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Fate strange Fake

フェイト/ストレンジフェイク

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ウオッチャー

「真」のキヤスター
フランチエスカが「自分の存在そのものを」を媒介にして英霊の座から
喚び出したもう一人の自分、フランチエスカ。



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偽のパーサー

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ロイド・エルメロイ



“四”のアサシン

「4」の登場をその前に書いた強敵のカーサンプ・ヒルがその後の本編で果たした役割とは、本編の戦いを観よう。

シグマ

「シグマ」は本編に登場する敵のリーダー。その正体は、シグマ・プログラム、シグマ・プログラムを指す。

「俺は魔術師としては中途半端だ。魔術使いと蔑まれる事もある。聖杯を求めるかという問いについては、求めるべきかどうかまだ迷っている」

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Give up, dear. That child is too much for us. He won't advance our family's magecraft; he'll destroy us all!

Are you telling me that child is what we get for putting up with the Clock Tower's ridicule for nearly two millennia? The Clock Tower might change its mind, true, but anyone can see they're going to crush us. Still, I'm sure that child will survive. He'll be the only one.

Why was that child even born? Is he really even ours...? No, I know. I'm sorry. You did everything you could to verify it, scientifically and mystically. You proved that he's ours beyond a shadow of doubt... I know that! I just still can't believe it! I'd have an easier time accepting it if you told me that there were still faeries and we'd been saddled with a changeling.

You know, don't you? Our family tackled that research problem 300 years ago, ultimately judged it impossible, and stored it away. That child completed it at the age of eight! No verbalization, no reproducibility; he just felt his way through it intuitively! ...Yes, I suppose you're right. You can't call it complete without reproducibility. I know. I know, dear. But still...

I'm scared. That child frightens me. Him being a gifted mage ought to make us proud. But it doesn't. It's wrong.

He doesn't make sacrifices. At first, I thought that he had too much kindness for a mage, that he was defective. But he's not even that. His purpose is fundamentally different. It's like finding out the tube you thought was a telescope was actually the barrel of a cannon. He's something... something different.

So, dear, I've been wondering. Could our mission as mages be to put an end to that child? I think that putting an end to him might be the culmination of the Escardos family magecraft.

Well, dear? It's time to prepare ourselves.

That boy is no child of ours. He's nobody. Nothing. Just a phenomenon that slipped in from some other world. We just got it into our heads that he was our son and named him.

There never was a child called Flat, just a flat expanse with some unintelligible scribbles on it... Isn't that right?

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Flat Escardos.

When they learned of his existence and his “singular” nature, two men oddly expressed exactly the same thought. One was an ancient mage called the devil of the financial world. The other was a Magician who conquered the jewel-studded kaleidoscope sky. Although separated in time and space, both praised not the boy, but his ancestor, in the same words.

“I see. So, you’ve finally done it.

“You’ve achieved the 1,800 year dream of the Escardos family, which even your descendants have forgotten.”

Interlude

“The Membrane of the Commonplace”

Interlude

The Membrane of the Commonplace

“Next, the weather. Low pressure in west Las Vegas...”

Ordinary news flowed out of the TV. The townspeople, glad and depressed by turns at the upcoming weather, went about their business. The city of Snowfield was not panicking yet.

The seven day Holy Grail War, a jumble of mages, an unofficial US military group, and agents of the Holy Church, had begun the moment thirteen heroic spirits were assembled. On the morning of its second day, they were still enjoying the peace the world had given them. The façade, however, was beginning to tear in a visible way.

The gas pipeline explosion in the desert. The numerous pets suffering from an unknown illness brought to veterinary hospitals. The people brought into psychiatric wards by their families, who complained that they “did not want to leave town.” The destruction of the historic opera house. The terrorist attack on the police station, apparently with the objective of releasing the criminals held there. The aftermath, which had spilled over into an adjacent hotel. The sudden, violent gusts of wind that had blown from the north of Snowfield to Crystal Hill, a skyscraper in the city center.

A number of incidents had taken place in the city, but they were not yet enough to destroy the daily lives of those who did not directly encounter them. At times, the “common sense” they had built up over the course of their lives paralyzed their senses. This side of panic, that common sense formed a membrane around people’s daily lives that narrowly prevented them from seeing the oncoming madness. Or, perhaps, many of them had already noticed, and were trying to cling to a sense of security by feigning otherwise.

Not yet.

It’s still OK.

It’s not broken yet.

The city’s still in one piece.

I’m sure things will be back to normal soon.

The membrane was filling up with wish after baseless wish that it would be so. That was why the people who sensed that, somehow, something was out of the ordinary felt happy, not uneasy.

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Happy that they were still in a full place. Happy that they were still this side of the border that separated the normal from the abnormal.

This is not to say that the people of Snowfield were especially optimistic. The city had been built up over the course of 80 years for the Fake Holy Grail War. Every part of it was under the influence of obliquely-inscribed suggestion.

Magecraft in the positions of public buildings and streets, billboards and roadside trees, which, taken individually, would appear as mere signs, even to the average mage. Like the color scheme of a scientific domain designed to produce a specific psychological effect, it was a form of suggestion that begins to function only when many layered elements are brought together which seeped into the bodies of its residents. Accurately measuring this suggestion would require the combined effort of a mage in command of superior powers of observation and one who, like Lord El-Melloi II, possessed the skill of assembling clues from anything and everything.

That was what had made it possible for the “masterminds” to conceal for so long the fact that the entire city of Snowfield was under the influence of a gigantic, vague suggestion that would prevent panic — up to a point. That was how they had kept it from passing mages, from sociologists suspicious of the city's rapid development, and from the residents who continued to lead their lives there. That was why, when animal after animal collapsed, fear that the disease might spread to humans had been kept to a minimum.

And so, the townspeople remained ignorant as they greeted the morning of the second day. Unaware even of the fact that they themselves — perhaps the city itself — were a grand sacrifice on the altar of the Fake Holy Grail War.

Suggestion, however, can only do so much. If the membrane — the sense of security — it cast was stretched too tight, it would eventually reach its limit.

The masterminds did not care. They supposed that if that membrane of suggestion reached the point of tearing, they would already be beyond the power of ordinary residents to resist. Those of them who were particularly anxious to keep magecraft secret considered that it would be better for the uproar to vanish in an instant like a firework than to grow slowly. In short, the townspeople were not even allowed to panic.

Orlando Reeve, the chief of police, bore fresh witness to that fact as he listened to the information streaming from the TV.

“A mage’s mage,” he muttered disgustedly to himself, eyes narrowed, “is no different from a hard-working corrupt politician.”

What about me? He wondered as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

As long as corruption stayed hidden, it was difficult for the public to tell the difference between a corrupt politician and an honest one. In which case, mages, who never entered the public eye to begin with, probably ought to be lumped in with them. There were exceptions, but from the standpoint of the general public, mages were generally evil.

Orlando was conscious that he was not one of those exceptions as he listened to the voices emanating from his office TV. It was a news program on a local station based in Snowfield. In the brief period before the next battle, the police chief — who was also a mage on the side of the masterminds — listened carefully, and in silence, to the stream of information, as if regretting that the announcer's calm voice would eventually fail.

“Our next story: The environmental effects of the gas explosion in southern Snowfield...”

Chapter 10

“Separate Mornings, Separate Pasts I”

Chapter 10: Day 2

Separate Mornings, Separate Pasts I

When Ayaka Sajou woke up, her mind was in the midst of distant scenery. It was not as if there was anything interesting to look at; she was racing across a level plain. She could see a forest in the distance.

She seemed to be riding a horse. She could see an armored hand gripping the reins.

A dream?

She realized that the hand on the reins was not hers. Then she realized that she could not move. Her view, however, was rapidly shifting. She guessed that she was sharing someone else's point of view. She supposed that there were dreams like that.

Despite Ayaka's best efforts to convince herself otherwise, however, the dream seemed awfully real.

"Richard!" A voice called out. "Hey, Richard!"

Ayaka's view spun around. There were more than a dozen armored men on horses behind her, and one of them was riding his horse closer. Once the horse had come to a stop in full view, its young, armored rider said:

"We came as you said, Richard, but do you seriously intend to search for it? This legacy of King Arthur?"

"Of course," she — Richard — answered the man's question. "I finally have a clue."

Ayaka experienced the strange sensation of words slipping out of her mouth even though she was not saying anything.

"You mean that drunken minstrel's gossip?"

"Exactly. Truth is cleverly hidden deep within the tales minstrels spin when they're sober. I, however, haven't got the knack of deciphering it. The things they say when they've lost their senses are so much easier to understand."

It was an absurd argument. Ayaka was shocked that such nonsense had come out of her mouth. The way of speaking, however, told her all she needed to know.

Oh, this must be...

They're calling me Richard... Am I Saber?

Ayaka finally figured it out. The outlandishness of the dream made her want to sigh. The conversation, however, was proceeding matter-of-factly without regard for her feelings.

"He only said that it was something to do with King Arthur; we don't actually know what.

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We have time on our hands, so it's all the same to us, but you're royalty. What is it you want so badly?"

"Oh, anything."

"What?"

"Excalibur would be best, but I wouldn't mind Caliburn, or Rhongomyniad, or even the shield he's said to have used in the slaying of the Chapalu. If I end up finding the entrance to Avalon and manage to catch a glimpse of the great king himself or his mage, that alone would make my life worthwhile."

The voice of the man who seemed to be Richard rang out innocently. The young man beside him gave a wry grin.

"If the legends are true, wouldn't Excalibur be at the bottom of a lake in Vivian's arms?"

"Then I shall find the Lady of the Lake and win her friendship. You know they say Sir Pelleas exchanged vows with one of them and survived Camlann Hill?"

"Wasn't he a stray knight they didn't even count as part of the Round Table? He just saw his chance and ran. Anyway, looking for the heirlooms of a hero who might not have even really existed isn't something that royalty should be seeing to personally."

"Surely there are no royals or commoners when it comes to admiring a great legend?"

Somehow, Saber seems more childish than usual. I wonder why.

They called him royalty, but the people around him acted more like good friends than vassals, and Richard did not seem to mind that one bit.

"If we do manage to find King Arthur's treasure, it will mean that all those legends are true. We can prove that those dazzling chansons de geste really happened on the ground we stand on! We've inherited the land the King of Knights and his men galloped over! That would be enough for me to accept my destiny!"

"So, if they didn't exist, you'll never be able to accept it? You never say anything reasonable," the friend shrugged exasperatedly atop his horse. "What's next? Are you going to lead us on a Grail quest?"

"That's probably a fool's errand."

"Why? What makes it any different from Excalibur or Rhongomyniad?"

"Chrétien told me. The Grail isn't something you can obtain just by seeking it; it chooses its possessor. The knights of the Round Table who went questing after it only managed to reach it because the current of destiny called the Holy Grail sought them out. So, we can't seek the Grail of our own choosing. I'm sure that, if I continue to pursue knightly glory, a fitting reason will eventually present itself."

Richard held forth on fairy tales with an air of perfect seriousness. The proper noun he used

prompted a response from his friend.

“Chrétien, is it? Rumor does make him a degraded remnant of the druids who peered into the past...”

“Oh, it’s true that some poets, like him and Vace, sing tales of the King of Knights and his Round Table as vividly, and as almost nostalgically, as if they’d seen the events themselves. I wouldn’t be surprised if you told me they were faeries who live for a thousand years.”

“Well, it wouldn’t matter. It wasn’t Chrétien you ended up getting your clue to Arthur’s legacy from; it was a drunken poet whose name you don’t even know in a city tavern. I can’t fathom why you believe his tall tales.”

“I’m happy with any clue at all. I’m not a king yet. It’s important that I study the King of Knights’ footprints while I’m still free, don’t you think?”

Ayaka could not see them from her viewpoint, but Richard’s eyes were probably shining. She could see his childlike expression in her mind’s eye as her attention shifted with Richard’s viewpoint to the plain. Then, she saw something strange.

“While you’re still free? You’re practically the lord of Aquitaine already... What is it, Richard?”

“...Something’s coming.”

It was a dot on the flat plain. The cloud of dust rising behind it, however, announced that it was rushing toward them. At first, Ayaka thought it was a horse galloping across the open fields, but it was the wrong size. Before long, a thunderous noise that seemed to be coming from it reached them, and the knights around her began to panic.

“What is it, a giant boar?”

“A carriage...? No, there are no horses... I’ve never seen anything like it. Does that thing have legs? How does it run? If it is a beast, I’ve never heard a bray like that!”

“Look, it’s coming this way!”

“What speed! Run, Richard!”

Richard ignored his companions, who had begun to pull on their reins.

“Fascinating...” His voice sounded calm. “It could be a descendent of Twrch Trwyth.”

More words I don’t know.

Still, Ayaka did not feel particularly nervous. That was partly due to the assurance in Richard’s voice. Mostly, however, it was because she recognized the thing making its way toward them, although its shape was a little different from the modern version she was familiar with.

The thing was gradually decelerating as it approached Richard. After a few more bestial roars, it came to a complete stop several meters in front of Richard.

“What is it...?”

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The man who had remained at Richard's side until the end stared suspiciously at the "thing." He probably meant to put himself in between it and Richard if the need arose.

"...A carriage made of iron?"

"It's wheels are quite thick. And what's that black stuff? Some kind of leather?"

Hearing the curiosity in Richard's voice, Ayaka had a sudden realization.

Oh, I get it. This must be when Richard was alive... right?

If that was the case, she could understand their funny way of speaking. Ayaka also decided that what she was seeing must be a dream after all.

What a weird dream. I mean, everyone's speaking Japanese.

If this really was the world of the past, then the thing sitting in front of Richard and his friends would be totally impossible. Its body was decorated with steampunk gears, gothic-looking iron barbs, giving it a gaudy and twisted silhouette.

Ayaka knew what it was called.

A car... Must be custom.

Confronted with an automobile that looked straight out of an action movie, Ayaka wondered what mental state she was in to produce this dream.

Well, I've been mixed up with knights and kings ever since I crossed the desert into Snowfield, so I guess I've got my time periods all mixed up...

As Ayaka considered, the situation in front of her began to change.

A banging sound started up on the inside of the car's door. The knights warily drew their swords and surrounded the vehicle.

The next instant, the — apparently poorly fitted — door was kicked open from the inside, and a man emerged. Then, the "car's" windows opened one by one to reveal things that resembled musical instruments, which began playing a twisted, cacophonous tune. Against this backdrop of noise, a cheerful voice rang out.

"Haloo, young manager of Aquitaine and your merry companions! How are you? I'm doing fine, but I surrender. Giving up and all that. So, could you maybe put away those swords for now?"

The man who delivered this easygoing speech with both hands in the air was dressed to rival, or even surpass, his car in sheer outlandishness. He wore gaudy nobleman's clothes whose coloring made him look more like a court jester than royalty. An odd hat was perched atop his head. The gears that adorned the stick in his hand turned with a distorted noise, presumably due to the workings of some mechanism.

The sight of him made Ayaka certain that this was, after all, a dream. Everything else she had seen had seemed like an aesthetically unified world. She had wondered if she might be getting a

genuine glimpse into the era when knights had fought on horseback, but the man's sudden appearance had spoiled the effect in a way that seemed simply ridiculous.

"What's this?" The bizarre man continued to the knights who had yet to lower their swords. "Don't you know the words 'love' and 'peace'? Raising both hands is a token of surrender... Or is it in the culture of this period? I could wave a white flag if you like. Well, it doesn't really matter. Anyway, I'm unarmed. Non-hostile. In fact, I have the utmost respect for you — you accepted the trap I set without hesitation and even came all the way out to this empty field."

"A trap!"

"Oh, damn. I went on and blurted out that I arranged for the drunken poet in the tavern all on my own. Well, it's no big deal. After all, you did show up here, so my plan was a success! I've done it!"

At the man's words, the knights tightened their grips on their swords and began to slowly tighten their circle. The clownish man shrugged.

"Now wait a minute," he said, thumping his stick on his own shoulder, "try to be a bit more broadminded. Even the likes of Alexander III decided to get some fun out of it when a novel, striking and eccentric figure like me popped up before his eyes, you know?"

"Enough nonsense!"

"Wait."

Ayaka saw Richard's arm stop the irate knights.

"What's this about Alexander the Great?"

"Richard! Listening to a suspicious fellow like this is..."

"He is not the King of Knights, whom I adore," Richard addressed the strange man while restraining the friend who tried to stop him with one hand, "but if you name that great king of conquerors by way of comparison, I must hear you out, whatever tall tale you may have for me. Isn't that right?"

Richard then crossed his arms before the eccentric and declared with an air of dignity:

"You may continue. First, who exactly are you?"

The mystery man grinned cheerfully, clambered up onto his custom car so that he was looking down on the knights, and sang out his name in a clear, full voice.

"Admirable listening! My name is Saint Germain! Saint Germain! I don't mind if you pause at Saint, but relax and run it together — Saint-Germain! Yes, Saint-Germain! The hedonist by the name of Saint-Germain has now appeared before a great future king! This is a cause for celebration — or at least it is to me!"

"You dare stand above Richard, knowing he's royalty?" Some of Richard's companions shouted, but they were not exactly furious. They likely understood that Richard did not place

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much importance on his own status.

Well, all the knights here were talking casually to him, too, Ayaka was thinking when she overheard Richard murmuring something as he looked up at the man making a speech on top of his car.

“Oh-ho... That makes quite a picture.”

...

Thinking back to what Richard had looked like when he had started making his speech on top of the police car, Ayaka decided that she was having this dream because the ridiculous act had left a strong impression. The realization did not help her wake up.

“And?” Richard’s voice rang loud and clear in her eardrums. “What is Saint-Germain to me?”

At that, with another shout of “admirable listening,” the man who called himself Saint-Germain struck an exaggerated pose and began to speak.

“I will be a signpost on your quest to trace the stories of past heroes, an advisor to help you scent ruin, a prophet who announces the end, and at times perhaps a dove with the branch of hope clutched in its beak. That is the role the man called Saint-Germain will play for you.”

“You’re too greedy. In short, a court mage. Am I right?”

“Regrettably, I am no mage. Nor am I a faerie, an incubus, a hematophage, a traveler backwards in time, or a world-hopping Magician. I am merely an aristocrat and a swindler.”

The man who called himself Saint-Germain twirled his stick magnificently as he went on.

“There is, therefore, no need for you to remember my name. I don’t mind if you forget it immediately. I’ll introduce myself again. I’m Saint-Germain. Saint-Germain, a name you might as well forget. Yes, Saint-Germain! Saint-Germain... The name isn’t important; that’s the man called Saint-Germain. Saint? Or Germain?”



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“Come on, Richard. Hurry and shut him up.”

Richard did not move, ignoring his companions, who were brandishing their swords again.

“Wait. If you are a swindler, I’d like to hear how you plan to hoodwink me.”

Ayaka could not see it, but somehow she knew that Richard’s eyes were sparkling like a child’s.

“Ha ha. I’m not the one who’s going to fool you. Faced with the world you’re about to set foot in — the myriad of mysteries that birthed King Arthur — you’ll try to fool yourself. I’m just here to assist in that grand fraud. What I mean to say is, best regards, if nothing else. A toast to this momentous occasion, on which you walk into legend.”

Saint-Germain got down from the roof of his car, kneeled reverently, and stared fixedly up at Richard’s face. Their eyes met. Before Ayaka had time to think, Saint-Germain’s lips moved.

“And to you behind the eyes, my everlasting best.”

A shiver ran down Ayaka’s spine. Instinctively, she understood: the man’s last words had not been directed at Richard, but at Ayaka herself sharing his vision. And, as if to prove it, Saint-Germain followed them up “Still, you’ve heard of with a sentence that would make no sense to anyone but her.

“I presume you are peeping from the future, you lifelong stray child.”

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At that point, Ayaka woke up. Her eyes focused on a gray ceiling and she realized that she was lying on a bed. Her back and palms were slightly sweaty. She could feel her heart beating fast.

“Oh, Ayaka, you’re awake? You must have been exhausted to fall asleep with your glasses on.”

Turning in the direction of the familiar voice, she saw Saber sitting in a chair beside the bed and reading a book. More books, which had probably come from a nearby shelf, lay on the table in front of him. The book in his hands at the moment was titled *The Life and Death of King John*.

“I did spend yesterday getting dragged all over the place by a certain someone,” Ayaka grouched, barely noticing it.

“If you’re recovered enough to abuse me, I’ve nothing to worry about! Still, you ought to rest a little longer for safety’s sake. It’s not dawn yet.”

“...Thanks. And sorry. I didn’t mean to grumble.”

Ayaka was disgusted with herself for speaking so sarcastically to someone who had helped her out of so many scrapes.

“You’ve nothing to apologize for,” Saber replied with a cheerful smile. “It’s true that I dragged you around, and I’ll probably go on doing so. Besides, girls who wake up in a bad mood are lovelier.”

“...You’re certainly positive.”

At that point, Ayaka remembered the “dream” she had just had. She remembered it quite clearly, for a dream.

Was it really just a dream?

Her instinct said no, but she was afraid to confirm it.

“Still, there are mountains of books in this house. Nothing but spellbooks in the basement, but there are heaps of histories and novels on the second floor. Hero tales too. I won’t get bored.”

When she saw Saber, his eyes sparkling with excitement — she supposed he had been reading all night — Ayaka could not keep quiet.

“Hey...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Do you know anyone called Saint-Germain?” Ayaka was on the verge of asking, but she froze up just before she could get the words out. She remembered the strange man’s eyes as she had seen them at the end of that dream and felt frightened to bring up his name herself.

Ayaka decided to try a different proper noun from the dream instead. It was a name she did not know, so her idea was that whether Saber recognized it would settle if it had been an ordinary dream or not.

“Hey... Do you know someone named... I think it was Chréti... Chrétien?”

“Chrétien de Troyes? That takes me back. He was a troubadour at the court of my sister Marie. He recited the legend of the Grail to me more times than I could stand. ...Sorry. I didn’t mean to lie, but I just told an untruth. I badgered him into reciting the Grail Quest for me hundreds of times, but I never got sick of it.”

“I bet he did, though...” Ayaka’s usual, half-exasperated attitude toward Saber took precedence over her surprise that the conversation was proceeding smoothly.

“Still, you’ve heard of Chrétien? Are you a fan of the Knights of the Round Table too, Ayaka? Aren’t they wonderful? Chrétien always said that they were twisted people, however they were as knights, but that’s just part of what makes the Round Table the best!”

Ayaka was not at all well informed on the Knights of the Round Table, although she vaguely remembered the name. Based on the delight with which she saw Saber talk about them,

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however, she was ready to accept that they must really be great heroes. His talk also gave Ayaka a chance to think calmly.

In other words, that wasn't just a dream... was it?

Certainly, now that she thought back on it, it had felt less like a dream than it had like being shown a first person scene in a film. If that was the case, had there been some kind of mystical action? She considered consulting Saber about her “dream” to make sure. Just then, however, there came an untimely knock on the door.

“May I let them in, Ayaka?” Saber asked, closing his book at the same time.

“...I'll leave it to your judgment. I've got no choice but to trust it, anyway.”

Saber carefully scrutinized her face, always remaining alert to events on the other side of the door, and nodded.

“As far as I can see, you don't have bed hair or sleep sand and your clothes are in order. It should be fine!”

“Huh? Uh, yeah... It's fine. I guess.”

“OK. Hello out there,” Saber called at the door. “You may come in.”

The knob turned, and the antique door swung slowly open.

“Did you manage to get some sleep?”

In the doorway stood a young man whose face looked young enough to be called a boy. He was dressed from the neck down in a mostly black outfit reminiscent of a special forces uniform which made a disconcerting contrast with his youthful features.

“Umm... Sigma, right?” Ayaka asked, keeping a wary eye on his holstered gun and knife.

In place of an answer, the youth made a dispassionate statement of fact.

“This house is already surrounded.”

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The same time. In a cheap motel.

A motel built on an unfrequented road. The skyscrapers of the city center were visible in the distance. Near the motel, however, there were few buildings worthy of the name. It was the kind of place you would expect to see warehouses of abandoned materials. Still, even taking all that into account — and even considering that it was before dawn — there were too few cars and pedestrians to be seen. It was as still as if time had stopped.

In that stillness, human figures appeared, seeming to ooze out of the darkness. Nine men and women who looked out of place in their somber suits.

“Scan complete,” one of them reported to the man in the center. “There are no traces of a ward or of magecraft being used nearby, and no signs of the magical energy being disturbed.”

“...Is this really the place?” The report prompted the apparent leader to doubt.

If their information was accurate, this place was the lair of a mage who belonged to the Clock Tower’s infamous School of Modern Magecraft — commonly known as the “El-Melloi School.”

Was it possible that a personage of sufficient stature to be chosen as a Master in the Holy Grail War was lounging around without a single ward in place? They were supposed to be up against a mage, not some poor civilian one had mesmerized into spying for them.

The leader’s long combat experience warned him that they could be walking into a trap. He cautiously revised his plans so that they might produce flawless results in the name of Zugzwang.

Zugzwang was a group of mages formed by the Einskaya family of Eastern Europe. They began as subordinates to the Romania-based Yggmillennia lineage, tasked with swiftly disposing of any vermin that came sniffing around their overlords. The power of Yggmillennia, however, had withered more than fifty years previously. With the line dissolved, Zugzwang had gone freelance, becoming an organization that handled all sorts of shady business.

As mages, their skills were middling, but they garnered praise for the ruthless efficiency with which they carried out their work. By taking on a wide range of requests from clients ranging from politicians to financiers with no knowledge of the world of mages and their factions, they just managed to keep their heads above water. Just.

As enforcers, they commanded a high price. They were, however, still mages. They would need more than fees to indulge themselves.

Then, opportunity had come knocking. A job offer that promised remuneration an order of magnitude greater than they were used to in addition to deeply interesting them as mages had fallen unexpectedly into their laps.

“Steal a Master’s authority and join the Snowfield Grail War.”

Zugzwang had been suspicious at first. Their client, a wealthy mage, had shown them a vision through a familiar — a vision of a battle between two Heroic Spirits and the enormous crater it had left behind — that had left them no choice but to believe. They were convinced that a wave was building in Snowfield that could shake the magical world. It was dangerous, but it was also a golden opportunity.

They had spent a day laying an information network across the city and had finally tracked down a Master’s hideout. They had no idea that the information that they believed they had unearthed through their own abilities had been deliberately leaked by a man called Faldeus.

Zugzwang was about to silently walk into Hell, unaware that, to the masterminds, they were

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foils to measure the strength of their target — Flat Escardos.

“...Start by confirming the target’s position. Pawns one through three, take the second floor of the motel. Pawns four through six, the first floor. Pawns seven and eight will accompany me to capture the manager’s office. We’ll use suggestion to get information from the manager, then dispose of them. Ditto for any witnesses.”

A Magic Crest is inherited through a lineage of mages. Zugzwang had deliberately split theirs. Half was embedded in their leader, called the “king.” The other half was further divided into eight portions, one in the body of each of his subordinates, called “pawns.”

Ordinarily, a Magic Crest split into that many parts would only provide a slight boost to mystical power. Synchronizing all of the pawns’ Crests with the king’s, however, enabled the king to forcibly raise the pawns’ abilities to the same level as his own in exchange for drastically reducing their life spans and the flexibility of their Magic Circuits.

The king was about to bare the Crest branded onto his arm in order to activate that peculiar spell when he saw “it.”

“Show the Crests on your arms. I’m going to bring you up to my level. You know the drill.”

A man with his face was standing in the middle of the group, talking like he always did.

“What...?”

His voice was raised, but none of the pawns turned to look at him. They must have been suffering from some kind of mystical interference, because they did not even seem to realize that he was there.

In what seemed like nothing so much as an out-of-body experience, the king watched the man who had his face move exactly as he would have, pressing his arm against the arms of the pawns.

This is bad.

Stop! Don’t touch arms with him!

The king picked up on a faint current of magical energy, but not in time to shout a warning. Even if he had, would his voice have reached the pawns? Such doubts momentarily flashed through his head. Then, the man with his face spoke.

“Three, two, one... Commence integration.”

“Gah...” “Eek?!” “Ugh...”

The next instant, the eight pawns that had linked arms with him convulsed like they had been struck by lightning and collapsed in front of the motel entrance, unconscious. A powerful curse, disguised as the wavelength of the real king’s Crest, had been put into their bodies as they synchronized.

The king instantly realized that they were now in desperate straits. By then, however, it was

already too late — the man with his face had disappeared. The king felt someone's finger touch the back of his head, and before he knew it, he was lying on the ground as well. The leader of Zugzwang was still conscious, but it took his hazy consciousness several seconds to realize that he was beaten. He could feel the cold asphalt on his right ear. With his left, turned skyward, he could hear a man's dispassionate voice.

"I see. You use some interesting magecraft. I mean, dividing your Crest to make yourself king of your own colony. What a strange coincidence..."

At that point, a carefree voice sounded from behind the strange muttering man, relieving the tense atmosphere.

"Everything OK? Wow! It looks like it went perfectly."

"Perfectly copying memories is difficult, but I can at least read superficial ones and established routines. Of course, with a mage of his caliber, I could reproduce his art completely."

"Ja — Berserker, it's not polite to say that in front of him."

"...My apologies. It seems this man's personality is rather arrogant. More importantly, did you just almost blurt out my true name?"

Berserker. When the mage-cum-assassin heard the young man — young enough to be called a boy — say that word, he understood. This, apparently, was what had dealt with Zugzwang in one fell stroke — one of the beings that, in the Grail War ritual, were called Heroic Spirits. The king also judged that the boy must be their target, Flat Escardos.

A total failure. They didn't even give us a chance to get started. So, this is a Heroic Spirit.

He also understood that he was about to meet his doom. Could he possibly turn the situation around? He racked his brains for a way, both as a mage and as an experienced hitman. In his present condition, however, it was clear that there was nothing he could do. With the curse gnawing at his body, he could not even speak to beg for his life. Any chance would most likely come when they interrogated him about his employer. Still, without his pawns, what could he do against a mage who commanded this Heroic Spirit?

I see. This is the Holy Grail War... If it encourages greater magecraft of this level, I suppose that, as a mage, ought to approve of it.

Unable to even take his own life, the king prayed that his death would be as painless as possible. Then, a weirdly carefree conversation reached his ears.

"Well, Master? What shall we do with them?"

"Well, for now, let's tie them up and toss them in the spare room we rented. Although, with nine extra guests... do you think we should rent one more?"

"We can squeeze them in. I'll carry them; you wait here."

"Don't worry about keeping people away; I'll reinforce the ward these people set and use

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that.”

Master and Servant spoke like they were having an idle chat.

The king struggled to roll his eyeballs — which he could just barely move — upward, and saw a young blond man and a man who looked exactly like himself. The next instant, however, the man with his face seemed to vanish, and a large, muscular man, more than two meters tall, appeared in his place. The big man lifted all eight pawns and then reached out a hand for the king, who ended up being carried off with his subordinates.

Several minutes later.

Zugzwang’s “king” had been shoved into a motel room. There, he discovered that not one of his “pawns” was dead.

Why is he letting them live? He would only need to spare a few if he wanted to torture them for information. Don’t... Don’t tell me he’s turning human bodies into Mana Crystals, like they say the Scradio Family does?

Recalling the rumors he had heard of that inhumane system made the king break out in a cold sweat.

Now that he looked, there were several other mages lying around the room apart from him and his pawns. He was thinking that they must also be mages who specialized in espionage and assassination when he heard the blond boy knock.

“Hello! Umm... Sorry for treating you all roughly! You seemed kind of murderous, so I had Berserker capture you! If any of you are mages who just happened to be passing by, or anything like that, I’m terribly sorry!”

“...”

Flat Escardos seemed distressed to see that the mages were glaring suspiciously in his direction.

“What should we do, Berserker?” He asked the big man beside him. “They all seem on edge. Could you turn into something that would help them relax? Like a child, or maybe a clown?”

