

Fate strange Fake

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Fast Forward



ノーランド・リーヴ



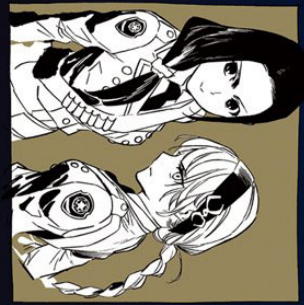
シオン・ウツノガワ



アキサンポウ・テヅマ



ヴェラ・レヴレット



スノーランド市警察
クイン・カレン・イン
二十六人の怪物



シャルル・ダイエ



マリテ・レヴレット



ギルガメッシュ



テイネの部下



ティネ・チェル



ドラッグストアの店員



タカ・サイトウ



ハン・サッバーハ



アルブラ



リチャードI世



ライト・エスカルデス



ロード・エルクローム



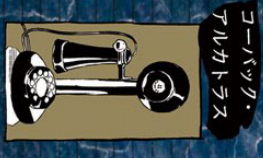
マナガル



ログク



キョウテ・ゼルク



コーバツク
アルカトラス

魔術協会・時計塔



ヒツポリエツ



テルゲツス



燃熱なる狂信者



狼狽



ハズデイロット・コーデリオン



ソグ



エルキプタ



イシユガル(イリテ)



ウキツチヤ



ランシエスカ



ハルリ・ボルザー



ジエスター・カルトワール



レテア



ハーサーカー



サノジェルマン



ペイルライダー



緑丘夫妻



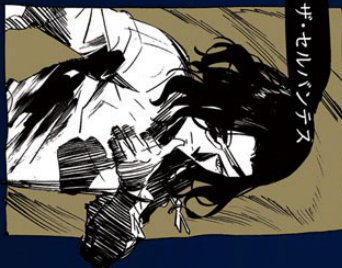
緑丘椿



テルミオ・セルバンテス

聖堂教会

ハンサ・セルバンテス



カルテット

Fate/Strange Fake

Volume 5

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Fate strange Fake

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Fate Strange Fake

フェイト / ストレンジ フェイク

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Intro

“ _ ”

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Summer 1842, On the Mediterranean Sea.

Gentle waves pressed against each other in the blazing sunlight.

A ship split and scattered their gleam as it advanced across the water's surface.

Although it could hardly be called luxurious, the sailing vessel had a certain elegance and strength about it. On board, a man spoke.

“... What's that island over there?”

The man was gazing at the silhouette of an island. Although it was beautifully formed, tracing a gentle curve, it was a barren expanse of yellow-brown rock mingled with traces of pale green.

“Oh, that place. . . . There's nothing on it, mister. Just a desert island.”

“Oh?” The man responded to the answer of a nearby crewman with interest. “No one lives there? I see something that looks like a building.”

“What? Oh. . . . Well, I don't know about that. Never taken the trouble to stop there. . . . But you're right. I wonder what it is.”

The crewman returned to his work with a quizzical look. In his place, a man approached holding a cup.

“What is it, brother? You fallen for that island or something?”

He was a well-dressed and well-built man with gentle features, but his eyes seemed to flicker with the light of a solemn intelligence.

“But you know you shouldn't fall for islands or oceans? They're scary women—a fright when they're angry, and ready to leave you penniless if they get half the chance. Well, I guess they could be men.”

The man shrugged. The man who had first been staring at the island shook his head.

“... The day we met it was 'my friend,' then 'my dearest friend' on the ship out. Now, on the return voyage, you're calling me 'brother,' Prince? If anyone heard you, I'd be stoned for *lèse-majesté*.”

“Nonsense. If I care for a man more than for any friend, but not as a lover, then I have no choice but to treat him as my own flesh and blood.”

The man who had been called “Prince” took a gulp of the liquid in his cup and flashed a grin.

“Besides, you never bothered with that kind of formal courtesy in the first place.”

“Well, we could converse a bit more attractively in prose. Want to do this by letter?”

“It's not me that people truly pay respect to; it's people like you. . . . People who give others joy. I, at least, cannot give people as much joy as your romantic play *L'Alchimiste* or your novel

Le Chevalier d'Harmental. It was you who accomplished that—none other than Alexandre Dumas. Your reputation will never suffer as a brother to the former emperor's nephew.”

The man who had just been so excessively praised—Alexandre Dumas—smiled wryly at the man in front of him and shook his head.

“I'll be damned. To think that the illustrious nephew of His Imperial Majesty Napoléon Bonaparte would sing my praises like that. I'm grateful, but I'd like to avoid a life under house arrest on that island.”

The man Dumas was addressing—Napoléon Joseph Charles Paul Bonaparte—smiled cheerfully in time with the rocking of the boat.

He was the nephew of Emperor Napoléon I of France and the cousin of Napoléon III. Because his father Jérôme had been King of Westphalia, the 19-year-old was called either “Prince” or “Plon-Plon”—his nickname.

He had become acquainted with Dumas—who was already a bestselling author at the time—when Dumas traveled to Italy, and at Jérôme's recommendation, they had gone on to Elba together. They had enjoyed themselves hunting on the island where Joseph's uncle Napoléon I had once been exiled and were currently being rocked by the ship bearing them back from it.

“By the way, brother . . .” Joseph turned a winning smile on Dumas, more than 20 years his senior. “Do you hold a grudge against my uncle?”

Dumas answered with a shrug.

“Ha ha! What could I hold against the great Napoléon, Emperor of France?”

“I hear my uncle treated your father awfully coldly. And that he even refused your mother's requests for a pension.”

“Drop it—it's over and done with. Well, I did live poor a long time because of that, and my mum had a rough time of it, too. I think I'd be within my rights to sock him one for her, but . . .”

After a short pause for thought, Dumas continued slowly while gazing at the island.

“I've never told you . . . about the time I met your uncle and had a talk with him, have I?”

“First I've heard of it.”

“It happened when I was barely 13. He'd come for a victory parade, and I went to get a look at him.”

He paused at that point and the ship tilted sharply.

“With a pistol hidden in my breast pocket.”

“ . . .”

That sentence, spoken in the break between waves, carried an impact like a scene in a play.

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Joseph, however, listened to it in silence.

“I’d planned on challenging him to a duel. To throw my glove at his carriage. It was His Imperial Majesty who insulted my old man and my mum first—that ought to give me the right to choose the weapons.”

“But my uncle didn’t die there, and the great author is right here, alive and well.”

“Yeah. I walked up while everyone around me was shouting ‘vive l’empereur.’ I must have looked like a ghost. I caught a glimpse of a pale face through a gap in the carriage. He was just a little man worn out from battle. It was simple—all I had to do was hurl my glove at him in place of a challenge. Once I did it, I was sure he’d order the soldiers all around him to shoot me or chase me off. But that would be fleeing from our duel. He deserved to have the townspeople mock him as the emperor who ran from a duel with a kid! . . . A moment later, the poor brat, drunk on those thoughts sicklier than the emperor’s face, pulled out his glove. And what do you think he did with it?”

Dumas recited his past rhythmically, in time with the rocking of the ship, and in a clear, resonant voice, like an actor delivering his lines.

“. . . The answer is that he waved it. He raised the glove he’d meant to throw high above his head and before he knew it, he was shouting ‘vive l’empereur’ with the rest of the crowd. Yes, Prince. Your uncle was a hero, but he was also hated by a lot of people. I’m sure there were any number of people apart from me who wanted to hurl a glove at him. I bet there was a crowd of people who came wanting to just put a bullet into his carriage and not bother with dueling, too. But every last one of those people showered the pale, worn-out man with cheers. I don’t know what made them do it, but the Emperor was the people’s dream. He was their idol. Once I realized that, I couldn’t go through with it. It’s a fine soldier who can coolly point a gun at a man he admires, but I’m no soldier. It’s because he made me realize that that I now fight with a pen in my hand instead of a gun.”

Bringing the long story he had begun gravely to a close with a lighthearted tone, Dumas winked and grinned at his friend more than 20 years his junior.

“Does it come off alright when I tell it like that, Prince?”

“Was that one of your inventions, brother?”

“Who knows? But if someone wants to make it that way, they’ll make it that way whether I affirm it or deny it. The truth dims in the face of an amusing lie. Put the other way round, even if you’re stuck with the awful meat called ‘truth,’ which no amount of boiling or grilling will make fit to eat, you can still make it a bit more palatable by letting it marinate in history for a few years and seasoning it with a sprinkle of lies.”

Dumas spoke far more cheerfully than he had when relating his own past. Joseph was exas-

perated but continued to press him.

“But now that I’ve heard this much, brother, I’d like to know what the meat really is.”

“In this case, the ‘truth’ is that, well . . . I’m not carrying a grudge against Napoléon I or his bloodline anymore. When I add stories like that one just now to it, it hardly matters if they’re truth or fiction, does it?”

“I see. Then to you, even a desert island is an ingredient worth dining on. Still, out of all the desert islands out there, what makes you so interested in just that one? Do you have some kind of history with it, by any chance?” Joseph asked with a raucous laugh.

“It’s a hunch,” Dumas shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

“A hunch, huh? I suppose that counts for a lot in your line of work.”

“It’s an island I spotted while sailing with a relative of His Imperial Majesty. I was thinking that I might as well make it famous in memory of our meeting.”

At that, the nephew of the man who had been emperor of France turned to the island and, giddy as a child, spoke in a voice bursting with enthusiasm.

“Yes, I think there’s something about that island myself. A few years back, I even heard rumors of a person who bears the same name. Just between us . . . the hidden side of the church even made some strange moves.”

“The . . . hidden side of the church?”

“Oh, forget about that. The church wouldn’t even bare all its secrets to my father, and he was a king. Anyway, there have been rumors of treasure and miracle stories about that island for a long time now. City children, fishermen, adventurers, religionists—because there’s nothing on that island, all sorts of people have been able to project whatever dreams they want to see onto it. But almost no one actually tries to search it, for fear of finding that there’s really nothing there.”

“Hey now, are you trying to steal my thunder? Telling a story about that island is my job. Just tell me what its name is, brother.”

Joseph, pleased at being called “brother” back, proclaimed the name of the island, his eyes shining with anticipation for the novel Dumas would write about it.

“That island is called Montecristo! An island of possibilities that contains everything because it has nothing.”

Bridge

“Rondo of the Outsiders, Part 1”

Bridge

Rondo of the Outsiders

“And in our next story, the string of sudden deaths yesterday of senators and industry leaders due to accidents and illness is causing chaos in share prices on the New York Stock Exchange...”

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Should what happened in Snowfield be called an “ordeal” or not?

The more accurately someone had been observing events, the more they inclined toward “not.”

That was because that series of incidents, unprecedented in the history of the city, and perhaps even of the whole United States—the Holy Grail War—had been deliberately engineered.

The city of Snowfield itself was a test site created on American soil for the ritual—abandoning the site and starting over had been part of the plan from the beginning.

But that was only the masterminds’ point of view.

As far as ordinary people with no knowledge of mystical matters were concerned, all of that was irrelevant.

As far as the ordinary townspeople with no knowledge of the reasons behind it all were concerned, it was a calamity that had descended on them without warning.

The Holy Grail War.

An exclusive ritual known only to a few, even among mages.

With Heroic Spirits whose beings were engraved into the world’s “throne” as their familiars, mages would battle each other with every fiber of their beings over an omnipotent wish-granting device—a genuine foothold on the path to the Root.

It was said that it had begun with other intentions, but the third Holy Grail War, held more than half a century earlier, had seen countless factions scheming beneath its surface. Then, in the fourth Holy Grail War, held over a decade prior, the loss of one of the Lords of the Clock Tower had drawn the attention of a very small group of mages who had made it past efforts to suppress the information.

Of course, in the grand scheme of things, it was considered “a dubious ritual performed in the Far East.” What was being held in America, however, was beginning to show itself as far too strange and twisted even for a Holy Grail War.

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To begin with, there was the fact that the number of Heroic Spirits summoned was too large.

The Holy Grail War was ordinarily fought by seven Servants, and while this one had appeared to conform to those numbers at first...from about the time that a Heroic Spirit seemingly of the Saber Class had appeared before the cameras of a local TV station and declared his intention to make reparations for a demolished theatre, a major “divergence” from the original Grail Wars had begun.

A ritual of magecraft ought, properly speaking, to be conducted in secrecy.

To anyone who dealt in magecraft, or Mystery in general, that principle was absolute. And yet this fake Holy Grail War had barely begun before it was broken.

Almost as if to say that that had been the masterminds’ intention all along.

There was the single combat between Archer and Lancer in the desert.

The clash of their Noble Phantasms had turned part of the desert to glass and left a massive crater in its wake. Officially, it was declared a gas pipeline explosion.

Then there was Assassin’s assault on the police station, seemingly aimed at Saber, who was being held there.

A hematophage who seemed to be Assassin’s Master had forced his way into the station amid the chaos and Hansa Cervantes, who the Holy Church had dispatched to oversee the Grail War, had gotten dragged into the brawl. Officially, it was declared a terrorist attack on the police station.

It was followed by an attack on Archer and his Master, who had taken up a position in the Crystal Palace hotel, which shattered every window in the vicinity and was explained away as the work of an unforeseen tornado.

Then two powerful Servants, as well as something else, had caused widespread destruction centered on a meat processing plant in a corner of the factory district—a mage’s workshop with the backing of the Scladio Family.

The devastation was still being kept from the eyes of the public by an illusion cast over a wide area, most likely by a Caster Class Servant.

In just a few days, severe distortions were already forming in the unfolding ritual.

A mystic ritual in the form of a battle to the death between mages and their familiars—and no ordinary familiars, but Heroic Spirits, embodiments of Mystery itself.

No matter how carefully the groundwork for that ritual had been laid, in the face of a string of irregularities on a scale that threatened to annihilate the city, concealment was nearing its limit.

But far from coming to a conclusion, the situation had begun to show signs of irreversible expansion.

With complete disregard for all preceding atmospheric conditions, a massive hurricane had formed on the west coast.

In an area centered on Washington D.C., key figures in business, politics and information were dropping dead one after another.

Those who knew what was happening behind the scenes realized that these disasters were not natural.

They realized that a great tide had risen in the city of Snowfield and that the world was being inexorably dragged into its shadowy depths.

If one were to deem this an ordeal bestowed by some higher power...then it would be like being flung into an endless labyrinth in which it was impossible to see what lay even an inch ahead, let alone the finish line.

Because they had yet to realize that they were in a labyrinth at all.

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A private chat on a certain social network:

Flue: “Well, that’s about the size of it... Let me just give you my conclusions.

“Snowfield is dangerous.

“To be honest, I want to get out as soon as I can.

“I mean, this is nothing like I was told.

“Course, no one mixed up in magecraft would ever tell the truth unless they’re forced to, but even taking that into account, it’s still crazy.

“The core of the ritual’s probably based on the one in Fuyuki, but its scale and its foundation have gone completely out of whack.

“First off, the Ghostliners.

“You veterans call ‘em Servants. You said seven of them fought when it was in Fuyuki, right?

“Well, I tried checking with my astrology, and this is on a whole other level. There’s nearly twice as many things I wouldn’t want to mess with—more than twice as many, going by some

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disturbances in the stars that I can't tell if they're Servants or what. I was watching the front of the hospital last night. First there was a three-headed dog, then two hundred of what looked like phantasms showed up out of nowhere and went at it with a Heroic Spirit I'd be scared to even stare at too hard. After that the magical energy got too disturbed for me to observe anything properly.

"You better not tell me that was Cerberus and a bunch of demons. Either way, things that don't belong on this side of the world are swaggering down the main street of an American city. If this is a dream, I want to wake up. It'd take a pretty childish mage to send me a dream like this.

"Just explaining what happened after that is a pain.

"I've attached an encrypted pseudo-video recording. Use magecraft to decompress it on your end.

"But if you think it's a hoax I cooked up, that's all I've got.

"I won't get mad if you're suspicious.

"If I were in your shoes, I'd be demanding my money back and sending a curse or two right about now.

"Of course, you're not like me, so maybe you can see it a different way, Mr. Scourge of Mage Society."

El-Melloi II: "That nickname was uncalled for."

El-Melloi II: "Anyway, thank you for your report. It sounds like the situation is getting worse than I thought."

Flue: "You can say that again. I thought that crater in the desert was the worst it could get, but it's been shooting past that and dragging the whole city down to a new low twice a day."

Flue: "Anyway, what's the deal with there being too many Heroic Spirits?"

Flue: "The land here is pretty good for leylines, but from what I hear, it still doesn't measure up to Fuyuki. It doesn't make sense that more Heroic Spirits than usual got summoned in spite of that."

El-Melloi II: "They're probably priming the pump."

Flue: "Yeah?"

El-Melloi II: "The first several Heroic Spirits summoned were used as a catalyst to intentionally disturb the leylines and temporarily draw in magical energy from elsewhere in the Ameri-

cas. It's a drastic measure, like inflicting damage on the body in order to stimulate an immunity."

Flue: "So, in order to summon seven Ghostliners, they summoned and sacrificed another six? They used those crazy Ghostliners as a catalyst like you'd use chicken blood? Isn't that a bit too out there to believe?"

El-Melloi II: "In order to push seven pendulums to the fore, they shoved...probably five or six pendulums into them from behind. Ordinarily, that would only move an equal number of pendulums, like a Newton's cradle, but the supervisors who shaped the land simply have to add enough power to push the seventh pendulum. Now that the first set of Heroic Spirits have served their purpose, they will probably be absorbed into the land over time in order to preserve the balance."

Flue: "That's not a pretty thought. I only half believed what you told me, but I bet that guy in the shiny gold armor really is the Akkadian King of Heroes. The instant I took a look at his star through a far-seeing spell, my head spun and I thought it was going to scramble my brains. They must be out of their minds if they're using up someone like that as disposable kindling—not even material for the Grail."

El-Melloi II: "Exactly. It's hardly what you'd call a sane idea, regardless of whether you're talking about mages or about people who have nothing to do Mystery. Such methods speak to a group with disdain for Mystery as such. That's who you ought be calling a 'scourge.'"

Flue: "Are you really one to talk when you're analyzing Mystery over instant messages, even if they are private?"

El-Melloi II: "At present, fewer mages devote their efforts to spiriton hacking than to communication via magecraft. Any method carries risks, but given the limits of my abilities, this is probably the safer option. Even if it is intercepted and read, any ordinary person will assume it's some kind of joke and there's no need to hide it from anyone who's already on our side. In fact, the more serious any proper mage is about concealing Mystery, the harder they'll work to erase those ridiculous reports for us."

Flue: "Would any mage really care about talk like that?"

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El-Melloi II: “Well, that will change in a few more years. The handheld devices called ‘smart phones’ that have begun to appear on the market recently will probably become common enough to have an influence even on mage society. As the danger of Mystery being recorded increases, methods of secrecy will have to change. It could end up being easier to seed dummy stories and label everything fake news. That’s all the more reason I want to avoid a needlessly large-scale ritual like this creating holes.”

Flue: “You talk as much as always. Or I guess ‘type’ in this case. I can’t believe you can run off a wall of text like that in under a minute. You’re not working some kind of magecraft I can’t catch in with all those letters, are you?”

El-Melloi II: “You give me too much credit. The games I play for fun sometimes require exchanging condensed information quickly.”

El-Melloi II: “Besides, I could never incorporate a concealed formula of such a high level that you wouldn’t notice. Still, even online and in writing, the way you talk doesn’t change.”

Flue: “I’m not used to it. And using your real name as a screen name is actually a reference issue. It’d suck to slip up and poison yourself with your own curses.”

Flue: “Well, anyway, I’m going to poke around here a little more and then get out when the going gets rough. Everyone who tries to leave gets hit with some weird curse and comes back under mind control, but I’ll do a reading to find wherever the curse is thinnest.”

El-Melloi II: “Sorry. I’m truly grateful that you were already in the city.”

El-Melloi II: “I managed to make contact with one of the masterminds—the chief of police—and form a temporary alliance, but I was only able to get partial information out of him. Based on what he told me, it’s likely that he hasn’t been informed of everything that’s going on either. That’s what makes your objective information so helpful.”

Flue: “Oh, I just came ‘cause I thought there might be some nice jobs on offer. A magecraft-using mercenary has to be quick on the draw if he wants to keep himself fed. Putting you in my debt ended up being the most profitable choice. You’re a real lifesaver.”

Flue: “...Just asking, but there won’t be any other Lords heading out here, will there?”

El-Melloi II: “That won’t happen. Old Rufeus of the School of Spiritualism is currently away from the Clock Tower on business, but he isn’t the type to visit the scene in person. Even if

something did go wrong over there, he would only shrug that ‘matters have merely reached their natural conclusion.’ Although he does appear to take some interest in Ghostliners.”

Flue: “Good. It’s enough to know that there won’t be any more dangerous people showing up in this town. As it is, it’s so full of people in my line of work that I’ve got to be careful not to tip my hand.”

Flue: “Speaking of which, one of my colleagues who’s made a bit of a name for himself in Asia is apparently participating as a Master. Well, he’s still a rookie compared to the real experts... but he makes up for what he lacks in magical energy with survival skills you wouldn’t believe. The guy’s like some kind of puppet. His name’s Sigma. You’d better warn your little student to steer clear of him.”

El-Melloi II: “Thank you for the warning.”

El-Melloi II: “I already wish that I’d warned Flat more about how dangerous the Holy Grail War can be.”

Flue: “That stings a little, considering I came here hoping to get paid.”

El-Melloi II: “My apologies. I meant no offense.”

Flue: “I know, Your Lordship.”

Flue: “Well, I’ve got a situation I need to deal with here, so I’ll be signing off now.”

Flue: “I got a weird bit of guidance from the stars earlier. I included it in my report.”

Flue: “I’ll be in touch if I find anything out, so remember to add a little extra to my payment.”

—Flue has logged out.

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Snowfield City Hall

“Now... Boasting’s all well and good, but things are getting out of hand.”

Snowfield’s main street was enclosed in a ward to clear the area of people and surging with limitless magical energy.

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A lone man inside city hall shrugged as he surveyed the street, which was the center of Snowfield and contained both the city hospital and the police station.

The man, who until a moment before, had been exchanging words with his “client,” Lord El-Melloi II, a Lord of the Clock Tower, in a private online chat room, silently looked up at the stars beyond the window.

Still, Mr. El-Melloi seemed pretty pissed off.

It was true that he had been unable to detect a curse or anything else expected of a maze in amid the strings of letters in the chat room. He had, however, been able to sense a seething anger in the man called El-Melloi II.

Not about the Mystery of magecraft being toyed with. Maybe about the place he called his own being defiled?

Honestly; he acts nothing like a mage, but he goes around revealing other people's magecraft. He's probably already got a way to dismantle this messed up ritual worked out in his head.

“I wouldn't be scared to go toe-to-toe with him in magecraft, but I'd never want to go up against him as a mage. I guess that over-specialization is what makes him one of the Clock Tower's top 12.”

The solidly built man with flowing beard lightly ran his fingers over a keffiyeh that seemed out of place in the heart of the city, far from the desert, and dropped his gaze to the deserted main street out the window of an empty room of City Hall.

“Well, I'd better act like a scout while I can still see the stars from this city.”

His name was Flueger.

He was a magecraft-using mercenary and astrologer labeled as a “teacher-killer.”

He had caught wind of this Holy Grail War and come less for direct monetary gain than to build a wider network of connections by promoting himself to a wide range of mages. Once he had learned that the Scladio Family, infamous even among dabblers in magecraft, was involved, however, he had contented himself with observing events. It was then that he had been contacted by a familiar Lord from the Clock Tower and immediately accepted his request to investigate.

“It's true the stars were mixed and I knew it would be high-risk-high-reward, but can the reward really be high enough?”

Flueger sighed, chuckled that it was too late to withdraw, then pulled several knives from a pocket and tossed them into the air.

“Lead me.”

No sooner had the knives come to a uniform standstill, tracing arcs in the air, than they began to actively stab themselves into the floor around Flueger as if each had a will of its own.

Despite the stone tiles, the dagger blades sank half their length into the floor.

Flueger slammed his fist into the center of the magic circle drawn by their points and cycled his magical energy between the earth and sky.

“Lead me, now.”

The daggers slid into motion like shark fins gliding through the floor and then rose, defying gravity to float around Flueger once more. Their points wavered like compass needles and then began to come to a halt, each pointing in a different direction.

A few of the daggers, however, continued to spin wildly, like compass needles in a disturbed magnetic field, and showed no sign of stopping.

“Has the number of Heroic Spirits gone down? No...”

Flueger had just performed magecraft to view the flow of fate through astrology in order to determine the direction and distance of Heroic Spirits, which did not naturally belong in this world.

If a Heroic Spirit had been eliminated, its corresponding dagger should have simply fallen to the floor. And yet, several of the daggers continued to float in the air, spinning energetically, as if to deliver the contradictory report that Heroic Spirits existed, but were nowhere.

“...Give me a break. I’m just a scout—I’m not going to intrude on the workings of fate, and solving mysteries is that Clock Tower professor’s specialty. Still...”

He looked out the window again. The rays of sunlight that had begun to illuminate the street revealed the marks of fresh destruction.

“What happened here after that?”

It was as if a disaster had struck the street and nowhere else. Bits of the hospital fence and the wreckage of parked cars littered the torn-up asphalt. The pipes must have been damaged, because jets of water were gushing from several deep rents in the ground.

You could say that it wasn’t much damage compared to the crater in the desert, but it was obvious that the destruction caused in the center of the populated city would impact the minds of its residents more deeply than the wasteland calamity. In fact, they would likely connect it to the explosion in the desert and to the other mysterious phenomena.

The practitioner of magecraft employed as Lord El-Melloi II’s scout, however, was focused on a different point.

He was focused on the fact that, in that wreckage where a fierce battle had almost certainly been fought, not a single dead body or drop of blood remained—as if the existence of life itself had been swept away.

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The Clock Tower

“Are you alright, master?”

“Yes, nothing’s the matter.”

Lord El-Melloi II answered his apprentice managing to furrow his brow and look exhausted at the same time.

His apprentice, recognizing that he was only putting up a front and feeling that she ought to do something to ease her teacher’s distress, voiced a suggestion.

“Have you considered contacting Ms. Tōsaka? She’s been through a Holy Grail War, so she might know some way for Flat to survive.”

“It won’t help. I can advise him from experience myself, and now that the War has changed so much, her information, coming from a deep involvement with Fuyuki, could actually prove detrimental.”

“..”

“Besides, if I told that lady about this, she might very well go storming off to America. I haven’t told Svin or the other alumni either. I can’t knowingly send my students into danger, even if they have graduated.”

El-Melloi II’s hand clutched a cellular phone in place of one of his trademark cigars. He placed several calls while speaking with his apprentice, but the person he was calling showed no sign of picking up.

He pictured the face of the person he was calling—the longest-attending of his students who had yet to graduate, Flat Escardos—as he grumbled at the phone which had gotten no answer in hours.

“That idiot... If it turns out that he’s just sleeping in, I really will never forgive him.”

Despite his words, his tone said that he hoped fervently for that to be the case.

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“And in our next story, the hurricane that suddenly developed off the west coast of the United States has been given a name not from the usual set list due to its unprecedented behavior..”

Chapter 14

“Gold and Lions I”

Chapter 14

Gold and Lions I

Several Hours Earlier

Main Street, near Snowfield Central Hospital

The sight was like a fantasy.

Not, however, in the sense of a delightful paradise. It was fantastical in the sense of a battle between gods or a vision of Hell.

Berserker, Jack the Ripper, had transformed into more than two hundred demons.

Their overwhelming domination, which had slaughtered the three-headed demon dog that had belonged to the “true” Archer, who called himself Alkeides, and had seemed poised to overwhelm the Heroic Spirit as well... When that power to become a demon—the Spirit Origin called a Noble Phantasm—had been completely stolen by Alkeides’ Noble Phantasm “Reincarnation Pandora: Usurper of Heavenly Winds.”

A Noble Phantasm that stole Noble Phantasms.

Its power defied reason. With it, Alkeides had acquired grotesque strength.

He kicked Jack aside and raised his weapon to slaughter the police officers who stood in his way.

But just then, the other Archer—the first of all heroes, clad in golden armor—appeared.

The further arrival of Saber, his red-streaked blond hair fluttering, and his party sent the situation spiraling into even greater confusion.

“Well, this is a surprise. Can these ‘Servants’ even be fiends of the pit?” Saber—Richard I, “the Lionheart”—asked the dark-haired young man behind him. The situation was obviously abnormal and filled with countless sudden deaths if he took even one false step, but Saber was unfazed, as if to say that this was where he belonged.

The dark-haired young man—Sigma, the self-proclaimed Master of “Lancer Chaplin”—who was oblivious to the prevailing mood in a different sense from Saber, replied matter-of-factly.

“I’ve been told that Anti-Heroes may have appeared in the Fuyuki Holy Grail War as well. According to my employer, beings like that are sometimes summoned when the conditions are right.”

“I see. Well, it is capable of summoning fairies, after all. If a banshee or something had turned up, I’d have liked to take a look at it for old times’ sake, but it appears this isn’t an opponent I

can afford to sit back and watch.”

Saber surveyed the Heroic Spirit who had taken on a demonic appearance, and then glanced upward.

“The same goes for the gaudy one up there.”

Above them stood a man clad in golden armor who exuded a powerful aura.

“Know your place, mongrel,” the Heroic Spirit looking down from atop the church’s belfry addressed Saber with an air of displeasure. “Who granted you permission to look up at me?”

Arrogance.

If one were to put a word to his manner of speech, that would be the natural choice.

Saber, however, immediately realized that it was not hubris. He was able to understand that the man was saying that he was nevertheless worthy of being granted permission.

The golden Heroic Spirit stood above him.

The demonic bowman stood in front of him.

That flashy fellow is an archer too?

I see. Two archers certainly does mean that this Grail War isn’t normal.

It appeared that, just as the Lancer he had met in the forest had warned him, this Holy Grail War was far from ordinary.

In spite of which, the knowledge he had received from the Grail pertained to a “proper” Holy Grail War. That probably meant something.

But Richard didn’t have time to consider difficult questions at the moment.

