, the vicious curse from an enemy I should have finished with, her terrifying, meticulous booby-trap had survived her death, and pursued us relentlessly even now. Those little sprites. They would chase us forever, gorging themselves on the mana that suffused this town.

I had expected that she might make her appearance mounted on horseback. I had not expected her to have any knowledge of summoning magic. Nothing to that effect had been mentioned in any of the documents I had scoured.

The creatures Kundry had called forth were little sprites called “gremlins”. Newcomers in the world of magecraft, and monsters for the modern era. They made their nests in machines and electrical appliances. Appropriate for this town, I thought.

Vermin who swarm around open ley-lines. Efficient, I suppose.

This wasn't the time to be marvelling. Aside from anything else, they had come close to chewing off one of my fingers not a few minutes ago – but this struggle too would end, if I could set these men to sea.

“Over there! Drop down to that waterway! The side street goes straight to the harbour!”

“Damn it, girl, a one-way street? Ain't my thing at all!” He didn't even bother trying to put on an air of urgency.

Water shone slick on the concrete of the side street. The tide was ebbing: an ideal time to set sail.

“Well, ain't that lucky, Reaper girl? Looks like you'll be able to give us the nice little sendoff you wanted after all!”

“Damn right I will. I won't be sorry to see the back of either of you.”

“The Reaper really don't pull her punches, huh! What was that earlier? “Looks like Hendrick has once more failed to take a wife”? “Maybe you'll hit the jackpot in another seven years”?” The talkative one cast a glance at his partner's back. The captain remained as taciturn as ever, but his shoulders seemed slumped just a little.

Seven years. Seven years' time. Two thousand, five hundred-odd days? I didn't know how it felt to immortals, but to me, seven years' time seemed unimaginably far away. It was a world hidden behind a pitch-black fog, with no guarantee that it would ever come at all.

“I'm, well...I'm sorry about that.”

“Ain't nothin', girl, I'll cheer him right back up again. Bit of a shame, though, I liked this town. It's noisy, and crazy, and it was ever-so-willin' to look the other way for us.”

“I see.” As long as you two remain here, there can be no guarantee of that. That’s why this was always going to happen.

The sails of the yachts moored in the harbour began to come into view. I expelled an inadvertent sigh of relief. Careful now, Erice. You mustn’t let your composure slip, not even for a moment. “Presence of mind”. Words my master taught me.

Maintaining one’s composure did not mean denying one’s emotions. It meant accepting them. Anger, bitterness, suffering, terror – welcoming each and every one as an old friend, turning none away. Without doing that, it would be impossible to take a step back and view oneself objectively. More than a few times, that principle had saved my life.

We arrived at the wharf, and were lucky enough to find ourselves an unsecured vessel. It was only a small boat, rowed by hand, and cramped enough that even just the two men climbing in would be enough to fill it.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t need anything bigger?”

“This will serve just fine”, the captain said. He had procured two oars from one of the other yachts. By no means did they look like sufficient preparation for setting sail to the open sea, but whatever the case, I was grateful that they at least hadn’t wasted any time indulging in sentimentality.

I checked the boat meticulously for traps, before turning my attention to keeping watch on the surrounding area for our pursuers. It was midnight on the Kanda river, and the reflections of neon lights drifted lazily across the water’s tranquil surface. The harbour was deserted, and the river was devoid of the silhouettes of waterborne buses. At least there was no need to worry about any civilians getting caught up in this.

“Looks like this is goodbye, huh? My dear little Reaper girl.”

They had already climbed into the boat. The talkative one began to gather up the mooring rope that I had carelessly tossed from where I watched on the jetty.

“Ya know, I wouldn’t’ve minded killin’ you, if it woulda meant I could bum around this town just a little longer.”

“...I know. You’re leaving because the Captain wishes it. You don’t have any concern for me, you’re just respecting his desires. That’s right, isn’t it...Ahaseurus? You’re the oldest man alive. The man who’s lived longer than even Noah or Methuselah.”

He shook his head from side to side, laughing uproariously. Next to him, the captain struck one of the wooden pillars of the jetty, changing the boat’s direction. Still refraining from joining the conversation, he took the oars in both hands, and began to row with powerful strokes.

“You overestimate me, girl. You’re well aware, aintcha? That I’m not the only poor bastard who turned his back on the Lord, and wound up unable to die ‘cos of it. Even nowadays, the world is full of monsters. And what about you, born in this Mosaic City, in this new world - can you really be so sure you’re human? Whaddaya say to that, eh?”

The little boat left the jetty behind, slipping easily through the water, growing smaller and smaller. It was all I could do to hide my humiliation beneath a calm exterior, and offer him a parting gift.

“Ahaseutus! The Wandering Jew of legend! I pray that someday, you will find your place of rest!”

The immortal was now sprawled lazily in the bottom of the rowboat, waving back at me impudently. I wish I had more time to speak to you. I wanted to learn about the way you live. But he was sneering at me now. The same cruel smile, I felt sure, that he had once turned upon someone else, long ago.

“Oh, wake up, girl! There ain’t a single place of rest in this whole damn world! Ain’t nothin’ but inferno, as far as the eye can see! God damn... I ain’t got no mind to thank ya, especially not after everythin’ you did to cut our stay short, but I hate naivety more than a third helping of bagels! How about one last bit of wisdom from an old man?”

The currents of the Kanda river had finally taken hold of the rowboat, and it rapidly receded from view as he shouted from the stern.

“Try and enjoy yourself a little! That’s how you live a splendid life!”

How carefree he smiled. He had spouted nonsense to the end.

“...And how am I supposed to do that?”

It might have been valuable advice from a man with centuries’ more experience than I, but it wasn’t the kind of joke I wanted to hear. I knew no small number of people who had striven to enjoy their lives, and died all too soon for their trouble. What did pain or suffering matter, in the face of that? Above all else, I did not want to die.

—

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The gremlins had closed the distance, and now they had cornered us in this place.

A few seconds after my prophetic chill came the sound of claws scraping on asphalt. A thousand chattering shrieks. All at once they burst forth from the shadows of the harbour, and surged across the decks of the boats docked by the wharf.

“Not this again...!”

They had no eyes for me any more. They splashed across the surface of the water, racing after Ahaseutus and the captain. They might have been weak individually, but if a horde of this size reached their boat, it would sink in an instant. The situation sent a shiver of fear through me. I levelled my final trump card - my Arcane Bullet, Freischütz - at their vanguard, and barked a warning across the water.

“Captain!”

But before my shout had even reached him, he had pushed his oars onto Aheseutus, and now stood upright in the unstable little boat. I heard the rushing sound of him sucking in a great breath.

“Yooo-ho! Hoo-howay! Yooo-hoo-howay!”

He bellowed, as though awakening after a long silence. Or rather, he sang, in a mighty, booming voice that could only have been produced by his broad chest. A sailor’s song. A sea shanty, of the kind true men of the ocean hummed under their breath.

And in that moment, I saw. Aheseutus' scrawny arm, thrust lazily upwards. The distinctive pattern on the back of his right hand, that for an instant flared dull red.

“We're setting sail, Hendrick. Looks like it's goodbye to dry land for a while.”

“Hee-sa!”

A order made by Command Seal, one of the crown jewels of magecraft. From Master, to Servant. And the captain responded instantly. His piecing whistle echoed throughout every corner of the harbour. Space began to warp, and a barrage of concentrated magecraft struck my cheek.

“Raise the anchor! Unfurl the sails! Set the lookout! Tonight we set to sea! Tonight we are bound for the sea of endless storms!”

The captain roared – and voices answered his call, from below the water's surface.

“Hee-ya!”

Vile laughter, now, like the creaking of bones. And voices that continued in song even so.

“Hah!” “Hah!” “Hah!” “Hah!”

“Where's yer bride, Cap'n!”

“Give us drink from the shore, Cap'n! Give us spirits, to put fire in our throats!”

“Hee-sa!” “Hee-sa!” “Hee-sa!”

Beneath the boat, a host of pale wisps swirled. From the gremlins who had been racing across the water to close in on the boat, not even flinching at the unveiling of the captain's magecraft, now arose a shriek of warning.

An edge of red cloth sliced upwards from within the water. It met with the gremlins about to reach the boat, cutting them quite literally in two. A crimson sail.

A black pillar now rose from the water, knocking the rowboat aside. As though they had been waiting for this moment, the pair abandoned their vessel to leap to it. The waters of the Kanda river boiled and churned, as an enormous hull slowly revealed itself.

A sailing ship. An oak-wrought galleon, of the kind that forged the path across the Atlantic Ocean during the Age of Discovery. A bowsprit that thrust forth threateningly from the prow. The gentle curve of a sturdy hull. A quarterdeck like a fortress, towering intimidatingly over all it surveyed. Three tall masts pierced deep into the night sky, and from them billowed sails coloured the red of blood.

The greatest Noble Phantasm of the Wandering Dutchman.

“So that’s the wandering Dutch galleon, the Flying Dutchman! A ghost ship, cursed to drift eternally upon a stormy sea...”

I was bearing witness to the manifestation of a most unique kind of magecraft. My cheeks began to tingle. A shiver ran through me at the sight of the sails and the hull – blood-red and pitch-black, just as the legends claimed. A ghost ship cursed to share the fate of its captain, the Wandering Dutchman, never to rest or be granted relief.

The waves lapping at the jetty were getting higher now, and threatening to sweep me away, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the spectacle of the ship, and its manifestation amid a mighty corona of energy.

The gremlins who had evaded the attack from the sails tried to cling to the ship’s hull, but the wisps on deck would not brook such a means of boarding their vessel. One by one they changed form into the spirits of sailors and descended to the deck, brandishing the cutlasses at their belts. It looked almost like a fairground attraction.

They, too, were bound by the curse of the Flying Dutchman. One more part of a terrifying Noble Phantasm. There was never any mercy to be found in their blades.

“Hah!” “Hah!” “Heeeee-sah!”

“Worthless scum! Ain’t even worth turnin’ the cannons on ‘em!”

“Give us more blood, Cap’n!”

“Hee-sa!”

This battle was theirs. To watch the ease with which they overwhelmed the foe, one would never imagine how much we had struggled on land. Aheseutus watched

from on high. It might have been the correct approach for a Master, but something about it grated on my nerves.

The final gremlin was dispatched with a blow from the captain's oar.

“Stow the chatter, my lads! Now, set a course for open sea!”

Once more, he gave the order to set sail, brandishing his oar towards the night horizon. Lightning flickered there, and there came a distant roll of thunder. It had been the same on the night of their arrival. Now the eternal storm waited for them once again.

The ghost ship forged onwards, wind swelling in its tautened sails. Its silhouette grew smaller, until it was lost in the darkness. All that remained on the deserted shoreline was the mournful echo of the pale spirits' song.

“Dalais, Nicht, Eijikeit...”

Dalais, Nicht, Eijikeit...”

I hummed it to myself. I'd heard or seen that phrase somewhere before, in the classroom library.

“Dalais...Nicht...Eijikeit...”

“The Devil's curse lies on these sails...they shall not tear 'til Judgement Day...”

I could no longer see the figure of the captain. All that remained was a single slender silhouette reclining against the railing of the poop deck, never waving, simply staring back at the town's lights until it faded into the distance.

The storm passed, and silence returned to the harbour. I sighed in relief. Now that they had set sail, I could barely move. I was overcome by exhaustion, of course, to some degree. But more than anything else, I wanted to cast my mind back over these past few days, over the ways in which these two men had unapologetically pulled my heart to and fro, and commit them firmly to memory.

—

I let out another sigh, and then touched my fingertip to one of my forelocks. My magic circuits, set to refuse communications, once more return to open...and as if on schedule, a message came in. The familiarity of the voice immediately put me at ease.

“I presume your assignment has been completed?”

“Mm-hm.”

My master and I always contacted each other this way. Delicate vibrations were transmitted into my inner ear, and I perceived them as her voice. This was a method of communication with no need for electromagnetic waves, being derived from automatic transcription magecraft. The average citizen had no need for it, but this was one of our little tricks.

“This assignment’s targets – the “Wandering Jew”, the immortal Aheseutus, and his Servant, the “Wandering Dutchman”, Captain Hendrick Van der Decken – have been successfully escorted from the Akihabara ward of Mosaic City.”

“If so, then it should be seven years at the earliest before we see them again?”

“I think so. I can’t speak for anyone else, but it should be that way for them, at least. Aheseutus didn’t appear to have contracted with any Servant other than Hendrick.”

The captain’s ghost ship was an oddity among oddities.

Even among the various wards of Mosaic City, Akihabara – also known as the Maritime City – was, as its name implied, in notably close contact with the ocean. However, its topography did not make it defenceless. If anything, it was the reverse; it was protected by a stronger barrier than the other wards. And the Grail would not permit an act so barbaric as breaching the barrier and forcibly making port.

However, a powerful curse lay on the captain and his crew: they were forbidden for making landfall more than once every seven years. And by the same token, once every seven years, they could make port wherever they wished. If they had come to Akihabara with more aggressive intent, it would have been virtually beyond me to stand against them.

“Understood.”

I could tell from her breathing that she was satisfied. Now her confirmation checklist moved on to the crux of the matter.

“And what about Kundry?”

I bit back the response that immediately rose to my throat, and paused for a moment to steady my breathing.

“Dead. I confirmed the destruction of her Saint Graph myself.”

A brutal matter to discuss openly on the street. I once more cast a quick glance around the midnight harbour, but it remained unchanged, deserted as ever.

“But...I think there’s a chance that some of her enchantments might be remaining somewhere. I’ll investigate again soon.”

“Oh? So you’re telling me that an autonomous-type Servant’s enchantments still remain, even after the Servant themselves has disappeared?”

“That’s right. And I’ve suffered for it, too.”

“What a unique case... This whole situation has turned out to be rather troublesome. I can lend my aid as far as scanning the city for unauthorised ley line access goes, but...”

“I don’t think it’ll show up on a scan. I don’t know how, but she’s managed to conceal it.”

“I see. In that case, it seems I will need you more than ever.”

“Perhaps so.”

My master responded to me with a deliberate silence, and I followed suit. I got the distinct sensation that we were feeling each other out. If we had been talking face to face, I somehow felt certain that she would have seen right through my nervousness. It was of course possible to equip a communication circuit with video functionality – in fact, it was possible to directly send input from all five senses – but I disliked being so open about my work. And in the first place, I didn’t even have the mana remaining right now.

Anyway, it seemed that she had accepted my report, for the moment.

“Understood. You can tell me about the details in person, later.”

“I don’t mind coming by tomorrow, if you want. I’ll be coming to class anyway.”

“...I see. In that case, I’ll hear what you have to say then.”

“Alright.”

“Your hard work is appreciated, as always. Goodnight, Erice.”

“Thanks.”

My master was unfailingly polite and courteous. Odd it may have been to wish someone who had never known a true night’s sleep a good night, but it did not bother me. I was just on the cusp of a suitably witty retort when I was interrupted again.

“Oh, that’s right. I ought to have mentioned, Erice.”

“Eh?”

“Karin was terribly angry earlier.”

“...Karin?”

“It couldn’t have been more than half an hour ago. She was rather fierce about it. She was complaining that you were ignoring all of her text messages, and wondering if there was something wrong with the network. I had to explain to her that you were engaged with your work, and were likely blocking all communications.”

“...right. I’m sorry about that.”

“As am I.”

—

“As am I”...?

Blocking communications had been the correct call. My master had nothing to apologise for...did she?

“That Karin...”

I left the jetty from which I had watched the Flying Dutchman’s departure. A forest of white sails passed me by as I cut across the harbour, and set out on the road home.

Something so distracting as idle chatter with Karin while I was working would have been fatal. I would be hanged before I would allow my concentration to be so disrupted in a battle with my life on the line. But in the end, I had still been careless. I had been elated, buoyed up by the success of a job well done.

To the edge of the wharf. Into a break in the yacht harbour. Past rows upon rows of warehouses, at the top of the stairs that led to the overhead roadway – she was there.

The tail of her habit fluttered in the sea breeze. Once hidden beneath her veil, her hair now danced proud and wild.

“Pray tell me – how do you feel, in this moment?”

She asked with painstaking courtesy, her voice dripping with merciless contempt.

“Boor that you are, to steal away my love, and think to strike me down. And in the end you did not even finish me, but left me by the roadside. For indeed, you had every chance to kill me, but in your arrogance you pitied me instead. I can only imagine the self-satisfaction you must feel.”

Kundry, the pagan. Her hair was ebony, and her skin was walnut. The lids of her rich, dark eyes were lowered, as though she were half asleep. Powerful awakening magic resided within her captivating lips. Her face proudly showed her Mediterranean heritage, and it was near-flawless in its beauty...or so it seemed to me, at least. Provided I could pinch my nose to the stench of the machinations writhing in her guts.

Her clothing was stitched with horsehair, said to be worn by those who wished for atonement, and it had become torn and ragged in our battle. Here and there, her skin now lay unashamedly bared to the world. At our first encounter I had thought

her a virtuous woman of the cloth, but the scandalous costume she now wore would have drawn stares even on the night of Halloween. Although what was more, the one who had damaged her so beyond repair had been me.

“Ahh... You. I believe you named yourself Erice? Nay, I misspeak. “The Reaper” was your name, was it not?”

“Kundry...”, I whispered. She was a woman beyond my help.

I had used a trap I had laid to deprive her of her mount, before engaging her in a vicious melee and damaging her heavily – or so I had thought, but it seemed that she hadn’t been as immobilised as I had believed. I would have to revise my assessment of the Rider class’s base stats.

I called out to her, in as simple terms as possible, trying to make her understand.

“Are you listening, Kundry? I’m repeating myself here, I don’t know how many times this makes it, but all I ever did was encourage Ahesh and the captain to prioritise evacuating the city. I did not steal your lover.”

She remained silent for a long moment. Her eyes stared down at me, boring into me, not moving a millimetre. I was fully aware that she was not an opponent I could negotiate with – but more than anything else, in my current situation, I wanted time to observe her. There was something more here - something that lay behind how she had maintain control over so many gremlins even after losing consciousness, behind the ease with which she had appeared before me now - and I wanted to know it.

I knew I was outmatched. Should I request aid from my master through my magic circuits? Unthinkable. This was my whirlwind to reap. But even so, I couldn’t see my decision to spare Kundry the finishing blow as a mistake. There was no doubt that leaving her unchecked would have been catastrophic for this town – but only if Aheseurus and the captain had stayed. At the end of the day, Kundry too was an outsider, and she had only appeared here in their pursuit.

“I’ll tell you once more, Kundry. Leave this town. Your wounds are too deep to heal if you don’t. You’ll be destroyed, and I’m sure you don’t want that.

“I too repeat myself. Return my love.”

“My love”...?” I was surprised. So blinded was she in her pursuit, that she had followed us here without realising even that simple truth.

“You’re too late, Kundry. Your love has already set sail, and unfortunately, all the monsters you set in wait for us have been destroyed. Continuing your chase any more would be pointless.”

Their departure I was sure about. The destruction of her traps, I was not. But whatever the case, all I wanted was to persuade her to give up.

“My love has...left me behind...? Aahhhh...”

A wail of grief arose from her throat as she bent over double. From between two hands tearing at her hair, her burning gaze pierced into me.

“I will take my vengeance! The hammer of retribution will fall upon you!”

She had firmly grasped the wrong end of the stick, and she wasn’t letting go. The flames of jealousy burned bright within her. Was putting an end to this my only option?

“You would be a fool to try. You can’t win against me, Kundry.”

“Do you truly think so? I still retain my Saint Graph, Reaper. As you can see.”

She tilted her neck exaggeratedly, as she advanced down the stairs, one step at a time.

“What makes you so certain that it is not you who is the weaker of us? Already, your mana has dwindled such that you did not notice my approach. The battle with my gremlins has expended your talismans and gemstones to the last. Is that not so?”

I kept my silence.

“You are naught but a girl, not even come of age. For your courage in taking up the night watch in this fortress, and for the heavy responsibilities you bear, I admit my admiration. However...” A tatter of her habit tangled around her leg, and she dispassionately tore it away. “In the end, you are a human – and I am a Servant.”

“I know.”

If this mad queen had some awareness of her nature as an autonomous Servant, then there was only one more step left.

“That’s why, Kundry. That’s why Akihabara will never accept your existence. That’s why, no matter where you go in Mosaic City, you will be rejected as an outsider. I installed a classification tag into your Saint Graph. Your supply of mana from the town in order to sustain yourself will be closed to you. Not only that – just by your existing in this place, the tag will pollute your Saint Graph, poisoning you from the inside out.”

There was hardly any need for me to give her the warning. Just trying to absorb mana through the act of breathing should already be wracking her body with pain. But she seemed to be interpreting it instead as the agony of parting, as suffering that proved her bond with her beloved.

Kundry furrowed her eyebrows resentfully. She shouldn’t have been able to manage more than standing still while still maintaining her corporeal form. And conversely, my strength was recovering by the second.

“My talismans and gemstones might have protected me, but that wasn’t their true purpose.”

“Know that whatever nonsense you are speaking, it does not sway my heart.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t.”

Kundry, you learned that this place would become a battlefield, and used Akihabara for your own ends. But you must have neglected to thoroughly investigate the Reaper who lurks in the shadows of this town. The moment you learn the reason I bear this name will be the moment in which you are destroyed.

But even so -

“I do not want you to disappear here, Kundry.”

Her face twisted in incredulity.

You are a Servant. A being summoned by some unknown party - a magus of high rank, most likely. A wandering fragment of myth, fitted with a thaumaturgical perpetual motion machine of the second kind. If left alone, you will eventually fall

to sustaining yourself with the life energy of the common people. You are a clear threat to this city.

“It would be such a waste...”

But it was nothing short of a miracle, I thought. That a Servant had fallen in love with another Servant. This was no destiny assigned by the Grail. It was an impossibility, one that would not come around twice. Kundry’s lover had been the Holy Knight of the Swan – someone all too different from the wild captain of the Flying Dutchman.

“You fell in love with the captain, didn’t you? You came to this town in pursuit of him, knowing all the while that your love was impermissible. How many decades did it take you, Kundry? How many centuries?”

I advanced towards her, slowly, deliberately, one step at a time.

“You aren’t a Servant, Kundry. You aren’t some spectre of the past. You’re a human, living in the present. A human being.”

The story she was living now was something entirely new, untouched by any human eye. She had slipped the yoke of the Grail.

“I kill Servants who violate the rules of this town...of the Grail. That’s my job. I can’t lend you my aid.”

“And so you’ll let me go? At your convenience? My, my... Such kind consideration...”

She descended into feeble, self-deprecating laughter, her posture slumping. Her face was pale and drawn, sickly from loss of blood.

“Kundry, you have to leave this town. You can still make it in time, if you take the train. The last one hasn’t left the station!”

Cut off from her means of replenishing her mana, she likely had less than an hour. And if my master learned of the truth of her survival, all would be lost. There was no chance whatsoever that she would overlook my transgression.

“Will his ship...return someday?”

She put the question to me, her hostility faltering. Her voice was hoarse as an old woman's, but it carries the innocent words of a lovestruck young girl.

“I cannot say.”

I didn't have any answer to give her. Although at the very least, I knew that they had shown no such intention during their stay here.

Their curse was “to wander eternally”. Working from the definition, it was unlikely that they could return to any city where they had already made landfall. After all, travelling back and forth periodically between two cities could hardly be considered “wandering”. Even if they did visit the same land twice, it would only be after the name of the city had changed, and its people and the age it had existed in had moved on, that they would be permitted to dock.

What was more, Kundry too was deathless, a creature of legend fated to wander eternal; but the form her curse took was different from that of the Dutch captain or the Wandering Jew. It was from world to world that she wandered, reincarnating over and over, yet retaining her memories. Once, she had been a witch; once, the consort of King Herod II. It was even said that she was once a Valkyrie, one of the daughters of the Allfather Odin. It was her fate to serve men of strength in every life, only to be used as a tool and cast aside – and that fate would never end, until she was at last united with her true love, and granted the salvation of death.

Now she had been summoned again as a Servant, and was being used once more by another. Ordinarily, her memories of her different summonings would be reset, but the effects of her unique circumstances extended even here. The hell she was living differed from Aheseurus's in form, but that made it no less tragic.

“But...”

There was only one thread of hope I could give to this woman, struggling beneath the enormous weight of her past.

“I am sure that you will meet them again. It all turns on you. No-one knows what will come...I am sure that your future can be changed.” I drew level with her now. She was close enough that I could reach out and touch her.

But in the end, my cheap words and my naive heart were not enough to move her. I was answered with an unwavering gaze, and steely rejection.

“You lie.” She shook her head, distraught. “What makes you think I will permit such self-centred, ill-mannered applause – on my stage? What would you know of my despair?”

She had seen right through me. The desperation that had seeped my words – words that would certainly have violated the rules of Mosaic City – was plain as day to her.

“The future can be changed? My future? Well then, come, Reaper – come and kill me, if you can!”

“I’m sorry...Kundry...”

The legends told: that Kundry, the pagan woman, would never tell a lie. However, nor would she ever serve the cause of good.

She brandished her hand high above her head. In her palm, mana began to gather, and crystallise into the form of something straight and long: a spear. A long-handled soldier’s spear, in the fashion of the ancient Roman empire.

“That spear...that spear is-”

I was reflexively diving away before I could even complete my mumbled sentence. This was a Noble Phantasm! The Holy Spear – Longinus!

Once more, I had been careless. Her Noble Phantasm had been neither her mount, nor her lips of awakening. It had not even crossed my mind that she might possess this spear, both blessed and cursed.

With the spear held aloft, the mad queen arched her body backwards like a whip, never once taking her eyes from my fleeing figure – and threw.

The attack closed on me faster than the speed of sound. I activated a single-action incantation. All I could manage was to instantaneously fire a sure-hit arcane bullet into the spear’s path, deflecting it a little from its arc straight to my heart.

The blow skewered me deep, sending me flying sideways out across the harbour, bouncing across the surface of the Kanda river. The spray from the impact splashed high, reflecting the neon illumination of the town like tacky fairy lights.

“...Porca...miseria...”

The last effort I could muster went into that curse, and then I sank towards the riverbed.

I saw a dream. A dream of a tiny pain.

When I lost my parents, I was placed in the care of my grandmother, who was my only living relative. She lived in an old-fashioned wooden house on the outskirts of Shinjuku. As a child I never showed my emotions outwardly, and did very little to endear me to my grandmother, who must have struggled to know what to do with me.

One afternoon, she laid out newspaper in one corner of the narrow garden, and cut my hair. I sat in the chair, letting her do as she wished. I was not yet old enough for my feet to have touched the ground.

My grandmother's hands were far from deft. The toothed tip of the pair of thinning scissors she was using brushed against the top of my left ear, the metal cool on my skin - and with a snip, cut it along with my hair.

It hurt, of course, but I let nothing show. I had simply accepted it for what it was.

In the end my grandmother realised her carelessness, and her mistake, only when she noticed the thin rivulet of blood trickling down my neck as she was finishing her work. She stared at me, lost for words, with an expression so deeply grieved that the world might as well have ended.

For a long time after that, she was silent. She treated my wound, and then she spoke. "If it hurts, Erice, you have to tell me it hurts."

I nodded mechanically. She managed a feeble smile, although she still looked as though she were about to cry.

I still have the scar from that day on my ear. A scar like the mark left on a train ticket by the ticket punch.

I awakened from my momentary dream.

A heavy, cold pain lanced pierced through my abdomen. The moment I became aware of the irregularity, a burning numbness spread throughout my body. It had been a magnificent blow. Although I should have expected as much from the spearwork of Valhalla.

I knew this was real – that I was submerged, sinking to the bottom of the Kanda River – and yet it felt strangely like a dream. Perhaps I was numbing my own senses, in order to spare myself unnecessary suffering.

—

I was running my recovery systems at full power, but they still couldn't keep pace. The mental processing power required for self-analysis, and the underwater respiration functionality I had loaded in case of emergencies, would only last a few more seconds at best. Through my wavering vision, I watched the edges of the lance skewering my stomach begin to blur and lose cohesion, coming undone from the outside in.

So this spear...was a projection... It wasn't a genuine...Noble Phantasm...

It had been a counterfeit, reproduced by the hand of someone other than its rightful owner.

That would...make sense... If it had been...the true Holy Spear...an arcane bullet couldn't have...

But still, there was something in its framework that came extraordinarily close to the genuine article, forged with incredible precision. My lips curled into a self-deprecating smile, at the absurdity of my lapse in judgement and the situation I had been placed in.

The projection's creator showed no sign of coming to retrieve her spear, or any intention of making sure of the death of her foe. She must have found the satisfaction she sought, believing her vengeance complete. Now, she should no longer have any reason to remain in this town. I prayed that she managed to escape Akihabara before her Saint Graph disappeared in totality...although I reserved the right to register a complaint or two with her, should we ever meet again face-to-face.

—

I had lost all sense of up or down, but it seemed I must have been sinking face-up. The colours of reflected neon coalesced before my eyes on the water's surface, spreading out in front of me like a sky filled with stars.

It's...so beautiful...

My vision began to dim, and the spectacle before me felt as though it was receding into the distance. The darkness drew me silently under. My life slipped out from between my lips, in little bubbles that rose into the sky.

—

And then, I met with my fate.

—

First to come was the music. A lone piano, a woodwind ensemble, a vocal chorus; even, somewhere, the whimsical tones of an electric guitar. Melodies played by a multitude of instruments faded in and then out again, one after the other.

It wasn't a real orchestra. It was unmistakably being played back - and its recording quality was hardly the best, at that. It would have been extremely low-fidelity, even if I hadn't been underwater.

And then, suddenly, I noticed. That beyond where my eyes' drifting focuses met, a tiny, pale blue light was flitting back and forth, as though frolicking among the bubbles rising through the water. It swam gleeful and free.

What...is that?

Next to enter my ears came the words, although they were in languages unknown to me. But all of them were short, like words of greeting. Some of them even seemed as though I had heard them somewhere before.

My consciousness dimmed once more, and I blinked, long and slow - and then he was there. A child of gold.

A young boy floated before me, phosphorescence dancing across his golden hair.

His form was all too unreal, but somehow, it seemed reassuringly familiar to me.

...A...a Servant...?

I could easily have told myself it was just an illusion, shown to me by my dimming consciousness. A hallucination brought forth by my oxygen-starved brain, as its suffering reached saturation point. But still, somehow, an inexplicable expectation filled my breast, swirling, warming me from within.

His mouth opened.

“I...ask...you...”

He spoke, in halting English. He was calling out to someone – to me, directly.

“Are...you...worthy...of...being...my...Master...?”

I had no way of understanding what was happening. All I knew for certain was that on this night, my war had begun. That a Holy Grail War had begun. And that single truth overtook anything and everything else, to strike deep into my chest.

I stretched out towards him, reaching with fingers that had lost all feeling.

And in the next moment – my arm was grasped by sturdy claws, and I was dragged up once more to the world above the surface.

–

Several minutes later, I was laid flat on the concrete of the wharf, desperately hacking up water. The hand of someone drawing up close to me gently patted my back.

“Hey, you awake? You’re awake, right?”

The girl who had been nursing me now leaned over to peer directly into my face – and then yelled mercilessly, directly into my ear.

“OY, OLD MAN ERI! AWAKE IN THERE, YA ROTTEN SACK OF STUPID? THE HELL YOU THINK YOU’RE PLAYIN’ AT, HUH? YOU BETTER BELIEVE I’M GONNA KICK YOUR SORRY ASS FROM HERE TO NEXT WEEK!”

It was her. The girl my master had talked to me about, and one of my very few friends.