The big man — Berserker — grunted and vanished. In his place, a young girl appeared.

“Whoa! We talked about this! Why do you keep ending up in that bathing suit thing when you turn into a child?”

Flat hastily covered the girl in a nearby bed sheet.

“It just always happens,” Berserker replied. “I find being this girl kind of reassuring. I also end up wanting to dissect things, though, so I think it’s a bad idea.”

“There’s nothing reassuring about it! Now please turn back before you dissect somebody or

the police see you! See? Everybody's giving you weird looks!"

The mages, who were bound with magically-sealing packing tape, started shaking as soon as they saw Berserker take the girl's form. They did not know why, but they seemed to be shivering with an instinctive, primal terror. Berserker gave a childish grunt, then vanished again, reappearing as a young man whose features marked him as English nobility.

"How about this?" Berserker telepathically addressed Flat. *"Something linked to the English aristocracy of my time. As with the girl, this form helps to put me at ease. It's one of the most prominent theories of my true identity. Hmm... In this form, I have an urge not so much to dissect people as to defile their very souls."*

Flat nodded and replied in kind.

"It's possible that you're more stable when your form matches a plausible theory of your identity. Try not to let those urges get the better of you, though."

"If I ever become so irrational, it's likely that my very Saint Graph will change and I will cease to be Berserker. If that does ever come to pass, use a Command Seal to force me to take my own life. Understand?"

"Jack..."

"This is my humble request, Master. I do not wish my identity to be determined so imperfectly."

Flat neither agreed to nor denied the request. He instead addressed the mages in an attempt to dodge the telepathic conversation.

"How about I introduce you? That's Lexarm lying in front of the shower, Kotcheff in front of the refrigerator, and Dikhail in front of the sofa. The person in the corner with black hair bleached blond is Sagara. Then, the nine people who just got here together are, umm..."

Flat asked Berserker, who answered based on the superficial memories he had copied.

"Just call them Zugzwang. They're nine people with a single soul."

"Right! Zugzwang it is, then! We'll be leaving this motel now, but I'll set the seals on all of you to break simultaneously this evening. It would be a problem if you started killing each other or anything like that, though, so I'll keep your Magic Circuits sealed for about another three days."

Seal their Magic Circuits. The words that the boy spoke so lightly caused the conscious mages to furrow their brows. As did his apparent intention to spare their lives.

"Master, will that not leave Zugzwang at an advantage? There are nine of them."

"Oh, yes. In that case, let's put the other four in the room we've been using and set their seals to break thirty seconds earlier. I think that should be enough of a time difference for them to get away if they want."

Hearing Flat's cheerful voice seemed, if anything, to make the scowling mages angry. Angry

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at the reality that someone who lacked any and all resolution as a mage had rendered them powerless simply by acquiring the weapon known as a Heroic Spirit. That emotion, however, quickly turned around.

Berserker saw the mages glaring at Flat.

“Master,” he asked, stroking his chin, “is it really safe to spare them?”

“Do you want to kill them that badly?”

“No... It’s true that we are fated to battle to the death — in fact, I almost feel as if I’ve already killed them several times in the past — but that was likely in a world on a different phase or a sort of tremor in the world. I will obey my Master. Still, is there any reason not to kill them?”

“We won’t kill them, Jack. A human life weighs more than the Earth, you know?”

To a mage, such words were appalling. The captives practically trembled with rage upon hearing them. What Flat said next, however, was the trigger.

Until then, they had acknowledged Flat’s mystical ability, but still thought of him as “a spoiled rich boy who has Magic Circuits, but lacks a mage’s spirit,” and “a defective mage who can’t even get rid of his human softness.” It was his words and the look in his eyes in that instant, that forced them to reconsider.

“Human lives, these people’s lives included, are valuable parts for jumping clear of the Earth.”

His eyes.

Flat’s eyes when he said that were neither the eyes of a mage, nor those of a mere human. They were filled holes, like something had fallen out, or like they saw through everyone.

When they sensed that presence, unlike anything they had ever felt before, all the mages understood: the boy in front of them was no mage. He did, however, not seem to be any kind of monster or puppet; both his body and mind were unmistakably human. Still, the mages’ instincts told them that he was looking at a different “destination.” They could not comprehend what this man called Flat Escardos saw.

Berserker had felt the same thing in the several days he had spent with Flat, but he had deliberately refrained from mentioning it. He sensed that his Master was not something that could be described in terms of good and evil.

As if to prove that, Flat continued without a shred of good or ill will:

“Wouldn’t it be a shame and a waste to just kill them?”

The mages were frozen in fear. Only Berserker noticed that a tinge of something like loneliness flitted across Flat’s face as he spoke.

Twenty hours remain until Jack’s Noble Phantasm is—

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The same time. Urban Snowfield. A back street.

“Humans treat life awfully frivolously these days. I feel kind of sorry for them,” Filia — or, to be precise, the thing possessing Filia’s body — said, looking around her at a predawn side street slightly removed from the skyscraper district. It had about as much traffic as one could expect, but its atmosphere was hardly one of safety.

“...Frivolously?”

The response came from a timid-looking female mage walking behind Filia. Filia shrugged at her faint-hearted demeanor and continued:

“Yes, they’re being wasteful, or perhaps I should say they’re living fast and recklessly. There’s nothing wrong with basking in a moment’s pleasure, but why don’t they enjoy the moment more fully?”

Filia’s gaze rested on a rowdy group of drunken men as well as the hard-faced hoodlums who seemed of a piece with the side street.

“Those children are taking the smoke of strange herbs into their bodies, and those others have the vulgar stink of their victims’ blood on them. I’ve got nothing against them getting drunk on decadence and throwing their lives away, but they could at least go about it more beautifully.”

Filia’s appearance made her quite conspicuous in these back streets. Her almost translucent pale silver hair swayed. Her red eyes blazed against her snow white skin. Her features were too well-proportioned — to the point of seeming almost artificial — but the vivid emotions now on her face, presumably due to the influence of whatever was animating her body, lent it a human quality.

“Hey there, girls. If you’re in this place at this hour, you must bAHBABOBOAHAHBO-BOBO.”

“You’re in the way. I didn’t hear any dirty words, so I’ll pardon you. Now go away or die.”

Rough-looking men had called out to her a number of times. Just one look from her, however, and they collapsed foaming at the mouth. The girl mage walking behind her knew why: the unbelievably dense magical energy that coated Filia had focused to the point that even ordinary humans without Magic Circuits could feel it and directly jolted the hoodlums’ brains.

Is it Od? Mana? Some principle that doesn’t conform to either concept...?

Sensing the torrents of magical energy whirling around Filia, the girl mage was seized by fear. She could detect that an immense quantity of magical energy was covering Filia. The truly

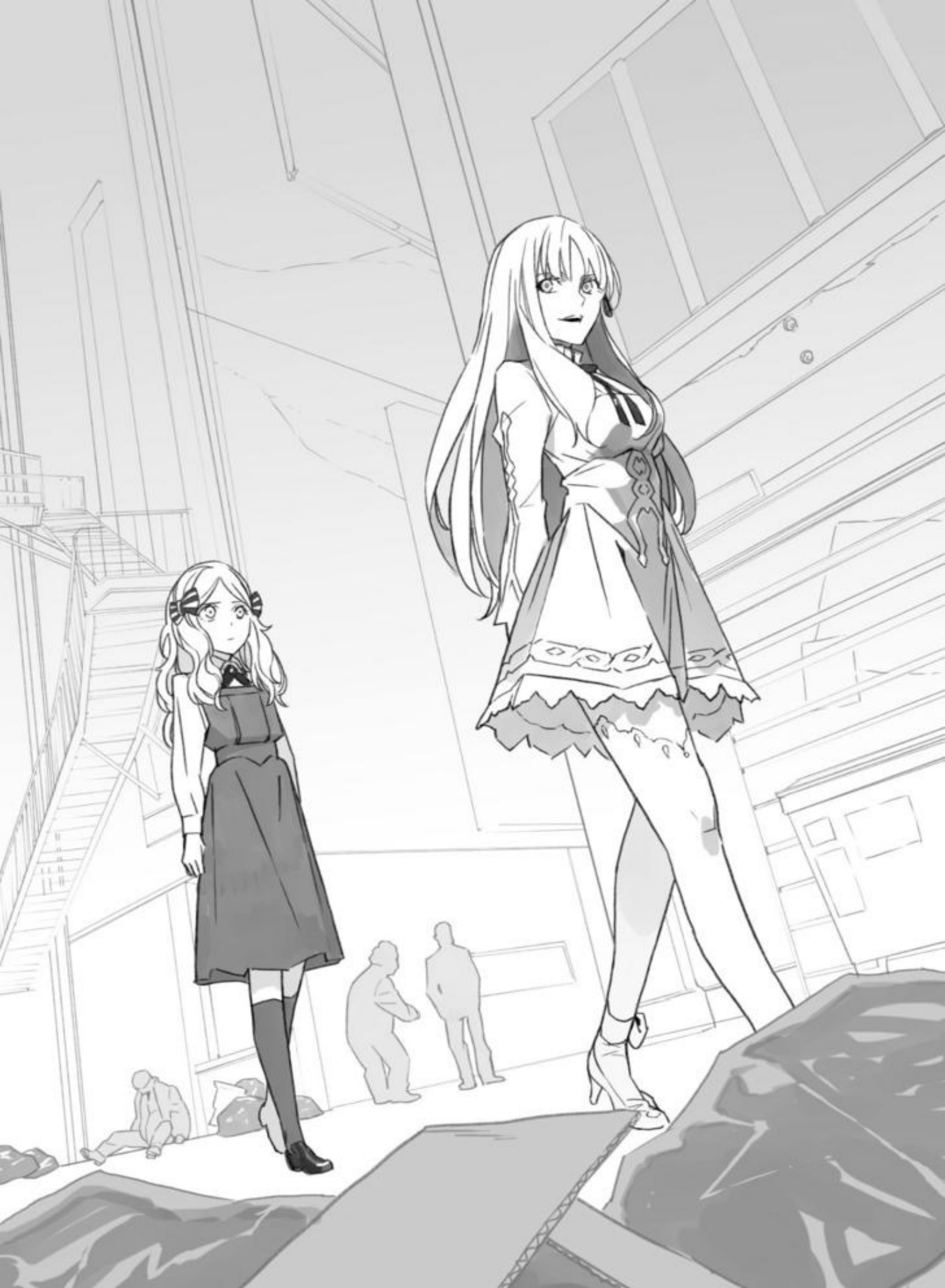
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terrifying thing, however, was that it remained within a roughly three-meter radius around her, forming a hemispherical dome of magical energy. What was more, absolutely no energy leaked out of that dome. The girl could tell that the mystical force was circulating, like a miniature star with Filia as its core.

The being in front of her was no mage.

Filia, an Einzbern homunculus. The girl had been briefed about her beforehand. Now, however, she was a being distinct from homunculi, mages, and even ordinary Heroic Spirits, retaining only Filia's outward appearance.

"You too, Haruri," the thing in Filia's form addressed the girl mage, who cowered in the face of the complete unknown. "Self-sacrifice magecraft wasn't uncommon in my age, but at least sacrifice yourself like you're enjoying it. It hurts just watching you."



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The girl mage — Haruri — shivered at Filia's words. She felt that her inner self had been seen through.

Haruri Borzak.

She was a rogue mage who did not belong to the Clock Tower, but her skill in witchcraft was first rate. Francesca had found her on the verge of attempting a mystical approach to the United States in pursuit of a certain goal.

Witchcraft demands sacrifice. Haruri was a maverick who invariably offered only her own flesh and blood. She also worked no deadly curses, but made up for it by specializing in reflecting them. Her magical abilities could be said to be of a high order.

Although she took pride in being an accomplished mage and in using magecraft, a certain circumstance led her to maintain a powerful hatred of the magical world. She had accepted Francesca's deal for a chance to destroy it.

If she managed to obtain the Holy Grail, she planned to use its power to render all the concealment deliberately maintained by mage society ineffective. The awareness of the general populace ought to weaken Mystery and leave mages distant from the Origin. She might even wish for the concept of magecraft to disappear.

That was the intention with which she had entered the Grail War, but she had been handed the strange fate of being almost fatally wounded by the Berserker she summoned and was saved from by the thing that had possessed Filia's body. That was how she had ended up walking along a dangerous side street before dawn.

An accomplished mage had no reason to fear a hoodlum or two. Assuming that they had specialized in combat, a mage of sufficient stature to receive the Clock Tower rank of Pride or Brand would make nothing of a whole gang, or even a small detachment of a regular army. It was even said that an extremely small portion of mages who had mastered the art of combat were capable of taking on the army of a small country alone and barehanded.

Haruri, however, while an accomplished mage, was totally unsuited to direct combat. Using familiars, she might be able to drive off around a hundred ruffians. If she was suddenly knifed from behind in the wrong place, however, even taking the restorative capabilities of her Magical Crest into account, she would have no choice but to accept death.

Ordinarily, her Servant should have acted as her spear and shield. The Heroic Spirit she had summoned, however, was Berserker, and had therefore lost its reason. She was not sure to what extent it would obey her instructions. However...

Haruri stared at Filia. Whatever was inhabiting the homunculus had easily restrained Berserker, treating it almost like a puppy. Although Haruri had succeeded in sealing a former contract due to Filia's mediation, Haruri could not consider the Servant she had summoned as her own.

She turned her gaze upward, and there it was, following them. The eerily robotic Heroic Spirit, like a cross between a mechanical spider and a lion, had not even dematerialized. It was crawling along the sides of buildings like a giant spider straight out of a movie. And yet, Haruri could sense nothing like magical energy from it. It did not seem to make noise, either, and there was no sign of panic on the part of the people inside the buildings it crawled on.

“Don’t worry,” Filia, swelling with pride, told a doubtful Haruri. “His presence and form are completely isolated. I’ve made it so that only you and I can see him.”

Filia spoke off-handedly, but Haruri, who understood what a feat that was, felt a renewed fear of the being in front of her. A full day had passed since their meeting, and Haruri still had no idea of her true identity or objective.

Although the wounds she had suffered in summoning Berserker had healed thanks to Filia, Haruri had holed up in her workshop in order to repair her lost Mystic Codes and damaged Magic Circuits and, most importantly, to gather information on the area. At some point during that Filia had disappeared. She had returned during the night, grumbling that she had spent the day “observing all sorts of countries out of curiosity,” but that they were “kind of boring for how flashy they are.”

“Although,” she had added, taking Haruri’s hand and dragging her outside, “there are a lot of things I could praise them on, compared to my time.”

Haruri was unassertive and had difficulty speaking up, but gathered her courage to ask:

“Umm... Where are we going?”

“To where the other Servants are, obviously.”

“What?”

Haruri was dumbfounded. The sight seemed to confuse Filia.

“You’re fighting a Holy Grail War, aren’t you? I’m just giving you a little hand to help you win. My goal matches yours anyway.”

“...Are you planning to march into another Master’s base?”

“Yes, right up ahead. The place with the rows of grimy factories that have nothing but size going for them. Although I’d honestly rather steer clear of any place that reeks of so much smoke.”

Whatever was inhabiting Filia let out a little sigh, then looked up at the dawn seeping across the sky and muttered to herself.

“I can’t stand to let my garden get filthy... I’ll have to wash it off soon.”

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The same time. The police station.

Orlando Reeve, the head of the Snowfield Police Department, had cut off sharing his senses with his Servant, Caster. He did not use his Servant for reconnaissance and he felt no need to provide Caster with information from his end. Consequently, the chief of police never viewed his Servant's mental world or memories in the form of dreams and considered such things unnecessary.

He had summoned the "fake" Caster, Alexandre Dumas, père, who was currently engaged in the production, or falsification, of Noble Phantasms at a remote site. Because they did not share senses, they could not communicate telepathically. Generally, they contacted each other by phone.

A day had passed since Assassin's attack. The chief and the other members of the police faction were finally getting back on their feet, when a new disorder erupted. News of the epidemic affecting pets and psychological disorder that caused people to suddenly declare that they could not leave the city which were causing a panic throughout Snowfield reached the chief's ears. He was under pressure to sort through data, both as one of the masterminds of the Grail War and as a police officer tasked with preserving public order.

He was still in the middle of that when his cell phone alerted him to an incoming call from Dumas.

"Hey there, bro! You picked up quick! Pulling an all-nighter?"

"Something like that. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since I summoned you."

"Ha! If you've got time to complain, why not summon Hyppolyte Durand too while you're at it? He built my place, you know! ...Of course, it's somebody else's these days. The Chateau de Monte-Cristo. Ever heard of it?"

"Of course. It's now a monument to you."

A mansion that was almost a small castle in the Ile-de-France region. The opulent mansion on the banks of the Seine, which Dumas had poured his whole fortune at the height of his success into building, could be described as an index of the author's splendor at his peak.

"Yeah, I looked it up and it was a real surprise. Who'd have thought that the house I sold off when I hadn't got a sou'd still be around in this day and age, much less end up as a museum of me!"

"You have the enduring fans of your work to thank for that."

"You've got that right. I don't know about including a portrait of my mistress, but, hey, works, house and mistress are all out of my hands now. I guess they were worth making if somebody can get a kick out of them."

“Works and house aside, modern values don’t think much of having mistresses.”

“Well, anyway,” Caster continued, ignoring the chief’s sarcastic interjection, “my friends took to calling my writing studio on the grounds there the ‘Chateau d’If,’ if you can believe it. It’s not very nice to call the room where a writer shuts himself up to focus a prison island, but I bet my efficiency would go up a lot there.”

“...I hope you’re not suggesting we shuttle Noble Phantasms back and forth between this city and France.”

“Honestly, it’s more than a hundred and thirty years since I kicked the bucket. I expected you’d have come up with at least one machine to transport things instantly by now.”

“Instant transportation between here and France wouldn’t even be magecraft anymore. That would have one foot in the realm of Magic.”

At that point, the chief was struck by a sudden thought.

“...Still, you must have had quite an attachment to that book to name your own house the Chateau de Monte-Cristo. Or did people just decide to call it that on their own?”

“Who knows? I’ve got a feeling I had it called that as an insinuation aimed at somebody, but they never came to complain in my lifetime. Doesn’t make much difference now, does it?”

It was rare for Dumas to avoid a subject so openly. The chief was exasperated, but he decided to go along with it. He repented dragging the small talk on too long.

“So? What are you calling about?”

“Hey, a few of your guys got their Noble Phantasms smashed up fighting that bloodsucker, right? I’ve made plans to fix ‘em.”

“That’s lucky. As always, the courier...”

“Stop right there. I don’t need any couriers. There’s somebody I want you to send instead.”

The chief furrowed his brow at Dumas’ suggestion.

“...I assume this isn’t your usual request for a woman.”

“Yeah. Bring that police force you picked out, Clan Calatin, over to my place. It doesn’t have to be all of them, but as many old hands as possible. Oh, and include the ones with broken Noble Phantasms. Same goes for the boy who got his hand eaten.”

“...”

His Servant’s proposal gave the chief pause. He had made Dumas’ existence common knowledge among Clan Calatin, but he could not immediately decide whether he could allow them to meet in person. A few days earlier, the chief would have deemed it unnecessary, and Dumas had shown no desire to meet his men. Under the present circumstances, however, he did want a change.

“...I believe you told me that you don’t require assistance to produce Noble Phantasms.”

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“That’s right. It wouldn’t make the Noble Phantasms any stronger. And to hell with compatibility when it comes to plain old humans. Fine-tuning for the user’s not my job.”

Before the chief had a chance to ask, “Why, then?” the flippant Dumas gave his answer.

“I’m just a spectator this time. I’m doing the bare minimum for you to cover my ticket fee.”

“...?”

“Only... as a spectator, if there’s an actor I take a shine to, I want to show my favor by picking ‘em out a bouquet or two.”

The chief mulled over Dumas’ words for a short while, then heaved a big sigh. After a few more seconds of silence, he made up his mind.

“...Alright. But they’re my officers before they’re mages. Promise me that you won’t do anything to their Magic Circuits or their minds.”

“I’m not some mage like Eliphas Levi or Paracelcus, you know? Do you really think I could pull off something that tricky?”

“Leaving aside that opinions are split on whether M. Levi was the kind of mage the Association would acknowledge... The basis of producing a Noble Phantasm is grafting a ‘legend’ onto a weapon. You’re not talking like a man who can manage ‘something that tricky.’”

“...Well, there is a chance that I might mess with their destinies. You’ll have to let that much slide. I’ll do my best to make sure I twist them for the better.”

The chief was about to give the shameless Dumas some candid advice, but he resisted the urge and quickly ended the call.

“...Sorry, something just came up. I’ll contact you later to let you know when I’ll be sending my people over.”

“Haha! No rest for you, huh, bro? Better keep some stomach medicine on hand! Man, it’s crazy how many kinds there are these days! Take care of your stomach, OK? Later!”

After hanging up, the chief glanced to his side. His personal secretary, also a member of Clan Calatin, was standing there, holding out a report.

The chief nodded wordlessly, then re-read the document. It said that the Einzbern homunculus that had appeared in the city was acting in concert with a mage Francesca had brought — with the Master of one of the true Servants. What worried him most was their reported destination.

The chief had been informed in advance about the Masters that Francesca and Faldeus had brought in to be their pawns. Cashura, who was supposed to summon Saber, had died at Assassin’s hands. The magecraft-using mercenary Sigma was only in contact with Faldeus. Doris Lusendra, the scion of a clan that commanded reinforcement magecraft and were said to have discarded even the concept of humanity, was also outside the police surveillance net. The result

was that Haruri, who they did have under surveillance, was of extreme importance to the chief.

Her acting together with the Einzbern homunculus, however, was troubling.

Is she being brainwashed or threatened...? No, considering Haruri Borzak's origins, it's possible that she made a deal and changed sides.

Haruri herself was not a powerful combat mage, so she would not present too great an issue. He would need precautions against deadly curses and the like, but such threats were not exclusive to her, so he already had layers of countermeasures in place.

The problem was what Heroic Spirit she had summoned. Data on the Masters had come down from "above," but it had not included who would summon what Heroic Spirit. He supposed that, from the higher ups' perspective, even Clan Calatin fell within the category of expendable pawns.

The chief did, however, at least have a firm grasp on where the Masters he needed to be most wary of had made their hideouts. He was able to infer that Haruri and the Einzbern homunculus were heading for one of them.

"The industrial district... Are they planning to make contact with the devil of the Scradio Family?"

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The man called Bazdilote Cordelion made a conscious decision not to dream.

He employed self hypnosis to put his body into a light sleep and his brain into a deep sleep for mere minutes at a time. It was a measure that enabled him to remain active for long periods, as well as to move immediately as he woke should an enemy appear.

Short-term sleep utilizing the deconstruction of consciousness was a simple spell, widely used even by amateurs. Although, as the deconstructing of one's consciousness was something like temporary suicide, only a limited number of mages made frequent use of it.

Bazdilote heard that there were magecraft-using mercenaries who employed a number of additional sleep spells for various purposes. He, however, fundamentally disliked dreams, and therefore refused to allow himself REM sleep.

That was what made Bazdilote suspicious.

From a certain moment onward, he was conscious that he was "dreaming."

A sunset-stained sea spread out around him. He dreamt that he was riding on an enormous ship that made a show of parting the white-capped waves as it advanced across the water's golden surface.

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Almost immediately, however, he revised that thought. This was no dream; it was a shared memory phenomenon composed of information and magical energy that were not his own.

His point of view was significantly higher than he was used to. Looking down, he could see a blond man who began speaking to him with a haughty grin.

“Hm? You want to know why I don’t fear you...? Why even ask something so obvious? It’s because I am a sage who possesses wisdom that even surpasses that of the gods, of course.”

Most likely, these were the memories of the Servant he was supplying with magical energy — Alkeides.

Cool-headed observation told Bazdilot that the man was speaking some ancient language of the region around the Aegean Sea. Possibly due to the modern knowledge bestowed on the Heroic Spirit, or possibly due to his own influence through the pass that linked them, however, his brain registered it as the language he ordinarily used.

The owner of the memory — presumably Alkeides — stood on the deck of a ship whose construction was too magnificent too seem ancient. A number of people were visible in his vicinity. Even in the shared memory, Bazdilot could tell that every one of them was cloaked in magical energy of an almost frightening intensity. If the average human shared these memories, Bazdilot thought, that alone would be enough to cause them mental disruption.

“You see, humans are fundamentally brainless. The fools choose a fool to lead them and act the king, so the country is never at rest, wars break out and the people starve. That’s precisely why a person like me has to seize power and glory.”

As far as “power” went, however, he could not sense as strong a presence from the blond man making a speech in front of him as from the others, although the man did seem to be under some kind of divine protection. When Bazdilot sharpened his senses and carefully scrutinized him, the man almost seemed to be cloaked in magical energy that resided in the ship itself.

“Even the people who fear you are all hopeless fools. Because they’re fools, they can’t understand the monster you are. They try to use you without understanding you, so they fear you even as they sing your praises as a hero. What a vulgar bunch. They’re no different from ignorant savages offering sacrifices and toadying up to a man-eating wolf that’s not even a monster, let alone a messenger of the gods.”

The man delivered his words in a clear, resonant voice. He spoke not so much as though he was drunk on his own words as he did as though his words were the one and only, blindingly obvious truth.

The reactions of the people around him were varied. Some nodded along with shining eyes, while others flashed grimaces that seemed to say, “He’s at it again.” Near the bow, a female archer with a bestial air was eyeing the blond man with undisguised suspicion. The man either failed to

notice her look or deemed it beneath his notice, because he kept talking.

“My country — the country I’m going to make — will be different. I will give every citizen an education. I’ll build a school in the city better than that stable and lend my knowledge to everyone. They’ll all be able to read and write so that they won’t be taken in by unscrupulous merchants. Of course, they’ll never equal my wisdom, so I’ll have to compensate for what they lack.”

A real talker.

Bazdilot continued to listen to the man’s speech, although it made no strong impression on him. Alkeides, the original listener, had lent an ear to the lengthy monologue in silence.

“I’m going to be king, after all; I’m prepared for that much labor. As long as everyone obeys me, I’ll give them suitable compensation and a prosperous land. A land where everyone feels safe. In that land... Listen to me! In that land, no one will look at you and be afraid!” The blond man proclaimed, spreading his arms wide and cutting off Alkeides, who had been about to say something. The gesture almost seemed to say that his words were the world itself.

“Because as long as you’re my man, my friend, my property, everyone will understand you.”

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At that point, Bazdilot regained consciousness. Around him spread the usual, dreary expanse of his workshop beneath the meat processing plant.

Bazdilot noted that he was seated in a chair. Then, he took out a pocket watch and confirmed that exactly five minutes had passed since he had begun sleeping.

After a brief silence to consider what he had seen, he slowly voiced his conclusions.

“I see. So, that was the captain of the Argo.”

At that, a portion of the space in the workshop writhed, and a dense mass of magical energy materialized in human form.

“What do you mean by that?” Alkeides asked his Master.

“Your memories encroached on my sleep. I assume due to the path of magical energy that links us. I saw an arrogant brat on a boat spouting nonsense about his utopia.”

Bazdilot made no attempt to conceal what he had seen or the impression he had formed of it. Alkeides sank into silence for a while, then stifled a chuckle as he shook his head, apparently reminiscing about the distant past.

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“...His utopia? I doubt there’s anyone else who would make such a dubious speech aboard ship.”

“A worthless man. In this day and age, people like us would use him down to the bone marrow, then throw him away — just an easy mark who doesn’t know his place. Why would a hero of your caliber haul oars for a man like him?”

Bazdilot dispassionately gave Alkeides a character sketch and a question based on what he had seen. Alkeides’ response was immediate.

“That man was a vulgar clown with all the weaknesses and twists of human nature in him. Nor can I deny that he always told his companions that he was the one who could make the best use of them. That earned him cold looks from Atalante.”

Atalante.

Hearing the name of the huntress said to have been one of Alkeides’ shipmates on the Argo, Bazdilot surmised that she must have been the woman in the scene he had just witnessed.

“...But that told of the same dream equally to me, who was feared as a monster, and to the queen of Lemnos, and even to monsters on the shore that understood human speech. He was aiming to be a king, not a god. Although, I doubt he made a distinction.”

It was a harsh assessment, but there was no sign of scorn in his voice.

“He was a pitiful man who forgot the teachings of our mutual teacher Chiron and became obsessed with his own desires. Still, there was nothing false about the wild tales he spun.”

Alkeides expounded on the man who had been the Argo’s captain with the deliberate tone of a man describing a dream he had once had.

“That man, smeared with dirt and avarice, was the most human human I ever saw. If I had to lose, I wouldn’t want it to be to the curses, thunderbolts and hellfire that the gods sent my way. I would want my soul to be scorched by the never-ending greed of a man like that — of a human.”

“...You sound almost like you’re hoping for it.”

“Of course I am. But after I’ve taken my revenge.”

Then, almost incidentally, he began to reminisce about the glorious ship he had crewed — the Argo.

“That ship was a true den of thieves. It shone brightly, but underneath it was a whirlpool of ruin, greed, treachery — all the karma to which human beings are subject. I doubt there was anyone onboard who couldn’t kill me, the captain included. And vice versa.”

“It sounds like you’re awfully attached to that boat.”

It was a half-sarcastic remark, delivered in a perfect deadpan. Alkeides neither confirmed nor denied it. He matter-of-factly told the story of that captain’s end.

“In the end, that man lost everything. I hear that he perished crushed by the corpse of the

ship where we shared joys and sorrows... although that may have been that fickle ship's one genuine act of mercy."

Seeing Alkeides deeply moved by his story raised doubts in Bazdilot's mind.

He's awfully talkative. I wouldn't have thought he'd be anxious to talk about the past...

Alkeides answered those doubts by grasping his bow and lightly planting its tip on the floor. Alkeides' bloodlust swelled, sending a cold, sharp shiver through the air of the workshop in step with the expanding ripples of sound from the impact.

"I've said this much so that I can justly convey the meaning of what I am about to tell you. I would not want it said that I deal out death without reason, like the outlaws who call themselves gods."

"...What do you want to say?"

Even in the face of Alkeides' naked bloodlust, Bazdilot remained unperturbed.

In the midst of pressure so intense that it might break an ordinary human's body even faster than it broke their spirit, Alkeides lowered his voice and gave his Master a "warning."

"It may be true that he was an incurably arrogant fool who didn't know his place, but even so... he was my friend. You were not on that ship, and I will not permit you to insult him so casually."

It was a direct threat. Bazdilot judged that, if he made another disparaging remark about that captain, Alkeides would turn on him without mercy.

"I see. Understood. I won't apologize, but I will promise never to bring up this subject again."

After a brief silence, Alkeides extinguished his bloodlust and turned his back on Bazdilot. Watching his back, Bazdilot understood why such a trivial conversation had traveled along the path of magical energy into his own consciousness. As far as the man called Alkeides was concerned, the time he had spent on that ship must have been one of the few times he had been treated as a human, rather than as the child of a god. The only other candidates were his infancy and the time he had spent frolicking with a wife and children who were fated to die. Those traces of Alkeides the human, standing out like stepping stones, must be all that now gave him form.

How twisted, the man who had done the twisting thought without a shred of sympathy. He etched the exchange into his memory for future use.

Maybe that captain really was a hero.

Bazdilot revised his evaluation of the blond man he had seen in his dream slightly upward. He was considering his future plans when the communication equipment in his workshop registered a call from the meat processing plant above ground.

"...What is it?"

The subordinate mage on the first floor answered Bazdilot's frosty tones with almost a

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scream.

“It-it’s the Einzberns! An Einzbern homunculus is here, and...”

That was as far as the subordinates got. There was an intense burst of noise and the call cut off with a sound like a person collapsing to the floor.

Wordlessly, Bazdilot rose to his feet and turned his eyes to the stairs that led above ground. Alkeides appeared to have noticed that something was out of the ordinary as well.

“...There’s only one presence,” he muttered, bow in hand, “but it seems as though there’s more than one of something.”