The golden Heroic Spirit probably far outclassed him. The strength of his Spirit Origin rivaled that of the beautiful Lancer Richard had met in the forest. He could tell at a glance that he had no chance of winning if they fought head-on.

And then there was the grotesque bowman with demon’s horns sprouting from his head, with whom he had conversed earlier. He could tell that this Heroic Spirit was likewise so powerful that he had no hope.

Richard’s Spirit Origin tensed and insistently warned him of danger. The alarm came from the fragments who were not quite Heroic Spirits and who accompanied Richard due to his Noble Phantasm.

“Do you want to die for nothing? Retreat before it’s too late,” Locksley the assassin, Pierre the bowman, and the other fragments of Spirit Origins continued to cool-headedly sound the alarm.

He could also sense the Spirit Origins of an indifferent-seeming swordsman and a mage who

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merely smiled faintly, but Saber himself was focused on the overwhelmingly mighty opponents standing before him, his eyes shining.

“My heart gave me permission. I doubt I could ever look down on you, but I take you for a storied Heroic Spirit worth looking up at. A king, judging by your manner. It’s not every day I meet someone who merits respect just by standing there. I know my place, and so I give thanks that I was able to be here today.”

“Mongrel. Do you intend to appraise me with such eyes? I have no need of thanks—I have not permitted you anything.”

The golden-armored Heroic Spirit spoke dispassionately, without changing his expression.

“Be gone at once.”

At that, the space behind the Heroic Spirit distorted and countless weapons emerged from holes in the air. When they moved, it was with the intent to kill Saber, who opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

Like arrows loosed from drawn bows, numerous weapons shrouded in magical energy on par with Noble Phantasms fired at the spot where Saber stood.

Sigma must have sensed the danger in advance, because he had already retreated to an alleyway by the church.

Saber, left to stand alone, hesitated for a moment, but then spoke as if he had made sense of the situation.

“When you said, ‘be gone,’ you meant from this world!”

He drew his own sword with a cheerful grin.

“Ha ha! What droll fellow!”

It was a dull-bladed ornamental sword that had adorned the walls of the mansion in the wetlands that Sigma had made his base of operations. But as far as Saber was concerned, having a grip was enough to make it a fine weapon.

The sword flashed for an instant and began swatting the weapons launched from behind the golden Heroic Spirit out of the air.

Even so, it was only able to strike down a few of them—a drop in the bucket compared to the dozens of Noble Phantasms raining down.

The golden Heroic Spirit was apparently convinced that that would suffice and had already turned his attention back to the monstrous Archer. That demonic-looking Archer, however, turned to look at Richard. His expression was indiscernible behind the strange cloth that covered his face.

Richard’s instincts as a Heroic Spirit immediately alerted him that he was being evaluated for some unclear purpose, but he had no time to consider the point. In less than a second, the countless weapons were nearly upon him.



Richard leapt, swinging his sword once again, and danced into the tiny gap left by the several weapons he had knocked aside. He had dodged the onslaught by a hair's breadth, but the weapons struck the ground around him, smashing the asphalt. The torn-up earth became a new threat to Richard, pouring down on the spot where he stood.

Richard, however, was no longer there.

"I see, I see! So, blades as fine as these cause disasters just by sticking in the ground!" Richard called out, moving with incredible swiftness and seizing one of the Noble Phantasms lodged in the ground—a weapon in the shape of a long sword. "What magnificent workmanship! Just holding it makes me feel as if I had an army at my back! I don't just mean the quantity of magical energy it contains; I mean this craftsmanship, this construction, this composition! It's plain to see that even its least decoration is both simple and complete! If each of these arms is the work of the planet, they form both the headwaters and the fertile plains! Hey! Listen! This is marvelous! Are all these other weapons as fine?! And you tossed them down like they were nothing! Where are you maharaja of? Oh, I tell you frankly and with respect: You are magnificent and I envy you!"

Despite having just evaded an attack that, had it struck him, would certainly have proved fatal, Richard's eyes sparkled like a child's. His sudden outburst drew bewildered stares from the police officers, who were doing their best to keep their distance and regroup.

The next words out of Richard's mouth would have seemed like nothing short of suicide to anyone who knew the golden Heroic Spirit.

"Say! Since you have so many... would you mind giving me a few?"

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Inside the church

"How can he smile in a situation like that?"

Snowfield's largest church stood across the street from the hospital. In one corner of it, a woman muttered, drawing in her breath.

"And?" A somber man's voice echoed from behind her. "Judging by your gaze, miss...may I presume that you are that Saber's Master?"

The words of the priest dispatched by the Holy Church to oversee this Holy Grail War,

Hansa Cervantes, caused the blonde woman who had been peering out the window, Ayaka Sajō, to glance briefly in his direction and then shake her head.

“I’m...not a Master.”

“Oh? But I sense a path of magical energy linking you. Aren’t you here in this church to seek sanctuary?”

“...No. I only came because Saber said this would be the safest place nearby.”

Ayaka spoke brusquely, but with the bare minimum of courtesy for the priest’s station.

Hansa was not especially put out and joined her in looking out the window at the street as he continued.

“Good grief. This is supposed to be a shelter. I can’t have people treating it like a watchtower or a trench. Oh well, it’s not a big deal. Using whatever you can is what war’s all about. Especially wars between mages.”

Hansa shifted his attention slightly upward and let out an aggrieved sigh.

“It looks like a Heroic Spirit’s gotten up on the roof. Honestly, what does he think this sacred church is?”

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“I took you for a mere fly, but I see you are a shameless beggar.”

The Heroic Spirit on the church roof appeared to take an interest in Richard for the first time. He turned not just his gaze, but his head to face him.

The golden Heroic Spirit looked down with less anger than pity in his eyes. Richard continued unperturbed.

“I suppose it was rude to ask you to give them to me! I would love to buy them, if I can afford their price!”

Richard persisted in speaking casually to the golden Heroic Spirit.

“But having laid eyes on such treasures, I can’t suppress the feelings they inspire in me! I’d run into battle with as many of them as I can carry if I could! I assume, given your preemptive strike, that we’re already at war, but for such fine pieces, I want to do things properly no matter the circumstances! I’d like to borrow these weapons as I please while we fight! How does that sound to you?”

“You have some nerve to joke like that while laying your hands on them so casually, mongrel!” The golden Archer scowled. “Still, it seems you have eyes for fine workmanship before letting glitter cloud your mind. As a reward, I shall permit you to stain my treasures with your blood. Receive it gladly.”

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By the time he finished speaking, he had already taken action and launched dozens more weapons out of thin air. They rained mercilessly down on Richard, who held both the new sword he had taken and the one he had come with.

They were slightly faster and more numerous than the previous attack.

Richard weaved between the weapons, planting his feet on the chunks of rubble they flung up and using them as stepping stones to leap high into the air.

“Since I’m risking my life for this joke, I’d like another favor from you!”

Then, twirling like an acrobat, he unleashed a weighty series of strikes.

“What I want isn’t blood on your weapons.”

“Oh-ho...”

“It’s to leave just a little scratch on your magnificent armor.”

Evading the oncoming swarm of deadly blows, Richard changed direction in midair.

He completely changed course without a stepping stone of any kind.

Although he must have been under considerable strain, he contorted his body still further, adding the force of his rotation to make his sword reach the golden Heroic Spirit.

Seeing that, the scowling Heroic Spirit drew the sword in his own hand.

“So, you, a mere gladiator, weave magecraft!”

The golden Heroic Spirit parried the nearly-surprise attack and dropped to the roof one level below the belfry, glaring at Richard, who held one of his treasures.

He did not shout angrily or lose his composure; his tone remained one of rebuke for a lack of courtesy.

“No, that wasn’t me.”

Richard judged that he was still unable to so much as bring the golden Heroic Spirit down into his arena and readied his swords again, grinning provocatively up at his opponent.

“It’s a little *joke* my retinue played on you.”

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“...He’s fast.”

The grotesque bowman, Alkeides, kept his distance and observed the new contender’s capabilities with a cool gaze that belied his wild appearance.

His dexterity was probably about on par with the Amazon Rider’s on horseback.

Alkeides could sense no divinity from him, which told him that the Heroic Spirit had been formed as a pure human.

His speed, however, surpassed human limitations and the magical energy that swirled

around him was shrouded in an aura that was neither human nor divine.

He isn't strong enough to make my blood run cold. But purely in terms of speed, he may outmatch me. Depending on his Noble Phantasm, he merits caution.

Alkeides then recalled the power, similar to magical energy, that surged from Saber's body.

It was like...the Naiads that abducted my attendant Hylas...

He was on the verge of dredging up memories of the time he had left the Argonauts from the depths of his Spirit Origin when he was forced to abandon that train of thought.

The police officers around him had gotten back into formation and were showing signs of resuming their assault on him.

"Humph... I must apologize for focusing on other enemies during our confrontation."

"...You have no intention of withdrawing?" One of the officers asked.

Alkeides shook his head.

"Just as you have those you must protect, I have things I must steal. There is no need for us to understand each other. If anyone could find common ground with my intentions, such a villain would also be my enemy."

He would vanquish those who opposed him.

Those who made peace with him he would also destroy.

It sounded unreasonable to the extreme, but Alkeides continued as if to test the officers.

"What I am going to do is slaughter a child unable to comprehend my reasons. Once I have done that, I will have no business with you. Will any of you forsake a child to save your own skins?"

He gripped his bow as he posed the question.

He did not draw the string. He merely gripped it.

Even so, if he were to suddenly swing his bow, casualties would result.

The quality of the Noble Phantasms the police officers held didn't matter.

The Heroic Spirit standing before them was beyond such distinctions.

All of their legs were shaking, but still, in spite of that, they did not flee. They did not even look away.

They were not unafraid. Some of them were holding back tears and chattering teeth. If this had been a normal mission, they would have called a temporary retreat.

But they understood.

If they retreated here, it would be the end.

There would be no heavily armed riot squad or National Guard coming to deal with the vicious criminal. Even if there were, they would never be more capable of facing him than they,

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armed with Noble Phantasms, already were.

They were the best.

They were there because they were the best pawns that the police, as an organization, had to offer.

They couldn't say whether that was a suggestion that their chief had implanted in them or routine that had seeped into them as autosuggestion. They, who were registered as Clan Calatin, had only their chief's assurance.

"You are justice."

Just those words without anything to support them.

But to those who believed them, those words were a spell, or perhaps a blessing, that bound action and fate.

And the one most bound by those words was a young officer who stood on the battlefield despite the loss of his right arm.

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Orlando Reeve, chief of the Snowfield Police Department, was one of the managers—or one might say the masterminds—of the "Fake Holy Grail War."

As far as the ordinary citizens were concerned, one of his subordinates, John Wingard, could have been called the ideal police officer.

When he had been barely old enough to understand what was happening, he had seen his mother's death on TV.

John's father had quickly turned it off to shield his son from that flame-shrouded scene, but that instant of fire had been indelibly engraved in John's mind.

His mother had been a police officer who had received numerous commendations for her achievements. He remembered that his generally unemotional father had told young John about his mother as bedtime stories to stop his crying.

When he thought back on it, it may have been a kind of curse.

Since then, John had been chasing the shadow of the mother he barely remembered.

He hadn't been told that his father was a mage, even by the time he joined the police force.

John was a third son and his oldest brother was to be the next head of the family, so as a mage he had only been regarded as his brother's spare.

His father had apparently concealed his true identity even from John's mother, but it seemed that higher-ups in the United States government, or rather certain departments that dealt with the field of magecraft, had been aware of his existence.

When it came to dealing with Mystery, no nation, no matter how powerful, could help lagging behind the Holy Church and the Mages Association.

It was in that context that John had been summoned to a certain police facility and informed of his origins. His father had apparently already agreed. John had been sold to the state on the condition that his father, who was estranged from the Mages Association, would receive the government's financial backing.

John had been confused, but the instant he actually performed magecraft himself, his skepticism vanished and he had been forced to accept reality.

He had felt fear.

If this power really existed, then just how many cases had it been used to cover up? How many unsolved cases involved magecraft? How many innocent people had been wrongly convicted due to false information?

He could understand the concept of concealing Mystery. He could not, however, understand the concept of sacrificing others to do so.

For mages, it was a matter of course, but John had been raised as an ordinary person. In the midst of his anger at the unreasonable nature of mage society, Orlando Reeve had spoken to him.

"When heretics commit outrages, it takes other heretics to keep them in line."

John, having been headhunted by Orlando and assigned to an unit under his direct command, was transferred to Snowfield, where he learned a shocking truth.

"This city is going to become a battlefield for mages. Now that the government has taken action, there's no way to stop that.

"We could fight the government, but that wouldn't even be recklessness; it would be folly.

"That being the case, our duty is to continue to maintain order while it happens. We need to prove to all mages that here, the border with the world of magecraft is guarded.

"Never forget: if we fail, at worst eight hundred thousand people will be sacrificed."

He did not agree with everything the chief said.

He had even made attempts to get that plan abandoned, sure that no government could be so cruel.

The more he learned about the plan, however, the more he understood that no individual effort could possibly change anything in time. He came to believe that the course the chief proposed was the most rational.

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They would take control of the course of the Holy Grail War and suppress the situation before harm came to ordinary citizens.

John believed that if they could do that, it would stand as proof.

If they had the power to overcome Heroic Spirits, the ultimate familiars, then they would become a major check against mages just by continuing to be there.

John did not understand that the monsters called mages would never have that sort of common sense. To mages, who would treat even their own lives as pawns in order to reach the Origin, a “check” that consisted only of great strength was just a fine subject for observation.

Not having been brought up as a mage, John could not even comprehend the cunning wiles that the Mages Association and the Holy Church, custodians of Mystery in the true sense, employed to spread their roots throughout the world.

And there was one more thing he had not understood.

No matter how spectacular a weapon he had, no matter how he honed his magecraft, mind, and body...there were horrifying monsters out there that would return it all to nothing.

The moment John realized that was the moment that the monster commonly known as a “Dead Apostle” that called itself Jester Karture had taken his right arm.

He had lost his arm completely when it had been “eaten” by the hematophage that called itself a Dead Apostle during the assault on the police station the day before. But because his supporter, Caster—Alexandre Dumas—had provided him with a new prosthetic arm, the chief of police had reluctantly permitted his return to active duty.

He had only been permitted to return as support for the other members of Clan Calatin and not to stand on the front lines...but they had quickly lost the ability to maintain a formation with any distinction between front and rear lines. Half of the nearly thirty police officers armed with Noble Phantasms had sustained injuries and were unable to move normally. It was the most the remaining members could do to maintain any kind of formation at all and they were in no condition to put up a proper fight on their own now that Jack the Ripper had retreated.

They had also not anticipated another Heroic Spirit they had obtained information about in advance, Gilgamesh the King of Heroes, joining the fray.

He was currently engaged in combat with the newly arrived Saber, but the King of Heroes’ fighting style was both bizarre and straightforward. He forced his opponents to surrender their lives through the force of overwhelming quantity. They had heard about his indiscriminate firing of Noble Phantasms, but now that they actually saw it, they could do nothing but dumbly let the scene burn itself into their eyes.

John even wondered for a moment if they were only confronting the grotesque bowman in order to avoid facing the reality of the King of Heroes' power, but the Heroic Spirit in front of them was no less dangerous, so he abandoned the comparison as meaningless.

"What I am going to do is slaughter a child unable to comprehend my reasons. Once I have done that, I will have no business with you. Will any of you forsake a child to save your own skin?" The bowman before them asked solemnly.

They had no obligation to answer him...but John opened his mouth before he knew what he was doing.

"If there were, I wouldn't laugh and I wouldn't be disappointed, either. But that doesn't mean I can let you through."

"Oh? You won't run, then?"

"...If I were keeping my cool and thinking ahead, I'd want to run. I doubt I'll be able to beat you no matter what I do... But I'm afraid of abandoning a kid in exchange for a future and a cool head."

After hearing that answer and scrutinizing John for a moment, however, the grotesque bowman made a strange pronouncement.

"...You have courage, son of man. I would not call you foolhardy. For that, I pity you."

"...?"

"No..." The bowman said to the bewildered John. "It's none of your concern."

The next instant, the bowman was standing right in front of John.

"Wha...?"

The movement appeared instantaneous, but it was achieved not through speed due to physical strength, but by moving in a gap in their attention.

The movement testified to the fact that the grotesque bowman did not rely solely on physical strength, but was also possessed of skill achieved through superhuman training. John, however, did not despair at it.

He had no time to appreciate the difference in power before the massive bow struck his neck.

Then, before he even knew what had happened to him, and before he had a chance to prove that he could fight with the prosthetic arm Dumas had given him...John Wingard was sent flying with a broken neck and smashed into the hospital's glass entrance door with a loud crash.

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Even as a pitiable police officer was about to lose his life, the duel between Richard and the golden Archer continued to unfold on the roof of the church.

The golden Heroic Spirit kept up a relentless series of attacks while still managing to appear unruffled. He, nevertheless, shot the occasional inquisitive glance at Richard, who continued to dodge his assault, and posed a question to him without dropping his haughty demeanor.

“Mongrel, I permit you to answer my questions.”

“I’m honored.”

He slackened his attacks, but there was no complacency or conceit in his opponent’s eyes.

Richard could see plainly that taking advantage of the opportunity to charge in would only lead to him taking the brunt of a heavy counterattack. He therefore decided to halt for the moment and listen to what his opponent had to say.

“You’ve scraped through a similar predicament before, haven’t you? I can tell by the way you dodge.”

“Yes,” Richard answered with a shrug, “I went through the same thing yesterday. It was all the other side up, though.”

“...What became of your opponent?”

“We made friends. Our Masters—well, contractors—seemed to get along too.”

Richard corrected himself in deference to Ayaka denying being his Master, but that did not seem to make much difference to his opponent, who showed no particular reaction to it. Richard failed to notice, however, that the golden Heroic Spirit’s eyelids twitched in surprise at the words “we made friends.” Even so, he could tell that his mood had changed.

Until then, he had been “eliminating an insolent pest.” Now, however, his animosity had lessened and a different mood was filling the area in its place. It was the atmosphere that Richard had surrounded himself with in life, but that fact was lost on his present self.

“I see... They may be my friend, but they are as soft on others as ever.”

The golden Heroic Spirit spoke with a wry smile. His words puzzled Richard, who had a bad feeling about what was coming.

“What?”

“My friend.” I’ve heard this somewhere before.

One day earlier, to be precise. When he had proposed an alliance to the Heroic Spirit he had met in the vast forest.

“You see, that one best friend of mine is rather hard to please. Whenever I try to make friends or form an alliance with someone, he says, ‘I shall test you to see if you are worthy of my friend,’ or something like that and chases them off with unreasonable demands.”

Then, Richard noticed that, unlike earlier, all the space around him had begun to distort.

Oh, this looks like I'm going to die, doesn't it?

Surrounded on all sides by the Noble-Phantasm-launching distortions, Richard sensed "death" with every inch of his body.

The golden hero addressed him just as the Lancer Richard had met in the forest had said he would.

"I shall test you to see if you are worthy of my friend."

"Hey now, just because someone might take your friend doesn't..."

Richard began to crack a joke, but cut himself short.

He was not unperceptive. One look at the golden hero's expression was enough to tell him that his opponent could not be motivated by simple covetousness, jealousy, or any other vulgar emotion.

"Please forget I said that. It was immature of me."

"You did well to stop yourself. You have my compliments. If you had finished that sentence, I would have struck off your head and ended this without even bothering to test you."

Then, the golden hero addressed Richard not as a king, nor as a warrior, nor as a Heroic Spirit, but as a judge.

"Circumstances have changed. Mongrel, I acknowledge you not as riffraff, but as a 'seeker' worthy of my trial. If you survive, you will be my friend's ally and my certain 'enemy.'

"Should that time come, I will permit you to leave your blood on my treasures again, this time as a 'person.' Consider yourself honored."

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Click, clack, clatter.

Clusters of little sounds wandered through the man's darkness.

Whispering voices mixed with the sounds of hard objects colliding faintly vibrated John's eardrums.

The metallic sounds, which refused to stop even while the voices spoke, sounded rough, but to John they seemed to have a musical elegance.

"Where am I...?"

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He slowly raised himself.

Strangely, he felt no pain, but all his other sensations were hazy. Only smell tickled his mind—an appetizing scent that included the aromas of fruit liqueur and toasting butter.

Then John realized that he was in a restaurant. Warm, orange light filled the air, but it was not electric light; it was the glow of candle flames.

John could see a single man sitting at the enormous long table illuminated by that glow, surrounded by stunningly beautiful women who chatted amiably and occasionally refilled the man's glass.

“Um...I...”

When John tried to speak to the people around the table, the man elegantly wiped his mouth with a napkin and then leisurely turned to face him.

“Hey there. I see you're up.”

“What...? Mr. Du—Caster?!”

It was Alexandre Dumas, the Caster who had made a contract with the chief of police and who was well known to John and the other members of Clan Calatin. Only his hair stuck up more and he seemed a little larger than when John had met him in his workshop.

“Um, what am I doing here...? Where's everyone else?”

At that point, John realized that Dumas was not looking at him.

“Huh?”

John tried to touch a candlestick, but his hand passed right through it. And that was not all—a beautiful woman carrying food walked right through him like a ghost. At that, John realized that he did not exist in that place.

His brief training as a mage must have borne fruit, because he recognized that this was no ordinary dream, but something of mystical significance.

“Relax. This is a restaurant. It's kinda high-class, though, so try not to make a scene. Friend or foe, I suggest you listen to what I've got to say for now.”

At first it seemed like Dumas was speaking to John, but his words were actually directed at someone standing behind and a little to the side of him.

John was still confused, but he steeled himself and slowly turned to look behind him.

And there...stood a single wounded man.

Part of his body was wrapped in bandages, stained here and there by oozing blood. But both the white of the bandages and the dark red of the freshly dried blood were quickly wiped from his impression of the man.

Black.



The blackness of the man's coat seemed to express the color of his soul.

His skin was pale to the point of being sickly and his hair was far from dark. He must have been caught up in some serious trouble, because while John caught glimpses of fine clothes such as a nobleman might wear under his coat, the coat itself looked scorched all over. Still, John could not help feeling that the blackness of that coat was the man's true nature.

While John hesitated, the man in the black coat continued to glare warily at Dumas without uttering a word.

Dumas, perhaps sensing the man's bloodlust, shrugged and waved a hand.

"Oh, I take that back. I'm not a fan of getting killed, so let me make it clear that I'm not your enemy. If I were, you'd be on a ship to Hell by now. Am I wrong? Actually, considering the 'enemies' you took on, you'd be lucky if a trip to Hell was the worst you got."

Dumas picked up a nearby pitcher of water and poured it into a glass as he continued.

"Anyway, have a drink. If you need someone to taste it for poison, I'll do the honors."

At that, the pitch-black man addressed Dumas without relaxing his guard.

"Who are you...? Do you...know about me...?"

"Yeah, you could say that. I'm not directly involved, but I happened to find out about you. About what you've managed to get done and about what you're trying to do now."

At that, the dark man slowly rose to his feet, warier than ever. Dumas held out the glass of water to him and nodded at the seat across the table, as if testing him.

"Have a seat. A count shouldn't be standing around like that."

"..."

"Oh, or would you rather I call you something else?"

Then, Dumas uttered a proper name that was both the other man's outer surface and his innermost core.

"Edmond Dantès. Nice name. It'd look great in print, you know?"

"Although 'Le Comte de Monte-Cristo' would make a better title for a novel."

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Central Snowfield

“A trial, is it?” Richard asked the man standing on the roof with him as he readied his sword.

“I see. I thought you were an Archer, but are you perhaps of the Ruler Class?”

Richard, drawing on the knowledge bestowed on him by the Grail, mentioned an Extra Class.

The golden Heroic Spirit, however, laughed scornfully.

“Fool. A Ruler in a Holy Grail War is merely an impartial scale that judges by the world’s standards. There is nothing impartial about my judgments. The path I have walked and the wealth I have piled in my treasury are the scales that will judge you.”

Faced with a Heroic Spirit who ostentatiously declared that he was the rules, Richard grinned cheerfully and nodded.

“A fool, am I? I get that a lot.”

Richard sighed, resting his sword on his shoulder and glancing down at the road.

“I only came here in the first place because I heard that the guards who defend this city were going to investigate a Heroic Spirit spreading a mysterious plague and thought I might be able to do something to help. I suppose that encounters in the Holy Grail War do naturally lead to fighting.”

“Do not dissemble, mongrel,” the golden Heroic Spirit laughed scornfully. “What do you have to lament? You are enjoying this situation more than anyone.”

“...”

Richard flashed a fearless grin by way of an answer and posed a question of his own to the golden Heroic Spirit.

“You know...your friend called that plague the ‘black curse.’ Those guards have assembled to do something about it, am I right? Are you certain you don’t want to help them? We could always form an alliance.”

Richard, who insisted on calling the police officers “guards,” recalled what his ally Lancer had told him—that “if the curse and mud mix,” it would be “a disaster”—while he waited for an answer.

The golden Heroic Spirit, however, kept his arms folded and his eyes fixed on Richard.

“That impertinent spell? I will blast it away when it shows itself. Nothing you do will alter that outcome. It is making itself a bit of a nuisance, but executing the source of the curse will put an end to that.”

“I see. It’s true that I’ve only just arrived and don’t fully grasp the situation, but it sounds like

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your 'trial' will take everything I've got."

Richard cracked his neck and inquired about his current predicament.

"It's not just my life on the scales; it's my whole past and future all taken together. Isn't that right?"

"Enough chatter. Are you a fool who needs everything spelled out for him?"

Richard watched the golden Servant make this unreasonable declaration with a wry grin.

"I see. I can accept that. So, this is already a battlefield with survival on the line."

Then, as he spoke his next words, the Lionheart sprang into action.

"The pact is made. I'll take the words we just exchanged for war cries...and launch my invasion."

The instant he stepped forward, the distortions in the air around him began to shine. Then, as if all the stars that blanketed the night sky had fallen, innumerable Noble Phantasms rained down on Snowfield.

Richard leapt from the roof of the building next door to the church as "judgment" closed in on him from all sides. It was both an infinite series of blows and a never-ending single strike. Death closing in from every direction with no end in sight.

But Richard was not a beast that simply let himself be hunted. He was, after all, a Heroic Spirit who had manifested in the Saber Class, said to be the "best" of the seven.

Faced with the trial of the unfathomable golden Heroic Spirit, Richard began to unleash his own power as a hero with the Spirit Origin of a king.

The rain of Noble Phantasms poured down, some fast and some slow. Richard leapt on the roof as he wove his way between them.

Onrushing Noble Phantasms.

Richard kicked one of the weapons and twisted his body, dodging the flurry of blows that followed by a hair's breadth.

His movements were too rough to be called acrobatics and too elegant to be called combat. He charged into the center of the oncoming blows, any one of which would prove fatal if it struck him, and as he had just declared, used his overwhelming speed to launch an invasion of that territory of death.

Richard readied the sword in his hand while contorting his body and slashed upward into the air with all his might. The radiance that overflowed from the arc of his swing scythed through the onrushing blades and created a new path for him to launch his own attack.

Even so, one wrong move would still cost him his life.

He walked that fine line between life and death with superhuman speed and muttered, not

to anyone, but to encourage himself.

“I may not have many qualities that can match yours.”

It was almost like a contract with himself.

“But...

“When it comes to speed, I’m more than your match.”

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Crystal Hill casino hotel, top floor

Tine Chelk.

The Master of Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, and also a girl who paid him heartfelt homage. She was a priestess who had been “made” over generations to avenge her people.

The Protectors of the Land, who had inherited power in a long, unbroken succession without belonging to the Church. Pressure from both inside and outside the world of magecraft, brought to bear on them by countless mages and a clique of people in power, had forced them to their knees. In order to one day reclaim the land, they literally offered themselves to the land that had continued to protect them.

They etched Magic Crests into the bodies of their newborn children.

Through those designs, etched using principles slightly different from those of Western magecraft, they forcibly linked their Magic Circuits to the land’s leylines and raised them as mystical “catalysts.”

It was a wish.

It was a miracle.

It was a cry.

It was a circuit.

It was a sacrifice.

It was...a densely packed curse distilled from tens of thousands of lives.

The actions of the mages who managed the land were synonymous with making a contract with the land. An extremely simple, pure curse called a contract.

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If they ventured beyond the reach of the land's leylines, they would die.

In exchange, by assimilating the land's leylines with their own lives, they were able to wield powerful magecraft with the greatest efficiency, even without an incantation.

They forced the land to enlarge their Magic Circuits and passed them on to their children.

Even Tine Chelk had been born as a sacrifice to the next generation, a mechanism to pass on her genes and Crest to a successor after undergoing that suffering.

She had twelve older brothers and nine older sisters, but they had all been taken into the land.

After sacrifices to assimilate her human Magic Circuits with the land's leylines, Tine's body had at last acquired an ability to wield magecraft that surpassed her father's. She had been fated to do the same thing to promising children of the next generation, whether they were sons or daughters...but the Holy Grail War had derailed that fate.

The reason mages had stolen the land from Tine's ancestors.

The plunderers were on the verge of realizing their dearest wish.

The Protectors of the Land had elevated Tine and begun to train her in combat magecraft and information about the Holy Grail War.

All in order to make Tine Chelk a Master in the Holy Grail War.

It was a fact that they revered her as their chief. Some opposed it, but they were a minority within the tribe.

At the same time, they understood that while she was a chief to be respected, the girl was also a sacrifice who would use up her life to achieve their goal—that she was a catalyst they must use up in order to carry out “the reclamation of the land,” the curse of a people.

But she was not a miserable puppet led on by her people. She had faced this Holy Grail War prepared to expend her own life. Even if she was being controlled, it was not by the will of her people, but by her inherited destiny itself.

Since she was very young, Tine Chelk had accepted that she would live as a curse against the usurper mages.

But now Tine could do nothing but open her eyes wide and burn that scene into her memory. Noble Phantasms rained down like meteors.

The weapons continued to slice through the unfeeling air, each and every one shrouded in Mana reminiscent of the Age of the Gods.

