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Fate strange Fake

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Fate/strange Fake 5

Fate/Strange Fake

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Intro

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There was a hollow rattle.

When it realized that the sound accompanied the end of everything, it thought . . . “Oh, it’s begun.”

It kept waiting for a long, long time.

“Time” was meant to be a part of the system—merely one of the elements that comprised it—but it was different now.

A slight uncertainty about its goal—“to wait”—arose in the program running inside it.

It already understood that the uncertainty was a system called “emotion” that had been copied from the outside.

At the same time, it realized that the time had finally come for it—born for the sole purpose of “existing”—to be meaningful.

In which case, it had to move on to the next phase.

It understood what it out to accomplish.

The greatest and final purpose bestowed on it by its creator.

The purpose for which it had been born.

Oh, yes.

It’s over.

It has come to a close.

I have fallen to ruin.

I have arrived.

I am complete.

Loss was always the final piece.

Following the principles of its birth, it rebooted itself.

Simply to achieve the objective that its creator had given it.

It recalculated the duty it had been tasked with.

Would its path be difficult or easy?

There was no point in speculating.

In either case, it had no choice but to see it through.

Nothing else would give it meaning.

Continue to exist. Continue to exist.

It need only become a true human and continue to exist in this world.

Even if that meant . . . wiping the species defined as “humans” from the face of the earth.

Bridge

“The Canon of the Demigods, Act 2”

Bridge

Antiquity, on the Shore of the Black Sea

It was a beautiful land.

Dazzling sunshine lit its fields and forests, surrounded by an expanse of deep, blue sea.

The city-state of Themiskyra.

That land, named for the sacred sea, or possibly for its goddess herself, commanded a sweeping view of the fertile plains on the southern coast of the Black Sea. On it stood a city built primarily on oceangoing trade.

That city was spoken of in many tales—some had it that it was an island, surrounded by the sea on all sides, others that it was a peninsula, and still others that the power of the gods enabled it to shift freely between the two—but the most important point was not the city's origin or geography but the people that ruled it.

The Amazons.

That tribe, also called the Amazones, was distinguished by being made up entirely of women. Except when those who desired offspring mingled with men of neighboring cities, hunting, agriculture, animal husbandry, and all other aspects of life were conducted entirely by women.

Men who took issue with that—kings of neighboring cities and groups of brigands who made their strongholds in the mountains—often attacked their city, but the Amazons beat back every assault.

Not only ordinary life but the military preparations essential to the defense of the city were managed entirely by women. Their skill in horseback riding and archery, in particular, was so impressive that word of it reached the cultures of distant Greece.

In Themiskyra there was a queen.

Her mother was Otrere, a devout priestess of Artemis and a great woman who had had congress with Ares, once the god of war, and, despite being human, borne the god's child.

Otrere's daughter, however, surpassed her in heroism.

She was a priestess of the god of war and the queen of the people.

She was also a war-leader who rode in the vanguard and kicked up a storm of blood.

That young queen ruled powerfully over the surrounding lands with her might and wisdom,

the divine aura and divine artefact she had inherited from the god of war, and the charisma to unite her sturdy warrior women.

On horseback, it was said, a sweep of her spear would part the sea and a shot from her bow would shake the forests. Her prowess was sufficient to inspire faith in her followers and terrified awe in neighboring cities, and her fame spread to distant Greece.

But . . . a turning point came for that queen and for all the Amazons.

A fateful wind carried a lone ship to Themiskyra.

Aboard it was a man who was then hailed in Greece—and who would be hailed by future generations—as a great hero.

It is said that the young queen was quite taken with him.

The reason for her attraction was simple, but that very simplicity made it complicated.

It was not a sense of duty to leave mighty offspring.

Nor was it a lust for physical pleasure.

Admiration.

When the queen, who until then had known no one truly strong except the gods, saw that man . . . she saw for the first time a man who was a fitting match for her origin, the god of war.

According to the surviving Amazons, the queen's eyes shone then like the eyes of a child who had just been told tales of the Olympian gods.

The queen did not hesitate to grant that great hero, who said that he had come on the order of a king to obtain the belt of the god of war, permission to stay and to negotiate.

Of course, she had not let her emotions get the better of her or decided to give up the belt without a plan.

She decided to give up the belt after allowing any women of her tribe who wanted children to mingle with the heroes aboard the ship and entering into a trade agreement with the city-state to which the great hero belonged.

The fact that the king did not want the belt for himself, but because his daughter asked for it helped negotiations to proceed smoothly.

The queen and her people ultimately accepted it as “giving aid to a woman living in a far-away land.”

In the end, they came to the conclusion that forging a peaceful alliance with that great hero was worth more to the Amazon people than the war-belt.

Neither the queen nor her people would ever hide behind an army of men. They would not be afraid even to do battle with that great hero, but the queen was not so mad for battle that she would go to war without cause.

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Given that the great hero was a man, they could not accept him as one of them, but by establishing a friendly rivalry between them, the queen hoped to cultivate a competitive spirit in her women and make them a stronger, more united people.

Although the queen allowed her emotions to drive her as she raced across the battlefield, she also made many such political decisions. For that reason, she was known to her people as a woman of two faces, but both of those faces commanded their respect.

They could not say whether her policy concerning the great hero and his men was realistic based on the social conditions of the time, or an impracticable pipe dream.

That was because it never bore fruit.

The relationship the queen had envisioned between her people and the great hero fell apart at the negotiation table just as she was about to hand over the belt.

Because the schemes of a goddess led . . . to the queen's tragic death.

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Main Street, Snowfield

A massive horse dashed over the broken asphalt, weaving through the thick, jet-black mist.

There had been four horses at first, but one and then another had been consumed by the oncoming darkness until the hoofbeats of only one could still be heard.

Even with its fellows hidden from the world, the last gargantuan horse raced through the city night as the whim of the grotesque Heroic Spirit on its back—Alkeides—without the slightest trace of fear.

But even a Heroic Spirit as great as Alkeides had no choice but to flee.

The blackness came on.

The blackness came on.

An overwhelming cloud of blackness was hot on Alkeides' heels, borne on the air the swayed with the leaves of the roadside trees, on the breeze that blew between the buildings, and even on the despairing sighs of those it had already consumed.

Alkeides carried within him warped, mud-like magical energy the color of destruction, but the shadow that pursued him embodied a different kind of darkness.

Alkeides had no way of knowing exactly what that “black mist” was.

Still, all his accumulated experience and the senses honed by the deadly combat he had just been engaged in told him that it was no ordinary being.

He could not know what became of those engulfed by the inky blackness, but he did notice one thing: The Spirit Origin of Kerberos, a part of his Noble Phantasm, had vanished from the area.

The magical energy that linked them was not completely gone, but he could neither recall it nor dismiss it.

It was as if a massive ward was slithering of its own accord in an effort to isolate him.

As the dark torrent, like the khamsin he had once seen in an arid region on the Mediterranean coast in life dyed black, rushed on behind him, his horse’s hooves at last outpaced the “black mist.”

There was no longer any obstacle in the way of his horse. His escape seemed simple.

That instant . . . the faint sound of something slicing the air reached Alkeides’ ears.

“. . . Here?” The bowman-turned-avenger muttered, a hint of a different emotion in his irritated voice.

“You would attack me in these circumstances? You are certainly fearless, queen.”

At the same time, he nocked an arrow to his bow and, still urging on his horse, twisted his upper body and loosed it.

There was a crash, and sparks shone in the night of Main Street.

A moment later, hoofbeats resounded through the gaps between buildings, weaving a tumultuous ensemble with those of Alkeides’ massive steed.

A single, swift horse appeared, displaying extraordinary movements. On its back rode a Heroic Spirit.

“. . . Alkeides!” The woman on the horse—the Rider-Class Heroic Spirit Hippolyte—shouted the moment they caught sight of each other. “How dare you! Are you planning to dishonor what those brave heroes achieved by using a curse to hold back the venom?!”

When he heard that, Alkeides flashed a fearless grin behind his cloth, even while he suppressed the hydra venom coursing through his veins with the power of the “mud” that had flowed into him through Bazdilot.

I see. That explains it.

The image of the police officers he had faced shortly before flashed through his mind.

Those humans, setting aside the one called John . . . They may have wielded Noble Phantasms, but I doubt many could have stood firm in the face of my strength.

His torrent of magical energy should have been enough to scatter a mob of police officers.

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But they had remained on the battlefield and survived.

They had been consumed by the black mist, and he did not know what had happened to them after that, but they had been unnaturally resilient . . . Or rather, some outside force had unquestionably been enhancing their meagre strength.

“Queen.”

Alkeides’ doubts instantly came to a head as he urged on his horse with all his might, and he matter-of-factly stated his conclusion.

“You . . . gave them your protection, didn’t you?”

“ . . . ”

Hippolyte accelerated her horse and fired her next arrow in silence.

Alkeides deflected it with his bow. The deflected arrow flew forward and tore up a large chunk of asphalt.

The avenger’s massive steed, however, trampled the viscous obstacle as if it were not there and hurtled forward, always forward with all its might.

Alkeides flowed smoothly into a counterattack without stopping the scything motion of his bow.

He nocked three of his own arrows at once and fired them in unison with the acceleration of his horse.

The three arrows tore through the air, each tracing a different trajectory, closing in on Hippolyte from the front, back, and above.

Hippolyte, however, skillfully maneuvered her horse and rode it across the side of a building.

Running in such a way would normally, of course, be impossible.

Launching out of the posture of a mountain deer walking up the wall of a dam, the swift steed continued to practically glide through the urban landscape with the force of a falcon.

Horse and rider moved like a single creature—Hippolyte continued to use her bow without being shaken by her steed’s movements. Paired with their blinding speed, their movements could be mistaken for a centaur of legend.

The queen of the Amazons, sometimes called “the original equestrian tribe,” drew a pinnacle of horse-riding skill whose perfection belied her youthful appearance—or rather, which had been arrived at by a different path than “perfection” in the modern day—from the depths of her Spirit Origin as she sliced through the darkness of night accompanied by the neighing of her steed.

“I’m sure that some of those officials were men,” Alkeides probed the queen as his own horse rocked him.

“ . . . ”

“Has the radiance of the Grail and the logic of war led you to abandon your pride, queen of the Amazons?”



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“... Silence.”

Neither of them allowed their offense or defense to slacken, even as they exchanged words.

“I don’t know what you would wish for . . . but would you really forsake your way of life for the wish-granting Grail?”

“I said silence!”

Hippolyte added emphasis in vexation. Alkeides showered her with quiet yet forceful words.

“Like you did when you betrayed us?” He asked, probing.

“...”

The queen’s response . . . was not an angry bellow but silence.

All expression vanished from Hippolyte’s eyes, which had been blazing with fury. Her mount was leaving the nighttime scenery behind it with the speed of the wind, but in her mind, time had stopped.

The face she exposed in the dark night was devoid of expression, or perhaps its expression had been blotted out by so many other emotions piled onto it like coals.

But that only lasted a moment.

Just the instant between her horse kicking the ground and its hooves striking it again.

After that brief blank in which the world seemed to have frozen, the look plastered on her face was . . . a fearless grin.

“Nonsense!”

She swiftly drew her own horse alongside Alkeides’ gargantuan steed and brandished a long spear materialized from the depths of her Spirit Origin.

“!”

“Were you trying to test me? Then you should have put more scorn in your words, Avenger.”

The spear was longer than its wielder Hippolyte was tall. She swung it at Alkeides, pressing him in an effort to take his life.

In a flash, her Noble Phantasm, the war god’s belt, was wrapped around her arm that held the spear, and a thrust cloaked in a divine aura shot out at Alkeides’ bow.

Alkeides countered by immediately activating the same Noble Phantasm—the war god’s belt—and parrying the thrust with his divine-aura-clad bow.

A limb of his mighty bow deflected the spearhead, and a loud crash echoed through the city night.

Scattered divinity tore through the surrounding darkness and slowed the pursuit of the “black mist.”

They clashed a second time, then a third, then their horses separated, and Hippolyte roared: “You can’t seriously believe that I would fall for a taunt like that!”

Their voices sounded with strange force in each other’s ears despite the sounds of hoofbeats and flying arrows that filled the air.

They continued to launch attacks on each other as their horses crossed paths in three dimensions and the “black mist” closed in behind them with renewed vigor.

“You’re acting desperate, Alkeides!”

“Oh . . .?”

Hippolyte was firing her bow at the gaps in the Nemean lion’s pelt that protected him while occasionally switching to her spear and attacking his weapon directly.

It was a ceaseless rain of blows, perfectly in sink with the movements of her galloping horse.

She was struggling to bridge the gap in the magical energy contained in their Spirit Origins with skill, but Alkeides was worn down by consecutive battles and was in no condition to shake her off with brute force.

Beside which . . .

. . .

As he fended off the queen’s spear thrusts, Alkeides realized.

Her strength is growing.

The quantity and quality of her magical energy were clearly greater than they had been during their encounter in the ravine.

Has she been temporarily boosted using a Command Spell . . .?

No, this isn’t a momentary enhancement. The base of her Spirit Origin has been reinforced.

“I retract my insult, queen.”

“ . . .”

“I imagined that your strategy was to provide your blessing to others while remaining hidden yourself and strike me while my guard was down . . . but you intend to tear through me head-on.”

“Of course I do,” the queen casually shot back from astride her horse, then bellowed: “Alkeides . . . you’re laboring under a misunderstanding.”

“Oh?”

“I have no intention of denying my sisters’ and my people’s beliefs, whatever they may be.” She built up power in the cloth wound around her right arm—the war god’s belt—she continued in a clear, ringing voice: “But you could never know why my people were born . . .!”

Her right arm glowed and the divine aura that filled her body swelled explosively.

She concentrated the greater part of that radiance into the spear in her right hand and channeled the remainder into her mount.

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The queen and her prized steed had gone beyond unity of horse and rider and become one with her weapon as well. They formed a single arrowhead, driving a ferocious blow into Alkeides.

“Or what I truly wished for at the end of those lush, spirit-haunted plains!”

For an instant, the “black mist” hid them completely . . . then the loudest crash yet rang out and scattered it once again.

“. . . Well struck, queen.”

Once the black mist cleared, it revealed Alkeides atop his horse, with the spear thrust into his left arm.

“It seems you have found an excellent Master.”

“. . .”

“I can see that in this short time you have either grown far more accustomed to battle or received precise tuning. They must be impressive to enable you to draw out so much divine power in this world so far removed from the Age of Gods.”

His wound, however, was far from lethal. Despite the fact that the spearhead was still embedded between his bones, the dark red “mud” was already squirming out to fill the wound.

“. . . Alkeides . . . what are you carrying inside you?” Hippolyte asked, her face growing grim and her right hand still gripping her spear. “What is that ‘mud’?”

Because her spearhead was still stuck into Alkeides, they were naturally forced to continue riding in parallel. As Hippolyte, seeing the “mud” oozing from her opponent’s wound, hesitated to pull back her spear for a moment, the bow swung by Alkeides’ right hand bit into her side.

With a grunt, she hurriedly blocked it with divine energy from the belt, but the force of the blow pulled her spear free and put distance between the two horses again.

Alkeides checked that the mud had staunched his wound once the spear was removed, then casually declared:

“. . . Who can say? But given that it adapts to my current form . . . it’s probably part of a ‘human.’”

The next instant . . . a portion of the mud that had overflowed from his wound abruptly grew into a dark-red surge that launched itself at Hippolyte.

“In which case, demigod queen . . .”

“What . . .?!”

“Know that you cannot pierce the end of man with mere divine power.”

The “mud” the color of half-rotten blood and distinct from the “black mist” leapt to engulf Hippolyte like a mass of living slime.

SShe and her horse avoided it just in the nick of time.

But the “mud,” which seemed to have a will of its own, pursued Hippolyte, forming into an immense pair of viscous jaws to consume her in a single gulp.

“It will take more than that . . .!”

Hippolyte once again focused magical energy into the belt wrapped around her arm, preparing to draw it more divine energy . . . but as if in response, the mud suddenly burst apart.

“!”

It spread out like a spiderweb centered on a Main Street intersection, becoming a cloud of muddy fumes that threatened to envelope Hippolyte and her mount from all sides.

Faced with what looked like a forest of black trees closing in on her from every direction, Hippolyte, aware of the dangers, began to fuse her own Spirit Origin with the belt, when . . .

“With my Command Spell, I order you:”

“. . .! Master?!”

A voice sounded within Hippolyte, going beyond telepathy and speaking directly to the nature of her Spirit Origin.

“Draw the dragon from the leylines and release it with divine might!”

The next instant, magical energy welled up from her surroundings—from the sacred ground of Snowfield itself—and was drawn into Hippolyte’s Goddess of War.

Suddenly, a rainbow-colored radiance lit the darkness of night.

It was not only her Noble Phantasm.

The magical energy contained within the Heroic Spirit herself swelled explosively, and with an immense torrent of light with her at its center, she blasted away most of the oncoming “mud.”

When the blinding light subsided, and Hippolyte surveyed her surroundings . . . the “mud,” the “black mist,” and even Alkeides were nowhere to be seen.

Realizing that he had taken the opportunity to withdraw, Hippolyte gritted her teeth.

“Are you trying to say I’m not even worth settling things with . . .?!”

Once Hippolyte’s anger had subsided, she turned to the empty air and spoke. She was communicating telepathically with her Master.

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“Master, one of your valuable Command Spells . . .” She began to protest but was unable to continue.

“ . . . No. Thank you, Master. And I apologize. It seems I still wasn’t strong enough.”

The recoil she had suffered and the twisted magical energy of the “mud” that had almost flowed back on her the moment she had blown it away with her Command-Spell-boosted Spirit Origin had convinced her:

As things stood, I wouldn’t have been able to stop it.

She was able to surmise that it would have been impossible for her to completely shake off that “mud” mingled with Alkeides’ blood and an immense quantity of magical energy without the aid of a Command Spell.

And . . . if that “mud” had done anything to her, she was sure that it would have been dire.

She believed that her Master, observing her from a distance, had used the precious Command Spell to save her because her Master had taken it more seriously than she had.

Even if my Master used up all three Command Spells, I doubt I would ever want to rebel . . .

Hippolyte harbored no dislike for the being who was her Master.

There were points on which they disagreed, but her Master was worthy of riding alongside.

But for that very reason . . . she felt indebted to her Master for needing the help of a Command Spell in a battle with an opponent tied to herself.

“ . . .”

The cityscape after Alkeides had departed and the black mist had rolled back.

Hippolyte stroked her horse’s neck as she surveyed her surroundings.

She had already left Main Street and put a considerable distance between herself and the hospital from which the “black mist” had burst.

As the sky began to lighten, she sensed the townspeople who had been kept away beginning to stir near the hospital.

“In any case, I can’t keep fighting like this. Let’s start over, Master,” Hippolyte telepathically announced and remounted her horse.

“You ran well, Kalion. Let’s rest with Master.”

Hippolyte called her horse’s name with a peaceful expression, then dematerialized and slowly set off back to the stronghold where her Master was, taking out-of-the-way side streets.

The retreating figures of the girl and horse were seen by several people before they dematerialized, but because casinos and other businesses occasionally employed horses for publicity, no one paid them much mind. They assumed that Hippolyte’s clothes must also be promotion for some event and continued on their ways.

The people of Snowfield could no longer afford to waste energy on such minor oddities. People who were supposed to have left the city inexplicably returned saying that they “did not want to leave.”

A mysterious disease was running rampant among animals.

Terrorists had attacked the police station.

Then there was the gas pipeline explosion in the desert, the damage caused to the city by a freak windstorm, and the fire in the factory district.