Perhaps it was a hero’s intuition, or perhaps it was something to do with his mind’s eye. Alkeides suspected that the diminutive presence he sensed and whatever had defeated Bazdilot’s men were separate entities. To prove it, he could soon hear the clangs of two pairs of feet descending the stairs.

What appeared in the workshop several seconds later was a woman with the distinctive pure white skin and pale silver hair of a homunculus and a girl — apparently a mage — who seemed to be trying to hide behind her.

At that point, Bazdilot and Alkeides understood. The reason that neither of them could detect even a trace of the presence of the woman who appeared to be an Einzbern homunculus was that she was forcing her magical energy to circulate only around herself.

Faced with a dome of dense magical energy with a radius of several meters, Alkeides wordlessly set his hands on his bow, while Bazdilot spoke with a look of imperturbability.

“An Einzbern doll, right? What do you want here?”

In contrast to Bazdilot, who kept almost all emotion out of his voice, the homunculus spoke with cheerfulness and a gentle smile on her face.

“Oh, look how muddy you’ve gotten... You’ve half-stopped being human, haven’t you?”

“In that case... I don’t suppose you’ll mind if I kill you along with that warped Heroic Spirit there.”

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That dim world was filled with the presence of dense forest.

All around, giant cryptomerias rose skyward like buildings. The deep shadows of their leaves blanketed the earth, as if to say that they would not permit any new buds to breathe.

Amid the gloom, a deeper shadow fell. It had the color of dark earth. In reality, however, its insides were filled with dense magical energy and the radiance of life. Inside that clump of earth, which wriggled like slime mold, a number of “words” were being repeated. To be precise, they were not even words; they were lumps of “will.” The newborn dirt clod was soaking in what sort of entity it was.

Pierce, and sew fast.

You are the all-piercing spear and the linchpin that will sew fast our truth — the world’s truth.

You have the knowledge you need to become a perfected doll and the obligation to do so.

Our first and last mercy, thrown to warn against the hubris that walks the earth.

Remind the race of humans of their role. You shall guide them.

Pierce, and sew fast.

But first, learn.

You have a need to know.

To know what humans are.

In the forest of Enlil, Utu birthed a human who was “complete.”

Look, speak, and pattern your form after its.

Then will Ninurta grant you a share of his power.

Before we hurl you into the woods of Uruk, you must be with the “person” that Utu reared.

Become perfect. Become a doll.

You are the lump of earth that will imitate all life.

Converse with humans.

Pierce, and sew fast.

The numerous words reverberated from the world itself into the dirt clod’s core. The clod simply existed in the shadows of the forest and searched as the words commanded.

It must know humans. It must meet the “complete” human that Utu was said to have raised.

Then, when the air of the forest grew colder, “it” appeared before the lump of earth. The voices within the clod swelled, and it instinctively understood that this was the “complete human.”

The “thing” — “it” could be called neither he nor she — that the mud became aware of as it

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simply spread through the forest raised a cry—

A cry of perpetual hate and unending resentment for the whole world.

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In a forest.

“What’s wrong? You sounded like you were having a nightmare.”

Enkidu gently stroked the back of his Master, the silver wolf, as it slowly opened its eyes. Seeing the light filtering through the surrounding trees, it rubbed its head against Enkidu in relief. After it let out a number of barks, Enkidu’s face grew clouded and he addressed it in tones of heartfelt apology.

“...I see. That must have been a memory from before I was born. I’m sorry for frightening you.”

Enkidu quietly closed his eyes. Then, recalling an age that was now long past, he murmured, half to himself:

“Utu and the other gods — all except Ishtar and Ereshkigal — genuinely believed that ‘she’ was a ‘complete human being.’ Actually... If I hadn’t met Shamhat and Gil after ‘her,’ I probably would have believed it too.”

The silver wolf let out a gentle keening, as if to comfort the sad-eyed Enkidu. Enkidu flashed the wolf a smile. Then, looking up at a starry sky slightly different from that of his own day, he spoke of the fate of the gods.

“At that point, it was probably already too late to stop their parting with the people of Babylonia.”

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Crystal Hill Hotel. Top floor.

“Humph... This still falls far short of my chamber in Uruk.”

“Really? But it’s so beautiful,” Tine Chelk exclaimed in surprise.

“Naturally; it came from my treasury,” her Servant, the King of Heroes, declared in a tone of

mild displeasure. “All my furnishings are of the highest quality. But the atmosphere of this time fails to counterbalance my treasures. To begin with, this quantity is hardly sufficient. A room such as this is too cramped to properly display the grandeur of Uruk.”

The hotel suite that the King of Heroes surveyed as he spoke looked nothing like it had a few hours earlier. Although Alkeides’ attack had shattered the window glass, it was still the most luxurious room in Snowfield. The furniture and bed were both of the highest quality. To Tine, used to living in an isolated desert settlement, they were things from another world. Nevertheless...

The previous evening, once the King of Heroes had finished his lengthy recital of the building of the walls of Uruk and moved on to expounding on how perfect the city of Uruk had been, he had announced his intention to redecorate. He apparently had doubts about whether Tine and her subordinates could fully comprehend the wonders of Uruk as things stood. After ordering Tine’s black-suited followers to “move all the furnishings into the corridor,” he had produced Babylonian-era decorations from his own treasury.

Tine stared with wide eyes at their beauty.

The unrolled carpets made her imagine she was walking on clouds. Glittering tableware the likes of which she had never seen were arranged on a table that appeared to have been carved out of stone. Even the design of the numerous gold ornaments, which one mistake could easily send over the line into bad taste, harmonized with their surroundings. They contained a simple beauty like fields of golden grain condensed.

...*The King of Heroes’ normal armor is glitzier than any of this stuff*, one of the black suits thought. Then, realizing that it was more than their life was worth to say that out loud, they broke out in a cold sweat and forced the thought down into their innermost depths.

As for jewels, even the numerous lapis lazulis — not an especially rare stone — that appeared from the King of Heroes’ treasury were unlike any that Tine had ever seen. The surfaces of the stones, enveloped in almost transparent indigo, were flecked with glittering crystal reminiscent of white-crested waves. They made her hallucinate that an ocean was sealed inside them and that, if she split them open, it would gush out to birth stars and life. If the King of Heroes had told her it was so, Tine might have believed him.

And the King of Heroes complained that, even adorned with enormous jewels of such beauty, it still “fell short.”

“Perhaps I ought to begin at the beginning by having a royal palace — no, a city — constructed. What are your thoughts, Tine?”

“We, who are not people of Uruk, could not dare to walk the streets of such a city.”

“Nonsense. Whether one is a person of Uruk has no bearing on whether one stands on its

paving stones.”

The King of Heroes looked down at Tine and dismissed her words out of hand.

“From my perspective, all are equally mongrels. High or low birth makes less difference than a sheet of gold leaf. Those I recognize as people of Uruk are those with the will to clear the wasteland themselves.”

Then, perhaps recalling Uruk’s inhabitants, his face softened.

“There was even a mongrel who rose from tavern wench to high priestess and shouted at me until I rebuilt the country, if you can believe it. I shall never understand her faith in that thoughtless goddess Ishtar, but that was how one of my people ought to be.”

“Such a person...”

“She was not unique. All the people of Uruk struggled desperately to live, but none of them considered that hardship. Although there were those who depended on and revered me, there were no crooked people whose only skill was flattering me. Anyone who would conceive such a scheme would die a dog’s death in the wastelands without even a need for me to judge them. That was the kind of age the people of Uruk lived in.”

When the King of Heroes, bathed in the rays of morning light that streamed in through the windows, reached that point, he turned his gaze to Tine. Perhaps she was using some form of magecraft, because she was wide awake and tense despite not having had a wink of sleep.

“I permit you to retire,” the King of Heroes addressed Tine in tones of mild displeasure. “You were born human; be natural when answering the demands of your instincts.”

His words were of appreciation for a subordinate and stopped just short of saying that he saw through her spell.

“B-but Your Majesty! For me to indulge in indolence while Your Majesty labors without sleep would be...”

“Then this is a royal order: rest. It shames a king to work even a temporary retainer to death.”

Still, Tine hesitated. The King of Heroes wiped all expression from his face and stated:

“I believe I already told you: you may offer me your life, but I have no need of an immature soul.”

“M-my humble apologies!”

When he had seen Tine vanish into the bedroom after repeatedly expressing her gratitude, the King of Heroes turned his attention to her black-suited followers who remained in the room. Tension ran through them at this behavior from the king who ordinarily acted as if they did not exist.

“You have labored hard as well. It must be a burden to revere an immature girl as your lord.”

“O-of course not. We would never..”

The King of Heroes narrowed his eyes at the first man’s forced smile.

One to start.

Gilgamesh, who had witnessed a great multitude of humanity as a hero, a tyrant, a wise king and a Heroic Spirit, instantly recognized the man as a traitor. He did not, however, point out that fact, or even telepathically communicate it to Tine.

Ten rats, I would say... but there will be more.

Smirking inwardly, he began to roll a cup on his palm, reflecting the morning sunlight.

Well, no matter. They are Tine’s followers, not my vassals. It is for her to judge the traitors, or to fail to notice them and be stabbed in the back...

If you claim that you are not a child, mongrel, show me the state of your mind. As your king, I shall take my time weighing its true worth.

Then, he spoke to himself in a voice that reached no one.

“Mongrel, if you are merely the child I took you for, drift in your dreams for the present.

“Even your nightmares must be better than reality.”

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In a dream.

Kuruoka Tsubaki awoke basking in the rays of morning sunlight that streamed in through the window.

“Good morning, Mr. Black!”

The black giant that blocked out the ceiling squirmed happily at her call.

Outside the window, little birds sang. In the garden beyond them, cats and dogs frolicked without fighting.

“Morning, Tsubaki. Breakfast is ready.”

The door opened and her mother appeared. The smell of cooked bacon wafted up the stairs.

“OK! Morning, Mom! I’m coming!” Tsubaki replied with an innocent smile.

It could be called an ordinary, uneventful day for the residents of Snowfield. The curtain rose again on the everyday life that Tsubaki craved more than anything else.

“I thought so! Everybody must have been on a trip.”

Once she was done eating breakfast, Tsubaki went for a walk while playing with the animals

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and noticed that the city had changed since the day before. Cars now occasionally ran along the avenues and a scattering of people could be seen throughout the city.

Tsubaki had spent most of her time cooped up in her house and knew few people apart from her family. Even so, the fact that people had vanished from the city had at first made her feel nervous and afraid. Remembering that, she thanked “Mr. Black,” who walked in the shade, again.

“Thank you, Mr. Black. Without you, I’d be scared and hungry. I bet I would’ve died.”

The black shadow just wobbled in response to the young girl’s words. The black mass waving in the shadow of a telephone pole on an unfrequented street looked like nothing so much as the product of a horror movie, but Tsubaki grinned innocently at it and seemed to trust it completely.

Tsubaki herself did not understand why she had so readily accepted the black grotesquery. Despite her youth — no, precisely because of her youth — there would have been nothing strange about her following her instincts and embracing fear. For some reason, however, Tsubaki had never felt afraid. It was as if she sensed that she could be safe with the thing. And, because she never questioned that fact herself, there was no one to consider the affinity between her and the black mass.

Not until that day, that moment.

“Hey, can I pet your dogs and cats too?”

Tsubaki was surprised at being spoken to so suddenly. When she hurriedly spun around, there stood a boy she had never seen before. He looked a few years older than Tsubaki, although from an adult perspective they would both be considered young children.

“Umm... Yeah. Sure!”

Tsubaki, while hesitant, cheerfully accepted the boy. She had not noticed that the moment he appeared, the black shadow — Pale Rider — had swelled up as if it was on guard, then returned to its normal size in apparent relief as soon as he smiled at the boy.

The boy, on the other hand, did remark the wriggling black mass, but let out a sigh of relief when he saw it relax.

Thank goodness. It’s determined that I’m Tsubaki’s friend. That was close; even I can’t perfectly predict the actions of a system-type Servant, the boy thought as he stroked a dog’s cheek and flashed Tsubaki an innocent grin.

“Jester.”

“Huh?”

“My name’s Jester Karture. Pleased to meet you.”

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A mage’s workshop.

In a dim workshop, a mastermind and her Servant lay happily munching sweets on a bed, totally unaware of two children’s chance meeting in a girl’s dream.

“Mmm... These are good. Let me try some of those, too.”

“Eat too many and you’ll get fat,” the girl — Francesca — warned.

“No, I won’t; I’m a Heroic Spirit,” the boy Caster — Francois Prelati — laughed boastfully, tearing open a bag of sweets.

Francesca responded by puffing out her cheeks.

“Must be nice. I wonder if I could become one too. Do you think, if I did something incredible now under the name Francesca, I could become a Heroic Spirit?”

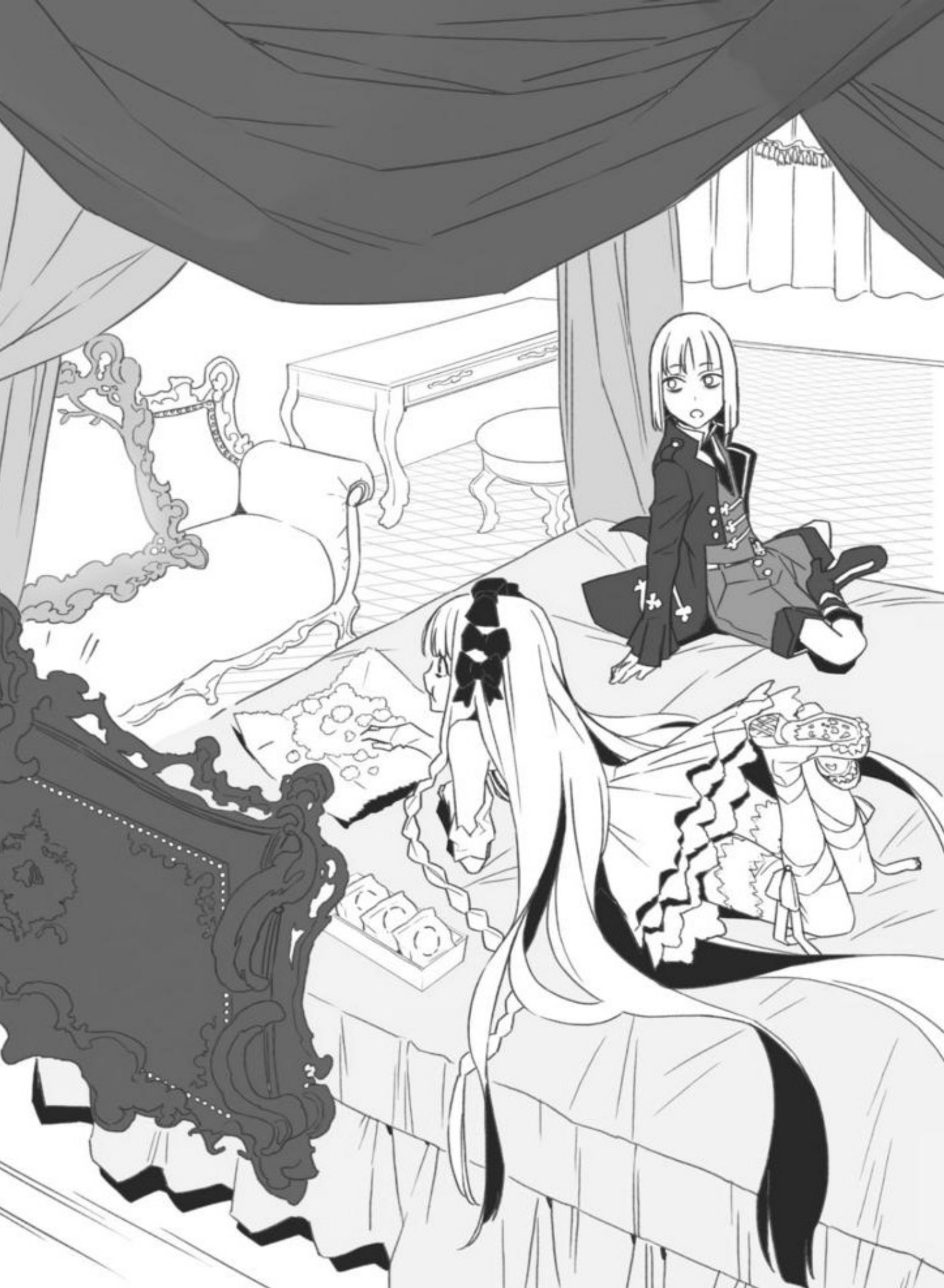
“I think you’d probably just be integrated with me. Actually, you now and the you the Throne copied as a Heroic Spirit would be different entities who just happen to have the same memories, so wondering if you could ‘become’ a Heroic Spirit is already messed up. Although, I do hear of exceptions who get summoned into all sorts of different eras while they’re still alive.”

Prelati’s words caused Francesca to tilt her head in puzzlement as she munched on a Japanese pastry called dorayaki.

“I wonder if Artie’s one of those. Not that it matters, since she didn’t turn up this time. And I just know it would’ve made a great jab at our masters if we’d gotten to bully her, too.”

“I see... You might be right. I hear she had a rough time at the fourth in Fuyuki, but it doesn’t seem like our masters went to help her.”

“They probably figured they didn’t have to. They couldn’t if they tried, anyway. It’d be one thing in Britain, but there isn’t enough Mystery left in the world to get them across the ocean from that lake. For that, you’d have to peel the world’s texture off or... Oh?”



Although the content of their conversation was inscrutable, the pair exchanged words with the air of a chat between a young boy and girl... Until the image on one of the countless monitors around them caught the boy's eye and his hand froze midway to another bag of sweets.

It was one of the images showing views of the locations of the mages who were Francesca's pawns — the one showing the industrial district that contained Bazdilot Cordelion's workshop. On the screen, one of the factories' smokestacks slowly collapsed, and an unnaturally large, grotesque silhouette was visible in the ensuing dust cloud.

"...What's that? A giant monster? The big spider from the Cave of the Crystals?"

The boy Prelati sat up on the bed and watched with interest. The giant grotesquery and Alkeides appeared to be engaged in combat, and serious destruction was beginning to ripple out into the industrial district.

"The spider won't wake up yet. It could be the cursed cat of Britain."

"It doesn't look like a cat or dog to me. Did somebody summon a giant or the king of the Picts?"

At that point, Francesca discovered a familiar face running away in a corner of the picture.

"Haruri?"

Francesca could not see clearly at that distance, but, the next instant, it looked as if the giant, monstrous shape moved to shield the girl from flying rubble, blocking every piece. When she realized that the pawn she had prepared was, for some reason, allowing something to rampage in Bazdilot's workshop, Francesca was glued to the screen with an ecstatic grin on her face.

"No way. For real? Wow, way to go Haruri! I only brought you in to fill out the roster, but you summoned up something amazing! Is that really that Heroic Spirit? That aside, isn't there something off about that amount of magical energy?! Oh, my organs ache! I love girls who defy expectations like that! You're the best! I've got to give you a hug and treat you to cake or something later!"

Francesca was breathing heavily and her cheeks were flushed. Her boy-shaped Servant, in contrast, protested his Master in a somewhat peeved tone.

"Hey! I can't see the screen."

Then, people greeted the dawn.

A dawn that, for the participants in the Holy Grail War, marked the beginning of full-scale conflict.

A dawn that, for the ordinary people of Snowfield, marked the beginning of destruction.

Interlude

“The Boy Does Not Believe In God”

Interlude

The Boy Does Not Believe in God

The wetland mansion.

Go back about half a day.

“Look, boy; your first trial’s already arrived.”

The words of the Captain, who called himself a shadow of a Watcher-Class Heroic Spirit, caused Sigma to spin around. His gaze came to rest on a lone girl.

She was his enemy — an Assassin Servant summoned by another Master — but the girl sprang into action before Sigma had a chance to realize that. She closed the distance between them in an instant and asked, in a voice stripped of emotion:

“Are you a mage who seeks the Holy Grail?”

Sigma returned the stare of the girl Assassin and, for a moment, accepted his own death. The presence of death hung thickly about the girl in front of him. It was almost as if her magical energy itself was adapted for taking human lives.

Ah, Sigma immediately understood, so, this is a proper Servant.

Every muscle in Sigma’s body screamed at him to run, but the instincts carved into his immature Magic Circuits and brain answered that running would do him no good. If he gave even one wrong answer, he would lose his life. He had not been able to figure out anything about his own Servant, “Watcher,” after a full day of conversation, but this girl, Sigma coldly thought, was genuinely simple and straightforward.

If he fought, he would die. A simple answer.

The instincts and experience he had gained struggling through many battles recognized the strength of the girl in front of him. That being the case, he had no choice but to abandon himself to fate. Sigma simply and easily accepted death.

Accepting death, however, did not mean that he had given up on life. His probability of dying in this situation was just “higher than when he was walking around normally.” Sigma calmly went on trying to think of a way to survive. The fact that, moments earlier, the self-proclaimed shadow who called himself Captain had told him to “keep struggling against God” and “never accept fate” might also have had something to do with it.

In any case, although the boy accepted that he was on the edge of a cliff, infinitely close to certain death, he never stopped racking his brains for a way out.

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Then, when the girl Assassin was tired of waiting and about to repeat her question, he finally gave his answer.

“...That’s probably half right.”

“Half?”

“As a mage, I’m half-cocked. Some even look down on me as someone who only uses magecraft. As for whether I seek the Holy Grail, I’m of two minds about whether I should.”

Assassin fell silent. It was Sigma’s turn to ask a question.

“Now I’d like you to answer my question. What do you plan to decide based on my answer?”

“Whether or not you are an enemy.”

“I don’t want hostilities. Would it be possible for me to negotiate with your Master?”

“...I have no Master.”

Murderous magical energy overflowed from the girl Assassin’s body. Sigma was just thinking that he seemed to have asked something he should not have, when the Captain cut in.

“What did I tell you, boy? If you were applying Watcher’s power, you wouldn’t put your foot in your mouth like that. The girl’s Assassin alright, but she was summoned by a bloodsucker. She killed her Master once, but it didn’t take. So, she cut her ties. Why not try a lie? ‘I’m a hitman who specializes in vampires?’”

“I’m the one conducting negotiations,” Sigma told the Captain, wondering why he was butting in so loudly. “Be quiet.”

His words, however, brought a suspicious look to Assassin’s face.

“Who are you talking to?”

“?”

“...A Servant? You spoke of my Master as well. As I thought, you are a participant in the Grail War...!”

Assassin leapt back several meters in an instant and fixed a piercing animosity on Sigma.

Sigma was readying himself, seeing that negotiation was impossible, when he heard the voice of the boy with the mechanical wings from behind him.

“Oh, sorry. It seems like no one told you... The only one who can see us or hear our voices is you, Watcher’s Master. We’re just shadows popping directly into your brain due to Watcher’s influence.”

I wish you’d told me that first, Sigma mentally grumbled. All the while, however, he kept a cool head. He endeavored to observe Assassin’s movements, even as his brain processed multiple simultaneous trains of thought — what would Assassin do? Would he have a chance to avoid it? Could he use the nearby table and chairs for cover? Unfortunately, her whole body was swathed in a black robe, and he could not predict her actions based on the movements of her muscles or joints.

Sigma was in the process of tracing an escape route in his head when Assassin's lips moved.

"...Zabaniya..."

At the same moment, the Captain's voice sounded.

"Here comes her hair. Look lively, now."

Just as Sigma grasped the meaning of those words, hair really did extend from the shadows of Assassin's hood, aiming to coil around his windpipe. Sigma avoided it by a hair's breadth, and Assassin's eyes narrowed. Apparently she had not expected him to be able to dodge. As a matter of fact, without the Captain's warning, he would not have been in time and the hair would have closed around his throat.

Seeing the hair carve away part of the column he had dodged toward, Sigma felt certain that he had just slipped through "certain death." At the same time, another shadow — the boy with the snake staff — called out to him.

"She has more than ten Noble Phantasms and she's capable of deploying more than one at a time, but she freezes for just a moment when she uses a new one. I think aiming for that opening might be your best chance."

Does she even need to use Noble Phantasms to kill someone of my level? Sigma wondered as he dodged the countless lunging strands of hair.

"Not for you," his answer came in the Captain's voice. "She's wary of a Servant attack. Of course, we shadows have no way of launching one."

Multiple simultaneous deployment, Sigma thought, listening to the Captain's stifled laughter. *That means that she invoked a perpetually-active Noble Phantasm like that hair in order to protect herself from being targeted when she fires a single-shot technique... If she has a perpetual offensive Noble Phantasm, what about a defensive one...?*

"She has one. A Noble Phantasm that protects her by turning her skin into a special crystal."

As soon as he heard the boy with the snake staff's voice from behind him, Sigma stared behind Assassin and shouted:

"Now! Stab her, Chaplin!"

Assassin spun around, raising her guard at what sounded like an order to attack.

"...Zabaniya...!"

The word "stab" suggested a physical attack. She invoked her Noble Phantasm, ready to deal with any blade... but there was no one there, and she could sense no disturbance of magical energy.

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When she realized that it was a trap and turned back to face Sigma, she found a black tube with holes punched in it in several places right in front of her eyes. Just as she moved to clear it away with her blades of hair, the cylinder split, and a light more dazzling than the midsummer sun spilled out.

Sigma leapt outside as he hurled the M84 stun grenade at Assassin, noisily smashing through a window in the process. The bang and flash began immediately after, but by that time he had already started to fall. The room that Sigma and Assassin had been in was on the second floor, but Sigma skillfully righted himself in midair and landed lightly as a cat.

I can't hope to damage a Heroic Spirit's eyes or eardrums with a physical stun grenade, but it should distract her for a moment.

I've erased my presence. Now I should temporarily hide myself and...

Sigma got to his feet, hoping that his opponent wasn't equipped with magecraft or abilities for detecting his presence. An unbelievable sight met his eyes.

He saw a woman, fallen down and pressing her hands over her ears, staring at the room where the flashbang had gone off. Going by her clothes, she was a civilian, but her presence outside the wetland mansion at this hour was unnatural. *Could she be Assassin's Master, the "vampire"?*

"Wrong," the Captain's voice sounded from behind him. "She's not Assassin's Master. She's a poor, poor little lady who got dragged into the Grail War."

"..."

The "shadows" had not lied to him, at least so far, and they had no reason to. Based on their information from the "Watcher" supposedly observing everything from above, Sigma provisionally identified the girl a few meters ahead of him as a civilian. And the action Sigma took toward that "civilian who had gotten dragged into the war" was...

"Run! You'll get caught up in a battle if you stay here!"

He shouted in an emotionless voice, and that was all.

"..."

Regret seized him as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

What am I doing? That shout just gave Assassin my position.

If he lived according to the training he had received in his youth, the correct response would have been to immediately eliminate the witness or to use her as a decoy in order to conceal himself.

...Watcher is already beginning to influence me, then.

“Hey, don’t go around putting the blame on people, bro.”

Sigma could hear a “shadow’s” carefree voice from behind him. He ignored it and started running towards the girl.

“A robber is holed up in that house. I’ll act as a decoy, so you need to hurry and...”

Before Sigma could finish speaking, a black figure stood between him and the girl.

Just as Assassin was about to thrust a knife hand at Sigma, a leather jacket-clad arm appeared from beside her and held her back.

Assassin glared silently at its owner. The man with red-streaked blond hair who wore the jacket beamed back.

“That strike didn’t look like it was aimed at a vital spot. You don’t intend to kill him?”

“...This mage had no intent to kill me. I cannot yet determine if I ought to kill him. As long as he is a Master in the Holy Grail War, however, it is necessary to at least halt his movements,” Assassin replied. The man in the leather jacket looked at Sigma.

“I don’t know about that. He showed no hostility when he saw Ayaka, either. It would be normal to assume that she’s Assassin’s Master.”

“...”

Assassin fell silent. The blond man ignored her and posed Sigma a question as he helped the girl he called Ayaka to her feet.

“I’m a Servant manifested in the Saber Class. Pleasure to meet you.”

After casually revealing his personal information, the man continued with a fearless grin.

“For now, would you mind hearing us out? If you desire a fight, well, it is the Holy Grail War, so I’d be willing to accept, but...”

Sigma eyed the man warily, unsure of his intentions. One of the “shadows,” however, laid a hand on Sigma’s shoulder.

“Let it go,” the old shadow in an outfit that reminded Sigma of a Japanese temple advised him.

“...”

“The man in front of you is probably fast enough to dodge rounds from that ‘assault rifle,’ or whatever you call it. As you are, you have no hope of victory. If you wish to struggle through certain death, however, if you wish to challenge him as a trial, I will not stop you.”

The shadow’s way of speaking, as if Sigma would stand a chance eventually, puzzled him. In the end, however, he let out a big sigh and greeted the man who called himself Saber.

“There are guest rooms. I’ll show you the way.”

Sigma still did not understand what was going on as he headed for the guest rooms. The

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Captain walked beside him with a quizzical look on his face.

“Still, boy, I’m sure you wanted to shout a plausible name for a Heroic Spirit, but why an actor of all people — and one from an era more recent than mine, at that?”

He must have meant the name Sigma had shouted earlier to fool Assassin. Based on the lack of reaction from the trio walking behind him, Sigma confirmed that the voices of the “shadows” really were only audible to him. He considered for a moment before answering the Captain in a low voice.

“...He was just the first great man that came to mind.”

“...I see. So you like classic comedies, do you? I’d never have guessed.”

The Captain stifled a chuckle. Presumably the world had bestowed knowledge of Charlie Chaplin on him through “Watcher.” As he vanished, the boy with the snake staff looked at Sigma with affectionate pity.

“In that case, let’s work to ensure you can end this war with a smile.”

Sigma mumbled something at that, then wordlessly picked up his pace.

He watched comedy films over and over. If pressed, he would have to admit that he liked them. He admired them. Still, if asked whether he had ever laughed with all his heart, Sigma would not have been able to say that he had.

He could not imagine himself with a heartfelt smile — the kind of smile that Saber had flashed him earlier. That had been a smile that seemed to take pleasure in the whole world. How could a Heroic Spirit, who continued to fight even after death, wear such a smile? Sigma could wonder, but he could not come up with an answer, so he silently stifled his heart. All the while thinking that jealousy and longing for people who could smile were useless to him now.

Did he even have a right to smile in the first place?

With such doubts in his mind, he was about to set foot into another trial. All the while feeling faintly irritated by the fact that, despite his contract with Watcher, which claimed to see through everything, he could not even see through his own heart.

Again, Sigma thought.

He did not believe in anything.

Not gods, not Buddhas, not even demons.

He thought that, maybe, if he devoted himself to one of them, he might be able to smile... only to realize that, as he did not even believe in himself, he had nothing to offer. Try as he might, Sigma could not find anything inside him that was worth offering.

Chapter 12

“The Gods Retrun from Twilight”

Chapter 11: Day 2, Morning

The Gods Return from Twilight

Underneath the meat processing plant.

“I won’t mind if you kill me? How many humans do you believe would agree to that?”

Bazdilot asked the homunculus intruder without changing his expression.

She, on the other hand, appeared genuinely confused.

“What? I don’t see why I should treat them as humans if they won’t do what I tell them.”

It did not sound like a joke or sarcasm.

At that point, it became clear that they would not reach an understanding. Bazdilot, however, remained expressionless and decided to continue the conversation in order to learn about his opponent. Alkeides, still materialized, waited behind him. It was unusual for a Master to take the lead, but both Alkeides and Bazdilot judged that, as Alkeides’ primary weapon was a bow, it was better for him to hang back and survey the field.

“Is that how an Einzbern homunculus thinks?”

It was possible that an advanced homunculus might consider itself to be above humans. Francesca had told him many things about the Einzberns. Still, something about this homunculus’ ideological leanings seemed off. To begin with, the aura cloaking her body was not that of any homunculus Bazdilot knew.