Tine was using a far-seeing spell to observe events on the ground from the top floor of the casino hotel Crystal Hill. Enhancing her eyesight with magecraft and looking down from the top floor directly would likely have sufficed, but her disposition as a person and her ability as

a mage to sense danger, as well as the instincts of her species awakened through the path that linked her to a Heroic Spirit as a Master all rejected the idea of looking down on her Heroic Spirit—Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes—from on high.

If she were a seasoned mage, she would have looked down at him without hesitation. She would likely have incurred the King of Heroes' extreme displeasure by doing so, but that was another matter.

She wondered if even watching him through a familiar might be disrespectful, but he had tolerated her observing his battle with Enkidu from a distance, so she judged that it fell short of a line she must not cross.

Just as I would expect of Lord Gilgamesh. That other Archer is certainly a formidable enemy, but I'm sure Lord Gilgamesh is even more powerful. That poor Saber must already be...

Then, Tine gasped. In the image she saw through her far-seeing spell...Saber was still alive. In fact, he was beginning to counter the King of Heroes' offensive.

"Who on Earth...is that Heroic Spirit...?"

Saber.

The class said to be the best in the Holy Grail War.

According to Tine's subordinates' investigation, based on the relic that had been brought as a catalyst, it was conjectured that the mastermind's faction likely intended to summon King Arthur. She had also received information that the Kuruoka mages, who had likewise thrown their lot in with the masterminds, had brought a relic related to Qin Shihuangdi from mainland China, but she could not predict what class he would manifest as.

Nevertheless, Tine had had no intention of stealing either catalyst.

Relics brought by the mages masterminding the Grail War would not be easy to take. Besides, the moment Tine had learned that someone had set foot on that land with a catalyst of Gilgamesh, she had made up her mind that the Servant she should summon and the king she should serve was none other than the King of Heroes, rumored to be the origin of all kings.

Even after witnessing extraordinary Servants such as that other Archer—the man who called himself Alkeides—and the horsewoman who called herself queen of the Amazons, Tine had no doubt that the King of Heroes would win through to the end. That was how exalted, proud and filled with a royalty that would make everything and everyone bend to its will the magical energy she could sense through the path that connected them was.

That Lancer who the King of Heroes called his "friend" was probably the only one who could challenge him. In which case, she had thought, all those who stood in his way before that final encounter were destined to be swept aside.

She had dismissed information such as Saber being the "best" Class as merely rough approxi-

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mations, and yet...

“So fast...”

Tine Chelk was forced to realize that, as the Saber Class was hailed as the best, every Saber must have something “extraordinary” about them.

She did not know whether this was King Arthur, as she had conjectured, or some entirely different Heroic Spirit. Even going by what she could see of Saber through her far-seeing spell, his Spirit Origin did not seem to be a match for the King of Heroes or Alkeides. It struck her as being on the same level as the Amazonian queen who had called herself Hippolyte or perhaps a little higher.

And yet, that Saber was still alive in the midst of a fierce onslaught from Gilgamesh’s Gate of Babylon. He was not countering every blow like the Lancer Gilgamesh called his friend, nor was he taking every blow like Alkeides, who was currently facing the police officers—Saber was continuing to evade the entire rain of weapons. He occasionally made the sword in his hand shine and struck away a few Noble Phantasms, but he kept those attacks to the bare minimum necessary.

If he was only running away, Tine could have understood it, but the strangest thing about that Saber’s actions was that they seemed clearly to be an “offensive,” not a retreat.

“It can’t be...”

Sweat ran down Tine’s brow as she watched Saber gradually closing in on Gilgamesh.

“He’s still...getting faster...?”

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The plaza behind the church

The boy hiding in the shadow of the plaza’s trees, Flat Escardos, watched the offense and defense being performed atop the church and the adjacent buildings and shouted:

“Wow... That gold guy’s attacks are cheating, but that guy who’s dodging them is almost as bad! It’s like he’s doing an action game dodge infinitely and then canceling every move he makes!”

“Your similes are always...so crass...”

The telepathic grumbling came from Flat’s Servant, Jack the Ripper, who had reverted to the form of a watch.

Jack, a Berserker who had made a contract with Flat, had been robbed of a Noble Phantasm that it would be no exaggeration to call half of his Spirit Origin by Alkeides and sustained extraordinary damage as a result. For that reason, he had transformed into an inanimate object to minimize Magical Energy consumption, but...

“Now, shall we take action as well?”

“But will you really be all right, Ja—Berserker?”

“Even if I retreat, you’ll find some excuse to go and help the police on your own, won’t you? Our acquaintance has been short, but I’ve gotten a fairly good idea of how you act.”

“Oh man... Do I seem like that kind of hero?” Flat sounded embarrassed.

“You probably aren’t,” the wristwatch Heroic Spirit replied telepathically. “But, concepts of good and evil aside, your professor tries to finish what he starts, doesn’t he? As his student, I expect you’ll follow his example.”

“...You’ve got me there, Jack. Can you read my mind?”

“I would have to be awfully unperceptive to miss that. You’re not foolish enough to charge in without a plan, but there’s a good chance your plan would be the height of foolishness. I’ll have to guide you.”

“Don’t worry, I plan on going home alive! I’ve got to show you off to everybody, after all!”

“Couldn’t you come up with a better reason?”

Jack enjoyed the absurd exchange, but it was like an injured person keeping up a conversation to keep their mind off the pain.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I know you’re better suited to support than to rough and tumble work. I’ll focus on supporting you while you support the others.”

“...I guess you’re right.”

Flat deliberately did not ask if Jack could still fight. It was obvious to him that Jack was severely weakened. Being robbed of the concept called a Noble Phantasm had seriously destabilized his Spirit Origin.

Instead, he asked a different question.

“...If we beat that guy, will your Spirit Origin go back to how it was?”

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answers to. You can see it, can’t you?”

“...Yes. From what I can see, the Spirit Origins have already completely fused... It’s like they’re melting together in some kind of super creepy mud-like stuff... I wonder what it is...”

“Yes. Even if we destroy that thing, that power probably won’t return to me. Not unless I’m destroyed and re-summoned from the Throne.”

“But,” Flat answered dejectedly, “that Ja—Berserker would have his memories and everything reset. He wouldn’t be the same person as you, would he?”

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“I don’t mind if you call me Jack now. After revealing my Noble Phantasms and saying what I did, my true name must be an open secret now... My memories may be recorded in the Throne, but as long as he’s summoned as a piece in the Holy Grail War, another me won’t share them. Although it might be different under particular—or should I say abnormal—conditions.”

“Yes, I know. The professor still wants to see someone again in spite of that, but...”

“Oh, yes... Your teacher is a veteran of the Holy Grail War, isn’t he?”

The pair continued to converse as if nothing was out of the ordinary despite the golden Heroic Spirit’s Noble Phantasms flying through the air within eyesight. Perhaps it was Flat’s natural disposition, or perhaps he was being considerate of Jack. Jack himself had realized that his Spirit Origin itself might be in jeopardy if he did not maintain his sanity by continuing the conversation.

“Still, we can’t just stand here twiddling our thumbs. If we aren’t going to retreat, then we have to do something to stop that Heroic-Spirit-turned-demon.”

“It would be nice if he clashed with that gold guy and went off somewhere, but...”

“That golden Archer is the enemy your teacher warned you to steer clear of. Now I understand why. He’s a disaster to everyone equally. We’ll have to act covertly.”

The pair considered how to make their rapid comeback and support the police unit.

That said, they hardly had time to think it out properly. Not only did they not know when a stray projectile from the battle between Archer and Saber unfolding above them would fly in their direction, it also did not seem likely that the police force could hold out for long against the Heroic Spirit they were facing.

“What about using another Command Spell to boost you and secure the girl in the hospital?”

“According to the information from the chief of police, that girl’s brain is affected by an unknown illness. I can’t approve of dragging her out of there without police support. The risk of other people becoming infected is supposed to be low, but if we drag the girl out without police support, her body may not hold up. Besides, we assumed we’d be bringing her to the church, but look at the state of it now.”

Flat looked at the church with the golden Archer standing imposingly on its roof.

“What about isolating her with a ward or something and making her invisible, then? I learned a lot of different patterns for concealment when I went to a tomb or something with the Professor a little while back!”

“In that case, that bowman who stole my power will probably blow away the whole hospital. That would probably be a piece of cake for that Heroic Spirit... Wait.”

“What?”

“Someone’s here.”

Jack halted the conversation to give Flat a warning.

Flat shifted his attention to his surroundings and found that a figure had drawn near to the trees they were hiding under. The instant Flat, who had been ritually registered as a Master, laid eyes on that figure, he knew that it was a being that, like Jack, had materialized as a Heroic Spirit. At the same time, he also realized that it was not a Heroic Spirit suited for combat.

Jack immediately took the form of an enormous wolf and barked menacingly at the newcomer.

“Stop right there, if you please! Who are you?”

“Whoa! Did you just turn into Le Chien, Jack?!”

Flat shouted some kind of proper name, but Jack did not answer and kept his eyes on the man coming toward them.

The man had close-cropped hair and his clothes, despite seeming antique, were fine and elegantly tailored. He did not seem like a fighter, but he did not give the impression of being a mage or a horseman, either.

“Based on your dress, I take it you come from the France of one to two hundred years ago?”

Jack had taken the form of a wolf based on rumors that Jack the Ripper was actually an animal. His question was packed with all the animosity and menace peculiar to a beast.

The man, who had stopped about ten meters away, answered with a shrug.

“Hey, didn’t anyone ever teach you not to judge a book by its cover? I’m not judging you by your looks, you know? I wouldn’t even be surprised if you told me your favorite food’s Commercy madeleines... Probably.”

“Oh, Commercy madeleines are delicious, aren’t they?!” Flat quickly shot back without dropping his guard.

“Oh?” The man responded. “Since you know what I’m talking about, I guess that means Commercy’s still famous for its pastries.”

“It is! A friend of mine from France always brings them as souvenirs for professors and friends!”

“That so? I’d love to try one and see how the taste has changed since I was alive. Whoops, I guess I just gave away that I’m from France, just like I look. Oh well, that’s no big deal compared to the taste of madeleines.”

The mystery man and Flat continued to discuss French communes with the air of a friendly chat.

The meteor shower of Noble Phantasms continued to fall in the sky behind them. Jack, standing beside them in his huge wolf form, addressed Flat with a look of discomfort.

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“Hey, this is no time for chit-chat. Who knows how many more minutes the police can last against that...”

However...

“I can’t quite get the measure of you, boy,” the man said with a sudden grin. His mood had changed.

“The way you let yourself get caught up in talking about sweets while you work up a spell behind my back is pure mage. But there’s nothing mage-y about still going on about sweets way after you finished the spell.”

At that, Jack looked at Flat in surprise and Flat looked confused.

“Huh? Well, I got it ready because I thought you might be dangerous if you were an enemy, but since you’re not an enemy, activating it would just be a waste of magical energy and it wouldn’t be fair to you either, would it?”

“...”

After briefly observing him in silence, the man looked at Flat and continued cheerfully:

“Boy...what are you?”

“Huh...? Oh, you want me to introduce myself! I’m Flat! I don’t want to become a target for curses and it’s needlessly long anyway, so I can’t casually give away my full name, but the name I usually give people is Flat Escardos! I’m Berserker’s Master!”

“Well, that wasn’t what I meant, but it doesn’t matter. Also, I don’t think you should casually tell people that you even have a full name, either. Anyway, now you’ve told me your name, it wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t tell you mine.”

“...Your name?” Jack asked suspiciously. “You, a Servant, would tell your name to us, participants in the same Holy Grail War?”

“I don’t want to hear that from somebody who might as well have been shouting ‘I’m Jack the Ripper’ with the Noble Phantasms he was showing off and the things he was saying back there. Although I hear you did your thing after I was dead and buried.”

“...”

“My weak points won’t change whether I give away my true name or not. If you lop my head off, I’ll die. If you stab me through the heart, I’ll die. If I drown, I’ll die. If I starve, I’ll die. If I freeze, I’ll die. If I get old, I’ll die. See? I’ve got loads of weaknesses. What kind of weakness could a man who can’t even stop a simple curse be hiding at this point?”

The Heroic Spirit showed no trace of hostility, but given the state of his Spirit Origin, Jack could not afford to take chances. He positioned himself to protect Flat and continued to eye the man warily.

“It doesn’t make sense. If you aren’t hostile, then why make contact with us?”

“Hey, our Masters have an alliance, right? I figure we Servants should follow suit.”

“...I see, so that’s who you are. That makes sense, but...”

The Master that Flat and Jack had made an alliance with, the chief of the Snowfield Police Department, had told them, “I can’t reveal my Servant’s true name, but they specialize in logistical support. You’ll never meet face-to-face.”

They might be temporary allies, but given that they would ultimately fight over the Grail, it would hardly be advantageous to reveal true names or allow Servants to come in contact with each other unnecessarily. Jack saw the sense in that, and that was why he could not help feeling that this Servant appearing in front of them was unnatural. And yet...

“That said, I’ve got my reasons for telling you my name. I can’t offer enough collateral to make a proper alliance in combat. But from what I see of your methods, kid, I figure that spilling my guts is the best way to team up with you for real.”

With a cheerful shrug, as if to say that he was well aware of the distrustful eyes fixed on him, the Heroic Spirit introduced himself.

“The name’s Dumas. I’m a Caster, though I’ve got no clue why.”

“Huh?”

Flat could not suppress an incredulous response. The Heroic Spirit who called himself Dumas shrugged.

“Alexandre Dumas. Never heard of me?”

“What?!”

This time, Flat let out what was clearly a cry of surprise and shouted:

“Wh-Which one?!”

“What do you mean, which one?”

“The super strong general who worked for Napoleon?! Or his son, who wrote *The Three Musketeers* and *Les Mille et Un Fantômes*?! Or maybe his son, who wrote *The Lady of the Camellias*?!”

“The second one. *Les Trois Mousquetaires* aside, you know some pretty obscure titles. Still, I’m happy to see people know my boy’s stuff better than mine,” Caster—Dumas—said with a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Of course I know it! I’ve seen the *Three Musketeers* as a movie, a cartoon, and even a puppet show! Wow! Are you really the real deal?!”

“A Heroic Spirit’s like a copy, so I don’t know about the ‘real deal,’ but if you’re asking if I’m Dumas, then the answer is oui. Still, I never figured my books would stick around for over a century. I guess it shows that, for better or worse, human nature hasn’t changed that much. If you want to look up to someone, though, better make it my boy. He’s got real talent.”

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“Oh, please don’t talk like your talent’s fake! There’s an alumnus from my school who comes from a whole family of book lovers, and they’ve got a bunch of original copies printed back in your day! Oh, wow! This is as good as an army, Jack! Oh, I really wish I could keep talking and get more information out of him, but helping the police comes first, so, let’s ask him for help!”

“Hmm... It’s true we’re out of time. If you say so, Master, then I’ll trust him for now, but...”

With that, Jack resumed his watch form and fastened himself on Flat’s wrist.

Dumas watched that and chuckled.

“I appreciate your confidence, but you know there’s no way I could handle that thing on my own, right? And since you’re going out of your way to stay a watch so you don’t have to move, I figure your Spirit Origin must be in pretty rough shape.”

Dumas’ gaze was focused on the flashes of light that came intermittently from Main Street on the other side of the church. The other Heroic Spirits seemed to have moved from the church roof while they weren’t looking, so there was no telling who was causing these flashes or the thunderous roars that followed them.

“If you still want to do something, though, I can lend a hand.”

“You really mean it?!”

“Kid...you don’t act much like a mage...but are you ready to toss your own life into the pot to get what you want?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry, it ain’t a witch’s cauldron that only comes out right when it feels like it; it’s a cutting-edge pressure cooker. I’ll even throw in a kitchen timer.”

Dumas flashed a fearless grin at Flat and Jack as he rattled off odd turns of phrase.

“And most importantly, it’s me who’ll be doing the cooking.”

Interlude

“Mercenary, Assassin, Vampire I”

Interlude

Mercenary, Assassin, Vampire I

“...They’re all so reckless.”

Sigma’s face showed no emotion, but there was a tinge of exasperation in his voice.

He was a young magecraft-using mercenary on the side of the “masterminds” of the Holy Grail War. He was originally supposed to become Lancer’s Master, but he had ended up haunted by a Heroic Spirit of the enigmatic “Watcher” Class and had formed a temporary alliance with Saber and Assassin in order to increase his chances of survival after his fashion.

He had come to observe the Servant that had formed a contract with a comatose girl in the hospital as well as the other enemy factions targeting her based on information provided by Watcher’s shadows. He had passed what he had learned from his Servant on to Saber and Assassin under the pretext that it was “data from his superiors.”

A mysterious Heroic Spirit supposed to have a bird’s eye view of everything that took place in the city.

Sigma had been drawn into the Holy Grail War without being told the characteristics of the Watcher Class and without having a clear goal of his own. Before that, everyone around him had treated him as “soldier A.” Francesca, who had brought him into the Grail War, had wanted him to continue being “soldier A,” so that was hardly surprising. The Heroic Spirit that had contracted with Sigma, however, was in the process of transforming him into something special in the “Fake Holy Grail War.”

Even so, Sigma’s combat ability was no match for a Heroic Spirit’s. While he had gained experience as a magecraft-using mercenary in battlefields around the world, he had of course never fought an extraordinary familiar like a Servant. The sight of the attacks of the golden Heroic Spirit was enough to tell him how out of place he was.

“That’s Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes. One of the earliest heroes,” said a boy with a serpent staff—one of the “shadows.”

They were “Watcher’s” terminals, a system for conveying information to their Master. Possibly they were directly linked to Sigma’s brain, because no one else could see or hear them.

Sigma thought it would have been easier if they were just his hallucinations, but the information they provided was accurate and given that they provided information that he could not possibly know, he had no choice but to admit that they were genuinely the power of a Heroic Spirit.

“To be blunt, you don’t stand a chance now.”

Obviously, Sigma mentally agreed with the “shadow,” which had changed from the boy with the serpent staff to a young man with mechanical wings on his back. He could tell at a glance that those were no ordinary weapons that that Heroic Spirit was firing out of empty space.

That was not an opponent he could handle with magecraft or modern firearms. He might be able to distract him for an instant with a stun grenade or flashbang, but he doubted that would be any advantage in the face of the Heroic Spirit called Gilgamesh.

It would be something if he could at least coordinate perfectly with Saber, but they had only just met and Saber’s Master—Ayaka Sajou—claimed not to be a proper Master or even a mage.

That being the case, there was only one person who might contribute to combat in this situation. She was a Heroic Spirit like Saber and Gilgamesh—the girl Assassin standing next to him.

“What will you do?”

He did not have a definite plan. Nevertheless, if he just stood there without attacking or retreating, he would only sink into this brutal mire.

In which case, he judged, his best option would be to act according to the cards in the hands of those around him.

“I’m going to protect the child,” she answered quietly. “Do you know where her room is?”

“Are you really going...? You’ll probably end up facing down either that archer-turned-demon or that golden gatling gun.”

“...I won’t go through the front. I hate to admit it, but immature as I am, it would literally take everything I am to execute them. Even then, I’m not certain I would be able to see it through. That wouldn’t matter if only I were concerned, but our objective is to save a child.”

“That’s those police officers’ objective, not yours.”

“?”

Assassin looked at Sigma in confusion, as if she did not understand his intention.

Sigma spoke to her in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You’ve never met the child and the probability of her becoming either an enemy or an ally is low. In fact, if the Heroic Spirit contracted to your target is hostile, you’ll end up in a direct confrontation with a Heroic Spirit you didn’t need to fight. Logically, it wouldn’t be to your advantage.”

“... I’d forgotten you were without faith.”

Assassin nodded as if to say that that explained everything, looked straight at Sigma and said:

“There is a benefit. A logical reason.”

“What reason...?”

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Why he asked, Sigma himself did not know. Probably it was purely because he could not fully comprehend what would drive Assassin to willingly get involved in a troublesome situation.

Assassin answered without hesitation.

“If it will save a growing child, there could be no greater benefit.”

As she spoke, she soundlessly moved into action. She began a roundabout approach to the hospital, threading her way through openings in the street-turned-battlefield. Sigma followed.

“...? I don’t understand,” he asked, half to himself, “child or not, she’s still a stranger. You don’t even know if she follows the same faith as you.”

If she were doing it to add more adherents to her faith, he could understand it. But should she really risk her life to save the child?

“I am still immature. Properly speaking, the deeply faithful do not consider benefits. Just by living they hear a great voice, as naturally as breathing, and choose that path.”

“...I don’t really understand common morality...but aren’t you trying to save a child in this situation because your faith is deep?”

Sigma’s words caused the fully mature fanatic to turn and look at him for a moment. Her eyes were filled with anger at herself and a deep sadness.

“I was not able to abandon my anger at the heathens. I was not able to have tolerance. As long as my current course is mixed with my wish to save others, it is merely a proud disdain for destiny. Because of that immaturity, I was not permitted to walk the path to the mountain enclosure.”

“...”

They stealthily crossed Main Street and drew closer to the hospital. The police force and the bowman had begun to fight and the other Archer—Gilgamesh—and Saber were also engaged in combat. Assassin might survive a hit from a stray projectile, but Sigma certainly would not. He used magecraft to dampen sounds and strengthen his body and followed close behind the carefully advancing Assassin while remaining wary of both battles.

Assassin continued to speak dispassionately to Sigma.

“But that doesn’t matter. My immaturity is no reason not to save a child.”

“...I see.”

At that, Sigma slightly lowered his gaze, thinking about the word “child,” and muttered in spite of himself:

“...No one saved us.”

For an instant, Assassin, who was approaching the back of the hospital, froze.

Sigma realized that he had made a slip of the tongue and expressionlessly averted his eyes from Assassin. An instant later, the voice of one of the shadows—the old man who had said “call

me captain”—came from behind him.

“You put your foot in your mouth this time, boy... Are you stupid? What were you thinking, whining that ‘no one saved you’ to somebody trying to save someone else? Are you jealous of that whelp sleeping in the hospital? Will you be happy if you slow her down by spouting bullshit and that kid ends up as bad off as you?”

Sigma made no attempt to refute the scornful voice.

That was partly because responding to a voice that only he could hear would make Assassin suspicious of him. It was also because there was nothing he could say to refute it.

Sigma had neither a strong wish for the Grail nor a reason to survive. He was a mercenary who had kept struggling and made it to that point based solely on a vague feeling that he “didn’t want to die.”

Given that that attitude had kept him alive so far, it might actually be one of his strong points...but it was certainly not something he could be proud of.

Assassin’s words had reminded him of his childhood—reminded him of how the person sitting next to him might be a bloodless “thing” to be disposed of by nightfall—and he had instinctively blurted it out.

Why?

Why had there been no salvation for them?

Why would the girl in the hospital be saved? What separated her from them?

Before, he would have dismissed such things as “just luck.” So why had those words come out of him now? Sigma realized that his being was becoming unstable.

This isn’t a good trend. Not as a magecraft-user and not as a mercenary, either.

People who let themselves waver died. He had seen it happen many times in the course of his work.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said tha—”

Sigma attempted to regain his composure by ending the conversation, but Assassin cut him short by turning to look straight at him and saying:

“My immaturity prevented me from saving you as a child.”

“...”

“I was unable to be there and save you. That is proof of my immaturity.”

“You’re a Heroic Spirit,” Sigma responded to Assassin’s seemingly unreasonable declaration. “I don’t know when you died, but we existed in different times and places. You couldn’t have met me as a child.”

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“Differences of time and place are trivial. As proof of that, you and I are here right now, standing in the same place.”

From Sigma’s perspective, her words were abnormal. She stated with certainty that, if her faith were perfect, she would have appeared before the young Sigma and saved him.

If he were currently happy, Assassin’s words might have angered him.

If, despite being unfortunate, he had chosen his own path, he might have argued with her.

“I’m satisfied,” he might have said. “No one ever pitied me because you never appeared to me.”

But that anger did not come to him. Sigma himself half-agreed with what she said.

Oh, I see.

Did I...want someone to save me?

If someone had saved us back there...would things have been different? If I'd been saved before Francesca and the others destroyed the country...before everyone died...or even earlier... If my mother had been saved...?

No, if my mother had been saved, I would never have been born.

Sigma cast his eyes down in silence as he remembered the details of his birth.

If you saved everyone, I wouldn't be happy or unhappy—I wouldn't be at all...

“...That’s an interesting way of looking at it. I think there was a comedy like that.”

Assassin seemed confused by Sigma talking to himself.

Sigma answered the question she had asked him before they began to move.

“...From here, the police’s target—Kuruoka Tsubaki—is in the room on the far right of the top floor.”

Assassin heard him and quietly nodded.

“I thank you. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Wait.”

“?”

Sigma, still expressionless, stopped Assassin. After considering for a moment, he said:

“...I’ll go too. I’m not sure about just protecting her, but there may be a way to carry her out while preventing infection.”

According to Watcher’s information, Kuruoka Tsubaki was infected with a “non-airborne pathogen,” but there was no guarantee that it would stay that way.

After all, she had an unknown Heroic Spirit with her. There was a possibility that it could act on her to alter the characteristics of the bacteria. On the other hand, if they could get that Heroic Spirit on their side, it would be a powerful ally and it would make it easier to transport Tsubaki to a safe location. If the police then incapacitated the Heroic Spirit as planned, he

would be able to make a satisfactory report to Faldeus without difficulty. That was Sigma's idea.

"Don't push yourself. I'll carry her out if the need arises," Assassin told Sigma. It seemed she had not expected him to accompany her all the way. The black haired youth, however, quietly shook his head.

"I doubt the girl's body could handle the way you move. She's been in a coma for a long time—if you put a heavy strain on her, it might be enough to stop her heart."

When I was little, one of my comrades died that way.

Sigma proposed a strategy without putting that memory into words.

"I'm probably more used to handling a stretcher than you are. After we've gotten her out, I'll tell that demonic-looking Bowman. If I do that, he shouldn't target the hospital."

If they managed to protect Tsubaki, but the hospital collapsed, it would be a disaster.

"Oh, how interesting. Whose sake did you just propose that plan for?"

The shadow in the form of the boy with the serpent staff asked him, sounding pleased for some reason.

For whose sake...?

"It has nothing to do with your mission. You said that yourself not too long ago. There's no benefit. So, why are you trying to support her?"

The "shadow" sounded as if it were testing him.

"...Oh, excuse me. I may be a shadow, but I'm influenced by my personality from when I was alive. I'd probably look different if I were to manifest as a Heroic Spirit... Still, we shadows do have behaviors that resemble individual wills. Consider it a joke from the residue seared into a shadow's shadow and let it slide."

So that boy with the serpent staff said, but Sigma could not let it go so easily. After all, Sigma himself could not explain why he had decided to go along.

This really isn't a good trend.

Why didn't I leave things to her and retreat?

Losing sight of the course of your own mind is a fatal flaw, both as a mercenary and as a magecraft-user.

Sigma was on the verge of announcing that he had reconsidered and would withdraw after all, when...

"...I thank you," Assassin said, dropping her gaze. Her voice arrested Sigma's heart.

"You are striving to do good. You are far more worthy of being saved than me, sullied as I am."

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...

If I say, "Actually, I'm leaving," now, it will create a fatal gap. That would impair both the chances of my mission succeeding and my chances of survival.

The thought flashed through Sigma's brain. He followed her in silence without giving her an answer.

The noise of Heroic Spirits' fierce battles resounded through the night.

They put distance between themselves and that clamor by circling around to the back of the hospital. After making sure that there was no one to be seen nearby, they entered the hospital grounds.

Inside the ten-story hospital, the police mages had taken measures to clear the area of people and placed a sleeping spell on the inpatient ward.

Even the nurses working the night shift were asleep for the moment and it was the inpatients' normal bedtime. Because there was a risk of unnecessary harm if the sleeping patients' condition suddenly worsened, the magecraft was set to remain in effect for the shortest possible time.

Sigma, who had heard that information from Watcher, decided that he could therefore afford to make a little noise and attempted to take the shortest route from the rear of the hospital. He advanced quickly through the back garden...but when he had made it about halfway across, Assassin grabbed the collar of Sigma's gear and yanked him hard to the side.

"?!"

Before he could ask what she was trying to do, they rained down on the spot where Sigma had been standing.

Numerous bits of metal stuck into the ground.

They were twisted weapons of death—spears formed from countless scalpels, scissors, and other sharp instruments half-melted and fused together.

Seeing them rain down, Sigma guessed that they contained every scalpel, scissor, and bone cutter in the hospital.

"Right, boy. He's spent this short time gathering sharp objects from all over the hospital," the shadow in the form of the captain smirked a short distance away.

"Now, time for the second trial. Overcome it and grow, boy."

Sigma ignored him and looked in the direction the spears seemed to have come from. And...

There, around the fifth floor of the hospital, a man stood perpendicular to the white wall.

"...!"

Sigma's Magic Circuits shuddered. Partly because beside him, Assassin's magical energy had gone wild. But more than that, because the magical energy within the "thing" that stood on the

wall with a disregard for gravity was so unnerving. Or perhaps it was not just his perception of magical energy, but his instincts as someone who had fought for so long as a magecraft-using mercenary.

That “thing” is bad news.

The shadows told me that there was a hematophage, but that “thing” is high-ranking even for one of them. Not one of the highest, but it’s on another level from an ordinary monster.

It isn’t something a human should ever fight.

He had fought a similar creature only once before. That time, he had just barely managed to defeat it by working with other well-known mages and magecraft-users...but the survival instinct he had built up as a magecraft-user was warning him that the “thing” in front of him was more dangerous than the one he had brought down.

For a moment, Sigma froze, overwhelmed not by fear, but by magical energy. Then, the “thing” spoke to him.

“...You made the right choice, boy.”

“...?”

“If, just now,” the “thing” continued to the suspicious Sigma while slowly clapping his hands, “you had tried to leave that darling girl and retreat alone, I would have gouged out your heart, ground it into the dirt, and spread it around the feed trough in a pig sty.”