It was one disaster after another, and everyone who checked the news or the weather all suspected the same thing: that the enormous hurricane that had the western United States in an uproar, which had formed without warning and was supposed to be heading straight for their region of the country, would make a beeline for Snowfield.

That all of this could not be coincidence. That something was happening in their city.

They had no proof.

If they wrote about it online, the responses from people in other areas were full of comments like, “Talk about bad luck,” and “You guys must be cursed.”

The fact that there had been few deaths was part of the reason, as were the efforts of a government agency to conceal any eye-catching damages, but unease was still growing among Snowfield’s residents.

Still, the situation had not deteriorated to the point of panic and rioting.

The countless suggestions and wards built into the city at its inception restrained such impulses.

Even so . . . they were approaching their limit.

The faces of those who sensed how bad their situation had become were beginning to show signs not of resistance but of resignation.

They had no idea what was going to happen.

The unease just swirled in the depths of their intuitions.

A feeling that the town called Snowfield would soon be coming to an end.

And that their lives and those of everyone else would be dragged into it.

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In the Sky

A massive airship flew, through the power of magecraft, at a normally unattainable altitude. Inside the blimp, which doubled as the workshop of Francesca—a mage who was among the masterminds of the “Fake Holy Grail War” in Snowfield—the mage girl observed events on the ground below alongside Francois Prelati, the Caster she had summoned.

Francesca had been using Francois’ Illusion Skill to deceive spatial distance and observe the battle in front of the hospital as if it were unfolding right in front of her without relying on familiars. However . . .

“That’s weird . . .”

“What’s wrong?” Caster asked, stuffing his face with pumpkin pie.

“There’s a lot of funny stuff going on,” his Master, Francesca, answered with an air of confusion. “I’m mean, I’m happy that unforeseen things are happening, but not knowing the answers makes my head feel all fuzzy, you know?”

“You sure are selfish. Just what I’d expect from me.” Caster—Prelati—replied with a raucous laugh. Francesca ignored him and continued to think out loud.

“The Amazon queen’s Spirit Origin is higher quality than it was when I saw her in the ravine. Her fortune’s about the same, but her physical abilities and her inner magical energy maybe have gone up by maybe a full rank.”

“Wow, that can happen? I never expected to see a Servant grow during the War.”

“It can, if they get a boost from an injection of magical energy. . . . Do you think her Master, little Doris, has finally taken reinforcement magecraft into forbidden territory? Maybe putting her lifespan and even her Crest on the line to enhance her own Magic Circuits by force . . .?”

“Whoa. That queen’s master is on ‘our side,’ right? She should know that the grail’s a warped fake. She’d have to be crazy to still risk her life for it.”

Prelati seemed to have taken an interest, because he wiped the pumpkin cream from around his mouth with a handkerchief and turned to look at Francesca.

“Well, we won’t get to find out if it can approach the Third Magic or not until all’s said and done . . . but considering how much magical energy is involved, it should be able to grant some pretty high-quality wishes.”

“Oh, who cares! It’s more fun if they really struggle instead of going down easily, anyway! I mean, we’ve got a real upset on our hands, with a top-contender like Gilgamesh going down!” Francesca suddenly decided to accept the situation and burst out laughing.

“Anyway,” Prelati asked her, “I’m more interested in that black mist that came out of the hospital. What was that?”

“Who knows?”

“Who knows? . . . That stuff’s not normal. Should we do something?”

“What would you do in my shoes? Panic and cry that you’re confused and scared?”

“. . . Well, if I didn’t know, I guessed I’d say, ‘Who knows?’ But seeing a gender-swapped me crying her eyes out might be surprisingly hot, so why not give it a try?”

“I completely agree, but it’d be a pain, so only if I feel like it. Right now, I’ve got no clue what’s going to happen, and I want to enjoy it to the max!”

She brushed off Prelati and went on wondering aloud.

“Still . . . little Tsubaki ending up as a Master was a funny accident, but I’d like to know what kind of Heroic Spirit she summoned. I mean, it seems like it whisked a bunch of people off to who-knows-where, you know?”

“And that girl . . . Haruri, right? My organs ached with joy when she summoned a monster, but she wasn’t very exciting today, was she?”

“I mean, it’s no fun having people do whatever they feel like where I can’t see them.”

At that point, Francesca narrowed her eyes, and her smile took on a wicked air as she muttered:

“And that bloodsucker coming and going as he pleases is just a little . . . unpleasant, don’t you think?”

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In a Dream

“It looks like quite a lot have been drawn into ‘this world.’ . . . I wonder what will happen now.”

The hematophage in the shape of a young boy—Jester Karture, the mage who was technically Assassin’s Master—used his power to switch his body to his boy form and gloated over the city from atop a building.

“If Miss Assassin sides with this world, she’ll make enemies of the police. Not that they were friendly to begin with,” Jester muttered to himself, chuckling.

“If she sides against this world, she’ll have to kill little Tsubaki, who she fought so hard to protect. Yes, it won’t hurt me, whichever way it goes.

“This is a Holy Grail War,” Jester continued with a wicked grin at odds with his youthful appearance. “Everyone around you is an enemy. Everyone.”

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Soon, a hint of ecstasy crept into his smile, and he spread his arms wide in ecstasy.

Jester continued to express his own joy in the world, as if trying to take the blue sky, in which the sun had fully risen, on himself.

“Only I . . . Only I, your Master, can be your ally . . . Miss Assassin.”

And so, Jester was drunk on his own ecstasy . . . but he was overlooking something—a single “abnormality” that had occurred in that world.

Not even Tsubaki’s Servant, Pale Rider, had noticed it.

Beneath the Kuruokas’ residence, something else was being born.

Beneath the house, a mage’s workshop, larger than the basement, had been constructed.

Around a certain “catalyst” that had been carefully preserved in its center, an abnormality was manifesting.

“ . . . ”

Perhaps it ought to be called an apparition.

At the very least, it was no one’s Servant.

“ . . . Why?”

It was a being that might have become one, but no magical energy linked it to anyone.

It had probably risen in response to some influence and would soon disappear. “It” was cloaked in a red garment causing quivering water droplets to drift about it.

“Why am I here . . . ”

It had clean-cut features and a strange, androgynous figure . . . but it did nothing in particular. It only wavered in that spot.

“ . . . Zheng?”

For the moment.

Chapter 17

“Breaking Dawn and Wakeless Dreams II”

Chapter 17: Day 3

Day 3, Morning, Snowfield Police Station, Chief's Office

A full day had passed in Snowfield since the deadly battle in front of the hospital.

The damage to Main Street had been explained away as an underground gas and water pipe accident triggered by the pipeline explosion that had left the crater in the desert.

The terrorists supposed to have attacked the police station had sabotaged the pipes before the attack, and the delayed effect on plumbing already damaged by the desert explosion and magnified the tragedy... or so the cover story went. Possibly it had been judged that the gas company would not last until the end of the Holy Grail War without an excuse.

The townspeople's anger was directed at the nonexistent terrorists, but because news that those terrorists were still at large was spread at the same time, a portion of the citizens developed a sense of danger and began to avoid visiting the city's urban areas without a good reason.

In the midst of that situation, one man's muttering filled his spacious office.

"So, Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, was taken down ..." Snowfield's chief of police, Orlando Reeve, muttered to himself with a frown as he went over the reports of one of his subordinates assigned to monitor Gilgamesh's Master, Tine Chelk, and her faction.

He had guessed as much based magical-energy measurements he had conducted in his office the night before.

Kuruoka Tsubaki, the Kuruokas' daughter, was believed to have somehow developed Command Spells while unconscious and become a Master.

He had dispatched officers to take Tsubaki into protective custody and confirm the intentions of her Servant, but their visit had turned into a melee between multiple Heroic Spirits.

Orlando had observed an extraordinary torrent of magical energy. An instant later, the Spirit Origin response he believed to be the King of Heroes Gilgamesh had fluctuated and was now becoming undetectable.

"Our most dangerous enemy is gone . . . or at least that's how I normally ought to look at this."

The chief had not despaired, but his face was severe.

He may have lost a powerful enemy . . . but the blow to his own faction had been devastating.

More than twenty of his subordinates—all but a few he had held back in case a third party attempted to exploit the commotion—had vanished immediately after the King of Heroes' Spirit Origin faded.

If they had been killed, he would be able to give up on them and immediately shift focus to

his next move.

He did not have enough of a mage's mentality to be unmoved by the loss, but he was prepared for all of them to die, himself included.

But, while he was not going to complain, not knowing if they were alive or dead did force him to consider his next move.

There were not even traces of corpses—only the material damage remained.

Most of the nearby surveillance cameras had already been destroyed by the battle, but several surviving cameras had captured footage of a black mist welling up from the direction of the hospital.

It looked like little more than thin smog on video, but if some form of magical energy were at work, then it might appear thicker to the naked eyes of mages or Heroic Spirits.

Even his second in command, Vera Levitt, had disappeared.

The chief had lost most of his pawns, but he considered confirming whether they were alive or dead his top priority.

Even supposing that the mist did take their lives, the absence of bodies has to mean something.

Consider the motive. Save figuring out who did what for later.

Do they plan to use the corpses? Either by controlling them like zombies, or by extracting information about us directly from their brains . . . ?

If they aren't dead . . . they might brainwash them without killing them or torture them for information . . .

It was depressing to think that he risked his subordinates turning against him or having information stolen in either case, but the chief continued his conjecture.

Other possible reasons . . . Does Kuruoka Tsubaki's Servant need to hide a large number of humans somewhere?

Either way, it boils down to a "whydunnit."

Although, while I can manage painstaking investigation, deductions were never my specialty.

Its Master's orders . . . ? No, that couldn't be it.

Kuruoka Tsubaki is comatose. She's in no condition to communicate with her Servant.

...

Wait. Is that really true?

I'm deliberately severing the link, but according to Faldeus, Servants' memories can flow into their Masters through the magical energy that connects them . . .

What about the reverse?

What if it read something from Tsubaki's subconscious mind while she's comatose and . . .

Just as the chief's thoughts were accelerating, a voice that slammed on the breaks sounded

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through the room.

“Yo.”

The chief turned and saw his own Servant, Caster Alexandre Dumas père.

“What are you doing here, Caster?”

“Oh, I’ve just been lending a hand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sorry, bro,” Dumas answered the chief’s suspicious question, “you cut off telepathy from your end. Then again, I didn’t try the phone ‘cause I was sure you’d stop me.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” The chief asked despite suspecting he would not like the answer.

“Well,” Dumas continued light-heartedly, plopping down onto the visitors’ sofa in a corner of the office, “it was lucky I was watching the fighting from a step back. If I’d been at ringside, I’d be in that black mist now myself. . . . ‘Course, I probably could have focused on supporting your officers better that way.”

“. . .?! You were there?! I don’t remember giving that order!”

“Yeah, and I don’t remember getting it. Good to know both our memories are in good shape. We could be witnesses for an alibi; that’s an important role in plays and novels.”

“. . .! Do you understand your position? My officers and I can be replaced, but if anything happens to you, our Heroic Spirit, our faction is finished.”

The chief’s words were charged with quiet anger, but Dumas brushed off his feelings with a shrug and answered as flippantly as if he were ordering breakfast.

“Not really. There are plenty of ways you could make it work. It’s about time we got some Heroic Spirits at a loose end, with just their Masters killed—just make a contract with one of them.”

“Do you think you can get out of this with assumptions like that?”

“I’m saying that you wanted in to this war, so don’t chalk it up as ‘finished’ so easily.”

“. . .!”

At Dumas words, the chief paused to take several deep breaths in silence, wiped all trace of anger and impatience from his face, and resumed speaking with careful self-control.

“. . . I suppose you’re right. Sorry. Even if all of our forces, including the two of us, die, we shouldn’t consider that the end.”

“Haha! I like how it only takes you a second to cool your head.”

“I’ll take that as consolation . . . but cooling my head won’t help me to improve our situation.”

“Then have some good news—my treat. Your officers who disappeared are still in good shape.”

“!”

The chief's eyes widened slightly.

"I can still sense the weapons I cooked up," Dumas continued with a cheerful grin. "I may not be much of a Caster for this Grail War, but I can at least tell if things I've been mixed up with still exist or not. Going by my feelings, the weapons I gave them are still somewhere in our world . . . but not somewhere you could walk to. . . . That's my honest opinion."

"But the fact that the Noble Phantasms are intact doesn't guarantee their users' safety, does it?" The chief asked suspiciously.

"John's alive, at least," Dumas answered.

"I'll explain that later. It just means I've got a Noble Phantasm I hadn't told you about yet."

". . . No. If you say you'll explain later, I'll wait. My officers' safety takes priority."

The chief swallowed whatever he had been about to say and returned his attention to the problem at hand.

"Still . . . I don't understand. Are they inside some kind of ward? . . . Don't tell me it's a Reality Marble?"

A Reality Marble.

At the thought of the term, the chief mentally let out a little groan.

"A Reality Marble . . . That's great magecraft, right? Builds up a little world out of a mental landscape and jams it into our world?"

"Your understanding is a little crude, but not entirely mistaken. . . . Hmm, a Reality Marble or similar magecraft would certainly be capable of isolating a certain number of people. It wouldn't surprise me if a Heroic Spirit had a trick or two like that up their sleeve . . . but it ought to require a massive supply of magical energy. It could hold the people who disappeared captive for a short time, but not over an extended period."

Even in the world of magecraft, Reality Marbles were said to approach Magic.

Considering the magical energy of mages, even a Heroic Spirit should not be able to overwrite reality with their "world," sometimes even bending the laws of physics, for more than a few minutes.

It would be a different story if they had a source of magical energy to maintain it longer, but their surveillance system ought to detect some sign of a movement of magical energy on that scale.

It's possible that Faldeus has already picked it up and is withholding the information . . .

No . . . there's also the massive magical energy reading that did suddenly appear last night.

We should keep running the surveillance system, but if it's possible to completely conceal a flow of magical energy on that scale, we'll need to try other approaches as well.

While the chief sank into thought, Dumas was reading a newspaper lying on the reception table.

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“Hey, more bad news. Get a load of this—there’s a hurricane heading straight for us. Think a Heroic Spirit could be behind that?”

“... The hurricane developed far to the west of us. I’d like to think it’s unrelated. Still...”

“Going by that sour face, I’m guessing you’re not so optimistic. That’s good. Whether it’s connected or not, wind and rain is gonna blow our plans all out of whack. Looks like a whole bunch of your country’s big shots died in one day, too. That’s another storm to worry about.”

“I’m concerned about that... but I doubt I’d get a satisfactory answer about it out of Faldeus or that old bitch.”

The timing being what it was, the chief suspected everything taking place in the United States of being involved with the “Fake Holy Grail War” in Snowfield. But even if it were connected, he frustratingly lacked any immediate way to be certain.

In central Snowfield, with the situation only growing worse, the chief realized his own powerlessness.

No, I already knew that.

I was always prepared to be outclassed in terms of ability. Still, we...

The chief clenched his fists.

“So, what’re you gonna do, bro?” Dumas asked casually.

“What do you mean?”

“When are you gonna go save them? It’ll depend on where they vanished to, but if a Heroic Spirit like me can sneak in there, I’ll give it a shot.”

The chief frowned.

He did not know everything about the Heroic Spirit he had summoned, but he did have a general grasp of his capabilities.

“... You almost fooled me earlier, but I can’t afford to send you to the front lines. I haven’t ordered you to go that far, and I don’t intend to. If you’re going to insist on acting on your own initiative again, I’ll restrict your movements even if it means using a Command Spell.”

The chief’s tone was severe. Dumas wiped his usual grin off his face and answered in earnest.

“No, you did order me. And first thing, too.”

“What do you...”

“Brother, you asked me to make weapons for your officers—to give ‘the strength to fight’ to a bunch of people who are novice mages and compared to Heroic Spirits aren’t much different from the brats rocking in strollers out there in the park.”

Dumas flipped through the newspaper, pointed to a page of a serialized short story by an author living in Las Vegas, and tapped it with his finger as he began to expound.

“I’m an author, brother. What ‘strength’ can I give you guys? What ‘weapons’? Is it the ‘Noble

Phantasm' that latched onto me from who-knows-where when I became a Heroic Spirit, whatever that is? The Item Creation Skill I got served as a garnish? Well, that's one answer, but it's doesn't get to the heart of the matter."

At that point, Dumas stopped his fingers and lifted the newspaper between them.

"There's only one thing that I can give to other people! Yes—stories!"

The next instant, Alexandre Dumas sent the newspaper fluttering through the air and loudly proclaimed, amid the rain of letters:

"Fiction or nonfiction! Plays I edited or my own autobiography! Fantasies worked out from A to Z inside my head! Lofty personages and historical ways of life reworked into history! The compiled history of the world's cooking! Every last one of them is a 'story.'"

Dumas continued in a clear voice, like he was performing a scene in a play.

He was not raising his voice, but it echoed in the pit of your stomach, like the song of a huge whale heard close up.

The chief judged that even if it were only an illusion, the words were sufficient to create that illusion. He did not ignore it as more of the Heroic Spirit's usual banter.

Seeing the chief's attitude, Dumas went on in high spirits.

"It's true that when Mr. Garibaldi said he was gonna start a revolution, I supported him with ships and money and weapons. But that was a 'story' too. The moment other people found out that gold, guns, and glory had fallen into someone else's hands, those things gained a bunch of meanings. Alexandre Dumas, author of *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, supported the hero causing a sensation! I might not've had much effect back then, but it was enough to influence one person's life. I glanced at some info about me online, and that story was there all right. That at least shows that people remembered it for a hundred years and a bit."

After hearing Dumas' speech, delivered like an actor in a play, the chief fell silent for a few moments, then ordered his emotions as he began to speak.

". . . I understand what you're trying to say. But that has nothing to do with you putting yourself in harm's—"

But Dumas cut him off.

"John Wingard."

". . .?"

The unexpected proper noun from Dumas caused the chief to freeze for an instant.

"Vera Levitt, Annie Cuaron, Don Hawkins, Chadwick Li, Yuki Capote, Adrina Eisenstein, . . ."

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The chief immediately recognized the list of names that Dumas rattled off as he carefully picked up the sheets of newspaper that he had just sent dancing through the air.

They were the names of all the members of “Clan Calatin,” the fighting force he had organized.

It was only a list of names, but the chief felt an undeniable power behind the words and continued to listen without interrupting.

“... Sophia Valentine, Eddie Brando . . . and last but not least, you, brother—Chief of Police Orlando Reeve.”

“... I knew you had been looking up details, but I didn’t expect you to memorize all of their names.”

“Oh, not just their names—their faces, voices, personal histories, and everything else I could learn, down to their favorite herbs and spices. But you’re the type to memorize all your officers’ names yourself, aren’t you, brother?”

Dumas was not boasting. Once he had finished his matter-of-fact statement, he placed the neatly folded newspaper on the table and moved to the chief’s desk.

The Heroic Spirit planted both his hands on the desk, leaned his large frame forward, and addressed “his own words” to his Master.

“The names I just listed were the ‘cast of characters.’ They’re already major characters in one of my works.”

At that point, Dumas grinned broadly, spread his arms wide, and concluded:

“I don’t fancy myself as God, and I’ve got no intention of controlling ‘em. But the program is a once-in-a-lifetime Holy Grail War—probably the first and last one you and your people’ll ever see. And I provided a bit of the script in the form of ‘weapons’ and ‘power.’”

“I’ve given the actors a little twist, but I don’t know how it’s gonna turn out in the end, even for me. Doesn’t that sound like the ultimate play—the ultimate life? Doesn’t it make you want a front-row seat?”