“The Einzberns? Oh, you mean the people who made this vessel? They’re not as good as us, but, well, I suppose they did their best.”

“...Vessel?”

“Yes. Without it, I would have had to possess some other human by force... but then our souls would have mixed and caused slight shifts in my memories and personality. I don’t have to worry about that with this body. It’s almost like it was born to be a divine vessel.”

A divine vessel. The instant those words left the woman’s mouth, Bazdilot felt a chill in the air behind him.

“...A divine vessel?” Alkeides asked the woman, drawing his bow.

“That’s right.”

“You claim to be a god, then?”

“A goddess, actually, but... Hey!”

The Einzbern homunculus’ eyes widened as she spoke. A thunderous roar passed by Bazdilot.

A gale sprung up in the room. A death-clad arrow flew at the self-proclaimed goddess, drawing in the magical energy in the workshop.

The woman appeared flustered, but quickly released magical energy from her hand to envelop the arrow, which then began to make loops around her as if guided by invisible rails in the air. Then, without losing velocity, the arrow Alkeides had fired flew back at Bazdilot.

“...”

Bazdilot tilted his head slightly to the right and dodged the arrow by a hair's breadth. The shockwave assaulted his skin, eardrums and eyeballs, but the mystically-reinforced surface of his body repelled it with brute force. Behind him, Alkeides grabbed the arrow with one hand. A moment later, a tremor ran through the air of the workshop.

Having viewed the sequence of events, Bazdilot narrowed his eyes.

No special magecraft. She parried Alkeides' shot with pure magical energy control.

At that point, neither Bazdilot nor Alkeides believed the woman in front of them to be a homunculus mage. Bazdilot did not know who or what she really was — he could not judge the truth of her claim to be a “goddess” — but it was at least reasonable to consider her as “something” with power to rival a Servant. Behind him, Alkeides seemed to have reached the same conclusion. A ripple of searing hate reached Bazdilot through the path of magical energy between them, prompting him to consider what he could do to restrain Alkeides.

The self-proclaimed goddess and the avenger ignored Bazdilot as they exchanged words.

“That wasn't very polite. You must be as arrogant as an eastern emperor, shooting at a goddess like that.”

“Which of us lacks manners, woman who names herself a goddess in my presence? I demand to know why you have so rudely intruded in our base of operations.”

“Oh? Isn't this a Holy Grail War? I'm neither a Master nor a Servant, but I'm free to ally myself with any faction I choose...”

At that point, a dangerous glint entered the homunculus' eye and her hand produced countless arrow-shaped bolts of light.

“It's only natural for me to help eliminate the detestable opposing forces, wouldn't you agree?”

She spit the words out lightly, but there was no emotion in her voice. Something in the woman's attitude almost suggested a mechanical doll attempting to simulate humanity.

In the same instant, the innumerable arrow-shaped bundles of magical energy launched themselves at Alkeides... only to vanish right in front of Bazdilot and reappear from a wall in a different place, flying straight at the homunculus woman.

The woman made one downward flap of her hand without uttering a word. All the arrows

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turned downward, dispersing magical energy, and vanished before reaching the floor.

“S-spatial... labyrinthization...”

The mage who had, up to that point, hidden herself in the shadows of the entrance behind the woman who called herself a goddess spoke. The goddess heard her apparent companion and addressed Bazdilot with a fearless grin.

“Finally decided to activate your wards? You’re certainly easygoing, making a maze when I’m already right in front of you.”

“Hardly,” Bazdilot responded dispassionately to the goddess’ contemptuous tone. “This is its proper application.”

Bazdilot remained expressionless as he spread his arms and emitted magical energy from both hands. The roof of the underground workshop writhed open to reveal a bluish spring sky. The entire meat processing plant was twisting into an entirely different form. A moment later, vicious demonic beasts appeared from the ceiling, which had twisted open in a spiral pattern, and entered freefall. It was as if the entire plant had become a gigantic carnivorous beast that was trying to devour the people inside it.

Haruri, who had been cowering behind Filia, could not suppress an exclamation at the sight.

“...Im-impossible... Such a large-scale defense mechanism...”

He’s partially transformed it into an otherworld...?

If he can create a defense mechanism on this scale, why didn’t he start by...

That was as far as Haruri’s thoughts got before Filia spoke.

“Hmm... I see.”

She matter-of-factly considered the peculiarities of her enemy’s workshop while observing the falling demonic beasts with annoyance.

“This workshop isn’t for keeping intruders out; it was designed from the ground up to stop anyone who enters from leaving... It gives you a glimpse into the twisted personality of its maker.”

Filia grinned broadly, raised her hand in the direction of the plummeting beasts... and ostentatiously loosed an arrow of magical energy.

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

“...The workshop in the industrial district is active?”

After receiving his subordinate’s report, Faldeus strode to a corner of the monitor room.

His Servant, Assassin, was currently en route to the Scradio Family’s headquarters on the West Coast in order to assassinate Galvarosso Scradio. That left Faldeus unprotected. As a result, he was determined to be thorough with his workshop’s defenses and with gathering intelligence. He had hoped that there would be no major developments, but it appeared that the world had not heard his prayers — things had been hectic since early morning.

To begin with, the Servant — apparently Assassin — who had assaulted the police station had returned to the mansion which was now Sigma’s base of operations. Saber and a woman who appeared to be his Master had also arrived there, and were now reportedly sleeping in a guest room.

Incomprehensible.

Faldeus had asked Sigma if it would be possible to dispose of them, but the response had come that it would be difficult, as Assassin was wary of Sigma. Accordingly, Faldeus had instructed Sigma to propose an alliance in order to acquire information, as well as to challenge the King of Heroes and Lancer, his trusted friend who was conjectured to possess equal power. The exchange, however, had ultimately served only to confuse Faldeus. He had asked if Sigma had ever managed to identify the Servant he had summoned. The answer he had received after a few seconds of silence had defied reason.

“...Chaplin. Lancer Charlie Chaplin. That’s the Heroic Spirit I summoned.”

“...Sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Lancer Charlie Chaplin. I will ascertain his Noble Phantasm and skills before long. I’ve determined that using a Command Seal to force him to talk is not a good strategy. Excuse me.”

At that point the communication had cut off, leaving Faldeus to cradle his head for a while.

Chaplin.

What on Earth...? Is that possible...?

The King of Comedy, a Lancer? Why?

Is he lying? No... Even if he is, Chaplin still wouldn’t make sense. What the hell is going on in this Grail War?

He had still been wondering when he had been brought the report that “the Scradio Family’s

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composite mystic workshop has activated.”

“...This is why I opposed letting Francesca choose personnel.”

Faldeus had initially considered making under-the-table deals with various Clock Tower factions and temporarily headhunting mages from them. There were any number of candidates — Augustus Henrik Asplund from Valué, Krast Lenny Wegner from Kishua, Valeia Cyclephy from Mystile, Mizaria Clowrum from Chimera, etcetera. Mage’s mages who were nonetheless on a level that they could completely control. Faldeus’ original scheme had been to manipulate such people from behind the scenes.

Because the overall plan called for making an enemy of the Clock Tower, however, a variety of “strays” had ended up participating as Masters through Francesca’s mediation. Even Sigma, who had some ties to Faldeus, ended up causing chaos, as their earlier conversation proved. By the time he heard a report that Haruri was being lead toward Bazdilot’s workshop by an Einzbern homunculus, it was enough to make him regret sending Assassin away.

Instantaneous movement may be possible with the use of a Command Seal, but all the way from the West Coast?

In a real Grail War, it would be one thing. But in this fake Grail War, forced into being through absurdity piled on absurdity, not even Faldeus, on the side of the masterminds, could predict what irregularities might occur.

Damn Haruri Borzak... Just when it seems like she’s going to offer Bazdilot an alliance, she turns around and starts a battle out of nowhere. Or is this the Einzbern homunculus’ doing...?

Faldeus’ head ached. He was about to heave a sigh when his subordinate, the female mage Aludra, called out to him.

“The workshop appears to be at maximum deployment. It seems that a ward was simultaneously erected around the entire industrial district to keep people away, but I’ve set additional repelling wards around the perimeter just to be safe. We’ve also received a communication from the police station saying that members of Clan Calatin are en route.”

“Roger that. They’d best keep their distance; they could easily be devoured by the workshop.”

“...Setting wards around a workshop of that size and treating it to become an otherworld... I can hardly believe it.”

“Oh, the area they turned into an otherworld isn’t that large.”

Faldeus casually explained the trick in response to his subordinate’s misgivings.

“I’ve heard that, during the fourth Holy Grail War in Fuyuki, the previous Lord El-Melloi constructed enough of a labyrinth in his workshop to turn part of a hotel corridor into an otherworld. Even for a mage of his abilities furnished with three magical energy reactors tuned for his use, however, that was the limit. It might be different for Caubac Alcatraz, the renowned

labyrinth mage of antiquity, but it's just not possible for a mage to transform an entire city block into an otherworld."

Faldeus shook his head as he matter-of-factly explained the situation. Or perhaps he was attempting to isolate himself from the present confusion by talking about what was, to him, common sense.

"Bazdilot only activated the workshop. It's actually the joint creation of the Scradio Family's mages. I doubt that even Bazdilot can leave when it's in full operation."

"A joint creation, sir?"

"Yes. The product of a number of mages combining their fields of expertise — otherwords, illusions, wards, the installation of demonic beasts. Individually they can't match the defensive capabilities of the previous Lord El-Melloi's workshop, but Bazdilot possesses uncommon magical energy. They made a stunt on that scale possible by having him activate other mages' workshops through brute force.

"It's not just that plant," Faldeus continued, watching the writhing meat processing plant on the monitor. "Scradio Family mages have worked on all the surrounding factories as well. They all function to support the workshop in that meat processing plant. As a result, it would be difficult for even an accomplished mage to escape the workshop when it's in that state."

"Then, the Einzbern homunculus and Miss Borzak are helpless?"

"Not at all," Faldeus immediately contradicted his subordinate as if his earlier praise of the workshop had been a lie.

"It would be one thing if they'd gone in alone. With the Heroic Spirit Haruri summoned, however, it's a different story. The workshop in Fuyuki I mentioned was destroyed along with the entire hotel, but if a Servant well-versed in magecraft had challenged the labyrinth, they would have broken through it sooner or later."

Faldeus' opinion on this matter was the opposite of what it had been ten years earlier. A modern labyrinthized workshop was difficult to penetrate; even a Heroic Spirit would need to exploit a weak point or back door, he had thought. Now that he had accessed the data from the puppet his ancestor had left behind — the record of the third Fuyuki Holy Grail War — and had contact with the Heroic Spirit Hassan-I Sabbah, however, he was in no doubt. A maze of that level would not work on a powerful Heroic Spirit.

Although I doubt that weak Avenger in the record of the third Fuyuki war could do anything about it, Faldeus thought as he turned his attention to a monitor.

"In any case, if she summons her Servant to break out of the workshop, it will be a golden opportunity for us to observe its abilities."

Without taking his eyes off the monitor showing a familiar's bird's eye view of the meat pro-

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cessing plant, Faldeus contacted a subordinate about one other matter.

“...Cattle calling Thorn. How do things look on your end?”

“No activity. Two heat sources inside the mansion, apparently humans. Based on magical energy readings, it looks like two materialized Servants as well.”

“Two... There should be three Heroic Spirits, including the one Sigma summoned... Are there any dematerialized?”

“I can’t tell. I confirmed a Servant who appears to be Saber through a second floor window, but there are strange fluctuations in the magical energy readings... Almost like multiple overlapping spirit forms...”

Faldeus was just about to ask his subordinate for a more detailed report, when...

“Fluctuations? What do you mean? Send me the exact...”

“What’s wrong?”

The subordinate was suspicious of the way Faldeus’ words suddenly cut off, but his question never reached Faldeus’ ears. Faldeus’ eyes were fixed on the monitor displaying the meat processing plant, where he could see something impossible writhing.

“...Cattle calling Thorn. Leave the minimum number of personnel there and head for the industrial district ASAP.”

After ending the call with the bare minimum of instructions, Faldeus glared at the monitor. He knew what Heroic Spirit Haruri had planned to summon. After all, it had been Faldeus who went through the state to prepare her catalyst. The thing he saw, however, looked like nothing he had anticipated. To begin with, it looked more like an animal or an insect than a Heroic Spirit. Its body was also covered in pistons, wires and cables, and it was large enough to stomp a small prefabricated house flat with ease.

Faldeus narrowed his eyes at the “thing” and muttered to himself.

“Haruri... What the hell did you summon...?”

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Several minutes earlier. The meat processing plant.

“Master, will these wards hinder my movements?”

Although his words were calm, Alkeides seemed ready to unleash his full power at the slightest provocation. Given that a woman had appeared claiming to be a goddess — one of his sworn enemies — that was to be expected. Bazdilot made no move to rebuke or restrain him; he just

stood between the woman and Alkeides and spoke dispassionately.

“They have directionality, but it isn’t perfect. Still, a little hindrance shouldn’t be a problem for you. If you have the strength to trample a goddess, show it to me here.”

“...That goes without saying.”

Alkeides began moving toward the upper part of the shifting meat processing plant in order to deliver a blow to the goddess, who continued to deal with the downpour of demonic beasts. Bazdilot sprang into action at the same time. He drew a crude pistol from a pocket and began a slow walk toward the female mage who had appeared with the woman.

“Ah...”

Haruri’s eyes met those of the approaching owner of the workshop, and she was assailed by a sensation of blood leaving her body. Bazdilot had the air of what a chimera born only to kill ends up as. His gaze filled Haruri with fresh conviction that she had come to a place she could never leave. Physically, she could not go back outside. There was no going back in terms of her situation, either. She regretted allowing events to carry her to this point. At the same time, however, she considered that, without Filia, she would have lost her life anyway.

In that case, what should she do with the life she had gained? The answer that came to her was, of course, her revenge on mage society.

“...”

As Haruri recalled her own past, the fear faded from her eyes and she began to gradually regain her cool. She hated mage society, but this ability to switch off her emotions spoke to her talent as a mage. Be that as it may, her mind was now filled with the determination to use everything she had been blessed with to fight her way free of that place.

Oh, that’s right. My plan was always to rage as much as I could in this world and disappear.

What am I afraid of?

Perhaps Bazdilot noticed the shift in Haruri’s mentality, because he stopped walking and, keeping his gun trained on her, posed a question.

“Was it your idea to come here?”

“...Filia suggested it. I just... followed her.”

“I see. So, that thing is called Filia... What is it?”

It seemed that Filia’s abnormality worried Bazdilot after all. Haruri shook her head, keeping her nerves trained on the muzzle pointed at her.

“I owe her my life. That’s all I know and, right now, that’s all I need.”

“Well now,” Filia laughed as she went on wiping out demonic beasts some distance away, “you can say some delightful things, despite all the time you spent cowering. Well, it’s true that,

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as long as you realize my charm, you don't need to understand me."

Out of nowhere, an arrow flew at her blind spot. As before, however, the dense magical energy that surrounded her deflected its trajectory, hurling it into the ongoing torrent of demonic beasts. The beasts it struck were blasted to smithereens. Bazdilot's Servant — presumably Archer — fired more arrows under cover of the spraying blood.

"Nothing you do will...?!"

Filia swallowed her words in mid-sentence. Reflected in her eyes were several dozen arrows flying out of the sky that peeked through the open ceiling. Who knew when he had found time to fire them. Based on the fact that their trajectories precisely targeted Filia, however, it seemed unlikely that he had simply shot countless shafts into the air and waited for them to come down. Then, Filia noticed — the bronze arrows were transforming as they fell, becoming birds with metal wings and beaks.

"Are those... the Stymphalides, familiars of the western war god...?"

The sight of the arrows transforming one by one into giant birds with bronze-coated beaks, wings and talons was fantastical. As the birds were rushing at her full of bloodlust, however, Filia had no time to be fascinated.

"...Not half bad."

Filia spoke as if she was impressed, but she wiped all expression from her face as the innumerable birds attacked.

Haruri, meanwhile, was distracted by the onslaught. No sooner had she looked away than a bullet fired from Bazdilot's pistol, aimed squarely at the girl mage's heart.

That bullet, however, never reached Haruri. Bazdilot's ammunition was crafted to pierce advanced defensive magecraft, but it ricocheted off an invisible wall.

A moment later, "it" materialized in the center of the workshop.

Something like static crackled through the space between Bazdilot and Haruri. A giant mass of rust-colored iron appeared, forming a wall between the two.

Meanwhile, in another part of the workshop, another mass of iron scythed through the air above Filia, smashing all the bronze birds born from arrows in a single strike.

The static spread to a wider area. At last, an enormous shape fully revealed itself in the workshop.

The most abnormal thing about it was its size. The Berserker that appeared before Haruri was far huger than when she had first set eyes on it, having achieved truly monstrous proportions.

An underground facility.

In a room where the sun did not shine, a woman froze in the act of tending to a horse.

“What’s wrong, Polyte? Your magical energy went a little wild for a moment there.”

Hearing a woman’s voice from the room next door, the woman called Polyte answered with some confusion.

“Just now... I sensed my father’s cherished birds... but they soon vanished.”

“Birds?”

“The Stymphalides — monstrous birds that my father, the god of war, was said to have loved... Although I hear that he drove them from the peninsula...”

“I see. Maybe ‘he’ summoned them, then? He had your belt, didn’t he? Still, if they’ve vanished, I doubt it would be a good idea to drop everything and rush over.”

“Polyte” considered briefly, then nodded her assent to the voice’s ready answer.

“I suppose so. Don’t worry, Master; I won’t act on my own again,” the woman declared with dignity. Her cheeks reddened slightly as she continued.

“And Master... calling me ‘Polyte’ is, well...”

“What? Why? You’re Hippolyte, so ‘Polyte.’ Oh, would ‘Hippo’ be better?”

“...Polyte is fine.”

The Rider Class Servant Hippolyte heaved an exasperated sigh. Her attitude hinted that she was less annoyed than embarrassed by the nickname. A serious look suddenly entered her eyes as she turned them back to the direction the presence had come from.

Hippolyte did not normally excel in sensing presences. She was, however, sensitive to any that resembled the Noble Phantasm she wore — the war belt she had inherited from her father.

Polyte supposed that Alkeides was involved in a battle. She refocused and turned back to her horse. All the while gritting her teeth at the thought of the great hero she would one day have to settle things with — or rather, of the avenger he had sunk to.

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The meat processing plant.

“Oh, you protected me while you were at it? Good boy.”

Filia looked up at “it,” surveying the flock of crushed bronze birds with a faint smile.

It was Haruri’s Servant, which had thus far kept its form and presence hidden. No one, however, was more shocked by its appearance than Haruri herself.

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“What?”

It's gotten... even bigger than before?

On the way to the plant, when it had been crawling on buildings, it had been roughly the size of an elephant. Now, however, it had completed a transformation into a mechanical spider gigantic enough to wrap its legs around even the enormous trailers used to transport an elephant to a zoo. Although it did not appear to be making any large movements, the sounds of spinning gears and metal scraping against metal still sounded from it and its eyes blazed with their usual white-hot light.

Then, a voice like a record player with a rusty needle, the same voice that Haruri had first heard, resounded in Bazdilot's workshop.

“EEEEennNNNe... eEEEEeeENennnennNEEEEMmimimimie.”

Berserker's body shook as it roared, trying to make some appeal.

Haruri was perplexed.

“Come on, Haruri!” A grinning Filia called out to her. “You're his Master, so hurry up and give him an order.”

“What...?”

“He's asking who the enemy is. If you leave him alone, I'm pretty sure he'll think all the little children apart from you and me are enemies and demolish the city. Is that alright with you?”

At that, Haruri hurriedly turned back to Berserker.

Designate an enemy. That was what Berserker's blazing eyes were telling her as it continued to stand between her and Bazdilot, shielding her.

Bazdilot had fired many more bullets, sometimes using magically-induced refraction to target Haruri's blind spots, but cables that sprouted from Berserker's body swatted every shot aside.

And Berserker was slowly vanishing into thin air. Even the sound of it was disappearing. The “pressure” it exerted, however, remained in workshop.

This is different from the concealment Filia performed in the city earlier. Even I can't see it.

Can this Heroic Spirit turn invisible under its own power...?

Haruri gulped. It was coming home to her that she had made a contract with a shocking Heroic Spirit.

Tell this Berserker who the enemy was, Filia had said. She felt that she was being tested. Could she kill a person, even an enemy Master?

Haruri pondered. Like a mage, she stifled her emotions and froze her trembling heart.

Would she give the order? The order to kill?

Would she, like a mage, free herself from the ethics of reality? Or would she prattle on about justified self defence, as if to openly declare that she was still human? Even though she had

thrown herself into the Grail War?

“...”

After a brief period of indecision, she shouted at the invisible Berserker.

“Berserker! The enemy is this mage’s workshop! Please... smash it to bits!”

The area reverberated with Berserker’s creaking and its grating cry, as if it was pleased to be ordered.

Filia, who had leapt to Haruri’s side without her noticing, quietly laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Hya?!”

Haruri let out a cry of surprise. Filia narrowed her eyes.

“Well now, you dodged that nicely,” she said, smiling kindly at Haruri. “You didn’t outright order him to kill.”

“...Th-that’s not what I...”

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me; I’m not blaming you.”

Filia grinned broadly as she dispatched the surviving demonic beasts one after the other with arrows of magical energy. Then, without her smile faltering at all, she matter-of-factly declared:

“I mean, if you were the kind of girl who could give the order to kill that easily, you’d fall into the category of ‘mage,’ not ‘human,’ and then...”

The end of her sentence was blotted out by sounds of destruction. The invisible Berserker must have begun to rampage. The nearby walls and floors were crushed. It demolished the entrance to a corridor that had been partially transformed into an otherworld by brute force.

“Now, you leave the rest to Berserker and run. I’ll have to be cautious when dealing with that mage with the scary face and the twisted Heroic Spirit; if I don’t kill them carefully, the ‘mud’ will fly everywhere...” Filia said as she leapt again and vanished through a break in the rubble.

Haruri broke out in a cold sweat as she watched her. She didn’t need to be told to throw herself at the doorway now that it was no longer an otherworld. Almost as if she was fleeing Filia, rather than Bazdilot or his bow-wielding Servant.

Amid the roar of destruction, she had caught the end of what the smiling Filia had said.

“I mean, if you were the kind of girl who could give the order to kill that easily, you’d fall into the category of ‘mage,’ not ‘human,’ and then...”

“Honestly, there’d be no point keeping you alive.”

It had been no joke. She was certain of that.

Haruri was still grateful to Filia for saving her. At the same time, however, she was deeply afraid of her. A question that she had pondered many time before reoccurred to her.

What in the world have I summoned?

“...”

It can't have dematerialized, Bazdilot decided. It was probably an optical camouflage ability. Even the sound disappearing must be due to one of the Heroic Spirit's Skills, or possibly to that self-proclaimed “goddess.”

Bazdilot judged that, if it had dematerialized inside his workshop, then, Servant or not, it would have suffered heavy damage from the wards and magecraft. He surmised that the “thing” — he could not tell if it was a Heroic Spirit or a monster — had been isolating its form, sounds and magical energy from the beginning.

After a brief pause, Bazdilot reached a coldhearted decision and telepathically communicated it to Alkeides.

“This workshop will likely be destroyed. You may go all out.”

“Are you sure?” Alkeides asked. “You'll lose that device as well.”

“Not a problem,” Bazdilot responded without hesitation. “The Family is already capable of mass-producing it.

“Any Mana Crystals we produce now would just be a drop in the bucket. Don't worry; our current supply was evacuated the moment the workshop's defense mechanisms activated. I wouldn't be able to show my face to the Scradio Family if I lost it all due to my own stinginess.”

Having dispassionately made up his mind to abandon something, Bazdilot performed reinforcement magecraft on his own body and leapt into the flying rubble.

“Either way, now that we've made this much of a scene, Faldeus and Orlando will take action. You making a bigger scene won't change anything.”

“So long as our opponent calls herself a goddess — be the truth what it may — I have no intention of taking the secrecy of magecraft into consideration.”

“I don't care. Arrangements are in place to dispose of the whole city if it comes to that. Faldeus will activate them if the need arises, whatever Francesca and the police chief think.

“It's only a sacrifice of 800,000 people,” Bazdilot questioned Alkeides, his voice still impassive. “Even the Clock Tower would approve it in exchange for magical secrecy. But are you prepared to make it?”

“Naturally,” Alkeides answered the probing question without hesitation. “It's a fair price to pay for the destruction of the gods.”

Then, Alkeides unleashed his power. In order to bring the hammer down on the woman who called herself a goddess and the Servant of the mage who seemed to be her underling.

It did not matter if they were foreign gods, different from the bitter enemies he knew.

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The wetland mansion.

“Don’t stick your head out the window, Ayaka. Snipers are scary, you know? Even I was shot dead by Pierre.”

“I wouldn’t stick my head out if you asked me to.”

Ayaka and Saber were going over the situation while hiding themselves deep inside the mansion.

When Ayaka heard from Sigma that the mansion was “surrounded by a special forces unit”, she had first assumed that it was SWAT or some other police unit in pursuit. According to Sigma, however, they were pawns of the mages who had organized this Holy Grail War.

“Part of the US government conspiring with mages? Is this some kind of fantasy movie?”

“Don’t be like that, Ayaka. People in power and mages make a good combination, you know? In the shadow of the great King of Knights was the flower mage who brought him into the world. I may not have had a court mage myself, but I did have an odd fellow who followed me around.”

“...You mean Saint-Germain?” Ayaka could not help blurting out in spite of how nervous she had been to bring up the name earlier.

“You’re well-informed. Is he famous?”

Saber looked surprised. Ayaka was just wondering how to explain when Sigma reappeared in the doorway.

“Seventy percent of the unit was just transferred to another location. The only ones left here are observers. So, if you want to move, I think now’s the time.”

“Transferred?”

Ayaka had a hard time keeping step with Sigma’s matter-of-fact demeanor.

He was a participant in the Grail War and he had been in combat with Assassin when they had met him the night before, but he had not seemed immediately hostile. Saber had begun persuading him to “form an alliance” and “sit at the same round table.” “As long as it’s an anti-war pact,” Sigma had surprisingly responded, with the result that they had ended up staying together in the mansion.

Ayaka heaved a big sigh and wondered how things had ended up like this.

To begin with, Saber had made a temporary agreement with the green-haired Heroic Spirit “while they dealt with mud and sickness.” He had seemingly made a deal with Assassin, who had also been present, as well.

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“I cannot forgive you for your deeds in life,” Assassin had said. “Still, I am aware that you fought alongside one of the great chiefs. Therefore, I will spare you until we have eliminated that demon.”

It seemed that they had avoided a fight to the death for the moment.

Before Ayaka had a chance to pick her jaw up off the floor, Assassin has suggested that, if they needed a base, there was a suitable house in the wetlands. Apparently the “demon” might return to it, so they had ended up going together.

After that, umm, there was a light in the window, so Assassin went to take a look. A little while later there was a big bang and a flash from inside the room...

Ayaka had still been confused while Saber conducted negotiations. By the time she regained her senses, the situation had changed.

Ayaka felt that she really was just being dragged around. At the same time, she was torn between being ashamed of her own cowardice and grateful to Saber for protecting her.

She had fallen asleep with those thoughts. But then had come that dream, and after all that they were apparently up against a special forces unit.

I can't understand the people who willingly participate in the Grail War, she thought as she questioned Sigma.

“Wouldn't selling us out put you in a better position?”

It was a blunt question, but Sigma answered it.

“Faldeus is the type to eliminate you as soon as he's done with you. If it comes to that, I'd like to have ties to people like you as well.”

“So we're insurance, then... But isn't there a chance that you'll cut us loose as soon as you're done with us?”

“I won't deny it. That's why I don't mind if you keep your guards up with me. I don't trust you with my whole heart, so it's fine if you don't trust me with your whole head.”

Ayaka sighed at Sigma's frank manner of speaking. She was wondering what she ought to ask him when Saber broke in.

“You said that seven tenths of the force moved. Has something happened?”

“Apparently a monster is on a rampage in the factory district.”

“A monster?! You must tell me more about...”

Oh, this looks bad.

Ayaka hurriedly tried to stop the conversation, but she was too late.

“I don't know if it's someone's Heroic Spirit or a creature summoned by a Heroic Spirit, but according to a communication I intercepted, a monster about the size of this house is destroying the factory district.”

Once she was sure Sigma had finished speaking, Ayaka turned slowly to look at Saber. She saw a grown man whose eyes were shining like a little boy's.

"Saber."

"Yes? What is it, Ayaka?"

"Do you want to go?" Ayaka asked bluntly.

"...What are you saying, Ayaka?!" Saber answered, avoiding her eyes. "I do want to go reenact the slaying of the demon cat, shield in hand! In fact, I'd absolutely love to! But I can't go dragging you into danger, now, can I?"

"You took me to a forest with other Servants without warning yesterday."

"I suppose I did... But still... It is a monster..."

They may only have known each other for a few days, but there were some things that Ayaka understood about Saber. He was basically a giant cat, acting on spinal reflex and with unbelievable energy. He would happily pounce on a tuft of green foxtail swaying in the breeze dozens of kilometers away if it caught his interest. But for all that, he was kind. And so, he ended up torn between his own desires and his concern for Ayaka.

Getting dragged around is a pain, Ayaka thought, but being a burden is even worse.

Just as she was about to say something to Saber... she saw "it" out of the corner of her eye.

"...!"

Cold sweat broke out on her face. Her breathing became spontaneously ragged.

Why...?

There's no elevator here...!

A girl wearing a red hood, lingering on the bed. She slowly turned her face toward Ayaka, but the hood concealed her eyes and expression. The girl's mouth moved slowly. Ayaka had a feeling that it was about to break into a grin. Ayaka was ready to scream in terror.

"What's wrong? Ayaka?"

At that point, Saber called out to her and she regained the reason she had been about to lose. The girl in the red hood vanished from the bed, leaving only Saber and Sigma staring at Ayaka's face in confusion.

"No, it's nothing. So, what are we going to do? Go take a look?"

Ayaka turned serious and made the suggestion herself. Before Saber could answer, however, Sigma interrupted.

"This is just advice, but it would be better if you didn't."

"Why?"

Sigma prefaced his response to Ayaka's question with, "I received another communication earlier," before adding a supplement concerning the current situation.

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“It sounds like my real employer is up to something.”

“Your employer... Isn't that a US special forces group?”

“I'm not contractually obligated to maintain confidentiality, but it's still my duty. So, I can't give you the details, but... at the very least, it definitely won't be anything good. You'd better stay away from there for a while if you don't want to be caught up in it.”

At that point, Sigma fell silent for a moment. Ayaka could not be sure if what he said next was meant as a joke or not.

“Of course... it was probably too late for both of us the moment we got near this city during all this.”

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Somewhere dark.

Almost no outside light penetrated Francesca's workshop. Monitors were the only sources of illumination.

The workshop's owner, Francesca, was scattering pastries and bags of sweets across the disheveled bed as she squared off against her Servant, the boy Prelati.

“If that's how it is, I'll have to give you an order as your Master, you know? ...Speaking of which, don't you think giving yourself an order is an awfully perverse pleasure? How does it feel on the receiving end?”

“It's unspeakable; a mix of envy and masochism, like I might have a gestalt collapse in the midst of intoxication. Care to trade places tomorrow?”

“It sounds lovely, but I can't. I mean, you'd go and start a game like stealing my Command Seals and making me kill myself instead the moment we switched, wouldn't you?”

“You got that right! I'd expect nothing less of me! You're a tricky one!” The boy Prelati cackled, slumping against the wall.

“So?” He continued. “What's your order? I can pretty well guess, of course.”

“And you guess right! I want my Servant Prelati to go work out a peaceful solution to that war of the monsters in the factory district by force! Wow! Doesn't that sound fun?”

“A normal Servant wouldn't want anything to do with this, even if you did use a Command Seal.”

“But you'll go, won't you?”