The man arbitrarily denigrated pig sties as he dropped to the ground with a broad grin. After making a courteous bow, the “thing” pulled off the tricky feat of grinning ecstatically with his mouth while glaring at Sigma with rage-filled eyes and said:

“You also made the worst possible choice, boy.”

It was an absurd declaration, contradicting his earlier statement.

“It is absolutely unforgivable for a puny human to try to walk with my darling. I will not tolerate my lovely Assassin so much as making conversation with the likes of you.”

The “thing” cracked his neck, then spread his arms wide and proclaimed his fierce resentment with a wicked grin.

“I’ll make you incapable of dying and then suck out your Magic Circuits one by one. I’ll squash your eyeballs, break every bone in your body, peel off your flesh, violate your brain, rape your heart, pound your lungs to paste, and chop your guts into mincemeat. Oh! Oh! I have it! I’ll rip your body into millions and billions of pieces while you’re still alive and spread it around the feed trough in a chicken coop!”

His voice grew steadily louder as he arched his back and stared up at the sky, which reflected

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the gleam of the golden Heroic Spirit's Noble Phantasms...then shifted to an ecstatic grin and turned his head to stare at Assassin.

“I wonder what face you'll make when that happens to someone you opened your heart to, even if only a little. Ah... Oh... Wonderful! You truly are wonderful! Just picturing you sullied by your own tears is enough to make me cry!”

The “thing”—the dead apostle that called itself Jester—actually shed tears of joy as he spoke. Assassin, watching him, had already sprung into action.

Stifling her emotions, but putting all the indignation she had built up until a moment before into her magical energy, she leapt at the monster that was her Master.

In place of the fiend's magical energy, she had the temporary supply Saber had leant her. She poured most of it into her Noble Phantasm.

“...Clad me in black sharpness...”

“Unfeeling Patrolling Spirits: Zabaniya.”

Chapter 15

“Gold and Lions II”

Chapter 15

The King of Heroes clad in golden armor—Gilgamesh the “judge”—was still standing where he had started on the roof of the church.

The church roof was pincushioned with Noble Phantasms and had collapsed in places, but the ward set on it must have been powerful, because it remained barely recognizable as a roof.

To a casual observer, it looked like a beautiful dance.

Tine and the other mages actually watching the scene through farseeing spells were captivated by the sight of Saber dancing in the gap between life and death with incredible speed.

It was a contest between kings, but it was certainly not equal. The golden king stood on high and the other king struggled to supplant him. Taken the other way round, it looked like a greater king passing judgment on a lesser one.

But that was why he charged. If they were both kings, then which of them was superior would change with time and circumstance. Their battle was a struggle for that height. One might call it the world’s smallest-scale “war,” waged between the kings’ Spirit Origins.

Of course, one of those kings was armed with the innumerable Noble Phantasms that his subjects had made and he had collected. The other, in contrast, had only seven “supporters.”

The golden king and judge showered Saber with attacks without ever dropping his guard. Nonetheless, the king once said to “have the heart of a lion” kept up his advance, pushing himself to even greater speeds as he narrowly avoided death.

Superhuman speed.

It was usual for a battle between Heroic Spirits to appear superhuman. Even taking that into account, however, Saber’s swiftness was extraordinary.

Speed due to his fundamental abilities as a Heroic Spirit.

Speed boosted through magecraft.

Speed that could only be attributed to some kind of “divine protection” associated with anecdotes of his exploits and bestowed on him by the Throne.

By combining all of them, he darted his way across the cluster of buildings that had become his battlefield with singular speed even for a Heroic Spirit, circling as he slowly but steadily closed distance.

The Lionheart’s advance, once begun, was like a gale scything across land and sea. The peerless speed of his march was so great that legend had it “only a general blessed with protection against wind had finally succeeded in halting it.”

Incredibly, the Lionheart, said to have raced across the battlefield with three times the speed

of an ordinary charge, at last drew close enough for his sword to reach his opponent.

“So, you have the insolence to stand before me.”

As good as declaring that he had only just begun, the golden king leapt backward while firing his Gate of Babylon in an effort to put more distance between himself and Saber.

But his efforts gave Saber the perfect opportunity.

“Ex...calibur!”

Saber’s sword shone, the arc of its swing becoming a massive band of light that flew at the airborne golden Archer.

“Not so fast!”

Gilgamesh materialized countless shields in front of him, dispersing the band of light.

“To think that you would strike at me with a mere imitation of a relic of the planet. Were we not in the middle of your trial, such folly would merit death, mongrel!Hm?”

When the scattered light dissipated and the countless floating shields scattered, Saber was no longer to be seen in front of the golden king.

As he landed, he sensed immense magical energy from behind him, lower down the slanted roof of the church. The golden Archer turned to look, his eyes narrowed, and saw Saber with his sword poised to strike.

“Ex...calibur!”

A second band of light was fired up the slope. It was blocked by the countless shields, as the first had been...but this strike was an order of magnitude more powerful. It pushed the shields back, lifting the golden king several meters into the air.

“How dare you...”

The golden king saw through the gaps in his shield wall that Saber was holding one of the Noble Phantasms that he himself had fired.

“I told you I was going to borrow them, didn’t I?”

Saber, still clutching the long sword, instantaneously slipped in directly underneath his airborne foe and made radiance envelop the blade once more.

The first time he had released the true name of his Noble Phantasm, the decorative sword he had originally held had shattered with a single strike. The Noble Phantasm shrouded in the aura of the age of the gods, however, remained intact after his second true name release and retained its properties as a Noble Phantasm.

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He unleashed magical energy in a third band of light.

The golden king deployed shields beneath him and blocked the attack, but he was pushed higher into the air.

Then came the fourth band of light.

Saber gave his opponent no time to recover and followed it with a fifth and a sixth slash of light aimed skyward from the church roof.

Even more frighteningly, the interval between strikes was steadily shrinking. By the time he got past his twentieth slash, they had become a massive, continuous band of light firing from the earth into the night sky.

As if to say that this, too, was both an infinite series of blows and a never-ending single strike.

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Several minutes earlier, the hospital's front parking lot

A short while earlier.

In the parking lot situated between the hospital and Main Street.

The area had been cleared of people, so there were hardly any cars parked in the moderately spacious lot and no obstacles up to the hospital entrance that John had been flung into.

The attack on John had triggered every police officer with strength to spare to spring into action at once. Each of them held a different Noble Phantasm. "Fake" Noble Phantasms—mere relics that had lost their original Mystery and magical energy, but whose legends had been overwritten by Caster.

It would be fair to say that they attacked with every trick they could think of—feints, sneak attacks from blind spots, and more. It could even be justly said that their teamwork had improved since their battle with Assassin at the police station.

And yet, Archer, having stolen Berserker's Noble Phantasm and gained the power of a demon, did not even make an effort to dodge them or to deflect them with his weapon. He took every blade and projectile aimed at him, but they had no apparent effect.

"Shit... Is he the same as that Dead Apostle Jester...?" One of the officers ground his teeth.

Memories of the moment they had been crushed in the police station flashed through their

minds. Faced with what was becoming a repeat of that defeat, the members of Clan Calatin never considered fleeing. If they retreated, they would lose their *raison d'être* called “justice.”

Like John, they carried their chief’s nearly-hypnotic words with them. That said, an honorable death was not what they wanted. They continued to think of ways they might stop the monster confronting them.

While they thought, the now-grotesque Archer advanced.

But every attack they aimed at his vitals was stopped by the cloth he wore. When they attacked his exposed arms and sides, in contrast, they felt their attacks connect, but never managed to reach the level of an effective blow.

On top of the cloth that completely nullified their attacks, his bare body’s specs must have been extraordinary as well. Given that he had also absorbed the demon’s power—although the police officers did not understand exactly what had happened—they supposed that his endurance and resistance to magical energy must have improved as a result.

In that case, did the enemy facing them have any weaknesses at all?

While the words “give up” ran through the officers’ heads, the grotesque bowman was steadily advancing step by step.

“...? Why doesn’t he just rush us?” One officer asked.

“Yeah,” another answered, “he could probably knock all of us out of his way in no time...”

At that, a woman who had been coolly observing the situation from a short distance away—Vera Levitt, the police chief’s aide-de-camp and effectively one of the leaders of Clan Calatin—said:

“He’s probably on his guard.”

She was a true mage as well as a police officer.

Although she had been born the younger daughter of a mage bloodline, her elder sister’s Magic Circuits were poor, and so she had been brought up by her mother, who carried the family’s Magic Crest. Her elder sister Amelia worked in Snowfield as a doctor, still ignorant of the world of magecraft.

Because her lineage had cooperated in running this Holy Grail War, Vera, as the heir, had joined the war having inherited a portion of her mother’s Magic Crest. It was an incomplete succession, given that the Crest transplant was not yet complete, but her strength stood out among Clan Calatin and it would be no exaggeration to call her the chief’s right hand.

Her next action was to take a little glass test tube that did not match her modern gear from her belt of equipment. She threw it in front of the enemy bowman and fired at it with the peculiarly decorated revolver she held.

Her bullet accurately pierced the test tube. A moment later, a smokescreen spread over a wide area.

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And no ordinary smokescreen—a smokescreen charged with magical energy of a randomly shifting nature. Call it jamming for magical energy perception.

Watching the dense smoke—which naturally also obscured his vision—spread, the bowman muttered in a low voice:

“...Impudence.”

Then, he moved his enormous body in a great leap, avoiding the smoke.

Vera had read the situation correctly.

The grotesque bowman—Alkeides—was wary, not of the police force, but of other factors—Saber, who had appeared without warning, and the King of Heroes, who had entered combat with him. They were fighting each other for the moment, but there was no telling when they might turn their attacks on him. He could also sense another Heroic Spirit’s Spirit Origin on Saber’s side and the presence of the monster that had stopped his initial attack on the hospital with a “shield of water” had not vanished.

This was not a duel to be fought honorably; it was a never-ending melee in which one had to outwit one’s opponents and could not afford to show even the least opening at one’s back.

Alkeides understood that. He could slaughter the police force spreading out and attacking him in an instant, but he would have to proceed carefully to do it without creating an opening. That was because the police force possessed more than a certain level of power. What they had acquired, the resolve to risk their lives, had not been for nothing.

There were twenty-five police officers on the scene. The rest remained in the station to guard the chief and to gather information. The bowman’s hellhound—Kerberos—had appeared just as they had been about to dispatch an advance team to their target’s hospital room, so none of them had reached the hospital room yet.

“How many do we send to Kuruoka Tsubaki’s room?”

“If the Servant possessing Kuruoka Tsubaki is hostile, a small team will end up dying for nothing,” Vera whispered her opinion to a female officer with a bow Noble Phantasm. “I would have liked to send Berserker, who could have dealt with it alone, but...”

Berserker had suffered serious damage to his spirit origin and had likely withdrawn with the aid of Flat’s Command Spells.

“...If the Servant is capable of understanding that Kuruoka Tsubaki is being targeted, it should take action to protect its Master. The fact that she still hasn’t withdrawn from the hospital means that either it hasn’t noticed what’s happening, doesn’t intend to protect her...or is confident that it can protect her without moving.”

Vera, thinking that the latter would be preferable, produced another several test tubes and

scattered them around her. No sooner had the tubes, thrown with the aid of magecraft, flown through the air to cover a wide area than bullets shattered all of them, spreading more smoke over the area.

Vera was about to order someone to scout out the hospital room, taking advantage of the delay, when...

“A wasted effort.”

The grotesque Archer flapped the demonic wings that grew from his back, kicking up a wind charged with dense magical energy around him. The wind carrying sinister magical energy formed a number of small whirlwinds and began to catch the smoke as if devouring it.

“How are we supposed to deal with this shit...?” One of the officers asked, his cheek twitching.

Despair began to spread across the officers’ faces...when a lone figure dashed through the smokescreen.

“Stop! It’s no use!”

The officers called out to restrain the figure. They could not see its face clearly through the windstorms and trailing smoke, but they could tell that it wore the same uniform as they did.

Alkeides judged it to be a reckless charge.

No matter what sort of attack the approaching police officer attempted, it would have no effect on him. If he struck with his bare fists, the blow would ignore the protection of the Nemean lion’s pelt, but in that case the attack would not even scratch him unless it was charged with a great deal of magical energy.

If he drew his bow, both of his hands would be occupied for an instant. That would obviously present the other Heroic Spirits with an opening. The King of Heroes, in particular, was capable of sending a lethal strike his way even while crossing swords with Saber. Even a “stray shot” could prove fatal if it happened to strike a gap in the Nemean lion’s pelt.

If only he possessed the Noble Phantasm that gave him twelve lives, which had been left before by his metamorphosis, he would probably have given little thought to the possibility and drawn his bow with all his might...but his present state did not merit leaving such an opening.

In that case, he decided, he needed only to brush the attacker aside with one blow of his arm, as he had done to that first brave officer whose neck he had shattered.

Alkeides raised his arm and waited for the police officer concealed by the darkness and smoke to approach him.

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Then, that instant, he sensed immense magical energy swell up behind him.

“!”

This magical energy... Saber.

The Saber who had been fighting with Gilgamesh must have fired some kind of Noble Phantasm. Sensing that its magical energy was aimed not at him, but at the sky, Alkeides did not take his eyes off the small threat closing in on him from the front. It was an action born of his refusal to drop his guard against even the weakest enemy.

No.

It was not that he did not look away.

He could not look away.

It was an effect produced by his “mind’s eye.”

It was not instinct.

His accumulated skill and experience, his honed senses, and the flesh and blood that comprised him all dominated his spirit and refused to let him look away.

It was not the other Heroic Spirits he ought to truly be wary of.

It was the lone police officer closing in on him.

Everything he had built up told him so.

The reason why would soon become clear.

Behind Alkeides, a pillar of light pierced the sky and illuminated the face of the approaching police officer before him. At the sight of that face, which appeared through a tear in the smokescreen created by the whirlwinds, Alkeides muttered:

“What...?”

It was unmistakably the face of the man whose neck he had broken and who he had sent flying into the hospital entrance a short while before.

“Ooooooaaah!”

The officer let out a wordless roar and kicked the ground.

His instantaneous acceleration exceeded Alkeides’ expectations. His arm moved to block, but before it could reach, the man’s slight frame sprang at Alkeides with the force of a bullet... and delivered a flying knee to the bridge of the grotesque Archer’s cloth-covered nose with all his might.

“J-John?!” The police officers shouted in surprise.

The way John had been sent flying earlier had put the words “instant death” into most of

their minds. He might have Magic Circuits, but he lacked the Magic Crest which only one child in a lineage could inherit. If he had had a Crest, which would have performed self-restoration magecraft when he was on the brink of death, it would have been a different story, but no one had imagined that John could survive without one, much less reappear so much stronger that he seemed like a different person.

But he had.

He had reappeared shrouded in magical energy that far surpassed that of an ordinary mage and made use of that energy to enhance his body and nerves severalfold.

John.

I see. So, this man's name is John.

Alkeides, despite taking the flying knee and being knocked backwards, coolly noted information about his opponent as he spun in midair and landed feet-first.

Those feet, however, were swept out from under him by John, who had circled around even farther behind him without his noticing.

“Oh-ho...”

Alkeides sounded impressed. He then caught himself with one arm on the ground and used his free arm to block John's follow-up attack. The shock ran through Alkeides' whole body with a creaking of flesh and bone.

John followed it up with a series of bare-handed strikes, continuing to batter Alkeides without giving him a chance to ready his bow.

What happened? He's like a different man... Or should I say he's matured?

He had gone beyond the level of ordinary humans, even for a mage. The experience Alkeides had built up over his lifetime warned him that the power surging from the police officer before him rivaled the enemy generals he had fought in ancient Greece in brute strength.

Is it his Noble Phantasm? Did Caster do something?

Alkeides noted that his body was being damaged, but it was not enough to make him register danger. Compared to when the Amazonian queen had struck him using her Noble Phantasm, the pain was like being punched by a child.

And yet...he regarded the man before him with the greatest possible caution.

Why? Alkeides wondered as he fended off the flurry of blows. Why was I wary of this man?

The vortex of magical energy that had sprung up behind him ought to have concerned him more than strikes like these. And yet everything he had accumulated was telling him not to take his eyes off this human.

His strength is certainly more than human, but it hasn't reached the level of a warrior Heroic Spirit.

Fate/strange Fake 5

So *why*, he wondered as he continued to take blow after blow. His attention was first drawn to the unnaturalness of his opponent's attacks.

...Why doesn't he use his right hand?

Throughout his flurry of unarmed strikes, the police officer called John never attacked with his right hand.

This difference in his center of gravity... A prosthetic?

While attacking and defending at split-second intervals, Alkeides instantaneously deduced the truth behind his opponent's unnatural movements.

That being the case, he wondered what that prosthetic hand could be.

Does it conceal a weapon? If so, it won't penetrate this pelt.

No, this man should already know that. Should I assume that it conceals magecraft, then?

Alkeides focused every nerve in his body on John's right arm while evading his close-quarters attacks.

It must be some kind of—No, is it...?

He felt a presence. A slight presence—an unique magical energy, or perhaps a curse—was escaping from the man's prosthetic hand. The instant that presence, which retained faint vestiges of the Age of the Gods, tickled Alkeides' nostrils and skin...

A chill of fear ran down Alkeides' spine.

Having noticed it, his instincts as a Heroic Spirit made him freeze in shock for just an instant.

No matter how much his Spirit Origin changed, *it* had a special meaning for him. It was because he knew its dangers better than anyone, because he knew the terror of it better than anyone, that he himself had soaked his special arrowheads in it.

"Damn you...!"

The instant Alkeides shouted, John's right arm *shone darkly*...and a peculiarly shaped blade appeared from it, forming the back of his hand.

A black liquid writhed around the prosthetic blade like a curse with a will of its own. It was one of the greatest calamities and most awful curses of the Age of the Gods, one that had killed countless heroes and even driven a certain great hero to take his own life—Hydra venom.

The blade coiled in that incomparably fiendish toxin closed in on a gap in Alkeides' cloth.

Impossible!

Has it survived into this era?! That water snake shouldn't be able to exist on the surface anymore!

He felt keenly how naïve his thinking had been.

The mages of this era could not hold a candle to those of the Age of the Gods, but they were intelligent enough to wield its remnants. Considering that his own Master likewise harbored the toxic, cursed mud in his body, he should have considered the possibility that his enemies possessed Hydra venom.

Faced with a weapon capable of killing him, Alkeides gripped his bow and leapt backward with all his might.

“...! Hurry! To the hospital!” John shouted to his nearby fellow officers once he was sure Alkeides had distanced himself. “I’ll buy as much time as I can! Secure the target while I do!”

“John... What happened to you?!”

“I don’t really understand myself...but it looks like Mr. Caster pulled something off for me!”

John then made to dash off, as if to say that they could talk later...when a chill ran through his body this time, causing him to stop in his tracks in spite of himself.

“...?”

John strained his eyes, his whole body breaking out in a cold sweat.

The grotesque bowman stood over twenty meters ahead of him. The intimidating air rising from him had magnified severalfold.

John had no difficulty figuring out why—the bowman had nocked an arrow to his bow.

He had fired arrows several times before, but this was different. He was serious.

The grotesque bowman spoke, paying his respects to John, who was trying to advance in spite of the chill.

“You who possess the means to kill me,

“I acknowledge you as my foe.”

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Crystal Hill, top floor

“Lord Gilgamesh!”

Tine, on the top floor of Crystal Hill, viewed the king who was her Servant, not through a farseeing spell, but with her naked eyes.

Fate/strange Fake 5

Gilgamesh was being forced upward to the height of their base on the building's top floor. His golden armor was completely engulfed in an even more radiant band of light and it was no longer possible to perceive his figure.

Not only Tine, but also the other nearby members of her tribe were wide-eyed.

The pillar of light that grew into the heavens from the church roof had ascended so high that its end could not be seen.

Not even the King of Heroes could be engulfed in that torrent of power and emerge unscathed.

Tine, sensing that, was on the verge of using a Command Spell to recall him... when she sensed Gilgamesh's magical energy swell within the pillar of light.

It might be more accurate to say that massive concentrations of magical energy had appeared around him.

It was the same thing that he had been doing all along.

Merely firing Noble Phantasms from his treasury out of empty space.

Only... the natures of the Noble Phantasms he deployed were a little different.

The myriad of Noble Phantasms, although each shrouded in immense magical energy, formed a single, titanic surge that coiled around the torrent of light itself, dispersing the light by brute force.

The Noble Phantasms that he had so far fired monotonously now displayed complex movements like those of a gigantic serpent.

But Gilgamesh was not using magical energy to control his armaments—golden chains that reached out of thin air on all sides were entangling the swarms of Noble Phantasms and forcefully adjusting their trajectories.

Gilgamesh emerged from the dispersed light and, by gathering together the rain of Noble Phantasms, transformed them into a waterfall that plummeted earthward accompanied by a furious surge.

It was like a great, golden dragon devouring the light Saber unleashed as it advanced.

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The Church

Saber, who was continuing to fire his Noble Phantasm from the roof of the church, sensed that the magical energy he unleashed was being driven back.

Then, seeing the compressed swarm of Noble Phantasms bearing down on him, he could not keep sweat from beading on his forehead.

Gazing up at the oncoming dragon of Noble Phantasms, Saber closed his eyes for a moment... and, forcing an intrepid grin, poured his magical energy into his next strike.

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“What? What’s going on...?”

Meanwhile, directly beneath Saber...

His Master, Ayaka, was inside the church, voicing her confusion.

As far as she could see out the windows, it looked like something on the church roof was glowing, but Ayaka, who was not a mage, had no way to make sure of what was taking place outside.

“Are you feeling all right, miss?” The overseer priest asked her quizzically.

“Huh...? Oh, now that you mention it, I do feel a little tired...”

“A little. I see...”

After a pause for thought, Hansa said:

“What are you, miss?”

“What?”

“The ability to provide a Heroic Spirit with that much magical energy isn’t normal. At the very least, anyone short of a first-rate mage should have run dry by now, but you...”

“I don’t know what you mean... I don’t even really know what this ‘magical energy’ stuff is...”

Ayaka frowned, looking troubled. Hansa was observing her with great interest, when:

“No, we haven’t got time for questions. You’d better get farther inside.”

“...Why?”

“I’m strengthening the wards,” the priest answered, staring up at the church’s high ceiling, “but the roof is about to cave in.”

“?!”

The next instant, a portion of the roof gave way and a figure dropped through the opening it left.

Fate/strange Fake 5

Ayaka narrowly avoided a direct hit from the rubble thanks to Hansa yanking her arm.

Before the situation could penetrate her brain, however, a haughty man's voice rang out through the hole in the roof.

"I had intended to obliterate you along with the church. I suppose I should praise you for stopping me."

It was a man in golden armor.

His armor was cracked in places, but his arms were crossed imperturbably and he was looking down at the center of the rubble piled in the middle of the church.

"What...?"

The instant Ayaka laid eyes on the man, she felt as if her brain had just received a violent jolt.

The instant she laid eyes on his face, to be precise.

She had a feeling that she had seen a similar face years before.

And in a church like this one.

When she tried to remember, noise ran through her thoughts.

Her brain buzzed... the noise was even in her vision. And in the gaps it made, a girl in a red hood appeared.

"Eee..."

Ayaka tried to clutch her head, but then she realized.

Why had the man in golden armor been speaking to the center of the rubble?

"I suppose I should praise you for stopping me."

Who had stopped him?

Ayaka tried to think, but the answer came to her at once.

She had recognized the thing in the center of the rubble.

For an instant, Ayaka had mistaken the figure with numerous swords and spears sprouting from its body for part of the rubble. It was unquestionably... Saber, who had so recently walked beside her, making friendly conversation.

While his heart and head were intact, his stomach, shoulders, and thighs were impaled by a number of weapons—enough to kill an ordinary human.

"Sa...ber...?"

The instant she recognized him, both the noise and the red-hooded girl vanished from her sight.

She nearly sank to the floor, but caught herself at the last moment and attempted to approach Saber.

She was tripped up by the rubble, however, and fell.

The man on the roof, seemingly oblivious to Ayaka, continued to address Saber.

“You could have avoided those wounds, had you dodged. Did you intend to protect this church? I ought to execute you for your hubris, but you did succeed in cancelling out a single strike. For the moment, you have my praise.”

At that, Saber, who had thus far remained motionless, moved sluggishly and twisted his lips into a grin as he answered the man on the roof.

“You...honor me,” Saber said, still breathing feebly and looking up at the golden Heroic Spirit. “I can’t believe you’d destroy a church. Don’t blame me if God has something to say about it.”

“Absurd. I had my fill of the wrath of the gods long ago.”

“Gods... I see, you’re a polytheist... And the way you talk... Ha ha. So, you... No, you two are the ‘primordial travelers’...”

Saber laughed, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth.

“Mongrel...what do you hold within you?” The golden Heroic Spirit looked at him and asked haughtily, without anger or disdain.

“...? What...do you mean?”

“I do not mean your retinue. I mean the foundation of your Spirit Origin.”

The man on the roof continued to speak dispassionately to the feebly-breathing Saber.

“In any case, it seems you still lack a reason to fight. To challenge me with that attitude is the height of hubris, mongrel. If dubious desires are all you can muster in the face of my treasure, then perish while all you harbor within you rots.”

He did not even uncross his arms, but ripples formed in the space above him.

“I will deliver my verdict. Have you any last words?”

“...I’d like to say no...but yes... The girl who shared her magical energy with me isn’t my Master... I just drained her energy...”

Ayaka had staggered to her feet. Saber’s words made her eyes widen. She realized what he was going to say next.

Stop.

Don’t say it.

She tried to speak, but her throat refused to function.

She was breathing raggedly and on the verge of falling again when Saber said, with a smile:

“She hasn’t opposed you...so don’t be harsh on her.”

“Very well, but do not forget that I will only grant her consideration. If she turns out to be worthless, I will simply blow her away, just like the other rabble.”

Then, the armored man slowly raised his hand and made to conclude his words to Saber.

“Mongrel, I judge you—”

Fate/strange Fake 5

His sentence, however, was never finished.

An instant later, the Heroic Spirit in golden armor was...

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Several minutes earlier, on Main Street

“Is that...John?”

The man who had appeared and saved them was their colleague who, moments before, had been sent flying with a broken neck.

His sudden display of superhuman activity seemed to declare that he had truly been “re-born.” The members of Clan Calatin were seized by confusion.

Vera’s clear, ringing voice cut through their hesitation.

“Front line, fall back and shield the rear line! Rear line, support John with everything you’ve got!”

The barked orders from the normally quiet Vera snapped them back to awareness.

The officers each readied their own Noble Phantasm and surrounded John and the grotesque bowman in the positions she had ordered.

Far from support, those with close-ranged weapons would only be a hindrance against the bowman.

So, the officers judged that they ought to leave it to the ranged attackers in the rear line to serve as a distraction. And if that really was John, he ought to know how to coordinate with the rear line.

They planned to support John, and in the meantime find an opportunity to send half of their number inside the hospital as he wished...but several arrows launched by their enemy shattered their formation in an instant.

A burly officer with a large shield Noble Phantasm tried to block one, but the instant the arrow struck, a shock like a blast from an adhesive grenade ran through the surface of the shield and launched him backward.

And the bowstring had not even been pulled fully taut.

The arrow had been just one of several diversionary shots fired without leaving an opening.

The officers were painfully aware that the only reason they, along with the city around them, had not been reduced to scraps of meat was that the Heroic Spirit had reason and, either by his Master's order or on his own initiative, was making some effort to maintain the Concealment of Mystery.

When he had first arrived with Kerberos, they had assumed he was a murderer without an ounce of concern for such things, but he was actually the opposite.

As far as that Heroic Spirit was concerned, using a beast like Kerberos to simply devour his enemies' flesh did more to preserve the Concealment of Mystery than fighting seriously himself would.

"Doesn't he have any weaknesses?!" One of the officers shouted.

It was true that John was moving on par with a Heroic Spirit, but his opponent's strength far exceeded their expectations of Heroic Spirits.

They had assumed that such strength must be unique to Gilgamesh and possibly the other Heroic Spirit—thought to be Lancer—who had clashed with the King of Heroes on the first day, but they were realizing too late that they had been naïve.

Still, they had known from the beginning that their abilities would not measure up to a Heroic Spirit's.

They needed to support John—who was likewise outside their calculations—and at least force the bowman to retreat.

The bowman must realize that wiping out the officers would not allow him to attack their Master or his Servant directly.

In which case, at a minimum, they only needed to convince him that it would not be worth it to continue.

Those were the thoughts running through the minds of more than a few officers...

When they realized that there was another police officer, apart from John, behind the grotesque bowman.

"!"

The officers wanted to shout at him to follow Vera's orders, but raising their voices would only alert their enemy.

When they focused their attention on the officer to see who was ignoring orders...they realized.

Before they knew it, the one officer behind the bowman had become two, who then soon became four.

Fate/strange Fake 5

It was not one of them.

It was none other than the Heroic Spirit who had been battling the archer in the guise of a police officer shortly before—the Servant Berserker.

Berserker—Jack the Ripper—had become a swarm of police officers.

Those officers, whose ranks had swelled noiselessly to sixteen, attempted to launch a surprise attack on their enemy's rear to support John.

But they were easily scattered.

Without turning to face them, the bowman twisted the grotesque wings that sprouted from his back and sliced through the first several Jacks who sprang at him.

“...So, you can still move.”

The bowman spoke without looking behind him, in a tone that was equal parts admiration and exasperation.

While he spoke, he continued to fend off John's attacks with his bow.

The superhuman sense that had allowed him to deal with Jack approaching silently from behind him was truly worthy of the name “Mind's Eye,” one of the remaining Jacks thought and called out:

“I'm impressed that you can use your newly stolen wings so well.”

Other Jacks lunged at the bowman as he spoke.

The new Jacks no longer even had the appearance of police officers. They were an assortment of ordinary townspeople, doctors, the young and old, men and women.

Possibly Jack could no longer afford the effort to keep his appearances uniform. The Jacks looked like a pitiful human crowd gathered to assault a demon out of legend, or else to throw themselves on its mercy.

“Absurd.”

Ultimately, Jack's power was not even what it had been earlier. Their movements were sluggish.