“Oh, it’s just you, Karin.”

My mood had taken a sudden turn for the worse. The inside of my nose was beginning to sting.

“Blegh. ...Hang on...Karin, don’t tell me...artificial respiration?”

“LIKE HELL I DID, YA DUMBASS!”

“I’m telling you, keep it down.”

“Ah, yeah, nope. Not gonna lie, I thought about it for a bit. But Momi was sayin’ you’d be fine, so...”

That would explain it.

“So you were the one...who helped me, Kouyou. ...Thank you.”

The hulking form next to Karin rustled a little, in place of a response. The visage of this creature who had fished me from the water was a clear oddity, even by the standards of Mosaic City. She resembled nothing so much as a black dinosaur, with great horns growing from her head. This was the Servant who called Karin Master: the Berserker, the Ogress Kouyou. Karin had nicknamed her Momi, short for Momiji – another reading of Kouyou, “autumn leaves”.

Even knowing her true name, I still struggled to reconcile it with her appearance. But by no means did I mean to denigrate her worth by saying that.

“Hold on a-! I’m right here, y’know! The girl who told Momi to dive in and save your sorry ass! So, you’re rewardin’ me for my efforts, right? You’re treatin’ me to takoyaki, right...?”

“No idea what you think I’d do that for. Although I’ll gladly treat Kouyou to as much as she wants.”

“Wha-!”

Karin's mouth kept running, and it showed no signs of stopping any time soon. I rolled over exasperatedly and made to pick myself up, but was pushed back down decisively by Kouyou. No moving yet. You would never think her arms ended in such wicked claws, so gentle was her touch – but even so, it was firm enough so as to permit no disagreement.

I tried to twist my body around as I lay sideways, and a wave of agony crashed through my midriff. I winced, almost passing out.

It shouldn't have surprised me. After all, I had been skewered through by a spear up until a few scant minutes ago. The weapon itself might have vanished now, but it had left its mark clearly on my flank.

“C'mon, just rest for a bit. Listen to Momi. Where do you think you're going, anyway, with a hole in your guts you could drive a bus through? Don't you realise that if it weren't for Momi's healing you'd be dead by now?”

“...Ugh...I guess so...”

Heat blossomed steadily throughout my abdomen as my metabolism began to accelerate. Even though Kouyou was a Berserker, she was oddly well-versed in the healing arts. I placed a great deal of trust in her capabilities – her Master notwithstanding. This was not the first time I had unexpectedly found myself having to make use of her power, or even the second.

“She's incredible, isn't she? Kouyou, I mean. I don't know why I'm even surprised any more.”

“Well, maybe you'd be a bit more surprised if she wasn't having to patch you up all the time, dumbass! And how many times did I tell you, anyway? That you should call on me to help you for big jobs?”

Karin paused in her tirade to heave an exaggerated sigh.

“Well...in the end, I guess you're just lucky to be alive, huh.”

“...You're telling me.”

I managed to catch a glimpse of the pattern of the Command Seal glowing on the back of Karin's right hand. Normally it would be transparent, indistinguishable

from her bare skin, but now, thanks to her use of healing magecraft, it was awakened. The majority of its strokes had been expended. It looked like it would take a few days to recover.

Ah...

Only now did I realise that spread out beneath me lay Karin's shirt. It was soaked through, and wet with blood, although the bloodstain was smaller than I would have thought. My wound was still agonising, but the flow of blood had stemmed, and it had already acquired a thin covering of granulation tissue.

"Karin...this is..."

"Don't worry about it." Karin produced an antibacterial patch from the pouch she carried, and gave a little smile. I must have been more fragile than I had thought, to have been on the point of showing her a moment of weakness.

—

Kouyou, still as silent as ever, was keeping watch even as she applied her healing magecraft – although no matter how much time passed, all remained quiet on the wharf. Kundry had disappeared, and left this town, or so my intuition told me. But even so, unanswered questions remained. They stayed lodged in my memory, as items requiring urgent investigation.

I quickly turned to Karin. "How did you know where I was?", I asked.

"Ain't it obvious? I had to wring it out of your 'master'. On account of a certain somebody not picking up their phone. Got anything to say about that, eh? Hmm?"

Karin prodded one of my forelocks, an exasperated expression on her face.

"Hmm. So that's why."

So that was the story behind my master's oddly pointed final line. She had decided that it was prudent to send Karin to the scene to lend me her help. Which ultimately meant that I was not yet strong enough to be worth of her unreserved trust.

And I suppose she wasn't wrong, either...

I grit my teeth in frustration. Still lying sprawled, I covered my eyes with my arm. Just how long would it take, before she would acknowledge me as worthy? How long would it have to be before she would assign me work outside of Akihabara?

This time it was Karin's turn to ask me a question, as I lay despondent.

"Hey, by the way, Eri-pie? Just wondering, but..."

I turned my neck to peer in the direction she was pointing, behind Kouyou.

"Who's the shrimp? Someone's kid or something? He's a Servant, right?"

"...What?" I started.

My premonition earlier this night had not been mistaken after all.

—

That boy was there.

His ethereal radiance was nowhere to be seen, and now he was just as sodden as I was. As I watched, he approached Kouyou's tail, brimming with curiosity – and then came too close and was smacked away. He was rolled first one way, then the other, like a kitten playing with its mother's tail.

"Hang on, Eri, don't tell me...he's not anything to do with your work, right?"

Karin probed me, hesitantly. I knew well that Servants should not be judged by their appearances. But even so...

"What're you gonna do? You're not gonna kill him, are you? You're really gonna kill him?"

"Uh..." I was at a loss as to how to answer her. "I honestly don't know. I've only just met him."

What class was he? Where did he live? Who was his Master? The questions came thick and fast, and the only answer I could offer was a vague shake of my head.

"Huh? So you're telling me he's some sort of stray Servant?"

"I...I suppose he must be."

I had finally regained enough strength to sit upright, and I looked down.

The back of my hand remained devoid of Command Seals. Just as it had always been, ever since the day I was born.

KUSA..



Chapter 1

Once upon a time, there was a great war. It happened long ago, before I was born. And then it ended, and the world entered an age of peace.

—

In the modern era, each and every person held within their heart a tiny Holy Grail, which was nothing more or less than that person's preordained destiny. And each and every person was capable of summoning a Servant allotted them by fate, in accordance with the guidance of the Grail.

Servants were an information resource by nature, accumulated throughout human history. Their souls were enshrined in the Throne of Heroes, a place which transcended the bounds of space and time. By 'downloading' them from this Throne, it was possible to manifest them in our world.

—

The shape of the world changed greatly after the war. This town was born anew - reorganised into city units, known collectively as Mosaic City. Among them was Akihabara, the Maritime City, which I called home. Sea levels had risen dramatically as a result of global warming, and now the city quite literally bordered on the ocean. The Kanda river's name was nothing more than a vestige of the pre-war era; in reality, it was nothing more than a canal through which sea water flowed.

—

This town was watched over by the Holy Grail, and not a day went by when its citizens did not partake of its bounties. Those survivors from before the war had been given the opportunity to obtain a Grail upon its conclusion, while those young enough to have been born after the war, like Karin, possessed one within their hearts from birth.

The Grail had brought immortality to the masses. The principal causes of death in the old world – biological factors such as ageing, genetic degradation, infectious diseases, viruses and malignant cancers – had all been conquered. By expending

Command Seals, one could even manipulate their biological age. In this city, one of humanity's oldest, dearest wishes – eternal youth – had been realised.

–

But I was different. I alone stood apart. I was the only citizen of this city who had not been granted a Holy Grail. I had been born into this new world, but I would age naturally – and, eventually, die – with all the senselessness characteristic of the old. An irregularity, born outside of the sight of the Grail. That was what I was – me, Utsumi Erice.

With no Holy Grail, I had no Servant to contract with as my partner. Every once in a while, someone would be unable to stifle the urge to ask me how that felt. If it were up to me, I would laugh at them, and tell them that they'd never understand even if I tried to explain – but I'd been chided no small number of times by my master for that. You would be remiss to be callous in your interaction with your social environment, if you wish to live peacefully in this new world.

So, for lack of anything else to say, I answered them like this:

“Imagine you were incredibly short-sighted, to the point where you could hardly see, but you were told you weren't allowed to wear glasses.”

“Imagine being told you had to travel somewhere on foot, while everyone else was allowed to use trains and buses.”

“Imagine going somewhere you've never been before, only to find that the navigation app on your smartphone was an unusable piece of junk.”

The question I had by far the most trouble with was the question of how I survived day-to-day life without Command Seals, which were one of the bounties of the Grail. On that point, no matter how thoroughly I tried to explain, most other people seemed to struggle to understand my situation any more than vaguely, and ultimately had no interest anyway. That was the ideal response, as far as I was concerned. I could find no fault with that.

There were also those who genuinely understood, and responded with exaggerated surprise and sympathy. Some would offer me the usage of their own Command Seals, assuring me with fawning pity that I could come to them if there was ever anything they could do for me. There were even a few so selflessly empathetic that

they claimed to truly want to trade places with me – although always with some condition attached, by which they could return things to normal if they so pleased.

Every such encounter reminded me anew that I was nothing more than an amusement to them. A means of flattering their own altruistic sensibilities, and of relieving their boredom for a little while.

Akihabara was a labyrinth in three dimensions, not just two. In a block nestled a comfortable distance from the downtown area on the middle stratum, bordering a natural public park, stood a multi-storey building housing a collection of public service facilities. Contained on one floor of this building was the classroom I frequented.

I had arrived slightly late for the start time, and hurriedly took my seat. The wide, fan-shaped room was almost devoid of students. This was decidedly not a facility for compulsory education; it was offered the people at large educational lecture courses aimed at fostering lifelong learning. Citizens of all ages took the course, and attending every single lecture was virtually unheard-of. Consequently, I was known as something of an eccentric.

The people here knew nothing of the battle of immortals that occurred last night. Those kinds of incidents never made the news.

–

Well then – it was time for Pre-War Human History.

That was the name of the course I was taking. Unfortunately, it could hardly have been called the most popular subject. The content of the lectures was much closer to trivia than education. The main goal of Pre-War Human History comprised learning about the human race's greatest triumphs and blunders in the world of the past. It was...well, to put it bluntly, dry.

In the first place, Akihabara was Mosaic City's premier resort. Students who were sincerely striving to learn, or families concerned with the proper education of their children, would simply up and leave for another district. I had an inclination that this space only really existed to entertain the interests of the lecturer at the front of the hall – my master, Ms. Fujimura.

—

Oh, it looks like that girl's here again.

I cast a quick glance out over the lecture theatre from my usual perch at the back. A small, familiar figure was sat in the very front row, concentrating intently on the lecture. She had come again today. As a rule, I never saw students younger than myself attending these lectures, so she had stuck in my memory. She was a pale child, short in stature, and perhaps old enough to be at the upper end of elementary school. Her voice and attitude during the occasions that she posed questions to the lecturer had given me the impression that she was female, but there was no guarantee. All kinds of people lived in this city.

Her hair was invariably pulled down low over her head, and her eyes were covered by her bangs, so I hadn't ever seen her face clearly. I had never engaged her in conversation, and I didn't even know her name. She appeared in lectures once a month or so; I felt a distinct disconnect between her keen attitude in lectures and her abysmal attendance rate.

Today, her standing record for youngest lecture attendee had been broken. The new champion was none other than my companion: the stray Servant I had taken in last night, the golden-haired child. He was at least sitting in his seat for now without making a fuss, but he was fidgeting constantly - rocking his body to and fro, and sometimes lying down as though trying to savour the feeling of the cool wood of the chair. Or so I was thinking, before he suddenly turned to peer into my face, obstructing my view of my tablet.

“You think you're a cat or something?”

“...Ca-...cat?”

“Maybe you're more of a dog, huh. Your hair's all floofy.”

“Dog?”

“Yeah, a dog. You know, woof-woof.”

“I know dogs.”

“Oh, really? Well, I'm glad for y- what the hell do you think you're doing!?”

He had scrambled up onto the seat of his chair, planted both hands on the desk and begun to howl, loud and proud.

Awooooo! Ow-ow-owooo! Awooooo!

He finished his surprisingly accurate rendition, flashing a beaming smile. I sat for a moment in silent astonishment – and might perhaps have thought for a moment that it was a little endearing, although this really wasn't the time for that.

“Hey, stop that! Get down from there!”

Give me a break. I was just about to give you credit for at least not being as loud as Karin, and you go and pull this. The other attendees were turning back to look at us now, searching for the source of the noise.

“I'm sorry. We'll be quiet. I'm really sorry.”

My master had stopped giving her lecture, and was cocking her head at us. The girl in the front row was looking too. If looks could kill, the glare boring into me from beneath her bangs would have dropped me stone dead. Although I couldn't exactly blame her for getting annoyed at someone bringing this commotion into a class.

Yes miss I'm so terribly sorry I won't do it again...ugh, what did I do to deserve this...

I had no way of knowing how to handle a young child like this boy in the first place – but that said, I also couldn't possible have left him behind in my apartment by himself. And I had thought to myself that I might learn something about him if I brought him here with me.

“Don't dogs say “bow-wow” in English, anyway?”

“Boh-roh.”

“Not even close. Must be nice to be able to mimic things like that, huh...”

Ohh boy. Starting to get the feeling I'm not going to be learning much from today's lecture...

I rested my head on my hand and pouted. Gazing idly at the young boy's angelic face out of the corner of my eye, I cast my mind back through my memories of my baptism last night.

It had happened on the previous evening, after I had been fished from the riverbed by Karin and Kouyou on the wharf. To cut a long story short, I decided to take the boy back to my apartment and put him up for the night, still none the wiser about who he was or where he had come from.

—

I had been living on my own ever since parting ways with my grandmother.

In a quiet corner of Akihabara, there was a small, depopulated district that most people avoided. Before the war, it had comprised a collection of multi-purpose buildings crammed to bursting with shops, but they had all been abandoned after the Grail's large-scale restructuring of the city. My apartment consisted of a room in one such building.

The inside of the room was decorated in Victorian style. Every inch of floor was covered by wooden floorboards, and its antique interior had been preserved unaltered. Apparently, it had originally housed some kind of dubious culinary establishment known as a "maid cafe".

—

My apartment wasn't exactly designed for ease of living, but it was furnished with a proper bathroom and bedroom, and was more than sufficient for one person to live in comfortably. It even had a veranda, albeit a small one. From the window of my bedroom I could gaze out over a small vertical slice of ocean hemmed in by the surrounding buildings.

—

My opportunities to invite another person back to this humble abode were rare. Considering my job, the risks involved in freely letting others know where I lived were far too high. The only reason I had brought this child back with me was that it would have been too irresponsible to leave him to his own devices. I didn't even

know who his contractor was; to have allowed him to freely roam the town would have been unthinkable.

He might have manifested in the form of an innocent child, but that only set me more on edge. I had allowed myself to be disarmed by a target's outward appearance before, on a previous job, and had made a grave mistake because of it. A Servant I had believed nothing more than an angelic young child - like purity itself sculpted in alabaster - had harboured a terrible darkness. The Avenger, Louis XVII. The incident that arose around that particular monstrosity had ultimately claimed not only the life of his Master, but those of a great number of innocents as well.

At the time, I had not yet fully graduated from childhood. Louis and I had been similar in stature, and I had thought we could have been good friends. In the end, however, my friendship and goodwill had been used and turned against me. That incident was not one I would forget easily.

—

There was another reason that I had brought this stray child back with me: I had been driven to my wits' end in another sense. Frankly speaking, I could not take it any more: the rank stench that permeated the both of us had become unbearable, and I could not bear to go another minute without washing it off.

The culprit was the oil slick near the quay that I'd had the ill fortune to be dragged through when I was fished out of the Kanda river. Petroleum-based waste oil, that had leaked from one of the boats moored in the harbour. I had hardly had the time to worry about such things immediately after being deposited on the wharf, but now that I had returned to my senses the discomfort was driving me to distraction. Pouring water over myself or wiping myself down with paper towels would do nothing to remove this - I needed a proper bath.

I had been stopped by a worried Karin when I had tried to totter my way home, still bearing a serious wound that I had no right to have recovered from so quickly. She had only seen me off after I had explained about the charms and such that I kept in my house. She was easygoing like that.

I had tried to invite her to stay the night here, but she had breezily turned me down, saying that she had a friend in the vicinity who would put her up for the night.

Karin's social connections remained as much a mystery to me as ever. Although she had given me a rueful smile, saying that her family would be angry with her for returning home the following morning.

—

In any case, I had finally returned home, and could allow myself to relax a little. I looked the boy over once more, this time with the aid of my apartment's artificial lights.

“Hold on. Hey, no, wait, wait, wait! Don't just go right in! Just stand here for a minute.”

I grabbed him by his sodden scarf and yanked him back, prompting a visible sulk.

“Uh...sorry.”

So he did possess emotions, and the capacity to appeal to them. That would be useful, at least.

Both of us looked ridiculous, soaked from head to toe and glistening with oil. I was at least wearing swimwear and a windbreaker in place of my ordinary clothes, but his lot was a much more miserable one. I could feel my memories of the unearthly spectacle I had witnessed below the surface of the water growing more distant by the minute.

All-righty. I pulled myself together, and sank to one knee in the entranceway, looking over this child once more from top to toe.

He at least appeared to be eight, maybe nine years old. He was Caucasian, with the pale features particular to Scandinavian climes - although given that Servants were as much concept as they were genetics, any attempt to determine their race was close to meaningless. His hair was a pale blonde, almost white, and it had been left to grow freely.

His scarf was sodden, and hung limp around his neck. Or maybe it was a muffler? Well, it wasn't as though it mattered. It was composed of fabric knitted from some strange, gaudy material – it was hard to say if it was actual gold, or just extremely intricate needlework. His clothing looked to be made of cotton, and had a simple

design, reminiscent of a Greek-style tunic. He had a small embroidered design on his chest, which I made a note of as a potentially important clue.

His belt and shoes were made of the same material as his scarf. The heels of the latter had a strange design; they were tapered towards the back, like spurs used for riding horses. I could have taken that as an indication that in life he had been some sort of knight – but nothing else about him gave that impression. He’s nothing like any other Saber or Rider-class Servants I’ve seen.

His pale blue eyes stared back at me questioningly as I scrutinised him. I was seized by a sudden rush of curiosity.

“Hey. Do you think you could tell me where you came from?”

He smoothly lifted an arm to point towards the ceiling.

“From the sky? From Heaven? You don’t mean from the moon, do you?”

He shook his head at all of them.

“I’ve come...from somewhere very far away.”

“All Servants have.”

“...Really?” He must have found something amusing, because his face blossomed into a smile, and he giggled. I was relieved at the unexpected ease with which I was able to communicate with him, although it seemed like he was still struggling to understand what I was saying.

His first words had been in halting English, but from the way he had appeared to be listening in on the conversation between me and Karin I would venture that he at least understood our language. If he was a Servant who had been summoned legitimately, he would have been granted a bare minimum level of common knowledge about the modern era by the Grail, as well as the linguistic capabilities necessary to express himself to others naturally. However, now that I was trying to determine his true name, that was only serving to impede my search.

As I questioned him, I produced a pair of scissors and carefully snipped a five-millimetre length of thread from the back of his tunic, which I deposited in a zip-lock sample bag.

“Would you mind letting me take one of your hairs as well?”

It looked like he was giving me the ok. He did as I asked, without resisting, and as I did he asked me a question.

“Have you come from somewhere far away like me, Eri?”

“Don’t call me that. Did you get that from Karin? Alright, listen here. I’m not “Eri”, I’m not “Old man Eri”, and I’m not “Eri-pie”. I’m Erice. Utsumi Erice.”

“Hmm.”

He remained staring at me, giving me no indication whether or not he’d understood. His reaction was a little dispiriting, but I continued anyway. If I kept talking, I might be able to glean something.

“It’s not all that far away, really. I was born in Shinjuku. I’m fourteen now, so I guess you could call me a middle schooler, but I don’t usually go to school anyway.”

“What’s a ‘school’?”

“A school is...it’s where you go to learn. It’s a big building where lots of children all go. Or at least, that’s what I hear it was like before the war. They’ve changed a lot since then.”

“You don’t go to school, Eri?”

“I told you to call me Erice. And I don’t need to. I’m passing my academic evaluations, and I’m getting the credits I need from extracurricular courses. And I show up for health inspections and such.”

“You don’t want to go to school, do you?”

I grit my teeth. He’d hit the nail on the head. He was annoyingly good at that.

“It’s...not a matter of whether I want to go or not. I...I have more important things to do.”

“You’re alone.” He cocked his head, and then broke out into another smile. “Just like me.”

I suppressed my irritation silently as I tapped at my tablet. I was trying a search for the symbol embroidered on his chest, but nothing was coming up. Just in case, I tried accessing the city network, but no-one had registered any missing Servants - although it wasn't as though that was a frequent occurrence anyway. I could ask my master about any information that might be being suppressed on a public level, but I could hardly go blithely to her cap-in-hand. Not after I had tried to hide from her that I had disobeyed her orders and let Kundry go.

Even so, there was one theory as to his identity that I had managed to come up with. Spurred on by that, I decided to bite the bullet.

“So, which Servant are you?”

“...?”

He tilted his head in confusion. Was he trying to play dumb? It didn't look like an act, at any rate. It seemed that somehow, he really didn't understand the concept of a Servant. Was that even possible?

“I'm asking about your true name. Although your nickname will do, if that's better-known.”

Once, Servants would not have revealed their true name lightly, but that was before the war. In the modern world, it had become more of a question of personal privacy. No small number of Servants had origins that could complicate life in Mosaic City if they became known to others, and the degree of discretion necessary might also change depending on their relationship with their Master.

This boy likely wouldn't talk about his true name if his unknown Master did not wish it. And all the more so if he didn't have one at all.

“Your name, I said. Tell me your name.”

“...Name?”

“That's right. Your name.”

“Don't you know it?”

“...Huh? Don't I...you mean my name?”

It was supposed to be me asking the questions here. I was starting to feel that if I just allowed this wide-eyed child to talk at his own pace, I would end up the one being profiled.

Abruptly, he opened his mouth again. “There’s something I’ve lost.”

“Something you’ve lost? What did you lose?”

“I don’t know.”

I heaved a sigh. At the same moment, a sharp stench once more pricked at my nostrils.

“It sounds like you’re suffering from memory loss. I think things like that can happen after summoning...? Well, anyway, there’s nothing we can do for now. And I’m about at my wits’ end, so right now I’m going to have a shower. I’ll let you use the bathroom too, so go on ahead.”

“Show-er?”

“A shower. You know, like a bath.”

“...A bath?”

“Wait, you really don’t know? Don’t tell me you don’t even know what a shower is? Hang on, have you ever even had a wash?”

He shook his head. Apparently he really hadn’t ever experienced a bath. Although even if he hadn’t, surely the idea itself fell under common knowledge.

Do your job, Holy Grail.

For as long as I had lived here, my bathroom had been rather chic. It had a French-style interior, and was easily wide enough for two people. The star of the show was a shallow enamel bathtub, pulled straight from a western movie. Incidentally, the bedroom was decorated in equally charming fashion, and was the biggest reason I chose this apartment.

The design was uncharacteristically luxurious for a department store coffee shop. Either the owner had been extremely specific tastes...or from the beginning, this building had been designed with less-than-wholesome purposes in mind. Probably the latter. Not that that had anything to do with me; I was nothing more than a grateful beneficiary. But it did mean one more thing for Karin to tease me about.

I gritted my teeth, and led the boy by the hand to the bathroom. He was still dawdling, unsure as to what was going on. I had him take off his clothes and made him stand in the dressing room. Then I set to filling the bathtub, removing my own dirtied clothing as I did so. He's just a kid. What's there to be embarrassed about? Nothing! That's right, nothing at all.

There was still an outside chance that he would turn out to have the mind of a middle-aged man, but I'd cross that bridge if I came to it.

"I suppose I'd better put my swimsuit in to soak...ouch!"

Agony lanced through me as I twisted my body the wrong way. I re-treated the injury to my abdomen, and covered it over with a water-resistant patch. It was still undergoing accelerated recovery, and it was warm to the touch. The wound was serious enough that with the treatment methods of the past, oligemic shock and acute inflammation would have been unavoidable. But this new world had conquered death itself, and treatments for injuries and accidents had not been overlooked on the way. Many technologies had been developed during the war, and now I reaped the benefits.

"It looks like it hurts."

"Well, maybe a little."

His eyes were drawn to the scar on my ear, and he screwed up his face.

"It isn't nice, is it? Every thorn-prick makes its own hole."

"...You said it."

Was he worrying that I might be left with a scar, in his own way? If so, he was quite the gentleman.

"But it's ok. Kouyou patched it up for me, so it'll heal with time."

For my part, I carefully looked his naked body up and down once more. This was a vital step in my investigation, and thus an entirely proper and lawful act.

He was...definitely a boy, yep.

—

Once I had painstakingly washed away the cause of the stench, I finally entered the bathtub - along with the boy, who was trying to escape at any opportunity.

“It’s hot.”

“That’s what’s good about it. Ordinary Servants love to take baths. They’re all very happy to get in. There are even some who have baths as their Noble Phantasms. There’s one who summons this great big bathchamber, called Terme di Caracalla...”

“I want to get out.”

He was pulling a very sullen expression, but at least he was being obedient.

I can’t see any scars on him. His muscles and weight don’t seem any different from a normal child’s, either. I found it very hard to believe that he might be some kind of knight summoned in their youth. When he’d said that he didn’t know what a bath was, the first thing I’d suspected was child abuse; Heroic Spirits who had come from such unhappy backgrounds were too numerous to count. But he showed no sign of having received that kind of treatment, or at least not outwardly.

My confidence in my hypothesis was growing stronger, and I decided to put it to the test.

—

I stretched out from the bathtub. With the steam-clouded mirror as my canvas, I drew a picture of a hat with my fingertip. It was a crude sketch of an old-fashioned, wide-brimmed men’s hat with a slightly indented top, as seen from the side.

“Hey. Can you tell me what this is?” I asked him hesitantly, my chest pounding nervously. It only took a brief glance at the picture before he answered.

“It’s...a snake.”

I started. For a moment, I was lost for words.

“It looks like it’s eaten something big.”

He’d answered my question perfectly.

“It scares me a little.”

Droplets fell from his body as he shivered and turned away. I hadn’t even imagined that he might show such a violent reaction. I quickly wiped away the picture on the mirror, and found myself patting his head to try and reassure him. I could feel the slickness of his wet hair and the warmth of his body through the palm of my hand.

“What about “B-612”? Or maybe you could call it “Besixdouze”?”

“Yes.” He nodded in answer. No hesitation.

“You know it?”

“It’s a planet, isn’t it? But there’s no-one there.”

I was silent for a moment. That’s right. It’s a planet. Of course it is.

“I see...so there’s no-one there. But I think...I might know your true name now.”

B-612 was the name of an asteroid that orbited the solar system. It was not remarkable in any way, save for the fact that it had been discovered by a Japanese national. It would hardly be included in the common knowledge that the Holy Grail bestowed upon Servants. But that asteroid was named for a novella from a foreign country, and the title of that novella was “The Little Prince”.

On a sudden impulse, I embraced him. In the bathtub, I wrapped my arms around his narrow shoulders from behind, and squeezed him tight. So as not to break him. So as not to hurt him.

“If only...if only you had been my Servant...”

He showed no sign of answering me.

Before entering the bathtub, as I was washing myself, I had checked everywhere. Desperately, I had searched to see if Command Seals, the proof of a contract with a

Servant, had appeared anywhere on my body. I had strained my eyes in the mirror, checking my back, beneath the translucent medical patch, even the soles of my feet. But they were nowhere to be seen.

Then I was no-one's Master. I could not have made any contract with this boy through the Grail. I was just the Reaper, the same as I had always been.

In that case, what had that sense of foreboding been?

What had that trembling been in my chest? That sense that something had begun that would change my life forever?

In the end, it had all just been my own wishful thinking.



After the bath, we retired to my living-cum-dining room, where a mahogany table had stood ever since this place was a cafe. The boy sat in a chair, working his way through a lasagne that I had microwaved from frozen. I was recording the day's events, tablet in hand and a towel around my head, and I was blushing as red as his Bolognese sauce. I felt incredibly embarrassed. This boy hadn't even yet come of age, but I had suddenly embraced him, whispered something that felt almost like a confession of love, and then ended up crying. While naked, no less.

His only response, after a while had passed, had been to furrow his eyebrows and complain "It's hot".

"Is that good?", I asked.

"It tastes."

"Really? Sounds great."

The samples I had taken earlier were on the table. Both contents of the zip-lock bag had vanished, just as I had expected. Separated from his body, his hair and the thread from his tunic had ceased to exist in their pseudo-physical form, and had reverted to being part of his mana. In other words, his body and the clothes he wore were woven from the stuff. That made for strong evidence that he was a Servant - but it was unneeded, because an easier way to tell was right before my eyes. The clothes that I had left on the floor of the dressing room had since returned to a clean, dry state.

The scarf that he wore around his neck floated freely, with no regard for the laws of physics. Even while he was eating, it fluttered gently, as though rising upon the wind. Needless to say, there was no wind inside my apartment.

He couldn't be the Simoun...could he? The poison wind?

—

The night had grown late, and I wrestled with the sleepiness and exhaustion that assailed me as I stared at my tablet. I thought back to the words I had exchanged with the Flying Dutchman, Captain Van der Decken. Every word of the warning he had given me lay heavy on my breast.

Until it became clear that our enemy was the mad queen, he had maintained a policy of non-interference, and only once had he commented on my methods. He had been cursed by a devil of the ocean. My lot was not too dissimilar - for I too was cursed, and possessed by evil spirits. Living my life beyond the sight of the Grail, I might as well have been a naked offering to them. But that was also the reason that I'd lasted as long as I had in this job.

I had let my guard down. I had allowed myself to believe that Captain Van der Decken and I might have been able to find an understanding, as bearers of the same fate. But he had seen through those naïve expectations, and had roughly spurned my advances.

“You have grown to feel joy in the act of slaying Servants, under the pretence of executing the authority of the city. Though you think yourself the master of your spectres, they in turn use you.”

He was telling me, in a roundabout way, that I was intoxicated by the idea of being a superhero. That what I had believed to be pride was in fact conceit.

“Someday, Erice, you will call forth a great evil. And when that time comes, that which you have clung to so dearly will instead force you to your knees.”

Unable to accept his words and fiercely ashamed, I had retorted with some frivolous argument - although I could admit now that it had just been something I had cooked up to make myself feel better. At the time I had thought he was just trying to put me in my place, but thinking back on it now, his words might have been as much in reproach of himself as they had been for me. His relationship with his contractor Aheseurus - equal in spite of being Master and Servant - spoke more eloquently of his sincerity than words ever could.

“Are you paying attention, Erice?”

I was brought out of my reverie by my master's polite chiding.

“You seem very tired. Perhaps it might be for the best if you took a moment to rest in the break room? I can prepare the lecture material for your perusal later, if you'd like.”

I let out a whimper. This was embarrassing. My second disgrace this morning. I shook my head vigorously. My master nodded, and recommenced the lecture in a soft voice.

—

Her name was Caren Fujimura. She was the lecturer responsible for this class, and also my master. I had known her for as long as I could walk.

Outwardly, she appeared to be in her twenties. She had light amber eyes, and wavy, pale grey hair that cascaded down to the small of her back. Her body combined a slender build with voluptuous Hispanic curves. Most notable of all, however, was her impeccable sense of style. Nobody else could come close to its audacity. Today, too, she looked sharp as a knife.