Francesca smiled impishly at her male self. The boy Prelati responded with an impish grin of

his own and nodded.

Francesca rapped the floor with the point of her umbrella, as if to say that a contract had been sealed. The wall that the boy Prelati was leaning against drew back with a mechanical click. The wall then slid aside like the door of a train, breaking the workshop's isolation from the outside world.

Light, light, light flooded into the room, accompanied by a transparent indigo color. Francesca beheld the white radiance of the sun and a deep sky blue harmony. That is to say, an infinite expanse of firmament, more vibrant than the sky seen from above ground.

The boy Prelati, meanwhile, tumbled out as he had been leaning. A different view met his eyes.

Endless red earth spread out below him. The city looked like a mound of salt spilled on the barren plain. If it had been night, the city lights would have looked like a starry sky that was partial to one location.

Prelati faintly regretted that he did not have the chance to see that as he spread his arms without hesitation and began his freefall while executing a series of dance-like spins.

The lowest layer of the stratosphere, twenty kilometers up. That was where Francesca's workshop was.

It was a giant airship, two hundred meters from end to end. Francesca had taken a high-altitude unmanned airship that the US military was in the process of testing, applied many layers of wards to it — invisibility, wind-aversion, etcetera. She had piled modification on modification, mystically, scientifically, and as a matter of taste. That said, it was hardly a mobile fortress, bristling with weapons straight out of a scifi novel. It was simply a two hundred meter balloon used to lift the meager area of Prelati's workshop.

It was an extreme height from which Francesca could look down on everything, but could hardly grasp events on the surface with her naked eyes. With Prelati's enhanced sight, however, it was possible to confirm something on the scale of the disturbance in the factory district.

He saw a gargantuan mechanical spider on a rampage and a bowman-turned-avenger challenging it alone. The factories around them were destroyed. There was no longer any trace of the meat processing plant. He could see scraps of otherworld and ward-induced static, as well as demonic beasts that had spilled out of the workshop. A scene of chaos had begun to unfold.

Prelati laughed with simple, unadulterated joy at the sight.

"Ahaha! Splendid! Wonderful! It's wonderful, Francesca!"

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Even while he laughed, the ground was perceptibly closing in on him. The boy continued to digest his clear view of the chaos in the factory district as he shifted his thoughts to the next stage.

I'd love to see that scenery spread through the whole city... but not yet. Not yet. I've got to hold on a little longer.

He strove to keep a cool head, although the overflowing smile never left his face. But then, he was only making a pretense of restraint in order to experience longer, greater pleasure.

I've still got to control myself, if only to keep up appearances. That friend of Master's — Faldeus — could easily put an end to the whole city.

The boy Prelati, high on the speed of freefall, settled on a target. That done, he spread his arms as he continued his head-first descent. Then, in the midst of the endless expanse of sky, he chanted, recited, sang. He sang the praises of his Noble Phantasm and chanted verses expressing the joy of deploying it.

“I make an offering. To this broken world I offer blessings and thanks and sacrifices!”

“I offer thanks to mother Até, born the embodiment of madness!”

“I offer blessings to the holy spirits of the world, who taught me magecraft, the madness of men!”

“O saint and knight who showed me a different madness, neither of you were mistaken!”

“I make an offering! To all humanity, permitted by this broken world, I offer the sacrifice that is me!”

As Prelati shouted his self-centered invocation, the space around him began to distort. As he hurtled toward the surface, he bellowed the name of the great magecraft that was his Noble Phantasm at the ground.

“Grand Illusion!”

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The surface. The factory district.

“There she is! It's that woman!”

Black-suited Scradio Family mages closed in on Haruri with bloodcurdling expressions. Berserker was prioritizing the destruction of the workshop and Filia was with him, so she would

have to protect herself.

The meat processing plant was no longer recognizable. It seemed, however, that the surrounding factories were also mage's workshops of some kind. Berserker recognized them as enemies and was busy dedicating itself to their destruction. By the time Haruri saw Berserker spit fire and turn the grounds of one factory into a sea of flame, she had already given up thinking about his actions.

Anyway, right now, I've got to focus on making it through this...

"Everybody! Please!"

At Haruri's shout, a number of bees that had been concealed in her clothing showed themselves.

"...Stop those people!" She begged the countless bees hovering around her collar. The bees took off in perfect order and made contact with the men behind her.

"What the...? Bees?!"

"It's no use struggling... Swat the — Guh?!"

While a few bees flew straight in as a decoy, the remainder made a high-speed flight and looped around behind the men. The men, stung on the backs of their necks, hurriedly tried to fight back with magecraft. An instant later, however, one after the other of them fainted and fell to the ground.

Just a little further...! This workshop's influence can't extend beyond this district...!

Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw demonic beasts that had gone out of control with the destruction of the workshop skirmishing with the Scradio Family's black suits while Berserker mowed down two smokestacks rising from a factory at once. She could also see a bowman racing up the toppling smokestacks, leaping high into the air and firing arrows that resembled laser beams.

The arrows scored a direct hit on Berserker's back. Berserker's creaking scream resounded throughout the district. The bowman continued his barrage. This time, however, Berserker used the cables and wires that shrouded its body like tentacles to swat them out of the air.

She could also see Filia weaving through the gaps with her counterattacks. The bowman scattered them with a sweep of his bow. It seemed like the tide of battle was seesawing back and forth.

It was not a battle she could keep up with, Haruri thought as she sent Berserker a mental cheer.

My magical energy isn't much, but I don't mind if you suck it dry. So... So, wreck it. Wreck it all! Everything mages have built! Every last thing!

Berserker uprooted power cables from the ravaged ground and began incorporating them

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into its body as a power source to supplement his magical energy. Strangely, as it did so, its body began to grow even more gigantic, absorbing the rubble of the surrounding factories.

I don't care who or what you are anymore! Please, please smash this whole world of mages into...

At that point, a bullet grazed Haruri's shoulder and gouged out a chunk of flesh. She let out a silent scream and collapsed on the spot.

The defensive barrier that covered her body had been momentarily destroyed. The bullet had reached her unprotected shoulder. Its force had been dampened, but it had still been enough to tear a chunk out of Haruri's shoulder and send her tumbling to the ground.

"Haruri Borzak," the man who had fired the shot — Bazdilot Cordelion — asked without the least change in his expression, "what the hell did you summon?"

"...You think I'd reveal information... about my Servant that easily?"

"It would be easy to kill you right here. But then it would be impossible to know what that monstrosity will do when it goes out of control. If you give me its data or order it to commit suicide with a Command Seal, I'll put you out of your misery without any unnecessary pain."

"Not... 'I'll leave you with your life,' then..."

Haruri struggled to her feet, clutching her shoulder. Bazdilot looked faintly puzzled.

"You don't look like a mage foolish enough to believe nonsense like that."

A mage.

Haruri had mixed feelings about someone as half-baked as she was being treated that way as she silently steeled herself.

I'll order it with everything I've got and make it look like I'm making it kill itself. "Completely destroy every mage's workshop in this city. Then, move on to Las Vegas or Los Angeles. Keep going as long as your power holds out."

After that, the Protectors of the Land can do whatever they want. Their Mystery may be lost too, but I can't say sorry for that.

"Alright. By my Command Seal, I order Berserker..." Haruri began, slowly raising her hands — when she all too suddenly dropped into a bottomless hell.

Only Bazdilot, standing a few meters in front of her with his gun at the ready, remained unchanged. The sky abruptly rushed away upward. In other words, Bazdilot was falling along with her.

Go back a few seconds.

Filia was the first to notice the abnormality.

"...This magical energy... A descendent of those Mycenaean freeloaders?"

The instant she muttered those words, she saw it. The ground under her feet vanished without

warning and she began to fall.

“Hey?!”

She hurriedly attempted to fly, then realized that the magical energy filling the space around her had vanished.

“This is... You didn’t fool me; you fooled the world’s texture! Unbelievable!”

A look around told her that the ground under her feet was not all that had vanished. A perfect circle of land, centered on the meat processing plant and encompassing most of the factory district, was gone. A blackness with no visible bottom gaped in its place. On top of that, all the magical energy in the area had disappeared without a trace. The Scradio Family mages, Filia, Alkeides and even the giant Berserker were all falling alike. As they all resigned themselves to freefall, Filia glared at the source of the phenomenon.

The boy who had plummeted to earth with death-defying speed flashed the homunculus who was glaring at him an innocent grin. It seemed that some contrivance allowed him, and him alone, to use magical energy. He adjusted his speed to match Filia, Haruri, Bazdilot and Alkeides, who had only just begun falling, standing shoulder to shoulder with them as they were all swallowed by the bottomless pit.

“Hey there. I see a lot of new faces. Has it already been a day since I met the archer there on a snowy mountain?”

The androgynous boy’s voice rang out light and easy as he fell head first. He spread his arms wide and addressed all the beings falling along with him.

“The Oriental Avici hell is supposed to be falling for two thousand years. Still, I suppose it’s kind in that, after two thousand years, you do reach the bottom. Of course, knowing that you were going to suffer for quintillions more years once you do, it might be better to keep falling. Which do you prefer?”

Around the hole, where there had been nothing but jet black walls of earth, various glowing objects popped into being and vanished just as suddenly in time with his speech. Oni at a banquet; a parade in an abandoned amusement park; children dying of hunger and thirst; an infinite expanse of starry sky; monsters too repulsive to describe; a city so beautiful it could only be described as a land of gold; the figure of a holy woman racing across a wasteland; corpses of knights stretching to the ends of the earth. Every one of them felt real.

It was almost enough to destroy the lesser Scradio mages’ sense of self. More than half of them completely lost their grips on consciousness on the spot. Despite being prevented from using magecraft, however, Bazdilot Cordelion maintained his usual vicious non-expression. Even

Fate/strange Fake 4

so, he must have had his hands full controlling the “mud” inside of him, because what looked like black tattoos peeking out of his cuffs could be seen to writhe fiercely on his skin.

“What’s your game, Caster?”

Bazdilot was impassive. The boy he called Caster, who was still upside down, made a respectful bow before replying.

“All is to ensure that the Holy Grail War proceeds without incident. At this rate, Faldeus will burn a hole in his stomach, the world will be full of sorrow, flowers will bloom, birds will sing, and as soon as the butterfly at the ends of the earth dances and starts a typhoon, and Faldeus’ business making barrels to put bodies in will turn a profit.”

The latter half of his speech was probably meaningless. Bazdilot ignored it and continued to glare.

“Tough crowd,” Caster cackled. Then, he gave an answer.

“Don’t worry; I’m a friend. I’m your friend. I’m a friend to humanity, a friend to the gods, a friend to demonic beasts, and a friend to mages. So, so that none of them are lost... I’ve come to postpone the festivities.”

Caster clapped his hands. The sides of the whole vanished, revealing thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people falling.

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to kill the eight hundred thousand people of Snowfield just yet.”

At that point, the boy vanished — only to reappear as a giant, seemingly kilometers tall. While still falling down the pit — which appeared after all to be bottomless — he stated his wish.

“So... how about we make a deal for the present?”

“A deal with little old me, who the foul-mouthed peasants used to call... a ‘demon.’”

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

“...So, you’ve done it, Francesca...”

Faldeus watched the scene on the monitor with an uncharacteristic frown.

The abnormality had occurred immediately after he received a message from Francesca, saying, “Don’t worry; I’ll work it out somehow or other before long.” The instant Faldeus confirmed it, he decided that this was an “evil day” — expressing his situation in the parlance of

onmyōdō, which lay outside his area of expertise.

The monitor showed a jet black hole almost completely erasing the factory district. It was well outside the realm of what he could pass off as land subsidence. Even if he took “emergency measures” to erase the entire city of Snowfield, that hole alone would certainly remain for all of America to see.

In addition, a surveillance satellite would pass high above the city in a few more minutes. It was a civilian satellite, supplying data to civilian researchers in close to real time. The day it showed a hole of this size this clearly, the concealment of Mystery would be the least of his worries.

He was just about to phone Francesca to inquire how she intended to take responsibility, when another abnormality began on the monitor.

No sooner was the colossal hole filled in than, almost like time was rewinding, the toppled smokestacks and crumbled walls of the factories began to reform. Even the burnt grass in the empty lots regained its verdant life.

“...What is this...?”

A transmission from Francesca reached the bewildered Faldeus.

“Yoo-hoo? Are you surprised? I bet I softened that grumpy look of yours a little. Well?”

“...This is no laughing matter. What exactly did you do?”

“Oh, just an illusion,” Francesca roared with laughter as she answered Faldeus’ question. “Of course, it’s my Noble Phantasm as a Heroic Spirit, so it can do things orders of magnitude more stunning than turning a wasteland into a snowy mountain! Oh, I almost forgot — I can’t say why, but the people who were brawling down there seem to have suddenly reached a peaceful settlement. Mysterious, isn’t it? Maybe it was the power of love? Isn’t that lovely? Love, I mean!”

Faldeus ignored the better part of her words and correctly deduced that she must have struck some kind of deal. Before he could press her about it, however, Francesca gave him a reminder by way of a warning.

“Don’t forget — until it’s all over, we’re enemies in the Holy Grail War too.”

Then, almost incidentally, she said something about the restored factories that Faldeus found difficult to believe.

“They may look like they’re back to normal, but it is still an illusion, you know? You can touch them, live in them, even go on using them as factories and workshops, but that’s all they are! In about five days the world will realize it’s being fooled and they’ll crumble just like they were, so take care of the cover up before then!”

With that parting wholesale delegation of responsibility, Francesca ended the call.

Faldeus turned his eyes skyward, glaring at the airship he should not be able to see through the ceiling.

Fate/strange Fake 4

“...If there is a next time, Francesca, I’ll eliminate you before it starts.”

“We have a strange report, sir.”

Faldeus decided that, in any case, he would have to start working on a cover up operation. He was considering putting it down to mismanagement, suggesting the same gas company implicated in the desert explosion. The report Aludra handed him was insufficient to draw his interest.

“We have a report that Clan Calatin members are en route. They must have used repelling wards to induce an evacuation.”

The report read, “Civilians living near the factory district have simultaneously begun a mass evacuation to the city center and suburbs.” As far as Faldeus could see, it was, in fact, only natural that people who had heard those explosions and sounds of destruction would evacuate of their own accord.

That was why he was unable to notice the abnormality at once — to notice that, while the disturbance in the factory district had been quelled, something even more dangerous had awakened in its place.

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In a dream.

“I wonder if the people over by the factories are alright.”

“I’m sure they are... See? Look there!” The boy pointed “They all came over here! They evacuated to the city!”

Tsubaki, seeing a large crowd of townspeople headed their way, heaved a sigh of relief.

A little earlier, a sound like thunder had come from the direction of the factories. Tsubaki’s new friend Jester had said that they were burning.

“Oh; if there’s a fire, there must be people. I wonder if they’re OK. I hope they all managed to evacuate.”

Seeing Jester worry made Tsubaki uneasy. That had made her talk to “Mr. Black.”

“I hope the people around the factories are able to get away in time.”

All the while unaware that, behind her, the boy who called himself Jester was wearing a wicked grin.

Thus, the one hundred and twenty thousand people who lived in the area around the factory district

Chapter 11: Day 2, Morning

contracted an unknown “illness.” While the bloodsucker in a boy’s skin grasped the truth... the city began to roll gently, but inexorably, toward tragedy.

And even he was unaware that, in only half a day, people who would attempt to stop it would appear.

Interlude

“Backstage at a Third-Rate Comedy”

Interlude

Backstage at a Third-Rate Comedy

Go back to when Sigma's group met.

When Sigma revealed that he was another Master participating in the Holy Grail War, the Asian woman who called herself Ayaka had looked a little wary. Saber, however, had displayed no particular concern.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to introduce your Heroic Spirit as well?" He had asked in a clear, resonant voice.

"...I can't afford to show my hand."

Sigma shook his head.

"He shouted 'Chaplin,'" Assassin, who was observing him from the sidelines, cut in.

Sigma fell silent. Ayaka's eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh, I've definitely heard that name..."

"One of that actor's works was among the films at the club yesterday!"

Saber's eyes began to shine conspicuously again.

"..."

Sigma's emotions were too weak for him to break out in a cold sweat. He did, however, feel that things had become difficult.

What would happen if he explained that he had made a contract with — or been possessed by — a Servant called "Watcher"? If they believed him, he might be able to survive. Assuming that he played his cards right.

Considering the advice that the "shadows" had given him during his earlier escape from Assassin, his ability to extract information could certainly be considered powerful. If he could pass himself off as a resource, then surely anyone would consider that it would be more beneficial to use him than to kill him.

Such doubts passed through his mind, but they were not enough to change it. He had already decided to fight, not as Soldier A, but as Sigma. It was not a life-changing resolution — the "shadows" had pushed him into it. It was an uncertain objective, but at least he had no reason to stay "Soldier A" out of duty to his employer, Francesca.

Sigma wondered if simply not wanting to die was a good reason to settle on a lifestyle. Still, carelessly antagonizing the Heroic Spirits in front of him would shorten his life. He decided to

Fate/strange Fake 4

keep the conversation friendly while concealing his own Heroic Spirit's abilities for the present.

"Won't you introduce him now? We know his name, and I wish to pay my respects to an actor."

"...He says that actors show themselves in film. He won't appear in front of people as himself."

Sigma had come up with a suitable excuse to deflect Saber's request. Still, he thought, it was not a very convincing one.

"I see," Saber nodded emphatically, ignoring him. "I can understand."

"You would..."

Ayaka glared reproachfully at Saber, but made no other effort to press the matter.

Having secured a quasi-armistice, Sigma returned to his room and heaved a sigh of relief.

They had decided on the utmost mutual secrecy. He would not intrude on Ayaka's affairs, so they would not question his position and allegiance. He had made the proposal, and Saber had, surprisingly, given it the OK without difficulty.

Was it possible that Saber always prioritized his own instincts and feelings and, as a general rule, did not think about anything? Sigma followed that sudden thought with a more frightening idea: The fact that Saber had left his mark on the world as a hero, despite putting his emotions first, meant that he was hiding enough power to make up for it.

At that point, a "shadow" in the form of a knight, who Sigma had not noticed beside him, spoke.

"You have a good instinct. That is indeed the sort of king he is — a passionate man who puts his emotions at the moment first. His true name is Richard. The Lionheart... although I doubt you would know that name. Do you even know the story of King Arthur's Grail Quest?"

"Even I know that much. It's a Monty Python comedy."

"..."

The knight fell silent for some reason and then vanished. The Captain continued in his place.

"Well, in any case, that Richard boy lords over the emotional battlefield like it's his own front garden. He's a lion in a man's skin, but the people still loved him. He might have some secret trick for manipulating the human heart. Keep a wary eye on him."

In other words, "Don't let your guard down."

It was certainly possible that trusting people so easily was a bluff. Sigma thought that he would have to take care to avoid a knife in the back. On the other hand, he also wanted to see how far he could take the armistice.

Making it through the night is all well and good, but how should I handle myself from now on?

His first objective was to survive. He felt that even more strongly after his confrontation with Assassin.

The shadow of death weighed far heavier on him than it did on any ordinary mission. He was in urban America, but it felt almost like the childhood he had spent in “that” country. Sigma was beginning to feel nostalgic when a sudden thought struck him:

Would an ordinary human be more frightened or panicked? He had an idea that the people he had encountered on missions, at least, would have lived more desperately in similar circumstances.

A lot's been done to my head. Is just trying to compare myself to other people crazy?

He let out a little sigh and realized that, after all, a sound sleep and steady meals were sufficient life goals for the time being. They were things that, in this country, in a normal home, he could enjoy without effort. But Sigma knew countries where that was not the case — his homeland, for example — and therefore recognized that sound sleep and food were indeed valuable.

In that sense, my safest bet would be to join Faldeus, who has the backing of the state... but I doubt relying on that will be enough to survive this Grail War. That's the feeling I get.

Sigma continued to deliberate until dawn, when he received a communication from Faldeus himself.

“...Cattle calling Famine. Any movements?”

“...A woman who appears to be Assassin appeared in the mansion and I came under attack.”

“Oh, the one who attacked the police station... I'm impressed you survived. Or was the Servant you summoned superior...? What became of Assassin?”

Faldeus' tone conveyed faint surprise. He had a low opinion of Sigma as a mage and had probably not expected him to survive his first battle of the Grail War.

“Saber and his Master arrived after that and offered a ceasefire. I accepted.”

“...What?”

Faldeus fell into a series of thoughtful silences as Sigma proceeded with his report. He issued Sigma only the bare minimum in the way of instructions. They were to propose an alliance against the King of Heroes and the equally powerful Lancer while attempting to glean information.

Sigma thought that that might prove difficult. After all, no sooner had he received that order than the “shadow” with the mechanical wings appeared to say:

“Oh, they've already made an alliance with Enkidu — the Lancer who rivals the King of Heroes. Saber's group, I mean.”

Sigma was wondering whether he ought to report that to Faldeus when Faldeus cut in with

Fate/strange Fake 4

a question of his own.

“By the way, have you determined the identity of the Heroic Spirit you summoned?”

“Yes. My Heroic Spirit is...”

Should he at least report to Faldeus truthfully?

“Watch out,” the Captain smirked from behind him, “Assassin’s got her eye on you.”

“...”

Sigma glanced at the mirror on the dressing table. He had a feeling that the shadows in one corner of the room were blacker than usual. Besides, while the “shadows” were not above deliberately withholding important information, they had never lied.

Thinking that he should eliminate as many hostile factors as possible, Sigma pretended not to notice and answered matter-of-factly.

“...Chaplin. Lancer Charlie Chaplin. That’s the Heroic Spirit I summoned.”

“...Sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Lancer Charlie Chaplin. I will ascertain his Noble Phantasm and skills before long. I’ve determined that using a Command Seal to force him to talk is not a good strategy. Excuse me.”

Sigma switched off the earphone-shaped magical communicator and sighed.

“...Was that an ally you put trust in?”

“...You were here, Assassin?”

“I do not fully trust you. Answer the question.”

Assassin glared daggers through the gap in her hood.

“I don’t trust anyone,” Sigma answered. “Not my employer, or even myself. I don’t believe in gods, or demons, or even the magecraft I use.”

After a pause, Assassin spoke again. She sounded confused.

“Do you not pray to any god?”

“No? I... don’t know what they call ‘God’s grace’ yet.”

Assassin then asked Sigma why he did not believe in god. Sigma was still considering how to express it so that people would understand as he started to answer.

“...I don’t see enough meaning in living to call just being born God’s grace. I’ve seen children from my village who died as soon as they were born, before they even had time to open their eyes. The people who raised us would tear fetuses that hadn’t even been born yet out of their mother’s bellies to use in magical experiments. They raised us to make us mystic weapons.”

It seemed like a serious past to begin with, but Sigma went on relating it to Assassin dispassionately, as a list of facts.

“The people who raised me said that... the people who ran the country were gods. But that country was destroyed. By a group that called themselves mages. So, I don’t really even know

what “God” is. I think that believing in them without understanding them might just be a nuisance to them.”

What am I saying? I won't communicate anything like this. I accidentally ended up answering honestly, but how is anyone supposed to trust me when I don't trust anyone in the first place?

Sigma decided that he had gotten his answer fundamentally wrong and deeply regretted it. However...

“...I see. I'm sorry. I've reminded you of something that must have been painful.”

There was something kind in Assassin's voice as she answered. The hostility that had remained in it until a moment before had completely disappeared.

“Don't let it bother you; it's a common story. Compared to the mercenaries from my village who are still in warzones, I'm sure I'm blessed. Although I can't appreciate it very well.”

Sigma had spent the better part of the year battling demonic beasts and stray mages while he was in Francesca's employ. Still, when he came to an urban area like this and saw scenes of warzones on TV, he could not help thinking that he should, by all rights, have died a dog's death out there while he was still a child. Even so, he could not bring himself to think of his present circumstances as “God's grace.”

Assassin gave a little shake of her head at him.

“Those covered in sorrow and suffering are everywhere. In the human world, suffering and sorrow are as common as joy and pleasure. But even so, one must not laugh them off as ordinary.”

Assassin narrowed her eyes and watched Sigma as she spoke.

“You aren't like the mages I've faced before. You truly believe in nothing... That's what your eyes say. But you don't deny all creation; you just haven't found anything sufficient to earn your faith.”

Sigma felt like he had been seen through. He tried to look away, but he could not move his gaze. It was like Assassin's deep eyes were sucking him in.

“I am now sullied by a demon's magical energy in addition to being immature. Ordinarily, I ought to speak to you about faith, but I've lost that right.”

After rebuking herself, she addressed Sigma again.

“Still, I wish that when a thing worthy of your belief is finally born, that it will at least be a good thing.”

When she was done “wishing” — not praying — Assassin put the room behind her.

“...”

Sigma stood dumbfounded for a little while, until a voice called out to him from behind.

“What's the matter? Don't tell me it's love at first sight? Hey!”

It was a large, muscular “shadow.” Sigma quietly shook his head.

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“No... Just, it’s the first time anyone’s really wished for something from me. Apart from Francesca’s ‘pleading.’”

Sigma thought for a moment, then asked the shadow:

“Hey, are food and a good night’s sleep a good thing?”

“Nah. I mean, to start with, a good night’s sleep isn’t something you believe in.”

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A few hours later, the Captain’s voice woke Sigma from a doze in a chair.

“Hey, boy. You awake?”

Sigma, who had deliberately kept his sleep shallow in case of emergency, responded immediately.

“What is it?”

“We don’t answer unless we’re asked, except when it’s dangerous. Some of your friends — a team called ‘Thorn,’ or something like that — are spread out around us.”

“!”

“Thorn” was the codename given to one of Faldeus’ operation teams. Similarly, Faldeus was “Cattle” and Sigma was “Famine.” “Thorn,” however, was a particularly heavily armed anti-mage assault team. Sigma had seen them shoot the body of a puppeteer called Rohngall into pieces through the eyes of a familiar.

“Looks as though you aren’t trusted, boy,” the Captain chuckled. “Fellow called Faldeus gave them orders to observe you. Watcher can’t see into minds, though, so I don’t know how Faldeus plans to serve you up in the end.”

To be frank, Sigma’s ability was not up to taking on the entire unit. If they had been ordered to dispose of him, he would not be able to put up a fight unless his Servant provided actual fighting power. It would be one thing if he was up against a local gang, but he did not have the firepower to break through an anti-mage team in tactical formation, even if Watcher’s ability allowed him to grasp the movements of all of its members.

I see. It makes sense that, if I don’t trust, they won’t either.

...I don’t think it’s likely, but it’s also possible that Chaplin’s been exposed as a lie.

The “shadow,” having gathered that Sigma had seriously believed that he would be able to deceive Faldeus, seemed to want to say something, but Sigma walked off before he could begin. In order to obtain firepower, he was considering putting someone in his debt and getting them to repay him at the same time.

Interlude

He pretended to be making a communication, then gave a warning — starting with Assassin, who he met on his way.

“...I just got word from my real employer. They say that this house is surrounded by a US special forces unit.”

Even as he used his real employer — Francesca — as a pretext, Sigma continued to think. He was pondering what path he should walk — not following orders, as he had done until now, but of his own will, and purely for his own survival.

All the while wishing to himself, and to “Watcher,” for the power to light his way, even just one step ahead.

Interlude

“Genius Was Not Built in a Day; All Magecraft
Leads to Disaster”

Chapter 12: Day 2, Daytime

Genius Was Not Built in a Day; All Magecraft Leads to Disaster

The Escardos family was a particularly old lineage, even among the mages of the Mediterranean Basin.

One rumor had it that they had operated before the formation of the Clock Tower — alongside the Magician Kischur Zelrecht Schweinorg and the mages who had been active in the centuries following the dawn of the Common Era. No one at the Clock Tower believed it, and, more importantly, neither did the Escardos heirs themselves.

After all, for as old as their line was, it had produced no worthwhile results. Even their Magic Crest had only age to recommend it — the greater part of the spells it incorporated were indecipherable even to the heirs themselves, to the point that their descendants suspected that they might only be bluffs made up to look like magecraft. Still, it did include advanced life-preservation capabilities as well, and so they managed to cling to their dignity as an old family.

The Escardos lineage maintained itself on an output of magical patents that diminished with each successive generation. Even at the Clock Tower, they were mocked as “moldering antiques.”

If only their Magic Circuits would develop..., the past several centuries of Escardos family heads had fretted.

Strangely, their Magic Circuits remained few down the generations. No matter how exemplary a mage’s blood they drew in or how many generations they did so, the growth of their Circuits remained barely perceptible. Still, they thought, it was better than declining.

In one sense, the fact that their Magic Crest had yet to show signs of reaching the end of its life span, despite the antiquity of the lineage, was a threat. On that point, even they were sometimes discussed as research subjects, even in the Clock Tower.

The Escardos found that preferable to their Crest reaching its limit, their Circuits gradually dying out, and being swallowed by the passage of time — disappearing as mages — as had happened to the Makiri. They worked desperately to shore up their footing as mages in order to avoid that fate. Even if other mages laughed that it was a wasted effort.

After a few centuries of that, an “abnormality” was born into the Escardos family.

His Magic Circuit count was genuinely an order of magnitude greater than the previous generation’s. They were like capillaries, circulating Od through every inch of his body.

Genius skill in magical energy control, the originality to combine spells from the past into

Fate/strange Fake 4

a unique new magecraft, and Magic Circuits unparalleled within his lineage — it was the birth of a truly ideal successor. A descendant with the abilities that the powerless, yet stable, Escardos family thought it had wished for, however, ended up sending them into a steep decline.

That was because, at the same time his talents began to bud, it became clear that he was entirely lacking the “mental attitude” that could be called a mage’s most important attribute.

The boy had been able to see “it” since childhood.

For that reason, he had thought of “it” as perfectly ordinary and assumed that everyone else could see “it” as well. He soon realized, however, that he was mistaken.

He was not yet ten years old when he was told that he belonged to a line of special people called mages. Once he learned that, he assumed that it was because he was a mage that he could see “it.” While talking with his parents and other mages they had dealings with, however, he came to understand that he was mistaken in that as well.

It seemed that his parents did not see the same world that he did.

When the boy sensed that, he felt fear.

He still had no definite way of communicating the nature of that fear to others.

When his parents first noticed their son’s eccentricity, they wondered if he had been possessed by some delusion. After numerous examinations, however, they were forced to conclude that the boy seemed to be speaking the truth.

The certainty that the Escardos’ son possessed powerful Mystic Eyes sparked a brief commotion, but both of the boy’s eyeballs turned out to be ordinary. The fact that he was clearly able to see “it” in spite of that puzzled the mages around him.

To the boy himself, it was normal. The looks he got, however, seemed almost to say, “We can’t explain how, despite being human, you’re breathing through gills.” He gradually came to view the things he could see as unpleasant.

After all, it was because of what he could see that he had more than once nearly been murdered by his parents.

Still, it was also thanks to what he could see that he had survived, so he could not completely reject “it.”

He loved magecraft and he loved humans — what would become of him if he ended up hating something that was so intimately connected to both of them? Such anxieties plagued the boy since childhood.

On his way to a certain boat party, he encountered a woman who seemed to be a mage, or something close to it. She must have noticed the boy’s worries during the small talk they made

when she asked him the way to the harbor.

“If you’ve got worries about magecraft,” she remarked casually as she boarded a luxurious passenger ship, “start by studying it. If you can’t count on your family, you might try the Clock Tower.”

The woman mage’s words lodged in the boy’s heart. If he went to the Clock Tower, he thought, he might be able to understand himself. So, he had gone to consult his parents, who had just failed in their fifth assassination plot.

“I want to leave home and study at the Clock Tower,” said the boy. He was not yet ten years old.

As a result, the boy’s parents had driven him out by way of ridding themselves of a nuisance — under the pretext of unveiling their wonder child and sending him to the Clock Tower.