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Within the Ward

“You mean . . . this is a fake world?” Ayaka Sajou muttered disbelievingly, slipping through the church doors and looking out at the world spread out under the blue sky.

It was a beautiful cityscape, the kind of scene that would be picked out for the cover of a tourism pamphlet.

It lacked the weight of history, but the well-ordered blocks of buildings displayed harmony, and the casino hotels and municipal offices in the city center stood out as especially grand.

The city scenery was the same as ever.

But even Ayaka could tell at a glance that the situation was not normal.

For one thing, she could see no one in the city except herself and the police officers.

For another . . . the church and Main Street in front of the hospital, which had been so showily destroyed the night before, had been restored as if nothing had happened.

“It’s all fixed . . . How?”

“No . . . It looks less like it was repaired than like it was never damaged,” Saber—Richard the Lionheart—who was linked to Ayaka by magical energy responded.

As he said, there were no traces of repairs on the street, and skid marks and stains that looked days old remained as they had been.

Ayaka still could not quite bring herself to believe it.

“If this really is a fake world,” she asked Saber, “can magecraft do something like that . . .?”

“Yes, although this is coming close to Magic. But it’s probably just barely achievable if you poured a ridiculous amount of time, skill, and resources into it, so I guess it is magecraft and not Magic.”

Saber sounded almost relaxed. Ayaka heaved a half-exasperated sigh.

“You know, this situation seems really weird to me . . .”

“Yes, it is. But at the same time, it stimulates my curiosity. Doesn’t the thought of whoever cast this great magecraft excite you?! What will we do if the great Merlin, or someone like him, turns up? In terms of this era’s values, I think I ought to get their autograph.”

“I don’t care,” Ayaka shot back a perfunctory response. “And I don’t know much about this ‘Merlin’ guy.”

“Maybe, but he’d be a powerful enemy. What should we do? Throw him at the moon . . .? No, I’m sure that was just one of Mother’s embellishments . . . Still, he’s a legendary mage . . . If we’re lucky enough to catch him, maybe I could hold him by the leg and swing him around as my Excalibur . . .? He might make a powerful magic sword . . . It’s worth asking if I do get to meet him!”

Ayaka looked at Saber, who was quietly getting worked up and muttering nonsense to himself with a grin, and kept walking, thinking to herself that he had certainly inherited his mother’s imagination.

“More importantly, is it true that we can’t leave unless we defeat that mage . . .? Isn’t there a

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safer way that we could, I don't know, sneak out . . .?"

Saber had just been seriously injured, and Ayaka wanted to avoid conflict as much as possible, but a denial came from a direction other than Saber.

"I think that would prove difficult. There is a possibility, but who can say how long it would take to find a way without anything to go on?" The female police officer told her with an expression like an android whose emotions had not been configured.

"Umm . . . Vera, right? Thank you for answering so thoroughly."

A world with few signs of human life.

The area around Ayaka and Saber, however, was an exception: ten of the police officers whom they had met in the church were surrounding the pair as they walked.

The officers had informed Ayaka that the world they were in was part of a closed space, and Ayaka had formed a temporary alliance with them to eliminate the source that had created it.

As far as Ayaka was concerned, it was better than being arrested, and Saber saw no reason to object to the temporary alliance, so they had ended up joining forces without much hesitation.

Vera Levitt.

That was how the leader of the police officers had just introduced herself. Ayaka glanced at her and asked, still warily:

"Are you, umm . . . a Master in the Grail War?"

"No, I'm not. I can't tell you the details, but think of me as a member of a faction working for a Master."

"So, the police are in league with the mages who set up this Holy Grail War? But probably not all of you—the ones who questioned me didn't seem to know anything."

Saber plainly stated his conjectures with his usual candor.

"But judging by the importance of your battle in front of the hospital, it's reasonable to suppose that you sent the majority of your forces there. And given that no reinforcements came, I'd guess that a bare minimum stayed to guard the Master you work for and you have around thirty police officers working with you. Am I right?"

". . . I don't consider that information necessary for our escape."

"You're certainly honest."

"What do you mean?" Vera asked suspiciously but remained expressionless.

"It's entirely possible that you'd dispatched another hundred officers to other important locations," Saber explained, "but your brief silence and the way your eyes moved made it obvious that I guessed right."

“...”

Vera fell silent.

“... Wasn't it kind of mean of you to go out of your way to point that out?”

Ayaka sounded disgusted.

“No, it's not like that!” Saber hurriedly countered. “I wasn't mocking her or showing off! Her reactions to an unexpected conversation were easy to read because she's fundamentally honest. I meant that it's a virtue that she can be honest despite being a mage. There was a mage called Saint-Germain who hung around me, and I could truly never tell if what he said was true or if he was making it up.”

At that, other voices chimed in.

“Saint-Germain...?”

“The alchemist?”

The officers walking nearby muttered to each other.

“Oh, I guess he really is famous. He always said he'd dropped in on all kinds of people... I sympathize with the people he bothered. But then, the kind of big names that went down in history probably had no problem accepting his odd ways,” Saber added with a shrug.

“Are you really a Heroic Spirit?” One of the officers asked. “You seem awfully relaxed...”

The young officer had been too focused on the battle with Alkeides to see the details of Saber's duel with the King of Heroes. That was why he found Saber unbelievably carefree compared to the Heroic Spirits he had faced—Assassin, who had attacked the police station, and Alkeides.

The other officers admonished their young colleague—“Hey!” “What'll you do if he takes that as a challenge?!”—but in Saber's mind, the young officer's words recalled a certain voice.

“You're always like that, brother.”

“You race across the battlefield like a devil, but you completely let you guard down in peacetime!”

“Do you even understand what it means to be king, brother?!”

“And you are?” Saber asked the young officer, fondly remembering his relative's exclamations from his lifetime.

“... John Wingard. You can call me John.”

“...!”

Saber's eyes widened in surprise.

The police officers and Ayaka were startled by Saber's sudden change in expression, but Saber himself paid them no mind and said, with a look of joy:

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“I see . . . So, your name’s John!”

“...?”

“This must be fate. Let’s be friends, John. Think of it as going with my carelessness.”

Saber walked amiably up to the officer and patted him on the back.

John, who had no idea what was going on, looked cautious.

“Where’d this come from?! What’s my name got to do with anything?!”

“Oh, well, you see . . .” Saber glanced away, apparently conflicted. “Have you figured out my True Name? Whether I can tell you depends on that. . . . Oh, hang on. That means I just gave away that the name ‘John’ has something to do with my True Name. All right, wait a moment while I figure out how to gloss that over.”

“It’s already hopeless. Just give up,” Ayaka said with a sigh, although she did not appear angry.

Ayaka understood that True Names were important, but the Heroic Spirit had introduced himself to her despite her protests that she did not want to know, so it was clear to her that the chances of keeping it hidden were slim.

A proper Master might have ordered him not to reveal any information connected to his True Name even if it cost them a Command Spell. Ayaka, however, did not even think of herself as a Master, and was assuming the position that if Saber were going to give it away on his own, there was nothing she could do about it.

Ayaka was still exasperated, but Saber ignored her and presented the excuse he had come up with.

“I know . . . The makers of the wonderful modern music I heard last night . . . Elton, Lennon, Williams, Travolta . . . I just thought that you might have musical talent, seeing as you have the same name as them.”

“But ‘John’ is Elton John’s last name . . .” One of the officers pointed out. Saber, however, began to hum contemporary music with unnecessary skill in an effort to play it off.

“That doesn’t seem like something a Heroic Spirit who’s supposed to hide his True Name would say . . .” Vera, who had been watching, muttered to herself with a rare look of confusion.

In the fourth Holy Grail War in Fuyuki, there had been a Heroic Spirit who loudly announced his name to people he was meeting for the first time . . . but Vera had no way of knowing that anecdote. She conjectured that this Saber was either highly unique or a cunning Servant calculatedly playing the clown.

Given his eccentric behavior, such as declaring that he would pay for the damage to the opera house in front of TV cameras or dematerializing in front of non-mage police officers, she was leaning toward the latter.

Based on that conjecture, Vera deliberately doled out a small amount of their information.

“ . . . The chief seemed to have an idea of your True Name.”

Vera shared information with the chief, but that information was not passed on to the other officers.

The chief had been reasoning analogically based on the information that Saber had “blond hair streaked with red” and the speech he had given in front of the opera house. Spreading information before they were certain could prove fatal if they turned out to be mistaken.

As a result, she did not attempt to identify him as the Lionheart and instead attempted to keep him in check by suggesting that they knew his identity.

John heard his superior and asked Richard again.

“All that aside . . . aren’t you still a little carefree for a hero? You didn’t make a fuss about trusting us or showing us your back; what’re you planning to do if we attack your Master here?”

“That’s an interesting question. . . . What do you think I should do, Ayaka?”

“You’re asking me?!”

“You’re the one whose life would be in danger. I’d like to ask you how to deal with enemies while we have the chance. I wouldn’t want to accidentally kill one with a counterattack only to end up making you sad because you didn’t want me to kill anyone.”

Richard was practically saying that actually dealing with them would be easy. One of the officers, who felt slighted, called with a slightly disgruntled look:

“You seem awfully sure of yourself. Are you trying to say you could hold back against us and still not—”

John stopped him with a hand.

“. . . What, John?”

“. . . Haven’t you noticed? We’re being watched.”

The officer looked at John and was taken aback.

For the past several seconds, John had been sweeping his gaze over their surroundings with a grim expression and cold sweat beading on his forehead.

Richard, on the other hand, looked at John, impressed.

“I’m surprised—you noticed in an instant. Either way, I don’t think you’d be so cowardly as to attack Ayaka from behind . . . but I see you’d make a good knight as well as a good official.”

“?”

Ayaka did not understand what he was talking about, while the police officers turned their attention to their surroundings. Like John, caution and surprise were causing cold sweat to form on their faces.

“. . .”

Only Vera remained cool. She shifted her attention to the pistol holstered at her hip and asked:

“Two . . . No, three. Can I consider that to be your forces?”

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“Huh? What?”

Ayaka looked around again . . . and finally noticed.

A heavily bandaged man she had seen the other day was standing on top of a building . . . and a lance-wielding man on horseback was peering at them out of an alleyway.

“That’s . . .!”

“Yes, I introduced the archer to you once before, Ayaka. I’m impressed, Vera. I didn’t expect you to sense Lock—Assassin while he’s hidden.”

“I couldn’t sense him. But I judged that you would need one more to cover all your blind spots and protect Ayaka Sajou.”

“That’s even more impressive. I see. The people around you must shine brighter in battle with you leading them,” Richard casually remarked. As he did so, the archer and the others vanished like a mist lifting.

“What’s going on?” John asked, still tense. “What are they?”

“My comrades. When I’m certain that you won’t target Ayaka, I’ll introduce them to you along with my True Name.”

“Comrades . . . Did you summon them from outside this ward?”

Richard answered Vera’s doubt with a shake of his head.

“They’re half fused with my Spirit Origin. They just came with me automatically.”

“. . . As a check on us, that was careless. We’re guessing your True Name. Don’t you think that information will bring us a step closer to the heart of the matter?”

“Are you concerned for me? . . . I knew that you were more like knights than mages.”

“. . .”

Vera remained expressionless but narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, I apologize if I offended you,” Richard answered cheerfully. “That wasn’t an insult. I value chivalry, but I don’t disdain mages. I’m praising your humanity. You’re cool and collected, but you aren’t callous.”

“. . . That doesn’t answer my question. You’ve been letting your guard down with us too much. You’re putting all your effort into protecting Ayaka Sajou . . . but you seem to be lacking any idea of ultimately defeating us once our alliance is over. As someone in this alliance with you, that strikes me as cause for concern.”

“In other words . . . I seem like I must be plotting something, so you can’t trust me to watch your backs?”

“What? . . . Saber isn’t that kind of . . .”

Ayaka started to protest, but Saber stopped her.

“It’s fine.

“Thank you, Ayaka. Well, I understand her caution as someone responsible for an organization. But if we want to return to our world safely, it will help to clear up any ill feelings in our alliance.”

Having said that, Saber came to a halt in the middle of the carless street and addressed the police officers.

“I suppose you’re right . . . I still haven’t managed to get serious about concealing my True Name . . . No, about this entire Holy Grail War. I was only in earnest about my personal ‘war’ with that golden Heroic Spirit.”

“You aren’t taking it seriously . . .?”

“Yes. I’m not going easy out of disdain for you. I’ve already explained this to Ayaka . . . but I simply haven’t found a wish for the Holy Grail.”

“You . . . don’t have a wish?”

Vera was doubtful.

With a few exceptions, the Heroic Spirits summoned by the Holy Grail formed contracts with living mages in order to make use of the Grail’s wish-granting powers.

If Saber had no wish, then why had he manifested?

Is it because the Grail is a fake . . .? No, but . . .

Vera tried to reason it out but determined that she ought to leave anything further to the chief and Caster—Dumas—and continued to listen to Saber’s words in silence.

“There were things I prayed to God for when I was alive. It’s not easy to tell whether my prayers were answered . . . but they were things I can’t wish for on the Grail, or rather, there would be no point wishing for them. But since I was summoned here like this, I suppose I must have some wish that even I don’t know about yet.”

Saber gave a casual shrug and flashed a friendly grin at the police officers.

“Basically, until I find that wish, I’m not thinking about going out of my way to kill you just to win. My top priority right now is to return Ayaka to her homeland unharmed.”

“My homeland . . .?”

For some reason, it was Ayaka who asked the question.

“You came from Japan, didn’t you? Am I wrong?”

“No . . . you’re right, but . . . Oh, it’s nothing. Sorry for interrupting. Just keep going,” Ayaka mumbled evasively and became lost in thought.

Saber was concerned about Ayaka but brought his speech to the police officers to a conclusion.

“So, I will keep our alliance as long as you have no intention of harming Ayaka. Yesterday’s enemy becoming today’s ally was an everyday occurrence in my day.”

Saber grinned as if to ask, “What about in your era?” Vera considered briefly, then surveyed

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her fellow officers and nodded.

“Understood. We won’t accept everything you’ve said on faith, but we will keep our agreement.”

Once he was sure Vera had finished, John spoke to Ayaka.

“Umm . . . Sorry about that. It was only to test your partner, but I still talked about stabbing you in the back. That’s not something a cop should be doing. Sorry.”

“Huh? Oh, don’t mention it. . . . Saber started it, anyway,” Ayaka answered bluntly.

John let out a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. . . . You’re awfully tolerant for a mage.”

“That’s because I’m not a mage.”

“Huh?”

John and the other officers looked confused.

Ayaka, however, seemed unwilling to explain further, because she shrugged and began walking with Saber.

Ayaka Sajou.

Vera did not let it show in her expression, but she was reconsidered Ayaka Sajou.

Who is she?

According to the records of her interrogation, she was a tourist visiting the city . . . but further investigation had revealed that the records of her entry into the United States had been falsified.

She must have entered the country illegally through some kind of string-pulling, but Ayaka herself seemed strangely unaware of the fact.

There was also information that the chief had shared with Vera but had kept from the other members of Clan Calatin because it might cause confusion.

There is a mage by the same name . . . but she—Sajō Ayaka—is confirmed to be active in Romania.

I saw a photo of her face, and she does look almost identical apart from her hair and eye color.

If she’s a fake, then for what purpose? If she planned to take Sajō Ayaka’s place, why did she change her hair color?

Sajō Ayaka is supposed to have an older sister, but there’s no record of her having a twin.

In any case . . . I’ll have to keep my guard up.

Now that they were unable to contact the chief, Vera was for all intents and purposes the leader of Clan Calatin. She decided work with Saber and Ayaka while maintaining the bare minimum of caution.

They possessed numerous “Noble Phantasms” of their own, but considering their individual combat ability, she determined that antagonizing Saber would be inadvisable.

At that point . . . Saber voiced a question as he walked.

“Hey.”

“What is it?”

“You said you’re going to eliminate the mage or Servant behind this, didn’t you?”

“. . . Yes. We theorize that that is the most reliable method of destroying this ward-world.”

Saber thought for a moment, moved his mouth slightly as if talking to himself, and then:

“. . . Yes. I suppose so. My comrade ‘Caster’ agrees that that would be the simplest way.”

“Your ‘comrade’ . . .”

“Think of them as something like that bandaged archer and the others.”

“. . .”

He even has one that acts as a mage? Vera recalled the mysterious entities—entities that were probably part of the Spirit Origin that was Saber—whose Spirit Origins seemed weaker than proper Servants but still far stronger than ordinary mages grew even more wary than before.

Saber’s words, however, threw cold water on both Vera’s caution and the other officers’ determination to give their all to escape.

“Still, most of my ‘comrades’ aren’t too enthusiastic about it.”

“Why not?”

“Why not? You’re asking why not? . . . Are you sure you’re not overlooking an important possibility?” Saber stopped again and said, giving them a glimpse of his serious face as a Heroic Spirit, not the carefree attitude he had shown them so far.

“The girl you were trying to protect . . . little Tsubaki, wasn’t it?”

“I”

“I heard about her from a mercenary I met yesterday. I heard about her . . . but have you considered that the one who shut us up in this world . . . could be Tsubaki’s Servant?”

“. . .”

Vera and a few other officers who had been prepared for that possibility lowered their gazes slightly, while John and several others who had just realized were momentarily taken aback and then began to make a variety of expressions.

“Of course, it could be that crazy thing that fought the golden Archer at the end, or some other Servant I haven’t even seen . . .”

Saber paused, then asked the cruel question in a matter-of-fact tone.

“But if that little girl is the cause, will you be able to kill her?”

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At the Same Time, A Closed-off Town, Inside Crystal Hill Casino

While Saber and the police officers were walking along Main Street . . . a different group was moving quite nearby.

It was not the second group of police officers, who had split their forces.

They had never joined up with Saber and the police officers in the first place.

One of them, his eyes shining as he spun a roulette wheel by hand, exclaimed:

“Oh, wow! I only watched at Mr. Fem’s casino, so I couldn’t tell, but now that I get to spin a roulette wheel myself, it’s lighter than I thought!”

The young man—Flat Escardos—shouted like a child. An answering voice came from the watch wrapped around his wrist.

“I doubt anyone but you would think of that in our situation.”

Then, the Heroic-Spirit-turned-wristwatch—Berserker, a.k.a. Jack the Ripper—stated his impressions as he surveyed their surroundings.

“Hmm . . . A totally silent casino with no hustle and bustle is a little eerie.”

“What? You know casinos, Jack?”

“Only as information. It was either given to me by the Grail, or perhaps due to a theory that my true identity was an immortal gambler. In any case, I can guess how much noise this place is ordinarily filled with from its gawdy décor.”

“Yes, it certainly makes you uneasy,” the pair’s “companion,” who had been watching the exchange, added with a shrug. “It looks like there’s power, but I’m surprised how much quieter it is with no one working the slots.”

The man looked to be in his mid-thirties and was distinctively dressed in a priest’s cassock and an eyepatch.

Four peculiarly dressed young women followed behind him, each surveying their surroundings with serious expressions.

The priest’s name was Hansa Cervantes.

He was an overseer dispatched by the Holy Church, but he and his nun subordinates had been enveloped by the “black mist” and trapped in that world.

“I think the police are here too. Shouldn’t we meet up with them?” Flat casually asked the overseer.

“I provided the church, but if this is part of the Holy Grail War caused by a Servant, then helping them to escape would be unwarranted favoritism. That goes for you too, of course. I’ll share information, but I don’t plan on helping you destroy this ward-world.”

Once Hansa had realized that he had been pulled into a ward modeled on the city, he had set out to investigate alone. In the process he had encountered Flat and they were now joining forces to survey the city.