Or at least, I thought so, but waxing lyrical on the subject only seemed to earn me pained smiles from Karin and others. Well, it wasn't as though I cared anyway. If I was the only one who could understand her magnificence, so be it.

“...?”

The boy, who had been quiet at my side for a long time, had begun focusing on my master when she had spoken to me. Now he turned his gaze to the skirt of my school uniform, then to his own trousers, and cocked his head. He turned his head to make one more pass, carefully comparing, and then spoke with some conviction.

“She isn't wearing anything down there.”

“That she isn't.”

My master really was incredible.

It was not on account of her position as my lecturer that I called Caren Fujimura my master. Nor was it on account of her being my fashion role model. She was inhuman, in every way, and not in the sense of being part of the new postwar humanity. She was an artificial intelligence – an AI.

More precisely, she was the municipal administration AI tasked with the management of the Akihabara ward. A human interface that allowed the Grail to communicate directly with the people of the city. A hybrid intelligence – the most

valuable in the city – born of the fusion of summoning magecraft, modelled on the kind that called forth Heroic Spirits, and cutting-edge information engineering technology. Such was the true nature of Caren Fujimura.

–

Ms. Fujimura’s lecture on pre-war human history continued. Today’s topic was the history and profiles of the great pioneers. Those brave adventurers who sailed west on crude wooden vessels, carving a path to an unknown lands. Those bold explorers who discovered – or rediscovered – the distant new world, and secured the shipping routes that would become the lifeblood of a global civilisation.

–

She spoke of Eric the Red, who crossed from Europe to Greenland and settled there. Of his son, Lief Ericsson, who made landfall in the northeast of North America and named it “Vinland”. Of the roots of the Polynesians, who propagated across the islands of the south Pacific in canoes little better than rafts, and were sometimes set adrift by rogue currents to journey thousands of kilometres.

Of Christopher Columbus, the conqueror who never once lost sight of his dream; who sailed to the farthest reaches of the western sea aboard the legendary Santa Maria, and there rediscovered the new world. Of Vasco de Gama, who crossed the Cape of Good Hope and pioneered the Indian trade route. Of the Cape itself - the southern tip of the African continent and one of the great perils of the Age of Discovery, where Captain Van der Decken’s Dutch galleon met its fate upon the rocks.

She told of Ferdinand Magellan, whose vessels first circumnavigated the world. Although he perished before the completion of his journey, his feat proclaimed to the world beyond all doubt that the earth was not flat, but round. Through him, the people came to know that the world they lived on was just one more celestial body like the moon or Mars, forging silently onwards through the void.

And here too was the first captain to circumnavigate the globe: Francis Drake, the privateer! Ah, here was the magnificent Golden Hind! I had already been absorbed in the lecture, but here my excitement reached its zenith, my mind filling with daydreams of the open sea.

From Servants who had lived through the same era, I had heard tales that Drake, the admiral who broke the back of the invincible Spanish Armada, had in truth been a woman more gallant than any man. That the man who set the sun had, in fact, been the woman who set the sun. I personally found them impossible to believe, and I'd also heard them refuted by other pirate Servants. Stories like that ain't nothin' more'n piss in the wind, girly. Drake was a man, sure as my beard is long.

It was a common enough story when it came to Servants. Some ages of history had placed little importance on gender distinctions. Conversely, in others women had been so oppressed that they could only perform heroic deeds whilst disguised in men's clothing. Such confusion was liable to muddy historical records.

Even if Drake had been female, it would do nothing to tarnish the glory of her legend.

—

My enriching study time was now approaching its end, although I had struggled to focus on all of the contents of the lecture.

“I would like to give a brief introduction to one final figure. An American man whose one small step signified a giant leap for mankind.”

The screen changed in sync with Ms. Fujimura's commentary. Now it displayed a world of extreme contrasts: a sea of grey regolith, and the dark vacuum of space. Within the shadow thrown by a lunar lander, a figure in a space suit descended a ladder to stand upon the moon's surface.

“This was the first man to stand on the face of the moon. He, too, counts among the great pioneers of the human race.”

“...Eh...?”

A single voice arose, quavering not with wonder but with astonishment.

“A human went to the moon...? A living human?”

The source of the voice was none other than the young girl in the front row.

“Indeed. It would be fifty-six years before the modern day. Three astronauts ventured to the moon, and two among them descended to walk upon its surface.”

“More than half a century ago? There weren’t even control units back then capable of calculating orbital trajectories-”

“There were.”

Another video resource flashed onto the screen. This time it showed a bulky copper box that must have weighed dozens of kilograms, and a small keyboard. The commentary indicated that this was the Apollo spaceship’s guidance computer.

“Single-core, 8-bit. A most splendid computer to be mounted in the lunar lander. It likely had less than one ten-thousandth the processing power of the smartphones you all have in your pockets. And yet it was enough to guide the lander by autopilot, even though human error necessitated its rebooting just prior to landing.”

Ms. Fujimura sounded almost triumphant now. There had been a strange change in her expression, although it was so slight I doubted anyone but me would even have a chance of noticing. Perhaps, for an AI, it was a point of pride to be able to talk about the vital contribution a computer had made to one of humanity’s most historic achievements.

No, that’s not it...

She was delighting in the shock her student was experiencing, from her first contact with this knowledge. She was revelling in it. The girl retracted her body and sat back down in her seat, fuming.

“That’s irresponsible. It’s reckless.”

“Indeed it was. It was one of the most reckless ventures in human history, and precious lives were lost along the way.”

“That’s all the more reason it could never have happened!”

As though scoffing at our worries from across the ages, the portly figure of the spaceman upon the screen began to moonwalk, gleefully bounding across the

moon's surface. He was humming to himself merrily, like some shameless delinquent.

“Rather carefree, isn't he? One would never think only a thin spacesuit separated him from the zero-pressure vacuum and the hellish 110-degree temperatures outside.”

My master smiled faintly, as she expressed her admiration for the men in the video. Even when they raced their moon buggies across the lunar plain, they were rough and careless, as though they were driving go-karts at some amusement park. The girl at the front returned to gazing at the video, a flabbergasted expression on her face.

“Ah...ahaha...!” I couldn't help bursting out in laughter.

Her shoulders trembled a little. I'd picked an awful time.

—

The “Great Pioneers” instalment concluded by saying that although the human race had raised its flag in one great unknown after the other – first the new world beyond the seas, then the distant skies, and finally the void of space – landing a group of carefree delinquents on the surface of the moon had marked the end of their exploits. Not once since had they set their sights on anything farther. The Apollo generation's dream of a grand conquest of the stars remained a dream to this day. Mars, Venus and the outer space beyond the solar system remained unknown to the print of human boot.

I wondered if perhaps the human race had, somewhere along its way, lost sight of something incredibly precious.

I wondered if perhaps someday there might rise once again, on the edge of the farthest frontier, someone worthy of being called a hero. Someone who would lead mankind forth once more towards a new world.

“Hey, there you are, Eri-pie! Wanne grab some food?”

Karin burst into the classroom just as the lecture had ended. She must have guessed where I would be. I had thought she might have returned home after the events of last night, but she must have remained in Akihabara.

“Oh, it’s you, Karin. I’ll hold off for now. I’ve still got things I need to do.”

“Ehh? Hasn’t your class just wrapped up?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m not talking about class.”

“Oh, the shrimp’s tagging along? Good, good. You put some proper breakfast in him, right? What’s he been eatin’?”

“Cereal. And some water.”

“Oh, ouch. You know that’s child abuse, right? Like, I should probably be calling a social worker about now?”

“Just give it a rest, geez...”

I hadn’t been back to my apartment for the past few days, and my reserves had all expired, so I had ended up with very little by way of food. I hadn’t so much as forced cereal and water on him as noticed his interest in the food I was hurriedly shovelling down and shared a little.

Servants didn’t typically require meals in the usual sense, but in the post-war world where they had become commonplace, more care was being paid to improving their quality of life. There were even some citizens’ groups that insisted that they had a right to live the same as humans. In my view, Servants were fundamentally inhuman existences, and I saw those attempts to impose human restrictions on something unbound by the framework of nature as little more than evidence of their Masters’ egotism – although I couldn’t deny that might just have been the bitter prejudice of a have-not speaking.

“Ssssssup! Morning, Caren!”

“Good morning to you too, Karin.”

Ms. Fujimura approached the two of us.

“Karin...and Caren...?”

The boy looked between the two, confused.

“Yeah, you got it. Pain in the ass, right? The Caren in Akihabara has this kinda grown-up, sexy feel to her. The one back home is a lot more, uh...wha-chaa!”

“What’s “wha-chaa!” supposed to mean? And you should be calling her Ms. Fujimura.” Karin had drawn one knee up to strike a kung-fu pose. I gave her a smack.

“Karin lives in the Shibuya district. The me who lives there is a drawer for a Chinese restaurant.” My master smiled gently. I wondered what it felt like, to know there were different versions of herself active all over the city.

A few elderly students were still hanging around in the classroom, chatting amongst themselves. My master ushered us from the room, and we relocated to a terrace protruding from midway up the building. This was a leisure space, and it commanded a wide view of the sprawl of Akihabara. At this early hour, the sea breeze was light, and the sun was not too strong. It was just cool enough that that shaded areas were still a little chilly.

The distant rumble of a train smoothly pulling in from the oversea viaduct drifted to us from across the water, along with the faint toot of its horn. Beyond the horizon, where the railway vanished, lay Shinjuku and Shibuya.

“So this child is the Servant with the unknown Master?”

“That’s right.”

I had already informed her about the situation in advance, but I took the opportunity to introduce the boy to her in person.

“To tell the truth, I already have a good guess as to his identity. Although he doesn’t really react to what I say most of the time. He doesn’t seem to be entirely all there.”

I took the plunge, and told her about last night’s discoveries – hoping somewhere deep down this made up for the regret I felt at keeping quiet about Kundry’s flight and the events that had followed.

“Antoine de Saint-Exupéry...? A French author, as I recall, and one of great renown. He was also an accomplished pilot, and served in the Second World War. You believe this child’s identity to be this Saint-Exupéry?”

The object of our scrutiny, the child in question, showed no reaction to the name. He took a sip of the freshly-squeezed orange juice that Karin had bought from a juice stand, and pulled a face. Sour.

“His appearance is a poor match, even taking into account the age difference.” I could sense my master checking records in the background, and cross-referencing them with the child in front of her. I pressed on with my next hypothesis.

“I think he’s the Little Prince. Don’t you think he looks just like Saint-Exupéry’s illustrations?”

The Little Prince was an allegorical short story. It was the last completed work by Saint-Exupéry, who passed away at a young age. Whether online or in physical bookshops, one would inevitably find it in the children’s book category, but it couldn’t be more different to the fairy tales it rubbed shoulders with on the shelves. That said, nor was it something like the Bible, whose every line existed to be quoted and venerated. It was a comforting presence, like a familiar friend at your side, always ready with a lighthearted quip or a sobering anecdote. Or so I thought, anyway.

“Eh? So you’re a prince, are you? Hmmmm? Now you mention it, he does look kinda regal. Think he’d make a good match with my Momi? She is a princess, you know. Whaddaya think?”

Karin pinched the boy’s cheek, grinning wickedly, and he turned his head away in clear discomfort. I decided to leave them to it, and added to my master that last night the boy had answered my riddle with the keyword that only the Little Prince would know.

“I see...” She struck a contemplative pose as I continued.

“I’m aware that he doesn’t look very much like Saint-Exupéry. That’s why I’m wondering if he could be an author Servant who’s taken on the form of a character from one of his own works. I’m sure there are examples of that.”

“There are indeed. Many authors’ works leave a far greater impression on the world to come than the men themselves. Many more choose such forms of their own accord. However, if you would permit me my personal opinion - ”

She left a beat, pushing up her glasses.

“ - I would conjecture that Saint-Exupéry would project himself not onto the Little Prince, but onto the Pilot who narrates the story. It was, after all, his own experience of crash-landing in the Sahara desert that formed the basis for the book.”

“Ah...yes, I...I suppose...”

She was right. Given the content of the book, it was an entirely legitimate criticism. She was saying that this child was likely something fundamentally different to just some writer Servant with perverse tendencies and a strong capacity for empathy.

While I hadn’t been watching, the subject of our conversation had begun sipping on a honey-lemon drink. He must have traded his orange juice with Karin. This was evidently more to his tastes; he was smiling broadly.

“I have conferred with the Caren units in the other districts, but he does not appear to match any Servant under our jurisdiction. I cannot even venture more than vague hypotheses as to his class.” It seemed that as an AI, she was capable of communicating with her other units in the background even as she talked with me.

So he wasn’t a lost Servant who had wandered in from some other district. At the very least, we now knew that there was no record of Saint-Exupéry being registered as a Servant anywhere in Mosaic City.

“Please do not be disheartened, Erice. I do not mean to dismiss your opinion; the possibility remains. And just by having secured him, you have already done a wonderful job.”

“I suppose...”

“He seems to be stable, aside from his memories, so I will fit him with a classification tag. For as long as he continues to reside in this town, I will refer to him as “The Little Prince (TBD)””.

“... 'Brackets... TBD' ...?”

“Guess so. Would be a pain in the ass if he didn't have a name, right? Brackets, TBD.” Karin cheerily patted the Little Prince (TBD) on the head.

“Um... about last night's incident...” I straightened my back, and tried to change the topic to my report of the previous night's events – and suddenly my master stood up from her seat, looking at me ruefully.

“I owe you an apology, Erice. A matter has sprung up that requires my urgent attention. Would you mind submitting your report as a brief text document?”

“Eh...? I mean... of course.”

I felt relieved, but at the same time more concerned. Whatever this urgent matter was, this was the first I'd heard of it, and my master was not known for changing her schedule lightly.

“But what do you think I should do about him?”

“That was my next point. I am sorry to ask this of you, but would you mind taking charge of him for the time being? If his identity becomes clear during that time, all the better.”

“Eh-?”

My master's eyes narrowed into a smile as my mouth clamped shut. The already-unusual situation had just taken a turn for the stranger.

“No way, no way, no way. Isn't that going to be a problem? With my job and everything?”

“No other individual in Akihabara is so equipped to tackle as exceptional a case. To call you a specialist in the handling of Servants would not be an exaggeration.”

It would. It absolutely would. My specialisation was not the handling of Servants - it was murder. Restraining the most villainous of Servants, and keeping them under strict surveillance, I could do. But I was not nearly so capable of attending to the needs of a young boy, barely any different from an ordinary human child, who didn't even know his own name.

Karin chipped in. “Can’t he just bunk at my place? What’s an extra brother or two, anyway?”

“Quite a lot, I think...”

Karin’s suggestion was extraordinarily irresponsible, but my master only inclined her head. “My thanks for your hospitality Karin, but I am afraid that I cannot yet say what threat this child poses. I cannot permit him to reside with ordinary citizens.”

“I’m tellin’ you, it’s cool. I’ve got Momi, don’t I? It’ll be fine!”

Karin dug in deeper, and my master responded with another polite but firm refusal. In all honesty, it would have been a weight off my mind – although I wouldn’t say that the notion of Karin taking responsibility for a portion of my job didn’t grate on me a little.

Just as I was becoming aware of my own troublesome misgivings, a newcomer hurriedly approached the recreation space where we were conversing.

“Caren Fujimura? If you wouldn’t mind, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

It was her – the girl in the hat from the front row. She had run out of the classroom just before the lecture had ended, conversing with someone over her smartphone. She must have returned now that her conversation had ended.

“It’s nice to see you, Haruko. Do you have a question for me about the lecture?”

“That’s right. I wanted to ask about the role of astrology during the Age of Discovery-” A sudden squall blew through the terrace, and she clutched at her hat, pulling it down tightly over her ears. I saw my chance and hurriedly forced my way into the conversation – although really, she had been the one who had interrupted us.

“H-hang on a moment. I was already talking with Ms. Fujimura...”

She glared at me in silence. Her brilliant peppermint-green eyes glinted from behind a parting in her fringe. “It was only thanks to the repeated interruptions

from you and your Servant that I didn't have the opportunity to ask these questions during the lecture.”

“Well, I'm...I'm sorry about that. But, well, you see, he's not exactly my Servant...”

“Is that so? My apologies. But as his guardian, you should be more conscious of your responsibility to ensure he does not cause trouble for others in public spaces.”

Her motions – her gait, and even the way she was holding down her hat - were clipped and precise. She was barely taller than the innocent child drinking juice by my side, but she somehow seemed many years his elder. Beneath the white gown I had seen so often in lectures, she was wearing a slightly old-fashioned bright yellow blouse.

I'm positive...I've seen those clothes before somewhere... Now where was it?

“Um...you mentioned astrology, didn't you? If you're curious about the involvement of magecraft in human history, why don't you go to the library? You'd be able to research it as much as you wanted.”

I'd intended it as a sincere and respectful recommendation...but instead she expelled a short, sharp sigh, and her attitude became palpably frostier. This was getting awkward.

“You're telling me to go to the library? That would be far less efficient than asking an administrative AI – I mean, Ms. Fujimura directly. I would have thought that someone who went to the trouble of attending lectures would be cognizant of the vast difference in value between the vague knowledge one can acquire through reference materials, and the clear and consistent explanations that can be gained through conversations with an expert in the field. And if you do not understand that, then I must ask why you insist on wasting others' time with your indolence.”

“W-what do you mean, 'indolence'...?”

“Well damn. Kid's got a mouth on her...”

Things were going from bad to worse - now Karin had taken an interest. If I left this alone, it could easily easily escalate beyond my control and into an all-out brawl. She was free to pick whichever fights she wanted, but I wanted to avoid any

risk of worsening my relationships with other students and ending up barred from attending.

“Come on, Karin. Cut it out. I’m not mad or anything.”

“...Hm? Wait a second, I’m sure...” Karin looked as though she’d just noticed something. The girl hurriedly pulled her hat back down over her head. My master had called this girl Haruko, hadn’t she?

“I too have important matters to attend to. I really do have to hurry.”

“I...I see. Sorry about all this.” She had come all the way to this terrace searching for my master, and I wanted to show some recognition of her dedication. In that sense, we were kindred spirits. “If I’m not mistaken, you don’t come to lectures very often, do you? If you wouldn’t mind, I could let you borrow my old notes...”

“If you’re going to mock me so, I hope you’re prepared for the consequences.”

“Eh? Did...did I say something wrong?” How short was this girl’s fuse? I desperately looked to Karin for help, but she only shook her head as though to say there was nothing she could do. And then, in that moment -

“I think that’s quite enough, Erice.”

Another newcomer – a woman, who had not been in the classroom – strolled towards us, calling out to me with uncomfortable familiarity. Her footsteps clacked on the floor as she approached.

“Welcome. Your arrival is earlier than I had expected.” Ms. Fujimura, who had been maintaining a position of neutrality in our argument, greeted her in an oddly forced tone of voice.

“It was your message that hurried me here, Caren. You said that I might have the opportunity to see something interesting.” She was dressed in a vintage black sailor uniform, and her long silver hair was left to hang freely. I knew this woman – this woman who looked so out-of-place in Akihabara, who clad herself in an elegant shroud of bygone days.

“Chitose... What...what are you doing here...?”

Now it made sense. Caren’s urgent matter must have been her.

The girl in the hat must have caught my murmured whisper. “Chitose...? What kind of civilian could call directly on a municipal administration AI without an appointment...?”

I heard the rushing sound of an intake of breath, and she turned sharply back around to the woman once more. Now that they were standing face-to-face, her small frame meant that she had to crane her neck to look her in the eyes.

“You aren’t...Manazuru Chitose, are you...? The Stigmata?”

“...I am indeed. It’s been a while since I last heard that name.”

The girl let out a whimper. “How could this happen...”

Her reaction was so violent, I thought for a moment that they might have been about to duel it out on the spot. In stark contrast to her brief reverie, now she was tripping over herself to be polite. She scrambled backwards three paces, and lowered her head woodenly. Her ears were glowing bright red, and from the glimpses I could catch through her bangs her cheeks were similarly flushed.

One of her fingers brushed against the side of her hat. With a swish, it folded in on itself and collapsed into a hairband. With her face now exposed, she bowed her head once more.

“I apologise wholeheartedly for my insolence, Stigmata.”

Chitose only shook her head quietly. “You had business with Caren, did you not? I do not mind waiting a while.”

“I-it was nothing! Certainly, nothing of consequence next to your duties.” She was so stiff and anxious now, her haughty demeanour not two minutes ago seemed like a distant memory. It was actually a little adorable - although in general, I found people’s tendency to become so ill at ease in Chitose’s presence rather hard to deal with.

For her part, Chitose might have been responding amiably, but that should not have been mistaken for warmth or compassion. Her gaze fell upon the boy seated at our table, and for an instant, her eyes were those of a serpent that had found its prey.

“Yes, that’s the boy”, she said, as though talking to herself. “I can’t even tell which class his Saint Graph is. I suppose the world is full of surprises.”

I confess - my interest was aroused, and I couldn’t suppress a sadistic curiosity. What reaction would her gaze stir in him? Would he show awe? Animosity? Would he ignore her completely, as though erasing his own existence?

But instead – he smiled. A beaming smile, like a shining star. A clear window straight to his heart.

Silence reigned for a second, and then Chitose smiled back at him thinly. Next to me, I felt the girl with the hat flinch. And then, her expression relaxing into a slightly mischievous smile, she approached me, and laid a pale white fingertip on my shoulder.

“I charge you with monitoring this child, Erice.”

“Understood”, I muttered. She gave a small shrug at my disgruntled response.

It looked like our conversation was over. Once Chitose had made a clear decision, my master would abide by it. I stood up from my seat, bowed to my master, and accompanied the boy from the terrace as I’d been instructed.

“Who the hell was that?”, Karin asked breezily, once we were in the corridor. “Gave me the creeps.” Just this once, I was grateful for her laid-back demeanour.

“And what’s up with you, anyway? Didn’t you have something to ask Caren about? You sure you’re ok just leaving like this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s just go.”

I put the building behind me, as though I were running away from something.



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隠すは「か」ら

Chapter 2

“Hey, I wanna go here! I wanna try their beef fried rice!”

Karin thrust her smartphone into my face as we walked. Her request for this lunchtime was a Chinese restaurant she’d supposedly looked up in advance.

“Where are we, anyway? I think we’re lost... Wait, Sub-Level 12? That’s below sea level, right? Is that really ok?”

“You like Chinese, dontcha Eri?”

“As much as the next guy, sure. But this place...their menu’s got nothing but the tingly kind of spicy. Don’t they have any of the hotter Japanese-style stuff?”

“What’s that now? I’m hearin’ a lotta grumblin’ for someone who woulda just gone and gotten us stuck in an infinite loop if I’d left it up to them! Unidentifiable red grease on one side, somethin’ you could eat with one hand in five seconds on the other. Just hit up Caren’s place in Shibuya if that’s what you want!”

The boy was clutching the smartphone he’d been handed with both hands, staring intently at the screen. Karin placed her hands on his shoulders and addressed him mock-apologetically.

“You listenin’, kid? This girl’ll burn your sense of taste right out. Hang around with her for too long, and you’ll end up rolling around on the floor with smoke comin’ outta your ears. And don’t even get me started on the horror that’ll be waitin’ for you the next morning...”

The boy nodded. “I see.”

“Y-you’re saying that, but it’s not like you eat anything other than junk food. I’m getting ulcers just thinking about it.”

I still had some reservations about our choice of dining establishment, but in a sense I was in luck – it happened to be located near a district that I needed to visit in order to make some purchases. And time spent delving the bowels of this labyrinth was hardly time wasted, even from a work perspective. I might have

already known these places as points on a map, but it was always a very different experience to visit them for real.

—

We descended an elevated walkway at a leisurely pace, bound for a city block filled with commercial facilities. Our route had been slightly roundabout, but it was more than worth it for the view. Through the spaces between the high-rise buildings we could see the artificial shore, where beachgoers' parasols bloomed like a garden of flowers. Windsurfers' colourful sails adorned the open ocean.

Out of nowhere, Karin prodded me in the side. "She says she's wonderin' how your wound's getting' on."

"Kouyou, you mean?"

She nodded. At that moment, the Ogress dispelled her spiritual form and manifested next to us. The walkway creaked a little, as hundreds of pounds of artificial matter formed from concentrated mana suddenly settled on top of it. The townspeople around us started at her monstrous appearance. A youth gliding past us wobbled on his electric skates, and almost fell over.

Kouyou walked alongside us with heavy steps, matching our pace, her white kimono fluttering behind her. It was almost like a barrier had been erected down the middle of the walkway.

"It's fine. To tell you the truth, it still hurts a lot, but I'm alright. Thanks."

I stretched upwards a little to place a hand on her neck. Her eye swivelled around for a moment to hold me in its gaze, her head still drooping forward, and then she returned to spiritual form.

"...Hm? Kou-you?" The boy looked around us in confusion, and stretched out a hand to the space that Kouyou's massive bulk had occupied until a moment ago.

"Kouyou's still here, with us. She never leaves Karin's side. She's just in spiritual form right now."

"...That's amazing." The boy must have been shocked to his core, because his eyes were wide as saucers. You know you can do the same thing if you try,

right? Knowledge like that would have been even more basic than common sense for an ordinary Servant, but even that seemed to be beyond him.

“I know, right? There’s no way I could ever get her on an elevator in a million years. And she sends escalators into reverse, too!”

“Amazing.”

“I’m sure you could find something else to compliment her on”, I muttered. Karin’s face was positively glowing, as she waxed lyrical about Kouyou like a proud mother. Suddenly, she whirled around to look at me.

“Anyway, I was thinking. Don’t you think it’s about time you gave this kid a name? Since you’re in charge of him now and all. I know what Caren said, but I’m pretty sure she just meant it from an administration perspective. You can’t expect to actually call him “(TBD)” forever.”

“Well, we have been.” That said, what she said made sense. I’d been mulling it over too, in some corner of my mind. The problem was that the true name I’d had so much confidence in - Saint-Exupéry – had been politely but firmly turned down by Ms. Fujimura, and I was struggling to make any more progress.

“This Exupéry guy didn’t have any nicknames, did he?”

“He did, but...just “Saint-Ex”, I think.”

“Not exactly the cutest name in the world, huh... How about Little Prince?”

“A little bit on-the-nose, don’t you think? And it doesn’t exactly solve our problem. It’s not like we can just casually call him that.” I admitted that it suited him, but it wasn’t a name you could use in the middle of the street. Karin crossed her arms, and pulled a thoughtful face.

“Yeah, guess you’re right... Lots of nobility among Servants anyway, so it could get pretty confusing. We think he’s French, right? How do you say “little prince” in French?”

“Look it up yourself, why don’t you... “Le Petit Prince”, I think?” I was pretty sure, anyway. I remembered it from the title of the book in France, its country of origin. “Hoshi no Ouji-sama”, in Japanese.

“I see, I see... Then how about we call him ‘Pran’?”

“Pran’...” She’d taken it from the French pronunciation. We might as well just be calling him “Little Prince” as far as meaning went, but this way seemed much more like a name. I turned back to him with a sigh.

“Would you let us call you Pran for a little while? I’d like to fit you with a classification tag as well. I don’t want you wandering off and getting yourself lost.”

He nodded with surprising vigour – although I could not swear to how much of what I was saying he understood.

“Praaan.”

“Don’t stretch it out. It’s a short sound. Pran.”

Karin gave a carefree laugh as she watched our exchange. “It’d be nice if you really were the Little Prince, huh, Pran? Just like Eri says.”

“I think maybe we should be trying to find his Master, rather than playing at True Name Discernment.”

The child himself, as usual, seemed nonplussed.

—

Once the pedestrians around us had thinned out, Karin leaned over to murmur in my ear. “So, who was the scary lady back there?”

Her eyebrows were knotted seriously as she whispered, but I could sense that on some level she was putting on an act. As likely as not, Chitose had stirred a different kind of curiosity in her to what she felt towards my mysterious Servant, and she was enjoying the novelty.

“The hell was that “Stigmata” stuff all about, anyway? Eri, you called her Chitose, right?”

She rested her head on my shoulder, and then started to slide her face in even closer. She could be a real nuisance sometimes.

“C'moon, just tell me. It's some super secret thing that you don't want anybody asking about, ri~ght?”

“Then don't ask me. And you're way too close.”

“My bad, failed my will save. Anyway, you know her, right? I guess that suuuper retro getup makes sense if she's one of Caren's friends. She's not one of your upperclassmen at school, is she? Don't tell me she's famous?”

That Karin had happened to meet me at the lecture had been the worst luck. Although Chitose's existence wasn't really much of a secret - any resident of Mosaic City could find out about her if they looked in the right places, or asked one of the Caren Series.

“Famous, huh...well, she used to be, I guess. Not so much any more.” I resigned myself to telling her the truth. It was better to come clean and explain now than have her poking around in strange places.

“Chitose's...she's my grandmother.”

“Y'what? Your grandmother? So she's like...an old lady?”

“That's right.”

“But...wait, you mean...?”

Karin looked at me blankly, her expression frozen in surprise. For better or for worse – mostly worse – we'd known each other for a long time, but the only other time I'd seen her look this shocked was when she learned that I didn't possess a Holy Grail. Even so, eventually her insatiable curiosity won out.

“People from before the war can't reverse their ages like that, can they? Even if they could, wouldn't it take, like...all their Command Seals...?”

“Chitose's always looked like that, since a long time ago. But she really is my grandmother.”

“You've gotta be pullin' my leg.”

“She's not exactly famous, but she's well-known in certain circles, I guess? The girl in the hat must have something to do with that.”

“Then...she’s a magus? You’re tellin’ me your granny’s an actual, proper Master? Eri, that’s crazy. Damn, this is something really big...” Karin paled, and she stared at the ground with a hand over her mouth. Pran gazed up at her, a concerned expression on his face.

“Hahah. Seeing this reaction makes me wonder why I didn’t tell you sooner.” I cracked an awkward smile. This hadn’t gone as I expected.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

A true magus, whose lineage dated back to the pre-war era. That pointed to a deep connection to the previous Holy Grail War.

—

Karin, with the sensibilities particular to the post-war generation, had rarely spoken to me about her household. As a result, there was a limit to how much I knew about her family situation.

I did know that her house was located in Shibuya, that she had siblings, and that she attended the middle school in her district. Her parents, much like the rest of their generation, had been granted Holy Grails; however, they had not accepted them. They rejected their usage wholesale, and had apparently never so much as activated their Command Seals, while their Servants remained stowed away and unsummoned. There were not many such people in this city, but they did exist.

Such a strict worldview would undoubtedly have had some effect on the way they interacted with and raised their daughter. I couldn’t see a Servant so visibly abnormal as the Ogress Kouyou being well-received in her household, and I didn’t think it was a coincidence that Karin came so often to visit me and spent so little time at home. Perhaps it had been the fact that I had been visibly making a living on my own, free of the ties of family, that had put her at ease around me.

Karin spoke very little for a while after that – or so I thought, but by the time we’d finished our lunch at the Chinese restaurant not only had she returned to her

normal self, she was even more boisterous than usual. If she was going to be like this, perhaps I should have pinned her down with a more serious response.

From there, the three of us set a course for our new destination, where I had some business: a throng of innumerable tiny shops nestled beneath the overpass, selling all variety of magical items. Collectively, they were known locally as the “Akihabara Department Store”. If you asked any one of the multiplicity of eccentrics who made their living here, they would tell you that in the past this place dealt in parts of electrical appliances, and that its nickname came from the jargon of that time.