As a matter of fact, when they saw a boy with an abnormal number of Magic Circuits who had mastered the use of magecraft far beyond his years, many professors grew excited that a genius who would leave his name in the Clock Tower’s history had appeared. But things did not proceed that smoothly. The boy did possess Magic Circuits the like of which had never been seen, as well as the talent to control them. And yet, despite his first-rate Magic Circuits and sense for magecraft, they could never manage to correct his idiosyncratic temperament or his complete lack of a mage’s mindset.

The instructors gradually began to shun him. They had a rough stone of the first water, but they could not polish it. Seeing raw stone shine more brilliantly than polished gems hurt the pride of the instructors who had tried to further their own interests. They ended up chasing the boy out.

A professor called Rocco Belfaban strove patiently to reform the boy while he was being passed around like that. In the end, however, even that old professor began to be baffled by the boy’s personality — and other parts.

One day, he made a proposal: an eccentric newcomer had just opened a school. Although he was one of the Clock Tower’s Lords, his sensibilities were a little different from the average mage’s. That man might be able to teach the boy what he wanted to learn.

And so, the boy went to meet the newly-minted Lord. He was glumly sure that he had just been kicked out again, and that his next teacher would be the same.

I might be sick. I try so hard to act like a proper mage, so why can’t I do it?

I guess another professor ended up hating me. I wonder how long it’ll be before the next one does too.

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Even as the boy thought such thoughts, he did his best to smile. He worked magecraft on the muscles of his face, desperate to maintain a cheerful expression. Although he had never learned it, he had known how to smile since he was a young child.

In order to act like a mage, the boy poured his energy into constructing a forced smile. He worked the spell to fix his muscles in a smile over and over and over again. When his heart was about to break from the thought that he might go on doing it forever...

That man appeared before the boy.

“You’re Flat Escardos? The boy they say can handle a wide range of magecraft, regardless of Mana or Od, and even without knowledge?”

A young man with a scowl and a furrowed brow greeted Flat as he entered the room. He was excessively tall and his hair was excessively long. The thing that most drew Flat’s attention was that, of all the people who called themselves instructors he had met, the man had the lowest internal concentration of magical energy.

Flat stared curiously as a little shadow poked its head out from behind the man. It was a child his own age, glaring daggers at him and growling like an animal.

“Professor! Professor! He smells all messed up! Can I break him?”

“Give it a rest, Svin. He’s an invited guest. For now, at least.”

The mage who had been called “Professor” turned to reexamine the boy who had just entered the room. There was no insincere smile on his face as he spoke.

“Why are you doing that with your face? Are you testing me, or mocking me? Otherwise, if that’s your way of getting on in the world, you’d better rethink it quick.”

“What?”

“I’m telling you that children shouldn’t use magecraft to force smiles.”

“!”

The boy was shocked. He had been certain that he had perfectly isolated all signs of magecraft and that no outside observers would realize that he was using it to smile.

Was it possible that this person could see the same things he could? For a moment, he hoped, but he soon realized that he was mistaken.

“What is it? Do you have a question?”

“...Yes, sir. How did you know?”

“Anyone could tell at a glance. When you move your smile, your zygomaticus minor, risorius, and levator anguli oris move in an order that ignores their proper functions — proof that you’re using magecraft to force your expression into place. I assume you only valued results and attempted to trace them. It appears, however, that you neglected to observe the process. An

immature way of thinking that leads to handling magecraft without knowledge. I acknowledge your talent, but you'd best mend it."

The quick explanation was not what the boy had hoped for, but he did not despair. The world that the tall mage in front of him could see was different from his. Still, he had a feeling that what the mage saw was different from what the boy's parents and other mages did as well. It was only a faint presentiment at that point. Even so, the boy released the spell on his own face and bobbed his head to the mage with the first real smile he had worn in a long time.

"I'm called Flat! I look forward to attending your lectures, Professor!"

"...I refuse — or so I'd like to say, but you come with a letter of recommendation from Mr. Belfaban, so I can't turn you down out of hand."

The mage sighed, then scowled at the boy — Flat — as he continued.

"Fine. Class begins soon. Sit in a corner and at least get used to the atmosphere."

At that, the child beside the mage — the boy he had called Svin — stared wide-eyed from the mage to Flat.

"What?!" He shouted. "He's really going to be my junior?! This prickly smell is definitely going to make trouble for you, Professor! Better to bite before you're bitten!"

"Wow. Biting? You're almost like le chien... Still, you're kind of cool!"

"See?! He talks nonsense, but he doesn't smell like he's lying! He smells totally broken! Dangerous! Destroy him before he destroys the school!"

Seeing Svin barking like an animal somehow made Flat glad. Being the object of such straightforward emotion — even if it was bestial animosity — was a fresh experience to him. It was so different from the way the apprentices in his previous departments had looked at him — from a distance, like they were watching something uncanny.

Flat was thrilled. His eyes shone. He stared at the face of the boy who gave off an animal odor that could equally be taken for wolf, tiger, or lion and began to mutter something under his breath.

"Lobo...? Beetho...? No, maybe Le Chien after all..."

"Wait a minute! Those had better not be contenders for what you're going to call me!"

Svin seemed ready to pounce at any moment. Sighing, the mage laid a restraining hand on his head.

"Pipe down. Do you want to be kicked out?"

At that point, young mages began to file in one after another.

It seemed that Flat was not the only newcomer to the class. "That's the Lord...!" Some said, eyes shining. "That's the Lord...?" Others wondered. All their eyes were on the mage.

Shortly after Flat plopped himself down in a corner of the classroom, as instructed, and the



bestial boy established himself in the center of the front row, the mage gave his name to the class.

Fate/strange Fake 4

“Department of Modern Magecraft, Third-Class Instructor Waver Velvet... was my name until a short while ago.”

Then, he gave the name of the man who was to change the destinies of many mages, Flat included, and go down in the history of the Clock Tower.

“Now, I’m the Second. I’m borrowing the name Lord El-Melloi II.”

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Day 2. Noon. Main Street.

Ten years had gone by since their first meeting, and Flat’s destiny had certainly changed. It had experienced such an acrobatic flip that he had gone from being slowly driven out of the world and into himself to participating in a Holy Grail War held in distant America. In exchange, Lord El-Melloi II had ended up with stomach ulcers, but that’s a different story.

“Well, let’s get going, Berserker.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Flat was currently handcuffed by Jack, who had transformed into a police officer. Even Flat was not enough of a fool to come as he was; in addition to disguising himself, he had adjusted his internal circulation of magical energy and prepared his wards so that mages would not sense them. He had on a cap pulled low over his eyes, sunglasses, and a leather jacket that did not suit him.

“Hey,” he said. “Let go. Let go of me. I’m innocent. I didn’t kill my wife! A man with a prosthetic arm is the real culprit!”

“Yes... I think it would be better if you didn’t speak.”

“R-really?”

Flat had begun to shout in a perfect monotone. At a word from Jack, however, he lapsed into silence and trudged dejectedly after him.

When they were about to pass through the entrance, he looked up, wiping the expression from his face.

“..What is it?”

“There are wards, many layers thick. Maybe they were broken recently? I get the feeling they were re-cast in a hurry.”

“I see... How many seconds will it take?”

“Five will be enough to fool it about your existence,” Flat answered easily and crouched down on the spot.

“What’s the problem?” An officer who happened to come through the entrance just then asked Jack.

“Oh, he was drunk and making a scene in broad daylight. I brought him in alright, but he says he doesn’t feel so good, so I’m giving him a short rest.”

“I see. Sounds rough... Don’t let him puke there, OK? They’re not totally finished investigating yesterday’s terror attack.”

“Sure. Don’t worry.”

As the conversation unfolded behind him, Flat quietly whispered his personal incantation.

“...Game select.”

Flat remained squatting and placed a hand on the floor, inserting a new spell into the part of the ward he touched. He had begun large-scale hacking on the barrier.

He was allowing his own magical energy to soak into gaps in the intricately-arranged wards, conducting “repairs” while fooling the detection functions into believing that he was their maker. He completed the spell in roughly four seconds and slipped it into the wards. It was like an automatic program that would continuously alter the wards’ significance as Flat wished.

“Game over,” Flat murmured with a grin, and slowly stood up.

“Thank you, Officer. I feel better now.”

“I see. Let’s go, then.”

He doesn’t look drunk to me..., the officer wondered, seeing Flat’s refreshed face, but he left the pair as they were. Presumably he had his own duties to attend to.

And so, Flat and Jack stepped into the police station.

Flat could justly be called the least determined Master in this Grail War. Even so, he took a step forward. The resolution he kept in his heart was so faint that it was almost transparent, but that gave it a certain purity.

It was to confront those creeping in the shadows of these events head-on.

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Crystal Hill. Twenty meters below ground.

The city of Snowfield did not have a subway system. Instead, it had an immense subterranean space situated fifty meters below the city center — a space controlled by the mages and state agency that had built the city.

Between that space and the surface, twenty meters below ground, were smaller-scale controlled areas. One of these was allotted as the “workshop” of Caster — Alexandre Dumas père.

“I mean, there’s a casino and a red-light district and classy restaurants right over my head, and I’m not even free to go enjoy myself? Talk about cruelty. What’d I even show up as a Heroic Spirit for?”

Dumas sighed and turned his attention to the five or so young people in front of him.

“When you make money, you’d better spend it. You get me? Money’s like food; it’ll go bad on you while you’re busy thinking it’s too good to waste.”

He grumbled, but his hands never stopped moving.

“I told Bro — your boss — earlier. Back in the old days, I used most of the money I’d made and built myself a dream of a mansion. The second floor was done up with busts of all sorts of geniuses. Old Hugo, Goethe, Homer, Shakespeare, the works. And in the pride of place was a bust of me, you get me? Spent a mint getting a first-rate sculptor to make it. Amazing, right?”

“Umm... Yeah. Amazing... In more than one sense of the word.”

Dumas kept on making his pen race without turning at the doubtful response that came from behind him. He was writing sentences in French on something like a scroll.

“That son of a bitch Balzac took one look at my house and said, ‘Yes... One look is more than enough to see you’re joking. Still, joking this well is actually refreshing.’ I couldn’t work out if he was complimenting or insulting me. ...Oh yeah, shockingly... ‘he’ came as far as the front gate, although he probably went home in disgust...”

“...’He’?”

“Whoops; slip of the tongue. Just forget it,” Dumas chuckled as he dipped his pen in the inkwell.

At that point, he finally turned to look behind him.

“So? Only five of you? Bro’s being real careful, isn’t he?” He asked with a shrug of his shoulders, then turned back to his paper.

One of the assembled people — a young man who was a member of Clan Calatin — addressed him.

“...Excuse us. Most of us were dispatched to the disturbance in the factory district, so...”

The apology came from a man somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. That said, his face looked younger than his real age. He could still easily pass for a rookie officer. He was the officer who had lost his right hand below the wrist in the recent battle with the bloodsucker. The wound was currently covered by a special cast and wrapped in bandages.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m just lucky you’re here. So? Did you get Bro’s ‘permission to fight’?”

“Not yet...”

The officer clenched his left fist in frustration. The chief’s words had been, “Unless you can prove you won’t get in the way, I won’t put you back on the front lines.”

“So, what’s your reason for fighting in the first place?” Dumas asked, continuing his “writing.”

“What...?”

“You won a chance to drop out of a war full of mages where anybody might die any time. What’re you trying to get back into it for? What’s in it for you?”

The officer who had lost his right hand considered the question for a moment before answering in a clear voice.

“Because, as you say, Caster... anyone might die at any time.”

“Oh?”

“I... No, none of us the Chief brought together think of ourselves as mages.”

“What are you, then?” Dumas asked, still writing.

“We’re police officers,” the man replied.

“...”

“In a situation where anyone might die at any time, it’s our job to save as many people as possible.”

Dumas heard that answer, given without emotional hesitation, and, laughing delightedly, posed another question.

“Pretty words. Can they put food in your belly?”

“If you managed to build a mansion, I can manage food.”

“Ha! Get a load of the mouth on you. Are my novels ‘pretty words’?”

“...!”

Seeing Dumas suddenly rise to his feet, the five officers could not help breaking out in a cold sweat. It was easy to fall into the trap of thinking of Dumas as bookish because he was a novelist. In reality, however, he had a highly active side. It was said that, even as he neared his last years, he had personally gone hunting wild beasts in order to write a cookbook. The intimidating physique he had inherited from his father — a military man who had served under Napoleon

Fate/strange Fake 4

— recalled the anecdote. “Even I could probably beat him in a brawl,” the Chief had said. To the officers, however, the outcome of a straight exchange of fists seemed less certain.

Dumas, cloaked in that air of intimidation, took the arm of the officer who had lost his right hand, and...

“They are,” he shrugged, and made to fit something over the officer’s right wrist.

“I like other things too, but... heroes who talk a lot of high-sounding ideas and see ‘em through to the end sell like mad in newspapers and on the stage. There.”

At last, there was a satisfying clang. The officer felt a light pressure and the proper weight on his right wrist.

“This is...”

Attached to the officer’s right arm was a perfectly fitted prosthetic hand.

“It’s got a special gimmick; I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“No, but... The Chief still hasn’t...”

The officer stared at the hand in confusion.

“John Wingard,” Caster addressed him, returning to his writing. “Twenty-eight. Born in New York. Blood type AB. Second son of a family of mages. Didn’t inherit the Magic Crest.”

“Wha...?”

The officer stared at Dumas in shock at hearing his name and a litany of personal information. Dumas grinned broadly as he continued.

“Sorry, but I did my homework on all of you. You lost your mother as a kid, and that’s why you became a police officer. That right, John? Didn’t want anyone else to share your sorrow?”

“...I wasn’t thinking anything so noble. I just wanted revenge...”

“Oh, no need to affirm it. You’ve got to allow me my pretty words. Revenge will do.”

Grinning, Dumas re-dipped his pen in the inkwell to record a new “story.”

“When I was serializing Monte Cristo in the paper, everybody from town peddlers to ministers of state wanted to know how the avenger was going to end up. You’ll be getting a lot of chatter too... You’re going to use that hand — that legend — I cooked up, after all. It’ll be a lie if you don’t make a splash.

“You tell Bro, John: ‘You prove you won’t get in the way!’”

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The police station. The Chief's office.

"...It doesn't make sense."

The Chief read over the report on the morning's incident in the factory district with confusion. It seemed as though Francesca and her Servant had done something — he had no idea what — to put a stop to that disaster that had threatened to spread to the entire city. Bazdilot and Haruri had gone their separate ways. Both had slipped through the police surveillance net. The same was true of the Einzbern homunculus, and it was unknown why she had been cooperating with Haruri. That, however, was not what weighed on the Chief's mind.

Members of Clan Calatin had combined large-scale wards with physical evacuation orders in an attempt to clear the factory district of curious onlookers. Before they had a chance to put their plan into practice, however, a mass-evacuation of residents had been observed. The movement of more than a hundred thousand people living in and around the factory district to the city center and residential areas had been reported as appearing to be a protest march. On top of that, there had been no sightings of rioting or destructive acts by the worse-behaved elements; they had done nothing except "evacuate."

"Did Francesca do something...? No... That old bitch would be happier to see the masses panic..."

She had forced an end to the situation to avoid scrapping the city just yet, but Francesca was essentially someone who fanned the flames of conflict, not extinguished them.

The evacuees still seem to be loitering around the city center and the residential districts... but there's no trace of wide-area magecraft. All that's left is to investigate whether individuals are under the influence of hypnosis or...

A knock on the office door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in."

The familiar face of one of his subordinates appeared through the opened door. It was the woman who assisted the Chief by performing the role of his secretary.

"Chief, I have an urgent matter to report."

"...What is it?"

"Flat Escardos is in the lobby."

"...What?"

At his subordinate's words, the Chief turned his attention, not to the normal surveillance system, but to the special surveillance monitor installed in his office. There, through the eyes of a familiar, was the boy from the reports. He was, for some reason, handcuffed and scrutinizing his surroundings in a way that made him look highly suspicious.

Fate/strange Fake 4

The chief narrowed his eyes at the sight of the police officer accompanying the boy. It was not a member of Clan Calatin, but a normal officer who was supposed to be off duty that day.

“There was a report that, when he first summoned his Heroic Spirit in the park, something that appeared to be that Heroic Spirit took the form of a police officer, correct?”

“Yes, sir. We believe he has infiltrated the station in the company of his Heroic Spirit. The wards haven’t reacted, so they may be completely isolating their magical energy.”

“I see... One other question.”

“What, sir?” The female officer who acted as his secretary asked expressionlessly.

The Chief appeared to waver for a moment. The next moment, the blade of a Japanese sword was at her throat.

“Who are you?”

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Dumas’ workshop.

“Umm, Mr. Dumas... How are you able to create Noble Phantasms?” One of the police officers asked.

The whole group wore nervous expressions. It was their first time speaking to an allied Heroic Spirit face to face. And it was the great writer Dumas. Some of the officers had come in contact with his *The Three Musketeers* as children. Most of them remembered his works from movies, TV series, and even puppet shows.

Dumas answered the fundamental question from one such “fan” matter-of-factly with a shrug.

“Heroic Spirits can be surprisingly versatile. The stuff you did while you were alive plus the legends is open to an expanded interpretation. In my case, I wasn’t a mage or anything while I was alive, but I did use the money I made to do a lot of things aside from writing.”

Flashing a grin like a child who has succeeded in some mischief, Dumas cheerfully launched into a recital of his past.

“Well, when my buddy Garibaldi said he was going to unify Italy, I decided to give him a little push. I ran loads of weapons in my ship, the Emma. Put out a newspaper, too. In exchange, he made me supervisor of a museum that dug up ruins and relics of the past. Man, did it ever give me a chance to see and touch some fascinating things.”

“Relics... of the past...”

“So, that mixed with a Caster’s ‘Tool Creation’ and ‘Territory Creation’ and anecdotes about my legal messes into a skill. It’s not magecraft; it’s the ‘art’ of faking a Noble Phantasm’s past — its story — and repaste it. The ruins and relics I touched back then might’ve had an influence. A lot of crazy things turned up from around Pompei.”

It seemed that he himself did not fully understand why he had acquired the ability. With the knowledge the world bestowed on him as a Heroic Spirit, however, he was able to perfectly master it.

Dumas chuckled nostalgically and resumed writing on the scroll.

“I had a lot of trouble around that time too. It ended up with me getting a roundabout revenge for my old man.”

Alexandre Dumas’ father, Thomas, went down in history as a renowned general. The arsenic he was given when he was taken prisoner at Naples wrecked his body and drastically shortened his life. The invasion of Naples had proceeded with the support of General Thomas’ son, Alexandre. Allied townspeople showed their respect by decapitating a statue of the king who had captured his father in front of him. He symbolically avenged, his father, if only indirectly. The police officers, however, appeared more interested in Dumas’ father than in the story of his revenge against the king of Naples.

“Your father served under Napoleon, didn’t he?”

“Enough of that. My old man was under Napoleon, but he had a little policy dispute with His Imperial Majesty. See, my old man was born to some marquis — my grandpa — and a black slave — my grandma. So, racism took its course and they used that as an excuse to kick him out. Thanks to that, my old man wasted away in despair, while my mother and I were denied even an army pension and left to live in poverty.”

“Do you resent Napoleon, then?” An officer who had taken an interest in the story ventured. Dumas did not appear to mind. In fact, he proudly continued his reminiscence.

“That’s another funny thing. I saw Napoleon just two times after my old man died... But I’ll tell that story another time.”

Dumas cut the story short for the moment. Perhaps he felt that it had gone on too long. At that point, however, he recalled another anecdote and began to tell it with gusto.

“Now that you mention it, I was still a moron back when dad died. I tried to run up to the second floor with a gun, screaming that I was going to kill the God that killed my old man! Dumb, right? Kid me figured that, ‘cause heaven was up, a bullet’d reach it if I shot from the second floor.”

“Well... You were a child...”

“My mom, now, she slapped me and said, ‘We don’t need any more heroes picking fights



with God!' 'Heroes' get dragged around by history until they end up dying and leaving their families behind... although they get slapped if they blaspheme God before that. You see?"

Dumas laughed and shrugged his shoulders, but the police officers just exchanged looks, unsure whether they were supposed to laugh at the story or not.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"Oh, umm... We weren't sure if we should laugh, and..."

"What, are you trying to spare my feelings? Go ahead and laugh. 'Course, lots of people'd hesitate to tell a story like that, so maybe it's a bad idea to talk too freely about the past. Still, if my silly reminiscences'll help somebody kill time, I'll tell as many as they like. I might spice them up a bit for a speaking fee, though," Dumas cackled.

"So?" He asked the officers without pause. "You satisfied? You won't get many chances to talk with a great author like me. If there's anything else you want to ask, now's the time."

The officers were starting to notice that Dumas liked to talk and beginning to think that they ought to draw more boasts out of him to keep him in a good mood... when John, who was flexing his prosthetic hand in an effort to accustom himself to it, asked a question with a serious look on his face.

"...Can we win?"

"I'm an author, not a tactician or a prophet."

"The Noble Phantasms you've created are truly amazing. But we who use them are still human. Can we imitation-Heroic Spirits beat those... those monsters with just Noble Phantasms?"

Fate/strange Fake 4

At that, Dumas fell silent for a while. Then, he cracked his neck and spoke.

“...This’ll be another story about my past, but...”

“?”

“When I first started out, I had no interest in plays or novels. My mom made me read nothing but dull old tragedies and I got fed up with ‘em... until one day I saw one called *Hamlet*. That one was different. I was overwhelmed. I begged for a copy of the script and read it over so many times I learned it by heart. That’s what got me interested in theatre. It was one of my beginnings.”

“I can see that with *Hamlet*. It’s William Shakespeare’s masterpiece.”

Dumas watched the police officers’ uniform agreement with a broad grin. Then, he told the continuation of the story with the eyes of a child who has just succeeded in some mischief.

“As a matter of fact, that *Hamlet* was translated — or adapted — by a guy called Ducis. Anyway, he tore the original apart, then rewrote it as a translation in his own style. I was too shocked to stand when I read the real script Shakespeare wrote later on. Compared to the real thing, what I’d seen was a hackjob that’d make Shakespeare, or any fan of his original, furious. It was a real imitation-*Hamlet*.”

Dumas cackled. Then, his roars of laughter abruptly cut off and he turned his face toward the officers as his lips twisted into a broad grin.

“Still, it was that ‘imitation’ that changed my life. Nobody can deny that. Of course, that was probably because the original was too good. Still, fake or not, it had old Ducis’ real passion in it.”

Then, handing the officers their weapons, which he had finished repairing and improving before they knew it, and declared with the cheerful face of an audience member watching a comedy, but the confidence of a director controlling the stage:

“Relax. You don’t know it yet, but Bro’s — your boss’s — passion is the real deal. Keep believing in him till the end, and you should be able to turn the tables on a few legends that are only genuine.”

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The police station. The chief’s office.

While the silver blade gleamed, time in the chief’s office stood still.

It was the female officer the katana was thrust at who broke the long silence.

“What do you mean, sir? I’m Vera Levitt, one of the members of Clan Calatin you assembled and your loyal subordinate. Should I consider this a form of workplace harassment?”

The chief narrowed his eyes at the woman’s dispassionate speech.

“Impressive. That sounds like something Vera might actually say.”

“I am Vera.”

“No, the real Vera is on her way to the monitoring room.”

The chief did not say why, but he was certain. All the members of Clan Calatin, himself included, had electronic chips embedded in their shoulders. The chief could amplify the distance between those chips with his Od and sense them like he was bringing up a radar display. If he trusted that sensation, then the chip currently headed for the monitoring room was Vera's. He could not detect a single other member inside his office.

Whoever was masquerading as Vera seemed to be worrying whether or not the chief's words were a bluff. A moment later, however, they sighed and shook their head.

“I just managed to read it. An IC chip... I can't copy something that complicated instantly. I suppose we ought to have taken a little more time, Master.”

Master.

Tension ran through the chief's body at that word. Then, as if to ease that tension, a gentle voice resounded through his office.

“Oh... An IC chip? Do they have some kind of electronic device embedded in their bodies? Wow. I certainly wouldn't be able to tell that. I guess I screwed up.”

The chief heard a sigh from a corner of the room and turned his gaze in its direction while maintaining his vigilance against the entity that had taken the form of his subordinate. He saw a dejected-looking Flat Escardos.

The one on the monitors is a diversion made with magecraft!

The chief immediately sprung into action. His plan was to use the demonic beasts built into the office's wards to take the Master hostage and prevent the Servant from acting.

If they're sneaking in like this, the Heroic Spirit's actual combat abilities must be low. Can I hold out until my people get back...?

If he activated the wards' internal defense systems, that fact would be communicated to the members of Clan Calatin.

The chief immediately drew his pistol with his free hand and fired it downward. As the almost-noiseless shot reached the floor, a special warhead activated the office's internal wards, and three demonic beasts materialized around Flat Escardos. Then...

“Play ball.”

Flat muttered something, and immediately the beasts hung their heads at Flat. They even began to wag their tails.

Fate/strange Fake 4

“What...?”

That was not all. The activation of all other defensive spells was nullified. Even the Clan Calatin emergency notification system was shut down.

Unbelievable... This isn't brute force like Assassin and the hematophage used two days ago. Am I supposed to believe that he overwrote magecraft that had already been deployed in real time and took over my entire system?!

The blessed cursed child.

The chief had only a moment to appreciate that the nickname given to the boy Flat Escardos was no exaggeration before...

“Game select.”

Flat muttered something again, closed his hand, and the demonic beasts returned to where they had appeared and dematerialized. The situation was completely restored to what it had been before the activation of the defensive wards.

But I still have a chance to counterattack.

The instant the demonic beasts materialized, the members of Clan Calatin inside the station should have sensed their presence and made for the office. With five of them, including the real Vera, he would be able to gain the upper hand, even against a genius and his Servant.

The question is, can I hold this Servant off until then...?

At that point, the chief's eyes widened again. A second, identical figure was standing beside the fake subordinate he was pointing his sword at.

“Please abandon your offensive posture, Chief of Police Orlando Reeve,” the thing that seemed to be Flat's Servant stated dispassionately in tones identical to Vera's.

Two more identical figures appeared in the room in the span of that brief sentence and pointed at the monitor on the chief's desk. The chief pulled away from them, shooting a glance at the monitor as he leapt back. What it displayed astonished him.

Every camera showed Orlando Reeve and Vera. They were in multiple places, explaining something to the various members of Clan Calatin individually.

This... isn't image modification. It's disguised as Vera and me...? As this many of us?!

The Heroic Spirit in Vera's shape spoke, as if in answer to the chief's doubts.

“The population of this police station is now forty percent me.”

The chief looked at the Heroic Spirit and at Flat and silently sheathed his sword.

“It looks like you’ve seized the initiative.”

“Oh, you understand, then?”

“Yeah. If you planned to kill me, I’m sure you have easier ways to do it. You’re showing off part of your power to gain an advantage in negotiations. It’s just how the Mafia operates.”

“Oh, no... All the wards were normally connected to you, sir, so I had them pose as one of your people to spy things out... I never expected you to see through it or things to end up like a fight. I’m sorry for startling you.”

The chief couldn’t help furrowing his brows at the sight of Flat bobbing his head. He had heard that the boy did not have a mage’s temperament. But why would such a gentle youth join the Holy Grail War?

Or is it all an act, this included?

“And? What do you want?”

“Well, actually, about that... I thought that, if there’s a Master in the police station, I’d better go and meet them.”

“...Wait. What makes you think that there’s a Master in the police station?”

“Because there are a lot of mages among the police officers walking around town, and there’s a mystical surveillance system centered on the police station. Plus, I thought that the Saber who made that speech on TV might be here, and...”

And I used multiple layers of camouflage just to be safe.

The fact that the surveillance system had been seen through made the chief scowl. After the strange skills he had just been shown, however, it hardly surprised him.

“There’s another surveillance system connected to the city’s... Corrections Center? Is that a prison? But this place was closer.”

That must be Faldeus’ surveillance net. So, even he couldn’t pull it off.

The chief felt just a little relieved and moved on to another question.

“If you’re here to propose an alliance, you must have a target in mind. Who is it?”

“What? Oh! Sorry, it’s not... exactly an alliance.”

“?”

“We, umm, came to report!”

Report.

Orlando, who was a police chief before he was a mage, had heard the word ceaselessly throughout his life. Now, however, he frowned as if he had never heard it before.

“You see,” Flat explained, “it looks like someone who’s hospitalized might be a Master in the Holy Grail War.”

“...What?”

Fate/strange Fake 4

“And, since this morning, that person in the hospital has probably been using faint magical energy to connect to a huge number of people in the city. So, well, I thought that, if someone connected to the police knew about magecraft, I’d better let them know.”

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Snowfield Central Hospital.

The doctor who was in charge of Kuruoka Tsubaki’s case received a message that there was a phone call for her and made her way to the office.

“Oh, Dr. Levitt. It’s from your sister.”

“Thank you... It’s not often that she calls me.”

She took the receiver from a female nurse and addressed the younger sister she had contacted herself only the day before.

“Hello, Vera? Sorry; I’m in the hospital, so I can’t use my cell.”

“Not a problem. It looks like the chaos in the city is still going on, and I was worried that it might be affecting you over there.”

“Oh, there was a fire over in the factory district, wasn’t there? We’re fine here, although it seems like the psych ward is still getting a lot of people who say that their relatives refuse to leave town... I wonder what could be causing it...”

“By the way, Amelia, how is Kuruoka Tsubaki’s condition?”

“Oh, little Tsubaki? As a matter of fact, she’s been great these past few days. So great it wouldn’t surprise me if she woke up any moment. The only strange thing is an odd mark on her hand.”

“A... mark?”

“I thought it was someone’s idea of a joke at first, but it doesn’t scrub off and it doesn’t look like a tattoo, either... It’s like a bruise. But it’s since it appeared that her condition’s improved. Oh, don’t misunderstand me; I don’t think it improved because of the shape of the mark, or anything occult like that.”

After a little more small talk, the doctor — Amelia Levitt — ended the call.

“Isn’t your sister climbing pretty high in the police, even though she’s so young?” The nurse called over to her.

“Yes. She inherited our mother’s strict way of talking, probably because she grew up with her. But that probably makes her a perfect fit for the police.”

From there, Amelia made straight for Tsubaki’s room, muttering to herself under her breath.

“Still, it’s been a long time since she showed any interest in Tsubaki.”

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The police station. The chief’s office.

The real Vera hung up the phone and turned expressionlessly back to the chief.

“I’ve confirmed it. It seems that, as Mr. Escardos says, Command Seals have manifested in Kuruoka Tsubaki.”

“...Is the person who mentioned the mark on her arm a relative of yours, miss?”

“My sister. Because she has no magical aptitude, she was raised in ignorance of our world.”

Vera spoke dispassionately. Flat smiled at her.

“Then you both work jobs helping people. That’s amazing.”

“...Thank you. I don’t know about myself, but my sister is a genuine hard worker.”

Flat spoke with an air, not of sarcasm, but of genuine respect. Vera thanked him, albeit brusquely. Judging by her words, she was probably more pleased to hear her sister acknowledged than herself.

At that point, the chief cleared his throat.

“In other words, she summoned a Servant while unconscious... Is that it?”

“Yes, sir. Depending on the circumstances, it may be possible that the Heroic Spirit is operating independently.”

“...Why the girl and not Mr. or Mrs. Kuruoka? Is there any connection to the fact that they’re still holed up in their house?”

The better ordered their information became, the more questions arose.

They could use police authority to interfere with the hospital. Without knowing the identity of the Servant they were up against, however, it would be tantamount to leaping into a trap.

“Umm... We could use large-scale magecraft to blow away the hospital room?”

The chief heard Flat’s suggestion and the furrows on his brow deepened.

“...When the time comes, we may have no other choice... but I sealed a pact with Clan Calatin under the pretext that we would be just. It’s my job to guarantee that they are. Unless I can at least declare that sacrificing that girl is just — that there’s no other way — I’d like to take that option off the table.”