“Oh, really? . . . Well, I guess I can’t complain. I wouldn’t enjoy winning a game where the judge was taking my side, anyway. Plus, if you did that, I’ve got a feeling the Holy Church would end up taking the Grail.”

Flat regretfully related his negative impression of the Holy Church, but Hansa nodded with a wry smile.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’d probably do that if I got orders from higher up. It’s always been obvious that nothing good would come of letting mages get their hands on something that grants wishes.”

“And the Holy Grail War having an overseer originally only applied to a Japanese city called Fuyuki, right?”

“But it’s a fact that we’re using that as our excuse to intervene. My bosses might change their policy if they ever realize just how different this Grail War is from the one in Fuyuki.”

Hansa deliberately refrained from saying whether that change would be for the better or the worse and shifted his gaze to the nuns.

“. . . Well?”

“It’s no use,” one of the nuns answered politely with a shake of her head. “We were unable to detect the presence of a mystical core forming the ward in this area. It may be skillfully concealed, but in that case, it may prove difficult to locate with our equipment.”

“I see. . . . I thought they might be drawing on the Grail’s power directly, considering they’re recreating the whole city . . . but that doesn’t matter if we can’t locate the core.”

Whether they were looking for the Grail or the core of the ward-world, they had guessed that there would be something suspicious about the tallest building in the city center, but it appeared they had guessed wrong.

“The power is on, right?” Flat asked.

“Yeah,” Hansa answered, looking up at the chandeliers on the ceiling. “But who knows where it’s coming from, so who knows when it will stop?”

“I’d . . . like to try going up to the top floor while the elevators are still working.”

“Oh? You think the ‘core’ might be there? It’s true that the area extends above and below the building. It might be worth checking . . .”

“Oh, no,” Flat stopped him with a wave of his hand. “I didn’t mean that. It would be a lucky break for us if it were up there, though.”

“?”

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“It’s because from up there . . . I can see over the whole city.”

“ . . . Do you have a plan?”

Flat answered Jack with a slight nod, slapped his own cheeks to psyche himself up, and said:

“If I take a look at it . . . I might be able to figure something out . . .

“If I can find a place where the guard is thin, I might be able to get in touch with the ‘outside’!”

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At the Same Time, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

“ . . . Repor . . . z . . . \$# . . . special alert . . . are advised . . . z . . .”

“ . . . The hurricane is moving . . . z . . . normally . . . inconceivable . . . z . . .”

“The National Weather Service . . . appropriate . . . z . . . ignoring the ordinary name list . . . z . . .”

“ . . . A special . . . designation to . . . z . . . # . . . \$. . .”

“ . . . z . . . li . . . z . . . ber . . .”

At that point, the voice of the emergency management radio became even more distorted and the sound of static completely dominated the cramped space.

The driver’s seat of a truck lying overturned on the side of the road.

Due to the fierce winds and driving rain, water began to intrude through the broken windows.

The radio continued to hum with static, heedless of the situation, but it was only a matter of time until it was completely submerged.

The driver appeared to have long since evacuated. A scattering of fallen billboards and broken trees was visible nearby, but there was not a human to be seen.

The record-breaking hurricane had formed suddenly and without warning.

Central Los Angeles would escape with only a few more damaged cars and buildings . . . but those who endured the raindrops pelting their faces to look up at the sky in the midst of the storm would later say:

Four huge tornadoes came down out of the sky.

They strode across the land, shrouded in flashes of lightning . . .

Almost like the feet of a gargantuan beast braving the skies and threatening to trample the very world to pieces.

Interlude

“Mercenary, Assassin, Pale Rider”

Interlude

“I’m glad you’re both better now!”

An innocent girl’s voice rang out in the garden showered in warm sunshine.

Squirrels, kittens, and other small animals scampered over the neatly trimmed lawn, and the countless little birds perched on the branches of a tree that grew in the garden were giving a modest singing recital.

If the word “heartwarming” took a physical form, it would probably be a scene like this.

There, the kind of vista seen only in picture books spread out in reality.

The two people the girl had spoken to, however, were totally divorced from that atmosphere.

One was a young man in black.

There were still traces of childhood in his appearance, and he could just as easily be called a boy. But in contrast to his looks, he wore an unsettling assortment of holstered guns, knives, and other weapons.

The other was a girl, her whole figure likewise in black.

Beneath her black cloak, which concealed as much of her face and skin as humanly possible, she was looking around her with a hint of confusion. If that were all, she would look like an ordinary woman in a niqab, but the black folds of her garment hid countless weapons, and something about her, unrelated to her dress, gave a general impression of danger.

The young man’s name was Sigma.

The girl was a Servant who had been summoned as Assassin in the “Fake Holy Grail War.”

A variety of circumstances had led the two of them to act together, but they were currently trapped together in the strange space.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“... You have my gratitude.”

Sigma and the girl Assassin each expressed their thanks.

The young girl—Kuruoka Tsubaki—responded by looking bashful and dashing awkwardly into the house.

“... That was Kuruoka Tsubaki.”

“So, that’s the girl who commanded a Heroic Spirit while unconscious.”

Both of them had already realized.

The girl’s parents, who lived in the same house with her, were clearly under the mental control of something... but only the girl was different.

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She was subject to no mental restraint—truly free.

“Meaning that that black figure . . . was her Servant.”

The large figure that Kuruoka Tsubaki had introduced as “Mr. Black.”

Pale glows floated here and there inside the mass of shadows, roughly as tall as the tree in the garden and so dark that it seemed to suck in nearby light.

It had withdrawn into the house for the moment, but it had not appeared to have substance, so it would not be surprising if it sprang out of the ground without warning.

The thought prompted Sigma to increased vigilance and the girl Assassin to thought.

“Was it . . . really a Heroic Spirit?”

“It could also be a monster or wraith . . .” Sigma muttered, but the girl Assassin shook her head.

“No . . . I don’t think so. I did not sense any tremors of malice or hatred from that being. . . . No, I sensed no fluctuations of magical energy at all . . .”

The magecraft-user and Servant remembered how they had both been surprised by that “shadow” when they had woken up in the garden.

If it were hostile, it would already have dispatched them. . . . Considering that they had not been attacked in their sleep, they thought that it might not even recognize them as enemies.

“I don’t sense anything like consciousness from it, but it does seem to obey that child.”

Assassin’s words prompted Sigma to broaden his speculation.

“Maybe her Servant is something else and that ‘shadow’ is a familiar . . .?”

“It’s possible . . . but we lack sufficient information. That fiend—the hematophage—must know something . . .”

Assassin gritted her teeth beneath her veil.

But she could not sense the hematophage either.

He was certainly plotting something, but it would be difficult to locate him unless he made contact.

The two of them had just surveyed the area under the pretense of going for a walk, but they had found few signs of human life.

They had spotted the occasional human figure, but like Kuruoka Tsubaki’s parents, they had seemed to be under some form of mental control.

They could make conversation, but that was all.

They did not seem particularly alarmed by Sigma’s armaments, nor did they seem to know anything about that world.

They had made numerous inquiries, but the people were ordinary civilians and unresponsive, and they had not been able to obtain any more information.

There was only one commonality—most of the people out walking claimed to have lived in the factory district but fled from a fire or some other disaster.

“The factory fire . . . I heard about it yesterday. A battle between Heroic Spirits.”

According to what he had heard from Watcher before he had lost contact, a Heroic Spirit who had not been involved in the battle had concealed the damage to the destroyed factory district, but it seemed that they had not been able to erase the fact that a fire had occurred.

The residents, however, had apparently displayed strange behavior and seemed, like Kuruoka Tsubaki’s parents, to be under some kind of mind control.

They could have carried their investigations further by taking destructive actions against those “people” and that “city.” But given that they did not understand the structure of that world or their enemy’s capabilities, that would be suicidal.

Sigma considered calmly and decided to investigate based on the fact that telepathy was usable.

“Ordinary civilians won’t understand the situation whether they’re under mind control or not.

“But . . . what about a mage who knows the hidden side of the Holy Grail War?”

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“You want to ask me something?” Kuruoka Tsubaki’s father said with somewhat vacant eyes.

“. . . Yes, somewhere away from your daughter, if possible.”

The mage, who had come as far as the front door at Sigma’s suggestion, glanced into the house and said:

“That could be tricky. I promised my daughter I’d read a book to her, so I can’t go far.”

“Oh, just down the street would be fine.”

“I see. In that case . . .”

Tsubaki’s father left his family’s property with no real resistance and followed Sigma to a little park nestled in the residential district.

“It really was coincidence that we ended up at your house, but I recognize you, Kuruoka Yūkaku.”

“Oh . . . Have we met somewhere before?”

“My employer’s name is Francesca. I have a deal with a man called Faldeus.”

At that, Kuruoka Yūkaku’s face took on a gloomy look.

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“I guessed you were a magecraft-user when I saw your equipment. I see I was right. . . . But as I told Faldeus, the Grail War is the farthest thing from my mind right now. I can’t give you any . . .”

“No, I’m not asking you to cooperate with us,” Sigma cut in dispassionately. “Could you please tell us what’s going on?”

His tone was polite, but there was no emotion in it.

Sigma showed the face of a magecraft-using mercenary faced with a mage and tensed himself for a sudden attack.

Assassin was hiding in a corner of the park, keeping a watch on the area.

Given that conversation was possible, they planned to gauge the intentions of the person exerting the mental control by the information they were able to get from Kuruoka—or conversely, by the information he was unable to tell them—in his mind-controlled state.

However . . .

“Yes, I can do that. As far as I can see, the Servant protecting my dear little Tsubaki intentionally created this world. It’s outside my area of expertise, but I think it may be a type of Reality Marble.”

“...?”

“Tsubaki’s Servant is probably the embodiment of a concept. I’d say it’s the concept of death, nothingness, or disease intentionally given a personality. In Japan, my home country, a *yōkai* called a ‘*yanari*’ was created to explain houses creaking. That was a type of folk magecraft, deciding that it was a conscious being, giving it form, and taking mental measures against it. . . . Considering that Servant’s power, however, I believe it must be an entity recognized on a global scale. I think I could analyze it more accurately if I examined it carefully, but since I dropped out of the Grail War to live quietly with my daughter, I don’t have time for that.”

Calmly, casually . . . as if it were of no importance, Kuruoka Yūkaku began to give his opinion as a mage.

But despite that, his way of speaking made it clear that he was still subject to mental control.

He hasn’t been prevented from talking about magecraft . . . not even from speculating about the Servant’s identity?

Or is he being controlled to feed us false information?

But if that were the case, wouldn’t they make the extent of their control more ambiguous?

Sigma was confident that he could see through an ordinary person’s lies using his experience and technique as a magecraft-user.

But discovering the lies of a mage—especially one who had used autosuggestion to convince themselves they were telling the truth—would require more experience, talent, and specialized

magecraft.

If I were connected to Watcher, I could compare it to information from the shadows to reach a conclusion . . .

Sigma's Servant, Watcher, which was supposed to be gathering all visual and auditory information from across the city, but he was currently unable to contact it.

That was why he needed information that would help him get outside at any cost, but he would need more for that.

"Don't you want to leave this ward?"

"What for? Our daughter Tsubaki is so healthy here."

"Isn't it possible that the Servant is controlling your mind to make you think that way?"

"Oh yes, it probably is . . . but what's wrong with that?"

When he heard that, Sigma realized what the goal of the mental control was.

If Kuruoka Tsubaki's Servant was causing the situation, then in all probability that Heroic Spirit was not acting to win the Holy Grail War.

Its behavior was genuinely centered on Tsubaki.

But he is technically a mage participating in the Grail War. He must have taken at least some precautions against mental control . . . Sigma thought, but he also knew that those precautions were not perfect.

There was a case in which skilled mages assembled for an auction of historical artifacts with mystical value had been betrayed and manipulated by one of their allies.

The mages in question had apparently been rescued by a Lord of the Clock Tower and, ashamed of their own blunder, had enrolled trustworthy members of their family in the Lord's classes.

Sigma remembered the story because the Lord in question's rise in power due to the connections he had formed with powerful mages in the process had been a hot topic among magecraft-using mercenaries at one time . . . but he dismissed the details as currently irrelevant.

The important point was that, given the right opportunity, precautions against mental control could be easily broken.

Encouraging him to escape or freeing him from the mental control . . . seems unfeasible.

I should ask Assassin later if she has a Noble Phantasm that can undo brainwashing . . . but from what I've seen, her Noble Phantasms seemed specialized to kill her enemies. I shouldn't get my hopes up.

Sigma decided to try a different approach.

" . . . Umm, are you aware that your daughter is being targeted outside the ward?"

"Oh . . . Is she? That's unfortunate."

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Kuruoka Yūkaku started to leave the park, heading for home. He did not seem especially anxious, but his expression did at least darken with concern.

“Thank you for letting me know. Still, Tsubaki’s Servant seems to be in the process of becoming practically unassailable, so I’m sure it will see her through this safely.”

“It’s . . . becoming unassailable?”

“Yes, just a bit before you woke up, it sent us a wonderful guard dog.”

“What do you mean?” Sigma asked just as Assassin approached them.

Sigma tried to stop Yūkaku, who was ignoring him and making his way home, but he saw that Assassin had a grim look in her eyes, decided that something must have happened, and decided to stop to hear what she had to say.

“What’s wrong?”

“. . . It appears that your conversation was . . . overheard.”

“...?”

“When you said, ‘Tsubaki is being targeted,’ it began to move.”

She turned her gaze toward Tsubaki’s house as she spoke.

When Sigma followed her gaze . . . time froze for him.

His brain was unable to grasp the situation. For fractions of a second, his mind went blank.

The thing that did that to a magecraft-user like Sigma, with his long experience as a mercenary . . . was a single large dog.

Although opinions might be divided as to whether it counted as a “single” dog.

Sigma had seen the thing that stood in the place Kuruoka Yūkaku was casually walking to once before.

It took him a moment, however, to realize that it was the same thing.

He was sure that “it” had been killed on Main Street and also that “it” had been at most the size of an adult elephant.

The thing that Sigma and Assassin stared up at with the beginnings of a cold sweat . . .

Was Kerberos, the three-headed guard dog of Hades, grown larger than a house.

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Fate/strange Fake 6

Snowfield, Factory District

“About your Noble Phantasm . . . Can you still use the birds and the dog?” Bazdilot Cordelion asked, servicing a pistol-shaped Mystic Code while members of the Scladio Family were busy repairing his workshop.

Alkeides lifted his dematerialization and stared at his own hands as he answered.

“. . . The birds won't be an issue but activating Kerberos will prove difficult.”

“Are there limitations on the regeneration of the individual beasts?”

“No. Ordinarily, with your magical energy I should be able to reactivate them after a day. . . . But I can't do it now. It seems its actual Spirit Origin was scraped away by that 'black mist,' along with three of the horses.”

“You have a Noble Phantasm that steals Noble Phantasms, but I never expected one of yours to be stolen. Still, the dog or horses falling into enemy hands shouldn't pose a problem,” Bazdilot said dispassionately.

Alkeides, however, silently shook his head.

“Not necessarily.”

“. . . Does something worry you?”

“They may have been stolen, but the ends of the royal orders I was tasked with are the foundation of my Spirit Origin. Even if they are no longer mine, I know when they undergo a change.”

The vengeful bowman frowned beneath his cloth as he carefully probed the alterations in the “links” of his Spirit Origin.

“But . . . this is . . .”

After a short pause for thought, Alkeides clenched his fists.

Then, as magical energy mixed with mud and blood trickled from between his fingers, he whispered with quiet rage.

All the while recalling the familiar darkness of the other side that edged toward him through the faint link of magical energy.

“Could the one who controls that black mist . . . possibly be a relative of Hades?”

When he finally relaxed his fists, he murmured with the faintest hint of pity in a voice that not even Bazdilot could hear.

“In that case . . . even if I do not harm her . . . its Master is fated to be hunted eventually.

“Hunted by the true heroes . . . who safeguard the people.”

Chapter 18

“As Dream and Reality are Both Illusion I”

Chapter 18

A Closed-off Town, Main Street

“What . . .?”

The first person to react to Saber’s question was not one of the police officers; it was Ayaka, who had been listening half-disinterestedly.

“But if that little girl is the cause, will you be able to kill her?”

She understood what Saber meant.

If the girl turned out to be the reason they had been pulled into this deserted world, there was a good chance that “dealing with” her would enable them to return to their original world.

The instant that thought took shape in her head . . . something pulsed.

Ayaka blinked slowly, steadying her breathing.

When she quietly opened her heavy eyelids . . . she was there.

Far across Main Street, visible through a gap in the officers.

She was too far away to make out her face, but Ayaka recognized her instantly.

A little girl with her face covered by something like a red, red—simply red—hood.

She looked like she might be three years old and seemed liked she might be about six, and Ayaka had a feeling that she was much older.

Ayaka could not be sure of her height or age.

Only the perception of the color red passed through Ayaka’s eyes and rampaged through her brain.

How could . . .?

An instant later . . . Red Riding Hood had drawn nearer.

She had not run over—before Ayaka knew what was happening, she was right behind the group of officers.

She had only been distantly visible before, but now Ayaka could see her clearly.

“Red Riding Hood”—the object of Ayaka’s ongoing terror and one of the reasons she had come to the United States.

There’s no elevator, so why . . .?

Red Riding Hood was only supposed to appear inside elevators. Ayaka was not even sure if she was real or a hallucination.

Since her arrival in Snowfield, however, the rules had begun to shift.

It seemed to Ayaka that she could feel Red Riding Hood's presence closer to her every time she was on the verge of remembering something in this city.

Her whole body broke out in a cold sweat, but she could not look away.

She could see Red Riding Hood's hood move as she slowly turned her head to face her.

Oh no. No.

I don't know why, but it will be my end. If I see the face under that hood, I'll be finished.

Even if she wanted to scream, her lungs were taut, and she could hardly breathe.

She was so paralyzed by fear that she could not even shut her eyes, let alone look away. Red Riding Hood lifted her hood even more. When it reached the point that Ayaka could see her sneering lips, Red Riding Hood vanished from her sight.

Blotted out by Saber, who had leaned over to look at her face.

"What's wrong, Ayaka? You're pale as a ghost."

At the same time, Ayaka's body was freed from its paralysis.

She hurriedly moved to look behind Saber, but there was no longer anything there.

"... Oh, nothing. Just a bad daydream."

"You do get like that sometimes. Are you under a curse? I might be able to dispel it if you are."

"... Thanks, but it's nothing like that... I think."

Ayaka declined Saber's offer and then took another look at his face... and decided to pursue the discomfort that had probably caused her to see "Red Riding Hood."

The discomfort and unease that had suddenly grown within her reflexively made her vocal cords squirm.

"... More importantly, Saber, the, umm... girl you were just talking about is the one in the coma, right?"

"Yes, but it's apparently confirmed that she somehow became a Master, so..."

"No... That's not what I mean..." Ayaka asked somewhat uneasily, reeling in the source of the discomfort that had sprouted within her.

"Why did you ask, 'will you be able to'... and not 'will you'?"

"..."

"Well... I don't know how to put it, but... it sounded like you weren't asking whether they'd kill her or not... Sorry if I'm wrong... but it sounded more like you were saying, 'If you can't kill her, I will.'..." Ayaka asked, choosing her words carefully.

Saber fell silent for a moment... then answered with a troubled smile.

"Honestly, Ayaka, you can be quite perceptive sometimes."

"Saber?!"

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“Wait, hang on. Don’t worry. I’m not trying to say that killing the girl is the right choice, and I don’t want to kill her if I can avoid it. I want to save her as much as you do.”

“I-I see . . .”