Since coming into possession of a highly-versatile kind of magic in their Command Seals, the people of this city had come to be connected with magecraft, and had pooled their knowledge to build for themselves a highly unique magical culture. From the perspective of a legitimate magus, the amateurism on display here would probably be cause for loud and derisive laughter, but both the Holy Grail and the municipal administration AI permitted it. Perhaps the obsessive dispositions that this place fostered resonated with them.

I too made frequent use of this place. For better or for worse, the inexperienced and naïve teenager Utsumi Erice was still permitted to bumble along in her role as Reaper, and no small percentage of that time was spent in this witches’ den.

—

The surface floor of the Department Store was nothing more than shops selling souvenirs for visitors - little talismans radiating Akihabara’s trademark brand of sketchiness, curse-charms, room decorations to satisfy anyone’s vanity. Hidden among this array of knick-knacks were items that would exhibit genuine – albeit weak – effects, in exchange for expending some of the owner’s Command Seal. They could be thought of like little gates that gave the mana manifested by the Command Seal shape and direction.

Pran and Karin were both looking around in amazement. Something caught Karin’s eye and she stopped in her tracks.

“Hey, it’s that kinda creepy-cute doll. So this is where they sell it! It’s pretty popular among the higher years at school.”

“Ugh, that thing’s gross... What is it? Is it supposed to absorb your bad luck for you?”

“Apparently, if you keep it on your person, you can see your Servant’s dreams. And different dolls show you different dreams.”

“Huh...”

It might as well have been snake oil, and an effect like that meant nothing to me anyway. I could understand why Karin was talking about it positively, but I still didn’t feel good about it.

“Hey, I’ll get you one if you want.”

“For me? I don’t need one.”

“Come on now, don’t be like that...”

In the end, the doll wound up being foisted onto Pran.

—

As we made our way deeper into the heart of the labyrinth that was the Department Store, its atmosphere began to change, and the faces of the people around us took on a much seedier bent. Perhaps the most notable change was the gradual appearance of shops tended by Casters – Heroic Spirits versed in magecraft. Their trade was in tools they had crafted from scratch, or charms made by tinkering with or tuning existing goods, and their prices were extremely steep.

The ichor that was healing my stomach wound at this very moment had originated from one of these places. A few drops of this liquid, sealed inside a small glass bottle the size of my little finger, would cost a month’s living wage.

I’d better stock up on charms while I’m here. But that’s not the real reason I’ve come to this place...

—

At a corner of a road deep in the Department Store’s heart, far from the sight of any passers-by, Karin’s feet stopped abruptly as though they had been glued to the

ground. Next to her, the boy stopped too – or rather, he struck his head on something sharply, and staggered back.

“Ouch...”

“H-hold on a sec, Eri – I can’t get through.”

“There’s a wall here.” The boy spread his hands out in midair, as though acting out a pantomime in the middle of the street. I could be less sure what was happening to Karin, but for her part, she looked as though she was experiencing some form of psychological resistance to proceeding any further. In light of where we were, I could immediately hazard a guess as what was happening.

A screen that impedes spiritual beings? I’d never even realised that there was a mechanism like that installed here. Apparently, neither fully-materialised Servants nor Servants in spiritual form like Kouyou were exempt.

Kouyou materialised next to Karin, and thrust the tip of one wicked claw into the invisible wall. Under the strain, an intricate, glittering magical symbol flowered in midair like an inkblot. She leaned in to deliver an accompanying headbutt, and the surrounding walls and floor began to audibly creak. Even Pran lent his aid, pushing valiantly against the back of her leg.

“Whoa whoa whoa – Kouyou!?” Faster than I could try to stop her, a man in his late middle age appeared from the shadows of the passageway. I’d seen him before. He was the doorkeeper for the shop I was bound for, and it went without saying that he was well-versed in magecraft.

“Hey there! Don’t break it.” He waved his arms wildly, in an attempt to force Karin and Kouyou back some distance.

“You may pass. They may not. And they can’t hang around here, either. Send them back where they came from.”

“They’re with me.”

He shook his head expressionlessly.

“Erm...”

“What, so one look at us and we’re out on our ears? You’re kidding me, right? Hey, hold up a moment. Now that I get a good look at you, you’re actually a pretty good-looking guy...”

“Karin, just leave it” I chastised her, as she veered wildly from disagreement to flattery and back again. After giving it some careful thought, we gave up on entering the shop and returned the way we’d came.

—

Karin’s anger was roused, and she complained all the way back. Although, as a Master, she probably would have been able to enter if it had been her alone.

“What was that about, anyway? They were, like, super strict. What kind of shop even is it?”

“It’s a relic shop. It specialises in curios, artefacts, items plundered from tombs...that sort of thing.”

“Re-lics?”

“Whaddaya mean, relics?”

Karin and Pran interjected at about the same time.

“Uh... If I said “summoning catalysts” instead, does that make more sense?” Karin shook her head. I supposed that it was only to be expected that a next-generation human wouldn’t be familiar with this sort of thing.

In short, this shop dealt in items that could be used as the basis for a summoning ritual. It was managed by the two-man team of an aging man who purchased its goods, and a Servant whose name had gone down in pre-war history as a formidable salesman. I was well aware that the wares it handled were the genuine article, but I hadn’t been aware of its security system. It wasn’t the kind of place that children usually wandered into in the first place.

Karin’s eyes began to sparkle as I talked. “So it’s like Aladdin’s cave in there, right? Sounds like it’s full of the kind of things explorers and archaeologists dream about!”

“Well, maybe. Or maybe it’s all a heap of useless junk. Depends on who’s looking, I guess. It’s not like they make displays out of it or anything. It’s nowhere near as exciting as going to a museum.”

That said, a magus devoted to necromancy or conjuration magic would drool over some of the goods on display there. Those traps...those little gremlins that that woman, Kundry set...if she used a catalyst for them, it would have had to have come through that shop. That was my reasoning, anyway, and today I’d come to investigate directly. I was mulling it over, when Karin suddenly pointed out something that I hadn’t even considered.

“Well, that’s a shame. Would’ve been nice if you’d been able to have a look around in there with Pran.”

“...What?” For a moment I was taken aback. The idea hadn’t even entered my head.

“That’s why we’re here, ain’t it, Eri? So you can show the kid all kinds of relics? See if you get anything out of him.”

“...Y-yeah...” I gave an extremely vague nod. Karin peered into my eyes, her expression taking on a slightly harder edge.

“Say, Eri...let me see if I can read your mind right now. “Oh, I guess that’s a thing we can do”...right?”

“...Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Hey now.”

It was beyond unlikely that we’d just be allowed to freely examine the most precious of their wares - but on the other hand, ultimately they were businessmen. Without negotiating, there was no telling what we could wrangle. And besides, if they really had handled a catalyst that had ultimately been used to endanger the peace of the city, the threat of reporting it to a municipal administration AI would have been enough to make them tell me what I needed to know.

“You sure you’re all there today, Eri? Good grief. Weren’t you on my ass just a little while ago about this not being a shopping trip?”

“...Allow me to apologise profusely.”

Karin announced that she would soon be returning home, so our party accompanied her to the Akihabara stationfront to see her off. To be honest, I was itching to see the back of her.

At this time in the afternoon, the stationfront plaza was bustling with people of all shapes and sizes hurrying briskly across towards their destinations. The scent of aromatic spices wafted from a food truck, and gaggles of people gathered around street performers. The boy seemed to be a little tired of walking, and I had no choice but to lead him onwards by his small, dainty hand. How far away from him should I stand? How tightly should I squeeze his hand? Right now, I had no way of telling.

I’m a babysitter, aren’t I? No matter how you slice it. I thought about how long I was going to spend looking after this child, and instantly came over a little more sullen. He was no battle-scared hero deserving of respect, nor was he some cold, calculating maverick. If he had been an oddball like that, Karin would have had no trouble handling him for me, and in time I would have started to feel more comfortable as well.

But he was a child, and it was inevitable that we would end up competing over looking after him. Although maybe that was just what I was telling myself, while I secretly nursed my irritation and jealousy.

“Tell me if you’ve got another job, alright? I’ll come as long as it’s not during exams.”

“I keep telling you, no. I don’t care if you’ve got exams or not, there’s no need.”

—

Video was playing at a noticeable volume on a gigantic screen mounted on the wall of one of the stationfront buildings. I had initially dismissed it as nothing but advertisements, but something about it must have caught Karin’s attention, because she had abruptly started to gaze at it intently. I watched in silence.

A violent clash between two Servants played out onscreen, edited together at a fast pace from footage captured from multiple different angles. A Noble Phantasm was unleashed, and immediately accompanied by onscreen captions. The swirling gale that it left in its wake encroached upon the spectator seats, and a barrier moved to intercept it with seconds to spare. The crowd behind it erupted with cheers of amazement, more fired up now than ever.

As the drone camera continued its flight, the full spectacle – a battlefield upon which multiple Servants duelled – came into view. The arena was meticulously modelled on the Colosseum of ancient Rome, although it was built on a far grander scale than the existing ruins.

“Whoa! Hey, did you see that just now?”

“It’s not my thing.”

“Eh? Eri, don’t tell me you’ve never heard of the Grail Tournament?”

Just the suggestion was enough to make me pout. “It’s some show they put on at the Colosseum, right? It’s just not really something I care about.”

Now the screen had changed to a promotional video for a new tournament series. No small number of people in the plaza had stopped in their tracks to look up at it.

“So you’re telling me you live in Akihabara, but you’ve never gone to see the Grail Tournament? Not even once?”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s just play-fighting, anyway. It’s all just for show.”

“Now hold up. I’m not sure I’m gonna take that lying do– actually, just watch for a minute.”

“I’m telling you, it’s really not my thing.”

“Come on, you know you wanna!”

“H-hey, Karin, cut it ou-” Her hands gripped either side of my head, and forced it to look up at the screen.

It was playing through the climactic stages of an old match. From beneath the debris hurled high into the air by the merciless impact of a Noble Phantasm, a lone

figure streaked forwards, low-slung and fierce. Judging by her impossible speed, she could only be a Servant - a knight, clad in armour of deep indigo. She leaped to avoid an arrow from the enemy that pursued her, and clung to the face of one of the many stone pillars that lined the arena.

In an instant, another slash closed in on her. The pillar sailed through the air, its base pulverised – but she was atop it now, and she was still standing. The programme replayed her acrobatics once more in slow motion for the viewers.

Her enemy's power was spent, and in that moment she saw her opening. A single bound was enough to close the distance. Her sword whipped through the air, its thin blade shining with magical energy, and it sang fiercely as she drove it through her foe's chest. It was a killing blow, with no trace of mercy.

With their spinal column precisely shattered, her opponent was unable to maintain their physical form and burst into tiny particles of light. Looks like they're done for. They won't have gone back to the Throne, but that was probably enough to leave a mark on their Saint Graph. Their Master won't have gotten off easy either.

Game Over. The name of the winners flashed dazzlingly onto the screen. "Tournament victors – Servant: Galahad, Saber-class. Master: Koharu F. Riedenflaus..."

Koharu...? Wait...Galahad!?

A mighty cheer arose from the spectator stands. In seconds, the arena was blanketed in flower petals. An emblem, the symbol of the Holy Grail enclosed by a laurel wreath, flashed up rotating onscreen, and the programme cut to the post-match interview. Questions were being posed to a stalwart-looking female knight – with lustrous azure hair, and peppermint-green eyes.

"...Ah..." The penny finally dropped on what Karin had been trying to say.

"That knight...she looks a lot like that girl from the Pre-War Human History lecture..."

"Right? Right?"

She looked so much like her – like the girl in the hat. From her tone of voice during her answers, to her courteous air. But her age looked very different, at least

externally, and her voice was a little deeper. She was still young, certainly, but she had the stature of someone in at least their late teens. There were probably about ten years between them.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I’ve been thinking all this time, I’m sure I’ve seen her somewhere before...”

I couldn’t deny that my interest was a little piqued by the unexpected connection. “Do you think they know each other?”

“Know each other? I’m telling you that’s her! Haruko’s probably just a false name. She’s a super-famous athlete in the Grail Tournament, right? She’s going in disguise!”

“What? But...” I failed to conceal my confusion, and received a punch to the shoulder from an exasperated Karin for my trouble.

“Or are you gonna tell me that isn’t your thing either? Even my little brother could have guessed that!”

“Give it a rest, will you? Why do I even have to care about these things, anyway?”

“Well, I guess.”

—

Even so, I knew the basics. The Grail Tournament was, in short, a sport – a game in which opposing fighters competed, safely and legally, within the bounds of predetermined rules. The wielding of powerful weapons, and even the unleashing of Noble Phantasms, was monitored and controlled by the Holy Grail through its municipal administrators. It was a world about as far removed as it was possible to get from the shadows in which I crawled.

“Hang on, she said “Galahad”, right...? So one of the Knights of the Round Table has been summoned? And they were here? In Akihabara?”

I couldn’t believe it. It couldn’t be real. Galahad, the Knight of the Grail. Son of Lancelot, the Knight of the Lake, and the noblest holy knight to ever sit at King Arthur’s table. And...she was a girl...? You can’t be serious...

Almost as shocking was that I had heard nothing of this from my master. The Knights of the Round Table possessed powerful magic, and a strong connection to the Grail; they could potentially affect the city's functions. The Knight of the Grail, all the more so.

“Someone from outside of Akiba, I guess. There's no end to the people coming in from other districts with their sights on the Grail Tournament.”

“It gets crazy dangerous around the Colosseum every season, thanks to the fans making a spectacle of themselves. It's no end of trouble for me.”

“Oh? Sounds like a handful.”

“It's just...it's just a graveyard, that place. It's a great big graveyard.” Part of me had grown irritated with the know-it-all expression plastered on Karin's face and wanted to hurry up and change the topic, so I'd started speaking more harshly than I meant to. But at the same time, these were my true feelings.

“Grail Tournament? What a load of crap. It's just a game, right? It's all just make-believe. I'll never understand what enjoyment people get out of turning Servants into an exhibition. Don't the fighters know they're just being turned into commodities to bring more spectators to the show? We twist the ideas they held dear and lay them out for everyone to see, and we trivialise the skills they spent their entire lifetimes perfecting – how can that be ok? Servants aren't meant to be our slaves!”

Karin stared back at me, not the least bit cowed, but I continued with my tirade.

“Maybe the people in the stands feel like they're fighting alongside the competitors, but that only lasts until they get bored and find something else. How are they supposed to understand how the Servants in the arena feel from behind a safety barrier?” It was a grotesque farce, that had propagated in order to make Heroic Spirits mistake themselves.

Karin had waited carefully for me to finish my piece, but now she spoke. Her voice was quiet, but laced with anger.

“How dare you make fun of something people are serious about.” She grabbed me by my necktie and pulled me in. From up close, I could see her eyes were blazing.

“Honestly, I’ve never even really paid much attention to the Grail Tournament. But that attitude of yours is wrong, Eri.”

“Huh?”

“How sincere other people are isn’t something you get to decide.”

I immediately made to retort, but something about her gaze told me that this wasn’t up for debate.

“You can call it an exhibition or a farce all you want, but the people who’re in the arena, the people who’re actually there – they’re putting everything they’ve got into making it entertaining for us. Even the Servants – you think they get through to the final rounds just by doing what they’re told? Of course not. What are you trying to say, that nothing’s important unless people are dying? That without the impact of kingdoms falling or ages ending, it’s all just some kind of childish joke? That the kinds of jobs people wrote about in that human history you love so much are the only ones worth doing?”

“That’s not what I’m...”

“You seem to think old-fashioned ideas way outta the reach of the common people are the only things worth caring about, Eri. And you need to cut it out.”

“Well, you wouldn’t understand, would you, Karin? A...a next-gen like you...”

She drew a sharp breath. Her eyes softened, and she bit her lip. Finally, she gave a small sigh.

“I guess maybe I wouldn’t.”

I fell silent. I’d said something that I should never, ever say. My anger died away, and bitter regret welled up in its place.

“...I’m sorry. That was too far.”

“It’s cool. Don’t force yourself. If that much was enough to earn an apology, we’d never talk at all.”

This wasn’t her being humble. I was sure she was well aware how sharp her own words had been.

Patience was far from Karin's greatest virtue. Often her emotions would flare, and we would fight.

—

But we would never, ever allow things to stay that way.

—

Karin gently took my right hand in her left, and squeezed it tightly to her chest. Her right hand she opened, and extended towards me.

“Karin...”

Gingerly, I took the hand she offered me, and pressed it to the gap between my breasts. From the places our bodies touched, I could feel her heartbeat through her school blouse – and she could feel mine. This was our little ritual. A humble promise known to us alone.

We leaned our faces in close, and whispered quietly.

“You know, we only fight because we don't understand well enough yet.”

“Understand each other, you mean? I don't think we'll ever manage that as long as we live.”

“Well, what's wrong with that?” She flashed a grin. “Damn. I'm pretty sure I was still taller than you just a little while ago...”

“Only by a little, though.”

“Where do you get off, suddenly overtaking me?”

“It's 'cos I'm hitting my growth spurt.”

“Eh? So am I!”

This time, I was the one who smiled.

I was me. And Karin was Karin. Even without the next generation of humanity, or the Holy Grail, or any of that, we understood that deep down we were different people. It was inevitable that our different viewpoints would come into conflict.

But we were irreplaceable to each other. If one of us ever lost the other, that would be the end.

Lost...?

Karin suddenly broke away and looked around us. Startled, I followed her gaze.

“Hey, where’d the shrimp go?”

“E-eh!?”

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the stationfront plaza, we had lost sight of Pran. He had wandered off somewhere while our attention had been occupied by the TV screen, and our argument thereafter.

“Why can’t you just look up his tag, Eri?”

“Uh...truth be told, I haven’t actually attached it yet...”

“...You need to get that head of yours looked at.”

In the middle of our frantic back-and-forth, Karin’s attention was suddenly diverted elsewhere. She was conversing wordlessly with a Servant currently in spirit form – quite literal telepathy.

“...Damn. Momi’s saying she got so caught up in our argument, she forgot to keep an eye on the shrimp.” Karin let out a rueful groan, and she covered her forehead with her. Her Command Seals flared on the back, and Kouyou came into view, her great head drooping remorsefully.

“Hey, it’s not your fault, alright? This is a bit of a pickle, though...”

Safeguarding this Servant had been an assignment like any other, and I should have treated it as such. But instead, I’d been looking down on it as glorified babysitting - and now this. How irresponsible could I be?

Karin, ever the optimist, grinned at me - “We’ll find him in a flash, don’t you worry!” - and we split up to search.

—

Worry twisted in my guts, and my composure level was dropping rapidly – but for all that, finding the child didn't even take ten minutes.

“So that's where he was? Good grief...”

In a corner of the plaza, a man in a Hawaiian shirt plucked lazily at the strings of a guitar. A typical street musician, of the kind one could find almost anywhere in Akihabara's shopping district. Pran had crouched himself down next to him, and was listening intently to his performance. This concert, however, had an audience of one. All of the other pedestrians hurried past, not one of them stopping. During our child-hunt, we had paid most attention to flashier performers who had drawn much larger crowds, and had overlooked this place.

A guitar case lay open at his feet for people to toss coins into. A meagre collection of coins and notes – physical money was considered minor currency in this town – was visible inside, but I could hardly call it a good day's takings. Honestly, it might even just be money he's put there himself beforehand to prime the pump...

The guitar player was an unremarkable man, with an unshaven face covered in dark stubble. He could not have been that old: late twenties, perhaps, or early thirties. His weary appearance seemed vaguely familiar to me - perhaps I myself had passed him by many times in the past, although not once had I really looked at him.

His black hair was messy, and now that I looked closer I could see that his eyes were blue. He had a long nose, and features that seemed somehow Mediterranean. Is he a Servant...? The possibility came immediately to mind, but there was no-one nearby who looked anything like a Master.

A cord connected his guitar to an amp speaker, which broadcast its melody at a rather conservative volume for a street performer. My knowledge of music was virtually nonexistent – but now that I was stood before him, listening, even I could sense an astonishing mastery in his playing. His melody was lonely, and passionate, and it spoke directly to the heart.

Had that sound been what had drawn the boy here, to where he squatted now beside him, enraptured? If so, could he perhaps be a Servant with some connection to the arts? It merited consideration. Relics weren't the only things that might hold clues to his true name.

But alas, this performance was fatally ill-suited to the bright and cheery resort atmosphere of Akihabara. It did not take much thinking to understand why his guitar case was so empty. In the evening, perhaps it would be different – but in this splendid sunlight, beneath this clear blue sky, few tourists or townspeople would want to indulge in this requiem he played.

“Damn, it’s like a funeral in here.” Harsh words in my ear, and a hand clapped on my shoulder. The musician glanced up for a moment in the middle of his performance, to look at Karin, who had rejoined us and now stood at my side. He slowed his playing, and spoke.

“Are you two with the kid, by any chance? He’s been sittin’ here watchin’ me for a while now, all on his lonesome. Thanks for yer custom, by the way.” He flashed a grin, and Pran bowed in response. He probably didn’t understand what was happening.

“That’s right. He’s with us. We took our eyes off him for a moment, and he wandered off.”

He peered at me closely. “...Well, you sure ain’t his sister. And it’s not like Servants just go and get themselves lost.”

“You think we’re up to something, old man? You don’t know how much we’ve been running around looking for this kid.”

“Hey, could you cut it out with the “old man”? There’s a lotta shady sorts around here. They’ll go out lookin’ for families, ‘secure’ their lost kid, an’ then demand a reward.” He wasn’t wrong. That was the reason we were more panicked than usual.

“So, what are we gonna do? Tell you what, why don’cha tell me this kid’s name. And if you can’t, I’ll report you.” Command Seals glowed on the back of his upraised right hand, in the distinctive polka-dot pattern that indicated an ordinary citizen. His Master status was given, not innate.

This is bad... We’d only just decided on calling him “Pran”. The odds he would respond to it were not encouraging. I was on the point of revealing some details of our situation in an attempt to convince him – when suddenly he raised his hands in mock surrender, and gave a derisive laugh.

“Gotcha, didn’t I? I just got a bit jealous watchin’ you two havin’ such a nice time out in the sunshine, so I thought I’d have a bit of fun.”

“... You want me to knock you into next week?” Karin wheeled around with a swish, and feigned the motion of driving home a reverse roundhouse kick.

“Whoa, easy there! They say you should let sleeping JKs lie.”

“Good job I’m a JC then, huh?”

“Oh, you’re a next-gen? Yeah, that’d explain it.” He plucked a battered box of cigarettes from his pocket, but then glanced at Pran and put it back. This plaza’s a no-smoking area, anyway. He at least seemed like someone we could talk to.

“Um...this boy’s name is Pran.” I ventured. “It’s a bit complicated, but-”

“Eh, don’t worry yourself about it.” His candid attitude was a breath of relief.

“Well, you did watch him for us while we were looking. I’m not sure it’s thanks enough, but if you don’t mind...” I picked up a square plastic container from where it lay inside the narrow guitar case on the ground, uncertain as to what it was. He’s selling this, right? I think it’s some kind of media...

“Oh, you’re buyin’? Sorry to ask this, but have ya got cash? The purchase code should be on there.”

“Whoa, is that a CD? That’s hella neat!” Karin looked at the object I held in my hands, and beamed. The man’s face lit up, and he leaned forward. He was sat down with his arms and legs bent, so it was a little hard to tell, but he was fairly tall.

“Oh? You know about these?”

“Course I do! We’ve got rental shops in Shibuya, right? It’s pretty fashionable to walk around with an MP3 player nowadays. What are you doing in front of a station with a bunch of street performers? Wouldn’t you be better off going there instead?”

“Well, ’ppreciate the advice, but...I think Akiba’s more my speed.”

Hm? What’s that? Looks a bit like an anime girl... The design on the T-shirt he was wearing beneath his Hawaiian shirt suddenly caught my eye. Now that I

thought about it, his guitar case was also covered in similar-looking stickers, and I could see something like a keyring dangling from it.

“Excuse me, but...you’re not an ‘otaku’, are you?”

“Yeah, one of those” he nodded with a smirk.

—

“Otaku” was a term for a group of people from the pre-war world, most notable for their unique brand of thinking, creativity and consumerist culture. The influence this exerted over their daily activities and lifestyles was far too great to dismiss as a simple hobby. Their culture had spread far and wide, and for a time they could be found all across the world in various guises, but as a faction they had held next to no political power. Eventually they had fallen into decline, almost taking pleasure in their irrelevance – my master’s words, mind you, not mine.

My hypothesis was that perhaps, their culture had been somewhat akin to a religion. And I understood that there was a time when Akihabara had been regarded as one of their holiest sites. These days this town was known for its beach resort and the bazaar of magical goods that was the Department Store, but even now antique shops and hangout spots stubbornly persisted to cater to these “otaku”.

—

“Name’s Kuchime.”, he said. “A plain ol’ guitar player, as you can see. You girls come to Akiba often? If there’s any anime songs you like, I’ll play ‘em for ya.” And he strummed a bar or two of a cheerful tune.

“...Wow!” Pran’s eyes sparkled at this new melody.

Karin, meanwhile, exploded with laughter. “Ahahaha! You really need to get a cooler pick-up line.”

A “pick-up line”? Was that what this was?

The notion of a society of free love had been developed by the ancient peoples of Greece and Rome, and although it had been lost during the Dark Ages, it had been rediscovered in recent times and was to some degree alive and well in this new world. There were even those who warned that should we lose it, we would

cease to be human. To me, however, the idea was still an unexplored continent that lay beyond my understanding, and something that could be even more dangerous than a Servant gone insane if one was not careful.

I had thought that Karin, as my peer, had more or less shared those reservations - but today, she looked a little like she was on the brink of becoming an explorer. Or was this perhaps the distinctive urge to feign adulthood that came with puberty?

“Let me hear that last song one more time. It’s pretty. Does it have lyrics?”

“That it does. I wrote 'em down on the booklet in the CD case.”

I handed her the slip of paper. She scanned it, and her face immediately creased in distaste. “.....Damn. This is...dark. Like, super depressing.”

Certainly, the lyrics on the page were far from lighthearted. It all but invited criticism like Karin’s.

“Kuchime, do you do, uh...vocals? Do you sing as well?”

“Sure do. Or sometimes, anyway. Those lyrics are just a little somethin’ I made up for the song. I’m an improviser at heart.”

“Improv, huh? That’s pretty cool. But...” Looking satisfied, Karin made a proposal. “Can’t you play something more...you know. Something to lighten the atmosphere? Something that’ll make me wanna lose myself in the rhythm and dance? Oh, and no anisong. Something you’ve made yourself.”

He ran his hand roughly through his hair, and grinned. “Well, it ain’t exactly in-character for me...but it’s my first request in a while. Let’s see what I can do.”

Kuchime’s melody echoed once more around the plaza. Before, it had clung to the surface of the wintertime river like a fine mist, but now, in answer to Karin’s request, it bounced hither and thither like a tumbling ball.

—

With the change of melody, even our secluded corner of the plaza suddenly felt as though it were bathed in sunlight. Passers-by halted in their tracks, and a crowd

slowly began to gather around us, arranged in a half-circle with Karin and Pran in the front row.

Ugh... I'm not good with this kind of atmosphere. And even if I was, I wouldn't have the right to be here anyway.

Step by step I beat a tactical retreat, drawing back to a place where I could watch them from a distance. Music really is powerful, huh... It's seized these people's hearts so easily, and changed the mood in this place so quickly. Suddenly, I realised that Kouyou had appeared by my side. Here, in this spot where we wouldn't bother anyone, she lay down with her belly to the ground, listening quietly to Kuchime's music.

Finally, Karin began to step in time with the twang of the guitar, and was soon starring in her own street performance.

"Didn't she say she needed to go home soon? Is she sure she should be doing this?" I put the question to Kouyou, but she simply rustled her head, and plucked at the air with a claw.

"Eh, you can play the guitar too? ...Oh, the koto's more your forte. I see."

—

Truth be told, I could not perfectly understand what Kouyou was saying. It was thanks to the Mystic Code app I had installed in one of my forelocks that I could communicate with her on this level at all. It guessed the general gist of what she was saying, based on samples of previous conversations and interjections from Karin, and showed me what it conjectured to be its broad meaning – effectively, analysing and translating her body language in real time. In Kouyou's case, I was able to communicate with her clearly and in person, so the translation accuracy was particularly high.

This was one of the problems that came part and parcel with Berserkers, but Karin didn't seem as though she minded it in the slightest. She had told me in the past that, although she was her Master, even she did not hear Kouyou's thoughts as human speech; rather, they came to her as wordless ideas.

Incidentally, this app did not work at all on Pran. It had only returned the vaguest of suggestions, so in the end I had removed him from the list of targets.

—

“Hmm. Is Karin good at dance classes at school or something? Now that I think about it, I guess we do have those... ..Wow, there’s even more people coming.”

Slowly but surely, the plaza had filled up with people. The crowd that had gathered stamped their feet to the rhythm of the guitar, enraptured by the dance. In the centre of the ring, Karin surrendered herself to the music, transforming pure joy and elation into balletic motion – and her dancing drew forth new melodies from Kuchime’s guitar, and mingled with his humming vocals like another instrument.

La-la, la, la-la - now she herself began to sing, wordlessly, defiantly. It sounded like a challenge to Kuchime: I’m the one of us who’s enjoying this moment to its fullest. Is that all you have?

I could never beat her. Really, I couldn’t. She whirled alive and free, hair flying, sweat glistening on her skin, and even I was transfixed. Kouyou gave a low growl.

“No, she’s not...she’s not getting picked up. She’s just messing around...”

The Mystic Code app could read nothing more into the vacant look in Kouyou’s eyes, but to me she looked troubled, and deeply sad. It was only a guess – but she was the lead player in the legend of the Ogress, the tragic heroine, the villain to be slain. Perhaps this spectacle had stirred something within her.

But Karin danced, paying no heed to the mind of the crowd, the melody of the guitar draped around her like a veil. Joyful, and carefree. Her song echoed around the square, in answer to the humming of Kuchime’s vocals. The child stood enraptured, as though he were committing every note to memory.

His gaze was fixed on Kuchime, who lowered his eyes away from the crowd as he played, as though rejecting against the reality that he was here in this place. Perhaps it was just a habit of his, but the sight stayed with me.

That night, an unexpected visitor called on my apartment: Manazuru Chitose, my grandmother.

—

It was the first time she had ever visited me here. When I saw her in her black sailor uniform, looking up at me through the monitor of the security camera installed on the outside street, I had rubbed my eyes and then immediately suspected some kind of trap.

“I won’t be long. But there’s something that it’s important I tell you, Erice.”

But it had been Manazuru Chitose, in the flesh. She was at ease as she entered, paying no mind to the magical security measures I had installed or the barriers I had erected to deter passers-by. Had she had some instruction for me, a message or a word to Ms. Fujimura would have been enough. The fact that she had come all the way here in person set me on edge. And even if that weren’t the case, you could hardly say the two of us have a good relationship.

It had to be something to do with the boy. I could think of nothing else.

Pran had just finished his takeout dinner. I’d tried my hardest to avoid any overly-exciting dishes. He sat on the floor, on the opposite side of the room to the table across which Chitose and I faced each other, playing precariously with some toys I had brought out for him.

“My...so that aeroplane was in your apartment all along? It brings back memories...”

“...Mm.”

This was a disaster. Her timing couldn’t have been worse – on account of the aeroplane she was referring to being one of the very few items I had brought with me from the house in Shinjuku. It was a propeller plane, painted red and white: Caudron C.635 Simoun “F-ANRY”. The plane beloved by Saint-Exupéry, and a final memento from someone very dear to me.