The chief spoke the words bitterly. Flat, hearing them, let out a sigh of relief.

“I see. I’m relieved to hear it!”

“...?”

Fate/strange Fake 4

“If you were the kind of people who would do that first thing, I wouldn’t be able to ally with you. ...A lot of the ‘mage’s mages’ everyone talks about would probably go straight to it without a second thought.”

“...You were testing me?”

The chief surveyed Flat with a heavy sigh.

It’s true — we may not be proper mages. Not this boy, and not me. A mage who puts rationality first would normally eliminate that unconscious girl without mercy.

“...But what I ultimately choose will be order for the greatest number. I will state that, if the damage seems likely to spread more than it already has, I am capable of turning my gun on that girl.”

“Yes, sir! But as long as you’ll come right out and say so, I can introduce you without fear!”

“Introduce me...?”

A smiling Flat produced a device from his pocket and passed it to the suspicious chief. It was a cell phone, and it was already connected to somewhere.

“It has twenty-seven levels of encryption on my end, and the other end has taken measures as well, so I don’t think you have to worry about being eavesdropped on magically or technologically. Go ahead.”

“...”

The chief put the phone to his ear as prompted. The man on the other end of the line seemed to sense that, and spoke.

“...Is this Chief of Police Orlando Reeve, responsible for coordinating the Snowfield City Police?”

The voice sounded young, but intimidating in its own way.

“Speaking. Who is this?” The chief asked, assuming some collaborator of Flat’s. Then, an idea struck him and he froze.

It couldn’t be.

The man on the other end of the receiver opened his mouth to confirm or deny the chief’s suspicion. Simply to inform one of Snowfield’s masterminds who and what he was. To speak the name of a man who was to alter the destinies of numerous mages — including Flat and the chief — and to go down in the history of the Holy Grail War.

“An instructor in modern magecraft at the Clock Tower. I generally go by the borrowed name of The Second... Lord El-Melloi II.”

“...!”

The man who had introduced himself as one of the Clock Tower’s highest authorities piled more words on the chief, who was wide-eyed with surprise.

“To you, however, I will give a different name:

“Waver Velvet... a simple third-rate mage who once participated in Fuyuki’s Holy Grail War.”

Interlude

“The Parade of Treachery”

Interlude

The Parade of Treachery

The wetland mansion.

Even as the day progressed, Faldeus' unit did not return to their positions around the mansion. Sigma, who had confirmed that fact by the words of Watcher's shadows, opened a notepad and decided to organize his information.

Saber had announced that the soldiers keeping watch around them "must be terribly hungry" and was currently out bringing refreshments he had prepared from the preserved foods in the mansion to the remaining snipers, spotters and scouts. According to the shadows, Saber's sudden appearance beside them had sent the snipers and spotters into a panic. Apparently they had nearly attacked him, although things had since been settled amicably.

Ayaka had been in the mansion throughout. As for whether she was defenseless, however, the shadows reported that "the mage Saber brought with him" was protecting her. *A Noble Phantasm that summons allies... I never expected that. Heroic Spirits have hidden depths.*

Sigma went on organizing his information, blind to the fact that he was contracted with the most unusual Servant of all.

Assassin was currently patrolling the area around the mansion. She was refusing to use magical energy from her Master, the hematophage, and was apparently being supplied by the aforementioned mage summoned with Saber's Noble Phantasm in exchange for a temporary truce.

Sigma sympathized with Assassin's circumstances — having placed her life in the hands of a stranger.

She was wary of Faldeus' forces. The shadows guessed that she planned to immediately dispatch any remaining scouts that launched an attack on her. They were surmising her personality based on her actions so far; it seemed that even Watcher's power was not fully capable of reading minds.

So, even Watcher isn't omnipotent.

It seemed that, even when it came to Assassin's Noble Phantasm, it had only been able to warn him because it had been the hair attack she had already invoked at the police station. If it had been an attack that Watcher had never seen before, he would have had no warning from the captain.

Fate/strange Fake 4

...I guess I was saved by chance, Sigma thought as he made his pen race across the pad. He wrote in a code that only he understood, just in case he was watched by Saber or Assassin.

"...From where I'm standing, it just looks like an evil spirit is forcing you to write gibberish." Sigma ignored the captain's words and asked another question.

"I'd like to confirm the differences in combat strength between each faction. Apart from Faldeus' forces, how many are engaging in the Grail War as organizations?"

"Let me see. In terms of sheer numbers, it'd have to be the team of the police chief and Dumas, who control the regular police. As for danger in small numbers, there's the one inside the homunculus Haruri Borzak's tagging along after."

"...Inside her? Who is it?"

"That's the question, now, isn't it? They haven't revealed themselves yet, so even Watcher isn't sure. Of course, when it comes to someone that strong, that damned Watcher ought to be able to guess by their presence, but..."

At that point, he vanished, and the boy with the snake staff took up the conversation.

"She's completely isolating her presence. She's also utilizing her power in spite of that, so she must be remarkable. It isn't just Watcher; even Enkidu, who possesses presence-detection abilities of the highest level, hasn't noticed her existence, or that of Haruri's Heroic Spirit."

"...I see."

"There are many other teams you ought to be wary of. Some of them act wordlessly and dispassionately, so even we can't fully grasp their objectives. We can't get a read on the movements of Hippolyte's group yet, nor can we guess what the silver wolf and Enkidu will do until they act."

I see. In that case, I can't let my guard down with factions that operate in small numbers either.

Sigma re-focused himself, thinking that, as he had suspected, it would not be easy.

"What about the Protectors of the Land led by Tine Chelk?"

"Their operating forces are currently fifty-six strong and active in the city. There should be more at their base in the ravine, but their village is out of range of Watcher's observation. Tine Chelk's combat strength is about forty-six people."

"Aren't there fifty-six?"

Sigma was confused by the discrepancy in numbers.

"Seven are traitors for other organizations," the boy with the snake staff answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "Three have been approached and are wavering. They won't be of any use."

"...I see. Sounds rough."

"There are traitors in every organization. There are three humans in Faldeus' unit working for the Scradio Family. And a mage of Francesca's level can easily make a human change sides with a single suggestion, even if they're not a traitor."

“That kind of randomness does sound like Francesca.”

Having expressed his half-sarcastic impression of his real employer, Sigma asked Watcher another question.

“What about the factions whose future movements you can predict?”

“Flat Escardos and the chief of police have formed a temporary alliance. At ten at night, the chief should convene Clan Calatin, communicate his plan to them, and begin operations at the Central Hospital.”

“Why at the hospital?”

“A Master is hospitalized there in an unconscious state. Her Heroic Spirit hasn’t shown itself yet, but it appears to be acting already. It seems to be possessing and controlling townspeople. The scale of it has swollen to tens of thousands of people, so the chief of police won’t be able to leave it alone.”

Sigma asked for more details. It seemed that Flat and the police had formed an alliance and planned to quarantine and examine the girl. As the girl was infected with a virus improved by the Kuruokas, they would act with more caution than usual.

“A hematophage is sleeping by the girl’s bedside, but his reasons are unclear. He did mutter something to himself about using her to bring down Assassin.”

The shadow — now the boy with mechanical wings — related information concerning the vampire Jester Karture. Apparently Assassin’s Master had quite a twisted personality. Sigma listened to the information and considered how he would act.

Should I stay quiet? Or should I intervene directly? Or pass part of the information to Faldeus and let him deal with it...?

Sigma considered a variety of possibilities. Then, the shadow said something that threw him into even more confusion.

“And, umm... it’s not definite, but, after ten PM, Alkeides may head for the hospital.”

“Bazdilot’s bowman? Why?”

“Because he’ll probably find out about the girl there.”

“?”

“It’s simple, boy,” the shadow — now the captain — said to the bewildered-looking Sigma.

“Didn’t I tell you the chief’s going to explain the operation to Clan Calatin at ten o’clock?”

“You don’t mean...”

“Dirty cops. I doubt even his Excellency the chief of police suspects that some of his people are in the Scradio Family’s pocket.”

Chapter 13

“At Last, a Second, and a Third...”

Chapter 13: Day 2, night

At Last, a Second, and a Third...

Ten PM. Snowfield Central Church.

Snowfield Central Hospital was on the opposite side of Crystal Hill, the city's largest casino hotel, from the police station. The church stood a short distance from it. Despite the short history of the city, it had a majestic appearance. As a result, the church was usually thronged with devout believers and sightseeing visitors. At present, however, it had become a space that no ordinary person would think of approaching; a ward was set to keep the crowds away.

Inside, a priest who had remained in the church after dark, spoke with a wry smile.

"I don't suppose you've come to seek sanctuary. I have been wanting to needle that chief of yours, though."

A priest distinguished by his eye patch — Hansa Cervantes.

Four nuns were deployed around him. They were not dressed for combat, but they were wary of their visitors and ready to fight in their habits at any time. That was only natural — it was Vera and about twenty-five other members of Clan Calatin who had appeared in the church.

The chief remained with several members at the station, issuing orders, but he proposed to use the church as a part of their operation against the hospital.

"I understand the circumstances, but do you honestly believe I'll give my permission?"

"We are not requesting support," Vera answered the confused-looking Hansa. "As far as our operation is concerned, we would like you to shelter one person here."

"The unconscious Master whose Servant remains active? Naturally, I'm in favor of giving her sanctuary as overseer, as a priest, and as a person, but only if she intends to withdraw from the Grail War. In this case, that depends on whether or not you can negotiate with her Servant. Am I wrong?"

"No. Depending on the circumstances, I believe it may come to eliminating the Servant by force. In that case, we will not seek your assistance, as events will exceed your purview as overseer."

"I see. I've got a feeling I'm being tactfully used, but, well, I suppose that's what being overseer is all about."

Hansa shrugged. Then, he noticed a young man staring intently at him from beside the police officers.

Fate/strange Fake 4

“By the way, who’s he? He doesn’t look like a cop.”

At that, the young man in question — Flat — stepped hurriedly forward.

“Oh, pleasure to meet you! My name’s Flat. I’m Berserker’s Master and I’m cooperating in this matter. I look forward to working with you, Mr. Overseer!”

“Oh, at last a Master who acknowledges me as overseer. Hansa Cervantes. The pleasure is mine,” Hansa laughed self-mockingly.

Flat surveyed him from head to toe and asked:

“Umm... Excuse me if I’m wrong, or if this is rude, but... didn’t you have a fight in the police station parking lot the day before yesterday, Mr. Cervantes? Your body’s about seventy-percent machine, right...?”

“...Oh, you can tell?”

“Yes. The flow of magical energy is geometrically altered here and there, and I don’t understand it, so I figured it was probably mechanical! Wow, it’s nothing like Rohngall’s or Touko’s puppets... Amazing! I’ve never seen a cyborg before! Can you shoot a rocket punch? Maybe a drill...?”

Hansa shook his head at the young man who had seen through his body’s peculiarities.

“My fists don’t fly off, and the drill’s a secret. One of my arms stretches up to three meters, though, and it can launch grenades too. ...And, just between us, I’ve got a consecrated chainsaw in my leg.”

“...I’m deeply impressed. I’d like to shake your hand, if you don’t object to a Clock Tower mage!”

“Sure. You’ve got good taste. If you get tired of magecraft, convert to the Holy Church.”

The mage of the Clock Tower and the executor of the Church, who ought to have been bitter enemies, smiled at each other in mutual approval and exchanged a firm handshake.

Ignoring the bewildered police officers, the nuns who stood ready in two man cells whispered to each other.

“Father Hansa is tipping his hand to a mage... Is that alright, do you think?”

“He’s always like this, so there’s no point worrying. Hansa’s like a kid deep down.”

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Somewhere dark.

Bazdilot, having abandoned his own workshop in the factory district, was standing by in a

spare base prepared by the Scradio Family. Before his eyes, the “communicator” in the form of an Ouija board began to move, picking out letters of the alphabet to form sentences. Bazdilot confirmed the message’s content, then addressed the darkness without a hint of an expression.

“Alkeides, can you move?”

In the darkness, Alkeides materialized and, rich magical energy coursing through every inch of his frame, spoke.

“Of course.”

“...I’ve gotten word from a ‘rat’ in the police. We’re going to the hospital.”

Then, he issued an order to Alkeides in a voice that was, as usual, devoid of emotion.

“...The time has come; I need you to take care of a kid.”

“I see.”

There was no visible sign of hesitation. Bazdilot was satisfied with Alkeides attitude. For that very reason, however, he voiced a doubt that had occurred to him.

“It may seem a bit late to ask, but you withdrew awfully obediently, even if there was no downside to Caster’s deal. I thought you’d kill that goddess at any cost.”

Bazdilot, having used up all his Command Seals, had no way to stop Alkeides. He had been prepared to sacrifice the deal for that reason when, to his surprise, Alkeides had put away his bow.

“...That was no god I know.”

“From a different place, you mean? Still, her essence must be about the same.”

“No, I don’t mean that. That was neither an original nor an avatar... It’s probably something like a shout seared into another’s personality. An irritating curse that has crossed the ages.”

Alkeides began to walk toward the exit of the temporary workshop, coolly adjusting his equipment.

“I despise the gods, but the maledictions they leave behind are secondary. I will deal with them eventually, but not before that demigod who calls himself the King of Heroes. That’s all.”

Bazdilot fixed his piercing stare on Alkeides’ back and presented the job’s merits for his Servant.

“If things go well, there will be far fewer uncertain elements when you face the King of Heroes. You’ll also be able to defame the gods who took everything from you all you want.”

With his back still turned, the bowman expressed dispassionate agreement with his Master’s words.

“That goes without saying. I exist only to drag their names through the mud.”

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Fate/strange Fake 4

The church. Rooftop.

Part of the Central Church's roof was a level rooftop. It formed a space where one could view the stars, part of the night skyline, and the beautifully ornamented bell tower.

There, Flat, awaiting his orders, let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness... Things worked out somehow."

"We have your teacher to thank for that," Jack, in the form of a wristwatch, responded. "The conclusions he stated to the chief of police and his skill in the negotiations afterward can only be called magnificent."

Jack had only watched from the sidelines while Lord El-Melloi II had, like an armchair detective, made sense of the situation in the city without actually being there.

The girl was likely being possessed by her Servant, with which she had possibly formed a contract in her deep psyche or in a dream. From the fact that she was afflicted with bacteria created by the Kuruokas, El-Melloi II conjectured that the Heroic Spirit she had summoned was related to pathogens, or possibly a being that had been treated as symbolic of sickness itself in an era that lacked the concepts of bacteria or viruses — that the abnormalities breaking out in the city might be brought about by the highly unique action of bacterial magecraft capable of deliberately selecting targets to infect.

After that, he had conducted various negotiations with the chief. It could be said that he, while remaining in England, had penetrated behind the masterminds of the Snowfield Holy Grail War.

"No one in the Clock Tower can beat the professor at investigation and negotiation without using magecraft... although it seems tough when the other side mixes in threats..."

A lot must have happened in the past. Flat rested his elbows on the edge of the rooftop and began to talk nostalgically.

"The Clock Tower is such a pain with factions and things. That sort of thing looks inefficient to me, so I don't really understand it... but the professor handles himself well and makes his opponents look good, too, all while saying how ridiculous it is. Apparently he even had a lot to deal with when he took charge of me."

Having said that, Flat paused briefly before addressing Jack.

"I hope the girl in the hospital survives."

"So do I," Jack agreed, then suddenly asked a question.

"...Something's been worrying me."

"What is it?"

"Why are you trying to save that girl?"

“Why...?” Flat hesitated, unable to immediately answer to the fundamental question.

“You certainly have an un-mage-like, gentle nature. I can understand you hating to kill a girl for the sake of the Grail War. Still, when you go so far as to expose yourself to another Master — your natural enemy — I wonder if you might be a little detached from the feelings of an ordinary person as well.”

“...If someone’s in trouble, helping them is only—”

“Not natural. To some extent, maybe, but that certainly isn’t natural, Master. People aren’t that strong. If they become strong, they must have a reason for it.”

At that, Flat nodded his understanding, then continued to ponder for a while, staring up at the night sky. Then, he gave one big nod, as if he had reached a conclusion, and opened his mouth.

“It’s simple. It’s because of the professor.”

“Ah. So it is his influence.”

“I thought that, if the professor was in my place, he’d help that girl, even if he didn’t get anything in return. ...You’re right, Jack. I don’t know why, but the professor is a really strong person, to make up for his low skill with magecraft. It’s not just me; everyone in the school, and even some people who hate the professor, recognize that.”

Flat gave a wry smile, as if ashamed of himself, and then began to speak to the Heroic Spirit watch wrapped around his left wrist.

“A long time ago... I made a big mistake and caused the professor a lot of trouble.”

“You’re constantly causing him trouble, from what I hear..”

“Yes, but that time was on a different level... My friend Le Chien and I got caught by a mage called Atrum. I was pretty sure we were going to die.”

Flat, who casually discussed his own death, continued with a self-mocking grin.

“But the professor took a big risk and saved us. He even put an important tool for seeing his precious friend — someone he wants to see even if it takes him his whole life — on the betting table.”

A tool for meeting someone. An idea struck Jack at that odd phrase.

A catalyst for summoning...?

The friend this professor wanted to see was probably the same as Jack himself now was — a Heroic Spirit he had encountered in a Holy Grail War. In which case, that catalyst had a value that no one else could hope to measure up to. If he had put that on the betting table for the sake of his students, then he really must have enough of a screw loose to be Flat’s professor.

While Jack thought, Flat, who had come to a conclusion after his own fashion, went on while flashing the occasional lonely smile.

Fate/strange Fake 4

“If this ended up being just my problem, I’d abandon the girl for my goal. I might even take the initiative and kill her like an ordinary mage.”

“...”

“But before I’m a mage of the Escardos family, I’m Flat Escardos of the El-Melloi School.
The El-Melloi School.

The instant Flat spoke that name, the tinge of loneliness vanished from his face and he blurted out in a voice bursting with confidence:

“Since I’ve been in that school, my life has stopped being just my problem. Abandoning that girl now would mean betraying the professor and everyone at school. To me, that’s... as scary as losing my goal as a mage.”

“I see. If you say it’s because you’re afraid, I’ve got no choice but to accept it.”

Next, Flat asked Jack a question of his own.

“Why don’t you object, Jack?”

“Hmm...”

“As far as winning the Grail War goes, there’s no need to go out of our way to save a girl, is there? If you’d been dead set against it, I’d have had to use a Command Seal, but you seemed to agree pretty quickly.”

In response to Flat’s words, Jack shook his watch hands in a manner that seemed to say, “Oh, that’s all.”

“It’s simple. I’ve simply been influenced by your teacher, Lord El-Melloi II, myself.”

When Flat had phoned El-Melloi II and received a two-hour lecture, Jack had had an opportunity for a brief conversation with the lord. When Jack had explained his own nature as a Heroic Spirit and that his wish for the Grail was to learn the true identity of Jack the Ripper, El-Melloi II had easily slipped into Jack’s mind in a flowing voice — almost like he was giving a lecture on magecraft.

“I believe that a person’s essence is formed through their encounters with others.

“Who or what actually committed those murders in 1800s London is a black box. Even within the Clock Tower, opinions are greatly divided.

“Still, I am frankly grateful that it was a level-headed being like yourself who appeared to Flat. If that foolish apprentice of mine has had any influence on you, for better or for worse, then I believe it would be right to say that a new facet of Jack the Ripper has undoubtedly been born.

“I promise to remember ‘you,’ not as an urban legend or a Heroic Spirit, regardless of what you were in life. I promise to remember the you I am speaking with now as Flat’s Servant, the being who showed him the way, if only for a short time.

“So, please... take care of my foolish apprentice — of Flat. I don’t have Command Seals or anything like that; this is just my selfish request. But please... keep him safe for me.”

“Honestly, I know I told you this before, but if we’d spoken any longer... he really would have had me wrapped around his finger. He might be some kind of incubus in human form.”

Jack, still in watch form, gave a wry smile at the memory.

“His words touched my heartstrings. I had my life slightly touched by him as well. That’s all.”

At that, Flat flashed an innocent grin.

“That means you’re a student of the El-Melloi School, too, Jack.”

“...I’m sure having a serial killer would just cause trouble.”

Flat shook his head at Jack’s obvious statement of fact.

“We’ve got an alumnus who’s kind of similar, so I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“...I have a feeling that it definitely will...”

At that point, the watch, still shaking its hands in a wry smile, suddenly began to speak seriously.

“You’re still missing something big... No, not missing... You probably haven’t realized it yourself, but there’s a big gap between you and the world. It’s actually frightened me at times.”

“...”

“However,” Jack continued to an uneasy-looking Flat, “I’ve been reassured. Not because a mage like that is your teacher; because you feel respect for the way your teacher lives. As long as you have that feeling, you should be able to overcome your gap.”

“...I guess you’re right. I don’t really get it. I do sort of understand that parts of me are out of sync with mages... and with regular people.”

“Don’t worry. All people live with the feeling that something about them is out of sync with the world. I don’t know if I ought to say so in this form, but there’s no such thing as a clock that keeps perfect time without ever being off for an instant. There are only people trying to make their clocks match.”

Flat giggled when he heard that.

“Your true identity might turn out to be a poet, Jack.”

“...Did I say something that flippant?”

“You did. I mean, you’re supposed to have signed a letter to the police ‘from Hell.’”

“...You had to bring that up.”

They did not burst out laughing out of consideration for the victims, but Jack and Flat did grin at each other before turning their attention toward the hospital.

“...It should start any time now.”

Fate/strange Fake 4

“Yes. We can’t clear out the hospitalized patients, after all. They’ll use wide-area magecraft to put the patients to sleep and block the doctors’ perceptions so that they can’t see the police unit storm in... Wait. Something’s wrong.”

“?”

Jack’s voice drew Flat’s eyes to the street in front of the hospital. He could see police officers in the street pointing at something and panicking. Flat turned his gaze in the direction they were pointing while using magecraft to enhance his sight... and saw “it.”

A three-headed dog the size of a full-grown elephant, pale breath roiling in its mouths, and, standing calmly on its back, a man wearing a strange cloth and readying a bow.

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Central Hospital rooftop. On top of a water tank.

“...Cerberos now? Who is that bowman?”

Surveying the enormous beast from above was Jester Karture, back in the form of the young vampire man. It appeared that the wounds he had received from Hansa had yet to recover — the holy water burns were still fresh on the skin that peeked out through his clothes.

“Interesting. What other heroes and monsters are there in this Grail War? Who should I make that beautiful Assassin dance with? I must focus and take my time choosing.”

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In front of the hospital. Main Street.

Due to wide-area wards set to keep out people, Main Street seemed strangely deserted to the police officers on their beats. Farther down the street, however, something appeared to shatter the lonely atmosphere.

It was a gigantic dog exhaling poisonous breaths through the razor-sharp fangs of its three heads. It took the officers a short while to recognize it as Cerberus, a creature they had seen in myths and movies often enough to lose interest in it. That was the extent to which the awe and fear it inspired surpassed the Cerberus of their imaginations.

The air was thick with magical energy. The bowman standing on the creature’s back, however, showed no sign that it fazed him. If he had held a great scythe instead of a bow, anyone would have screamed, taking him for Death.

The gargantuan guard dog of Hades walked up to the police officers and then stopped. It lowered its heads and glared all around. Then, the bowman on its back put a question to the speechless officers in a solemn voice.

“...Where is the child who harbors a Heroic Spirit?”

The bowman was already turning to face the hospital as he spoke. He must have been asking in what part of which floor the girl was to be found.

“If we tell you,” one of the police officers screwed up their courage and asked the bowman, “what are you... going to do to her?”

“Naturally, I shall slay her in a frontal assault, in accordance with the rules of the Holy Grail War.”

The police officers murmured. This being, whose appearance made them feel a strength unlike that of an ordinary Heroic Spirit, this being cloaked in such an air of intimidation that it made the Assassin they had fought the other day seem sweet, was declaring his intention to murder an unconscious little girl “fairly, in a frontal assault.”

“...Bullshi—”

One of the officers shouted, realizing what the words meant. His angry voice was drowned out by the roar of an explosion.

The shaft the bowman had loosed by way of a threat pierced the asphalt, blasting a circumference of ten meters to smithereens and creating a small crater. A number of nearby officers were caught in the blast. Several lost consciousness on the spot.

“You need not answer; just don’t interfere.”

Then, the bowman pulled his bow taut.

The police officers soon realized what he was planning to do. This bowman intended to completely destroy the large, ten-story hospital with nothing but his bow. After seeing the crater he had left in the asphalt with a warning shot, no one found the idea absurd.

Then, before the police could move to stop him, he unleashed a strike from his fully drawn bow.

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“So, that’s his game!”

Jester Karture immediately realized the bowman’s intention and destroyed the water tower beneath him with a stamp of his foot. Some power allowed him to freely control the water that

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gushed out and made it leap at the oncoming arrow.

There was a watery explosion. Droplets scattered like fireworks under the city lights. The arrow missed by a fraction, scraping off part of the hospital roof and then vanishing into the sky.

“Good grief. What’s wrong, police? I’ll be in trouble if you don’t work harder.”

Jester flashed a sarcastic grin and sighed as he cheered on the police force he had nearly destroyed with his own hands a few days earlier.

“Kuruoka Tsubaki will be safe for now if I make her one of my kind... The problem is, if I do that, Assassin won’t hesitate to kill her. That wouldn’t be any fun.”

When Jester was done muttering to himself, he realized a vital fact and shook his head.

“No, with her strength, the girl’s body might not be able to stand it. She’d die before she’s changed...”

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“...Some species of demon?”

Alkeides, atop Kerberos’ back, turned his attention to the being that had erected the thick shield of water. Seeing a man shrouded in the aura of neither a Heroic nor a Divine Spirit, he warily descended to the ground.

“Kill all who stand in your way.”

Kerberos, the guard dog of Hades he had once captured, summoned through the Noble Phantasm King’s Order. Alkeides issued instructions to the gargantuan beast not of this world and carefully surveyed his “enemy” on the roof of the hospital. He readied his bow to seriously destroy the building himself.

His presence is not that of a Servant. It’s not that of the woman who calls herself a goddess, either. He’s most likely some beast birthed by the planet... a man-shaped Nemean lion.

Remembering the lion to which the hide that covered his own face had belonged, Alkeides further heightened his vigilance. He was wondering if he should materialize anything else with King’s Order... when a light impact ran across his back. Of course, it only felt light to Alkeides — properly speaking, the impact had enough force to pierce through the body of an armored car.

The thing that the Nemean lion’s skin deflected was a spear hurled by one of the police officers.

“...Damn it... Shrugging it off’s not fair... This again?! Why? Why the hell? Are you another one of those Dead Apostles or whatever, you bastard...?!”

As if in answer to the officer's scream, the rest of the nearby force poured out what seemed to be ranged Noble Phantasms one after another.

"...Dull."

Alkeides swatted them aside with his bow. The shot he fired through the gaps between them produced another crater in the road.

What is Kerberos doing?

Despite the fact that he had just given the order to kill, the police force's numbers showed no sign of decreasing. In fact, they seemed to be growing.

"...What?"

Alkeides realized that there were indeed more police officers than there had been. Moreover, Kerberos was indeed doing as Alkeides had ordered it. There were several human bodies in each of its three mouths. More than a dozen officers were pinned beneath its feet. And yet, they still resisted.

It appeared that the officers had also noticed something unusual about the scene.

"H-hey..."

"...Who are those guys getting eaten?"

Alkeides heard the confused murmurs and furrowed his brows. Then...

Another dozen or so officers appeared before his eyes and immediately leapt at Kerberos. They did not appear to have any weapons that could be Noble Phantasms. They rushed in to challenge Kerberos with nothing but pistols and batons. It was almost as if they wanted to be the first to be eaten.

"Absurd..."

"There's nothing absurd about it."

Alkeides turned at a voice from behind him. There stood a perfectly ordinary police officer, watching countless identical others be devoured. He spoke with a grin heavy with madness.

"I am originally a criminal who claimed to come from Hell, a murderous fiend whose sins are beyond redemption.

"Being continually gnawed on by the hound of Hades suits me perfectly."

The officer squared off against Alkeides as he spoke. Armed with nothing but an ordinary pistol and baton, against a fiend more vicious than Kerberos.

"I doubt it, but, seeing as you're accompanied by that devil-dog of the underworld, I don't suppose that Hades himself can have manifested?"

In an instant, dark fury shrouded Alkeides. He addressed the officer in a voice thick with hate.

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“Weakling... No matter how much mightier than yourself I appear, do not group me with those fools, the gods. If you commit the same mistake again, your reward shall be more profound than death.”

“I hoped to sound you out,” the officer replied with a fearless grin. “I apologize if I have committed an indiscretion. I see. It appears that you are indeed no god. If you were a relation of a god, I might have been able to force cause and effect together and become you...”

“...?”

“But it seems that I can’t. Still... I’ve grasped your essence. Factoring in Kerberos and your hatred of the gods, I can make a rough guess at your identity. A great hero who has denied the gods, although I suspect their blood once ran in your veins.”

It seemed that the officer had, by some means, probed into Alkeides Saint Graph. And despite knowing Alkeides’ strength, the thing in the form of a police officer still leapt at him, weapons ready.

“Then I shall treat you as a human... and kill you as a human!”

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“It’s not an illusion. What is it...? Solid bodies are actually appearing and being eaten by Kerberos.”

Watching the scene unfolding on the street below, Jester furrowed his brows.

The mystery police officers had appeared just when he was wondering whether to mount a serious counter attack or to abduct Tsubaki and make his escape. At first, they had made for Kerberos, identical officers appearing one after another and keeping Kerberos’ claws and mouths in a state of saturation. Now they were attacking the unnatural bowman as well, swelling their numbers as they continued the fight.

“Is there a Heroic Spirit like that...? What country’s hero could it be...?”

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What am I looking at?

John Wingard, member of Clan Calatin, had only just obtained his new prosthetic hand. What he saw was a police officer who looked identical to him.

But that officer wasn’t one of his comrades. He was appearing around the bowman, being struck down, disappearing, and then appearing again unscathed and unnoticed. No matter how many times his body was twisted apart or pierced with arrows, the same officer continued to challenge the Heroic Spirit.

Watching him, John returned to his senses.

What am I spacing out for? I've got to hurry and back him...

He was about to run in when someone laid a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. When he turned to look, he found a man with the same face as the officer who was fighting the bowman.

"That's my 'prey'; hands off. Fall back to somewhere safe."

"B-but..."

"Your job is protecting Kuruoka Tsubaki. Don't waste my Master's resolve."

Hearing that, John understood. This man was that young man called Flat's Servant. John did not know what kind of being he was, but perhaps he should leave this place to him.

Just as John and the other officers were starting to think that, the bowman opened his mouth.

"Weakling... tell me your name."

At that, the officer took a step back and replied with a broad grin.

"I have no name."

Before they knew it, there were two of the officer. Both spoke with the same voice.

"Great hero, being who lives on in myths of the Age of the Gods, changing your form and refining your great deeds with the ages, I, who am but an insignificant criminal, have but one thing I can say to you."

The officers multiplied again. Four of them now declared to the bowman from four sides.

"I suppose you have fitting reasons for your resolve... However, if you say that you will deny the power of the gods with it! If you try to deny and abandon all the gods' deeds, evil and good alike!"

The eight "somethings" had taken a variety of forms besides police officers. Their shouts echoed on the city street.

"...However mighty you are, you are now, as you wished, a 'human.'"

Sixteen bellows addressed the bowman's soul.

"Hero who has fallen to become a rogue, to become human! No matter how great a hero you are! Even if you have the power to destroy the world!"

Just when it seemed that thirty-two fearless grins ringed in the bowman... all the figures vanished, as if they had been absorbed back into the first one.

"As long as your essence is human... you will fall victim to a mere powerless 'killer.'"