Ayaka was somehow relieved, but as she steadily calmed herself, she asked:

“Then why did you ask . . .”

Ayaka had difficulty framing her question, but Saber intuited her intent and answered, choosing his words carefully.

“Of course I want to save the girl, and I have no intention of giving up. But if they try to kill her to save someone else, even if I try to stop them . . . in the end, I won’t be able to hold them back. Not unless I overcome them by force.”

He looked like a different person than the Saber who had spoken light-heartedly even about matters of his own life and death.

Saber continued to speak not as a knight nor as a Saber, but as the embodiment of something else that Ayaka did not recognize.

“So . . . if by some twist of fate, we’re put in a position where someone has to kill her . . . when the time comes, I’ll do it.”

“Why?!” Ayaka shouted in spite of herself.

She understood his reasoning.

If a “sacrifice” became absolutely necessary, someone would have to do it.

Even when it came to herself, she was not sure what she would do if she were told that she could save the girl but would be left behind in this deserted city as a result.

No, I . . . I’d probably . . . sacrifice that little girl . . . who I’ve never even met.

No, I’m sure I would.

Stained red.

After all . . .

Stained red.

I even let . . .

Stained red.

. . . a girl I knew die.

Stained bright, crimson red.

The color of “Red Riding Hood’s” hood was indelibly seared into the insides of her eyelids.

She wanted to scream but was unable to.

If she collapsed here, she would no longer be able to talk with Saber.

She would no longer be able to stop him.

At that thought, she wrung words from deep in her throat even as the world seemed to spin around her.

“Why . . . ? You don’t have to do that. . . . You don’t . . . so why would you?”

Her words came out brokenly, barely forming her question.

“Yes. . . .”

Saber, however, did his best to grasp Ayaka’s intent and answer.

“I suppose it means that, in the end, I wasn’t able to become like the knights I admired.”

Saber then turned back to face the police officers, who were more than a little confused, although not as confused as Ayaka, and proudly declared:

“But you are different. You are splendid knights.”

“What do you . . . ?”

Cutting Vera short, Saber, who had been a king in life, praised the officers as if extolling the virtues of his own followers.

“You fought honorably against that fearful bowman and survived! All to save a girl who is no relation of yours and who you have never even seen! Thus, you should continue to be defenders of the innocent! No, you must! You should never harm them, even to shield the rest of the people or society itself.”

Saber lowered his eyes and after a momentary silence, as if he were looking at somewhere else, continued.

“Once you’ve done that once, you lose control. . . . I should be the one to bear that responsibility.”

“Saber!” Ayaka shouted again. “No! That’s not right! You’re not like that. . . . You always smile, and you never abandon anyone!”

Ayaka could not understand why she was shouting so emotionally.

But it was not rational.

She had a feeling that if she did not shout now, Saber—the Heroic Spirit who had been able to laugh with her until a moment before—would vanish before her eyes.

She did not know the first thing about the Holy Grail War, and she thought that what she had to say was probably just the whining of a sheltered naïf . . . but she still forced out the words that welled up from deep in her chest.

“. . . You think too highly of me, Ayaka. . . .”

“It’s not because I’m your substitute Master. I’m sure you’d save even a passing kid on the street. I can at least tell that much! You’re not like me! You’re not! I won’t tell you to never kill anyone—it’d be selfish, and I don’t have the right—but . . .”

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At that point, Ayaka was briefly lost for words but gritted her teeth and spit out her shout, her raw emotion, along with the reservations that had lodged themselves in the back of her throat.

“It doesn’t matter if you get your hands dirty in the end. It won’t erase the fact that you saved me! But . . . at least don’t talk like you should be the bad guy . . .”

Finally, she concluded her display of passion with a declaration that crossed a line.

“So . . . if someone has to be the bad guy . . . I’ll do it.”

“ . . . ”

Saber listened to Ayaka, who sounded as if she were condemning herself and not him, and looked at her sorrowful face . . . and found himself seeing his subordinates, from when he was alive, in her.

“Why, Your Majesty?! Richard?!”

“You didn’t need to bear those sins! Why didn’t you leave it to us?!”

“You should have become a hero! Why didn’t you have us do it and pretend not to know?!”

“Oh, oh, Your Majesty . . . your lion’s heart has grown to great. You are too fearless!”

The words of the man who had followed him as his court mage came back to him, interrupting his reflections.

“Good grief. I knew it would come to this, of course.

“Still, I did try to stop you. And this is the result.

“Then again, if it hadn’t turned out this way, it’d probably be a case for pruning.

“That said, even I, Saint-Germain, am a bit appalled. Even the mahatma is shocked.

“Yes, that’s right! Exactly! You are wonderfully daring! Lion-hearted!

“That’s precisely why you had no fear! No fear of anything at all!

“Not ten thousand foes, not generals who outrank you, not mystical retaliation, not superhuman fiends . . .

“Not even staining your own hands . . . with the blood of countless innocents.”

Finally . . . like a curse cast out of the distant past, he recalled the words of his younger brother by blood.

*“Oh, what are you worried about, brother?
“No matter how much blood you have on your hands, the people of this land are in your thrall.
“For some reason, it seems as though it’s my job to take on your disgrace and have stones thrown
at me.*

*“What do you think? Aren’t I quite the clown? Go ahead and laugh, brother!
“. . . Laugh. You’re lucky. You’re a national hero, aren’t you?
“If you’re a hero . . . then laugh.”*

“I see. . . .”

Saber lowered his eyes and fell silent for a moment.

When he opened them again, the resignation-tinged gleam, like dim fire, had left them, and they were his usual eyes again.

“You notice the smallest things, as usual, Ayaka . . . or so I’d like to say, but that’s not quite right, is it?”

“Of course not. Meeting you isn’t small to me anymore.”

“. . . All right, I’ll withdraw this time. But be warned—I won’t lose next time.”

“Huh?! . . . Was this a competition?”

Saber affectedly ignored the confused and wide-eyed Ayaka and announced with his usual manner:

“I can hardly force Ayaka to do the dirty work, and she won’t allow me to do it . . . so I’ll just have to save the girl, even if it costs me my life! Then, we’ll all leave this place safely!”

“Saber . . .?”

Saber beamed at Ayaka, who was confused by his sudden return to his usual attitude.

“It won’t be a problem. The church was our starting point in this ward-world. What do you say we shelter the girl who’s dropped out instead of the priest and steal the overseer’s thunder?”

“. . . Good idea. I’ll help.”

Ayaka flashed a relieved grin . . . when a sudden vague apprehension brought a look of confusion to her face.

“. . . Church . . . Shelter . . .”

“What’s wrong?” Vera, who had kept silent up to that point, asked the troubled Ayaka, realizing that the pair’s conversation had finished for the moment.

“I think,” Ayaka said haltingly, deep in thought, “I’ve met that guy in the gold armor . . .”

“What?”

“But . . . where . . .?”

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Ayaka was trying to remember something.

She could not help feeling that she recognized that golden Heroic Spirit who had tried to kill Richard from his vantage point on the roof of the church.

And the keywords “church” and “sheltering a child” began to violently shake her brain, which had been locked with a timeworn key.

But at each jolt she could vividly sense “Little Red Riding Hood’s” presence, and the fear that she “must not remember any more” kept the doors of her memory shut.

I know I have to remember . . .

So, why . . . ?

Ayaka struggled desperately to reach her own memories.

She had a feeling that “Little Red Riding Hood” was right behind her.

She had a feeling that she was trying to tell her something.

She had a feeling that she could hear Red Riding Hood’s voice.

Ayaka tried to endure the terror and still keep thinking . . . until she saw Saber and the police officers being looking around and realized that her brain was not the only thing shaking.

“? . . . What?” She muttered suspiciously just as the soles of her feet began to clearly feel the earth pulse.

“A-An earthquake?!”

No, not an earthquake.

Something’s coming toward us . . .

Then . . . as the vibrations grew steadily stronger, “it” emerged from behind a building.

An enormous, pitch-black dog, easily over fifteen meters tall.

Its entire body gave off a miasma-like smoke, and black flames, the same color as its coat, perpetually dripped from its jaws—the jaws of the three-headed monster blessed by Hades.

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Several Years Earlier, Somewhere in Europe

“So, you’ll accept the offer? I plan to refrain, myself.”

The mage, whose way of speaking gave an impression of cunning, had the outward appearance of a young girl.

While the elegant clothes she wore suggested a sheltered young lady from a good family, the crow perched on her shoulder seemed strangely at home, giving rise to a sense that she was something out of the ordinary.

She was a mage who, despite belonging to the Clock Tower, kept her distance from it out of dislike for its power struggles.

Her somewhat elderly way of speaking in contrast to her sweet voice was said to be because she was actually over eighty years old, or a result of inheriting her Magic Circuits complete with the knowledge of their previous owners, but the truth was kept a mystery.

That mage with an air of experience was speaking to a girl magecraft-user whose youthful air matched her appearance.

“... Is that because you want to protect mage society?”

“Ha ha! If a single ritual was enough to destroy our society, it would be long gone by now. ... Or so I’d like to say ... but lately rumor has it that a ritual in the far east stepped into fairly dangerous territory. I thought it was odd that this ‘Holy Grail War’ didn’t attract much attention despite a Lord dying in one ten years ago, but it looks like someone’s been finessing the flow of information.”

The Holy Grail War.

It had been known as a minor ritual in the far east, but it had not attracted serious notice until a few months previously, when the “fifth ritual” had been performed.

They had not managed to learn the details of what had been done or achieved in it.

Still, plausible rumors had it that if things had gone badly, it could have become one of the “ends” that the hermits of the Atlas Institute spoke of.

“No respectable mage would accept a proposal as absurd as recreating that Holy Grail War in America, especially not without the backing of the Mages’ Association. They reached out to you because of your grudge against the Association despite the quality of your bloodline ... or so I’d guess. I have a healthy respect for your talents, but when it comes to that monster—Francesca—individual ability is secondary at best.”

“... That doesn’t bother me.”

The girl who stood before the mage with the crow on her shoulder was not yet even fifteen years old.

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Despite that, her gaze was filled with resignation toward the entire world, and the faint gleam deep in her eyes came from the dark flames of hate.

At least, the crow-tamer mage was convinced that it was so.

“. . . Just between us, once, when I was participating in an auction on the Rail Zeppelin, I caught a glimpse of a Ghost Liner . . . one of these ‘Heroic Spirits.’ It wasn’t on the level of a familiar—it was a shadow of the human order engraved into the Earth itself. Don’t think that you can use one for a personal vendetta and come out unscathed.”

“ . . . ”

“If you want to destroy something big, you need to pay the price,” the mage with the crow continued to tell the girl, who lightly clenched her fists and dropped her gaze. “Destroying the Mages’ Association is tantamount to making an enemy of mage society itself. There are any number of people prepared to be destroyed in the end themselves, but don’t forget—your grandfather who gave up his humanity was one of them . . . and the order is backwards. The bigger the thing you want to destroy is, the sooner you’ll be destroyed first. Call it ‘advance payment.’

“Just look at mages,” the crafty lady mage with the youthful appearance continued to the girl magecraft-user whose legal guardian she had become. “They strive to break the laws of nature and reach the Root, and isn’t every last one of them broken?”

After a slightly self-deprecating smile, the mage’s face became expressionless, and she asked the girl who had become her ward:

“Haruri Borzak, will you break as a person, or as a mage?”

“Neither, ma’am,” the girl called Haruri plainly answered the mage who far outranked her.

“I was already broken a long time ago. Broken by those people from the Clock Tower . . .”

“ . . . ”

“Father and mother were both ordinary mages. . . but they were branded heretics and had everything taken from them, all so the Clock Tower could get its hands on the research results they inherited from my grandfather, who abandoned his humanity!”

“. . . Your life wasn’t taken, was it? It was the Borzaks quick perception that allowed them to pass on their Crest—albeit only partially—to you and let you escape. If you conspire with that thing—with Francesca—that will all have been for nothing.”

She made her tone slightly graver as she spoke, but there was no change in Haruri’s expression.

When the mage who was Haruri’s guardian saw that, she let out a faint sigh and shook her head.

“If you were a mage, you would resign yourself to usurpation by the Clock Tower as a ‘matter of course’ . . . but the instant you wished for revenge for your parents instead of restoration as a mage, you were no mage. You aren’t broken yet. You could still start over. You could stay hidden while using magecraft to make your life a little easier.”

She said that, but she made no further effort to stop Haruri.

Haruri was only her ward, not her apprentice, and their relationship was not enforced by magecraft. She must have decided that it was not her path to get more deeply involved.

She had a duty to a descendant of her acquaintances, the Borzaks, but that duty would not easily change to compassion.

She might distance herself from the Clock Tower, but she was still that much of a mage.

“I believe that the Lord I caught a glimpse of on the Rail Zeppelin—El-Melloi II, I believe—would be willing to accept even someone at odds with mage society like you at his school, but I suppose it would be rude to detain you further.”

The crow’s eyes flashed eerily as the mage walked off into the darkness.

She walked like a girl of her apparent age who had lost her way at night, but the gaze of the crow on her shoulder was almost frighteningly sharp and remained fixed on the girl called Haruri.

“... Never forget, Haruri.”

Did the voice that rang out an instant before they melted into the darkness come from the girl’s mouth or the crow’s plumage?

The girl whose eardrums and spine shivered was no longer able to tell.

“No matter how prepared you are to break...”

Those last words, however, became reverberations that lingered in Haruri the magecraft-user.

“Preparation won’t mean a thing in the face of someone who was broken from the start.”

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The Present, Snowfield, a Luxury Residential District

“Hmm...”

A woman’s voice rang out in the real Snowfield. There was a somehow unreal beauty to it.

“I was sure he’d come rushing to track me down right away... but Utu is high in the sky and there’s still no sign of him. He’s surprisingly cautious, considering his best friend just got crushed.”

A luxury residential area in the Snowerk district.

Its largest mansion belonged to the owner of the casino building in the city center.

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Publicly, at least.

The owner was a proxy put in place during the city's construction—a businessman who had died from illness at a young age and was merely made to appear alive.

The casino building was actually managed by one of the mages “on the inside,” who used magecraft to disguise himself as the late businessman to fool the eyes of the public when it was absolutely necessary for the owner to put in an appearance.

As a result, this elegant mansion, which looked like it might belong to a minor Hollywood star, had no real owner—its only visitors were servicepeople who performed the bare minimum of maintenance necessary to keep up appearances.

And yet . . .

A group was currently using the mansion as if it belonged to them.

A woman lounged on a pure white sofa so luxurious that it probably cost as much as a small house on its own. She was just sitting casually, but she gave the impression that she would make a perfect picture no matter who looked at her or from what angle, as if she were the very definition of beauty.

“Oh well, it doesn't matter. I want to let Gugalanna do the honors of wiping out that piece of junk, anyway.”

The person stuck having that impression seared directly into her eyes was a girl still in her late teens.

Haruri Borzak, the girl who was watching that goddess from a corner of the enormous room, was staring at Filia, the woman on the sofa, with a somewhat gloomy look in her eyes.

“What's got you looking so down?”

Haruri answered Filia's question in a tone of mingled caution and fear.

“. . . Would you please tell me your name?”

“Oh, you're still hung up on that? Didn't I tell you—if you've realized how charming I am, you don't need to know anything else.”

“Right now . . . it isn't just charm. I feel afraid, too. I know I said that all I cared about was that you'd saved me . . . but since we're going to fight together, I'd at least like to know your name.”

Haruri was terrified, but she still looked Filia in the eye as she spoke.

“Oh?” Filia answered with a faintly bewitching smile. “I see you've gotten awfully assertive.”

“You told Bazdilot and his Servant that you were a goddess. As a mage, it's hard to believe... but at the very least, you're not a mage. You're something much 'higher' . . . aren't you?”

“That's such an obvious question I don't even know how to answer it. I mean, all I can say is 'of course,' and that's boring.”

Filia shrugged, taking a sip from her glass. Even that gesture seemed so beautiful that it almost convinced Haruri that she was looking at the ideal form of relaxation.

“Still, I suppose you have a point. Now that I’ve practically finished off Gilgamesh, there’s no real point hiding my name . . . is there? And I was the one who told you to get away from the hospital because you’d probably get dragged in and die.”

After a brief pause for thought, Filia rose leisurely from the sofa and continued speaking to Haruri.

“What I told that Avenger and his Master wasn’t a figure of speech. I’m not a human who was called a goddess, either. I’m a genuine goddess.”

“What?”

“I’m a goddess of beauty who governs abundant harvests, bestows fortune, glory, and ruin on warriors with the radiance of Venus, and protects people . . . That’s enough to give a mage like you at least an idea, right?”

“...!”

Haruri gasped at the declaration that “goddess” was meant literally.

Still, she had half expected it and did not fall into doubt or confusion.

She would have liked to be wrong, but she had already put her life in Filia’s hands, and it was too late to refuse.

And the numerous fragmentary hints Filia had dropped lead her to a name.

“A goddess of Venus . . . Aphrodite . . . Venus . . . Astarte. No . . . Closer to the source . . . Inanna?”

“That’s ‘me’ too, but I prefer my Sumerian name. Although that depends on my mood when I manifest.”

“The goddess . . . Ishtar.”

“You got it. Good thing you didn’t get it wrong, huh?”

Filia left her glass, which was still partly full, on a marble table. Walking casually, she picked up the TV remote and pressed the on button.

She flicked through several channels before a jeweler’s segment on a shopping channel caught her eye, and she began to mutter with great interest.

“The cuts are gorgeous. Magecraft has declined, but if this is the result of specializing in technology, that may not be such a bad thing. In terms of taste, the artisans of Uruk suit me better, but . . . Oh well. I’ll respect this era’s sensibilities when it comes to that, at least,” she said, toying with the jewelry she had found around the house and smiling happily.

“After all, in the end, all techniques and tastes come down to whether or not they suit me.”

They had probably been prepared either as camouflage or as mystical catalysts for the man-

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sion's real owner, but any of them might still have cost over fifty thousand dollars in an ordinary jewelry shop.

Still, Haruri could not shake the feeling that price had nothing to do with it.

Even if they had been cheap gems, or even glasswork or marbles, the mere act of her holding them seemed enough to make them standards of beauty and enhance their inherent value.

"A goddess of beauty . . ."

It was true that she was so beautiful that it seemed disrespectful to even look at her directly. At the same time, that frightened Haruri.

Genuinely perfect beauty could become great magecraft—nearly Magic—in and of itself.

For instance, Haruri had heard rumors of the "Gold and Silver Princesses" of the Iselma family, powerful mages of Valué, the School of Creation, at the Clock Tower. Those twins were ultimate beauty, the arbitrary product of generations of magecraft research. They were supposed to project a "beauty" so perfect that it blotted out the consciousness of anyone nearby just by existing. Haruri had never seen their faces, but she surmised that the goddess of beauty in front of her was something else entirely.

If the Iselma princesses were the result of generations of mages studying to approach the Root from the perspective of "beauty" and achieving a height at which their forms seemed to reflect the universe itself, then what this goddess had ought to be described as a completely different category that just happened to also use the word "beauty."

The goal of the Iselma family's "beauty" was ultimately a method to reach the Root. If they ever did reach it, it would be a domain worthy of the name "otherworldly beauty."

Ironically, what the goddess possessed was the opposite—otherworldly "beauty" befitting of the heavens applied to earthly forms. You could call it the end goal of "beauty" as it is meant near the human sphere. The kind of "finished product" that fell from an unreachable height and painted over its surroundings with itself.

The self-proclaimed goddess before her eyes was like if the golden ratio defined everything it wore as fashionable and fixed that conception on its surroundings. Her way of being broke the rules.