The bowman seemed to realize that, because he kept the majority of his attention on the human police officer in front of him.

An instant later, however, his assessment changed completely.

Countless black arms grew from Jack's shadows and wrapped around the bowman's body.

“Hm...?”

Shadows.

He was surrounded by a jet-black vortex that seemed to swallow even the darkness of night.

Having recognized it as magecraft, the Bowman—Alkeides—let his attention wander around the area while continuing to deflect the police officer's prosthetic hand with his bow.

He discovered a distortion in the scenery.

It was a crude illusion. No ordinary person would ever have seen through it, but it was obvious to a Heroic Spirit of Alkeides' caliber.

"...So, you've come out of your hole, mage."

Alkeides judged that it was Berserker's Master and immediately grasped what the shadows meant.

They were merely a diversion.

If they had been a type of magecraft that inflicted direct harm, he would have been imperious to them.

It would be a different story if his adversary were a mage from the Age of Gods, but assuming that Berserker's Master was a human mage and not a Heroic Spirit, that was impossible.

According to intelligence supplied by his own Master, Bazdilot Cordelion, Berserker's Master was a genius from the headquarters of the Mages Association known as the Clock Tower. As long as he was a modern mage, however, his magecraft was nothing to fear, and the mage ought to be equally aware of that.

In which case, he ought to regard the shadows as a diversion.

As a matter of fact, Alkeides was aware that in his current situation, with multiple Heroic Spirits in his vicinity, a diversion was far more dangerous than any half-baked attack.

Accordingly, he made his next move with care.

"...Peck."

That softly muttered word became a weighty curse scattered over the area.

John and the Berserkers were forced to retreat before the force of a horizontal swipe of his great bow.

Alkeides took advantage of that momentary opportunity to fire the multiple arrows in his hand at once.

In the twinkling of an eye, the shafts metamorphosed into birds of war with bronze beaks and talons, which launched themselves at the distortion in space on the sidewalk down Main Street.

The distortion was torn at with each pass of the magical-energy-shrouded birds, revealing the figure of a young man in what had appeared to be empty space.

"Whoa! P-P-Play ball!"

The young man disturbed the surrounding air currents to avoid the birds' attacks while he hastily erected a mystical barrier.

Fate/strange Fake 5

A mighty shot from Alkeides, however, threaded through the whirlwind-scattered birds and pierced the pit of the young man's stomach.

“...”

The avatar of destruction had torn its way through without regard for strong winds or mystical barriers.

It had accurately annihilated the young man's core, shattering the surrounding flesh and bone as it destroyed his organs.

“Master!” Berserker cried from behind Alkeides.

“Flat!”

The police officer called John shouted the mage's name as well.

His shout reminded Alkeides that the name in the information his Master had supplied him with had been Flat Escardos and assured himself that he had disposed of Berserker's Master.

The Magic Crest marked onto the mage's body might activate automatically, force his fatal wounds to heal, and revive him, but Alkeides would not give it the time for that. He had already fired a second and a third arrow to destroy the mage's entire body, Crest and all. The birds, which had gotten free of the gale, had also begun to peck at it.

However...

Just as the destruction was about to begin, the young man's body began to fade like mist.

“What...?”

For a moment, Alkeides suspected an illusion, but he was quickly proven wrong.

He had definitely felt the “birds,” which were a part of his Noble Phantasm and linked to him by paths of magical energy, pierce his enemy's body.

But it was a fact that the corpse was vanishing, almost like a Heroic Spirit's.

Alkeides' primary focus shifted to the question of the Master he had killed for only a few seconds.

And in those few seconds... *he* was completing his complex and bizarre spell.

“...Game select.”

The voice came from right beside Alkeides.

From among the Berserkers who had become corpses in that short time.

In the midst of that pile, one body Alkeides could not remember slaying moved its mouth and hands and rapidly performed magecraft.

A moment later... one of the arrows Alkeides had nocked burst, causing his now-grotesque frame to stagger for an instant.

Impossible.

Alkeides immediately realized what had been done to him.

The current of magical energy necessary to activate the Stymphalian Birds, part of his Noble Phantasm, King's Order, had been tampered with and made to short-circuit.

That, however, was only the beginning of the spell.

“Ngh...!”

Just as he tried to regain his footing, he was struck by another wild burst of magical energy.

Alkeides was not a mage, but as his body was itself a mass of magical energy, every vein and nerve in it could be called a Magic Circuit.

All of them had become fuses and were setting off surges of uncontrolled magical energy one after another in a chain reaction.

Magical energy burst in his lean, steely arms.

Magical energy burst in the toes of his feet, so well-honed that they sometimes became blades.

Magical energy burst in the veins that ran throughout his body, deep and strong as the roots of the world tree.

Magical energy burst in his beautifully woven nerves.

Magical energy burst in each of his alveoli before he even had a chance to breathe.

Magical energy burst behind his eyeballs, hidden by his cloth.

Magical energy burst in a part of his brain stem.

It burst, and burst, and burst...

The interval between bursts of magical energy grew shorter and shorter until at last he felt a massive explosion of magical energy near his heart.

He could not distinguish the pain from the heat of it.

Half of the wings on his back and the horns on his head snapped off. There was even an explosion of magical energy in the hand that held his bow, tearing off several of his thick talons.

The magical energy ran out of control inside his body as well, shredding parts of his organs.

But his Spirit Origin, once renowned as a great hero, was to be feared.

“...No!”

With a shout of effort, he stamped his foot down onto the street and poured his rampaging

Fate/strange Fake 5

magical energy into the earth.

A moment later, the asphalt lifted in patches all along the street, which ran for several hundred meters, and ruptured pipes shot fountains of earth and water into the air in unison.

Many Heroic Spirits might have burst entirely at that point, but he had held his body together by the force of his sheer physical strength.

Even so, the resulting damage was extraordinary.

The backlash had torn up the street around him and a number of cars that had been parked along it were overturned and half scrapped.

Alkeides' insides, however, had suffered far greater damage than the cars.

It would ordinarily be inconceivable for a single mage to inflict such damage on a Heroic Spirit.

Alkeides' Spirit Origin, with its extraordinarily powerful Anti-Magic, was impervious to modern magecraft.

Meaning... it had backfired.

There was one part of his Spirit Origin whose Anti-Magic was weak.

It was also a part of Berserker, meaning that a path of magical energy had linked it to the young man who had until recently been its Master.

The mage had introduced a spell that disturbed the flow of his magical energy through the power of the Noble Phantasm he had stolen from Berserker—the part of him that had transformed into a demon, a kind of phantasmal.

Even so, it was no easy feat.

Unless the mage had a complete grasp of the complex flow of his magical energy in this condition, it would be impossible.

Meaning that *he* had accomplished that.

"I had to get this close for it to work," the mage who had been hiding among the crowd of Berserkers said, revealing a relieved smile.

The Berserker corpses around him began to vanish. At the same time, the corpse of the mage Alkeides had just shot through disappeared completely.

It had been Berserker in the form of the mage Flat Escardos.

Circumstance piled on circumstance dulled Alkeides' mind's eye for an instant.

And that momentary unbalance... created a fatal opening.

A roar struck Alkeides' ears.

It signaled that the police officer called John had poured all his strength into a desperate

strike... and by the time it reached his ears, John was already upon him.

The blow momentarily broke the sound barrier.

It created a shockwave that sent Flat and the nearby rubble flying.

It took just an instant.

An impact ran through Alkeides' side, feeling so weak to him that he almost doubted it.

It may have been a supersonic blow from a prosthetic hand transformed into a Noble Phantom, but that was all it could do to Alkeides' superhuman physique.

As a matter of fact, the impact had broken off the prosthetic hand's blade at the base and the recoil had sent John tumbling to the ground several meters away.

But it had been enough.

John had put all his might into that blow of his prosthetic hand—a thrust of a blade dripping with hydra venom.

It would have been a fatal wound to almost any Heroic Spirit... but there was a reason it ate into Alkeides' Spirit Origin with especial ferocity.

Death.

The pure curse of deadly poison.

The thing that had once driven Alkeides to end his own life coursed through his veins.

As it entered his body, Flat spoke the phrase that concluded his spell, signaling that his stratagem was complete.

“...Game over.”

He had created an opening for John, who possessed a strike worthy of being called final.

The steps he had taken to produce that moment of time were simple and obvious.

He had offered up his soul.

He had offered it to a Heroic Spirit of the Caster Class, whom he had known for only a few minutes.

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Fate/strange Fake 5

“My specialty as a Heroic Spirit is tinkering with tools that have a bit of notoriety and whip ‘em up into Noble Phantasms... but I don’t get many chances to work on a real Heroic Spirit.

“You see, I’d need the owner’s consent for that, which is normally a no-go.

“But when the pieces fall into place, an ‘exception’ comes out tasting best.

“Basically, I’m gonna fiddle around with your ability to ‘become anyone’ and elevate it.

“I’ll make it so that you can turn into strangers even more perfectly.

“Of course, it’s up to you whether your Master counts as a stranger.”

Alexandre Dumas’ proposal had been quite a tradeoff.

It was to temporarily enhance Jack the Ripper’s abilities by combining one of his Spirit Origin’s skills, Thousand Faces, and his Noble Phantasm, Natural Born Killers, with one more “ingredient”—the essence of his Master, Flat Escardos.

It was a metaphor, of course; Dumas did not chop Flat up and toss him in a pot.

Still, for the Master and Servant whose links of magical energy Dumas strengthened and whose beings he artificially intermingled, it was equivalent to being thrown in a blender and turned into a mixture of ground meat.

For the Master, it meant having his own nature mixed with the Spirit Origin of a “killer.” It was impossible to foresee what side- and after-effects it might have. He might lose his magecraft, or unconsciously commit murders, drawn along by episodes associated with the Heroic Spirit Jack the Ripper.

There was no end to the conceivable negatives... but Flat had agreed without hesitation.

Jack had been fortified by Dumas’ Noble Phantasm and gained the ability to become the mage Flat Escardos down to the last detail, including his magecraft.

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Before they knew it, the pillar of light that had reached into the sky had vanished, and in its place, part of the church that had been its base had collapsed.

As darkness engulfed the area, a grave, but quiet voice rang out.

“...Why?” Alkeides asked Berserker, the poisoned blade that had broken off John’s prosthetic arm still buried in his side.

Alkeides understood that Berserker had used a perfect disguise to make him mistake Berserker’s Master’s location, although not how they had accomplished that, but that did not dispel

his doubts.

“If you can completely become your Master, you could just as easily have done so and worked the spell on me yourself. Why did you risk your Master on the battlefield?”

Berserker, in the form of a police officer, answered:

“Simple. No matter how completely I become my Master, there are things I can never possess.”

At that, Alkeides shifted his gaze to Berserker’s Master, Flat Escardos, who was just picking himself up from the ground.

A second one of the Command Spells on the back of his left hand was faded.

Alkeides realized that it had been the “final push” behind the spell that had sent his magical energy out of control.

“...So, you repurposed one of your own Command Spells.”

Command Spells only affected Servants contracted to their user.

It was impossible to overturn that principle and enforce a command on someone else’s Servant... but by skillfully rewriting its immense magical energy and using it to “hack” the path of magical energy that linked Alkeides to his Master... Flat had forced him to use a spell equivalent to ordering him to take his own life with a Command Spell.

“Well... I guess it was kind of a gamble... Your Master already used all their Command Spells, right, Mr. Archer? If they had even one left, I think I would have bounced off the strength of that connection.”

Seeing Flat smile that he had been lucky with a look of relief, Alkeides realized how abnormal the young man was.

“I see. I never expected you to have the ‘sight’ to perceive so much...”

Then, he muttered to himself in a voice too low for Flat to hear:

“So... it’s you.”

“?”

Flat looked puzzled, but Alkeides did not answer his unspoken question.

He had realized... that ‘death’ was eating into his body.

A “death” that had been enough to drive the human shell and soul from that hateful man, the “glory of god,” who had once been his other half.

Alkeides looked at the blade stuck in his side and then at John, the owner of the broken prosthetic hand.

To John, who was still trying to rise, Alkeides said:

“Well done, child of man, my brother who rejects divine rule and stands on his own feet.”

Fate/strange Fake 5

There was a sound of spilling liquid—dark blood had dripped from under the cloth that covered the grotesque bowman's face.

“If the power you were given had been a divine blessing, I would have slain you at once, but the power coursing through you is born of man and earth. The gods had no hand in it. And so, I praise this world, this age. You may have used the water serpent's venom, but I congratulate you on producing a technique to destroy me while rejecting divine aid.”

Was his calm speech the mark of a Heroic Spirit who realized his end was near and meant to meet it with dignity?

John was under the illusion that it was, until Alkeides continued:

“And... I pity you, hero.”

“What...?”

Alkeides' side was eaten away by the venom, melting into a black wound before John's puzzled gaze...

But an instant later, the jet-black toxin was consumed by “mud” of an even more sinister hue.

“What?!”

The police officers, Flat, and the Berserkers froze in spite of themselves.

The mud-like mass of magical energy that welled up from Alkeides' body enveloped the Hydra venom as if to consume it, to consume “death” itself, and was then sucked back into the wound.

“If I had merely thrown off the robe of godhood, I would have suffered and then gone to my rest.”

The poisoned wound that had eaten so deep it exposed his ribs and hipbone vanished, leaving his body fully restored in its place.

“Before my Spirit Origin was twisted, I would have been willing to fall to that scratch. This venom alone may have been able to eat through all of my countless lives.”

Then, he stood before the speechless John and declared:

“But... we have both been unfortunate.”

There seemed to be a faint hint of resignation in his voice, but it immediately turned to anger.

“I have lost my twelve lives... but know that you cannot vanquish me, afflicted as I am with vile mud, with deadly venom.”

With rage, not at John and the others, but at himself, at limitless “power” itself, Alkeides bellowed as if pronouncing a curse.

“It will take more than venom to dye my corrupted blood... the flames of vengeance that my soul harbors!”

Then, his magical energy overflowed.

It was a writing of magical energy, but it became a physical wind that buffeted the bodies of all nearby.

A vortex of magical energy stained a dark red swept over the area. It was as if Alkeides had become a monstrous tornado.

The familiars that had been observing the battle were blown away. Magic Circuits screamed. The mere touch of the wind drove some to their knees.

Alkeides had not done anything.

This was the result of his mere presence.

“He wasn’t even... taking this seriously...” One of the officers muttered with a look tinged with despair.

“No, he was,” a Berserker answered with a wry grin.

“Until now, he’s been seriously scouting things out... I suppose. He’s been wary of everything around him.”

He was also wearing a look that said there was nothing more to be done and clearly considering how to make an escape with his Master.

“That was why we had to kill him completely here... before he devoted his full power to his murderous impulses.”

A moment later, Alkeides sprang into action.

His target, however, was neither the police force nor Berserker.

As if to say that they were now beneath his notice, the lone avenger kicked the earth.

That kick carried Alkeides high into the air... where he drew back the arrow he had nocked and loosed it without hesitation.

Loosed it at the Archer who, shrouded in an aura of divinity, was at that moment about to pass judgment on Saber.

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On Top of the Church

Gilgamesh stood on a section of the roof that had narrowly avoided collapse and looked down on Saber, who lay drenched in blood on a pile of rubble.

“Mongrel, I judge you—”

He was about to deliver a verdict, not as a king, but as a “judge,” when a tempest of dark-red magical energy swirled around him and an intense bloodlust bore down on him.

“...How boorish,” Gilgamesh tutted with an icy expression, halting his judgment in mid-sentence.

Space rippled and Noble Phantasms launched out of Gate of Babylon to intercept the oncoming arrow.

“If I were here as a king, I would dismiss this as a jester’s antics, but if you interrupt my judgment, I will eliminate you.”

Then, he slowly turned and addressed Alkeides, the Archer-cum-Avenger who had alighted on the opposite edge of the church.

“I see you have been unmasked, clown. I will permit you to remove your cloth as well,” Gilgamesh continued, as if to say that the dark-red magical energy shrouding his opponent’s body was of no concern to him. “I would look on your tear-stained face.”

“...My tears have long since run dry. I shed them all that day when the divine tyrants took everything from me.”

“So, you drip mud from your eyes instead? I see you’ve brought quite an eyesore... I shall make the organizers of this ritual pay for defiling the Grail, one of my treasures, with mud sullied with a mongrel’s obsession.”

After insinuating that he had perceived the nature of the red-black, mud-like magical energy, Gilgamesh asked Alkeides, as if to test him:

“So, what will you do now? You could say that coming for my head while you still have strength to spare was the right choice, although impertinent... but do you really believe I cannot dispel your paltry corruption?”

“...Mighty king, it is true that corruption would be nothing to you if you made use of your treasures.”

In contrast to the immense vortex of magical energy swirling around him, Alkeides was unsettlingly calm and relaxed.

His arms hung loose at his sides. His right hand lightly clutched his bow.

And yet, his untensed limbs were pregnant with an ominous sense that they might become decapitating blades at any moment.

“But... feeble warrior, it is not corruption that will slay you.”

“Oh?”

“It is... the corpse drowned in that mud.”

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Between the two Heroic Spirits was the massive pit created by the collapse of the church roof.

“Ah... What a shame,” Saber muttered, watching the two presences squaring off above him.

“A big war is about to start, and it looks like I’m going to miss out...”

“Idiot!” Ayaka, who had practically crawled up the rubble, shouted in a low voice. “This is no time to be worrying about things like that. We need to get out of here...!”

“Yes. Sorry, Ayaka. I meant to keep the church safe... but I slipped up just a little.”

“You want to brush this off as ‘a little’?! Listen, you need first aid... The church must have bandages or something...”

“...Trying to heal a Heroic Spirit with bandages...? I guess you really... aren’t a mage.”

The blood-covered Saber gave Ayaka a wry grin.

“Besides... your concern... is far better medicine...”

“This is no time for jokes! We have to at least get away from here.”

Ayaka grabbed Saber’s arm and tried to lift him over her shoulder.

“Oh, hang on... Accepting that kind of help from a subject I’m meant to protect... would be a disgrace as both a knight and a king...”

“Your name was mud the minute you started hanging out with me! Now hurry!”

“Causing you to disparage yourself like that... is a disgrace... as a Heroic Spirit...”

Saber somehow struggled to his feet unaided and, as if to say that his heart, at least, was unbroken, forced a pained smile and said:

“Of course... after getting us into this situation... I can’t complain if you tell me I’m not fit to be a Servant...”

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The words Saber muttered atop the mountain of rubble naturally failed to reach the Heroic Spirits above him.

Fate/strange Fake 5

“I may already be a corpse, but my sins are eternal.”

Having declared himself a dead man, Alkeides took a step forward.

“And so, I shall consign my body and soul to the seat of oblivion that drifts in Hades.”

A nonchalant step.

Nonetheless, his opponent, the King of Heroes, recognized it as a weighty step, charged with Alkeides’ whole being.

“My great foe and pitiful fellow, dance along with my mad rush.”

Then, Alkeides, his posture still relaxed, spoke with force.

“...Nine Lives.”

At almost the same instant Gilgamesh deployed his Gate of Babylon, Alkeides fired his bow. Hundreds of Noble Phantasms were fired.

Not the weak Noble Phantasms that Gilgamesh had attacked with during their confrontation in the wasteland—each and every one of these would be sure to smash his opponent’s Spirit Origin.

If they had been fired with conceit, the myriad of Noble Phantasms would have fallen as a rain of vicious bloodlust with no thought for efficiency or any other consideration.

Now that he was standing on the same land as his friend Enkidu, however, Gilgamesh had no conceit.

His onslaught consisted of accurate Noble Phantasms aimed precisely at the parts of Alkeides’ body that the Nemean Lion’s pelt did not cover. It was a lethal swarm that would have obliterated any ordinary Heroic Spirit.

And yet, the rapid barrage of arrows that Alkeides fired while leaping to one side were downing those Noble Phantasms by matching them shot for shot.

Each arrow shot down multiple Noble Phantasms, but even more shocking than their force were their unusual trajectories and the speed of the barrage.

Alkeides was nocking two or three arrows at once and drawing his bow too fast for the eye to follow.

And that was not all. His arrows changed trajectory in midair as if each shaft had a will of its own, precisely shooting down Gilgamesh’s oncoming Noble Phantasms.

Those he could not completely evade, he blocked with the pelt by twisting his body, nullifying them.

Seeing the pelt undamaged, the King of Heroes snorted and made his next move.

“I shall personally assess...”

A large distortion in space formed beside him.

“...how well that pelt of yours can recognize the works of man.”

From the air to his left, blazing white flames.

From the air to his right, shining silver liquid.

To be precise, the liquid itself was colorless, but the moisture in the air around it froze instantly, giving its appearance a silvery gleam.

As they were in the King of Heroes’ treasury, both fire and liquid must have been human creations.

They were joined by manmade thunderbolts, and the storm of fire, ice, and lightning assailed Alkeides.

“...”

Alkeides, for his part, drew his bow back especially far.

The longbow bent back. Just as it seemed about to snap in two, it was released... and “it” took form in the sky above the church.

It were nine arrows shrouded in ominous magical energy whose twisting trajectories looked like titanic serpents.

They covered the sky over Main Street like the Hydra of legend, devouring not only the on-rushing Noble Phantasms, but flame, cold, and even lightning alike.

Had the bowman been his proper self, his shots would have been shrouded not in the sinister, mud-like magical energy, but in pure divinity.

It was originally a culmination of skill and divinity said to be “clad in dragons.”

That Noble Phantasm, when unleashed with a sword, was a breathless dance of nine strikes and with a spear a series of nine blows, was no secret art passed down from father to son. It was a myth that the great hero had created and perfected alone.

The shafts he fired having become a disciple of vengeance, however, raced between the skyscrapers with appearances that suggested vipers or evil dragons.

And, as if to declare that the gleaming gold King of Heroes would be their final prey, the nine outspread great serpent heads bore down on him.

“Hydra venom? It may be the way of the world for a king to be served poison, but you lack artistry, mongrel.”

He paused his barrage of Noble Phantasms and caused another ripple in the air in front of him, preparing to open a door for a new treasure.

“I hate to take snakes into my treasury, but I already have venom to match yours.

“Along with its flesh, blood, and antivenom.”

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“You can win, Lord Gilgamesh... I know you can...!”

Tine, who had been watching the clash from the top floor of the casino hotel, instinctively clenched her fists.

The grotesque bowman who called himself Alkeides must be one of the most dangerous opponents in this Holy Grail War.

But what Tine saw of the exchange convinced her that her own Servant, Gilgamesh, would triumph. He seemed to be deflecting all of his opponent’s attacks, and these nine bowshots that seemed to be a Noble Phantasm must be one of Alkeides’ trump cards.

Judging from circumstantial evidence, Alkeides possessed a Noble Phantasm that stole his opponent’s Noble Phantasm, which smacked of foul play. But the way things were going, Gilgamesh would not even need to draw Ea, the Sword of Rupture, to unleash Enuma Elish, so there would be no risk of it being stolen.

More than anything else, it was Gilgamesh’s attitude, which betrayed not an ounce of fear or distress, that made Tine feel relieved.

“I would expect no less, my king...!”

The words Tine could not suppress were not those of a mage seeking to reclaim her land.

They were the words of a child who had yet to fully mature, entranced by the King of Heroes’ radiance.

Tine Chelk had forgotten.

Forgotten that while she was a retainer of the King of Heroes, she was also Gilgamesh’s Master.

And Tine was unaware that, however great and exalted a being that Gilgamesh might be, even if the King of Heroes abandoned conceit and carelessness...

The Holy Grail War was not so soft that it could be won without Master and Servant fighting as a team.

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Just as Gilgamesh was readying a Noble Phantasm to intercept the nine arrows shrouded in grotesque, dark-red magical energy that were closing in on him...

The distortions in space that had spread out around him suddenly vanished.

"...What?"

At that, Gilgamesh frowned for the first time.

The disappearance of the distortions in space pointed to a single fact.

The gates to the treasury of Babylon that held every last one of the king's treasures, to the vault said by some to still exist somewhere in the world and by others to exist in other space entirely, had all shut.

Gilgamesh himself, of course, would not do such a thing.

But was there anyone else who could?

It was impossible.

In the fractions of a second it took Gilgamesh to reach that conclusion, the hero-slaying poisoned arrows were still closing in on him.

But this Gilgamesh was neither conceited nor careless.

Refusing to despair so soon, he attempted to bring the Noble Phantasms he had already fired to bear to counter them, when...

"— _ _ — _ — _ — _ _ _ — _ _ —"

"It" bore a strange resemblance to the song of the earth that Enkidu had sung on the first day.

"It" resounded throughout Snowfield without warning, becoming a cacophony that scrambled the brains of everyone there.

What set "it" apart from Enkidu was the timbre.

"It" was not a beautiful singing voice ringing out in praise of the land and its people...

"It" was the resentful roar of a twisted monster that seemed to curse the whole world.

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Tine witnessed the look on Gilgamesh's face in that moment through her farseeing spell.

"What...?"

For an instant, she did not believe her eyes.

Fate/strange Fake 5

The look on Gilgamesh's face reflected in them was one she had never seen on him before. At first glance, it was close to his look of surprise when he had sensed Enkidu's presence. Except for his eyes. Unbelievably, *his eyes were tinged with an emotion that the King of Heroes must never show.* An emotion ordinarily seen in the eyes of the King of Heroes' opponents when they looked at him.

His eyes expressed shock, irritation, hesitation... and the faintest tinge of fear. Everyone who witnessed that sight, momentary though it was, reached the same conclusion. The instant he heard that roar, the King of Heroes had flinched.

Impossible.

It's not true. My eyes are playing tricks on me.

Tine did not even have time to finish her thought before her farseeing spell showed her a tragedy.

The instant that one of the arrows bearing down on the King of Heroes pierced his shoulder.

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"Ngh...!"

It had barely missed his vitals.

But with a poisoned arrow, that hardly mattered.

The other arrows, which he had evaded, were closing in on him.

His treasury refused to open.

The one arrow impact had unbalanced him.

And the swarm of arrows was bearing down on him with too much force for him to deflect with his sword.

With nothing more to be done, a second and third shaft pierced the King of Heroes' arm and leg.

The remaining arrows would be sure to strike vital points.

That instant, when it seemed to everyone that the King of Heroes was about to fall in a shocking upset... a "spear of earth" flew out of nowhere, passing by the King of Heroes to strike down the arrows.

The magical energy shrouding the shafts was deflected with a thunderous crash, shaking the

window glass in the surrounding buildings.

“...So, we’ve been interrupted.”

“Damn... you.”

The King of Heroes’ rage-filled face was turned to the night sky. It was impossible to tell if he could even hear his opponent.

“To think that you would wander here... Do not tell me... you have fallen that far.”

His words were not aimed at Alkeides.

Gilgamesh’s eyes, fixed on empty air, had already sensed that presence.

A presence that, until then, had been skillfully concealed.

A presence that had emerged the instant the poisoned arrow had struck Gilgamesh, as if to say that it no longer had any need to hide.

And, in answer to his word... a third voice rang out in the sky over Main Street.

“‘Fallen’? How rude.”

It was a beautiful, clear voice, but so utterly cold that it gave its listeners chills.

“My elevation has never changed. You just convinced yourselves that you had climbed above us. Am I wrong?”

From behind a skyscraper appeared a woman floating in the air, with white skin, red eyes, and inhuman beauty.

Gilgamesh did not recognize her appearance.

But he knew the being that most likely dwelt within her more than he would like.

You might even say that he knew her too well.

“Still, you finally left me an opening... Actually, I think the searing pain from that venom should be hitting you about now. Don’t you want to writhe? Hurry up and scream in agony—I’ll do you the favor of laughing at you,” the beauty told Gilgamesh with a faint smile as the Hydra venom began to eat into him.

But Gilgamesh, although he must have been suffering a shock for which the word “pain” was insufficient, like powerful acid coursing through every vein in his body, and despite the sweat beading on his forehead, looked down on the beauty hovering above him.

“How you bark. To think that even the passage of millennia has not worn off the arrogance stuck to your soul. Quite a deep-rooted mold, it seems.”

“Say what you like,” the woman who the King of Heroes, himself like the word “egotism” walking around in a suit of armor, had declared arrogant continued with a complacent smile. “Still, tracking you down took a lot of work... You deserve a thousand deaths just for making me walk through that gloomy cave.”

Fate/strange Fake 5

At the word “cave,” both Gilgamesh and Tine, who heard through her farseeing spell, simultaneously thought of the same place.

The cave in the ravine where the outsider mage had first summoned Gilgamesh.

“But I forgive you. After all, it helped me find something that will come in handy for killing you.”

The woman, glaring down at Gilgamesh, produced a key of lavish workmanship.

What she held in her hand was none other than the catalyst that the mage had used to summon Gilgamesh.

The front key to his treasury.

Not the key-sword that unlocked its deepest recesses, which housed Ea, the Sword of Rupture.

It was literally a work of art that served to open the treasury’s front gate.

“Just a pointless knick-knack that a mere human couldn’t do anything with, right?”

“Damn you...”

The woman regarded Gilgamesh, who groaned, drenched in cold sweat, but continued to stand erect, with a charming tilt of her head... and spoke with a smile that chilled to the bone.

“But in my hands... I can at least ‘relock’ it.”

It was a declaration that she had sealed the King of Heroes’ treasury—fatal to Tine’s faction.

But, as if to say that there were more important things, the King of Heroes smirked and pronounced with sarcasm:

“I am surprised that you shut the door before my treasures blinded you. I said you had fallen, but I was mistaken.”

“...”

“You deserve praise, Ishtar.”

Ishtar.

The woman answered the name he spat out with a cold smile in place of acknowledgment. Gilgamesh continued to sneer ironically back at her, suppressing the pain of the venom that wracked his body with his superhuman pride alone.

“Or did that vessel influence you?”

“Not a chance. I completely overshadow her original personality... She’s a kind of human made just to be a vessel.”

The next instant...

A seven-colored radiance, like a rainbow, spread from under her feet, and a gargantuan “thing” revealed itself beneath her.

Most likely... the creature that had just let out the “bellow” that had made Gilgamesh flinch.