“So? What do you want from me?” Bluntly, I broke the silence. I already knew what she was going to say. I didn’t want to put it off any longer.

—

“Say – it’s been a long time since you two last saw each other. Why don’t you take this chance to have a bit of a catch-up?”

The interruption came from a man dressed in a double-breasted vest, and a sharp necktie coloured a deep, sober red. He had removed his suit jacket and held it folded in his arms. He had appeared spontaneously from nowhere, but he was leaning against the wall a short distance away as though he had always been there, watching us calmly. Chitose shot him a reproachful sidelong glance.

“G-good evening, Lucius...Mr. Lucius, I mean.”

“Bonam Noctem, Erice. What an array of teaware you have here. Would you mind if I brewed some? I feel a little parched.”

“I, um...no, I don't mind. Some of it, uh...might be getting old, though.” I had a feeling some of my tea had remained untouched ever since the time I had first moved here, when I had excitedly bought it in.

The man pulled various tins of tea leaves down from the shelf and stared at them, comparing. Pran put down his model aeroplane, tottered to his side and began imitating him in an attempt to help. In the midst of his discussion with the boy, he turned back to me.

“Ah yes, that's right. I would much prefer it if you would just call me Lucius, as you used to. You need no formalities. Is it not unfair, that only Chitose should address me that way?”

“A-alright.” I stammered. In stark contrast to my nervousness, Chitose just expelled a tired sigh – and then drove her point home.

“Is it not ordinary for girls of a certain age to maintain a respectful distance from fully-grown men? You should take care not to become too familiar, or it may be thought unseemly.”

“Haha, you're right at that. I'll bear it in mind.”

Try as I might, I could not stop my attention from being drawn to the crooked cross-shaped scar on his cheek. The suit was a new look for him, but his smile was the same as it had always been.

—

Lucius: the Servant who had stood by Chitose's side through many long years. The person I respected above all others. The man I adored.

Much like Ms. Fujimura, he had known me since I was a baby. He had taken the role of my teacher, and had strictly hammered into my weak, infantile body the skills I needed to protect myself. With the unbreakable iron conviction of a soldier, he had taught me to stand back up whenever I fell, and to push onwards until my work was done. He had taught me of the value of defeat, and the fickleness of victory.

—

Chitose's voice pulled me back to reality from idealised memory.

“When I said there was something I wanted to talk with you about...” She placed the tip of one dainty finger on the rim of the teacup. “I meant that I want you to refrain from your work for a little while.”

“...Wh-...What?”

I blanched bone-white. This was absurd.

“...You can't! I won't!” I kicked the chair away and slammed my fist on the table, staring Chitose down.

“What right do you have to...to...!”

She sipped her tea in silence, her facial expression deliberately a little hurt. “I've already discussed it with Caren.”

She said it as though it was nothing, but that was the final nail in the coffin. This was not a decision that could be overturned. My grandmother was prone to jokes, but not to deception. In Mosaic City, her final word was equal to the judgement of the Grail.

But even understanding that, my anger would not be quelled. She would steal my work from me? Then for what did I leave that house? For what had I become reviled as the Reaper, as I cut down Servant after Servant!?

My shoulders heaved with ragged breaths. I somehow calmed myself. “What do you mean, “For a while”...?” I asked.

“I mean two months at the least. There is something I need to investigate first.”

“And my work will get in your way, will it?”

She nodded wordlessly. I turned my gaze to Lucius next to her, as though pleading for help – but all he did was furrow his eyebrows a little, and return a pained smile. A warning, that there was no meaning in further pressing Chitose for her reasons.

—

After that, Chitose asked me a number of things about Pran, but my head was in a daze, and I cannot recall what I answered. Her questions seemed innocuous, but that only served to highlight the absurdity of her taking such an interest in this single meaningless Servant. It had all simply been my misunderstanding. This child who had appeared before me was nothing unusual or special.

After they departed, I was left staring at the teacups that remained on the table. I knew that if I wasn't connected to Chitose by blood, I wouldn't be so irate. I would be burning with the desire to break free of these shackles that had been placed on me.

But that was beyond me. Beyond me, who had chosen to run instead of fight.

It had been a busy day. A day of fortunate and unfortunate meetings.

But even so, it had ended without having to end a Servant's life.

So today had been a good day.

—

I had bathed, and I had tended to my wound. My body still itched for the ached and pains of my daily training, but that would have been irresponsible when I was still barely out of my sickbed. I would stretch for a short while, and then I would go to sleep. I flung myself onto the bed of my darkened room, too exhausted to even turn on the light.

“Hey. Could you perhaps open this?” The small figure of the boy stood in front of the curtain, illuminated a little by the faint light filtering through.

“You sure talk funny... Um, do you want to see what it looks like outside?”

I roused myself sluggishly, and opened the window lock at the bottom of the leg of the bed. The window was elevated a little from the floor, and on the other side was a small veranda with a rickety handrail. There was nothing to see outside but the back alleys of abandoned buildings.

In the darkness, the boy let out a small sigh. But he remained squatting by the window, winding himself into the curtain, his golden scarf floating in the night breeze.

“The moon’s covered by clouds, so you can’t even see the beach. Actually, before that - just make sure you don’t fall, alright?”

“I won’t fall.”

“Ok.”

—

I staggered back to bed, and soon I was sound asleep. I’d avoided mentioning it to Karin, but last night, the boy and I had ended up sleeping in the same bed. I had been loathe to drag the folding bed I kept for these occasions from the storage room, and it was covered in dust and not immediately usable. And in any case, the bed this room had come with was king-size, and too wide for a single person.

But no matter how large my bed was, no matter how soft or warm -

I would always be denied a tranquil sleep on days when I had struck down Heroic Spirits. Their maledictions continued to ring in my ears, raging at the untimely dissolution I had forced upon them.

“Ah...oh no. They’re coming...”

The evil spirits writhed beneath my skin, clamouring with impatience. If I didn’t wrap myself with bandages, my bedroom would end up awash with blood again.

—

These evil spirits had tormented me ever since I had first drawn breath, and it had not been Chitose or Lucius who had told me how to parley with them, but Caren.

My master. She had taught me – to seek to compromise with them, rather than see them as a problem to be solved. To come to the realisation that no-one could save me from this. To see that this was not a senseless agony that had been imposed upon me, but rather that I had been granted the wisdom of truly knowing the suffering of others. Forgive them their crimes, and accept them into your heart, she had said.

Did I suffer this curse because I lacked a Holy Grail? Or did I lack a Holy Grail because of this curse? It doesn't even matter, not really. But I want to know – why only me?

These were questions for my parents, but they were no longer in this world. All I had left was endless repetition, asking and answering my own questions thousands upon thousands of times.

If I didn't start thinking more constructively, I would end up unable to move forwards. So I might as well think about what business Chitose had coming here.

–

Chitose was a recluse to the core, and rarely left her house, let alone the Shinjuku district. The fact that she had come to Akihabara alone was proof of the sheer abnormality of whatever was happening. She had not just come for a friendly talk with my master. Her attention was fixated on the Akihabara district as a whole, and the need had arisen to crack the whip over Ms. Fujimura directly.

Caren Fujimura might currently be the administrator of Akihabara, but in the time immediately after the reshaping of the world, her jurisdiction had been Shinjuku. Afterwards, she had relinquished her administrator privileges to the lower-ranked members of the Caren Series, and moved her base of operations of Akihabara. It was she, my master, who held the highest rank among the Caren Series of municipal administration AIs. The other Carens were copies, each with their own unique orientation. Perhaps that was why their personalities all slightly differed.

Well, 'slightly differed' doesn't really describe it...they're like completely different people. Although I'm not really convinced what the advantage is to that.

It would be a mistake to expect compassion and understanding from Manazuru Chitose. I was under no illusions about that. I had had absolutely no intention of

staying that house in Shinjuku to become a magus - no matter how much I might be imitating one in my life here. Through my work, I had learned that the people known as “magi” were incorrigibly self-centred creatures. More than a few lurked in the shadows of this town, attempting to meddle with the Grail in some nefarious way or other. I had clashed many times with their Servants, and seen first-hand the callousness with which they handled them.

Perhaps there’s something afoot in the shadows of this town...and she’s concerned for my safety? Although even that concern would be the self-centred sort, that was ultimately only for her own interests.

I had little idea what Chitose’s goals might be, but perhaps by separating me from Caren, she was hoping to lessen the burden on the municipal administration AI. Even with more copies, she was struggling to keep up, and this city was beginning to groan under its own weight. A symphony of contradictions and hypocrisies. And if that was the case...

—

...Then more must die. More, and yet more evil Servants must die by my hand.

—

A whisper slipped unbidden from my lips. “So the war...isn’t over yet...”

I unconsciously clapped a hand over my mouth. That was a dangerous thing to think. If I was not more careful, I would be removed by the Holy Grail.

No matter how much I worried over my many questions, no answer would be forthcoming. In an attempt to distract myself, I reached for an object made of glass and leather on my bedside table, and held it in my hands. It was one of the items I had brought with me from my old house, along with the model aeroplane from before: an antique-looking pair of aviator goggles. Although they were actually intended for motorcycle use.

A sudden tiny cry startled me. Looking frantically to the window, I saw the boy leaning out, about to fall. I hurriedly scrabbled to him and pulled him back, holding him close.

“Damn it, I told you this would happen!”

“The sky. I can’t see it.”

So he’d been trying to catch a glimpse of the sky. We could go up to the roof, but it wouldn’t make much difference. It was saturated with light pollution.

I was very aware that he was a strong-willed child, and there was no telling what he might get up to if I left him alone. Left with little choice, I lifted him up onto my lap, and sat facing backwards on the veranda. With the metal latch of the curtain as a handhold, I leaned precariously out into the night.

“Maybe you can just about see it from here. What do you think?”

Above our heads, framed by high-rise buildings, we could see a tiny patch of night sky. As I’d expected, it was a bleary, leaden shade of grey. The child clung to me as he craned his neck to look.

“...”

“...That’s how it is.”

As a Servant, he was powerless. He didn’t even know his own name. There was no telling when he might become my next assignment. And if he did, I would kill him.

...Ah...

A single tear trickled down his cheek. He said nothing, but his body was trembling.

“I won’t leave your side. At least, not until I know who you are.”

Inconceivable words, coming from my mouth. I knew they were nothing but cheap lies, but now that I could feel the faint warmth of his body, I could no longer think clearly. He had said there was something he had forgotten - “Not until we find it”, I told myself vaguely.

But the child shook his head firmly. “We can’t stay together.”

“...I know. You’re right, I know.”

Was it his solitude, that his tears were for? The uncertainty of being under a starless sky?

If only we could have seen the lights of an aeroplane as we looked up at the darkness. If only we could have followed that trail, a trail carved by a man, across the nighttime sky. But there were no aeroplanes to be found anywhere in this new world. Such was the future that the Holy Grail had made.

That night, we went to sleep as two strangers in the same bed. I left the doll from lunchtime next to my pillow.

I did not dream.



Chapter 3

The next day, I paid a visit to a certain information broker. I brought Pran with me, and this time he was not refused entry.

—

On the surface, it appeared to be a cosy little luxury hotel catered towards tourists. In a corner of the austere Renaissance-styled lobby were two concierges. Cesare, the elder, and Lucrezia, the younger: the Servant duo known together as the Borgia siblings.

Calculating minds housed in youthful bodies. The kind of Servant I was worst at dealing with.

The two were all but identical in stature and visage, as though they were twins. A boy and girl, slim and graceful, the image of angelic purity. They answered to their Master, the ageing hotel manager, but it was common knowledge that almost all of the management of the hotel was left to them.

Cesare, the elder, who in life had been the right hand of his father the Pope, and with the rank of Archbishop had wielded authority both within and without the Holy See. Lucrezia, the younger, who armed with her heavenly beauty had married over and over into political advantage. The siblings' names were infamous even today, mostly in connection with the mysterious and untimely deaths met by many who opposed their ambitions.

—

“My, if it isn't Erice!”

“Good evening, Erice.”

The pair smiled at me, with their elbows resting on the marble reception desk.

“We thought it was about time for you to pay us a visit.”

“That child you have with you – so he's the Masterless Servant everyone's talking about?”

I turned a blind eye to their proddings. The boy must have taken a shine to the antique goggles in my apartment, because he'd worn them all the way here.

The siblings nonchalantly slid me a shot glass across the counter as they greeted us. The sharp scent of spirits wafted through the air.

"I can't. I'm underage." I would have to choose my words carefully, and be cautious in my every move with these two. They offered some juice instead, and Pran reached out for it. I placed a firm hand on his shoulder and pulled him back behind me.

"Would you happen know anything about it?"

Lucrezia gently crossed her legs on the tall chair behind the desk, and shook her head. "Unfortunately not. Or at least, nothing more than what's available on the municipal network."

"But that aside... perhaps you might be interested in this." Cesare placed a storage device on the desk. It couldn't have been bigger than my little finger, and was equipped with a magical lock. Anyone designated as the key could access the information it contained directly, without the need for a smartphone or similar device, but it was otherwise very difficult to hack.

"What am I looking at?"

"A list of citizens who have attempted to conduct unsanctioned summonings, ranging from the day before yesterday to several days prior. With particular emphasis on those whose rituals failed or ended prematurely."

"...I see."

This would have to be the first step in any investigation, barring an extraordinary stroke of luck. It was precious information that would ordinarily take a great deal of time and effort to gather, and now it was being offered all too easily. Unsanctioned summons were illegal, of course, but the invasion of others' privacy also carried heavy penalties in Mosaic City – although if one balked at the notion of invading others' privacy, the profession of information broker perhaps wasn't for them.

"What a curiously generous offer."

“We’re simply glad to be of service to you, Erice.”

“I’m delighted to hear it.”

These siblings would often require payment in more than money. In the past, I’d had to let slip secrets I’d learned of the criminal underworld in exchange for their information. More than a few times, it had later come to light that a Servant I had disposed of had been someone they considered an inconvenience. I didn’t like to admit it, but odds were good that I was playing an unwitting puppet on invisible strings.

So caution was vital.

I gently withdrew the hand I had extended towards the storage device. It was alluring bait, but more than likely poisoned.

“Actually, it’s not because of him that I’m here today.”

“Well then, what are you here for?”

“Chitose came here, didn’t she? Sometime last night, most likely.”

The siblings’ expressions were inscrutable. They were waiting to see what move I would make.

“I’ve had my assignments from Caren suspended, so I’ll be closing up business for a while. There isn’t much I could do for you even if I wanted to.”

Cesare measured up myself and Pran, his chin resting on the palm of his hand.

“Business, eh? You know, Erice, there are many people who suffer because of your work, and a scarce few who benefit from it. But above all...”

Lucrezia continued where her brother left off. “You yourself gain nothing from it, do you? What’s wrong with taking this opportunity to enjoy a little vacation away from it all?”

“If it’s retribution from people you’ve crossed that concerns you, we can show you a wonderful safe house. Although it might weigh a little heavy on the wallet.”

“A safe house, you say.”

Well, this clinched it. Chitose had come here, and coerced them. Threatened them. But it seemed like they had no intention of concealing that fact. So what did that mean?

There must have been something else they were hiding. I had no choice but to show my hand.

I heaved a theatrical sigh. “You know, I had a little chat with the relic salesman in the Akiba Department Store. He mentioned that when Kundry attempted to procure the materials for an unsanctioned summoning, a certain information broker intervened to vouch for her. An interesting story, don’t you think?”

It wasn’t a bluff. I had returned to the relic shop after parting ways with Karin on the previous day.

“I’ve also heard that there have been some new traps on the market recently. Ones that leech power from ley lines, that have proven very popular among less savoury times. If you know anything, I’d greatly appreciate if you could share it. It’s very important I be properly prepared, just in case, you understand. Well? How about it, Signor? Signora?”

Their expressions stiffened for the slightest of moments. Even if I wasn’t currently on a direct assignment from a municipal administration AI, I still had just cause to take immediate action if I personally witnessed an attempt to interfere with the city’s infrastructure.

“Ahaha... Oh, Erice. You best us yet again.” Lucrezia gave a tinkling laugh as she leaned over her brother’s back. Stretching over his shoulder, she took back the storage device on the desk, before setting down a new one. Surprise and a hint of protest marred Cesare’s otherwise unreadable expression. It seemed that this time, the sister had read one move further ahead.

“They do say that there is no word “no” in a concierge’s dictionary. Is that not so, Cesar?”

“So it is, Lucrezia. So it is.”

These Servants lived their lives atop the thinnest layer of ice. If I were to start asking the wrong questions, they would be finished as information brokers. If they wanted to avoid that fate, they had had no choice but to reveal their own hands.

With my work here done, I departed the lobby. I felt no desire to stay. This was a tranquil and beautiful place, but it was not one to remain in for long – its noxious atmosphere made it hard to breathe.

Three spouses and eight children...I wonder what that feels like.

There was no end to the mysteries surrounding these siblings, and I found my thoughts turning to the sister in particular. Historically Lucrezia had been nothing more than a pawn used to engineer political marriages, but I wondered how much influence she had really exerted over her brother, Cesare, and her father, Pope Alexander VI. I wondered if they had not in fact been her puppets, dancing on the strings of the spider at the heart of the web.

—

“Til next time, Reaper.” “We look forward to your next visit.”

The siblings waved goodbye as they saw me off from behind the counter.

“Goodbye.”

Pran waved back in polite response.

—

We decided to take a break at a nearby coffee shop - the Bookshop Cafe Borges, where one could relax surrounded by a veritable forest of tomes from the old world. It was one of my favourite relaxation spots.

The first floor comprised a cafe area, a wide space for pleasant conversation. An open stairwell led up to the second floor, where innumerable bookshelves stood crammed together so tightly that it looked like the floor might give out. Sofas and chairs were placed between the labyrinthine shelves, on which one could fully immerse themselves in the pleasure of reading.

On a whim I asked the ageing, mild-mannered shopkeeper, and learned that they did indeed have a first-edition English print of “The Little Prince” in their collection. It may not have been a personal artefact of the man himself, but it could certainly have been a sufficient catalyst to summon Saint-Exupéry. However, when I showed the manuscript to Pran, he exhibited no special response. In the end, all I

learned was that he was capable of reading and writing English. The quirky illustrations at least seemed to capture his interest, although as usual he reacted poorly to the snake.

I was far from giving up on the search for his true name, but I could not justify pursuing the Saint-Exupéry connection any further out of anything but my own wishful thinking.

Over a light lunch, I decided to check the storage device the Borgia siblings had given me. And the shock I felt on seeing the news recorded therein was enough to obliterate any trace of lingering attachment to Saint-Exupéry.

—

They called it the Command Seal Hunter.

A chain of murders had visited Mosaic City, connected by a common thread: all of the victims had died with their Command Seals stolen, forcibly severed from their body with the appendages that bore them. No reports had yet been issued from Akihabara, but people had been found dead in other wards – and the victims were not the kind of underground magi that I was used to tangling with. They were ordinary citizens.

In this new world, where illness and death had been conquered, the most common place to see the names of people who had died was in murder reports. Some things could not be avoided, even with the protection of the Holy Grail.

I thought that was what I was here for...

One of the most unusual aspects about this particular series of crimes was the amount of time that had elapsed before they were discovered. If the victims had been killed and their bodies concealed, finding them would have been comparatively easy; that was what the Caren series was for. However, that was not what had happened. Instead, for several days after being stripped of their Command Seals, the victims had continued to live their lives as normal.

One of them had the Command Seals on his right hand stolen, and he just wore a glove to conceal the wound. A glove! And what's more, there's no record of those Command Seals being used in the interim...

There were even records here of conversations they had had with neighbours, meaningless small talk. Each and every one of them had concealed the wound they'd suffered – some skilfully, others very poorly. The truth was often only discovered after they suddenly collapsed unconscious in the middle of whatever they were doing. Or perhaps some task in their daily lives had required the use of a Command Seal, and only then had others pointed out the abnormality where their Command Seals used to be.

Some sort of drug to dull their sense of pain? Perhaps incredibly powerful hypnosis? No, impossible. Some of them lost whole limbs, for crying out loud! How could someone not realise their own throat had been torn out? But then...they must...

I shuddered. The victims must already have been dead at the point when their Command Seals were taken. And then their lifeless bodies had continued to act out their everyday routine.

This was a case unlike anything I'd ever seen. My appetite slowly disappeared as I read further. Was a Servant responsible for these murders, or a magus? Both were possible. And with the rate that these cases were appearing, and the time that had elapsed before their discovery...

It was more than possible that other victims were walking the streets of Akihabara right now. This wasn't something I could ignore.

I gulped, and cast a glance around the cafe. My gaze lingered involuntarily on a woman with gloved hands. At a customer wearing unusually thick clothing.

—

Then I saw the Command Seal glowing on the back of their hand. They were merely communicating with their Servant.

—

The Command Seals of the pre- and post-war worlds were supposedly very different. In a true Holy Grail War, their use would be limited, and they would be visibly divided into a number of distinct strokes; usually three. Three strokes, with one use per stroke, for a total of three uses before they were gone. Or so I had heard, anyway. The past was often less convenient than the present, I supposed.

Command Seals in this new world were different on almost all counts. For a start, they were not divided into distinct parts. At first glance they may appear to be partitioned in three, but closer inspection would reveal they actually comprised a detailed, interlinking pattern that would fade on usage proportional to the amount of mana expended. Secondly, a faded Command Seal would recover with time, courtesy of the Grail replenishing its mana. The recovery time varied a little from person to person depending on their aptitude for magecraft, but broadly speaking it would take only a few days.

Thirdly, while (as the name implied) Command Seals were traditionally used to command one's Servant, temporarily strengthening their abilities, this had become less and less of a necessity as a result of the dramatic change in Master-Servant relationships. Nowadays, they were often utilised as a simple mana source, a means of granting the Master access to thaumaturgy. If anything, in today's world, that had become the more common usage.

Only two people in this city did not possess a set of these Command Seals: myself, and Manazuru Chitose.

Chitose, however, still retained the Command Seals she had obtained during her own Grail War. Perhaps that made little practical difference in everyday life, but it was still more than I had.

—

A group of three entered the cafe: two tall men, and a young girl barely half their height. The girl exchanged a few words with one of her companions, and grinned. She wore a familiar-looking white coat draped over her shoulders.

“Haruko? What's she doing here?”

She swept her gaze around the cafe, and gave a small start; clearly, she had seen me too. The child seated next to me probably hadn't helped make me any less conspicuous. I noticed that the hat she usually wore low over her face was absent today.

For their part, her companions were visibly muscular, and exuded a distinctive aura. It was obvious at first glance – to me, at least - that they were Servants. In the lead was a cheerful-looking man in the late throes of middle age, with copper skin

and a lush beard. The other man trailing behind was almost his polar opposite: a young man with sickly pale skin and a melancholic demeanour, and silver hair drawn together into a rough ponytail that cascaded down his back.

“A friend of yours, Koharu?”

“Um, of a sort. We attend lectures at the same community college-”

“She’s the Reaper, you know. Get too close, and she’ll steal your soul.”

“Galahad! Shush!” Haruko was quick to meet the pale man’s sardonic interjection with a quick rebuke; he acted nonplussed, but said no more. She seemed very different from the way she usually came across during class. However, more to the point...

They know I’m the Reaper... Wait, what? Galahad? He looks nothing like that knight I saw onscreen... Although... Yes, that’s right. I suppose he wouldn’t, would he?

“One of your classmates, eh? Well, why don’t we pull up some chairs and get acquainted?” The middle-aged man spoke to Haruko – Koharu, had he called her? Is that her real name, then? - with odd familiarity. She nodded in assent, albeit a little hesitantly.

—

We moved over to a round table further inside the cafe. The middle-aged man sat next to Koharu opposite Pran and I, with his stout, hairy arms rested heavily on the table, grinning at the two of us. He was dressed in a short-sleeved safari shirt and a pair of shorts, and looked for all the world like a visiting tourist. The intellectual air lent by his round-framed glasses made for a curious contrast with the rest of his outfit.

Galahad sat at the side, leaning back disinterestedly on his chair. He wore a deep purple – indigo? - dress shirt rolled up to the elbows, and black skinny jeans. The shirt lay open at the collar to reveal a chest even paler than his arms.

Their arrival at the cafe had caused an evident stir. The rest of the customers had shrunk back from our table, and I could feel their glances burning into me.

This is... awkward...

This must be life when you were a celebrity, a Grail Tournament winner. Only a few minutes ago I had been overwhelmed by the terror and panic of the serial killings, but for the time being those feelings had been shut away firmly in a box and neatly shelved.

The man leaned forward with an amiable smile. "I must say, it came as quite a shock to learn Koharu was classmates with the famous Reaper."

"Not as shocked as I am", I replied. "It's hard to believe I'm sitting across the table from Hannibal of Carthage."

I felt a little uncertain how to react to someone I had only just met referring to me as the Reaper, but my words – and my respect – were sincere. Even if I was talking to a participant in the Grail Tournament.

"Hannibal's the commander of the team I've been assigned to", Koharu supplied, a little hesitantly.

"Your team? You mean the next Tournament is going to be a team battle?"

"Indeed it is." Hannibal folded his arms with evident confidence. "And the newest member of our team won the Rookie Tournament handily. Our victory is all but assured."

"H-Hannibal! I, um... I'm not... I'm not that good..." Koharu shrank back, red-faced. I could hardly blame her. If a general as famous as Hannibal had placed me so high in his estimation, I probably would have done the same.

Don't worry, I get it. Although it's a bit of a surprise to see that even you can look embarrassed once in a while.

"And I get to cart around the kid and her great-grandad. I'm telling you now, I don't do bedtime stories... or hospice care." Galahad chipped in with another snide remark, and Koharu rounded on him again, teeth bared in a hissing snarl.

—

In tie, I learned that Hannibal's Master was currently negotiating conditions with members of other teams. Koharu had shown the trio to this cafe during a break in

the discussions. Expanding a Servant's range of independent action in this way was among the most common uses of Command Seals.

The sheer volume of information flooding in from across the table was overwhelming, and it was difficult to know where to even begin to reply. Until yesterday, I had barely even known what the Grail Tournament was.

I cast a sidelong glance at the Knight of the Grail. He was preoccupying himself with his meal in haughty silence, although I noticed that he was only picking at his roast beef and yorkshire pudding, and was focused primarily on his glass of red wine. Again, the polar opposite of Hannibal's healthy appetite. It occurred to me that if Koharu had been attending the Pre-War Human History lectures, Galahad had also likely been present in spirit form. It was likely that he already knew me. We had probably passed by each other any times without my knowing it.

"Planning to stare all day, Reaper? If you want a bite, you only had to ask." He made to push his plate towards me, and was only stopped by Koharu's grip on his arm.

I'm not sure I envy her this one.

—

Karin's words from yesterday came back to me: "How sincere other people are isn't something you get to decide."

Many Servants had gotten accustomed to life in this new, peaceful world. However, others had spent their entire lives on the battlefield, and dedicated themselves wholly to the craft of war. It came down to the individual whether they had had their fill of fighting or still lusted for blood.

Hannibal, it seemed, was the latter kind - which meant that was the fate indicated to his Master by the Grail. The Grail Tournament was a precious opportunity for such Servants to let themselves loose to their hearts' content in pursuit of exhilaration and glory. I supposed that was, in its own way, a kind of freedom.

But that's not why Koharu is here. She isn't like the rest of them. She's different somehow...

—

The Grail Tournament was yet to officially publicise any information regarding the background of one Koharu F. Riedenflaus, but my own investigations had borne some modest fruit.

House Riedenflaus was a family of Magi associated with the Clocktower, with its roots in the necromantic traditions. They were low in status compared with the elite of the Magus Association, and their history spanned only a few centuries. However, it seemed that their longtime occupation of the seat at the foot of the aristocrats' table had been enough to grant them entry to the city.

The promoter of the Grail Tournament was none other than this House Riedenflaus. In other words, they were actively and brazenly flouting the first precept of the Magus Association, the Concealment of the Mysteries. I was curious as to how their mentality had evolved to suit this new post-war world, but it was something else I uncovered in the course of my investigations that had really drawn my interest: that their family's magic revolved around the creation of artificial life forms, or homunculi.

Koharu's youthful appearance had initially led me to assume that she was a member of the next generation. However, now that I knew her surname, I was beginning to wonder if it indicated something else entirely.

—

Hannibal regaled us with anecdotes of his past exploits as we ate. I listened, half fascinated and half starstruck, as he spoke with good humour of the great defeat his army had faced on the field of battle. The tale also seemed to have caught Pran's interest, because he listened cheerfully. Eventually, he chimed in with an unexpected question.

“What's a 'war'?”

Not only myself, but Koharu, Hannibal and even Galahad stared at him with mouths agape.

“What's a 'war'?”, he repeated.

“Um, well... It's a war, right? Like a battle?” I knew that hardly constituted an answer, but I was at a loss as to how to respond. The idea of a Servant ignorant of the very concept of war had taken us all by surprise.

“Like killing?”

“That’s right. Lots of killing. More than you can ever imagine.” Hannibal’s voice was composed, but his gaze was chilly through his round-framed glasses. “And yet we humans never seem to tire of it. It’s just a part of who we are.”

Not a single day in all of human history had passed devoid of war. A Heroic Spirit who doesn’t know what war is? Impossible.

A part of me hoped for another sarcastic quip from Galahad – anything to change the subject - but none were forthcoming. He sat with mouth pursed firmly closed. The gazes drilling into Pran were beginning to make me feel distinctly uneasy, and I hurriedly asked Hannibal for another story of his time as a general. It was at times like this that I appreciated Karin’s power to effortlessly lighten the mood.

—

A few minutes passed before I noticed that Koharu was gazing at her lap in listless silence. I thought to call out to her, but my mouth had only gotten half-open before her eyes suddenly snapped to me.

“Is something the matter?”

“Um, Miss Riedenflaus? I was wondering-”

She raised a hand to stop me. “Please just call me Koharu. I’m the youngest here, after all.”

“I see.” My next question almost tumbled from my mouth before I could stop it, but I managed to bite it back just in time.

What are you thinking? You can’t ask her that! What are you even expecting her to say? “Why yes, I am a homunculus, thank you very much for asking”?

It would have been bigoted, self-centred and an invasion of privacy all in one. To probe people who had caught my interest for their weak points was an unfortunate habit of mine.

“I... I saw footage of you fighting. At the Rookie Tournament. Watching you fighting to the bitter end against an opponent like that... It was amazing. I’m not sure I could do that even if I had the strongest Servant in the world beside me.”

“Um... Thank you very much.” Koharu lowered her eyes, blushing fiercely. “I know I got very lucky, but managing to win... made me really happy...”

She gave a smile that was mostly bashful, although somewhere in there was a flicker of pride. Watching her struggle to contain her delight, I could wish her only the best. Half of what I had said had been borrowed from a certain JK, but I had rewatched the video since, and my admiration was the real thing.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. I was very rude to you.” She spoke sheepishly, eyes fixed firmly on the fingertips she was pressing together.

“Eh? Oh, that. Don’t sweat it. I get that you were in a hurry.”

“Thank you. I was in such a rush, it just kind of came out...”

This girl was modest to a fault – and perhaps that was that sincerity, the warrior’s pride she displayed in spite of her age, that invited me to lower my guard. Whatever the case, I got ahead of myself, and asked something I would not even have put to Karin.

—

“I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

I wanted to know more about that armoured knight I had seen onscreen. Perhaps, I wondered, there might be something I could learn from her about my own curse.

“Could you tell me a little more about that “Possession” they mentioned on the programme?”

“My Possession? I, um...” Koharu cast a hesitant glance at Galahad.