If the human sense of beauty is a type of crisis avoidance or pleasure mechanism developed for survival, then her beauty was the opposite. Her beauty was something that gave to humans.

The goddess was aware that she possessed perfect beauty and that she was the standard of beauty. As a result, she must regard beauty as something that inevitably belonged with her and the act of studying herself as totally alien.

Haruri could not help surmising as much, even though the goddess was just standing in front of her. That was why Haruri admired her freedom and also why she feared that she would

be eliminated if she deviated even slightly from the aesthetic sense of this entity beyond human understanding.

A feeling worthy of the name “awe” welled up within Haruri. She fought the urge to fall to her knees as she expressed a doubt that had suddenly occurred to her.

“I thought it wasn’t possible to summon a divinity in a Holy Grail War . . .”

“No, it isn’t. It’s normally impossible for a Holy Grail. There are a handful of nearly heretical ways to do it, but it would be impossible to summon a divinity of my caliber with a localized ritual like this, and especially not with a fake Holy Grail that’s lost its proper function. Oh, but . . . if you used the Holy Grail as a wish-granter at the end of the ritual, for example, you could probably at least get me to listen to you.”

“Then, how . . .”

Haruri persisted in her question.

“I only manifested here,” the goddess within Filia answered carelessly, “because power I’d left in this world from the start activated.”

“Power?”

“That’s right. A blessing I bestowed on this world.”

“...?”

Her existence here was the result of a blessing to the world.

Haruri’s face made it plain that she did not understand what the goddess meant. Filia shrugged and continued.

“Of course, it would probably be a curse to those blasphemers.”

“You mean . . . the goddess Ishtar’s power resides in that ‘vessel’?”

“Not just my power; my personality too. Although they’re basically the same thing to beings like us. . . . This body just had a program in it, you know. It was easy to overwrite. I think she’s a sacrificial priestess prepared as a final terminal to receive the Grail’s power, or something like that.”

The goddess seemed uninterested in her vessel’s origins. She returned the topic to herself as she stared happily at jewelry.

“There was a time when we could manifest in our proper forms, but if this were back then, the humans in this town would have burst and died a long time ago.”

“Modern human bodies can’t withstand the magical energy of the Age of Gods. . . .”

Haruri had heard something like that before.

The age when gods and humans had coexisted was over, and magical energy was vanishing from the world. Humanity had adapted to that environment, and their bodies could no longer withstand their original one.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Haruri did not know if it were evolution or regression, but just as humans could not survive in too high an oxygen density, they had already begun to part ways with the world of magecraft. And not at the societal level—with the exception of mages and magecraft-users who actually continued to use magical energy.

“Well, the environmental changes and my inability to manifest are for different reasons. Even if you recreated the same environment and tried to summon me . . . I suppose it would be noble if I thought of it as a sacrifice, but there’s really no point if there aren’t any humans to praise me in exchange for protection.”

“Then why go to the trouble of manifesting in an era like—”

“I told you, I bestowed a blessing on the world. It just activated successfully.”

At that point, the goddess narrowed her eyes and flashed a bewitching smile.

“I can hardly believe that something like this could really happen. . . . I’d like to applaud the me back then.”

“?”

“You see, when I was insulted by a blasphemous king and that piece of junk threw my divine beast’s entrails at me, I seared a blessing into the world. I kept going until I dissolved into the human order and vanished.”

Fear is beauty, and beauty is primordial fear.

That was how it seemed to Haruri when she looked into Filia’s eyes.

Her keen features made Haruri’s blood run cold. They were just too beautiful—if she had been the object of their hatred, Haruri felt sure that not only would she be unable to resist, she would actually feel grateful.

The perfected rage and hatred of a goddess of beauty.

To be precise, a “vestige” of the passions of the deities who once ruled this planet were reigniting an ancient wrath within the vessel called Filia.

“If those two ever returned to this planet and reunited . . .”

Faced with a miracle she had arrived at amid an infinite expanse of possibilities, the being who called herself a goddess wore a smile so beautiful that it would freeze the heart of anyone who saw it.

“I would devote my divinity and soul . . . to protecting humans.”

Then, as if in answer to those words, a grating sound came from the mansion’s courtyard.

Haruri did not turn to look.

She knew that she would see nothing if she did.

Haruri’s Servant, rendered invisible by magecraft, had stationed itself in the courtyard.

Because it had absorbed rubble from Bazdilot’s workshop, which it had destroyed, it actually

put more strain on it to dematerialize, so they were getting by with invisibility magecraft and magical-energy concealment.

The woman who called herself Ishtar seemed to still be able to perceive the Servant clearly, because she looked up into the courtyard through a glass wall and said:

“Don’t you think so too?”

In response, a sound like the grating of a massive ship’s propeller rang out from the courtyard.

“Oh, honestly. It sounds like she thinks those tall stone towers are the cedar forests of Lebanon,” the goddess said with a shrug and a wry smile, as if to a pet dog.

“All right, I’ll take you to a real forest later. That piece of junk is probably there . . .

“But now that Gilgamesh is out of the picture and he’s gained reason, he won’t pose a threat.”

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The Distant Past, in a Forest of Gigantic Trees

You need to learn.

To learn about humans.

Utu created a “complete human” in the forest of Enlil.

Behold her, tell of her, and mold yourself in her image.

Ninurta will then share his power with you.

Before we loose you into the forests of Uruk, you must spend time with the “human” Utu has raised.

Complete yourself and become humanoid.

For you are a lump of clay that imitates all life.

The will of the gods.

When the lump of clay that had had that “duty” carved into it as an irresistible, comfortable slumber awakened in this world . . .

“_____”

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The world was engulfed in a scream that rent heaven and earth.
It had no meaning as words.
It was just a whirling vortex of pure, undirected emotion.

The first thing that the “tool” called Enkidu observed in this world was an everlasting series of screams.

The chain of sounds alone destroyed nearby objects and soon reduced everything to dust.

In the “process” of being created by the gods, he/she was discarded into the heart of that vortex of shrieks.

However . . . “discarded” was merely an objective description.

In reality, it would be fair to say that the gods were pouring all their efforts into making that weapon supreme.

He/she was a divine homunculus—a tool, a weapon, and an independent processing mechanism—that the gods of Mesopotamia had created to rebind a child who had degenerated into a human to the gods.

That was why, as a necessary step, Enkidu has been placed in the midst of the calamitous voice.

He/she had been dropped there with something akin to love, like an infant into its first bath, as a final precaution.

Enkidu recognized the series of thunderous roars as a “human voice” after eighty days in the noise.

The processor had been dropped into the world in a state of innocence, input only with the role the gods had bestowed on him/her and a bare minimum of information. He/she had to begin building up everything by choosing what would be necessary and what types of knowledge to accumulate.

And intellectually, Enkidu had already been given the answer, defined by the gods, to what the source of the screams was.

It was a being called a “human.”

It was, the gods claimed, the apotheosis and perfection of the human species that Enkidu must go on to confront.

In his/her initial state, Enkidu did not yet know what words were. From his/her perspective, the mighty words of the gods were imprinted as “sensations.”

Even so, Enkidu continued to face that “perfect human” and to expose him/herself to its cries.

As a result, in order to answer the voice, Enkidu was transforming into something like a

gargantuan clay doll.

If that automaton had been completely suffused in the “screams” then . . . he/she would not have been able to achieve mutual understanding with the sacred prostitute Shamhat.

Enkidu might not even have been able to recognize Shamhat as “human.”

That was how greatly the “perfect human” that he/she had encountered through the gods’ guidance differed from the humans who walked on two legs in Babylonia.

The thing that would link Enkidu to human society at the last possible moment . . . was a young girl’s voice that rose amid the endless screams like bubbles from seaweed.

“Who is it?”

“Is someone there?”

Before Enkidu was aware of it, little flowers were blooming around him/her.

The gods’ processor would learn.

The storm of screams calmed as if it had never been, and a series of delicate sounds that seemed to mean something rang out, but only for the brief time that those flowers continued to bloom.

After a long time, Enkidu realized what those sounds meant—what “words” were.

And the independent processor learned.

Enkidu learned that while it was true that the cries like ceaseless thunder had no meaning as words . . . they were continuing to carve the emotion called “resentment” into the world in the form of a curse.

They never ended. They never reached a destination. The “humans” just continued to scream.

To scream a curse that would never conclude in a place that was, to Enkidu, the beginning of the world.

When Enkidu realized that, however, he/she was unfazed.

If these were the beings called “humans” that the gods spoke of, then this must be how humans were. Enkidu dispassionately recorded the fact as a basis for calculations.

Caught between the endless screams and the gentle girl’s voice that occasionally surfaced, the processor—who could not even distinguish “gentleness”—accumulated knowledge about humans with complete detachment.

Only the mission that the gods had given him/her continued to echo within Enkidu’s hollow soul.

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Converse with humans.
Pierce them and stitch them fast.

A calculating lump of clay that was not yet even a doll.
Enkidu simply judged that it was necessary for his/her mission and attempted further communication with the “perfect human.”

At that point, Enkidu had merely memorized “her” whispered words and grasped the situation. He/she had not yet reached the level of conversation.

Groping for a way to fulfill the role that he/she had been given, Enkidu attempted various forms of communication with the “perfect human.”

In the process, one day . . . Enkidu made flowers bloom.

Enkidu retained no record of memory of why he/she thought to do that. It may have been a coincidence, or some factor that the then-incomplete Enkidu could not identify may have been involved.

But the result, at least, was burned into Enkidu’s circuits.

The cries of resentment calmed for just an instant, and “she” brought her body to the surface.
“Thank you.

“Pretty . . . aren’t they?”

Enkidu did not notice the slight tremor in his/her system at the sound of that voice.

Later, however, the weapon understood.

That had been the first moment that he/she had succeeded in a mutual exchange of “wills.”

Time, and words, flowed on.

Enkidu remembered the precise number of days, but he/she saw no meaning in it.

To the weapon, it did not matter how much time had passed, only how it had come to understand “humans.”

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“We’re your friends, Enkidu.”

“But soon, we won’t be friends anymore.”

“Because we can’t go anywhere anymore.”

“We won’t be able to see the same things as you anymore.”

“We’re sure to forget about you.”

“To us, you were like a flower, Enkidu.”

“You saved us from being lonely.”

“We hope that you’ll meet someone like a flower one day too, Enkidu.”

“Someone who will bloom again, even if they wither and die.”

“Someone like a flower . . . that blooms anywhere before you know it.”

Before Enkidu knew it, “she” had begun to form a tiny individual body when she rose from the swarm of resentful voices.

The sound-emitting apparatus and visual and auditory sensors packed into that “little body” caught Enkidu’s attention.

Cranium, face, head.

Enkidu matched the images that the gods had given him/her with the words that he/she had learned from “her.”

The top of that head that seemed as if Enkidu could crush it with the slightest exertion was decorated with a flower that he/she had made bloom a few days before.

Then . . . she picked up a different flower in her hand.

It was one of the tiny flowers that “she” had made bloom when she first surfaced—on the day that Enkidu had first encountered her.

When “she” used that flower to decorate Enkidu’s head, which was just a massive lump of clay, she twisted the visual sensors and speech emitter on her head into odd shapes.

It was much later that Enkidu learned that it was called a “smile.”

And so, at the time, Enkidu was more concerned with the things that floated around her.

They were seven little rings of light that shone like rainbows just after the rain and seemed to guard “her.”

Enkidu judged that those rings of light were “perfect things” and etched their radiance into his/her soul.

The gargantuan lump of clay, which was massive enough to take all the cries of resentment that “they” let out when the girl’s form was submerged and had tuned his/her mental makeup for that purpose, allowed something like what humans call “hope” to well up in his/her soul for the first time.

Even when he/she obeyed the gods’ commands and left the forest.

Even if he/she destroyed humans for the sake of his/her duty . . . he/she had to see that perfect, beautiful radiance again.

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Enkidu etched that wish into his/her system without even analyzing the reason why.

The weapon would get his/her wish a long time later.

But
the next time Enkidu saw “her”
that radiance . . .

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The Present, Snowfield, Crystal Hill, Upper Floors

The flowers that bloomed the first time he met “her.”
What color had they been?

The upper floors of Crystal Hill.

The direct elevator to the top-floor suite was currently only usable by a select group of people, the official reason being damaged glass due to high winds.

Enkidu suddenly found himself reflecting on events from his life as he walked the red-carpeted hallway one floor below that led to the suite.

Reflecting on the flowers that had grown thickly deep in the forest where he had spent time with the being called Huwawa.

He remembered the color of the flowers that he had made bloom later.

He had made clusters of pale blue flowers bloom for “her.”

Enkidu would never recreate them on his own because there was no need, but if someone asked to see them, he could do so easily.

In the end, however, he could not remember the color of the flowers that had been with “her”—the personality that called itself Huwawa.

Why did Enkidu try to think of those flowers, which existed in a realm that was neither a record for his ‘completion’ nor a memory?

Enkidu self-analyzed the reason, immediately arrived at two answers, and lowered his gaze with a faint smile.

It was less a smile of self-derision than of pure nostalgia.

One reason was that he had learned that his former sibling—Huwawa—was manifesting in the world.

The other . . .

“It’s not about personality or the color of their souls. . . . Their transience might be a little similar.”

Enkidu continued to advance, sensing the presence of a girl in the inner recesses of the top floor.

“?”

He turned a corner and found several men and women in black eyeing him with confusion and alarm.

“Hey, who are you? Stop right there!”

“This area is off limits to . . . Wait. Bare feet . . .”

“Can this be real . . .? He’s not a mage. His magical energy is like . . . the Earth itself . . .”

“A Servant . . .? Don’t tell me that’s Lancer!”

Only a select few members of the organization occupying the suite were familiar with Enkidu’s appearance.

Only the ones who had used their familiars to watch his battle with Gilgamesh on the first day.

They had been told his distinguishing features, but none of them had expected him to just walk up to them in the hallway in broad daylight.

The magical energy that coursed through the Heroic Spirit’s body was both of the same type as the magical energy that flowed through the earth’s leylines and as peaceful as a calm sea. Many magecraft-users and mages would not be able to detect it, even at close quarters.

That was why, now that they had detected it, they understood.

It was like they had caught a whiff of seawater by the shore and suddenly realized that there was a massive whale in front of them.

It was too late to launch an attack. They doubted that anything they tried would have worked, even if they had struck first.

There was almost nothing that they, who had not made contracts with Heroic Spirits, could do. Their superiors had even given them strict orders never to engage a Heroic Spirit if one appeared.

They remained keenly aware of their holstered guns and offensive Mystic Codes, but not one of them reached for one.

The Heroic Spirit saw that and spoke with a smile.

The voice could be taken for male or female, but the Heroic Spirit’s sex didn’t matter to the

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black-suited guards.

Not only his physical beauty, but everything, including the magical energy they sensed from within him and the way he moved as he walked toward them, told them that this was a “perfect body.”

In the face of that fact, age and sex were trivialities. Types of curse or magecraft that varied according to sex would be meaningless before this mighty being regardless.

“I’m going through.”

The Heroic Spirit calmly said that short sentence.

“...”

The black-suited group, every inch of their skins breaking out in cold sweat, were powerless to do anything. They stood petrified.

As the Heroic Spirit passed by them, he lowered his gaze slightly as if in thought, paused, and said:

“You can relax. I haven’t come to fight. In fact, if you had chosen to fight, the thing you ought to be protecting might have ended up as collateral damage.”

“...?”

The looks on the guards’ sweat-drenched faces said that they did not understand what Enkidu was trying to say. He, still smiling, dispassionately stated the facts to them without a hint of irony or approbation.

“I mean that you didn’t make the wrong decision. So, you don’t need to feel responsible. . . . I hope that you will continue to make correct choices.”

Correct choices for whom?

They wanted to ask, but they could not get the words out.

They felt that the Heroic Spirit, who had done nothing but walk past them, had grasped their entire beings, and it terrified them—and then that Heroic Spirit glanced back at them and said:

“It’s all right, Master. I’ve disarmed all of the security systems in this hallway. . . . That means it’s safe.”

“...?!”

Master.

At that word, the guards’ tension reached its limit.

They were shocked to discover that the Heroic Spirit had disarmed all of their defensive magecraft without appearing to do anything, but the reason he had done so was even more troubling.

The fact that it was not just a Servant—a Master had marched in on them as well.

The leader they were supposed to be guarding had currently as good as lost her Servant.

If this Master had come to propose an alliance, would they just eliminate her once they realized the situation?

The worried group shifted its attention to the corner of the hallway.

A moment later . . . with slow, cautious steps, sniffing as it went, a sleek, silver-coated wolf rounded the bend.

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Crystal Hill, Top Floor Suite

“. . . Have you come to slay His Majesty?” The girl—Tine Chelk—quietly asked Enkidu when he opened the door.

There were more than ten of her black-clad subordinates in the room.

Like the group in the hallway, however, they were unable to make any careless moves when suddenly confronted with a Servant.

A nervous thrill ran through the room at Tine’s question.

The tension, however, was relieved by a few mild words from Enkidu, who stepped into the room with the silver wolf.

“That’s a correct inference for a Master in a Holy Grail War, but it doesn’t match the facts.”

“Then . . . have you come to execute me? I’ve disgraced His Majesty, your best friend.”

“That’s not right either,” Enkidu shook his head, still smiling but somehow dispassionate.

Tine’s attention was focused on Enkidu, but she was not looking at him.

She was in the middle of what was, in a sense, a sumptuous “mage’s workshop” furnished with the King of Heroes’ personal possessions, continuously channeling vast quantities of magical energy into the being who lay supine at its center.

“Your Magic Circuits . . . no, you yourself are linked to this land, aren’t you?” Enkidu sounded impressed.

“. . . I see. *No wonder you have a similar aura. . . .* Your people tried the same thing as the old gods.”

“...?”

Tine looked slightly confused by Enkidu’s strange remarks, but it seemed that she could not spare the time to pursue the question because she continued to direct magical energy into the



center of the room without giving him so much as a glance.

“Do you know about me?”

“His Majesty calls you his friend.”

Tine still did not look at Enkidu. Every inch of her body was drenched in sweat as she manipulated extraordinary quantities of magical energy.

Nevertheless, she responded in a firm voice, apparently determined not to show weakness.

“I can only think of one Heroic Spirit that His Majesty would call a friend and who could also compete with him in raw power.”

“I wonder. That was probably true while I was alive,” Enkidu answered evasively.

The black-suited subordinates near Tine gradually began to move again.

“... If you don’t intend to fight, what are you doing here?” An elderly man warily asked Enkidu.

The suspicion in the man’s voice was faintly tinged with hope.

Enkidu guessed his meaning and shook his head apologetically.

“If you believe I have come to save King Gilgamesh, I’m afraid you will be disappointed.”

“...!”

Most of the room’s occupants looked discouraged by the Heroic Spirit’s words, and Tine’s shoulders trembled slightly.

The thing in the center of the room—the thing Enkidu was staring at—was indeed the King of Heroes’ “corpse.”

The Einzbern homunculus who Gilgamesh had called “Ishtar.”

Thanks to her interference, Gilgamesh had been pierced by Alkeides’ arrows, and then impaled by the gargantuan “something” that had appeared immediately afterward.

It was undeniably a fatal blow.

Worse, his body was being eaten away by some force, and his wounds continued to rot even while he was alive.

The only reason that his physical body still existed was that Tine was drawing massive quantities of magical energy from the leylines to hold his Spirit Origin in its human shape and keep it from disintegrating by brute force.

Surveying Gilgamesh in that state, retaining only the form of a Servant, Enkidu dispassionately stated his opinion.