Fate/strange Fake 5

“Like this one.”

“...!”

At the sight of the massive thing revealed—the “True Berserker” summoned by a Master named Haruri, although he had no way of knowing that at the time—several emotions ran through the King of Heroes.

Then, looking at it with eyes ultimately filled with rage, he slowly shook his head.

“Well, well. I, of all people, have misjudged... Not the original, but an inferior echo of her curse.”

“...”

Ishtar’s only reply was a faint smile. Instead of answering Gilgamesh, she surveyed the area and broke into a broad, cheerful grin.

“I’d really love to play with you more... but it looks like things will get annoying if I take any more time.”

“What...?”

“A servant of Ereshkigal... or Nergal, maybe? I suggest you run. It said that it’s eaten its fill, but you’ve just suffered ‘divine punishment,’ you know?”

Perhaps she had overheard his conversation with Saber. With those dispassionate words, she and the gigantic Heroic Spirit turned their backs and left with a parting shot.

Leaving behind her a last remark accompanied by a smile that was too wicked—or bewitching—for a deity.

“I went to the trouble of sparing your vitals, so suffer as long as you can.”

“...Or so I’d like to say.”

With that, Ishtar halted and turned her head toward Gilgamesh with an even crueler smile.

“It seems like she’ll never forgive either of you, even if I do.”

The next instant, a seven-colored halo shot from the steel colossus, twisted and tapered into something like the head of a jackhammer... and plunged straight into Gilgamesh’s belly.

“Lord Gilgamesh! No! Nooo!”

The young Master’s cries echoed high into the sky, but they did not reach the woman called Ishtar or Alkeides near the ground.

Whether they reached her Servant, Gilgamesh, was impossible to determine.

Only one thing was certain: Gilgamesh had stood majestically and firm in the face of his

enemies until the moment he lost consciousness.

The catastrophic, wracking pain that even the centaur who had been the tutor of numerous heroes had abandoned his immortality for and had longed for death.

Even eaten away at by that venom in three places and impaled through the gut by a steel beast... Gilgamesh continued to stand before his enemies as a king.

Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes.

In this battle, he had been devoid of conceit.

The fact that, even so, he had fallen before the schemes of a deity and the violence of a beast was driven home.

At last, as the church roof he stood on crumbled and vanished into the rubble, the path of magical energy that connected him to Tine began to fade...

And the king's Spirit Origin vanished completely.

Then, a few dozen seconds later... came a swarm of overwhelming "blackness," different from Alkeides' mud.

The jet-black wind that blew from a single room in the hospital enveloped the entire area...

And all life vanished from Main Street, which had been the scene of so much fighting.

It ultimately erased Gilgamesh, Alkeides, the police officers, Flat, and even the overseer priest, Ayaka, and Saber inside the church.

Not even an insect's corpse remained in its wake...

Only a silent cityscape.

Not even the chief of police, Faldeus, or Francesca Prelati, who were on the side of the masterminds, could grasp the full scope of what had taken place.

Silence simply continued to hold sway over Main Street.

Interlude

“Mercenary, Assassin, Vampire II”

Interlude

Mercenary, Assassin, Vampire II

The Past

A short time after Sigma had begun his life as a magecraft-using mercenary, he had been betrayed by a mercenary fighting alongside him.

And by one raised with him in the same “facility,” at that.

In the “facility,” he had been called Lambda and his skill in magecraft had been several levels better than Sigma’s.

When they had gone together to suppress a magecraft-using criminal syndicate, Lambda had led Sigma into an ambush and then fired a gandr curse at him from behind.

A series of twists and turns had followed, but in the end, it had been Sigma who survived.

Lambda had been more skilled in magecraft, but he had relied too heavily on it as a result. Sigma had taken advantage of that to defeat him with tactics using modern weapons.

“... Why me? Why ... am I dying?”

After being forced to lose control of a deadly curse, the magecraft user was dying of auto-toxemia.

He could no longer move a muscle and his heart was on the verge of stopping, but resentment continued to flow from his mouth.

“Because you sold me out.”

He had been about to be killed, so he had killed. That was all.

The feebly gasping magecraft user shook his head to deny Sigma’s simple answer.

“No, that’s not what I mean. It doesn’t make sense. No sense. The strong get to survive. That’s natural law for us. Bloodlust becomes a curse branded into the world and rebounds if the target deflects it. That’s natural. But that’s not what I mean ... That’s not what ... I’m trying to say ...”

The man vomited black blood mixed with bile as he continued to scream out his resentment.

“I ... I have a reason to live! I found people I have to protect! There are so many things I want! That ‘facility’ may be gone, but our homeland hasn’t changed! I have to change it! So that there are no more guys like us! To do that, I couldn’t let that syndicate be stamped out now ...! So, I gave everything I had! I tried to sacrifice my time, my life, even you, my best friend raised in the same facility, to the cause!”

He shouted with a glare that threatened to leap to his feet and strangle Sigma at any mo-

Fate/strange Fake 5

ment, but the flame of his life was relentlessly fading.

And yet, Lambda still spit curses at Sigma, who continued to listen expressionlessly.

“So! So, why?! Why, Sigma?! You don’t have a cause, or a will, or anything! You don’t even want to! So, why did you kill me?! How . . . How did you surpass me?! What belief drew out your strength?! What do you live for?! What’s worth killing me?! Why . . . are you alive . . .?”

As the man’s lungs finally fell still, Sigma paused briefly to think over those cursed words . . . and shot back a simple answer.

“Do I . . . need a reason?”

“Wha . . . t . . .?”

“. . . I just don’t want to die. I don’t like pain, either. So, I retaliated and killed you. That’s all.”

“You just . . . don’t . . . want . . .?”

The color was rapidly draining from the man’s face.

He must have realized that his cries of resentment, the curse he was trying to sear into his opponent, were utterly failing to reach him, because a different sort of anger and despair overtook him.

Even confronted with that expression, however, Sigma remained expressionless as he continued.

“Even if you’d explained your cause and then asked me to die for you, I think I’d probably still have said ‘no.’ So, a surprise attack was the right idea. You should be proud of your betrayal . . . I think.”

Sigma remained expressionless and his words lacked confidence. The magecraft user tried to muster the last of his life to shout something back.

“Don’t . . . Not . . .”

But he could not manage it.

Blood vessels burst in his cranium and blood began to flow from his eye sockets . . . signaling the end of his life.

Sigma stared coldly down at the dead man and thought.

I tried to sacrifice even you, my best friend, to the cause!

Those final words replayed in his brain. Sigma looked up at the sky in silence.

“So . . . you thought of me as your best friend . . .”

At the same time he realized how much pain it had cost the man called Lambda to set him up, he realized that he had not thought of Lambda as a friend, or anything else.

“. . . That’s a bad joke.”

Once it was all over, Sigma received his payment from his employer and then played a rented DVD of a comedy program over and over again.

To others, he might not look like he was enjoying himself.

But he was just inexpressive; he did enjoy comedy . . . except for one stray thought that intruded on his pleasure.

He recalled the magecraft user who had died with an expression of mingled rage and despair, his face like a cursed statue, and thought, enemy or not, it must be awful to die looking like that.

Maybe he would have passed a little more peacefully if Sigma had been able to throw out a clever joke at the end.

But he still had no idea what he should have said—all he could do was watch the red-clad comedians on the screen and murmur his real feelings from the bottom of his heart.

“ . . . Comedians are incredible . . . I can’t believe they can even make the Inquisition funny.”

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The Present, Snowfield, Behind the Hospital

Sigma wondered.

Wondered why, in this situation, he remembered the face of his ex-compatriot.

The scene before his eyes bore no resemblance.

The girl Assassin transformed the dense mist that shrouded her body into numerous shapes—massive beasts, great serpents, beautiful women, giants—that somehow attacked the man who seemed to be a hematophage—no, a monster called a Dead Apostle—with physical force.

She attacked the man-shaped monster who delightedly danced across the battlefield, sometimes dodging, sometimes having a limb torn off and immediately regrowing it.

“Ha ha ha! Are those jinnīya? I’m amazed your control extends to them! Really, there’s never a dull moment with you! I’ll let you command even more powerful jinnīya if you accept me. Don’t you want to be like the great Sulayman?”

“ . . . I do not control them. You insult my great forebears and their teachings . . .!” Assassin whispered with hatred, then leapt into the fray herself and lunged at her enemy alongside the great beasts and giants formed from her mist.

Seeing the fiend take even that assault and regenerate with a laugh, however, Assassin could not help narrowing her eyes.

“Monster . . .”



Interlude

“Monster! Monster, is it? In one aspect, you aren’t mistaken, but don’t refer to me by such a broad category. I might get jealous of other monsters and wipe them all out before I know what I’m doing! It’s impossible, but for your sake, I’ll make the impossible possible! But my darling, won’t you call me by my name? My name is Jester, Jester Karture! I’ll tell you as many times as it takes! Yes, I will!”

Jester continued to laugh ecstatically. From his shouts, you would never know that he was in the midst of battle.

Sigma brushed it off with the thought, well, mages and monsters are both mostly weirdos like that.

On the other hand, he could not take his eyes off Assassin, who continued to fight the monster whose death he could not imagine.

Her face was suffused with rage.

Stamped with hatred for her enemy and for her own powerlessness.

Oh, I see.

Sigma realized why he had thought of his compatriot’s face.

It was because they were the same.

That monster was trying to defile his opponent’s way of life, just as he had once done.

Just as he, who, lacking a reason to live, had defiled his compatriot’s determination, that monster was trying to defile the Heroic Spirit who was risking all she had to survive.

Assassin and his compatriot were nothing alike.

Even in terms of good and evil, it was probably fair to call them opposites.

But . . . good or evil, their faces, suffused with rage and despair, were the same.

His compatriot had betrayed him, but like Assassin, he had been trying to protect something he could not give up.

What was he—Lambda—trying to protect?

He had never tried to know Lambda. He had not even remembered him until that moment.

But one thing was certain—Lambda’s curse had failed to reach Sigma’s soul . . . but it lingered in a corner of his memory.

Not to give pain. As more of a suggestion than a curse.

In other words . . .

It was a slight mental compulsion to help Assassin in this situation.

Not even Sigma’s compatriot, who had meant to convey only resentment, had intended the suggestion . . . but with irony worthy of a comedy, it moved Sigma.

As a result, Sigma drew his gun and immediately fired a bullet into Jester.

It was a considerable distance, but Sigma’s reinforced senses and body were turned into a sin-

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gle emplacement and his shot hit its mark in the center of Jester's forehead.

It would naturally take more than that to kill him, but the bullet, treated with magecraft, inflicted damage that no ordinary weapon could.

"You just had to butt in," Jester tutted. "You, a mere human."

Jester instantly regenerated his injury and shot a glare at Sigma.

Sigma used that brief opportunity . . . only to ask a telepathic question.

To ask the shadows of his Servant, "Watcher," for everything they were currently able to learn about the monster in front of him.

Then . . . he spoke the answer aloud.

" . . . How many of the 'bullets' inside you are left?"

He aimed to rattle his opponent by saying something that would confuse him.

He did not know his Servant "Watcher's" identity, but its unique ability to perceive everything that occurred in the city while it was summoned made it like a fantastical surveillance system.

According to the information he had been able to gain through its ability . . . the vampire known as Jester possessed a number of cores that he called "bullets" and was able to rearrange his entire body, including his soul, by switching between them.

His Spirit Origin as a mage seemed to have been destroyed by Assassin, but Sigma did not know the details because Watcher had not been summoned at the time.

" . . . What?"

The effect of Sigma's provocative suggestion that he knew Jester's secrets was simple, but immediate.

Jester wiped the expression from his face and confronted the already-expressionless Sigma with a masklike face.

" . . .?"

Assassin looked at Sigma while remaining wary of Jester, who had suddenly stopped moving. Jester returned her attention favorably while staring at Sigma, and asked:

"Are you a Master?"

" . . . I don't need to answer that."

"How did you learn about me? Through your Servant?"

"I have no intention of revealing my source. All I can tell you is that you took the form of a child to escape the executor and that you then infiltrated the hospital, where you attempted to do something under a girl's bed."

Sigma spoke matter-of-factly. Jester, who had thought he had acted in complete secrecy,

scowled and raised his voice in irritation.

“What a creep . . . I’m still going to beat you to death, but I think I’ll stop that smart mouth of yours first.”

Then, just as he was about to shift the focus of his attacks to Sigma . . .

Gargantuan serpents danced in the sky over Snowfield.

“!”

Even Jester was wary of that torrent of magical energy and turned his attention toward it while distancing himself from Assassin and Sigma.

“This is . . . An archer with this much power must be . . . I see, I see. A Grail War with ground-work this thorough is almost like the Age of Go—”

His delighted mutterings were interrupted by the onslaught of another torrent.

“— _ _ _ _ _ — _ _ — _ _ _ — _ _ _ — _ _ _ — _ _ _ —”

A roar like a scream cursing the whole world rang out from Main Street.

At that shriek, like the earth itself was crying, Jester’s eyes widened, while Sigma and Assassin imagined that their souls had been shattered. For just an instant, time went on without them.

“What . . .? Can the Grail really summon something of this magnitude . . .?”

Jester muttered to himself in alarm, having sensed the Spirit Origin at the source of that roar.

“Good grief. At this rate, this won’t turn out as a comedy or a tragedy to my taste. They’re going to burn up the audience, the stage, and everything else.”

No sooner had Jester made an exaggerated show of regret than he plastered a wicked grin across his face and glanced at Assassin.

“Oh well. In that case, let’s move to a new stage.”

“. . .? What . . . do you mean . . .?”

The moment she ran magical energy to transform the mist surrounding her into even more gigantic beasts, her animosity undiminished . . . a “thing” like black smoke poured out of the hospital.

“?!”

“This is . . .”

Before the shocked Assassin and Sigma, Jester spread his arms wide and welcomed the black mist.

“Come, it’s the start of the second act! Worry not; your stage won’t be a brutal place like this. It will be peace itself—a gentle paradise!”

He allowed his body to dissolve into the black mist . . . but his voice continued to fill the air.

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“I can’t wait . . . to see you utterly defile its beautiful scenery with your own hands.”

One moment, the voice seemed to come from all directions, like it was licking them from head to toe. The next, the swarm of “blackness” rushed forward like a tidal wave to envelope Assassin and Sigma . . .

And the stage lights dimmed.

Chapter 16

“Breaking Dawn and Wakeless Dreams I”

Chapter 16

Day 3: Breaking Dawn and Wakeless Dreams I

In a Dream

Wind blows.

Wind blows.

Whoosh, swoosh, they all melt together.

The stars, and the tall, tall buildings, and the sleepy townspeople too.

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Even in the dream, the girl continued to sleep.

She slept because it had gotten dark. She slept because she was sleepy.

That was the girl's modest wish.

Thus, therefore—

“_____”

“_____”

Her protector simply acted to grant it.

To put the dazzling lights that kept the girl from resting soundly to sleep.

To stop the noisy wind that threatened the girl's salvation.

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In _____

A voice.

A voice began to reach the ears of the dozing “observers.”

“The likes of you will tell the story of my love and hate?”

Whose voice could it be?

It was a sharp voice, and yet quivering with the flames of resentment. Its every utterance froze the air and seemed to presage tragedy.

The “observers” recognized the next voice they heard.

“You got it. This is a deal. I’ll arrange your revenge into a book. I’ll tell everyone in Paris—everyone in the world—about you.”

It was the voice of the Servant who had given them the strength to fight—Alexandre Dumas. After sound came hazy vision.

The “observers” saw a man in black holding a sharp fork to Dumas’ throat.

It was probably a kind of fight.

Dumas had not followed in the footsteps of his martial father. Nevertheless, faced with a “rival,” he was risking his life on his words.

“Everyone’s got at least a little love and hate. Even a brat could tell a story about it. But who can tell the story of your love and hate, Edmond Dantès, Comte de Monte-Cristo? . . . I can. Only I can, avenger. What sets your grudge over having your whole life stolen apart from a little brat’s grudge over his kid brother taking his sweets? Something does, of course! But you aren’t the one who can tell it most dramatically. Can you speak to the hearts of thousands, millions, of people? I can! That’s what my pen is for! . . . Or, putting it the other way ‘round, you’ve as good as finished speaking to millions, billions, of people! It’s my pen that will put it to paper, but it’s you who showed me how you live!”

Despite the fork still at his throat, Dumas got to his feet partway through his speech and spoke with the full tones of a rough commander addressing his troops.

“..”

A brief silence followed.

The man in black stared expressionlessly at Dumas, but in the end, he lowered his fork with an air of disgust and practically spat:

“. . . I won’t seek compensation, but your ‘deal’ is hardly reasonable.”

“Oh, you’ll be compensated,” Dumas answered, shrugging his shoulders and twisting his mouth into a broad grin. “I’m gonna make you a celebrity.”

Then, spreading his arms wide, his eyes shining like a child describing his dreams for the future, he began to expound his views to the man in black.

“My protagonist will walk a road of revenge paved in bright-red blood spray and pitch-black hatred, but everyone will cheer that that’s what makes it beautiful. I’ll make sure that for the next

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thousand years, the word ‘avenger’ will make every person in France think of you.”

The “observers” finally realized that Dumas was conducting a negotiation.

And that the man in black in front of them must be the model for someone in Dumas’ massive body of work.

A few well-read “observers” realized who the man in black was, but couldn’t shake the doubt: “He couldn’t have actually existed, could he?”

“That’ll make your revenge complete. You were slandered by society, forgotten by the people, and abandoned by the world. But for the first time, people will recognize that you were in the right.”

“In the right . . .? Do you think I want that?”

“Yourself aside . . . it could mean salvation for people who’ve been mixed up with you.”

At those words, the man in black fell silent again. Then, he slowly shook his head.

“Do as you please.”

“You don’t mind?”

“The man called Edmond Dantès no longer exists. The only thing here is a grudge that continues to fall toward the far side of love and hate.”

Even as he took a philosophic view of his situation, the man’s voice still seemed to burn with dusky flames.

Dumas swirled his wineglass again and said, with a hint of loneliness:

“So, you’re casting off Edmond Dantès?”

“. . . It’s the name of a man who ought to have vanished inside the Château d’If.”

“That coat you’ve wrapped yourself up in is like a black fire. You want to burn yourself one of these days? . . . Or else . . . have you already done it? A black tulip’s the same color, but it’d be a sight to stir up the people’s hearts. Ever considered turning back before you’re nothing but cinders?”

The “observers” were confused.

Dumas had spoken as if he approved of vengeance. Why would he try to talk the other man down at this point?

“Yeah, that’s right. The only place you’re headed for is Hell. A darkness even deeper than the black flames you’re wrapped in. There’s no salvation for you. I’ve seen enough humans to say that for sure. Ten to one, you won’t make it back here. You’ll end up crushing ordinary happiness with your own hands. But if you turn back now, you just might meet the same end as the hero of the novel I’m going to write.”

Dumas almost seemed to be trying to tell the man not to let him write the novel. The avenger in black heard him and, with an incredibly cheerful grin, directed a sinister laugh at the empty air.

“I see . . . So, you, the man they called the king of Paris, guarantee the hell awaiting me.”

“What’re you laughing for?”

“I’m relieved. That means my path is worth walking.”

The avenger let a rage whose flames threatened to consume him seep into his voice as he continued.

“I do not need salvation! I do not need mercy! How could I speak of ‘revenge’ if I refused to pay the price for dragging even the innocent into my rage?!”

Why are we here?

Why are we seeing this?

The “observers” wondered.

But at the same time, they could not look away.

Even if they did not know the identity of the man speaking with Dumas, they were painfully aware of the dark flames of the soul that dwelt within him.

It was as if they had been brought to this place by those flames.

Ignorant of both the man’s circumstances and Dumas’, the “observers” simply felt their hearts being mysteriously influenced by the man in black.

The man in black paused, turned back to face Dumas, and resumed speaking.

“Still . . . what becomes of a man walking into Hell should be no concern of yours.”

The man chuckled and said with a hint of pleasure:

“I took you for a money-grubber like my archenemies . . . but you’re surprisingly cordial, novelist.”

“. . . It doesn’t matter, does it? I’ve just already got more money than I know what to do with.”

Dumas scratched his head, put off by the sudden remark.

The man in black turned his back on Dumas and began to walk toward the room’s back door.

“It’s just a name I’ve discarded. If you say you’ll save it with your pen, then do it, if you can.”

“I’ll do it all right. Yeah . . . It’ll take some prep work . . . but the next time I hear someone mention the island of Monte-Cristo someplace that has nothing to do with you, that’ll be fate giving me the signal. I think I’ll start writing then. I’ll get it serialized in a newspaper or something, so look forward to it.”

“See that you don’t forget. If I don’t like the ending, I’ll pay a visit to your bedroom to tear up your manuscript and your windpipe.”

Dumas responded to the threat, spat out with a keen-eyed grin, with sarcasm.

“Sure thing. If I strike it rich, I’ll build a ‘Château de Monte-Cristo’ on the banks of the Seine so you’ll know where to find me.”

He had no idea that he would one day follow through on what he meant as a quip.

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“Anyway, if the ending strikes your fancy, come to applaud me. I’d like to find out how my model really ended up, if I can.”

“I have only one thing to say to you.”

The man in black flashed a faint, wry smile and, with his back to Dumas, pronounced:

“Wait and hope.”

The “observers” who had been listening to the pair were unable to see any more of the scene.

As the man in black spoke, their consciousnesses withdrew from that space.

As they did, they had a premonition that they had already been incorporated into the life experienced by the Heroic Spirit Dumas—into his “story.”

Then, light enveloped the “observers” consciousnesses . . .

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In the Morning Sunshine

“. . . What . . . was that?”

Vera, the police unit’s coordinator, realized that she was lying on a bench on the hospital grounds and slowly rose.

“Where . . . How did I get here?”

The other officers lay on the ground nearby and were also beginning to rise, as if at a signal.

They were all surveying their surroundings with looks of confusion.

“Where . . .?”

“Huh? Wasn’t Caster just . . .”

“Mr. Caster . . . and a guy in black . . .”

Based on their mutterings, Vera judged that they had all seen the same scene.

“A dream . . .? But it was too . . .”

Vivid and lifelike.

They could even clearly remember what had been said. It was like their waking minds, and nothing else, had been blown into a different time and place.

“Oh, did all of you see it too?”

“... John?”

The voice from behind Vera came from John, who seemed to be already awake.

His prosthetic hand was half-destroyed, and he had lost the hydra-venom blade.

Of course, it would have been incredibly dangerous if his hand had been broken with the blade exposed, so, in a sense, that was fortunate.

“Since you mentioned a guy in black, I guess you saw Mr. Caster talking to the avenger in the restaurant... Well, that was the first thing I got shown too...”

“The first...? John, what happened to you? How did you get that kind of power?”

John answered Vera’s cool-headed questions with visible confusion.

“Well... I don’t really understand it myself... I was shown all kinds of ‘heroic tales,’ starting with that one, for about... ten hours, I think. Crazy strong musketeers, like the famous three, and the revolutionary hero Garibaldi. Then it shifted to a gathering of the amazing authors he met in Paris... Oh, but I guess those authors were heroes too...”

John sounded bewildered. Vera reacted to one thing he had said with confusion.

“Ten hours...?”

“Yes. It’s weird, though—when I woke up, dust was still falling from the hospital ceiling. I guess it must have only lasted a few minutes. But one thing’s for sure—Mr. Caster gave me power... I can tell that much.”

“Caster did...? Could he have come up from underground? Is he here too?”

“Speaking of here... Where is this place, anyway...?”

John’s voice trailed off as he looked at the front entrance of the hospital, which led to Main Street.

“I woke up in front of the church, but... Well, see for yourself. I can’t explain it...”

“?”

Urged on by John, Vera took several other officers who had regained consciousness and left the hospital’s premises, where they saw... no trace of destruction. Little birds flitted about over the pristine surface of Main Street.

The church, which ought to be half-destroyed, had also been restored. Actually, it looked less “restored” and more like it had never been destroyed.

It seemed to say that the destruction of the battle between Heroic Spirits the night before had been an illusion.

Behind the bewildered officers, the haggard-eyed John asked a question that seemed half addressed to himself.

“If the fight before we lost consciousness really happened... then where is this place...?”

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Snowfield, Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“They disappeared. There’s no other way to put it.”

Publicly, the facility was a privately-run prison, common in the United States at the time.

In the special surveillance facility deep inside it, Faldeus heaved a little sigh.

Having run his eyes over the report, he was considering the disappearance of a number of his associates who had been at the scene.

The report told him that the police had surrounded the hospital.

Also, that someone from the police station had contacted the hospital beforehand.

When he saw the name of the patient that the physician they had contacted had attended, Faldeus shook his head.

“Kuruoka Tsubaki . . . Damn the Kuruokas. I can’t believe they would set up their hospitalized daughter as a Master.”

Faldeus had had his doubts about the motivations of the Kuruokas, mages who had been cooperative with this Fake Holy Grail War, but thanks to the chaos of the day before, he had gotten a rough idea of the circumstances.

“I don’t know if she accidentally developed Command Spells, of if it was intentional . . . but I see now. They’re using their daughter to supply magical energy and directing the Servant from a safe location . . . Cunning, but I suppose it’s reasonable. I’ve heard that, even in the Fuyuki Grail War, a renowned Lord used his fiancée as a source of magical energy.”

“You think that Kuruoka Tsubaki’s Servant did something?”

Faldeus answered the woman who served as his aide-de-camp, Aludra, with a short nod.

“I’ve gotten Francesca’s guarantee that there are no traces of magecraft being used to impair recognition or of any kind of illusion being cast. Of course, she did seem to be enjoying the situation.”

“Meaning that more than thirty people vanished from Main Street in a brief period of time. Including Servants, if we assume that they didn’t dematerialize to conceal themselves.”

Aludra’s businesslike, unemotional statement prompted Faldeus to run his eyes over the list on the report again.

“In addition to the police unit, the missing persons are Flat Escardos, Hansa Cervantes, the

self-proclaimed overseer, and four nuns thought to be his subordinates, who were in the church . . . He's officially an ordinary priest, but based on Chief Orlando's reports and the combat footage our surveillance network captured, he must be an executor. A capable one, at that."

Faldeus frowned, then read out the remaining names.

"Also . . . Sigma, and Saber's Master, who was accompanying him."

Looking at the spectacled blonde woman he had seen in video recordings, Faldeus sunk into thought.

"Her identity concerns me . . . but she doesn't look like a mage. We can't eliminate the possibility, but we ought to view this as the work of Kuruoka Tsubaki's Servant."

They had lost contact with Sigma, who was, practically speaking, on their side. They had also been unable to confirm Assassin and Saber, who seemed to be accompanying him, since that morning.

Even setting aside Assassin, who had been summoned to "prime the pump," if Saber had been destroyed, his Spirit Origin and magical energy ought to have been poured into the Grail.

The fact that there was no sign of that meant that there was a strong possibility that Saber, at least, was still alive.

In which case, where had they disappeared to?

Faldeus wanted to consider the question carefully, but Aludra reported a matter that required his attention even more urgently.

"Let's say that the destruction on Main Street was the result of underground gas lines bursting . . . a chain reaction caused by the pipeline accident in the desert the other day. It will be a little hard on the gas company . . . but we did create it to be expendable. I sympathize with the low-level employees who don't know anything, but we'll leave them to the social security plans the 'ordinary' politicians draw up."

Faldeus sounded unconcerned as he shifted his attention to another issue.

Now, it's high time I located my own Servant.

At worst, I may need to use a Command Spell to recall him . . .

Just as he was about to return to his work . . . he sensed a slight shift in the flow of magical energy within him.

" . . ."

It was an odd feeling, different from his ordinary five senses. Like the inside of his body had ever so slightly dimmed.

Faldeus intuitively recognized it as a "signal." He left the remaining details to Aludra to iron out and exited the surveillance room.

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He stepped into his “workshop,” inside the same facility, confirmed that its door was shut, isolating it from all outside radio waves and magical energy, and then spoke.

“. . . May I ask what you are playing at?”

“What would you ask, my contractor?”

A voice that was utterly devoid of all emotion and, for that reason, utterly chilling sounded from behind Faldeus.

The puppets in his workshop, handed down by generations of his ancestors.

Faldeus found himself imagining that the voice came from each of them as he spoke in a dignified tone as its Master.

“I am, of course, referring to the orders I gave you, Assassin—no, Hassan-i Sabbah.”

He made a point of speaking the name aloud.

Faldeus was addressing his own Servant, whom he might call “True Assassin” in contrast to the girl fanatic who had been summoned to “prime the pump.”

“I ordered you to assassinate Galvarosso Scladio, the head of the Scladio Family. And yet, matters seem to have taken a strange turn.”

In the day since he had given that order, a portion of the United States had fallen into chaos.

In that one day, thirty-five important figures in the worlds of business, media, politics, diplomacy had passed away due to accident or illness. And a majority of the deaths from natural causes had the result of sudden strokes or heart attacks rather than prolonged struggles with illness.

“I have yet to receive a report of Galvarosso’s death . . . but the area in which he is believed to reside has produced one fatality after another. It would be unreasonable not to suspect a connection.”

Faldeus spoke aggressively, concealing the cold sweat on his back and hands.

If his Servant was committing a string of murders for some reason of his own, then Faldeus needed to reign him in, even if it meant using a Command Spell.

If the Servant was the type not to fear his own destruction, however, it was entirely possible that he might kill Faldeus before Faldeus had the chance to activate his Command Spell.

Faldeus steeled himself as he asked the question, readying his mind and magical energy to activate a Command Spell . . . but the shadow—Hassan—simply answered matter-of-factly.

“I have not deviated from our agreement. I have merely returned the lives that your faith determined to end to the other side of sleep.”

It was a cold, robotic voice, as if a shadow with no will of its own was speaking.

“As one who walks in the shadows of the sacred purge, I swear—I have surely ended the life of those people, Galvarosso Scladio.”

“. . . Those . . . people?”



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Faldeus frowned questioningly, then looked up with a stare.

“Don’t tell me . . .!”

“Just so.”

The “darkness” that stood behind Faldeus alleviated his doubts by quietly stating a single fact.