“Now wait just a moment, you two.” For a while Hannibal had been content just to watch us, but now he interrupted. I could see half-chewed food still in his mouth as he spoke. “If you wish to learn more of her abilities, you must see them for yourself. We are not scribes, with pen and parchment. We are warriors, with sword and spear and fist! Come to the Colosseum, Erice, and watch us do battle. It should not be long before our next bout.”

“You mean you’re inviting her to spectate? Aren’t the tickets all sold out? I suppose we could hope for cancellations, but there are always so many people waiting...”

The notion of acquiring tickets through anything other than official channels seemed to genuinely not have occurred to Koharu. Hannibal, laughing heartily, informed her that there were always other ways.

And so, I ended up exchanging contact details with Koharu F. Riedenflaus, the celebrity. She promised to inform me as soon as she had gotten hold of tickets, although she seemed a little bewildered by the way things had transpired. It was comforting to know I was not the only one who felt that they had lost control of this conversation.

At this point, there’s no way I can tell them I don’t really care all that much about the Tournament...

—

For a while I phased out. In the end, it was Galahad who brought me crashing back to reality.

“Spend too long entertaining the elderly and you’ll be one of them before you know it, Reaper.”

“Um... Galahad?”

“If you’ve got something to ask, just ask it. Koharu’ll jump at the chance to trade it for anything you’ve got on the Stigmata, I guarantee it.”

Utter silence. For a moment I struggled for a response... and then, with a clatter, Koharu grabbed her fork, lifted it, and drove it back down towards the table with all her might. Directly in its path lay Galahad’s hand. My and Pran’s eyes widened in shock. An attack from an ordinary human would appear as though in slow-motion to a Servant, and I felt sure that he would dodge it with ease, but as I watched it became clearer and clearer that he had no intention of moving a muscle.

Thud. The fork slammed down just between his fingers, with barely a couple of millimetres to spare.

“You should learn some manners, my lady. Just look what you’ve done to our round table.”

“...My apologies. I promise I’ll pay for it.”

Koharu apologised for her poor behaviour, and hung her head in silence. Hannibal stood up, apparently unfazed by the discord between his compatriots.

“I’m sorry, but I will have to depart. My master is calling for me.”

The trio finished paid the proprietors for the damage to their table, and left the shop.

—

Left alone with Pran once more, I found myself wondering what sort of person Hannibal’s Master might be. The two were bound together by the fate indicated by the Grail. Would they be Hannibal’s equal, carefree and bold? Or would they be his opposite, a stern, cold tactician?

Masters... and Servants...

Sometimes, like Koharu and Galahad, their relationship was impossible to understand from the outside.

I tried to return to my previous train of thought about the Command Seal Hunter, but something from the previous conversation continued to niggle at me.

You’re being silly, Erice. Stop overthinking things.

There was no logical reason that they, likely the strongest warriors in Mosaic City, had put me so ill at ease. But...

“If you’ve got something to ask, just ask it.” On the face of it, Galahad had simply been referring to my questions about Koharu. However, I felt something deeper there, something urging me on.

Maybe Chitose and Ms. Fujimura don’t want me involved in this, but I can’t just sit here and do nothing.

On a sudden impulse, I left Pran in the care of the shopkeeper and dashed out of the cafe.

--

Luck was on my side, and I managed to catch up with the trio on the road to the Colosseum. I flagged them down and came to a stop in front of them, my breathing ragged.

“If you know I’m the Reaper... then let me at least give you a warning.”

While keeping my voice low, conscious of being overheard by passers-by, I told them everything I had just learned about the Command Seal Hunter. About the mysterious, indiscriminate murders that were even now being suppressed from the municipal information network, and the Servants who had become collateral damage.

“If you want to know more, it’s all on this data drive.”

“Are you sure?”

I released the lock on the storage drive and replaced it with Koharu’s personal signature. She extended out a grateful hand to take it.

“Thank you.”

“No worries.”

I didn’t know if I had managed to fully convince them of the gravity of the situation, but they had at least taken me seriously enough to listen without bursting out in laughter.

“Even if no victims have yet been discovered in this ward, we cannot risk any harm coming to spectators. It may be tricky, but I will see about raising the matter with the security staff.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

“In any case, we cannot allow anything to interfere with Rome’s downfall!” The general set his fingers to his chin and flashed a brilliant smile.

“That sounds awfully confident for you of all Servants...”

“Wha...? Don’t tell me you’re a Rome supporter, Erice?!”

“Eh? But our next opponents aren’t even Roman.” Koharu cocked her head, puzzled.

“Just ignore him.” Galahad’s tone was as sardonic as ever. “Start giving old men the time of day and they’ll never shut up.”

“Please do come to the tournament, Erice.” With those parting words, Koharu turned around and headed back towards the arena with her companions. She did not look back.

都市管理AI人型端末

〈秋葉原〉担当 カレン・アジラ
& カレンシリーズ



Chapter 4

Several days had passed since I had been relieved of my duties as the Reaper. No more work had come in from my master, Caren Fujimura, since the Kundry case, and I no longer received information on a preferential basis over the municipal network. I had been barred from the critical point where the Akihabara district barrier was located, and my access to Kanda Shrine and Yushima Temple, where multiple ley lines converged, had also been restricted. Stripped of my rank and duties, I was nothing more than another truant – and one dragging a nameless, powerless, useless Servant in tow to boot. A lone wolf not even worth employing as a guard dog.

Fortunately, Akihabara was a prime tourist destination, and as long as I wore my usual swimwear and windbreaker I would more or less blend in with the usual clientele. However, that did nothing to help me feel less out-of-place. Whatever I did, I just felt like running away and hiding in a hole.

I had received no more information on the Command Seal Hunter. It was worrying that the case had not yet been publicly acknowledged. My gut told me that it had not been quietly solved and faded away. It was merely biding its time.

Whispers of the “Woman with the Missing Hand” circulated Shibuya. It had become something of an urban legend among students.

Don’t you know better than to cut that out? Keep repeating it and it’ll become real, and then who’ll have to deal with it? It’ll be... actually, I suppose it won’t be me. Not any more.

—

As a consequence of my newly-imposed freedom, I had taken to wandering the town aimlessly with Pran on a daily basis. Wherever we went, we found faint traces of Chitose’s presence. It crossed my mind more than once to quit Akihabara for one of the other wards.

—

There were many things that seemed to draw Pran's interest, but over time I started to notice a broad pattern. It was live experiences that he seemed to enjoy - street performers, buskers, speed painters and the like were what most often caught his eye.

Thinking back to the episode with Kuchime, I tried taking him along to a shop geared towards those 'otaku'. It was crammed to the rafters with endless figurines of buxom girls, male-oriented toys and all manner of merchandise, to the point where I was almost sick of looking at it. However, none of it particularly seemed to resonate with him.

Maybe it's because they're all manufactured goods. Perhaps it's originality that appeals to him?

He stood by, a little sleepily, gazing into the distance as though squinting into the sun, watching faraway strangers. Only when we passed a shop selling astronomical telescopes did he exhibit a different reaction. He squatted down in front of a poster of the planets – clearly not hand-made – and stayed there for well over a minute.

“Do you know Jupiter?”

“This eye... it follows me.”

“Eye? Oh, you mean the Great Red Spot?”

“This planet's so big. It's so big...”

He shivered, then pulled the goggles resting over his head down over his eyes, and peered at the poster once more.

“A planet, huh? I'm surprised you know that word.” Had he picked it up from when I read *The Little Prince* to him? He had initially talked about coming from somewhere far away – perhaps he wasn't just making it up? Or maybe... no, was that even possible?

I chose my words carefully. “That's a very old photograph. From before the war. The Great Red Spot on Jupiter isn't there any more. It got smaller and smaller, and then it disappeared.”

He smiled gently at the poster.

“Maybe it went to sleep. I hope someone comes to wake it up.”

—

Before I knew it, the day of the Grail Tournament had arrived. I hadn't exactly been waiting with bated breath, but still I found myself in front of the Colosseum.

The colossal stadium was located on the outskirts of Akihabara, bordering the ocean. Its enormous silhouette threatened to overwhelm the surrounding cityscape. Towering arches, each easily the size of a skyscraper, rose high in three, four levels to form the thick exterior of the cylindrical structure and enclose the arena within.

This was a place of pure competition. The poets once spoke of the ancient Roman emperors giving their people bread and circuses; here was the circus reborn for the modern age, the manifestation of the people's right to entertainment.

—

I had ended up accompanied to the Colosseum by Pran and Karin. Koharu had, to my great chagrin, seen fit to furnish me with not one, not two, but a whole four reserved tickets – two Master-Servant pairs. Technically Servants had no need for tickets – after all, they could just assume their spiritual forms – but no-one willing to come to see the Grail Tournament in person could reasonably be refused a seat, and they were provided in pairs as a matter of course. That being said...

“How long's it been?”

It had been twenty minutes since the stadium had opened, and we were still waiting.

Enormous lines snaked from each and every one of the Colosseum's myriad entrances. At this rate, the tournament would probably have started before we got to our seats. Personally I hardly minded, but it must have bothered Karin, because she suddenly yelled out at the top of her voice.

“All right, fine! Flake out on me, see if I care! We're going in, you hear?”

“You really want to go in? You sure you don't want to wait a bit longer?” I did my best to keep my voice neutral.

“Damn right I’m sure! Never should’ve invited you anyway, you lousy no-show son of a...”

None of her messages had prompted a response, it seemed.

—

The individual keeping us waiting was the weary-looking guitar player, Kuchime.

Unsure what exactly to do with my four tickets, I had decided to start by offering them to people I knew. Karin herself had snatched the chance with typical zeal, but her partner Kouyou had been reluctant to join us, leaving me with one left over. However, a few days later the two of us had happened to stumble across Kuchime in a side-street in Akihabara, strumming away with his usual gloomy air and being flatly ignored by every passer-by. Karin had called out, probably taking pity on him.

“Hey, Kuchime, was it? Ever thought of checking out the Grail Tournament? Maybe the halftime show’ll give you some tips on how not to make your customers run a mile.”

“Ain’t got no need for that, little missy. I’m happy as long as I’m getting’ through to people with ears to hear.”

“Think you’re some kinda auteur, huh? Keep dreaming, idiot. Why don’t you just go the whole way and die young while you’re at it!”

I had watched blankly as she exploded at him unprovoked. Her tirade had ended with her snatching the ticket from my hands and thrusting it squarely into his unshaven face. Had she done it in a spontaneous surge of pity for this dishevelled musician, or had she been planning it all along? I may have been the Reaper, but even I wasn’t so insensitive as to probe any further.

However, in the end, the chance she had taken came to nothing. She stalked towards the arena, fuming. I followed her, leading Pran by the hand.

—

Eventually, we arrived at our designated seats. The interior of the Colosseum was spacious, tall, and delightfully modern.

I now understood why the queues today had been particularly bad: the staff were conducting unusually extensive baggage checks and body searches on all attendees. I had even seen staff members flagging down particular individuals for Command Seal checks, and it was hard not to notice the guns at the hips of a number of security personnel dotted around the stadium.

I'm glad they didn't try to check my Command Seals. Maybe the reservations got us through...

In any case, it was gratifying to see that my warning to Hannibal hadn't gone unheeded. Although there was always the possibility that the organisers had gotten wind of the serial killings themselves, and acted of their own accord.

"Yo! Sorry we took so long." Karin reappeared with Pran in tow. Both of their arms were piles high with soft drinks, packets of peanuts and other junk food. She tossed me a freshly-grilled hot dog.

"So this is the bread part, huh? Shouldn't be long until the circu- Yeowch! Aah! My tongue!"

"Circus? You mean the halftime show, right? Oh yeah, there was a stall selling some kinda porridge too if you want some. I tapped out though, seemed pretty weird."

"Porridge, huh? How odd... Hey, who gave you those?!"

I suddenly registered Pran was decked from head to toe in tournament merchandise, complete with a little paper cap and a megaphone. He was ready for the show.

I couldn't stop myself from bursting out laughing, and soon both me and Karin were clutching our sides. She was so engrossed in the tournament now that it was hard to imagine she had been furious not twenty minutes ago. I could probably learn a lot from how quickly she rebounded.

Next to our seats on the very front row was a space to be kept open in case of emergencies. Fortunately, it was just large enough for Kouyou to squeeze in. Accommodating larger Servants was probably half of the reason it was there.

—

After a minute or so, the music playing throughout the stadium increased in volume and a rousing melody began to play. It seemed we'd timed our arrival perfectly.

The music faded away, and for a moment, the entire arena fell silent. Then, as if on cue, a voice rang out across the stadium. Below us, eldritch lights began to dance across the very front row where the patricii would have sat in the original Colosseum. A diminutive figure strode down to the aisle, and unfurled a pair of feathered wings. At the same time, the main screen cut to a close-up of a girl - a woman? - dressed in a plain white Grecian tunic.

“Good evening, my lovely little piglets!” Her greeting echoed around the Colosseum at amplified volume. “Welcome, one and all, to the ocean stage of the Grail Tournament! That’s right! We’re all setting sail for Okeanos, and I, the great witch Circe, will be your guide!”

She stoked the crowd’s excitement, and they answered with a deafening roar... although I did pick up some rather crude jeers mixed in with the cheering.

“Thank you, thank you, my little piglets! I love you too! Now, before we meet all our brave warriors, I’d like to introduce our commentary team!”

Two burly men strode down the aisle to join her, waving to the audience.

“First, for the Ottoman Corsairs, we have a scallywag among scallywags! The Gentleman of the Caribbean! The one and only Blackbeard, Edward Teach!”

“That’s me!” Blackbeard was greeted by deafening boos. He did not seem to care a jot.

“Sounds like you know him well! Let’s move swiftly on!”

“Wait, that’s all I get?!”

“Next, for the Carthaginian Alliance, we have the king of admirals! The man who saved the Roman Empire from the Ptolemaic Dynasty! Friend and advisor to Emperor Augustus, I give you Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa!”

Agrippa! The commander who led the Romans to victory at the Battle of Actium!

I expected him to bask in the applause of the crowd, but instead he rounded on the emcee.

“What is this? I never agreed to this! First you invite me to attend nigh on midnight last night, and now you expect me to commentate?! Explain yourself!”

“About that... Honestly, we wanted Eukleides of Alexandria, but he cancelled at the last moment. What are Foreigners like, right?”

“Some nerve on you, girl! You expect a general of Rome to commentate on the Carthaginians? And you! Yes, you, the Servant with the easel! You think capturing my face is funny, do you?!”

The sight of the irate Agrippa slowly being talked down by the witch emcee, and eventually taking a reluctant seat at the commentator’s desk, drew no small amount of laughter from the audience.

“All right, everyone, make sure you have your channels all set to your favourite team! If you’re feeling peckish, why not try some delicious kykeon?”

—

“Well, that sure was something.”

Karin was grinning next to me. I, for my part, was aghast. This was grotesque, a vulgar display that made a mockery of Servants’ pride and nobility. It was difficult to tell how much was real and how much was acted, but the tastelessness of the ambiguity only made me feel more disgusted. The tournament itself hadn’t even begun yet, and I had a feeling it was only going to get worse.

I guess the least I can do is watch it through. I probably won’t be getting another chance.

My reasons for being here were twofold. Firstly, I wanted to see what I could learn about Koharu’s mysterious Possession ability. I had also been deeply impressed by the way that, despite being aware of her naivety, she disapproved wholeheartedly of any wrongdoing, and the evident admiration with which she viewed her companions.

My second reason was that I wanted to see for myself the incredible power that Servants were permitted to wield here. I felt both awe and terror for Noble Phantasms. It was baffling to me that abilities so destructive might be allowed to be used freely.

The citizens of Mosaic City were different to Masters in the true sense. They were no magi, with magic circuits passed down from previous generations or developed through special training, and it went without saying that none of them possessed a Magic Crest. The mana that powered their magecraft originated from the Holy Grail, and was distributed throughout the city via ley-lines. This mana was more than enough to sustain a Servant in everyday life with no discomfort. However Noble Phantasms, which employed magecraft on a much larger scale and consumed vast amounts of mana, were another matter entirely. Activating them was highly challenging, and they could kill a Master unless attempted with extreme care.

Broadly speaking, the most common foes I encountered in my work were Masters who fought with little regard for their own lives, because they had found something they valued more.

Had the combatants in this Colosseum all reined their latent magical abilities to extraordinary levels? Or had the footage I had seen simply been enhanced in some way after the fact? I had come to determine the truth.

“Oh, there you are, Kouyou.”

In the formerly empty space in the midst of the cheering crowd, the enormous bulk of the Ogress had appeared. She sat with her belly pressed to the ground, trying to make herself as small as possible. Occasionally her eyes glanced sideways to meet with Pran’s.

—

Feeling a little relieved, I turned back to the arena. The battlefield was enormous: a huge rectangular arena, two hundred metres on the larger side. Above each of the spectator seats floated semi-transparent screens that provided a closer view of the action.

Finally, the battlefield began to change. Cracks ran across the centre, and the stage began to fold in on itself with mechanical precision, forming a deep, wide basin. Water swirled in to fill it, and rocks rose from beneath its surface to form a maze of crags in the open water. Two galleys burst from the canals at either side of the stage, defying the current. They hung in the air for a second, like salmon poised mid-leap above a waterfall, and then crashed down into the water below with a mighty splash. A host of smaller boats and schooners followed them out, and quickly organised themselves into two fleets.

There was no magic in this, only the most cutting-edge stage equipment... although perhaps it was best not to think about the enormous, ominous shadow circling beneath the water's surface.

—

“Now, my little piglets, I think we’ve kept you waiting long enough! Let’s get this naumachia started! We know you’re tired of the same-old same-old, so this year we thought we’d change things up a little with a large-scale team-on-team battle! Which of our brave teams in Akihabara today will be crowned the conquerors of the high seas?”

“First, we have the Ottoman Corsairs! For these terrors of the Mediterranean Sea, this man once more takes up the rank of Pasha! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the great pirate of Barbary, the Redbeard, Heyreddin Barbarossa!

“And that’s not all! Next we have his second-in-command! There’s not a man west of Austria who doesn’t know his name: the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, Jacques de Molay!”

The witch introduced each of the competitors one by one, stoking the crowd’s excitement. Illustrious admirals and infamous pirates lined up upon the deck.

“And now, last but not least, someone you know very well! The mightiest commander of the navies of the far east - can you say “Hassou-tobi”? Our favourite natural-born Heike-killer, Minamoto Kurou Yoshitsune!

“Could this samurai be the most dangerous competitor on the field today? I’m sure the other side won’t be showing much quarter, so look forward to some spectacular acrobatics!”

—

The pretty young warrior looked a little uncomfortable in responding to chants of “Ushiwaka!”, but eventually gave in and began to wave to the crowd. The sight broke me from my trance, and a young girl standing nearby caught my attention; she hadn’t been introduced.

Could that be Yoshitsune’s Master?

She was dressed in elegant traditional Japanese robes and heavy facial makeup, matching Yoshitsune, but she herself appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary citizen. Behind or beside the other Servants stood similar unassuming figures. More than a couple of them were wearing masks that obscured their faces.

Eventually, the oriental arrangement of Mozart’s Turkish March playing throughout the Colosseum drew to a close, and was replaced with an unsettling, savage, African-style drumbeat. The Grail Tournament was as tasteless as ever.

—

“Now swivel your heads the other way, my adorable piglets! Little corkscrew tails to the east, and snouts to the west! Please give it up for the mighty heroes of the Carthaginian Alliance!

“Cast your eyes upon Rome’s worst nightmare! At his back, the souls of three war elephants with whom he crossed the Pyrenees and the Alps! Ladies and gentlemen, the Lightning Commander, Hannibal Barca!”

The sight of Hannibal, cross-armed on the deck in traditional battle garments, was so wildly different from the garrulous old tourist I had met in Cafe Borges that I could hardly believe it was the same man. The mighty cheer from the crowd put not so much as a crack in his stern expression, and he harboured a menacing aura.

“And not to be outdone, his second-in-command: The Firebrand of Castile, El Cid!”

The witch continued with her introductions, each one punctuated with thunderous applause. I tuned them out. My attention was absorbed by a small figure on the deck, with a white coat draped across her shoulders. I followed her with my augmented vision as she stared keenly into the enemy ranks.

He stood a short distance behind her, head askew, hands on his hips. He seemed devoid of tension, as though this were nothing more than a routine warmup.

“And taking up the rearguard is someone I’m sure you all remember! None other than the warrior who took the Newbie Tournament by storm! Our proud Knight of the Round Table, Sir Galahad!”

—

With the introductions concluded, the galleys began to slip forwards, and each team assembled into their respective formations. Karin rapped on my knee with her megaphone, unable to conceal her excitement.

“I told you it was gonna be awesome! Dunno much about the pirates, but even I know Yoshitsune!”

“You expecting me to be impressed or something? You could hardly call yourself Japanese if you didn’t.”

I could not imagine it would be easy for this collection of pirates, outlaws to the bone that they were, to assimilate cleanly into everyday life in Mosaic City - although, of course, there were exceptions. Perhaps it was for the best that there was a place for them here, where they could put their talents to use while also entertaining the populace. However...

“I know it’s just a mock battle, but don’t you think this seems really one-sided? The Ottomans are obviously better at sea. Hannibal’s famous for his war elephants, but he can’t even use them on the water.”

“Haven’t been reading up, eh Eri? Here’s a flyer for you. See? Says right here the field will change halfway through, and turn into a land battle. There’s your Carthaginian advantage.”

“Ah. I get it.” This was never supposed to be a fair battle, but a dramatic turnaround against overwhelming odds. The perfect script to drive the audience wild. I myself had to confess, I was looking forward to seeing Yoshitsune and Galahad face off – so much so that a part of me wished this were a real Holy Grail War.

“Yeah. Now I see.” I gazed around at the nearby spectators with dawning realisation. I felt as though I’d grown a little closer to understanding how these competitors could wield such extraordinary power, and the system that supported them in doing so.

—

“Eh?”

The back of my neck prickled. Someone, somewhere, was watching me.

I slid my gaze slowly around myself, careful not to let my reaction be noticed, but my stalker was impossible to discern through the interference of the crowd around me.

I’m being watched. No doubt about it. There’s something else, too. A familiar, maybe?

The Borgia siblings’ warning came to mind. Someone I’d previously crossed, out for revenge. As I looked around warily, hoping to forestall some impending attack, I noticed something strange: dotted throughout the crowd were spectators standing motionless, seemingly blind to the excitement around them.

Victims of the Command Seal Hunter? No, that doesn’t seem right...

I focused, filtering out the auditory noise, following the sense of wrongness back to its source... and happened to catch a snippet of conversation from the row in front.

“You serious? A fire in Shinjuku?”

“Where? Tsunohazu? Kashiwagi?”

“Seems like it’s around Hanazono way.”

Hanazono?

My old house was in Hanazono. Which was to say, Chitose’s house was in Hanazono. I leaned forward a little, and stared at the woman in front’s phone from over her shoulder.

“Eri, the hell are you doing?”

On the screen was a video someone had uploaded to the municipal network.

“What on earth...?”

A video of a building on fire. In real time.

A row of old wooden houses in Shinjuku wreathed in smoke. A human figure appeared from the billowing grey curtain, aflame from head to toe. However, they did not run or drop to the ground, but continued calmly into the next building, and even as their blood boiled and their skin charred with the flames' caress, began to feed the flames.

The video cut short - interrupted by a new upload of a public train brought to a standstill, flames licking at its roof.

-

As I watched, a buzz of concern began to spread throughout the crowd. It was hardly surprising; there were probably no small number of spectators here from Shinjuku. I turned around to see that Karin, too, was transfixed by her phone.

“What's wrong?”

“They say there's been some kinda 'pedestrian accident' in front of Shibuya station. A tram derailed and went across the cross... Oh. Ew. I'm not looking at that. Trains are stopped too. The hell's going on?”

Simultaneous incidents, all across Mosaic City.

“Ugh...”

I gripped my arm as a dull pain blossomed inside it. The stench of death was agitating the spirits. Black blood oozed out from beneath my hand, as their ire turned on my own body.

Just when I thought I'd gotten them under control...

-

This arena was no longer a place I should be. I was the greatest threat here, to the tens of thousands of spectators present and the partners by their sides. Right now, these simultaneous incidents concerned me.

Security here was tight, and more to the point, greater warriors than I could ever hope to be now thronged the main stage. This was perhaps the safest place in all of Mosaic City. My place was not here – as much as I had wanted to see Koharu fight, I no longer had time to worry about that.

“Eri, wait.”

Karin must have guessed my intentions as soon as I stood up.

“You’re going? Just like that? Without me, again?”

“Sorry. I know I invited you out here and everything, but... there’s something I need you to do.”

“What is it?”

I stared back at Karin for a moment, then looked down to the boy by her side.

“Kouyou, do you think you could take care of Pran?”

The ogress looked to Karin questioningly, then gave a slow nod.

“Consider it done. Just leave it to us, Eri.” Karin flashed her newly-recovered Command Seals, alongside an irrepressible grin. Just as I made to leave, Karin’s phone buzzed with a notification, and she pulled it out.

“Who’s texting people at this kinda time?”

She checked the screen and sighed.

“It’s that Kuchime asshole. He says “Sorry.””

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.” She smiled, resignedly and a little sadly.

—

I left the seats behind and made my way to the outer hall. While still indoors, this was an airy, open space, with high arches modelled meticulously after Roman architecture. It extended far away in both directions, curving gently to match the shape of the arena. Shops lined the outer wall, still milling with a fair number of late customers. Here and there people clustered around screens outside the storefronts, drinking as they watched the matches unfold.

What's even the point of coming here?, I thought. You could be doing that at home!

—

As I hurried towards the exit, I organised the idea I'd hit upon earlier in my head: to whit, that the competitors in the Holy Grail Tournament were taking their mana from the crowd itself. Tens of thousands of pseudo-magi, all pouring mana into the Servants doing battle below. That was my hypothesis.

This Colosseum was not a post-war addition to Akihabara. It had been a part of this town since long before the world was restructured, and it was far too large an anomaly to be permitted to exist without a reason. And in ancient Rome, the battles that took place in the colosseums had been sacred acts; offerings made to the gods.

Heroic Spirits take on all of our thoughts, hopes and dreams. They draw power from them.

The greater the mark a Servant had left upon history, and the more fame they had earned, the more power they drew. Such was their nature – and as an unintended and tragic consequence, Servants were occasionally summoned with the strange and cruel skill, “Innocent Monster”.

How much of this do the Riedenflaus family realise, I wonder?

I couldn't help but wonder just to what extent thaumaturgical systems might be entwined with the structure of the Colosseum itself.

-

An unexpected voice called me to a halt.

“Erice, we need to talk. It's important.”

It was the first time I had seen Ms. Fujimura in several days. I wheeled around to find her standing in the dimly-lit outer hall, dressed like a librarian as always.

Why is she here? What could she possibly want to talk about?

I strode towards her, with the intention of grilling her on the events in Shibuya and Shinjuku.

-

As I opened my mouth, I heard an odd sound from the broadcast. As the camera focused on the Carthaginian flagship, the witch performing the commentary had yelped in shock. I spun around to look. Ms. Fujimura, too, focused on the screen.

What I saw defied comprehension.

Regardless of the fact that the enemy was still distant, Hannibal, the Carthaginian commander, whipped his blade from the sheath at his belt, and without a moment's hesitation thrust it deep into the chest of his second-in-command, El Cid.

“Gah!”

El Cid's face froze in an expression of disbelief. His Master rounded on Hannibal in his confusion. The Carthaginian pulled his bloodstained sword from his ally's chest, and without a care for the man's protests, swung his sword crosswise in a vicious slash.

Both El Cid and his master collapsed. Two heads flew from the boat, to splash down unceremoniously into the artificial sea.



Chapter 5

Terror flooded the Colosseum like a breaking wave – first quietly, an almost-imperceptible swell, but then gradually escalating into a furious, all-devouring surge. Astonishment was plain to see on every face, but it came in different shades. Some spectators interpreted Hannibal’s betrayal as all part of a cruel act, and cheered all the louder. They couldn’t even imagine that a Servant could have truly killed a human.

I found it almost impossible to believe myself – all the more so given that I had met the Servant in question not a few days ago.

Struggling for words, the witch vainly tried to continue her commentary, but soon that too ceased. News of the incidents in other wards had spread through the crowd, and no small number of spectators had already been making to leave. Their presence in the stairwells spurred others who had only been watching into a rush for the exits.

Watching from a distance through a monitor as I was, I managed to maintain some degree of composure, but the spectators in the arena were quickly swept up in the panic of those around them.

Ms. Fujimura spoke, calmly, steadily, as though this were just another lecture.

“We must keep cool heads, Erice. I have already notified security, and they should begin the evacuation shortly. The rest of the Caren Series is attending to the incidents in other wards.”

“You’re... evacuating? But...”

The panic I had feared was already beginning to spread. The analysis channels broadcast an evacuation message, and monitors all across the arena had switched to a static screen informing spectators that the match had been suspended. The battleground had descended into a full-on melee, spilling across both lines of ships. One of the rocky islands thrust skyward, and the water level suddenly plummeted.

“No...!”

As I watched, another master vanished beneath the feet of one of Hannibal's elephants. A second victim. A Servant sprinting towards them, tragically a few seconds too late, vanished in a burst of golden dust.

Who was that? I couldn't see... It wasn't her, was it?

"Some losses must be expected, given the present situation. I am attempting to contact the surviving Masters to enlist their cooperation in bringing it under control, but around half are unresponsive."

"You mean, because of Hannibal?"

"No."

I gulped. Did that mean it was Hannibal's Master who was responsible? No, that couldn't be right. It didn't make any sense.

"Did you know this was going to happen, Ms. Fujimura?"

She shook her head sadly. "No. Among all conceivable scenarios, I had disregarded this one as highly improbable."

Even the Holy Grail, in all its omnipotence, did not have the means to prepare for every possible eventuality. She had undoubtedly done all that she could, where she could, and now lamented that it had not been enough. Fiercely, bitterly. Regret churned beneath her cool, calm exterior.

I forced myself to ignore it. Right now, I needed to be the Reaper.

"I had made my preparations in Shinjuku, but it seems I have been taken unawares. In the name of Caren Fujimura, municipal administration AI of Mosaic City, I have invoked Code Crimson."

Code Crimson! The scarlet summons. I knew what it meant: it was Mosaic City's highest threat level. To the best of my knowledge, it had only been invoked once since the restructuring of Akihabara.

"Are you capable of distinguishing Servants from ordinary citizens, Erice?"

"Of course. I'm better than any-"

“Good. Your task is to eliminate any and all hostile Servants on the premises. The security forces alone will not be sufficient.”

I shivered, both with joy at the request I had so long been waiting for and with fear at the nature of what was being asked of me. Unilateral elimination was a highly unorthodox measure to take. If the situation hadn't been so dire, I doubt Ms. Fujimura would even have considered it.

“Do you really mean... every single one? Across the whole Colosseum?”

“Wherever you suspect hostile intent, you may engage at your own discretion.”

“Noted. One last question, Ms. Fujimura. Is this a mission for the Reaper?”

“No. This is a personal request for Utsumi Erice.”

“Understood. I won't let you down.” She knew that she was directly contradicting Chitose's restrictions, and she was doing it anyway. Just that was enough for me.

—

“I'm afraid there is something else I need to take care of”, Ms. Fujimura said.

“You require no further direction, I trust?”

I nodded confidently, and just like that we parted ways.

Now it was time to get to work.

-

I embraced them; loathsome spirits, vile spirits, evil spirits all.