“There are two venoms eating away at Gil’s body. If it were just the hydra venom, I could force open Gil’s treasury and probably find an antidote. He used to say that he was going to hunt the vipers at the world’s end one day, after all. His treasury might even yield a cooking utensil or two made just for them in addition to corpses and antidotes.”

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Enkidu continued to speak casually, as if he were telling everyday jokes.

Tine gritted her teeth and responded with a tinge of anger, still not looking at him.

“Aren’t you . . . His Majesty’s friend . . .? How can you speak so calmly when . . .?!”

Her shout was too dignified to be the temper of a girl who was in some ways still a child.

Enkidu accepted it at her side. He stopped smiling, but his expression remained composed as he replied.

“It’s because I’m his friend.”

“What . . .?”

“Gil and I spent irreplaceable days together. We’ve already finished our eternal parting and the grief that came with it. The ‘current’ us are shadows burned into the Human Order. We may rejoice at our reunion, but we don’t need to grieve at parting again. I don’t believe that Gil would shed a tear if I were the one lying here on the verge of death, and I wouldn’t ask him to.”

“..”

Confusion suffused Tine’s profile.

She glanced at Enkidu just once, but her experience of life was too short to judge the truth of the Heroic Spirit’s words by his expression.

“I believe it will be difficult for you to understand, and I can guess your reason for directing your anger at me. So, if it will make you feel better, feel free to curse at me as much as you like.”

“..”

When she heard that, Tine turned her face fully toward Enkidu for the first time. Her eyes showed a range of emotions—anger, sadness, fear. Then, after a momentary look that might have been begging for help, she lowered her head and said frustratedly:

“No . . . it wouldn’t. . . I’m sorry. . . I’m . . . truly sorry. . .”

A clear apology to Enkidu spilled from the lips of the mage, who was in some ways still a child.

“You aren’t the one I hate. . .”

Massive quantities of magical energy coursed through Tine’s Magic Circuits. Every nerve in her body was beginning to groan in protest.

As she spoke, however, her face was twisted not with pain but with regret.

“I . . . couldn’t do anything. . . I didn’t do anything. . .”

Tine fell silent.

“You used two Command Spells, didn’t you?” Enkidu asked calmly, neither comforting nor blaming.

“..!”

Enkidu was looking at the back of Tine’s left hand.

The majority of her Command Spells, the mark of a Master, were faded. Just one remained.

“One to summon him back here, and another to attempt to heal him. . . . That was a good decision for a Master. Without it, there would have been no chance that Gilgamesh could maintain the form of his Spirit Origin.”

“You said that . . . there are two types of venom?” Tine asked without slackening her efforts to maintain Gilgamesh’s Spirit Origin. She seemed to be grasping Enkidu’s personality, because the side of her that had been built up as a mage began to show on her face.

“Yes. The other is closer to a curse than a toxin.”

Enkidu narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the wound gouged in Gilgamesh’s torso.

“. . . I suppose this is what they call ‘irony.’”

“?”

“I don’t suppose it was a rainbow-colored light that impaled King Gilgamesh’s body?”

“. . .! Do you know what that was?”

The scene of Gilgamesh being struck down replayed in Tine’s mind.

The seven-colored halo, distinct from the titanic mechanical “something.”

The way it had twisted into a shape like the tip of a rock drill and impaled Gilgamesh through the belly.

“That was the protection of the gods. It’s also a curse to the human race. . . . The light that was poured into Gil was one of them, a curse descended from Pestilence.”

“Pestilence . . .?”

“We should probably be grateful for the hydra venom. It and the pestilence are competing with and consuming each other. . . . That’s why the plague hasn’t spread from Gil’s body. If not for that, there’s a high probability that all of you, and probably me, would also be trapped in the abyss of death by now.”

Tine and her subordinates gasped at Enkidu’s casual statement.

“Oh, there’s no need to change his treatment. In my estimation, both the venom and the curse will disappear along with the Spirit Origin of the body called Gilgamesh. It’s not ‘his’ Spirit Origin anymore. The only thing here now is the corpse of an ancient human.”

“What was that thing . . . that metal giant? What do you know about . . .?”

“Let me see. Where should I start . . .?”

Enkidu lowered his gaze as if lost in thought, and then began to tell his reason for coming there little by little.

“I came here because I wanted to know a little more about all of you.”

“About us?”

“I mean, you tried to use Gil, and he spared your lives. I was curious what you were like. Gil

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was also curious about my Master, but . . .”

Enkidu smiled at Tine and continued without stating what his own judgment had been.

“Nothing would please me more than if we could work together. I also want to do all that I can . . . to remove that wicked deity from this stage.”

“. . . What deity? Do you mean that steel monster that stabbed His Majesty?”

“No, I mean— . . .?”

The next instant, Enkidu raised his head as if he had noticed something.

“There’s . . . someone here.”

“What?”

Enkidu slowly surveyed the surrounding space without answering Tine’s question.

“Is this . . . a human? No . . . it’s like a human, but . . .”

“Do you mean that someone is hiding in this room?”

Tine probed the nearby magical energy in confusion, but she could sense nothing of the kind.

Enkidu, however, seemed certain of its presence and wiped the emotion from his face as he said:

“No . . . they aren’t hiding. . . . It’s probably the opposite.”

“?”

“It seems . . . that something is trying to probe this place from the reverse side of the world.”

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A Closed-off Town, Crystal Hill, Top Floor Suite

“I knew it. This room looks like it has the ‘thinnest walls.’”

The Snowfield recreated inside the mysterious ward.

In the top floor suite of its Crystal Hill were Flat Escardos, Berserker Jack the Ripper, and the Holy Church personnel led by Hansa Cervantes.

“I see. . . . But what is this place? It’s the top floor of a hotel, but it doesn’t look like guest accommodations. It reminds me of a mage’s workshop, but the furnishings are too needlessly extravagant for that.”

Flat responded to Jack's question by looking around the room in growing excitement.

"Don't you think it's kind of like a museum?! There's pretty jewels and gold dishes and all kinds of amazing things!"

The space, which ought to have been the hotel's most luxurious room, was decorated with countless sparkling treasures that looked brand new despite their antique style. The assortment really could plausibly be some kind of exhibit.

"I've seen these in the professor's lectures. I'm pretty sure they're treasures from somewhere around Mesopotamia, but . . . hmm . . . The way they're made, they should have some magical energy stored inside, but I don't sense any. . . . They don't seem like fakes, but it's like they're empty shells. It's weird," flat commented as he stared intently at the furnishings.

"But if the walls are thinnest here," Hansa cut in from behind him, "does that mean that altitude is the key?"

"No, I don't think that's it. . . . I've got a feeling that this place is uniquely in harmony with the world outside the barrier. Like both sides are connected, or . . ."

At that point, Flat shifted his focus to a point at the center of the suite.

To the middle of the largest room.

What looked like a magic circle of a system unfamiliar at the Clock Tower was drawn on the floor there, but the target of that magecraft was missing from its center.

"What's this? I think it's a circle for stabilizing something . . . but there's nothing here."

"From the looks of things, this must be some faction's workshop after all."

"I'm technically neutral. I can guess who it belongs to, but I decline to comment."

Hansa went out of his way to explain something he could have easily left unsaid with a shrug.

Jack maintained the bare minimum of cautious attention on Hansa and the nuns who were inspecting the room as he continued.

"Could the circle be empty simply because they haven't begun their ritual yet?"

"No. . . . It's strange. I've got a feeling that something is already happening here, but . . . This circle really isn't active . . . but this is definitely the place."

Flat waved his hand over the center of the empty circle with a look of confusion.

"The reason this place has the strongest connection to the world 'outside' the ward—to the real city—is . . ."

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Fate/strange Fake 6

Snowfield, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

Enkidu's voice rang out outside the ward, on the top floor of the "real" Crystal Hill.

"Yes, something is definitely here, but I can only sense its presence."

When Tine's subordinates heard that, each of them seized a weapon or Mystic Code and frantically looked around the room.

There faces, however, showed confusion. It seemed that they could not find even traces of magical energy.

Enkidu's high Detect Presence Skill, however, was certainly detecting the "fluctuation."

And when he found its center, he looked with faint surprise at the face of his half-corpse friend.

"This . . . wasn't accounted for, I suspect."

There's was something human about the grin that quietly spread over his face, in contrast to his usual nearly expressionless smile . . . but no one in the room saw it.

"Still . . . you really haven't changed, Gil."

Guessing what had befallen the venom- and curse-ridden Gilgamesh, Enkidu quietly accepted its "course."

All the while allowing a light of hope, unbecoming of an arithmetic logic unit, to flicker in his heart of hearts.

"I'm amazed that you still pull the fate of the world to yourself even after your functions have been halted."

Countless gleaming, golden chains sprouted from the hem of his robe and instantly spread to all sides of the room.

"! What are you—"

Tine cried out, and her black-suited guards tensed.

Enkidu, however, reassuringly spread his arms in a gesture of defenselessness and said:

"Please don't be concerned; this isn't an attack against you, although I'm sorry to say that it isn't to protect you, either."

Enkidu winked like a mischievous child while erecting several layers of defensive measures only around the silver wolf sprawled at his feet—his Master—and wistfully recalled his "adventuring days" as he continued.

"I'm just going to become someone's tool, as always."

"In this case . . . I suppose that in your terms, I'll be a 'booster.'"

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A Closed-off Town, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

“Huh?!”

Flat let out a cry of surprise, and the others turned to stare at him.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

“No, not exactly a problem,” Flat answered Hansa with a look of confusion. “Maybe more like a problem got solved . . .”

Flat manipulated magical energy with the fingertips of both hands and began overwriting the magic circle inscribed on the floor.

“What do you intend to do?”

Flat continued to work while he answered Jack.

“Since asphalt that was torn up in the real world is fine here . . . I think it can probably ignore major damage and decide not to copy-paste it. But an enemy faction’s magic circle still being here means that the range of ‘things it would be inconvenient to copy’ must be pretty narrow.”

“Recreating the real city inside a ward is copy and pasting? I see young Clock Tower mages are even up-to-date in their expressions.”

Hansa shrugged and watched Flat work with interest.

“Thank you very much! I may not look it, but I’m in the School of Modern Magecraft! It’s all thanks to the professor that I’m up-to-date!”

Flat, meanwhile, shot back a slightly off-base answer and continued to survey the surroundings.

“I knew it. The closest thing to this place is probably a Reality Marble. . . . But still . . . No, I doubt anyone but the professor could put it into words well. And I only saw it before; it’s not like we covered it in class.”

“Saw what?”

“I’ve seen something like this once before, in Wales. That was in a cemetery . . . but if that was ‘a ward-world that recreates the past,’ this must be ‘a ward-world that recreates the present.’”

“. . . In Wales? Don’t tell me you mean the Blackmore Cemetery, founded by a clan with strong ties to Dead Apostles? A priest I know and a nun I never got along with nearly died in some trouble over there . . . but I never figured you’d be mixed up with that place too.”

Hansa sounded surprised. For some reason, Flat’s eyes shone with delight.

“Oh, you know about that! Yes, this world inside the ward is like a massive stage set made to be a whole fake city. . . . You see that as a setting in games sometimes. I think there was a Jim

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Carrey movie like that too.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a city set built from the ground up, not a reproduction. . . . That last scene was great, though. It was a good movie.”

“Wasn’t it?! I want to teach my liquid mercury Mystic Code friend the greeting from it next time I see her!”

“Save that talk for later. You won’t be able to see that Mystic Code again if we don’t get out of this world first.”

“Ah. S-Sorry. . . .”

Snapped back to reality by Jack, Flat dejectedly returned to the subject at hand.

“Since the cars are all stopped and the slot machines don’t work, I think it might not be continuously mirroring the real city but regularly singling out and copying ‘worlds’ one moment at a time. There are parked cars here too, so I’d guess objects whose position data is changing drastically in the ‘isolated moment’ aren’t reflected.”

“I see. . . . In that case, something is being done in the real-world suite that this magic circle corresponds to. Or could they be trying to open a way into this place?”

“Hmm. It didn’t look like it from the way the magical energy was distorting until just now . . . but that just changed. How should I put it? It’s like my phone suddenly got three bars even though we’re in a subway tunnel, or . . . That’s it! My phone!”

Flat hurriedly pulled out his cell phone and placed it on a nearby marble table and began to rummage through the nearby objects.

“Let’s see. I’ll just borrow this . . . and this and this . . .”

He was selecting several of the historical artifacts of apparently Mesopotamian origin with which the room was decorated and filling them with his own magical energy, restoring their power as ritual tools.

“What do you intend to do?”

“Well, some of the decorations looked like they’d be useful as Mystic Codes, so I thought I’d set up a simple altar with them. Then, how should I put it? It’s like knocking on a wall to get a response. If I’m lucky, I might be able to get my phone to connect to the ‘outside.’”

“I see. . . . No, wait, I said I see, but is that really possible?”

“Don’t worry; I’ve done similar things plenty of times. My classmate Caules and I used to convert between magical energy and radio waves all the time, so I think it’ll work out.”

Flat was moving ahead with a carefree attitude.

Jack was uneasy after his rough explanation, but he considered that Flat had accomplished several advanced feats of magecraft with the same approach and decided to wait and see.

When my thoughts blended with Master’s due to that Caster’s power . . . I somehow grasped the

nature of his magecraft.

It's similar to Eastern ideas. He doesn't limit his magecraft to a single system by defining the boundaries of his self. . . . Or rather, he can't.

He constructs and performs most of his magecraft on the spot by sense alone. Even if you told him to construct the same magecraft again, Flat could probably only make a rough approximation.

He isn't mold-breaking so much as he never had a mold to begin with. I'm astonished that that mage, El-Melloi II, could raise an enfant terrible like him.

As he watched Flat work, Jack thought that, given such an apprentice, a typical mage would either break in some way, or else try to break Flat.

He possessed a basic knowledge of magecraft thanks to traditions that Jack the Ripper was a mage, but even from that perspective, and even from the perspective of a unique Servant who had been partially mixed with his Master by Caster, Flat was an anomaly.

I know it's an odd question to ask when I don't even know who I am myself. . . . but just who is my erratic-yet-dependable Master?

In the background of that back and forth between Master and Servant, Hansa was surveying the city from the top floor.

"It just looks like an ordinary city from up here. . . . Still, it looks like there's no question we really are in a closed-off world."

When he stared into the distance from the top floor of the skyscraper, he could see something like a dense mist rising a considerable distance outside the city.

He doubted that the world continued beyond that mist. Recreating the entire world had to be beyond the realm of simple magecraft.

"At that point, it'd be less a recreation of the world than transportation to a parallel one. . . . Not that this situation isn't crazy enough already."

Hansa shrugged as he surveyed the quiet cityscape. One of the nuns approached him at a brisk walk.

"Hansa."

"What?"

"There's something strange over there."

Once Hansa turned to look in the direction that the nun unemotionally indicated, the other three nuns gathered to look down on the city from windows on the same side of the building.

"Has something happened?"

". . . Father Hansa, there's been activity. Over there."

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Hansa looked where the polite nun with the eyepatch indicated and saw what looked like a rising cloud of dust.

“That’s . . .”

Lights and burst of flame occasionally flashed inside the dust cloud.

It looked a lot like the battle in front of the hospital that they had been able to see from the church the night before.

Soon there was a particularly intense burst of light . . . and a gigantic form reared into view.

“ . . . Kerberos. We saw it yesterday . . . but was it always that big?”

The three-headed monster was larger than the average house.

The sight of it made Hansa suspicious even before it put him on his guard.

“Is the Archer wearing a cloth who used that thing here too? No, if that were it . . . If he could make it that big, I’m guessing he would’ve done it last night. . . .”

A number of theories raced through Hansa’s head.

I’m sure that demonic beast’s body was left lying on the road.

So, was it just pulled in like the rest of us?

Did the Servant who created this world give it strength . . . ?

At the very least, the Servant’s probable Master, Kuruoka Tsubaki, would not know that kind of magecraft.

That narrowed down the possibilities.

It was either a Servant, one of the people trying to exploit the situation in the city, or a dangerous being that just wanted to rampage regardless of the circumstances.

“What’s the plan, Hansa? If we’re going, I’m going to change my clothes.”

The blonde nun’s question caused Hansa to reflect for a moment.

Then, after a look at Flat and Jack behind him, he removed his own eyepatch and said:

“No, this is our chance. We can observe the widest area from here.”

From beneath the eyepatch appeared an artificial eye Mystic Code packed with variety of Mystic Codes—biological, mechanical, and even electronic—inside mystically treated crystal.

The lens inside the crystal rearranged themselves with a whirring sound like a robot in a sci-fi movie.

Then, with vision enhanced to dozens of times that of a normal human, Hansa began to observe not the battle but the buildings around it.

“If a Servant is using that thing, they may be nearby watching the fight. If I can at least find traces of magical energy . . .”

At that point, Hansa stopped speaking.

He had spotted a small human figure standing atop a building a short distance away from the uproar.

“Is that . . .?”

That figure . . . was familiar.

Hansa immediately fished where he had seen it before out of the sea of his memories.

In the hallway of the hotel he had leapt into in pursuit of a hematophage after the incident at the police station.

That’s where “he” had been.

It was the boy who was supposed to have been attacked in passing by that monster—the hematophage Jester Karture.

“. . . He got me.”

The corners of Hansa’s mouth curled upward even as he followed the figure with an angry glare.

If he had been using the type of farseeing magecraft that operated directly on its target’s space, the figure would have noticed that he was watching.

At present, however, Hansa was only using his artificial eye to directly enhance his vision.

In a sense, it was like he was just looking through binoculars . . . as he observed the boy-shaped thing happily watching the conflict in the city.

He could not tell whether it was controlling the giant beast.

But he was certain at least that the hematophage was involved in the current situation.

“A transformation ability . . .? It must be pretty impressive to turn even his presence completely human.”

Not only Hansa but most Executors could see through transformations and disguises that relied on ordinary magecraft or hematophage peculiarities.

But the sight of that transformation, which was almost like the creature had swapped out its very soul, reconfirmed for Hansa that Jester was an “enemy” he could not afford to underestimate.

“Change gear. We’re going to slay that hematophage while we’re in here.”

“That child is the hematophage from before?”

“Couldn’t he just be under his control?”

The nuns sounded skeptical about their orders, but Hansa gave a little shake of the head.

All the while glaring at the look on the distant boy’s face.

“He may be able to change the color of his soul . . . but he can’t change that twisted smile.”

Just then, a cheerful voice rang out from behind them.

“I got through!”

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Hansa and the others turned to find Flat grinning from ear to ear and dancing for joy in front of the bizarre altar he had constructed with his phone in one hand.

The signal from Flat's cell phone and the magical energy he had used to transmit it had just connected to "the outside world"—the real Snowfield.

In other words, a hole had been made in the walls of the ward for that magical energy and signal to pass through, even if it were a small one.

For Flat and the others, it was only a steppingstone on their way to "the outside" . . .

But the small change caused big changes in the world of Snowfield.

It was a single ant tunnel in a massive dam.

In a sense, you could say that this minor change was the trigger that ended the deadlock between the factions vying for control of Snowfield . . . although no one knew it yet at the time.

But whether anyone knew it or not, the city's fate began inexorably to change.

As if to show that one cracks had begun to spread, they would eventually bring everything crumbling down.

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In the Sky Above Snowfield, Airborne Workshop

"Found it."

High above the real city.

Inside a massive airship floating so far above the earth that it was not even reproduced inside the ward, Francesca grinned ecstatically as she whispered:

"Yay! There's finally a 'hole.' I don't know who did it, but I want to give them a Nobel Prize or something! The Nobel Me Prize!"