“Galvarosso Scladio had already eaten away ‘personhood.’ That is all.”

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One Day Earlier, Somewhere in the United States, Scladio Manor

The Scladio Family.

It was one of America’s foremost crime syndicates, exerting major influence not only on the criminal underworld, but on the business world as well.

There was a reason why it retained its powerbase, even as crackdowns on cartels intensified.

It rounded up mages who had, for whatever reason, been driven out of the Clock Tower or Asian mage organizations and stray magecraft-users and used its abundant financial resources to support their activities.

They provided the Scladio Family with magecraft in exchange, but there was no compulsion—the mages and magecraft-users voluntarily assisted the Scladio Family in order to avoid losing an ideal patron or a protector from rival organizations.

The Scladio Family also had strong connections to South American drug cartels, but their “drugs” never hit the market. Those drugs, which had undergone various forms of improvement, were used as specialized catalysts or ingredients in elixirs by the mages the Family patronized.

The Clock Tower partially ignored the Family, reasoning that, while they would love to crush it if the chance presented itself, the ensuing confrontation with the United States and the release of the magecraft-users affiliated with the Family would outweigh the benefits of doing so at present.

The leader of that powerful organization, whose reach extended to the public, criminal, and even mage society, was currently . . . lying limp as a sheet on a massive bed in the innermost recesses of a vast mansion, a respirator and countless tubes attached to his body.

Anyone who saw him would assume that he had at most a few years left to live, but he was smiling under his respirator and handing a large plush fox to the young girl who stood beside

his bed.

“Thank you, Great-Great-Grandfather! I’ll treasure it as long as I live!”

“Good . . . Olivia. You don’t need to treasure it that long. When you find something you care for more, forget about me.”

The bedridden old man spoke to the girl of five or six in a voice that was hoarse, but still had strength in it.

His name was Galvarosso Scladio.

It was a false name, but it would be no exaggeration to say that that name, which had left its mark on the world, was all that he was.

He was the head of the Scladio Family, a man who employed every means at his disposal to prolong his life. Officially, he was 109 years old, but rumor had it that he was actually even older.

The majority of those means employed magecraft and could never be made public, but, perhaps because he was not a mage himself, there was a limit to what they could do to halt his physical and mental degradation.

Mages of truly high degree were capable of transforming themselves into hematophages and other “inhuman” things, but none of the mages affiliated with the Family, at least, were capable of converting another person—especially a non-mage like Galvarosso—without risk.

“Listen, Olivia.”

“What is it, Great-Great-Grandfather?”

Galvarosso smiled as he addressed the girl, who was the youngest of his forty-three great-great-grandchildren.

“You’re the spitting image of my wife, who died eighty years ago . . . Give me a closer look at your face.”

“You’re acting funny, Grandfather. You talk like you’ll be gone soon.”

The guards who accompanied the girl averted their eyes slightly at her naïve remark.

They must have known that Galvarosso likely did not have much time left.

The old man himself, however, displayed no such weakness and continued to listen to his great-great-granddaughter with a smile.

After a short conversation, the girl and bodyguards left the room.

The bedridden Galvarosso was left alone inside with the faint sounds of his respirator.

Although it lacked even a single guard, magecraft had made his room in the innermost recesses of the Scladio Family’s headquarters into a fortress.

One of the bodyguards who had brought his great-great-granddaughter was a capable mage. Without his guidance, she would not even have been able to notice the hallway that led to his room.

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A massive composite workshop created by the utmost efforts of the most elite mages even among the many at the Family's disposal—that was the Scladios' main residence.

A variety of defense mechanisms and numerous evil spirits inside a powerful, thirty-five-layer ward.

In light of a case in which a mage's workshop had been destroyed along with the building that contained it, its systems had been designed to defend against both airborne projectiles and attempts to destroy its foundations from deep underground.

For mystical defenses to surpass it, one would have to look to mage centers such as the Clock Tower or the Wandering Sea, or else the labyrinths and dens of vice that mages powerful enough to approach the Root had spent their lives constructing.

At the center of the toughest ward was a space devoid of any trace of insects, let alone malice.

There was nothing there to threaten Galvarosso except his own lifespan. Despite which . . . he deliberately removed his respirator, stared at the empty air, and spoke.

“ . . . You're there, aren't you, darkness that signals my end?”

The empty air did not answer.

Nevertheless, Galvarosso continued to speak, as if to himself.

“ . . . Yes, I knew. I've known . . . for years now.”

Breathing must have been difficult for him without his respirator, but Galvarosso continued to speak at length.

“I poured my personal fortune into an auction to obtain these Mystic Eyes . . . We weren't very compatible . . . or maybe too compatible . . . but they only showed me a single future . . . again . . . and again.”

The man's slightly mismatched eyes showed self-derisive laughter as he continued to address empty space.

“Today, the day I die . . .”

Still, the empty space did not answer.

But Galvarosso sounded certain that he was being heard. Something in his face expressed relief.

“I knew today was the day . . . as soon as Olivia asked me . . . for the plush fox.”

Galvarosso had had a Mystic Eye implanted into his head on a certain train.

That Mystic Eye had shown him the future.

The future that would play out in this fixed location.

He had seen his eyes closed by “darkness” after he gave a plush fox to his great-granddaughter.

“It's simple. All I had to do was not give the fox to Olivia . . . the youngest member of my

family. That might have been enough to change my fate. That's what I thought . . . but I suppose this is what it means to get old . . . If the alternative is seeing Olivia cry and sulk, I'd rather accept death . . . That was honestly how I felt."

Galvarosso quietly explained himself to what should have been empty air.

There was no trace of the cold-hearted leader who had once terrified rival syndicates—just a dying man who continued to speak to something invisible.

"Funny, isn't it? I've crushed plenty of organizations and killed many, many people to get where I am now . . . Please, darkness who has brought me death . . . If you really are there, listen . . . I . . . will end, but not like this . . . No, I can't end . . ."

His face was growing gradually paler, as if from a lack of oxygen, possibly because he had removed his respirator.

But, as if to indicate that there was still something he needed to say, he stretched out a hand toward the empty air as he continued.

"The mages who seek to prolong my life . . . decided that it no longer matters if I am me . . . Bazdilot was against it . . . but the other mages . . . killed the souls of other powerful Americans . . . and overwrote . . . their personalities. They want to turn this country . . . into a mage's paradise . . . Please . . . stop this nonsense . . . Let me . . . end . . . I just wanted a chance . . . to use magic . . . magecraft . . ."

His speech had become broken. His words had begun to stop forming sentences.

But, as if struggling to carve his essence into the world, he seared words that were nearly curses into the air of the room.

"Yes, yes, the first woman I fell for, my wife, was a mage . . . Barely any Magic Circuits . . . Practically an amateur . . . Killed by the Clock Tower . . . Magecraft . . . Yes, magecraft . . . Magic . . . I always yearned for it . . . like a child . . . I wanted . . . to use magecraft . . . like she did . . . I wanted to see the same world . . . the same view . . . that my wife did . . . That's all I wanted power an organization Ah Aah Aaa aa aaaa"

Galvarosso continued his fragmentary account of his path, as if to atone for his sins.

As the words poured out, there was a tremor of emotion in his eyes.

Then, just as his heart was about to break under the fear of death . . . darkness reached out from the empty air to quietly, gently cover his eyes.

"It" did exist.

A messenger of death that had slipped into the heart of the gargantuan magecraft workshop whose wards and defense mechanisms, while not supreme, were only a step below it, without triggering even one of its systems.

Fate/strange Fake 5

“You have nothing to fear”

It was a strange voice. It seemed to come from the entire room, and yet it was only audible to Galvarosso. Its words were simple, but because they were simple, they swiftly resonated with his chaotic emotions.

“... Are you sure? A man like me ...”

Tears flowed from his Mystic Eyes, which no longer showed him anything. Darkness mercifully enveloped his life.

“I have no reason to judge thee, nor do thou. Entrust all to the night.”

The darkness, which had taken human shape before he knew it, laid its hand on the man’s head as it dispassionately intoned:

“Awake in peace on the far side of sleep.”

Then, unnoticed, the darkness vanished from the room, leaving behind only an old man who no longer needed to breathe, his eyes closed and a hint of relief on his face.

He had yearned for magecraft.

Some might say that, for a man who had moved behind the scenes of mage and American society for so long for such a childish reason, his end had been too peaceful.

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The Present, Snowfield, Meat Processing Plant

The battle between the gargantuan, mechanical Heroic Spirit and Alkeides had left the meat processing plant in ruins.

Thanks to Francois Prelati’s Noble Phantasm, however, it was apparently restored.

In its distorted space, the mage who was Alkeides’ Master—Bazdilote Cordelion—was collecting elements that had not been destroyed to begin with and rebuilding a simple workshop in the meat processing plant.

His subordinates—Scladio Family mages—whispered to each other as they watched Bazdilot, who was using magecraft to contact someone via a communicator, from afar.

“Hey . . . when does Mr. Cordelion sleep?”

“You don’t know? He’s special. I hear he can get by with a few seconds of sleep a day.”

“. . . Seriously? I could see him managing for a few days like that with magecraft, but . . .”

“That’s not all. He eats the bare minimum, too. Rumor has it he went thirty days without food or drink hunting down and dealing with a hostile magecraft-user who’d holed up in a snowy mountain workshop.”

The mages watched their superior at work with frightened eyes.

“Thank God he’s on our side . . . Even when he faced down that creepy Heroic Spirit, he didn’t give an inch.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what kind of mages the other Masters are, but I can’t even imagine him losing.”

Even among mages and magecraft-users, they were nearly strays. Their positions in the Family weren’t especially high, either.

But a mature man’s voice, which, unlike theirs, was perfectly calm, rang out in the meat processing plant.

“No . . . Mr. Cordelion isn’t invincible. He’s been beaten a few times, and he doesn’t make a secret of it.”

It was the man who had been working under Bazdilot the longest.

He had come to replace the man who had been replaced by an enemy mage and held a fairly high position in the Scladio Family, although Bazdilot still far outranked him.

The veteran magecraft-user elaborated on Bazdilot to his juniors.

“He’s nearly died fighting Holy Church executors, and a freelancer named Shishigō outwitted him once. Magalo or Der Familie gouged out one of his lungs, and Brother Degras burned most of his Magic Circuits. I think he fought to a draw with Wu from the Marvel Company . . . This was before he joined the Family, but I hear he expected to die when he went up against one of the more infamous Clock Tower organizations—Sponheim Abbey, I think.”

“I-Is that so?”

“The scary thing about him is that none of that put a crack in him mentally. It didn’t matter if he had his organs rotted or his lover’s head dumped at his feet—he never turned a hair. The person who dumped that head probably hoped to cast something on him while he was shaken . . . but that didn’t pan out for them.”

The mage spoke matter-of-factly while lighting a cigarette.

“. . . What happened to that mage?” One of the underlings swallowed hard and asked.

Fate/strange Fake 5

“The same thing. He just stuffed them into that machine and turned them into a Mana Crystal, the same as all the others. Of course, they bawled more pathetically than the rest.”

The man’s gaze rested on the hulking machine developed by the mage Atrum Galiasta to convert human life force into Mana Crystals. It has been damaged in the battle with the gigantic Heroic Spirit the day before and was currently inoperable.

Still, that was not a problem—they had enough crystals stockpiled to enable Alkeides to use his full strength for the duration of the Holy Grail War.

“You see, he’s sacrificed his own life and family to the big boss, Galvarosso Scladio . . . I’ve never seen him cry or . . .”

The man had been speaking matter-of-factly, but at that point, he suddenly cut himself short.

Bazdilot had left his seat at the communicator and begun walking toward a storehouse deeper inside the meat processing plant without his noticing.

“Mr. Cordelion . . . What is it?”

The subordinate mages wondered what he could want in the storehouse, but they had not received orders about it, so they remained on standby.

Then, after a brief interval . . . Bazdilot emerged from the wide-open doors of the storehouse. His mage subordinate’s eyes widened at the sight of him.

Their surprise was due to the instrument he carried in his right hand.

Of course, an ordinary instrument would not have been so shocking.

In fact, even a shamisen made of human skin would have surprised them less.

The type of instrument was the issue.

The instrument clutched in Bazdilot’s hand was larger than his entire body—it was a grand piano.

“ . . .”

Silence fell between the mages, who were unable to keep up.

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Oh, it’s . . . a piano? Huh?

At first glance, it looked as if he were dragging the black mass, but he was holding it off the ground with the strength of one hand.

It must have been the result of using reinforcement or domination magecraft to alter his own body.

The mages were unable to follow Bazdilot’s use of this disproportionate, superhuman brawn for the bizarre purpose of carrying a piano. The better they grasped the situation, the deeper their confusion.

He continued to walk, advancing toward an enormous freezer manufactured to fit the meat

processing plant.

“M-Mr. Cordelion?! What’s going on?! Is the, um, piano . . .”

They knew that the piano had been placed in the storehouse for some reason.

They were aware that playing the piano was one of Bazdilot’s talents, but none of them had understood why he would bring one to a place like this.

To begin with, bringing a piano into a freezer seemed unlikely to do anything but significantly shorten the instrument’s lifespan.

A tuner or pianist would probably faint at the sight.

The mages were so confused that such irrelevant concerns crossed their minds.

As they began to wonder if it might be some kind of Mystic Code disguised as a piano, the expressionless Bazdilot began to speak.

“It seems that Mr. Scladio . . . Don Galvarosso has passed away.”

“. . . What?”

This time, time ground to a halt in the mage’s brains.

Leaving the stunned mages behind, Bazdilot opened the freezer doors and vanished into a forest of suspended beef.

The door closed, and the freezer was locked in darkness.

The placement of the jet-black grand piano in its center caused alien “blackness” to eat away at the world of red flesh and white fat.

The tennis-court-sized freezer was brought into an eerie harmony, as if it were a work of art.

In its center, the still expressionless Bazdilot placed his hands over the keyboard and held still.

There were not even clouds of white breath around his face; it appeared he had stopped breathing.

Silence and stillness combined to make the frozen air pierce the mage’s skin with increased keenness.

After a full minute of stillness so complete that it seemed even time had frozen . . . Bazdilot, his breathing still stopped, began to glide his fingers lightly over the keys.

“Hey, what’d he mean, the don is dead?”

“Wait.”

One of the mages waiting uneasily outside gestured for silence and strained his ears.

He heard . . . a carefree piano tune from the other side of the freezer doors.

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The beautiful, ephemeral melody made the hearts of the bewildered men as calm as the surface of a clear stream.

“... A requiem ... Is that ... Lacrimosa?” The veteran muttered.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In his twilight years, the great composer had begun a great work that one of his students had taken up and completed after his death—Requiem.

The tune was one of its sections—Lacrimosa.

Their hearts captivated by the sounds of the piano, grief-stricken yet filled with tenderness, took in the meaning of Bazdilot’s declaration that Galvarosso Scladio was dead for the first time.

They had no choice but to take it in.

“Mr. Cordelion ... For the don ...”

One of the low-ranking members grew teary-eyed as he listened to the playing that escaped the freezer.

They had heard that Galvarosso likely did not have much time left. Bazdilot must have brought the piano with him to Snowfield so that he would be ready to play the requiem whenever the news reached him.

The men etched their respect for Bazdilot’s resolve and for the way he had expressed his mourning for the don without turning a hair into their minds as they stood and let his playing wash over their souls.

If anyone else had witnessed the scene, they would still have wondered if it really made sense to bring the piano, but Bazdilot’s men were past caring about such things.

They were simply reaffirmed in the belief that their superior was extraordinary in everything he did.

Still, why go out of his way to play in the freezer?

By the time that question resurfaced in their minds, the performance was coming to an end.

After a brief silence, the large doors of the freezer opened.

“Mr. Cordelion!”

Several men ran up to him to ask for details.

“When did the don ...”

Then, their words stopped.

And not just their words.

Time froze for the men. They stood, rigid, unable to continue.

This was not the time or place to question Bazdilot.

His face itself was its usual non-expression brimming with machinelike murderousness.

But in contrast ... the interior of the enormous freezer behind him had become a red-black hell.

Red and black.

The interior of the freezer was dominated by those two colors.

The dozens of animals worth of beef that should have been hanging up had all been knocked off their hooks.

Some chunks of meat had been smashed into the walls, flattened until they resembled red insoles. Other had been shredded into ground beef, bones and all, and scattered over the floor.

In places the torn meat had rotted, dissolving into red puddles that looked like blood, while in others the bits of meat had been scorched to ash.

Something like dark-red mud was writhing between the scraps of meat, as if it were scavenging the destroyed flesh not as foodstuffs, but as bovine corpses.

“Eep.”

One of the underlings sank to the ground.

They were all mages or magecraft-users after their fashion.

The appearance of the freezer would not have been enough to frighten them.

But when the haphazard, inexhaustible magical energy that oozed out of the room, like a child had thrown a tantrum and poured all his strength into a mixture of bloodlust and animosity, hit them, they could not suppress screams.

They were terrified.

Terrified of their superior, Bazdilot Cordelion.

Terrified of his rational abnormality that had caused such an atrocious rampage of magical energy while playing such a beautiful tune—and yet confined it entirely to a single room.

Bazdilot glanced at his collapsed underling before turning to survey the freezer, as expressionless as when he had entered it.

“. . . I see some got on the piano.”

A few shreds of beef had splattered on its legs.

The dark-red “mud” was completely avoiding the piano. It looked as if there were a ward set around it.

A moment later . . . the piano instantly sank into the sea of mud and entirely vanished from sight.

Bazdilot shut the freezer doors and walked into the center of his workshop as if nothing had happened.

Then, in place of his subordinates, who were still frozen in place, his Servant, who had remained incorporeal up to that point, materialized and spoke.

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“That was somewhat unexpected.”

“. . . What do you mean?”

“That you take an interest in music.”

Alkeides avoided touching on Bazdilot’s emotions, simply expressing his surprise that his Master could play the piano.

Bazdilot answered the avenger dispassionately.

“I accepted training to assist with mental tuning . . . Mr. Scladio just happened to hear and take a liking to it.”

After a brief pause, he added his reason for playing just then.

“I promised that I would play a requiem . . . if the worst happened.”

Bazdilot turned to face Alkeides and asked a question of his own.

“You seem to have recovered from your physical injuries. It looked like you took quite a beating.”

“It’s no cause for concern. Although facing pursuit from Rider . . . the queen of the Amazons in that state was troublesome.”

Alkeides was one of the few participants in the battle on Main Street the day before who had not vanished and remained in Snowfield.

The previous night, when the “black smoke” that overflowed from the hospital had been about to envelope him . . . Alkeides had summoned four of the Horses of Diomedes, one of the powers of his Noble Phantasm King’s Order, sent three into the black smoke as decoys, and succeeded in escaping the scene on the back of the fourth.

He had, however, suffered an attack from Rider—the Amazon queen Hippolyta—who had chosen that moment to appear, and sustained injuries.

Both those injuries and the hydra dagger wound in his side had now completely vanished.

The “demon” power he had stolen from Berserker was currently contained within him. At first glance, Alkeides looked as he had immediately after being summoned and transfigured.

Bazdilot, however, dispassionately asked about the other side of his Servant.

“How many more days can you last?”

Alkeides answered with surprising alacrity.

“I can remain sane for another three or four days.”

“I see. That erases our advantage over the fakes . . . No, given that being overtaken by madness won’t destroy you on its own, we still have the upper hand.”

Alkeides had indeed been poisoned with hydra venom.

He had used the vile sludge to consume it and prevent his bodily destruction . . . but that deadly poison, which had led to his own death and indirectly driven his third wife to suicide, had still been taken into his body.

It was the influence of King’s Order that kept it from eating away his flesh.

He had drawn out the power that he had taken from the Erymanthian Boar.

It was not, however, the boar’s own power.

The boar was not the greatest thing he had taken and conquered during that expedition.

It was the thing Alkeides, during his penance, had taken from his mentor Kheiron.

It was none other than Kheiron’s immortality.

Kheiron, a centaur bestowed with the power of immortality, had been struck by hydra venom due to a stray shot from Alkeides.

The pain had been so intense that, unable to bear it, Kheiron had surrendered his own immortality to Prometheus and ended his life.

Therefore, while Alkeides had lost the twelve substitute lives that his proper Spirit Origin possessed, he did possess a single substitute lifespan, Kheiron’s immortality until it was ceded to Prometheus, as one of his Noble Phantasms.

Activating it, however, meant nothing less than experiencing the same pain Kheiron had suffered.

At that very moment, that ceaseless agony—the same agony that had led him to choose death while alive—continued to torment him. He was currently cancelling it out by transforming that pain and suffering into strength through the influence of the “mud.”

“Do you regret it? Killing your mentor?”

“. . . Were I to obey my heart, having given myself to vengeance, I ought to rejoice that I was able to liberate my mentor from immortality, a vile curse of the gods.”

After that evasive answer, Alkeides continued:

“. . . The mud is winning at present, but this venom is the symbol of my death. Little by little, it is eating away at the root not of the body, but of the mind of my Spirit Origin.”

But he showed no fear of that.

Despite the mitigating effect of the “mud,” an agony beyond any ordinary toxin was coursing ceaselessly through his veins. And yet, Alkeides maintained his usual mental state, forcing himself to endure out of his lust for vengeance.

That, however, would only last the number of days he had just told his Master.

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“That will be enough. You just have to obtain the Grail before you’re finished.”

Bazdilot’s statement prompted a questioning response from beneath Alkeides’ cloth.

“ . . . I thought you had no interest in the Grail itself.”

“If my master had simply died of natural causes, I wouldn’t.”

Bazdilot’s eyes narrowed slightly.

He rarely showed emotion, but his voice was dripping with hatred and something approaching bloodlust.

“ . . . Some of the Family’s mages didn’t know when to stop . . . They copied my master’s personality into several other people’s brains . . . but all those ‘substitutes’ died as well. And from different causes.”

“Oh?”

“That means that their deaths weren’t a chain reaction caused by the side effects of magecraft. Someone else intervened. I have a good idea which organization would do that just now.”

Bazdilot then swallowed his hatred and wrestled the maturing “mud” into submission through superhuman force of will as he exhorted his Heroic Spirit.

“When you obtain the Holy Grail, use its power to show them to your heart’s content. Once you’ve destroyed this country and crushed it beneath your feet . . . take back the name you cast off and show them all. By overturning common sense and exterminating Mystery, the name you detest—Herakles—will be dragged through the mud and perish along with Hera herself.”

“ . . . That goes without saying.”

That day, that moment . . . an evil possibility for the United States was born.

If Bazdilot were to obtain the Holy Grail . . . its power would be used to exact his revenge on the state.

That would mean nothing less than becoming a “sacrifice” to grant his own wish using the might of Alkeides infused with the full power of the Holy Grail.

Faldeus had made only one mistake.

He had guessed—wrongly—that Bazdilot Cordelion was an unfeeling mage—a mage’s mage or magecraft-user who would make the concealment of Mystery his highest priority. That a mage who had been a cog in one large organization would, once that organization’s leader was gone, turn to whatever other organization could offer him the most in order to fulfill his ambitions as a mage.

Of course, Faldeus had intended to kill Bazdilot. The instant Bazdilot showed signs of doing anything of the kind, Faldeus would have exploited the opportunity to finish him off.

But that was a misreading—one that Faldeus had made because he was a mage himself.

He was right that most of the Scladio Family's mages were either using Scladio to further their own research, looking for ways to reach the Root alone, or else magecraft-using mercenaries who would join whatever organization offered them the best support.

But the remainder, including Bazdilot, were different.

There were very few people driven by ways of thinking that were un-mage-like—and yet not those of ordinary people.

Even among that minority, Bazdilot Cordelion had put down exceptionally deep roots in the Scladio Family.

His disposition made it difficult to understand . . . but he was becoming something other than a mage. In his mind, the Family already took precedence over the Root.

Bazdilot was not a mage.

He was not a magecraft-user.

He was not a clergyman.

His soul had put down roots in the community called the Scladio Family.

Those roots were deep and tangled.

So deep and so tangled . . . that a mage like Faldeus could not hope to understand what drove him.

Faldeus did not know that yet.

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When she came to, Ayaka Sajou's consciousness was in a distant scene.

Once Ayaka grasped her situation, she quickly realized that she was once again seeing Saber's "past" from his point of view.

She was fully conscious but felt as if her body were moving on its own.

She remembered that the last time she had seen Saber gallop across a field with his knights and encounter a man who called himself Saint-Germain who was driving a car . . .

This time, however, things seemed quite different.

She was in an old-fashioned stone castle, surrounded by dazzling decorations.

But the height of her eye level relative to tables and the size of her hands, which she glimpsed

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occasionally, convinced Ayaka that this was a child's viewpoint.

...

So . . . is this his—Saber's—childhood?

The body that did not respond to her will seemed to be playing a musical instrument.

Even Ayaka's ears could tell that it was a beautiful melody.

The sound reverberated off the stone walls, falling on Ayaka's ears with the rich sound of an orchestra despite coming from a single musician. It was hard to believe that it was a child playing.

He did seem good with instruments . . . I guess he's been that way since he was a kid . . .

Ayaka thought. She had heard his improvised playing at the nightclub.

As soon as the performance ended, the adults around her began to sing her praises.

"Magnificent, Prince Richard! I can hardly believe that you've come so far . . . in such a short time."

"And not just in music. Your Highness excels in the arts and in feats of arms as well."

"I hear that Your Highness bested one of Her Majesty's personal guards in swordplay."

"Your Highness is truly the son of the 'incomparable' Queen Aliénor."

Praise was on the tongues of all the old-fashioned-looking men ranged in front of her.

But Ayaka understood.

For better or worse, she was able to glimpse the fear and jealousy of her that lay behind their words.

And judging by the gaze and behavior of the young Saber's body, he was not especially pleased either.

A little while later, the boy returned to his own room, where a beautiful woman greeted him.

"What's wrong, Richard. You look unhappy."

Then, the voice of the young Richard's body rang in Ayaka's ears.

". . . Mother."

What?

Is this pretty lady . . . Saber's mom . . . ?

The word "majestic" suited her.

The woman radiated a sense of presence that was not overshadowed even inside the luxurious castle. In fact, she made Ayaka feel that it would be no exaggeration to say that the castle and soldiers were all there just to protect and enhance her.

Just as Ayaka felt that this must be what queens in stories were like, the woman, who might justly be called the personification of her beautiful homeland, addressed her with a mother's loving smile.

"Tell me, Richard. I won't help you unconditionally, but I won't scoff at what you have to say either."

At that, the young Richard hesitated for a moment and then spoke clearly to his mother.

“... Mother, I’m frightened.”

“Frightened? Of what?”

“I... I can do anything. I can do it all well.”

... Excuse me?

That’s a hell of a thing to say.

Still, I guess...

No, that was definitely a hell of a thing to say!

Ayaka made two mental retorts, but there was naturally no sign of them reaching Richard.

“I studied swordsmanship, and now no one in the castle can beat me. I thought they must be holding back because I’m the prince, so I left the castle and attacked a bunch of bandits who prided themselves on their valor, but I vanquished them all without difficulty.”

“...”

What does this kid think he’s doing?!

Is he an idiot?!

I mean, I guess that does sound like Saber, but still!

“It’s the same with instruments. Once I learn one, I can play it perfectly in no time at all. Archery, painting, wrestling, hunting, fishing, spear-fighting, horseback riding, shatranj, nine men’s morris... I master everything as soon as I start it. Before long, no one can beat me in any kind of game!”

“Oh dear.”

“I’ll never make any friends at this rate. Everyone eyes me with envy. I want to get along with everyone, I want people to follow me, but what should I do? Would it be better if I held back and pretended to be bad at everything?”

Whoa. If he weren’t a kid, I’d want to give him a good kick in the behind.

Still, normal Saber never says anything that bad...

Maybe that means he’s matured... although I’ve got a feeling he hasn’t really changed that much...

Ayaka thought, exasperated, but then she remembered the mix of envy and fear in the eyes of the grown men earlier and felt a little sympathy for the young Richard.

Well... I guess if people were always looking at him like that, it’s no wonder he got a little twisted.

Richard’s mother, however, burst into raucous laughter.

“Didn’t you promise not to laugh, Mother?” Richard said, sulkily.

“No, I said I wouldn’t ‘scoff.’ I laughed, but I’m not going to dismiss your meaning and feelings out of hand.”

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Then, gently stroking Richard's cheek, the regal woman said:

"Listen, Richard. It's true that you're a genius."

She sounds so sure . . .

Ayaka was surprised, but Richard's mother continued, smiling:

"But that's all. What's the point of being a genius?"

"Huh . . .?"

"You're just able to do things. That doesn't mean you've accomplished anything. Being able to do something has nothing to do with leaving a legacy."

Richard's mother was comforting him as her son, but at the same time she was facing him as an individual and imprinting her words onto his soul.

"Before you show off your strength against bandits around town, you ought to think of a way to share the grief of the people those bandits tyrannized and to overcome it with them. Be ashamed of the environment that created the bandits you bested—of the state of this kingdom. I'll share your shame."

Then, embracing her son, Richard's mother continued:

"It takes more than just genius to make a hero, Richard. By the same token, a person becomes a hero when they see their own path through, even if they have no talent at all."

"A hero?"

"Yes, a hero like King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table or Charlemagne and his Paladins. Just like Sir Kay, who they say was the least talented of the Knights of the Round Table, became a hero who supported the Round Table because of who he was. You need to learn how they created this land and how they laid the foundations of people's hearts. If you really think you can do anything, Richard, then you should prize the ability to tell stories more highly than anyone else."

Then, she launched into a story.

A story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

Richard's mother told of Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan, Galahad, Percival, Gareth, Agravaine—even the traitor-knight Mordred—as if she had seen it all with her own eyes.

She must have gotten fired up as she went, because she started to add scenes that struck Ayaka as overdoing it, even for myths. By the time she ended with incoherent ramblings like how "the world began when King Arthur's Excalibur separated Heaven and Earth, and King Arthur learned of the wicked King Vortigern's plot to drop the moon on London and threw Merlin at the moon to knock it back, and Lancelot held off five billion Picts with a single piece of straw to defend a lake," Richard was drifting into a peaceful sleep.