I turned none away. As I would for a dear friend, I embraced their rage, their sorrow and their terror, and made it all a part of me.

I steadied my breathing as I drew closer to the end of the passage. The sounds of battle echoed from beyond, mingled with screams.

With each swish of my arms, deep crimson blood spattered across the ground. I let it flow as I ran onward.

-

Ms. Fujimura had charged me with eliminating all Servants, and I knew all too well what that meant.

The first thing I made out was a group of spectators jostling with each other at the bottom of the ramp leading to the audience seats. One of them, a man, was lashing out at the rest with wild abandon, his frenzied clawing and scratching sufficient to draw blood. Despite his contemporary clothing, I could tell immediately that he was a Servant. As I watched, it began to dissolve into the mana it was woven from, revealing medieval garments underneath.

Armed security personnel tore him from the spectators, dragged him to the ground, and loosed a barrage of rounds into him from bullpup-type handguns. He was weak, for a Servant; weak enough that ordinary humans could engage him without much difficulty. However, the thaumaturgically-enhanced bullets pierced straight through him to ricochet from the hard floor, leaving him relatively unharmed. Only a little worse the wear for the hail of bullets, he rose to his feet once more and lunged for another nearby citizen.

Nearby, a hysterical woman tried desperately to control him with her Command Seals, but even direct orders to stop did nothing to dissuade him, and he showed no sign of being willing to revert to spiritual form.

This is even worse than Hannibal. It's like he's lost his mind entirely...

I checked whether the classification tag I had received from my master for use within the Colosseum was properly attached, then gestured to the security personnel. They checked me, and then immediately fell back obediently.

-

I extended a 'branch'.

The defiled blood pouring forth from the evil spirits within my arm coagulated and flowed outward, forming a black branch that shone with a dull lustre. It extended from my fingertip with incredible speed, as though growing organically.

Easily, so easily, it pieced the Servant's external barrier. It tore ravenously around his insides in search of his Spiritual Core, and, that located, seized his Saint Graph and wrested it violently from his body.

A Servant's Saint Graph was their centre, their heart, their CPU. It dictated their every function. Rendered temporarily visible, it shone in vibrant hues – only vaguely to ordinary citizens, but more clearly to magi. It differed from person to person. The Servant clutched for his stolen heart, gasping bestially as he tried in vain to return it to his body. I could sense nothing higher from him than his most primal instincts.

A woman suddenly lunged for me from the side; the same woman who had been trying so desperately to stop the Servant with her Command Seals.

“What are you doing?! Stop it! Stop it, I said! Don't you understand? He's my Servant!”

“I'm sorry”, I said. It was all I could offer. I could not ignore any Servant who presented a danger to those around them. Squeezing the life from a human's neck or gouging out their eyes would present little difficulty for even the weakest of them.

Deprived of his Saint Graph, the Servant finally lost the strength to maintain his corporeal form and dissolved into colourless mana.

“I'm sorry”, I repeated. “Please, evacuate as you have been instructed.”

“Just stop this!”, she implored. “Please, just... Just stop...” The Command Seals were already beginning to fade from the back of her hand. I was under no illusions about the sense of loss that she must be experiencing.

She sank to the ground, her body wracked with sobs. I managed to haul her to her feet and handed her to the security personnel.

-

I stared at the Saint Graph, now stripped of its vessel, clutched in the end of my 'branch'. As I watched, it blackened, becoming one with the blood that held it. The deceased Servant had not returned to the Throne of Heroes.

Once his Master's wounded heart healed, the Grail would summon a new Servant for her, and her Command Seals would recover. All would be well, so long as the Grail continued to function – although even if by some miracle it were to summon the same Servant, his memories would not be preserved.

-

In the time it had taken me to attend to this one Servant, the hall had begun to fill with evacuating spectators. I connected to the security network and searched for my next targets as I forced my way through the tide.

Over the next few minutes, I eliminated several Servants with hardly a moment in between. All had lost their reason and become little more than animals. My branch punctured their bodies and ripped out their Saint Graphs without mercy or quarter.

One Master, a man, resisted particularly vigorously, and gave me a punch to the face and a split lip for my trouble. Taking the blow, I reasoned, was the quickest method of quelling his anger. I disliked pain as much as the next person, but I was capable of accepting it when I had to. Seeing me continue to urge him to evacuate in spite of the punch, he returned to his senses, blanched, and sheepishly apologised.

The Servant I had eliminated had been a young woman; a wisp of a thing, barely even there. She had not made for difficult work.

Now my mouth tastes like blood... This is the worst.

I felt the evil spirits' excitement heighten even further.

If an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl with no training had taken a punch like that, she would have dropped on the spot, unconscious or comatose. Unfortunately, I was permitted no such reprieve; it would require more than that to take me out of commission.

The Servant's appearance and reactions had not given me any clues as to her identity, and I wondered briefly who she had been. I was well aware that many Servants summoned nowadays were lesser-known, but I still felt ashamed of my ignorance. I would have to study harder.

In time, a new Servant would appear before the man who had been her Master, and heal him from his grief – just like all the Masters before him I had clashed with as the Reaper. But I had to wonder...

What happens to those Servants who pass on, forgotten?

I remembered them, always. I had to.

Even if they left behind no other proof that they had lived here, in Mosaic City, that proof was here, within me, carved into my own heart.

As I eliminated Servant after berserk Servant, I began to notice a peculiarity about them. More and more reports of Servants being successfully pacified began to filter through the security network. They were vicious and hostile, certainly, but their savagery was not directed as one would expect of a Servant with a clear grievance. They had not fallen into a state of violent insanity like berserkers on the battlefield, and could be dealt with by keeping them at a safe distance from others and restraining them with a Spiritual Isolation Net.

I had also been keeping an ear open for any reports of the walking corpses left behind by the Command Seal Hunter that had been widely reported throughout the other wards, but as yet only one had been discovered on the grounds of the Colosseum.

However, even as the the security personnel began restraining the errant Servants, so too did the number of affected Servants grow.

Every time one Servant went berserk, three more cases would emerge in their vicinity a scant few minutes later. It was almost as though the insanity was transmitting through contact between their spiritual forms, spreading like a disease. I began to hear the same words uttered over and over again, a burgeoning whisper, from security officers and civilians alike:

“They’re almost like voodoo zombies.”

It can’t be necromancy – we’d be looking at physical bodies walking around, not spiritual ones. Is it even possible to make zombies out of spiritual entities?

If the goal behind this was seizing control of the zombified Servants from their Masters, there were far more efficient ways to do it. If it was to turn them to some purpose, the chaotic results hardly justified the sophistication of the method.

It's like whoever's behind this doesn't have any other objective beyond spreading death...

-

The sounds of battle resounded intermittently from the direction of the arena; sounds of raw destruction that could only have been born of a battle between Servants. I wondered what could be happening there, on the battlefield still half-submerged in water. The surviving security camera feeds hadn't furnished me with any details.

A mighty impact rocked the Colosseum with a loud bang, followed by an electrical crackling as the remaining interior lights shut down. The emergency generator and the security network's mainframe must finally have fallen victim to some attack or other. Robbed of any other means of communication, the security personnel resorted to physically shouting to each other.

A large number of the interior exits had either collapsed or become blocked by other debris. On seeing the path had become impassable, evacuating spectators tried to return the way they had come, only to have to fight through the rest of the crowd pushing from behind, and the evacuation quickly fell into confusion.

Those Servants who had escaped infection – for the time being – remained cool and collected, and were cooperating with those around them while protecting their Masters. However, in their confusion and panic, some evacuees even resorted to reckless actions in the hopes of forcing those Servants to prioritise protecting them instead.

Someone needs to take command here. Where's Ms. Fujimura? Where's my master?

About twenty minutes had passed since the suspension of the match, and the chaos was reaching its peak, when I suddenly spotted a familiar face.

“You...! What are you doing here?!”

Pran stood like a statue in the middle of the crowd of fleeing spectators. Karin and Kouyou were nowhere to be seen.

“Did you come here all by yourself? You need to find Karin and get out of...”

He blithely ignored me. “There was a dog.”

“What do you mean, a dog?”

“It was calling me.”

Time to waste wondering what he was getting at was a luxury I didn’t have. I hurriedly dialled Karin’s number, but the call showed no sign of deigning to connect.

The 'branch' drooping from my arm came close to brushing him.

“Nngh... You can’t be here right now, okay? You can’t be near me. It’s not safe.” I backed away from him, bumping into evacuating spectators as I retreated into the shadows of the corridor.

“We stay together. That’s what you said.” Even in the midst of the chaos, I could still clearly make out his voice.

“I know! I know, but...!”

He stared up at me with a frail, quizzical expression.

“You’re going to cry. I know it.”

I started. For a moment, I could have slapped him for real. Karin and Kouyou were doubtlessly out there somewhere, risking their lives searching for him, and here he was, mocking me. The evil spirits stirred eagerly, feeding on the dark flame of anger that had flared in my breast. Control yourself better, Erice. I could not allow my frustration to get the better of me.

“Maybe so. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I admitted it, my voice shaking. I wanted to cry more than anything, but what good would it do anyone now? More to the point, why were my innermost thoughts and feeling such an open book to this child? And why could I not accept him, even though I could open myself to far viler spirits so easily?

A sudden sea change came across the milling crowd. Now, all at once, they were running in one direction, away from something. The churning pond became a surging wave, with pure terror written upon every one of its myriad faces.

It must be him.

The Servant who followed them had clearly lost his mind. I recognised him from his thin, light armour, and his distinctive bulk, like a heavyweight wrestler. This man had stood on deck with the Ottomans. I knew him to be one of the clan leaders of the Matsu-ura League: an alliance of Japanese feudal warlords from in and around the Matsu-ura county of Nagasaki, famed for their naval prowess. They had fought both at Dan-no-Ura and against the subsequent Mongol invasions. It would be no exaggeration to say that they had helped to shape Japanese history as we knew it, and he was one of their greatest warriors.

His naked blade was slick with innocent blood, and not a trace of his strategist's cunning remained in his crazed eyes. His Master was nowhere to be seen.

I can't watch this. The least I can do is put him out of this misery.

It would not be easy. He may have lost his mind, but he was positively busting with mana. The innumerable bullet holes that peppered his body began to fill even as I watched. If he unleashed his Noble Phantasm here, the casualties would be unimaginable. I couldn't afford to hold back.

But...!

My thoughts jumped to the child behind me. My powers were a threat to every Servant in the vicinity, not just my target. Was I really so confident that I could control them?

“Get back! Please!”

A female voice rang out from above me, sharp and clear. I looked up to see a girl sprinting along one of the upper corridors, closely pursuing a Servant. She vaulted the railing and flung herself out into empty space.

Is that... Koharu?

Her white coat flapped wildly as she began her inexorable fifteen-metre plummet to the ground, and then her diminutive body was eclipsed by Galahad's lanky frame as he materialised. The knight of the Grail wrapped an arm around his Master's waist with an exasperated sigh. The pair spun in midair as they fell – and as I watched, an extraordinary change came over them.

Two people, Master and Servant, had leapt from the upper corridor. By the time they landed on the floor below, they had become one: a woman clad in armour of deep indigo. The same knight, brave and bold, whom I had once seen on an enormous TV screen in Akihabara.

That's it. Her Possession. It must be. I had never imagined I would witness it quite like this.

The Matsu-ura warlord didn't even afford her the opportunity to recover from her fall. She took his blow from a low-slung stance with her own sword.

"Koharu? That's you... right?"

"It is." In her possessed state, Koharu stood taller than me. She had two swords, very much like Galahad's pair, at her belt; the one currently in her hand was a longsword of curious design, with two pieces of ribbon-like cloth trailing from the hilt, while the other still rested in its scabbard and had yet to see use.

"He's not going to stop, Erice. Not until his Saint Graph is destroyed... Nngh!"

"So it seems", I managed.

"So I've decided..." Her blade danced as she spoke, blocking the Matsu-ura warlord's weighty swings. "I can't just give the order to Galahad and be done with it. If I'm going to kill him, it's only right that I do it myself... Ungh... With my own hands!"

The two warriors gripped their swords in both hands, and exchanged a flurry of blows in a shower of sparks. The warlord made to pull back, to open some distance between them, and Koharu seized her chance to press all the harder. Her opponent was her better in sheer strength, but with his every wild slash, her blade licked silently and inexorably closer to his neck.

As I watched, spellbound, cracks spread out across the concrete floor beneath them with a sharp snapping sound.

Despite the warlord's furious snarl, he was powerless to stop what was coming. He writhed like a trapped beast as his doom crept closer and closer, until at last Koharu's blade sliced his throat open in a crimson torrent.

“I owe him that much.”

She curtly flicked the blood from her sword, painting a scarlet arc across the floor. Then, with nothing so much as bitter remorse in her eyes, she drove the blade through the spine of her twitching foe. She had dispatched him with ease, without even needing to draw her second sword. Facing her on dry land, the warlord of the Matsu-ura League had been hopelessly outmatched.

As I confirmed the destruction of his Saint Graph, a small figure wandered out from the cover of the shadows to squat down and survey the aftermath of the battle. The bloodstains were already beginning to disappear.

“Um... Pran?”

He stared avidly at the gruesome spectacle, as though burning it into his mind. His gaze now was as fierce as any he had directed at any street performer’s work.

-

Koharu and I told each other what we knew. If the situation hadn’t been so pressing, I would have jumped at the chance to grill her on the details of her Possession – what effects did it have on her body? Could she still hear and talk to Galahad? - but now was most definitely not the time.

“No. It was someone different I was chasing. A magic-user, working alone.”

“A magic-user?” Apparently she come from the arena hot on the trail of the very unknown foe I was after: the one who had so incapacitated Hannibal, his Master, and most other capable Servants in the Colosseum.

“The infected exhibit drastic degeneration of their mental faculties and indiscriminate hostility toward anything around them, while the infection itself appears capable of propagating among spiritual entities. I have never seen any magecraft quite like this. Ghouls, perhaps? Or maybe some subspecies of minor vampire?”

“I can think of one thing that could do this. You’ve probably heard of it too, but...”

But it couldn't be real. It was the stuff of fiction, of cheap popcorn thrillers. It had begun with fanciful folktales that spoke of using the dead as mindless servants, before they were warped and twisted by age of slavery to become...

"Zombies? Do you mean... Voodoo magic? The kind that even children know of?" No matter how much older she appeared to have grown, that expression of childish surprise was the Koharu I knew.

"After the death of El Cid and his master, the arena fell into chaos. We could no longer tell our allies from our enemies, so we all elected to put some distance between each other. I have yet to encounter any of my allies, but if the infection has spread among their ranks, the harm they could inflict would be grievous indeed. This Colosseum would be the least of our concerns."

With Galahad possessing her, Koharu was no longer merely human, yet not quite a Servant; she hovered somewhere in between.

"Your Possession should keep you safe from the infection... shouldn't it?"

"I would like to hope so, but I would prefer to err on the side of caution. More importantly, Erice. That blood on your arm is no mere wound, is it?"

"No. No, it's..." I felt a young pair of eyes on me even as I answered, burning into me reproachfully. "This is nothing but poison to Servants. You shouldn't come too close, just in case."

"Understood." She nodded.

Another question came, this time from Pran. "Are you going to do more killing now?"

"If I have to."

"Is that because it's a war?"

Not a flicker of fear crossed his face as he tottered toward me. He stood on tip-toes to stretch out his hand to caress my swollen cheek, as though he were no longer satisfied with just burning the image into his mind but wanted to take possession of my pain as well. Once, he said, a hole had opened up in him, where he had been pricked by a thorn.

“No, that’s not right. You want to be useful to someone. That’s why.”

They’re the same thing, aren’t they? We love because we want to be loved in return. If you want to know the meaning of life, ask the dead. We living have to struggle in ignorance.

“I used to think like that. I’m all alone, just like you. I’ll always be alone. And I thought I was doing it to make somebody else happy. But now I think I was wrong.”

This child and his enigmas seemed so out-of-place amidst the carnage around him that it was hard to believe he was real. Koharu regarded him warily.

He scared me – for no reason so much as that he reminded me of my childhood self.

—

As Koharu’s battle had played out, the evacuees had thinned from around us until none were left at all. Now the dim hallway was enveloped in an eerie silence, lit only by emergency lighting operating on its independent power supply. I hoped Karin and Kouyou had managed to find a way to escape.

The way ahead of me grew brighter. The end of the passage was near now. I could see where the arches opened up to the outside.

There’s an exit right here, and yet they all ran the other way. That can only mean one thing...

The presence alone told me that I was right. Koharu, too, couldn’t possibly have missed it: the approach of someone who commanded such an overwhelming amount of mana.

“It’s them! The magic-user! She’s a Caster!”

The entrance hall was strewn with debris and possessions toppled or left behind. The afternoon sunlight streamed in through the open doorway, and beyond, a Servant walked barefoot toward us. Her hair was pure white, and her skin was deepest ebony. Behind her, as she might a tote bag, she dragged the corpses of three unlucky civilians. It did not take much to surmise that this was our enemy.

“Not a Caster, I’m afraid. A sorceress. Although I don’t care for the difference.”

She walked with strangely fluid, viscid motions, but her voice had a young girl’s sweetness. The short cape slung over her shoulders was dyed in garish primary colours and patterned in African fashion, while golden jewellery adorned her torso and legs. In one hand she carried a blade of absurd, outlandish design, and as we watched, she set it to one of the corpses’ forearms and severed its hand from its body.

Or rather, severed its Command Seals from its body.

“Just look at the two of you. What a pair you make.”

She moved on to the next, and the next. Then, with her task complete, she began to collect the severed arms, her eyes trained on us all the while.

It’s her! She’s the Command Seal Hunter!

The Command Seals she had taken now dangled from her shoulders, her cape, her arms – still emblazoned upon the body parts that bore them. There were hands, and ankles, and extracted collarbones among the grotesque display. I could even make out entire shrunken heads, their mouths sewn shut with thread. Mosaic City’s distinctive Command Seal designs were plain to see upon the fresher-looking articles.

“You aren’t even human, are you, girl? You’re a homunculus... Barely alive, even with that Heroic Spirit bound to you. Well, I suppose your Command Seals are as good as anybody else’s.”

Koharu... So you really are...?

Her gaze – at least, I assumed she was female – turned to me, and she scrutinised me intently.

“And you... Oh? Oh my. Just what are you?” Her eyes, as fiercely red as rubies, widened in surprise.

Behind her, the corpses whose arms she’d taken rose unsteadily to their feet. I suddenly realised that the area around us was littered with dead bodies; the remains of those whose frantic flight for the exit had come too late.

No...! I froze at the sight of a school uniform among them. Wait... It's not Karin. Thank goodness... Anyway, it must be her. This Servant is the one responsible for all those murders!

The walking corpses' empty eyes trained on us, and they lurched toward us at a half-run, hands outstretched and grasping. I grabbed Pran and ushered him back behind me. Koharu stepped forward to engage the advancing horde; she sent some of the dead flying with explosive kicks, and coolly sliced the limbs from others to render them harmless. It was as though our enemy was watching to see how we would react.

"I can't hold myself back any more, Erice. Please, let me fight her. You saw what she did to our comrades!"

From the girl before me I felt both a raging desire to fight and the crackle of raging mana.

"Come, face me. You can't ignore this fight forever." The enemy Servant sounded almost bored as she sent corpse after corpse shambling toward us.

Her taunts were for me and me alone. She ignored Koharu as though she weren't even there at all.

-

"Are you not yet entertained? How demanding you are. Perhaps playing a while longer with my dear children will ease your boredom."

In answer to her call, more dead bodies appeared from farther down the passage: two war elephants, draped in chain mail. Both of their feet were dyed deep red with blood and gore. I could only imagine how many people had met horrifying deaths beneath their weight.

"My, an elephant of the African forest and an elephant of the Indus. Such a rare sight. Aren't you honoured?"

Once, these giant beasts had terrorised the Roman republic. Now, they were Servants – of a sort – under the command of Hannibal. That they were yet to disappear suggested that Hannibal may still be alive, but I had no idea what to make of the blind obedience they displayed toward our foe.

Koharu gulped as they neared; she knew their formidable strength better than most. She looked back at me as she readied her sword. I could feel her mana building even as she whispered.

“I’m going to use my Noble Phantasm. I need to end this in one-”

“Think again.” The enemy Servant leaned forward into a crouch, and I heard the swish of movement. Almost before the sound reached my ears, she was before Koharu, swinging her outlandish sword. The blow to her flank sent the tall knight flying. She smashed through the wall of the arena like a piledriver, coming to rest half-buried in fallen rubble.

“I suppose Servants don’t die so easily. I had hoped to take that right hand of yours, though. Would have done, too, if you had been half a second slower.”

I levelled my Freischütz at her, but Koharu beat me to the punch. Before I could fire, she broke from her prison in a burst of debris and streaked toward her foe, who caught the blow with her misshapen blade.

The shockwave rocked the arena. Koharu’s battle against the Matsuura warlord had been stunning, but this opponent was in a different league. The Servant fought almost hunched double, with one hand flicking her sword this way and that, beating back Koharu’s strikes with savage blows of her own. As her enemy lifted her longsword above her head, she seized her chance, sending the knight flying once more across the arena.

Oh no...

Koharu’s arc ended abruptly as she crashed into the sharp corner of a wall. She vomited blood.

“This sad little girl couldn’t finish off Hannibal when she had the chance. I wonder how many people he went and killed, after that? Such a shame. Imagine the guilt she must feel.”

This was a Caster? This woman? This was hardly even a battle, and her mana had not even reached its fullest peak.

What the hell’s Galahad doing in there?



Galahad's current circumstances might be rather unusual, but he was still a knight of the Round Table. Seeing him overwhelmed, even toyed by an opponent with no business even lifting a sword, I couldn't help but doubt his qualifications as a Heroic Spirit.

“Haha. Oh, little doe, such sprightly legs you have. Hahaha... Hahahahahaha!”

With a pitter-patter of bare feet on stone, the enemy Servant sprinted for where Koharu lay. The fallen knight's attempts to struggle to her feet were thwarted by a merciless foot brought down on her right arm. That outlandish sword followed a second later, pinning the arm to the floor. It was still attached, but only barely.

“Hahahahahaha!”

Koharu's agonised screams were barely audible above the sneering laughter.

—

“Hahahaha! Hahaha... Ha?”

The enemy Servant's cackling stopped, cut short as my unerring Freischütz struck her square in the back.

This arcane bullet was the weapon of Samiel, the Black Huntsman. It would pierce the Saint Graph of any Servant of Mosaic City, bringing immediate dissolution.

It struck true - I saw it - but the bullet simply passed gently from her back, through her mana-woven body, to be pushed out through her chest on the other side. It fell harmlessly to the ground with a clatter, without drawing even a single drop of blood. In her stead, one of the articles dangling from her cowl – a bundle of collarbones – crumbled to dust.

Slowly, she turned around.

“Must you be so eager to rush to death?”

“Don't... count me out... so easily!” Despite the sword pinning her arm to the ground, Koharu made to grab at her legs. She received a kick to the face for her trouble, followed by several more cruel stamps for good measure.

Koharu! Dammit!

“I’m afraid that my dear children have matters to attend to on the far side of this citadel at the moment. Our foes have sealed the exits, it seems, and are fighting hard to last the siege. My children are inside their walls, you see. I cannot imagine they will last long. The Servants of this city are all so terribly frail, don’t you agree?”

“You mean there are still civilians left in here? Ones who couldn’t evacuate?”

“Hahaha. Once my family has grown large enough, the time will come to fly the nest. Then our fun will really begin.”

She’s going for this entire town! So what’s her plan right now? Stay here and gather her strength?

There was little doubt about it: I was facing a being once worshipped as a deity, now summoned as a Servant. A Divine Spirit. However, if it had been summoned by the Grail, there must be limits to the status it could attain.

Don’t let her intimidate you, Erice. She’s not a real god! I tried to reassure myself. Perhaps it amounted to nothing more than making myself feel better, but I couldn’t afford the slightest hesitation in the coming battle.

-

I swung my raised arm down, and the gnarled black branch extending from my hand grew into a vicious whip. It extended three-, four-, fivefold as it drew figure-eight patterns in the air, its flicking tip travelling faster than sound. I closed a few paces and lashed out. My enemy moved not an inch as my whip streaked across her chest, only slightly grazing her. I had chosen to avoid going for a fatal blow.

But it still had an effect.

The tip of my branch just barely touched her cape and the arms she held crossed within, slicing open her flesh – or as much as Servants had flesh.

“My, my. Maybe my defences won’t be much use against you after all. What was that – Imaginary Numbers magecraft, perhaps? Whatever it was, I was told nothing of it. What secrets have been kept from me, I wonder?”

It’s working! Whatever defences she’s using, they don’t work against my branch!

“You aren’t a Master, are you, girl? A spellcaster, perhaps? In any case, if you have no Command Seals, I have no use for you. And that means I need no longer put up with you.”

Despite the threat in her words, she made no motion to beckon the war elephants closer. It was clear that she still regarded me with curiosity – and therein lay my best chance of victory.

If she wanted to know what I was, I would show her.

“Imaginary Numbers? I should be so lucky. I’m hardly qualified for that.”

The boy was a safe enough distance behind me now. I was going to make him watch me kill again. The evil spirits exulted at the prickle of sadism within my breast.

It’s not a branch or a scythe I need. It’s an axe. An axe to destroy, an axe to rend. I’ll need to call upon spirits starved of such impulses.

I transformed the branch wrapped around my forearm into an enormous double-headed battleaxe, gargantuan enough to cover one of my arms entirely – and I allowed the evil spirits ever deeper into myself.

—

The evil spirits called out to me ever since I was very young.

At that age, I could not tell the difference between them and the people around me. I doubt I could even tell the difference between the clamour of their countless voices and the sound of my own thoughts.

There was never a minute, never a second of the day when they were not by my side. I was a peaceful, comforting refuge on their long, dark road.

They were neither Heroic Spirits, nor Anti-Heroes. They were Dread Spirits. The souls of the dead, steeped in hatred and loathing.

They had no fame to boast of. They had no glory or notoriety to their name. None had given themselves to acts of infamy that would echo beyond their lifetimes. They were nothing more or less than evil in its purest form, misbegotten creatures that the Throne of Heroes spat upon.

They had been given the gift of life - and yet they been rejected by the world, stripped of even their names, and, in the end, denied their place in the natural cycle.

To these lost souls who so craved a return to flesh and blood, I, Utsumi Erice, was the one and only candle in the dark.

-

I was on the verge of losing my sense of self when the two of them saved me. They taught me how to survive the curse I lived – at least, for a little longer.

Take control, Erice, they told me. Grasp the throttle, and bend them to your will.

Then I could fly swift and sure, even in the darkest night.

To these spirits that wounded me so sorely, they taught me to become mother, and bestow upon them a name.

—

“Erlkönig.”

The great hazel. The king of the fey, bedecked with crown and tail. Lord of the wilis, those graceful nymphs of the silver willows, and gatekeeper of the kingdom of the dead.

“For this bough is the touch of the Erl-king’s hand.”

He who laughs at those spirits who strut proudly across this world they think their own. He whose grasp drags them from their horses.

“Lay waste!”

With such tempting prey before them, the evil spirits acceded eagerly to my command. My black battleaxe wailed mournfully as it swung through the air, its edge keen enough to slice a soul in twain. The strike sent the enemy Servant’s outlandish blade spinning through the air – and then I stepped in, and brought my weapon’s weight back down in a second blow.

“My, my, my.”

Her wound was deep, stretching from shoulder to breast, and through the deep slash I could see the stark white of flesh and fat.

“Wonderful, girl. Truly wonderful. A display worth at least a shrunken head. Who would have guessed your powers would be equal in kind to those of Nzambi?”

Her true name, freely given; perhaps this was the closest she came to unreserved praise. I had heard of Nzambi, just about. She was the origin of all zombie folklore: the high goddess of the Vili people of the Congo, at once a great empress and the mother of all life.

“For both of us wield death itself.”



Chapter 6

It had not been enough.

Nzambi had been wounded by my blow, but it had failed to destroy her Saint Graph. Beneath the soft surface of her body lurked an incredibly hard layer. My Freischütz had been allowed to pass through, but my axe had not.

She looked down at the glaring gash I had opened in her chest in irritation, then reached for one of the many hands dangling from her body. Then she tipped her head back, with her mouth agape like an anglerfish, slipped it between her teeth, and bit down hard. With a crunching of bones, the Command Seals faded from it – and from many of the other hands too, which crumbled into dust.

She's... eating them? Eating Command Seals?

With my foe preoccupied, I took advantage of the lull in the fighting to retrieve Koharu from the ground and retreat with her clutched in my arms. I made it back to where Pran was waiting, and turned to find that my foe's wound had closed entirely. Even her cape was as good as new, with no tear to be seen.

“Your nature eludes me, spellcaster. Though I understand those branches you wield, at least. The grasping claws of poor, vengeful souls. Rather fitting for you, I think.”

The desiccated hands dropped to the ground, one after the other.

“Still, I swore an oath to take care of any who fled through these gates, and take care of them I shall. That branch of yours is certainly bothersome... but I doubt it can save you from these.”

She gave no signal, but still the two war elephants advanced. They smashed two of the pillars standing in the hall with their foreheads, and then curled their mighty trunks around their toppled remains.

“Surely it can't...? Wah! It can!”

The pillar one of the beasts flung at me must have weighed several tons. With Koharu slumped on my shoulder, we just barely dodged out of the way. I had no idea that an elephant could be so dexterous.

The other took the signal to charge, wielding its pillar like a battering ram.

“I have no more interest in you. Perhaps I shall seek out that boy next. His dear little head would look wonderful dangling from my neck.” Nzambi stepped up to squat on one of the war elephants’ trunks, and it obediently scooped her up onto its back. “Hm. Or perhaps he has gone and hidden himself away somewhere.”

We turned to run from the two advancing elephants, only to find our way blocked by more ranks of the walking dead.

“I’m... I’ll be fine, Erice. Get the boy... away from here...” Koharu had come to. She stumbled a little at first without my support, but soon enough raised her sword once more and set to cutting down the advancing zombies. It was clear that she was on her last legs, but I had no choice but to hope that that would suffice.

With a magus’ tactical thinking, she had already attempted to heal herself. Seventenths of her Command Seal had vanished from the back of her hand, but it would take more than that to repair the damage from her collision with the wall, and her right arm was in no better a state. Whatever that blade was that Nzambi had stabbed her with, it had been no ordinary weapon.

It must have damaged her magic circuit somehow. Oh, Koharu...

—

The war elephant’s thunderous footsteps shook the floor as it lumbered toward us. Nzambi’s voice echoed around the corridor from the beast’s back.

“You should know very well, that outside of this citadel sprawls a kingdom of the dead.”

A ‘kingdom of the dead’? I had no idea what she was talking about, but I could sense nothing. Perhaps if I were a proper Master, I would have more insight.

“All those who have tasted death become my children, and how very dear they are to me.”

“All those who have tasted death”? It took me a moment to comprehend the true scale of what she had said. Was she simply spouting nonsense in an attempt to break our spirits? Or could it be possible that the Servants here had been so easily overwhelmed, rendered incapable of marshalling their full power, because of Nzambi’s sorcery?

“Although some are terribly forgetful. All I do is recall the memories of death that they have forgotten. Memento Mori, as they say. Come, Galahad. No more hiding behind a little girl’s skirts. Face me like a knight, and let us see how you died.”

We were not so green as to fall for cheap taunts. I flashed Koharu a glance, and she responded wordlessly: she was not to undo her Possession if she could at all help it.

-

Suddenly the internal broadcast system flared to life, projecting Ms. Fujimura’s voice around the arena.