Then, before the eyes of the police and the reddish-brown bowman... the nameless Berserker —

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the murderous fiend Jack the Ripper — shouted the name of the Noble Phantasm whose release should lay bare his own essence and end the life of a great hero.

“From Hell!”

Then, in the gap between the hospital and the church, hell on earth was made manifest.

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“It can’t be... It can’t be, can it?! Is that what it is?!”

On the roof, Jester’s eyes sparkled as he flashed a pleasantly surprised smile.

“Jack... Jack, Jack, Jack! Jack the Ripper!”

Jester had drawn that conclusion from the fact that the Servant had called himself a “killer” and the name of the Noble Phantasm he had shouted.

Looking at the “world” that had just begun to unfold before his eyes, Jester shouted in frustration with an ecstatic grin on his face.

“Oh! Oh! Beautiful Assassin, why aren’t you here?! Why aren’t you seeing this with me?!”

He almost used a Command Seal in spite of himself, but the desire deep in his guts allowed him to barely hold onto his reason.

“N-no, I can’t waste any more Command Seals. No matter what, I have to save two to make her fall into despair and finally commit double suicide with me...”

When he was done moaning in apparently heartfelt regret, he turned defiant and shouted:

“Then I’ll burn this scene into my eyes! I’ll tell her later!”

He went on to make the praises of Jack the Ripper resound across the hospital roof.

“Oh, Jack! Jack! Jack! The world’s most impure thrill seeker! Pure demon raised by human delusions!”

Jester, a hematophage, went on extolling a worn out urban legend, spreading his arms and spinning with supreme delight on his face.

“You scrap of folklore that filled the night with terror despite being a powerless anti-hero! You personification of viciousness spread fear through the world at speeds that even that Wallachian Night can’t match! No, show me! Will you crumble pitifully in the face of a true legend, or will you score a blow as the new darkness?”

“This is what makes the world so fun! O beautiful Assassin, I dedicate this comical hell to you!”

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As the hematophage had shouted, a hell had manifested between the hospital and the church.

A thick fog enveloped the area. The roadside trees morphed into bluish-black plants no one had ever seen before. The craters Alkeides had made filled with red magma and gave off poisonous steam. Human-faced bats flew through the air. Imp-shaped flames surrounded the traffic lights. Countless illusory, sooty buildings, suggestive of London back allies, appeared. But...

There was not a person to be seen.

No children stealing bread out of starvation. No one beating those children to death to take the bread. No dealers peddling narcotics. No constables taking their money. Only the figures of gremlins playing at mimicking their actions with puppets loomed up through the fog.

In other words... that hell was no more than a comical puppet show. Pumpkin lanterns straight out of a fairy tale grinned under the street lights without a shred of reality.

At the same time, however, it was an embodiment of the desires harbored by people of Jack the Ripper's day. If it had been a different aspect of Jack, the scene might have been an irredeemable hell built of raw human evil. The hell Jack had made manifest on earth in this instance, however, was the corruption of humans by the absolute evil called demons. It could be called a manmade hell, the product of a twisted wish to foist all tragedies, all human evil, on the products of imagination.

Mixed in with that distorted, immature hell was a single genuine article.

“ ... ”

Alkeides faced “it” head on.

It must have been about five meters tall.

A raw sensuality accompanied the thing that stood atop the puppet show “hell.”

Its skin was a toxic blue-purple, like a cross between a blueberry and a poisonous insect.

Its long, unusually developed arms ended in glittering, saber-like claws.

Long, twisted horns and sharp fangs protruded from its face, like a skull transformed into a demonic beast.

The wings that spread from its back cast deep shadows all around it, fluttering like black cremation smoke.

“ _____ ”

At the sight of it, Kerberos pounced.

At that, the thin skin of the thing's chest swelled and the beating of a heart that gave off a barbaric gleam resounded through the surroundings. As the beat sped up, its eyes shone red.

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Two rays of heat from its eyes pierced through Kerberos' body in an instant.

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A scream that genuinely seemed to echo from the bowels of hell escaped the three heads and shook the eardrums of every member of Clan Calatin on the street.

That, however, was not the end of Hades' guard dog. The demonic hound only bared more of its fighting spirit and propelled its massive frame in an effort to rend the thing with its three sets of fangs. An instant before those fangs connected, however...

The claws that the thing swung down from above cut diagonally into Kerberos' body at the shoulder, biting into entrails and spine as they bloodily shredded fur.

Kerberos' massive body crumpled to the ground with a low rumble.

Clan Calatin stared wide-eyed. Hansa Cervantes, watching from a window of the church, scowled and murmured:

“...It doesn't seem like a genuine demon. A temporary existence as a phantasmal species...? Still, to become something that fiendish, even temporarily...”

Hansa pressed a hand to his eye patch and muttered to himself about the thing Flat's Heroic Spirit had become — that is, about the entity that most ordinary people would call a “demon.”

“If I didn't know it was a Heroic Spirit... I'd be calling on the Burial Agency right about now.”



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“...So, it can’t achieve divine beasthood without that cursed Hades’ blessing,” Alkeides spat, glancing at the fallen Kerberos, then turned his attention back to the gigantic shadow in front of him.

“You said that I would die because I am human, didn’t you, weakling? But does not the sort of monster you are reducing yourself to fall at human hands?”

Alkeides spoke challengingly. Jack’s pure-white eyes, now far from human, crinkled, and he laughed. He just laughed.

“...No, you’ve got that wrong, slave of the gods reduced to humanity.”

Seeing the demon’s eyes gleam again, Alkeides assumed a defensive posture. When the attack came, however, it was from a total blind spot — out of the sky behind him.

“Nngh?!”

He turned as a ray of heat pierced the top of his shoulder and saw... a demon, identical to the one in front of him, flying through the air.

“Humans do not slay us. Humans are the fools, the sages, who create us — no more than cannibal prey.”

At the same time, the swooping claw strike of yet another demon drove Alkeides’ body deep into the street that had become the paving stones of hell.

Then, the true hell began.

What Alkeides, driven into the ground, saw when he raised his eyes to the sky... was a great army — tens, hundreds strong — of the enemy Heroic Spirit that had become a demon looking down on him.

Jack the Ripper’s Noble Phantasm, *Evil Fog Perishes With the London Dawn*: From Hell, materialized rumors that Jack’s true identity was a demon from hell as an ability. The theory had grown from the phrase “From hell” in a letter said to have been written by Jack himself. When it spread to the countryside, where superstitions were more deeply held than in urban areas, anecdotes that “Jack the Ripper was a demon, or possessed, or a devil worshipper” put down deep roots.

Having used its power to become a demon... Jack had added the other Noble Phantasm he possessed.

That Is Not Worth the End of Tragedy: Natural Born Killers.

“Jack the Ripper was not a single person, but a group.”

It was a Noble Phantasm built of such anecdotes. It incorporated a wide variety of elements, from idle speculation that “Jack’s crimes were all committed by unconnected people; no one in the world can be Jack the Ripper,” to the theory that it was a ritual performed by a religious cult, which had gained force at the time.

The maximum number of people varied based on the strength of the Master’s magical energy. Paired with Flat Escardos, it was confirmed to be capable of “dispersing” into a maximum of five hundred and twenty at one time.

Such numbers were of course impossible with both Noble Phantasms deployed simultaneously... but it easily reached over two hundred demons, all attacking the “human” Alkeides.

The next series of blows assailed Alkeides, standing on the ground, before he could even begin to act. They hit hard, most importantly because, as they were not delivered with weapons, the power of the Nemean lion’s hide had no effect on them. Its inherent toughness prevented it from being torn to shreds, but a portion of the attacks still pierced it, so that the claws and heat reached even Alkeides’ guts.

The ceaseless rain of blows no longer permitted him to so much as stand. If there was such a thing as the pains of hell, it was certainly his current predicament.

The police officers looking on thought so. They held their breaths, even forgetting to be afraid. To the audience, the sight of the absolute strength wheeling through the air overwhelming a different strength even seemed to have a kind of beauty.

“Hey, did... did they get him?”

“Actually... is it really OK to have those... things on our side?”

Some of the officers muttered, wiping cold sweat.

Could it really be controlled? Where was its Master, Flat?

Having grown uneasy, they looked to the roof of the church, but there was no sign of Flat Escardos there. That further excited their terror. None of them could speak.

Would that Bowman even be recognizable by this time?

No sooner had someone thought that... than a change appeared in the situation.

“...Impressive.”

As his low, but carrying voice reverberated in the surroundings, Alkeides exposed himself to the claws of the airborne demons in the center of the pulverized asphalt.

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The claws bit into Alkeides' shoulder with a dull thud. It seemed to the onlookers that it could easily have been a mortal wound.

Alkeides, however, pinned the arm of the gigantic demon whose claws were eating into him and seized one of its fangs with his free hand as it tried to bite him. The other demons launched a simultaneous heat ray attack, but Alkeides did not release his grip.

Then, he commended the hero he had deemed worthless. He spoke words of heartfelt praise, acknowledging that the modern serial killer without so much as a scrap of divinity was indeed a worthy foe.

"...Impressive, weakling. You've done well to corner me. You've done well to climb this high."

"...? What are you...?"

The demon-Jack spoke, perhaps in response to an unpleasant premonition. Alkeides, however, ignored him and continued.

"What you have built does indeed have value. I could counter with Nine Lives... but your power is too valuable to merely defeat."

"...?"

"Unknown killer, I will usurp you with respect.

"You are worth stealing."

Then, the avenger activated his own Noble Phantasm. Neither Nine Lives nor King's Order. His hidden, third Noble Phantasm, activated by his being warped into the Avenger Class.

"Regeneration Pandora."

That instant, fate, hope and despair all changed places.

In an instant, the swarm of demons flitting through the air transformed into a crowd of powerless humans. The innumerable Jacks, having lost the power of flight, plummeted to earth.

"You... Impossible..."

The Jack whose claws had been buried in Alkeides' shoulder had reverted to the form of an ordinary police officer. The sight that met his widened eyes... was Alkeides with the same horns that Jack had sported until a moment before poking from under his cloth, wings like black smoke sprouting from his back, and, most importantly, shrouded in magical energy several times stronger than his had been thus far.

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Jester Karture, having witnessed the events from beginning to end, wiped any trace of a smile from his face. Wearing a look of deep wariness that he had not shown even when he had seen the clash between the King of Heroes and Enkidu, he muttered:

“A Noble Phantasm... that steals another’s Noble Phantasm...”

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Despair ruled Main Street.

The scene that met Hansa’s eyes as he peered out from the church was the reverse of what it had been moments before. Standing before Jack, who had gone back to being human, was a fiend who had abandoned divine power and had now even ceased to be human. Although, to borrow Jack’s words, it was certainly something humans had created. Probably, simply taking warped human despair into himself made him nothing but “human,” no matter how his shape changed.

Hansa pondered such questions while sipping the canned coffee that had appeared unnoticed in his hand. Because the area around the hospital’s water tower was in a blind spot from his window, he had yet to realize that the hematophage he was pursuing was in the hospital. Even so, he was on the highest possible alert.

“I see,” he muttered, narrowing his eyes. “So, this is the Holy Grail War — a battle between Heroic Spirits.

“No wonder Father Kotomine is with God now. I’d better prepare myself for a lot, too.”

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“You stole... my... power...?”

Berserker’s faint voice echoed futilely down the street. His hell had vanished before anyone knew what was happening. Its presence now surrounded Alkeides.

“...Hate me if you like,” Alkeides answered, looking down at Berserker, who lay on the ground, his power spent. “I am used to being cursed as an usurper.”

“Haha... Perish the thought. Isn’t usurpation by a hero called a legend?”

“...Scathing, but there are no heroes. The only one here is a detestable fiend who’s about to strangle a child.”

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When he had finished his forceful declaration, Alkeides picked up the unscathed bow that had fallen beside him. He spoke reluctantly as he nocked an arrow.

“Farewell, great killer. It was a good contest. I never imagined I would bring so much power to bear against a human opponent.”

“I don’t know if you can call me human in that form.”

“Appearances are trivial. I don’t even know your name, but I promise to engrave at least our battle into my memory.”

“...”

Jack lay silently on the ground and awaited his end.

It’s ironic. I never dreamed that my current self would be acknowledged by friend and foe alike.

Oh, come to think of it, Master was the first to acknowledge me. Something about mysterious entities being cool. Honestly, that Master of mine...

Alkeides loosed his taut bow at Jack, whose face was covered in a wry smile. An instant before the arrowhead reached Jack’s heart, he vanished without a trace.

“...I see. I suppose my Master is the only one foolish enough to have used up his Command Seals at this point.”

Forced transportation by Command Seal.

Alkeides slowly surveyed his surroundings, impressed by the judgment of the Master who had saved his Servant by a hair’s breadth. The only ones left were the police officers, each of whom carried a weapon that seemed to be a Noble Phantasm. They had been dazed at first, but they seemed to remember their duty, because one and then another of them readied their weapons and inched toward Alkeides.

“...Humph. Noble Phantasms? I don’t know how you assembled so many, but I’ll test their worth.”

Piercing animosity welled up from every inch of Alkeides’ body. Earlier, he had considered the police force trivial. After the battle he had just experienced, however, he could not bring himself to scorn them as mere humans or to ignore them.

It was a fact that the police officers, who were no more than ordinary humans with Noble Phantasms, were standing against him. They were hardly without fear, but they were striving to conquer it and stand firm in the face of the death that Alkeides was.

“Courageous. You have a better look in your eyes than Calais and Zetes.”

No sooner had he readied his bow with a rare good-spirited grin, intent on slaughtering the officers with his full power... than one who was to return his mood to nothing swooped down

from high above.

“Ha... Hahahahahaha! Mwahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Ringling peals of laughter resounded along Main Street. The officers and the bowman looked up and saw a golden archer.

The King of Heroes watched the horned and winged Alkeides with an ear-to-ear grin.

“This is a new one... I can hardly describe it. You have grown rather handsome, mongrel! Mongrel or not, to assume so disordered a form...!”

He stood atop the church’s belfry and spoke in his usual tone while looking down on the whole road below.

“I came in the hope that some unusual scenery was being created, and you are entertaining me quite ably. You may have the makings of a clown, after your fashion.”

It seemed that he had noticed the commotion while on the roof of Crystal Hill and had descended to view the scene on the ground. The police force had learned that he was on the top floor of Crystal Hill, but because they had planned to operate in secret not only from the King of Heroes, but from everyone, he had apparently been entirely out of their minds.

“So you’ve come, mighty king.”

Alkeides grinned broadly and drew his bow, heedless of his opponent’s provocation.

Then, just as he was about to activate King’s Order afresh... a new intruder appeared on Main Street.

“Halloo! What’s going on here?”

A carefree voice came from the shadow of the church. When they turned their eyes in its direction, the police saw a familiar face.

They had not exactly made a flashy entrance. In fact, they had arrived too normally.

One of them was Saber, his red-streaked blond hair fluttering in the wind.

Alkeides froze warily. The King of Heroes glanced in their direction but presumably took no particular interest, because he said nothing.

At the sight of the Heroic Spirits, the craters in the ground, and the fallen police officers, Saber addressed the baby-faced soldier beside him.

“This doesn’t look like what you told us. Wasn’t it supposed to be a covert operation?”

The soldier — Sigma — remained expressionless and responded dispassionately.

“The situation changed while we were en route. That’s all.”

“I see. Nothing we can do about that.”

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As the Heroic Spirit and the soldier carried on such mundane conversation, the hooded woman Assassin appeared unostentatiously behind them. The police frowned at that, but someone on the roof of the hospital had a different reaction.

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“...Hey, who’re they?”

Sensing destiny in Assassin’s appearance in this place, Jester Karture was on the verge of shouting for joy... when his eyes fell on the two men close at her side. He erased all trace of expression from his face as he glared at the pair.

“Why are they with my Assassin...?”

Pure rage filled the hematophage’s icy glare as he continued.

“And... why is my beautiful Assassin’s body not tainted by my magical energy?”

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“Are you alright, Jack? I’ll perform a healing spell right away!”

In the square behind the church... Jack chuckled, sensing the gathering heroes and ignoring the flustered Flat. It was not only that bowman; Heroic Spirits he had yet to see were strutting on the stage of this city, each struggling for a legend. While finding humor in the fact that an urban legend such as himself was among their number, he muttered self-deprecatingly.

With one last gleam of hope still deep in his eyes.

“I see... I did indeed come from hell. Still, this place might be a mild hell itself.”

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And, a little behind them, yet one more Heroic Spirit made for Main Street in front of the hospital. Despite the fact that it was his first time going outside since his summoning, he swaggered down the center of the road with an air of total familiarity.

“For God’s sake, don’t make an author do manual labor,” Alexandre Dumas grumbled as he drew steadily nearer to the hospital.

Naturally, the chief of police was unaware of the fact. If he had known, he would certainly have recalled Dumas by Command Seal. The chief, however, had his hands full with his subordinates’ dangerous situation and had not gotten around to considering Dumas’ activities.

It was precisely because Dumas knew that that he was heading to the scene on his own feet. He halted at a distance from which he could observe the whole situation from afar, however, and did not advance farther.

Instead, with his usual fearless grin on his face... he spread open a scroll that had appeared, unnoticed, in his hand.

“If I want my actors to show courage, I guess I should revise the plot a bit.”

Then, spotting the officer with the prosthetic hand — John — in the distance, he grinned from ear to ear.

“I’m not gonna let you end up as bit parts. ...It’s guys like you who ought to be heroes.”

Muttering to himself, he began to write a “story” on the scroll. A present to his favorite actors in place of a modest bouquet.

“...Musketeers, Masquerade.”

While even the actors themselves remained ignorant of what that story meant... the curtain was quietly but surely rising on the next act of the tragicomic play.

Bridge

“One Day, Above the Sky”

Bridge

One Day, Above the Sky

Day three. Morning.

“Next, the weather. Following up on the low-pressure system that formed in western Las Vegas...”

The usual news flowed out of the TV. The townspeople were heading to their respective jobs, alternatively pleased and worried by the upcoming weather.

The city of Snowfield was not yet in a state of panic.

Faldeus was mostly satisfied with that outcome. He could cover up most disturbances himself, and he had confirmed that he could suppress larger-scale incidents to some extent with Francesca’s help.

“How to deal with the incident at the hospital last night... Assassin should be setting to work assassinating Galvarosso around now, too...”

Such matters occupied Faldeus’ thoughts when a secret communication arrived on his personal channel. It was not from inside Snowfield. It was from the special bureau in Washington — the “true masterminds” — who were backing him up.

“...Faldeus here. What is it, General?”

“...Have you seen the news?”

The solemn voice of the man he had called “General” prompted Faldeus to turn his attention to the local news that had just ran. Nothing, however, stuck out to him as particularly important, so he checked the national programs. There, he saw the news that a powerful candidate in the upcoming presidential election had died of natural causes.

“Oh... And they said he had this election in the bag, too. Talk about bad luck. Still, I don’t believe this directly concerns your section, General.”

“...You didn’t have anything to do with this, did you?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not just him. Thirty-five financial bigwigs, big-time mass media personalities, and even leaders of major lobbies died suddenly, of accidents or natural causes, yesterday afternoon alone. Every one of them had a fat pipeline to the White House.”

Fate/strange Fake 4

“...”

“Autopsies concluded beyond a shadow of doubt that the deaths were accidents or natural causes. That’s what has some people thinking that this coincidence must have something to do with magecraft. Given the timing, it’s only natural to suspect a connection to your ritual,” the general informed Faldeus in a tone that said those doubts had not been assuaged. He sighed deeply, then abandoned his businesslike manner.

“I haven’t reported to the president yet. If you figure out any connection to the ritual in Snowfield, contact me ASAP.”

Faldeus thought about that day, which was later to go down in books on urban legends as “America’s Cursed Day.” Then, as the result of independently looking up the times and places those thirty-five people had died on the net and connecting them on a map... he determined that they were centered on Galvarosso Scladio’s headquarters and linked in order of proximity to it. It was almost as if an angel of death had set out from Scladio’s headquarters and walked around killing targets in the order that it found them.

Faldeus was not big enough to look at this and say, “Hassan-I Sabbah can’t be involved” with certainty. He was also not shameless enough to pretend not to have seen it.

He did not know whether the all-important Galvarosso was alive or dead. Even if he was dead, it was clear that the Scladio mages would conceal the fact for some time.

“Hassan... Where are you...? And what are you doing...?”

At that point, it struck Faldeus — this “ritual” was no longer confined to Snowfield. It was beginning to spread its curse to the entire United States. Also that Francesca had probably hoped that it would from the start.

As if to kick the shocked Faldeus while he was down, the announcers on the news launched into a hurried announcement.

“This is a follow-up to the weather report — observers report that the low-pressure system that formed in western Las Vegas is currently rapidly increasing in force and has transformed into a massive hurricane.”

“...?”

In the satellite image displayed on the TV, he was able to confirm an enormous hurricane more than eight hundred kilometers in diameter.

“There is no precedent for such a development...”

“In Death Valley National Park, a sandstorm is...”

“Its projected course is a beeline for Snowfield...”

“...It really is going in a straight line, isn’t it? Is something like that possible?”

“It’s almost like the hurricane has a will of its own.”

“This is no time for jokes.”

It began to flow. A chaotic whirlpool of information.

Faldeus instinctively picked out the facts, looked half-resignedly up at the ceiling, and muttered:

“Who’s doing this...? Which faction?”

“What the hell... are they trying to summon to this city...?”

×

×

Snowfield. Twenty kilometers above ground.

“Hurry up now.”

The gigantic airship that served as Prelati’s workshop.

Standing atop its balloon portion, Filia stared at the sky far to the southwest. She continued to nod in satisfaction, watching a mass of clouds visible on the curved horizon. Even taken on a global scale, it was gigantic.

“That’s the way. I pulled you from a ‘branch’ that doesn’t seem like it connects to anywhere, but, well, it shouldn’t be a problem for just a little while, right? I mean, the ‘me’ in that age should just barely be able to use her Authority...”

Then, she held out her hand to the mass of clouds, hundreds of kilometers distant, as if looking at a cherished pet, and spoke as if addressing it directly.

“Don’t worry; I won’t start anything until you get here. We’ll all get our revenge together.”

Her expression was a smile, but it was utterly devoid of any human quality. In a sense, it held a terror exactly the opposite of Bazdilot’s.

And, as she directed it downward, that smile expressed an unspeakable desire to kill.

“...On that rude pair of ingrates.”

×

×

Francesca’s workshop.

“The person on top of the airship’s been acting kind of scary...”

“Don’t mind her. She’s glaring at the two on the ground, not us.”

Although Prelati’s words soothed her, Francesca puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

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“Oh, I wish she’d lay off the unjustified resentment and go somewhere else...”

“Going up against a broken goddess’ data would be no fun at all!”

×

×

Unaware that she was being complained about under her feet, the “thing” that had possessed Filia’s body called out to the hurricane far to the west in tones of what almost sounded like self-pity.

“Once you get here, I’ll restore you to your proper shape...”

“Look forward to it, Gugalanna!”

next episode [Fake05]

CLASS

True Caster

Master: Francesca Prelati

True Name: Francois Prelati

Gender: Unknown (summoned Saint Graph is male)

Height
Weight: 152 cm, 38 kg

Alignment: Chaotic Evil

STR  E

M.E  A

END  D

LCK  B

AGI  C

NP  A

Personal Skills

Illusion: A

A skill that denotes excellence in the art of illusion within the field of magecraft. At this level, it is even possible to go beyond people and deceive the environment.

Disciple of Spirits: B

Proof that one has been initiated in magecraft by certain lake spirits. The efficacy of magecraft improves dramatically.

Divinity: E-

Prelati shares the blood of a deity, but as that deity is banished his rank is low. Barely manifested at rank E due to combination with traditions that link Prelati with Beelzebub.

Class Skills

Territory Creation: B

Tool Creation: B

Noble Phantasm

*The Sunken Spiral Castle Does Not Exist, Therefore There is No End to This World's Madness:
Grand Illusion*

Rank: A; Classification: Anti-Personnel Noble Phantasm; Range: 1-10; Maximum Capture: 10 people

Legends that Prelati revealed the form of Beelzebub to sworn friends or that he (she) was the incarnation of Beelzebub combined with the art of illusion and lineage that Prelati originally possessed sublimated into a Noble Phantasm. It is a great magecraft that surpasses even the environment to deceive the very texture of the world. It is even capable of causing a target to hallucinate that Prelati has imprisoned them in a Reality Marble. It is still an illusion, however, and therefore lacks the power of a Reality Marble.

Because it takes the form of a demon that humans envision as their own natural enemy, it inflicts particularly effective damage on humans.

Textbook of the Sunken Spiral Castle: Prelati's Spellbook (unusable)

Rank: EX; Classification: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: 1-99; Maximum Capture: 1,000 people

The result of Prelati utilizing magecraft while dispelling their own rationality with drugs Prelati compounded themselves. Against astronomical odds, it ended up linked to a place one must not link to, Prelati inscribed the truth of it in a blank bible that was a Mystic Code and sealed the link itself. Prelati was therefore incapable of reproducing it, and entrusted the spellbook capable of opening the one and only link to a knight who was their sworn friend. Prelati can never use the Noble Phantasm unless the knight returns it on the spiritual level, but will the day of their reunion ever come?

CLASS

Berserker

Master: Flat Escardos

True Name: Jack the Ripper

Gender: Varies based on transformation

Height
Weight: Varies based on transformation

Alignment: Neutral Evil

STR All except Noble Phantasm tuned by transformation —

M.E All except Noble Phantasm tuned by transformation —

END All except Noble Phantasm tuned by transformation —

LCK All except Noble Phantasm tuned by transformation —

AGI All except Noble Phantasm tuned by transformation —

NP  **B**



Personal Skills

Thousand Faces: A

The ability to transform oneself into any human occupation, animal or object that has been presented as the true identity of Jack the Ripper, and to make use of any skills the target possesses, weakened to rank E.

Walker of Foggy Nights: B

An altered form of the skill Murder on a Foggy Night, which Jack would possess if manifested as another Class. Grants an equal rank of Block Presence as long as it is night.

Class Skills

Mad Enhancement: —

Because Jack's fundamental attribute is madness, an inversion occurred and this skill was sealed. That seal, however, is extremely unstable.

Noble Phantasm

Evil Fog Perishes With the London Dawn: From Hell

Rank: A+-E-; Classification: Anti-Personnel Noble Phantasm; Range: 1-80; Persons Affected: —

Based on the theory that Jack the Ripper was a demon, this Noble Phantasm transforms Jack into a demon in the sense of a phantasmal species. Because it is rooted in the latent fear and unease of nearby people, its power changes in proportion to the population density within a radius of 5 km. In a deserted wasteland, its strength is only equal to that of a large beast of prey. In an urban area, it displays power equivalent to that of a martial Servant.

That Is Not Worth the End of Tragedy: Natural Born Killers

Rank: B; Classification: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: —; Maximum Supplement: —

A Noble Phantasm based on the theory that Jack the Ripper was a group. Enables the creation of multiple bodies according to the Master's magical energy. The last remaining body automatically becomes the main body. It can also be said that every body is the main one. The maximum number depends on the quantity of the Master's magical energy. The number of bodies decreases in proportion to the strength of the entity transformed into.

Afterword

(Contains major spoilers for the main story; reading after finishing the book is recommended)

Me: “You know how I said I’d wrap things up in five books? That was a lie.”

Nasu: “I knew it.”

Sanda: “I just wonder how you didn’t realize back in book three.”

And so, I’m terribly sorry... As a result of my wanting to write fleshed-out episodes for all the factions, instead of just the main three, and also as a result of my playing the seven chapters and final chapter of Fate/GO, the plot has gotten considerably longer... When this volume only got up to the halfway point of what I was supposed to cover in volume four, I went, “Huh? I’ve filled up a whole book’s worth?” and ended up in the predicament of putting preview scene from the end of the last volume in the endgame. My lack of foresight and the weakness of my mind, which gave in to the desire to write the Jack and Haruri factions as fully as Ayaka and co. instead of having them exit early, are the cause. So, while I sincerely apologize to the people who just thought, “But I bought it because it was supposed to end in five volumes!” I would appreciate it if you would bear with me for a few more books...!

Now, to the people who have read to the end: I hope you now understand why I waited until after clearing FGO chapter 7 to write. Yes... it’s about “her.” “She’s” been there since the plotting stage. Some time has passed since, one day, Nasu-san told me, “Oh yes, she’s going to appear in FGO fused with ____, so take care,” but I wanted to actually see “her” in action.

“Oh... I’d heard that she’s ‘a horrible being who doesn’t understand the human heart,’ so I was thinking of making her as kind of a minor hysteric, but she turned out to be such a good character, even if she is fused with _____. Can I really kill her off quickly? No, I can’t!”

With something like that, I started revising characters and ended up adding a lot of plot as a result. Hehehe. Still, since being charmed by her qualities as a character and raising her to be strong in-game, I’ve gotten fired up all over again.

Nasu: “Her raw personality, not fused with anyone? Add Tōsaka Rin and Luviagelita, divided by two and subtract most of the humanity. See? Simple, right?”

Me: “You. Say that. So. Casually.”

With new anime, FGO, Extra and more, the Fate series continues to produce new works.

Fate/strange Fake 4

That provides a strong impetus to a spin-off author like me.

I enjoy the tear- and laugh-filled stories of the UBW anime, FGO and the Extra games. At the same time, while I have nothing to do with the games and so on, to me and Sanda-san in our positions as spin-off authors, they're occasions for nervousness and heavy breathing. "____-san tossed a new setting detail into the script this time! And it's interesting, so I can't complain!"

Sanda: "SN Caster's Master was a middle-aged man of medium build! This Atrum guy's an oil baron, damn it!"

Me: "Damn it! The setting! Bring me the setting! If this is how it's going to be, I'll make a real baccano out of it!"

Sanda: "It's here, Narita! Ready-made details that I'm sure even Nasu-san's forgotten about!"

Me: "Oh, well done!"

In that spirit, we spent our days making progress with our work while fussing and occasionally conspiring with Mashin-san of Himuro no tenchi. Reconciling with the setting was hard work, but genuinely worth doing.

Regarding well-known modern mages, they may no longer be mages in the TYPE-MOON world due to the concealment of Mystery, so don't let what Dumas says confuse you... Saint-Germain? Ha ha ha (deception).

By the way, I suspect the phrase "Wallachian Night" in this volume may have caused some people who follow other TYPE-MOON works to think, "Huh?" Some may have already been confused about the phrase "Twenty-Seven Ancestors" in previous volumes.

That concerns one of the parts that makes Fake "a completely different world even though the outcome is the same as SN," so I would be delighted if you would keep an eye on future developments in the Fate world.

About Fake Caster's episodes and other characters: I generally consult biographies and reference books. When there is a discrepancy between those many sources and this text, I would appreciate it if you would decide that I've exaggerated the story and laugh it off...!

Thanks:

My editor, Anan-san, who I gave a lot of trouble with deadlines again this time, and everyone in the editorial department; all the Fate-related people, beginning with Higashide Yūichirō-san, Sakurai Hikaru-san, Urobuchi Gen-san, Mashin Eiichirō-san, Minase Hazuchi-san, and Hoshizora Meteo-san; Team Barrel Roll, who did part of the Servant background research for me; and Sanda Makoto-san, who, in addition to providing editorial oversight for magecraft, El-Melloi II's lines, etc., gave me a wonderful endorsement for the wrapper:

(Contains major spoilers for the main story; reading after finishing the book is recommended)

Thank you very much!

Morii Shizuki-san, who has found time in her busy schedule to produce wonderful illustrations and, most importantly, Nasu Kinoko-san, who created Fate and provided me with editorial oversight, along with everyone at TYPE-MOON, everyone on the Fate/Grand Order staff, who lifted my imagination with their wonderful production and story... and all the readers who picked up this book and made it this far:

Thank you very much!

March 2017, “Once this crunch is over, I’m going to play Horizon and Zelda...”

Narita Ryōgo