As even Ayaka's view began to grow hazy, Richard's mother stared kindly at her son's face,

gently stroked his cheek, and said, with a chuckle:

“Of course, Vortigern didn’t really drop the moon. I made that up . . . Now, wake up.”

“Nnn . . . Mother . . .? What happened to Sir Bedivere next . . .?”

“Good morning, my darling Richard. I’ll tell you that next time.”

Then, she changed her attitude slightly.

“But before that, Richard, I’ll have to show you hell on earth.”

“Huh?”

“As your mother . . . I’ll have to scold you for leaving the castle without permission to fight bandits.”

Richard’s great mother, still grinning cheerfully, let loose a king-size thunderbolt . . .

And Ayaka’s consciousness was hurled into darkness.

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“. . . yaka. Ayaka, are you all right?”

Saber’s normal, adult voice reached Ayaka’s ears.

“What . . .?”

When she woke up, she was in the church.

Seeing Saber in front of her and remembering what had been happening before her dream, she leapt up.

“You . . .! What about your injuries?! Are you all right?!”

“Yes. I’m not completely recovered, but I can move now. It has been more than half a day, after all. Although I’d be in trouble if that golden Archer’s attacks had been the kind that consume you Spirit Origin and all or poison you . . .”

“I see . . . Thank goodness . . .”

Ayaka heaved a sigh of relief.

Saber briefly glanced away from her, then steeled himself and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry! I borrowed a lot of magical energy from you to get one of my companions to use healing magecraft on me. That’s probably why you ended up sleeping passed noon. Sorry.”

Saber sounded apologetic, but Ayaka gripped his arm firmly and said, angrily:

“I don’t care about that! That’s not why I’m mad at you!”

“Huh? Oh, you mean how I boasted and then lost? True, that was . . .”

“Idiot! That’s not it either! It’s not that at all!”

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Ayaka's strained words to the confused Saber sounded more frustrated than angry.

"You . . . left me in the church so that I could get them to protect me as soon as you died, wasn't it . . .? You said that in a Holy Grail War, the overseer protects defeated Masters . . ."

"I thought . . . Well, I thought that would probably be the best thing for you."

"If you've got time to worry about me, try taking care of yourself . . . This isn't self-flagellation, Saber; I'd say the same thing if I were a king or a queen! You need to take better care of yourself! Oh, damn it, there's a lot more I want to say, but I'm not good at finding the right words . . . And . . . umm . . . thanks. You ended up protecting me again . . ."

Ayaka understood.

Saber could probably have avoided the attack on the roof of the church if he had wanted to.

But if he had, the church would have been demolished, and Ayaka, inside, would most likely have died.

". . . Sorry. It seems I made you worry again. I ought to have lured him somewhere far from the church, but I was sure that I could never beat that Heroic Spirit unless I hit him quickly, practically by surprise. . . . No. I lost, so that's just an excuse."

Saber sounded troubled. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling as he spoke.

"That golden Heroic Spirit saw through me too. I probably haven't gotten serious about this war yet. . . . Probably because I still haven't found a heartfelt wish for the Grail."

He had joked that he wanted to take all sorts of songs and heroic tales back to the Throne, but that wish seemed achievable even without the Grail.

"But if I wish for something in earnest . . . then I'll really end up dragging you into the war. I don't want that."

"I've already been dragged into it. I mean, just earlier I almost got blown away along with the whole church and . . ." Ayaka started to say. Then, she realized.

The ceiling that Saber was looking up at was the church's.

The church, which should have been in ruins due to the golden Heroic Spirit's attacks, was completely unscathed.

"No way. . . . What's going on? Is this the 'magecraft' you talked about, Saber . . .?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but if I could do that, I would have repaired the theater I destroyed right after I was summoned. There are some things even I can't do."

Ayaka, who had finally managed to get her feelings under control, sighed at Saber's self-deprecating tone. She adjusted her glasses as she spoke to mask her embarrassment.

". . . Even though you said . . . 'Mother, I can do anything'?"

At that, Saber froze.

". . . You saw that?" He asked with a forced smile, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

Richard trembled as he spoke, knowing that Ayaka was talking about his “past,” shown to her through the magical energy that linked them.

Ayaka, despite thinking that she should not have mentioned it, looked away as she confirmed his suspicions.

“... Yeah. . . . Your mom was pretty, though.”

For a little while after that, Saber laid on the floor of the church, his face bright red.

“... Do you still think you can do anything?” Ayaka casually asked Saber once he had regained his composure.

She looked serious, not teasing, so Richard answered seriously.

“I’m not as childish as that. Still, I’m confident I can do most things well. That must be how my nature is imprinted on the Throne.”

“I guess. . . . You do seem like you could do just about anything. I doubt you’re bad at anything but reading the mood.”

“You’re exaggerating. There are things I couldn’t do while I was alive. I’m made up of the Throne’s knowledge now, but . . .”

“What can’t you do?” Ayaka asked, interested. Richard hesitated for a moment before he looked away from her and answered:

“... English.”

“What?”

“I . . . could speak French, Italian, and Persian,” Richard said dejectedly, “but even though I was the king of England . . . I was hopeless at English.”

Ayaka stared at him for a moment, stunned . . . and then she seemed to relax for the first time and let out an exasperated laugh.

“It’s not nice to laugh at people’s shortcomings, Ayaka.”

“Sorry. It’s just . . . you sounded so confident that you could do ‘anything’ . . .”

At that point, Ayaka let out another big sigh and looked at Saber while wiping away tears behind her glasses.

“... I’m glad you’re alive, Saber. Thank you.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

Saber raised his voice at the sight of Ayaka’s smile, as if to say that that was enough to satisfy him.

“All right, I’m a new man! Now that you know my shameful past, I have nothing left to lose! I’ll even beat that gold fellow next time! I’ll protect you, Ayaka, no matter what you say! After all, I’m a man who can do anything!”

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Ayaka was able to understand.

It was not bravado, and he was not the least bit downhearted.

Even after having such a huge difference in strength brought home to him, even after coming so close to death, Richard was undaunted.

Ayaka stared enviously at him, until the atmosphere was disturbed by a visitor from outside.

“... Saber and Ayaka Sajou, right?”

The church doors opened, and there stood a group of police officers.

They were the officers who had been fighting the other Archer on Main Street, between the church and the hospital.

“Oh, you made it through safely? Taking on that intimidating bowman and surviving is quite a feat. I’m impressed!” Saber showered them with unfeigned praise.

“... Can we ask you to accompany us?” A female officer, who seemed to be the leader, asked him.

“The cops...!” Ayaka muttered in the tense atmosphere.

Only Saber looked up at the ceiling as if he had remembered something and shrugged as he said:

“Come to think of it, Ayaka and I are escaped fugitives, aren’t we?”

The female officer, however, quietly shook her head and offered Saber a deal.

“No, we have no intention of accusing you of anything at the moment. I would like to propose a temporary alliance.”

“An alliance? Against whom? I think the golden Archer fell from up high at the end. . . . What happened to him? Or are we fighting whatever made that odd bellowing I could hear just before I passed out?”

Saber leapt at the offer like a child. The female officer remained expressionless as she dispassionately stated the facts.

“We are probably isolated in a ‘world’ similar to a Reality Marble.”

“Isolated?”

“We can see people in the city, but their minds have all been seized by something. The police station and city offices are deserted. It’s possible to leave town, but past a certain point the roads connect back to the city. We can hypothesize that space has been warped, but we can’t be certain.”

She went on to matter-of-factly explain the rest of what they had seen.

Beside the female officer, who introduced herself as Vera, was an officer with a broken prosthetic hand dangling at his side. It appeared that the church was completely surrounded.

“We’ve been searching for Masters and Servants in the same situation as us. We’d like you to join our alliance.”



Fate/strange Fake 5

“World? Isolated? . . . What does she mean?” Ayaka asked, confused.

“. . . I guess it’s something like a Reality Marble,” Saber explained. “Think of it as a kind of fake world that a mage or monster created. Still, based on what she said, I’ve got a feeling it’s something a bit different. . . . Do you have a plan for getting out of this ‘world’?”

At Saber’s question, Vera lowered her eyes for a moment, then said:

“We believe it will be necessary . . .

“for us to eliminate the mage or Heroic Spirit at the core of this ‘world.’”

Interlude

“Mercenary, Assassin, _____”

Interlude

Mercenary, Assassin, _____

“...”

Sigma woke up to find himself in the garden of a private house.

“... What happened?”

Despite his confusion, he swiftly and smoothly checked his equipment, condition, and surroundings.

He could not see the hospital, and the casino building in the town center was visible in the distance, so he supposed that he must be in a residential district a significant distance from it.

He lowered his eyes and found the girl Assassin lying on the grass.

Something like a pillow had been placed under her head, and a thin blanket was draped over her body.

Upon closer inspection, he realized that a similar blanket had been laid over him and not a pillow, but a small cushion lay where his head had been.

Did someone . . . put us to bed?

Assassin did not appear to be injured, and when he drew closer, he could see that she was breathing in her sleep.

I've heard that Heroic Spirits manifested in temporary bodies generally don't require sleep . . .

If that was the case, then her sleep could be the result of some external factor putting her Spirit Origin into a sleeping state.

Did that hematophage do this? Sigma wondered. But that did not explain him being alive.

“Nnh . . .”

The girl Assassin seemed to have regained consciousness and slowly raised her black-robed figure on the fresh green lawn.

“Where . . . What happened . . .?”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. . . . Is that fiend . . .?”

“He's not here. . . . At least I don't think so.”

He did not sense the hematophage's presence.

That only unsettled Sigma.

“... He was saying something disturbing at the end . . .”

Assassin's words reminded Sigma of what the hematophage who called himself Jester had said.

“I can’t wait . . . to see you utterly defile its beautiful scenery with your own hands.”

“There’s probably a trap. We don’t appear injured at first glance, but he could have slipped some kind of spell into our clothing or bodies.”

“Why do something so indirect? He could have finished us off while we were unconscious.”

“You can find twisted people like that anywhere. One of my superiors is one, and I’m sure that hematophage is too.”

Sigma matter-of-factly circulated magical energy through his body, checking for any strange spells. Almost as an afterthought, he described an example of twisted behavior.

“There are even magecraft-users who will pretend to let someone go but place them under a suggestion to kill their wife and children as soon as they get home. Not for any real reason, just to enjoy their reactions.”

Those who forgot their goal of perfecting magecraft and used it for business or their own pleasure.

Many of the most vicious “magecraft-users” fell into that category.

That said, mages would do crueler and more vicious things if they agreed with the goal of perfecting magecraft and Mystery, so it was impossible to say which group was more dangerous.

Assassin, who visibly frowned at Sigma’s example, waved a hand in his direction and confirmed that there was no abnormal magical energy in his body using the perception that came with Meditative Sensitivity: Zabaniya.

“ . . . I can see no signs of any strange spell on you. I’m not able to detect mental ties that don’t rely on magical energy, but . . . ”

“Yes, my own analysis didn’t find anything either. Are you all right?”

“There is no need for concern.”

Sigma, who had no choice but to trust Assassin’s words, started to survey their surroundings again . . . when he realized something unsettling.

“ . . . ? ”

If the pattern so far held, then one of the “shadows”—Watcher’s familiars—should have been ready with a sarcastic remark the moment he woke up.

But he could not even see the shadows, and the magical energy linking him to his Servant, which he had learned to sense over the past two days, was obviously weakened.

“What . . . ? ”

He called out telepathically, but there was no answer from the shadows.

He felt something like a response, but he could not meaningfully exchange information. It was like an internet connection that had suddenly been blocked by heavy traffic.

“What’s wrong?”

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“... I can't contact my Servant. I don't think he's dead, but ...”

“Lancer ...? If he hasn't been eliminated, then in the worst case you should be able to use a Command Spell to summon him.”

A Command Spell, huh.

I wonder what would happen if I used one.

The shadows did say that Watcher is high up in the air ...

Sigma was telling Assassin and everyone else involved with him that his Servant was “Lancer Charlie Chaplin.”

Sigma himself still did not understand what Watcher really was. He sunk into thought, wondering how he ought to use his Command Spells.

“... GPS is functioning.”

Sigma confirmed that the electronic terminal that was part of his equipment was working and checked his coordinates to pinpoint their location.

“Our relative position to Crystal Hill confirms it. We're in the Snowerk residential area, a district of Snowfield.”

Snowfield had once been divided into a number of towns, which had then been unified into a single municipality. Sigma had been told that this district, which was sometimes called Snowerk City as a remnant of that period, was a high-class residential area home to Snowfield's elite.

“Let's go outside. I'd like to avoid being threatened with guns for breaking and entering.”

Whoever had laid out the blankets and pillows for them was not necessarily the owner of the house.

Sigma, aware that the state's gun laws were lax, even for the United States, started to head toward the road ... but before he could find out who owned the garden, the door of the house opened.

“... Oh, you're awake?”

A laid-back-looking Asian man emerged.

The sight of him made Sigma more wary than ever, although he was careful not to show it.

He recognized the man's face from the documents Faldeus and Francesca had given him.

“And you are ...?”

Sigma thought that it would be rude to ask the man's name when they might be trespassing but decided that this was no time to worry about that and asked the question while preparing himself to counterattack immediately under any circumstances.

The man, however, showed no sign of taking offense and introduced himself with a gentle smile.

“Oh, I’m Kuruoka. Nice to meet you. I’m the director of the private library next door.”

His answer matched the documents.

The Kuruokas were publicly the managers of a nearby private library that operated on a membership system, establishing a position for themselves in Snowfield while taking the utmost care not to stand out.

Kuruoka . . .

He must be the father of that girl in the hospital.

In which case, is he the one who called us here?

Does he know of his daughter’s condition, or is he pulling her strings . . .? I may not have had much time, but I should have made asking Watcher about him a priority.

One of Watcher’s abilities was perceiving what took place in the city.

But that was limited to things that could be perceived with sight and hearing; it did not extend to people’s minds. It was a vast quantity of information, but Sigma could only share it by questioning the shadows, meaning that he needed to ask about the information he wanted to know, like searching the web.

Now that he was unable to contact those shadows, he was faced with an overwhelming lack of data about the man in front of him.

Sigma decided to start by introducing himself and observe the man’s reactions. He felt confident that the man would not know about him, but also felt no need to use a false name.

“ . . . I’m called Sigma. I’m ashamed to say it, but it looks like we were passed out in your garden. I remember being in town last night and feeling unwell, but after that . . . ”

“Oh, is that so? Well, apparently my daughter found you passed out in our garden this morning. We were just inside debating whether to carry you to a bed.”

. . . I’d expect you to start by calling 911.

Sigma had questions but decided to go along with the man’s story.

“I see. It must have been your daughter who brought us blankets.”

A woman who appeared from behind the man who called himself Kuruoka with an equally peaceful smile answered:

“Yes. When she brought out blankets, I thought that she’d found a puppy in the house again . . . but I never imagined she’d found people.”

She seemed natural at first glance, but Sigma sensed something hollow about her.

As if to confirm his suspicions, Assassin whispered to Sigma so that only he could hear:

“Take care. This man and woman seem to be under the influence of someone’s suggestion.”

Sigma realized that.

In which case, if anyone who had not been placed under a suggestion appeared, they should

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be immediately suspicious of that person.

At minimum, it would be reckless not to consider that person's intentions. That was Sigma's conclusion . . . but that "unaffected" person appeared before him sooner than he expected.

"Mister, miss . . . are you all right?"

A little girl poked her head out shyly from behind her mother.

She looked like she might be about ten years old. She stepped out from behind her mother and bobbed her head hastily, but clearly of her own will.

"I'm Kuruoka Tsubaki!"

The name of a girl who was supposed to be hospitalized in a comatose state.

The girl who Assassin and the police had tried to save, who was supposed to be possessed by a Servant was standing in front of them in perfect health.

Before Sigma had a chance to consider what that meant . . . the girl looked behind Sigma and Assassin and said:

"That's my friend Mr. Black!"

As she spoke . . . a strange presence that had not been there before grew behind Sigma and Assassin.

"?!"

Both immediately spun around . . . and saw a jet-black mass standing in the shadow of a large tree.

Confronted by that just-barely-humanoid mass of "darkness," Sigma and Assassin readied themselves, fully alert . . . when Tsubaki's voice, coming from behind them, fell on their ears.

"He's really big, but he's not a scary person!"



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“I can hardly wait.”

A single figure surveyed the encounter from a distance—the Dead Apostle Jester, in the form of a boy about Tsubaki’s age.

“I wonder what face you’ll make when you realize that this is the world’s happiest hell,” he said with an intoxicated grin at odds with his youthful appearance. “And when you realize that no one but me can leave it without killing Kuruoka Tsubaki . . .

“What are you going to do . . . Miss Assassin?”

Bridge

“One Day, Atop a Building”

Bridge

One Day, Atop a Building

Day 4, Morning: Crystal Hill, top floor

“You still refuse to give up?”

A calm voice rang through the suite of Crystal Hill casino hotel.

An immense volume of magical energy continued to swirl through the space, which had become more of a museum or showroom for the King of Heroes’ furnishings than it was Tine’s workshop.

Tine Chelk—the girl who, until a day before, had been Gilgamesh’s Master.

Her body was becoming merely a conduit for magical energy from the leylines.

The magical energy flooding through her was eating away at not only the Circuits throughout her body, but blood vessels, nerves, and even bones as well.

Despite that, Tine did not halt the flow of magical energy.

She had been standing there for more than a day straight, holding her hands over a peculiar magic circle drawn in the center of the room.

An androgynous voice called out from behind her.

“. . . Two hours and thirty-four minutes. That’s how much time is left until your Circuits completely burn out.”

It was a calm voice, but there was a hint of mechanical coldness in it.

It sounded in Tine’s mind like the voice of Death.

“Without treatment, your vital functions will cease about thirteen minutes later. That’s assuming that my calculations fully conform to this era’s systems, of course.”

Tine accepted Death’s—Enkidu’s—words as the truth, but nevertheless continued to release magical energy.

Enkidu, the peerless Lancer, his faintly glowing, pale-green hair fluttering.

He stood beside Tine, staring down at the corpse that lay in the center of the magical circle with a tinge of sorrow in his eyes.

“Corpse” was not precisely accurate.

It—the Spirit Origin that until the night of two days before had been a shining king—was continuing to die and yet not living.

A strange, rainbow-colored stagnation was spreading from the hole gouged into his chest. It and the hydra venom spreading from his arrow wounds were eating away at each other.

The only thing barely staving off the body's ongoing destruction was the pressure of the massive quantity of magical energy that Tine Chelk was pouring into it, halting the Spirit Origin's disintegration by brute force.

"I won't give up. . . . I can't give up . . .!" Tine shouted, more to convince herself than in answer to Enkidu's question.

Enkidu dispassionately stated the reality of the situation to her, his voice devoid of anger or sorrow.

"If Gil were alive, he would probably say, 'Surely, mongrel, you are not so conceited as to suggest that your ineptitude caused my defeat?'"

"I know that! But . . . even if he calls me insolent or executes me, I can't give up now . . .!"

A low animal whine filled the air.

The silver wolf rubbed gently against Tine's legs and then looked at Enkidu.

". . . This girl isn't like that girl called Ayaka. She's one of the 'humans' you despise, Master. Are you sure?"

In answer to Enkidu's question, the silver wolf repeated its low cry and lay down beside the girl.

"I understand. You're kind, Master."

Enkidu quietly crouched down, placed one hand on the silver wolf's back and the other on Tine's right shoulder.

A huge surge of magical energy rose from the silver wolf's body and enveloped Tine's.

"What is . . .?"

"I've forestalled your body's collapse using my Master's magical energy. It's temporary, but you should last significantly longer than I calculated."

"Why . . .?"

Without answering Tine's question, Enkidu stared at his friend's corpse, enveloped in a shell of magical energy drawn from the land's ley lines, and murmured:

"It's like the cages of the underworld. What would Ereshkigal say if she saw this . . .?"

Then, he reached out a hand into that shell.

His skin melted and peeled back on contact with the torrent of magical energy, but Enkidu instantly regenerated it as he touched his hand to Gil's chest in its center.

"I want your help, Gil. I'd like you to wake up if you can."

The King of Heroes' Spirit Origin was lost.

Even if they did revive him, with his Gate of Babylon closed, they would not be able to neutralize the venom. Even so, Enkidu allowed a hint of emotion into his voice as he told his lifelong friend:

"I want . . . to save her soul—the one I met before I was born as me."

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Then, he slowly rose and, looking out the window at the forest which until the day before had been his headquarters and now was being encroached on by a magical energy that was not his own, directed a question at the center of the transformation.

“Are you in that Spirit Origin?”

The past.

Even earlier than his life.

“Or . . . have even the memories of that flower garden all sunken into oblivion?”

Remembering things from before he had first been born into the world, he murmured:

“This time I, no we, will save you. All of you . . .”

Without showing emotion, he whispered her name.

The name of the “human” he had once met and had his soul saved by . . . who he had reencountered and, unable to save her soul, had destroyed alongside his friend.

“. . . Are you still there . . . Huwawa?”

next episode [Fake06]

CLASS

Saber

Master (?): Ayaka Sajou

True Name: Richard I “the Lionheart”

Gender: Male

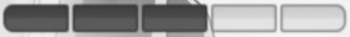
Height
Weight: 178 cm 66 kg

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

STR  B

M.E.  B

END  B

LCK  C

AGI  EX
(B-A++)

NP  A

Personal Skills

Lionheart: A

A skill that embodies the name lionheart. That fearless courage transformed into a skill. Inspires fear and wariness in enemies and raises the morale of allies.

Master of All Trades: A

Derived from anecdotes of Richard displaying prowess in a wide variety of fields, including the martial arts, fine arts, and romance. Skills he took an interest in in life are B-class or higher, and he learns new skills with extraordinary speed.

Superhuman Speed: A

A talent marked into Richard’s Spirit Origin by the rapid marches of his armies and his lightning swiftness on the battlefield. Richard’s agility increases the longer he remains in battle.

Class Skills

Anti-Magic: B

Riding: A

Noble Phantasm

Ever-Distant Sword of Victory: Excalibur

Rank: D-A+; Classification: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: 1-99; Maximum Targets: 1-1000

A Mystery that Richard obtained in life as a result of his adoration of Arthurian legend and his efforts to live as its successor. Its power became a Noble Phantasm by merging with accounts that he named every weapon he held “Excalibur.” Richard is able to wield any and all weapons he holds as Excalibur. Its power varies from weapon to weapon, but never equals the genuine “holy sword of the planet” —not even if he were to hold the real Excalibur.

Play the Lion on the Round Cross: Rounds of Leonheart

Rank: A; Classification: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: —; Maximum Targets: —

A Noble Phantasm that uses Richard’s Spirit Origin as a catalyst to materialize individuals he had ties to in life as servants, followers, guides, etc. The number he is able to summon varies depending on his Master’s supply of magical energy and the land he is summoned in. He is capable of summoning individuals recorded in the Throne as Heroic Spirits, but in that case, they will materialize in a weaker state than if summoned normally. They sometimes assist Richard, but because actually continuing to materialize them consumes an enormous quantity of magical energy, it is almost impossible to utilize them like ordinary Heroic Spirits.

CLASS

Caster

Master: Orlando Reeve

True Name: Alexandre Dumas père

Gender: Male

Height
Weight: 182 cm, 82 kg

Alignment: True Neutral



Personal Skills

Era Observation: A

The skill to observe not humans, but the flow of time and incorporate it into his works. Because he pours this power into the novels he writes rather than into his own attitude, it has little effect on his personal life.

Gourmet: A

A skill representing a wide range of culinary knowledge, from junk food to palace cuisine, with technique and a keen sense of taste to match. Includes hunting and fishing techniques for cooking.

Innocent Monster: E

The influence of numerous anecdotes, from his father's valor and his copyright trials to controversies after his death, that became famous due to gossip or to biographies written by other authors (or by Dumas himself). Its rank is low due to the progress of research into the truth of statements on plagiarism scandals, etc.

Class Skills

Territory Creation: E Item Creation (Modified): EX (A+–E depending on the targeted catalyst)

Noble Phantasm

Musketeers, Tilt at Windmills: Musketeers Masquerade

Rank: E–A+ depending on targeted catalyst; Classification: Anti-Personnel Noble Phantasm; Range: 1–99; Maximum Targets: 1
A Noble Phantasm that “writes” and “revises” the target’s life by overwriting it with Dumas’ own experiences or creations. Usable only a fixed number of times per summoning. A support Noble Phantasm that boosts one target’s abilities several times to several tens of times with each use. Because it is an enhancement for those confronting immense power, it normally only displays its effects on humans.

Long Unfinished Stunning Tale of Culinary Delights: Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine

Rank: A; Classification: Anti-Object Noble Phantasm; Range: —; Maximum Targets: —

A Noble Phantasm based on the fact that Dumas worked on multiple collaborations and revisions during his life, his posthumous work *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, and the fact that he was once the general manager of an archaeological museum dealing in ancient relics. It transforms the Caster Class Skill “Item Creation” into “Item Creation (Modified),” the ability to raise the “rank” of pre-existing items by creating anecdotes concerning them, making them pseudo-Noble Phantasms.

If Dumas obtains a relic that is already rank A or higher, he will not be able to modify it because its anecdotes are already “complete.”

Afterword

(Contains major spoilers; reading after finishing the main story is recommended)

Hello, Narita here. It's been a while.

First and foremost, I'm really sorry that this volume took so long to publish . . .!

To begin with, I discovered that I had something the government classifies as an incurable disease (I won't die from it any time soon, but I won't fully recover, either) and spent several months in the hospital, but I think it's safe to say I'm healthy now!

That said, my health issues don't have anything to do with you readers, so let me sincerely apologize again for taking so long. I'm really sorry . . .!

I did a lot of trial and error while writing this one, partly because it's been so long, and there were a lot of parts I cut or changed. The conversation between Dumas and "him" was originally three times as long and included everything from their first meeting to when they part, but that was obviously too much and ended up encroaching on the main characters, so I reduced it to its current length. I'm keeping an eye out for a chance to reuse that material.

I'm still consulting and interweaving a wide variety of sources, including biographies, novels, and even hearsay, concerning the Heroic Spirits who appear in this volume. When there are conflicts between those many sources and this book, please consider it my own exaggeration and let it slide.

The Heroic Spirit whose name comes up at the end is something that I've been holding in reserve since the before the series began and has accumulated a lot of background details ahead of time.

Me four years ago: "I wonder how Gilgamesh would react if _____ actually showed up in front of him."

Mr. Nasu four years ago: "Ve__ta facing Perfect Ce__ or post-transformation Fr__za."

Me four years ago: "Excuse me?"

Mr. Nasu four years ago: "Instead of energy blasts, he'd let out an angry yell, like 'Kwaaah!' and rapid-fire Gate of Babylon with an aura like a merciless demon."

Me four years ago: "We'll have to collect the seven (Heroic Spirit's) souls and summon the wish-granting dragon . . .!"

Fate/strange Fake 5

A lot of time has passed since that conversation.

I was sure that the King of Heroes must have changed after FGO chapter 7 and Extra . . . but I decided that his emotional core would stay the same. Still, I asked for Mr. Nasu's oversight, thinking that after his work on FGO he probably wasn't the same as he'd been four years ago . . .

Mr. Nasu: "About this volume of Fake . . . There was one serious mistake. . . . I don't want to sound like I'm nitpicking, but it involves an important setting detail, so I have to point it out."

Me: "(Ah! I've never seen him this serious! I'm done for.) Y-Yes?"

Mr. Nasu: "In the part where Richard's mom says 'the world began when King Arthur's Excalibur . . . and threw Merlin at the moon to . . .,' it's really a shame that you didn't include the famous passage about how 'Mordred the mage flew through the sky riding an iron giant and bombed Camelot, but Excalibur drove him into outer space'. . . but you've got plenty there already, so it's fine the way it is!"

Me: "Wh-Whoa, that really is serious! I also forgot to include how 'Tristan could hit a hole-in-one on his enemies' weak points from up to 120 yards. We get the word golf from the music he played at the time, goryūfu!"

I was relieved to find that four years of work on FGO hadn't changed Mr. Nasu one bit. I almost wondered if the mood of our conversation might be a bit too unchanged, but that's a separate issue.

That said, I still need an IV drip twice a month to keep myself healthy, and I'm doing my best while working on other jobs at the same time, so please bear with me!

Those "other jobs" are three works I have the good fortune to be involved in as original creator, all releasing this month—Dead Mount Death Play, serialized in *Young Gangan*; *Kuroha* by Nijisuke, serialized in *Magazine Pocket*; and *Mushikago no Jōmae*, a TV drama in production at WOWWOW with a spinoff manga serialized in *comico*!

Now, the Holy Grail War in Snowfield has had its first "loser," and this story has finally made it to the top of the mountain. The rest will be rolling it down at the same angle.

The next book, book 6, will firmly move the story along and also feature Francesca, who doesn't appear in this book, and True Rider, who hasn't appeared in two. I hope you'll wait for it!

And now, some thanks:

My editor Anan, who I once again gave a lot of trouble with deadlines, and everyone at the publisher.

Oyama and everyone else at II V who adjusted their schedules for me.

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Sakurai Hikaru, who oversaw “his” lines in conversation with Dumas, and all the many writers and manga creators involved with Fate.

Miwa Kiyomine and everyone at Team Barrel Roll, who researched details about specific Servants for me.

Sanda Makoto, who looked up details of mage society around El-Melloi II for me and gave me a lot of feedback. (Congratulations on The Case Files of Lord El-Melloi II getting an anime! Flat will be in it too! Yay!)

Morii Shizuki, who provided many wonderful suggestions on the visual side of things and created more incredible illustrations for this book.

And most of all, Nasu Kinoko and everyone at TYPE-MOON, who created Fate and oversaw my work, and all the staff of Fate/Grand Order, which I was fortunate enough to be involved in in the form of Enkidu’s interludes . . . and all of you who picked up this book and read it.

Thank you very much!

February 2019, still excited from the Code Geass movie I saw yesterday, Narita Ryōgo