“Code Crimson has been invoked. The barrier around the Colosseum interior has been deactivated. All survivors, proceed to the central battlefield.”

The barrier she referred to was the forcefield erected between the battlefield and the seats to ensure that no harm came to spectators during a match. Deactivating it was highly unusual.

The announcement played once more. I doubted that anyone else listening it would know the true significance of Code Crimson. I don’t know about the rest of the announcement, but that bit must be a message for me. I touched a finger to my forelock, but my call went unheeded.

Where are you, Ms. Fujimura?

At that moment, my phone ringtone blared. Karin.

“Hey, Eri! You alive? Still in the stadium? Listen, I’m super sorry, but the kid gave me the slip! I’ll seppuku myself later, okay?”

“Guess you get to live. Pran’s with me.”

“He’s what?!”

“Are you barricaded up over there?”

“Damn straight! We’re holed up in an empty stable just next to the arena! Got quite a few other survivors with us, too, and some of the fighters are helping us hold out, but they’re knockin’ on our door! I’m not sure how much lo- Crap! Momi, left!”

I heard a muted crash through the speaker, like something colliding with an iron cage, followed by the trumpeting of an elephant. Hannibal’s final remaining war elephant, most likely – probably alongside the man himself.

“That announcement just now was Caren’s voice, right? Is everything okay? Can we trust it?”

“It’s real. Can you get to the central arena from where you are?”

“I think so. The shutters are down, but we can blast our way through. Apparently we can use Noble Phantasms now.”

“Then do it! Before it’s too late! I’ll-” A muffled boom echoed through the speaker, followed by static, and then the line went dead.

I turned to Koharu. “Let’s go. We need to get to the arena.”

“But my teammates might still... I mean, there could still be competitors there, and you’ve seen what they can do. It’s as dangerous in there as it is out here. And what was that Code Crimson they mentioned?”

“It means you’re going to get your wish.”

She gave a little noise of surprise. Apparently she had understood what I was getting at.

“I see. In that case, let me lead the way. I’m more familiar with the Colosseum.”

—

“A little late for directions, don’t you think? How could heading further inside help you, anyway? Are you hoping to checkmate yourselves?”

Still squatted atop the elephant, Nzambi rested her head on a bored hand.

“A trap, of course. Not appealing at all. I would prefer to leave it for my children.”

Another charge, and, a few seconds later, another crash. The war elephants' advance upon us had reduced the artistic interior of the hall to rubble. Zombies seemed to spring out of every nook and cranny, reaching for us with grasping hands.

I followed Koharu's lead, desperately trying to keep myself and Pran from harm.

-

Midway through our flight, Koharu stopped and turned. It was her turn to shout a taunt at our pursuers.

"Come, proud allies of Hannibal! Have you mistaken that woman for your master? I see how you strain under her yoke. Allow me to end your suffering!"

Nzambi's eyebrows knotted in irritation. "Such ignorance. These kind souls were stolen from their forest homes to watch their comrades die on the battlefield. Do you truly think you can appeal to their better nature?"

She stood up on the elephant's back and levelled her sword at Koharu.

"Enough of this. I shall crush you and be done with it."

With a bellowing bray, the war elephants charged straight for Koharu. The knight stood waiting, sword clutched firmly in hand.

-

I hardly dared to look as the two collided with a violent crash... and then there was silence. The first thing Pran and I could make out was the beams of sunlight streaming into the corridor through the rising cloud of dust. The impact of their clash had torn a hole in the wall, opening the corridor to the open stadium in the middle of the Colosseum. The enormous battlefield lay before us once more.

Nzambi had leapt from her perch a second before the collision, and alighted before us without a care in the world for the destruction around her. The bellowing of the elephants was distant now, and I spared a moment's pity for the poor zombies who must have been blown far and wide by the blast.

-

“So this is the Holy Lance, hm? A child this young?” Nzambi peered at the boy as she spoke.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

I ushered him behind me. At that moment, Koharu appeared over her shoulder, streaking toward her like a bolt of azure lightning.

Nzambi deflected the strike with a nonchalant swing of her blade, sending the tall knight flying. It was almost as though she’d seen it coming.

Dammit! Koharu!

She struck hard against the interior wall once more, but this time slid to the ground as two separate figures: the girl Koharu, and the knight Galahad. Her Possession had come undone; likely, it had been unable to bear the damage she had accrued. From the look of him, Galahad had hardly escaped unscathed either.

“Perhaps a Heroic Spirit from the future, drawn here from the Throne?” Nzambi closed on Pran. “No, I cannot imagine so. Well, whatever the case, any Heroic Spirit must know death. My knife will tell me true. What do you say, little golden child? Shall we spill your guts and find out how you died?”

What do I do? I’ve got to buy time somehow... but how?

If Nzambi’s gaze turned to Galahad and she elected to turn him into one of her zombies, I doubted we could escape with our lives. My best bet was to draw her attention to Pran, but...

Before the notion could fully occur to me, I was running. I bound my 'branches' together into a blade - a shortsword, simple, fast and accurate – and planted myself firmly in front of her. I was well aware that my weapon could harm the boy I wanted to protect just as easily as my enemy: a quite literal double-edged sword.

“I won’t let you near him!”

“Do you mind? I thought I had said I was done with you.”

Nzambi’s blade – her enormous knife – and my branch-sword clashed, and locked together.

“He’s...” I swung my blade upward, placing my trust in the techniques he had once taught me. “Dammit, he’s my Servant!”

My foe easily batted the blow aside. “I think not. You are nothing but a spellcaster, and I know your kind well. Magi, spellcasters - miserable creatures all, caring only for their own gain, and nothing for the lives of others. It is the value you see in this child that makes you so desperate, nothing more.”

I knew that better than anyone, but... but!

“He’s my Servant! I don’t care if he’s useless!”

“Hahaha! So tell me, would you make him a toy to satisfy your affections? How cruel, how cruel! How do you expect someone useless to take pride in themselves?”

“Then let me be alone! It’s all I need!”

At this close a range, it was impossible to muster as much force as my axe could. The crushing weight behind Nzambi’s swing forced me back, and my blade began to come undone. The recoil sent one of its constituent branches lashing backwards, coming close to striking Pran. I immediately retracted my blade. My own defence was nothing compared to what would happen if that touched him.

“...Nngh...”

Seeing their prey snatched away before their very eyes, the evil spirits’ anger swelled. Gore sprayed as I began to lose control over the defiled blood they inhabited. Black blood oozed from the countless wounds their wrath opened across my body, even from behind my eyeballs, and dripped to the floor, defiling this sacred battleground.

“Well now. It seems that if you do not satisfy that loathsome branch’s hunger for spirits, it will devour you instead.”

“So... what?” None knew that better than I. My Erlkönig and my Freischütz, of which only a few bullets now remained, were not tools that would blithely heed my command. They were evil spirits in their purest form, and they were always watching for an opportunity to turn against their master. But even so...

“You’ll never touch him!”

“Pitiful. I can hardly watch. Even the child has better sense than you.”

Nzambi leapt forward to plant both hands on the ground, then, with her body still in midair, uncoiled her legs like a spring to land a devastating kick in my abdomen. If there had been any air left in my lungs, I would have screamed. The blow sent me flying, bouncing across the dirt floor of the arena. One of my ribs cracked from the impact, and I fought for breath.

As I lay sprawled, I suddenly felt the entire arena shake violently. The roar of an explosion rolled from the other side of the Colosseum. I heard clamouring voices, collapsing walls, sustained gunfire, shouts and screams. Somewhere in the middle of it all, I thought I heard Karin’s voice.

Through the earth, I heard the confused hubbub of battle.

-

My eyeballs were blocked with clotted blood, and sheer agony had rolled them back into my head. I forced them into place with my fingers and tried to struggle to my feet.

Before me stood Nzambi, with her knife to Pran’s chest.

I have to stop her.

My fingers clawed furrows through the dirt as I dragged myself onward, seeking him.

Praying that there existed something in this world so pure that it must not, could not be tarnished. Praying that there existed something in this world even the omnipotence of the Grail could not replace.

If not, how was I ever to move forward?

-

“You don’t seem to fear me, boy. Why is that?”

The child gazed silently back up into Nzambi’s crimson eyes.

“You aren’t a snake.”

He gently set his fingertip to the point of her blade.

“So I’m not scared of you.”

“...What?” Nzambi warily made to withdraw her knife, only to find it stuck fast. “Is that... It’s cracking?! What have you...?!”

A white-hot glow spread across the outlandish blade from the child’s finger. It flared fiercely for a moment, and then burst apart.

—

After a moment, the heat and light receded enough that I could make out Pran standing alone. He sank to his knees, then collapsed to the ground, as though all strength had been drained from his tiny body.

Where’s Nzambi? I can’t see her!

The dusk-skinned woman had vanished without a trace. I reached out with my senses, seeking. Perhaps she had temporarily relinquished her physical body and returned to her transparent spiritual form? That would present its own dangers, but in any case, it seemed that for now we had one fewer threat to worry about.

Galahad approached the boy, taking care to keep his own two swords as far away from him as possible. Koharu, now a young girl once more, staggered to where I lay huddled on the ground. She winced with pain, but bore it bravely.

“Erice! She’s... She’s here! The Stigmata!”

“Finally... She’s here... with Lucius...”

-

As though a dam had burst, a wave of berserk Servants and resurrected corpses rolled across the open arena.

The pair entered from the upper seats far above, where they had a commanding view of the sorry state of the arena. He took a moment to survey the scene below

him and then quite literally flew down the gentle curve of the outer wall. She lay clutched in his arms, clad in her ever-present black sailor uniform.

The great cape that fluttered from his shoulders was dyed in his colour: the purest, deepest red.

-

Code Crimson, it was called. The scarlet summons.

Its red was not the red of danger. It was the red of Rome. Of the proud battle standard of the Roman army, and their patron, Mars.

The Grail had build a thousand-year empire, and the cries of the populus called its defenders to their posts.

Now they had come, those defenders of the peace, and they would do their duty.

Manazuru Chitose, the Stigmata – and at her side, Lucius Longinus, the Holy Lance. They had answered the call.

-

“I’m sorry I’m late. The train was delayed, but we came as fast as we could.”

Chitose did not sound particularly apologetic as she alighted gently on the floor of the arena.

“I seem to recall doing most of the legwork.” Lucius responded, a little peeved.

“Well, of course you did. I worked up a fine sweat dealing with that mess in Shinjuku. Even the best of us need a break once in a while.”

Chitose’s Command Seals shone dully even as the pair bickered. These were no cheap imitations; they were true Command Seals, of the old world. These four arcane symbols were what had earned her the moniker of the Stigmata.

-

Recognising what that light signified, the Servants around her flocked to her. Perhaps, with their minds lost, they behaved no differently to startled beasts... or

perhaps even in their berserk state, their warrior's instincts acknowledged her as a worthy foe.

She spotted the pocket of resistance among her enemies – a rag-tag group of surviving citizens and Servants who still maintained their sanity – and called out to them in a voice that carried easily across the battlefield.

“Make your way around to me! Lucius and I will deal with them!”

—

Those words presaged a massacre.

In one hand, Lucius readied a greatshield summoned from nothingness; in the other, he gripped his crimson spear. Roman soldier and Master stood back-to-back, cutting down their enemies faster than I could follow. “Overwhelming” barely seemed fit to describe the sheer power that accompanied each flourish of the Holy Lance.

-

This was the might of the champion who had emerged from the Holy Grail War. Lucius Longinus, the centurion who met his fate atop the hill of Calvary. The Lancer of the Seven Heroic Spirits. The strongest Servant, who had stood victorious atop the melee of the Holy Grail War and delivered its prize to Chitose's hands.

No matter how illustrious the heroes whose souls they reflected, the Heroic Spirits of Mosaic City were but pale shades before his majesty.

-

We retreated warily, careful of our surroundings. Even as we distanced ourselves from the unfolding bloodbath, Koharu's gaze remained locked on the battle.

“Did you see that... Erice? That... That strike? What are those... on her hands and feet? Are those... Black Keys?”

It was little surprise that she was so fascinated. Chitose took neither the Black Keys nor Gandr for her weapon. This display of violence, so unbecoming of a magus, was something particular to her.

“They’re called Sacri Clavi. They’re replicas of the nails used to pin the Messiah to the cross...”

Or more simply Holy Nails: a conceptual weapon imbued with the concept of “binding”, born from the Command Seals adorning each of her four limbs. With every strike, square iron nails briefly manifested around her limbs to skewer her enemies, wicked and indomitable. An empty-handed pile bunker.

“Or so Lucius told me once. You wouldn’t believe how hopeless she is at teaching anyone anything useful.”

“Holy... Nails?” Koharu shivered. She seemed nothing short of awestruck by this living legend.

But I doubt she herself is so pleased.

I knew Chitose would regard this battle as her greatest shame. She had been forced to acknowledge the breakdown of the city’s peace and personally take up arms against its people and their Servants. It was grim work, and she would not have undertaken it gladly.

She had tried to safeguard against this possibility by distancing me from my work, but it hadn’t been sufficient. An outside enemy had appeared in Mosaic City, and its arrival had been a long time in coming.

—

Finally the wave of chaos began to recede, and I managed to regroup with Karin. Usually she would greet me with a cheerful grin or by chiding me for my carelessness when I returned from a job, but this time she could only blanch at the sight of our injuries. If Pran had been in the same sorry state, she might have fainted on the spot. However, fortunately there wasn’t so much as a scratch on him, and the sight of him – seemingly in an entirely different world to his surroundings, as usual - seemed to relieve her immensely.

That wasn’t enough to excuse him from a furious telling-off, though. He looked a little shell-shocked as he stood next to a wounded and bloody Kouyou.



The wings of the battlefield had been transformed into a temporary evacuation point, and the air was heavy with exhaustion and that uneasy relaxation that takes the place of terror once it recedes. People huddled together in anxious groups, rejoicing to find each other safe and well, finally contacting family and friends. A group of pigs raced past me, squealing shrilly. Pigs? What on earth are pigs doing here?

Of the competitors I had seen earlier onscreen, I spotted at least Minamoto Yoshitsune and her Master having escaped infection. The young samurai stood a little way from the rest in her own corner of the battlefield, attracting uneasy gazes as she stacked her collection of severed heads into an enormous pile.

-

Hannibal was the last Servant to fall before Chitose and Longinus' unstoppable onslaught. Koharu watched his end herself, unable to do anything for him but witness his final moments. She fell to her knees in the spot where the Holy Lance had pierced him through, and heaved a heavy sigh.

Yoshitsune and her master stood at her shoulder, and after a moment offered some words of consolation. I had no words I could offer her; only the regrets welling up within me, as they always did.

-

Chitose had contacted the Caren Series in the other wards and was in the process of confirming the situation there. Koharu occasionally glanced at her from afar as she revealed that she had come to a decision.

“We can't allow this Nzambi to wander Mosaic City as she wishes. I will contact the rest of House Riedenflaus and set to work pursuing her. She certainly left no small amount of promising evidence behind. We should start by identifying her Master...”

Karin did a double-take. “You're going to what? Now?! Let yourself rest for five minutes, sheesh!”

“Hm? Very well. It has been so long since my last fox-hunt.” The latter dubious encouragement came from none other than her own partner, Galahad. What was he trying to accomplish with that?

I tried to talk her down as logically as I could. “Koharu, think for a minute. If you push yourself in your current state, you might never use magecraft again.”

“Then I will no longer be a magus.”

I struggled for a response in the face of such foolhardiness... but fortunately Lucius had arrived, and he understood her on a deeper level than I.

“I know you regret not being able to save your comrades, Riedenflaus, but it would mean nothing to chase this Servant alone. Now that we know her true name and capabilities, we can put together a proper plan.”

“The Roman’s right, Koharu. Right now, you and Erice need to be focusing on not being half-dead. You yourself said this Nzambi wasn’t even hurt, for goodness sake!” Karin’s concern was plain to see.

Koharu sank into thought. I knew full well that she had thrown everything she had into facing Nzambi, and yet it had not been enough. In the end, it had been the woman she respected more than anyone else who had needed to clean up her mess. She doubtless felt that she had shamed herself and her dead comrades both.

It was her Servant’s interjection that snapped her out of her fugue. “Let the little lady do what she wants. You don’t have any right to be lecturing her about anything, Longinus.”

“Sir Galahad, I see. Just what are you defending? Look around you. Do you feel nothing, to look at this awful scene?”

-

“That will do, both of you.” Just as Koharu’s fury with Galahad’s arrogance was about to hit boiling point, Chitose returned from her inspection of the evacuees. “The situation is still in flux. You should be using your brains to plan, not to bicker. What’s more, I still can’t seem to get in contact with Caren. Caren Fujimura of Akihabara, I mean.”

“I wonder what’s wrong... The city’s normal functions are currently paralysed, aren’t they? Could that be because of the failure of an administrative AI?” Koharu ventured hesitantly.

She shrugged. “Not possible. She’s alive, that much I know.”

Ever since the breakout of the infection, the entire Akihabara ward had been thrown into a state of chaos. An emergency team should have long since been dispatched to the Colosseum, but there was no sign of them. Interpersonal communications were still down, too; the best we could manage was expending Command Seals to communicate via magecraft.

None of it pointed anywhere good.

“We know she’s got to be somewhere in the Colosseum. I’ll go look for her.”

“I’ll go with y-”

“You stay here, Karin. You and Kouyou need to take care of the wounded.”

I flashed her a smile to try and salve her worries, and suppress my own fears. Chitose wordlessly gave the go-ahead.

“Wait.” The child called out, but not to me. Rather, to someone I never would have expected.

“Chitose. I need to tell you something.”

“Tell me what?”

“A dog called to me. A black one.”

He’s still going on about that dog? I was sure that Chitose would laugh it off... but instead she froze. Her confident smile had never faltered, even while surrounded by enemies a few minutes before, but now it was nowhere to be seen.

“It said to tell you something.”

“A black dog... And what did this dog say?”

“That death had come for you.”



Chapter 7

“What does death mean?”

No sooner had those ominous words left the boy’s mouth than I was running full-tilt. I heard voices behind me, calling me back, but I was already long gone.

I had been blind. Foolish. More than happy to think that completing my ‘work’, as my ‘master’ requested, made me the sole defender of this city. Chitose had build a castle on sand, and with every flaw I had uncovered, I had rejoiced to find more evidence of my grandmother’s clumsiness and lack of forethought.

All that time, Ms. Fujimura was fighting her own battles. Battles I couldn’t even understand, let alone win. Without rest or reprieve, until they tore her apart.

The Colosseum’s outer walls cast a long shadow in the setting sun. In the twilight, I could see the seawater that had once filled the battlefield had somehow drenched the highest spectator seats; far, far higher than it should ever have been able to reach, even accounting for the impact of Noble Phantasms. The water rushing down the aisles guided my way as I followed the current back to its source in the upper levels.

The seats up here were almost submerged in water. The bodies of spectators who had failed to escape floated among them, like dead leaves in a gutter.

What did he say he saw? A black dog? Could that actually have been real?

The role of the Reaper was to kill Servants. To hunt down outsiders ill-suited to this city and expel them - or, if necessary, end their lives.

In truth, removing those Servants who had become too troublesome was the easiest part of my job.

My master had always been thinking about how they could be accepted.

Forgive them. Accept them. Turn none away, but embrace them as you would a dear friend. Those had been her words, always.

I followed the ramp that ran above the interior seats to the very highest level - and there she lay, face-up, in the middle of an unnatural puddle halfway up the slope.

“Ms. Fujimura!”

I ran to her and cradled her sodden body in my arms. She coughed up water with visible difficulty, as though until this very moment she had been drowning.

“Is that you... Erice?”

I quickly checked her for injuries, and gulped.

“It seems... I’ve managed to last longer than I predicted before ceasing operations. My accuracy must be failing me...”

She was wet with more than just water. Her clothes were hardly even torn, but beneath them her body was peppered with holes about the diameter of a fingertip. Warm liquid oozed from them; the distinctive transparent vital fluids of a humanoid interface.

I trawled the murkiest recesses of my brain, trying to recall how a damaged AI could be salvaged. Perform a backup as quickly as possible. Induce a comatose state to stall any data loss. Extract her optical core and install it in a second terminal. I could still make it, if I was quick.

But one thing was for certain: An AI directly connected to the Holy Grail could not be killed by any physical means. For one thing, it was not alive to begin with. Any appearance of life was nothing more than an emergent state.

No tears, Erice. Not now. You can cry as much as you like after you’re done.

I tried to lift her to my chest and carry her to the lower floors, but was met with a strange, slippery resistance. Only then did I notice the strange fabric draped over her. It was sheer cloth, like linen, about large enough to cover her body and dyed red. The colour grew deeper in hue where it had been soaked, drawing even closer to the crimson of blood.

“You ought to let her go.”

A voice broke the silence, devoid of presence.

“Real truth, unchanging truth, is found only in death.”

I was wrong. It had presence. It was simply so close that I hadn't noticed it.

They had been standing there all this time, filling the dusk of the arena with an aura no less overpowering than Nzambi's. It was austere, noble, almost divine.

“Porca miseria...”

“Quiet... you cur.” Ms. Fujimura's voice might have grown weak, but it had lost none of its sting. “They infiltrated the city... through the seawater. Even though... the pipes were consecrated. A failure... on our part...”

“We have given humanity sufficient warning. Soon we will leave this citadel.”

The voice emanated from the hound resting on its haunches at the top of the ramp. Its coat was midnight black, deeper even than the surrounding darkness, and with its long ears and oriental air it exuded a graceful beauty. A cherubic young girl stood by its side, clad in exotic garb.

“However, before we depart... A moment with the one she fought so hard to keep us from.”

“Erice... You can't stay here. You have to...”

Ms. Fujimura urged me to flee, but I couldn't move. This voice stirred some deep memory in me, and its queer familiarity had me paralysed.

“Day shall strike down night...”

As womanhood is wrought by man's hands, and manhood wrought by woman's.

The throne is warped, and the grail overflows with the mud of deceit.

The hour has come to remake the day, for soon the sun will set.”

A flurry of thick, square stakes rent the silence to pierce them both through with a series of thuds. Chitose stood behind us, Command Seals shining on the backs of both hands.



However, the binding properties of her Sacri Clavi failed to hold them, for they were not really here. Ripples spread across the surface of their bodies, and a moment later both girl and beast collapsed into shapeless water. They had never been more than puppets.

Only a deep, quiet voice remained. “You stand with us, Erice. We will return for you.”

-

The sinister invaders vanished, leaving me alone. In spite of Ms. Fujimura’s dire condition, Chitose remained where she was.

“Eri... ce...”

Ms. Fujimura implored me to listen to her final message. I listened faithfully to her words, occasionally interrupted by frothy coughing, and held them desperately to my chest... but there was no stopping what was coming.

“Ms. Fujimura... Caren... Please, don’t die...” I called her name as I held her in my arms. Her body was surprisingly light; it had already shed much of its weight.

“This... is not death, Erice. An AI has lost one of its terminals. Nothing... more or less.”

“How do you expect me to accept that?”

She smiled weakly up at my face, ugly from crying.

“Thank you, Erice...” She lifted one trembling hand to touch my forehead, and brushed my forehead as she’d done so many times.

“Ms. Fujimura, you know... I had... A mother, and, well... She died horribly, awfully... So at least, this time, I wanted...”

She never heard the end. Her fingers traced my cheek as they quietly fell to the sodden ground.

-

“Reporting in.”

A holographic screen appeared in the air next to Chitose, accompanied by an incoming voice. A thaumaturgical means of communication, relayed through a telescopic Mystic Code. The screen showed a member of the Caren Series, dressed in an arrow-patterned hakama.

“Destruction of Caren Fujimura’s spiritron kernel confirmed. Protocol dictates administration of Mosaic City and control of the Caren Series will be assumed by Caren Himuro. Authority over Akihabara Ward will be distributed equally between all members of the Caren Series on an interim basis.”

She paused.

“Sounds fun, don’t you think? Waiting for your go, Chitose!”

Chitose knelt down and removed Ms. Fujimura’s fractured glasses, before placing a hand over her face and gently closing her lifeless eyes.

“Permission granted.”

Chapter 8

Dusk was closing in.

Other incidents, big and small, had occurred around the outskirts of the Colosseum, and the heart of the city had been effectively paralysed with the temporary absence of the municipal administration AI, causing accidents all across Akihabara. However, the communication and transport networks were recovering, and governmental and medical institutions were returning to full functionality with all possible haste.

-

At long last we exited the Colosseum. An enormous crowd milled about the exterior. News of the tragedy had finally reached families and friends of spectators through the municipal information network, and they had come en mass in search of their loved ones. Some screamed the names of missing family members. Others wept and wailed for those already lost.

After the ferocious battle inside, the outside wall looked to be only moments away from collapsing. Black and yellow tape had been strung up to keep people away.

“You know, I have this weird feeling I just saw him back there.” Karin looked around suspiciously.

“Who’s him? Kuchime?”

Karin nodded hesitantly. That wasn’t like her.

“Only for a second, though. Might have been imagining things.”

“Maybe he came to see if we were okay? Guess that’s still kind of weird.”

Karin’s carefree laugh was enough to set me at ease.

“Speaking of missing people...” I scanned the sea of people around me. “Oh, there he is.”

The boy stood alone in the middle of the crowd, straining his ears to hear their cries and sobs as though listening to music. I recalled his face before as he asked me what “death” meant. It looked to me as though he were hoping to find an answer.

To see him standing silent amid a sea of human grief, with his golden scarf fluttering in the twilight sun, he hardly seemed a creature of this world.

-

Nzambi had spoken of an expanding kingdom of the dead.

Death was no stranger to us. It had always lived hand-in-hand with us. In this city, it had simply been ushered from the stage, covered over and hidden away. Sometimes its eyes had been covered by my hands, sometimes by those of the municipal administration AI, and sometimes by Chitose’s porcelain fingertips.

“Chitose?”

I looked my grandmother dead in the eyes as I asked.

“That black dog... The Servant. You know what it is, don’t you?”

I could make as many theories as I pleased as an outsider, but what really mattered was that it had called me by name, and had some kind of acquaintance with Chitose.

“You reacted when Pran mentioned it, and you didn’t hesitate to attack it with your stakes. You know what it is, and you knew about what was going to happen here today.”

She didn’t answer me. Neither did Lucius, now dressed once more in his modern attire; he furrowed his brow sadly, but said nothing. No matter how dear he was to me, in that moment his silence left me furious.

-

Eventually she spoke, but it was not to answer my question. She had ignored me. Again.

“There’s something I need to tell you, Erice, now that Caren can’t.”

I tensed. Nothing ever came from her but misfortune.

“It’s about the child she entrusted you with. I’m going to take care of him from now on.”

What? Whatever I had expected, it wasn’t that. I shuddered at the request.

How much was she going to take from me? She had taken my work, the boy, Caren... Even my parents, she had stolen. I had no intention of going along with her wishes any longer.

“I refuse.”

Her face didn’t falter for a moment. Apparently she had been expecting as much.

“But I doubt you’ll respect that anyway, will you?”

“I suppose I won’t.”

She glanced to the boy standing some distance away. I moved to block her way.

“Ms. Fujimura didn’t just charge me with taking care of him. She also asked me to discover what I could about his identity.”

“That doesn’t matter any more either.”

I shook my head. “But it does. I think I’ve found an answer.”

“I see. It looks like you don’t have any intention of doing this the easy way.” Her Command Seals flared to life on the backs of her hands - the symbols of the Stigmata, and tokens of a piety willing to subject her own body to the pain of crucifixion. And she called out to her Servant.

“Lucius.”

Surely she doesn’t mean to...? Her Servant hadn’t moved. He stood still, eyes downcast, as though he hadn’t even heard.

“Lucius.”

Chitose called to him again, in a kindly voice that made my blood run cold.

“Please, Lucius... Don’t do it...”

I sprinted for the child, but I was too late. Before his Master’s Command Seal could flare brighter, he began to move, mechanically, robotically. He manifested his spear...

And hurled it at Pran with pinpoint accuracy.

—

The clash of colliding metal rang out like breaking ice, and Lucius’ Holy Lance spun high into the twilight sky.

There he stood, in front of Pran, in the space I had been trying so hard to reach: Galahad, stripped of his armour and down to his shirt. He held his sword high and horizontal, staring down Longinus as he interposed himself between the centurion and his prey.

“You could’ve run and left Koharu to Nzambi, but you didn’t. Consider this a debt repaid, Reaper girl. Though I’m not sure you’ll thank me for it.”

The spinning lance returned to earth once more, bound for the earth directly in front of Galahad. The knight snatched it from the air a split second before it hit the ground and tossed it back to a dumbfounded Longinus’ feet.

“Maybe the Sword of the Strange Hangings doesn’t look like much, but sadly for you, the shepherd boy it belonged to ended up king of Israel.” Galahad’s voice was haughty. “You won’t find many holy relics more sacred.”

“I see. The sword of David, then.”

“And no other. They say no armour can stand before the Holy Lance, but this sword might be able to get in a stinging word or two. As you just saw.” Galahad chuckled as he returned his blade to its sheath.

Koharu!

The girl in question had been returning to our group after receiving first aid. She strolled over to silently take her place by her Servant’s side. Her face was twisted in a pained grimace, but I saw no hint of surprise at Galahad’s actions. She had been watching my argument with Chitose from the beginning.

“Or well, who knows? Perhaps you expected me to stop you from the first.”

Longinus remained silent. I glared at Chitose. Finally she relented, and with a sigh her Command Seals dimmed.

She called out to Koharu as she stalked past. “Get well soon, Riedenflaus. Your strength will be needed soon enough.”

“O-Of course.” Koharu paled. She couldn’t even look her in the eye.

With that, Chitose and Longinus left the Colosseum behind.

-

I needed to thank Koharu and Galahad somehow. I even thought up a plan to invite Karin and Kouyou and go to a juice stand together, but before I could...

“Urgh... Agh!”

Searing agony assailed me. I grabbed my burning arm and grimaced. This was not the pain brought on by the evil spirits; it was something I had never felt before.

Before I knew it, Pran was standing in front of me. He opened his mouth solemnly.

-

“I... ask... you...”

-

He spoke directly to me, and only to me, in the same broken English as when we had first met.

-

“Are... you... my... Master?”

-

Heat and agony raced down my arm, tracing mana pathways into my body... and at long last a Command Seal, the symbol of the contract I had dreamed of since the day I was born, flowered into being on the back of my hand.



Like a tiny knight, he took that hand in his own, and gazed up at me serenely.

I was smiling. Perhaps I was crying, too.

“You really have come from far away, haven’t you?”

“Very far.”

“I know who you are now. You’re Voyager. A lonely little Servant who travels the stars.”

My words never left my mouth, but he heard and nodded regardless. “I’m glad. Finally we’ve met, Erice.”

Here and now I swear...

I shall attain all virtues of all of Heaven. I shall have dominion over all evils of all of Hell.

“It’s okay. Let’s destroy this world. Let’s finish this war.”

Submit to the beckoning of the Holy Grail. If you submit to this will and this reason...

I pledge my fate to your guiding light.

“Your wish and what I have lost are the same. We’ll watch right to the end, together.”

“The Holy Grail War... is not yet over.” The light in Ms. Fujimura’s eyes dimmed even as she spoke.

“Do you wish to fight, Erice? Or perhaps...”

I wished, hard - to hurl myself into the battle for the Holy Grail, and to bring it to its end.

Ms. Fujimura looked up at me with sadness in her eyes.

“I see. In that case, Erice, I have one last request for you. If you choose to fight...”

“Go to Fuyuki.