"The what?"

Francesca flapped her legs on the bed as she cheerfully answered her shadow, Caster.

"I give the money from a Nobel Prize to whoever helped me out! I'm sure they'll be happy to get it, and I'll be happy since I won't have to pay out of pocket. The people at the Nobel Founda-

tion will lose out, but there are two sides that benefit, so in terms of pluses and minuses it works out to a positive! That's how the world becomes a nicer place!"

"No, I was wondering what a Nobel Prize is."

"Huh? Didn't you get that kind of knowledge from the 'Grail'?"

"Well, it sounds like it's clearly unrelated to the Grail War. Of course, it's case-by-case, so I don't know how it would work in a proper Holy Grail War."

Francesca turned to look with interest at the boy Prelati, who was stuffing his face with expensive chocolate truffles.

"Hmm. That does make you wonder, huh? How much do you think the people in Fuyuki knew? They were active in Japan, so I'm guessing they at least got its political system and laws in their heads. Hey, do you know who the current U.S. president is?"

"Nope. But I do kind of know what the presidency is. I know how TV works, too, and I can use a cell phone no problem. I don't know the names of any phone brands, though."

"I see. Hmm. I wonder if the Other Heroic Spirits are the same way. You're me, so you might have connected to my knowledge when we made a contract and established a magical energy connection."

"Does that really matter? Whatever I started out knowing, I can just pick up any cards I need later, and betting the farm on my current hand and going down in flames would be pretty fun too. Don't you think?"

Prelati slumped against Francesca's back and softly brushed her lips with a fingertip covered in melted chocolate.

Francesca grinned, ran her tongue coquettishly over the finger . . . then flashed a malicious smile and leaned her head against Prelati's cheek.

"Yes, yes. It's no use trying to corrupt yourself, you know? I'm already corrupted."

"Are you sure you're not the one trying to tempt me? Am I right in thinking that this qualifies as narcissism?"

"I wonder. I'd love to summon Narcissus and ask him. Not that I have a catalyst that eccentric, of course."

Francesca tried to change the subject with a few offhand remarks about the Greek boy who lent his name to narcissism, but Prelati—her own shadow—was undeterred and turned the conversation back to its original subject.

"But you are working to make the world a more fun place, right?"

"Well, only by leaving things to others and cutting as many corners as I can."

"I can't wait. How much do you think we'll be able to lay the world bare once we let the Grail take care of that 'great labyrinth'—it's risky to even look for the entrance—and get our hands on

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the ‘microcosm of the world’ in its depths?”

“Well first thing’s first; the door to this city’s ‘little labyrinth’—a weird world made by a weird Servant—just turned up!”

Giggling, Francesca traced lines in the air with her fingers and caused several floating mirrors to rise.

“Out of the group trapped inside, I’m most interested in . . . The Lionheart, I guess. Although it really is a mystery why that fanboy turned up instead of little Arturia.”

Francesca, who like the police force was already certain of Saber’s identity, stared at his image in one of the mirrors, which showed him delivering his speech from atop the police car, as she licked her lips.

“Yes, he’s wonderful. A real kingly king who’s lit by legend of the past and magnifies their light to shine several times as bright.”

“Are your guts aching?”

Prelati leered, and Francesca smiled innocently back.

“Of course! That Saber’s been giving me butterflies this whole time! I couldn’t help becoming a fan! Not quite as strong as with Jeanne or Gilles, but really close. Does that make sense to you? Of course it does!”

Francesca gestured animatedly as she spoke, like a low-teen girl talking about her favorite pop star.

Prelati watched her and continued calmly.

“Yes, it does. You’re me, after all. That’s why I know just what you want to do to that oh-so-wonderful king you’ve become a fan of.”

“Will you come with me? I can’t cast illusions as well as you can right now.”

“Sure I will. Should we do it inside the ward?”

“Yeah. Faldeus will never shut up about it if we do it here!”

The boy and girl chatted conspiratorially.

Outwardly they appeared to be young humans, but writhing within those vessels were indeed so utterly dark that they could only be called monsters.

Reflected in the mirrors that hovered around them were records of the past.

Vestiges as images, which were factual but did not reflect the truth.

While she wondered what truth she should add to them to thrust on The Lionheart, Francesca gazed absentmindedly at an image of more than ten years earlier.

An image of a holy-sword-wielder clad in blue cloth and silver armor . . . who had once overcome everything and yet lost everything.

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In a Dream

The city was kind of noisy.
The wind was kind of humid.

Kuruoka Tsubaki was still too young to be able to put her apprehension into words.

By all rights, she should not even have been able to sense the change . . . but thanks to her Magic Circuits and the influence of Pale Rider linked to the magical energy they generated, changes in the “world” around her and the Heroic Spirit who was its ruler echoed vividly within her.

The girl sensed it in the midst of an afternoon nap. She lay on the family sofa in a dream within a dream—a troubled sleep that was hers alone.

I’m scared, daddy.
I’m scared, mommy.
I don’t really understand, but I think something scary is coming.

“Girl.”

Where did Mr. Black go?
Jester hasn’t come to play today either.
Is everyone going to go away again?

“Girl.”

Will I be alone again?
Because I couldn’t do it right.
Is everyone going to be mad at me again?

“Can you hear me?”

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How can I do a good job?
Daddy and mommy are smiling at me.

*“Can’t you hear me?
“Zheng noticed immediately . . .
“But perhaps humans change in two thousand years.”*

What can I do so they’ll keep smiling forever and ever?
Will they stay with me?

“Perhaps you don’t understand my language?”

I’m scared.
I’m scared.

*“Hello, girl.
“Zaoshanghao, nühai.
“Ohayō? Musume-san?
“Bonjour?
“Chào buổi sáng.”*

. . . ?

*“Are. You. OK?
“. . . What is ‘OK’?
“I’m a fool.
“There’s a limit to the languages I can learn from the documents in this room.
“. . . This is my only chance, now that ‘he’s’ distracted, but . . .”*

. . . Who’s there?
. . . Mr. Black?

*“?
“You noticed me!
“Thank you, young lady!”*

“...?”

The girl awoke from her nap.

Having woken up into the dream world, she stared around her from the fake sofa in the fake house, but there was no one to be seen.

She could see her mother and father talking in the garden, but there was no sign of anyone else, and she could not see “Mr. Black” anywhere.

Despite her youth, the girl felt that she must have been dreaming and was about to go running to her parents to relieve her unease, when . . .

. . . Hello, girl who wanders in dreams.

“?”

A clearly audible voice brought Tsubaki to a halt.

Have no fear; I will not harm you, nor will I be angry with you.

The voice of someone she could not see.

An ordinary girl in her situation might easily wailed in terror, but Tsubaki was strangely unafraid of the voice.

Just like when she had first met “Mr. Black” . . . she was strangely certain that the voice was on her side.

With “Mr. Black”—Pale Rider—her dormant mage instincts had told her that the Heroic Spirit was “a connected part of her.”

This time, something like warmth that she sensed from the voice itself caused Tsubaki’s human instincts to accept its owner as “something she could be safe with.”

“Who are you? I’m Kuruoka Tsubaki,” Tsubaki asked, just as she had when she first met Pale Rider, and the “being” with the beautiful, androgynous voice quietly explained itself.

Thank you, girl. I have no name. I had one long ago, but I lost it.

“?”

Tsubaki looked confused, not understanding what the words meant. The “owner of the voice” calmly told her about itself.

I am . . . what was once called a “deity” in a certain place.

Now, however, I am merely a remnant. . . . A, umm, “leftover,” if you will.

Interlude

“A Mercenary is a Free Man I”

Interlude

The Ward-world, the Kuruoka Residence

A short while earlier.

“Oh . . . thank goodness. My daughter seems safe. She’s sleeping peacefully,” Kuruoka Yūkaku stated, watching his daughter through the window from the courtyard.

Sigma, who had followed him back, considered the situation.

Assassin had declared that she would investigate the giant, three-headed dog and was acting independently.

Sigma had followed Tsubaki’s father, Yūkaku, in order to obtain more information, but the all-important Tsubaki appeared to be taking an afternoon nap, and he could learn nothing definite.

In that case, why don’t I try getting to the heart of the Kuruokas’ magecraft? The child Tsubaki must be rooted in it.

“What type of magecraft do you study?”

The expression vanished from Kuruoka’s face as he answered.

“You expect me to tell an outsider that?”

It was what any mage would say.

At the Clock Tower, you could tell the direction of a mage’s interests by the school they belonged to, and many announced their work to gain influence. Even so, few would disclose the specifics of their magecraft. That practice was not limited to the world of magecraft; ordinary businesses and researchers did the same thing.

Nevertheless, Sigma deliberately pushed ahead to confirm his guess.

“I want to know so that I can secure Tsubaki’s safety.”

He did not lie.

Sigma’s current objective was to escape from this ward-world, but before being sent there, it had been to accompany Assassin and secure Kuruoka Tsubaki’s safety.

He did not know what kind of abilities that pitch-black Servant possessed, but if it had the power to detect lies or hostility, deceiving Yūkaku could prove to be fatal.

More importantly, his question was also intended to confirm something.

Kuruoka Yūkaku’s eyes glazed over for a moment, then, after a few seconds, he broke into a placid smile.

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“I see. If it’s for Tsubaki, then I guess I’ve got no choice.”

With that, Sigma was certain.

As I thought, this world, including the personalities of the people being controlled, exists to protect its Master. That pause must have been the time it took for the Servant controlling Kuruoka Yūkaku’s mind to make a decision and guide him.

And it’s probably not the type to doubt what I say, as long as I don’t lie.

He said that it’s probably a conceptional entity related to death and disease, but . . .

As Sigma speculated about the Servant that had produced this world, he remembered Mystic Codes made with pseudo-personalities.

He had both fought them as enemies and worked alongside them to complete missions.

Among magecraft-users, the woman-shaped, liquid mercury Mystic Code used by the heir to the El-Melloi family was particularly famous. They were essentially like loyal robots that carried out their users’ orders, but many were capable of more adaptive autonomous thought than current AI.

Still, this is a Servant we’re talking about. Maybe I should assume it thinks more like a human than the El-Mellois’ mercury Mystic Code.

. . . I pray it doesn’t think like a mage.

While Sigma was lost in thought, his own face resembled that of an emotionless android.

He remained oblivious to that as he continued solemnly questioning Yūkaku.

“What does your family’s magecraft specialized for? I’d like you to tell me if you’re using it to perform any special treatment on Tsubaki.”

“Oh, treatment . . . Treatment . . .? That’s right. Of course I am.”

The girl’s father did not hesitate to admit it. He began to explain before Sigma could even ask a follow-up question.

“I . . . Yes, I found a guidepost.”

Ecstasy tinged Yūkaku’s expression despite his brainwashed state.

His words to Sigma were charged with emotion, as if he were proud of what he had accomplished.

“I couldn’t beat the Makiris by being decent. Their actual bloodline is basically a swarm of insects at this point. . . . Their perfect use of insects is beautiful. . . . But my objective was symbiosis with the magecraft I use. A more natural form of symbiosis than parasitic insects. . . . I know—how many bacteria do you think a human body hosts? More than several hundred different types of bacteria function alongside human cells to form an intelligent lifeform. Compared with the number of bacteria, the number of human cells is half at best.”

Sigma recognized the family name Makiri.

They were a family of mages in the Far East and one of the three families that created the original Holy Grail War.

He recalled Francesca saying that they employed an efficient but heretical technique of implanting Crest Worms and other insects in their bodies and merging them with their internal organs to create pseudo-Magic Circuits.

Sigma had personally had other things implanted in him as a child, although never insects, so he decided it must be similar.

Both methods shared the fact that, from the perspective of a non-mage, they were inhumane.

The mage continued to expound his life's accomplishments, even while his listener was busy dwelling on the past.

Being a mage, he had not announced them publicly, but he must at least have the desire to show the world what he had done.

"I shivered when I saw those microorganisms I collected near some ruins in South America. I never imagined any bacteria could be so mystically compatible with humans. I don't know if they're a remnant of evolution that took place in the Age of Gods, or if those microorganisms have a completely different origin from normal Earth species. . . . I couldn't develop them from scratch, but I was able to modify those bacteria and adapt them to our magecraft."

It sounded as though he had mixed the magecraft of the Makiri family with peculiar microorganisms he had discovered in South America to create something that might be called a "bacterial familiar."

It could also be a virus, even smaller than bacteria, but the effect that difference would have was outside Sigma's area of expertise, so he decided to disregard it for the moment.

"I caused the microorganisms I'd modified using magecraft to enter a symbiotic relationship with Tsubaki's Magic Circuits. I didn't anticipate that they would spread to her brain, but Tsubaki's Magic Circuits showed major changes for a single generation. Do you realize how valuable this is in magecraft?!"

". . . That's true."

Magic Circuits, the source of mages' power, like blood vessels for circulating magical energy, ordinarily took many generations to develop. The number of Magic Circuits a mage possessed was set in stone—it was possible to open dormant circuits, but not to add more.

With the exception of methods like the Makiris' technique of implanting insects as substitute circuits.

But Kuruoka claimed that he had done it.

That's impossible.

"Yes, it is."

Fate/strange Fake 6

It was like Yūkaku had read Sigma's mind.

"I can't give her more Magic Circuits. I changed their quality and capacity. The microorganisms I created automatically awaken Magic Circuits and utilize them in the most efficient way. All to make their habitat as comfortable as possible."

"..."

"As a benefit, Tsubaki is able to circulate magical energy through her body far more efficiently than someone else with the same number of Magic Circuits. Those revitalized Magic Circuits should make Tsubaki an excellent mother in the future. The actual number of Magic Circuits will probably increase dramatically in her children's generation."

Yūkaku sounded much more like a mage than when he had been speaking as a "father" earlier, but Sigma was mostly unmoved by the change.

He was a magecraft-user who had been born as a result of government experiments.

Since childhood, he had been subjected to numerous experiments with little concern for his life. He had not known about the concept of human rights until after the fall of his country.

So, when Sigma heard how Tsubaki's parents had used her as a test subject, he felt neither sympathy for her nor anger at Yūkaku.

But, although he did not feel anything, he still thought and asked more questions.

"Are those bacteria in your bodies as well?"

"Yes, but only at the trial phase. The latest version we infected Tsubaki with will only take root in infants whose organs haven't fully developed yet. It was hell to tune. We were frantic when she lost consciousness, but relieved to hear that her ability to leave descendants was intact. . . . Hmm . . . No, Tsubaki is awake now. . . . Isn't that the best we could hope for? Who cares about her children . . .? Yes, Tsubaki is perfect. . . ."

Yūkaku gradually descended into muttering to himself. Sigma decided that he must be confused by the contradictions between his past actions and current mental state.

If this were the worst his confusion got, he really must not have any negative feelings about experimenting with his own child's body.

That train of thought suddenly reminded Sigma of his own parents.

He had never seen his parents' faces.

His father had never been identified, and Francesca had told him that his mother died in a distant country.

She had had a boy's body and called herself Francois then. Still, why had Francesca already known about his mother when she had only just met him?

He had asked her, but,

"D-Don't get the wrong idea! Just because I was interested in your ancestry doesn't mean I'm

interested in you! . . . Would you like it if I said that? You don't feel anything? Oh, OK then. That's all I've got to say about that!"

Had been the only answer he got, and it made no sense to him.

Sigma, who did not know what his parents looked like, did not know how to act in front of Tsubaki, who was being raised by hers, but he was able to grasp one thing from his conversation with Yūkaku—being raised by your parents did not necessarily mean a higher standard of “happiness” than being raised by a government agency like he had been.

There was probably a difference in percentages, but mages were far removed from human sentiment to begin with.

When he thought what it would be like to be in Tsubaki's place, would he welcome the loss of freedom, or being treated as a “factory” for Magic Circuits, always asleep and unable to even carry out orders?

Not long before, he had reached the vague conclusion that he “didn't think it would be much different.”

In that sense, Kuruoka Tsubaki was probably similar to him, Sigma thought.

In this fake world, she might have found the “sound sleep” he wanted.

Defeating her Servant would mean destroying her peace.

What should I do, then?

He had no orders about this situation, and unless he escaped from this world, he would not receive any.

He remembered what Francesca had told him right before the start of the Fake Holy Grail War.

“Once you've called up a Heroic Spirit, do whatever you feel like.”

Whatever I feel like, huh?

Cut off from Francesca and Faldeus and forced to think and act on his own, Sigma stared at his hands as he began to seriously consider the question.

At that moment, there was nothing he could do but think.

What should I do?

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Fate/strange Fake 6

While Sigma was busy questioning himself, Assassin activated one of her Noble Phantasms. “Sink into a dark prison . . . Meditative Sensitivity: Zabaniya.”

A perception-type Noble Phantasm that attuned her to the surrounding space as if she were the world’s shadow and sensed nearby currents of magical energy and wind.

Using those currents, she attempted to locate either the “giant black shadow” that seemed to be controlling the giant, three-headed dog, or the hematophage who must be connected to this world.

“...?”

What she found, however, was a different current of magical energy.

It was giving off a strange current, as if to disturb the balance of magical energy throughout the entire city.

It was an infinitesimal current. Without her Noble Phantasm, she would not have been able to detect it.

Is this . . . magical energy leaking out?

No, leaking in? Or is it . . .

The flow was like the whole world was breathing magical energy through that one airhole.

She paused briefly, wondering whether to pursue the giant, three-headed dog, but ultimately decided to follow fluctuation of magical energy.

She thought that where it led was simply too symbolic and might even offer a hint to escape that world.

She headed toward the source of the strange current of magical energy in that balanced world. Toward the top of Crystal Hill.

Chapter 19

“As Dream and Reality are Both Illusion II”

Chapter 19

Ayaka Sajou

Why had she visited this city just as the “Fake Holy Grail War” began?

That was something . . . that even she did not know for certain.

While wandering around her hometown of Fuyuki, she had stumbled into a castle-like building in the forest.

There, she had been captured by a beautiful, white-haired woman, and something had been done to her.

Looking back on it, she thought it must have been some kind of mind-control magecraft, but Ayaka did not know much about magecraft and was not sure of the specifics.

The next thing she knew, however, she had been put on a ship to the United States with only the order to “participate in the American Holy Grail War.”

She was not sure why she had had to go by ship, but considering she had no passport, she had almost certainly entered the country illegally.

She had actually been given a fake passport and visa on the ship but had never gone through customs.

Her memories of the voyage were also hazy. Before she knew it, she had been able to speak English. That probably had something to do with magecraft too.

Ayaka had been abandoned on the west coast of the United States in that state and been forced to use what little cash she had been given to make her way toward Snowfield.

The words, “I will erase this ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ that has been seared into you.”

It might have been a form of suggestion that had led her to see hope in something so vague and come all this way for it.

Or maybe she had just been frightened by the all-too-simple—for a curse—threat, “If you run, a curse will devour your life.”

Ayaka.

I’m Sajou . . . Ayaka.

She reminded herself that it was “Ayaka Sajou” in English while repeating “Ayaka” over and over. While attending university . . . I lived in the Senna Apartments and . . .

University . . . ?

Which university?

Her memories were getting hazy.

She could not escape the feeling that all of her memories from her birth to right then were sinking into a dense mist.

No, it was not just a feeling.

Her memories were actually getting hazier, little by little.

Ayaka.

Sajou . . . Ayaka.

I'm Ayaka.

Her identity was fading like a star before the moon. To her . . . that name was a password to hold herself together.

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The Present, the City in the Ward-world

A wind drew closer.

A wind drew closer.

A wind of death that threatened to blow away Ayaka's life along with the memories wavering like mist within her.

"Oh . . ."

She was not able to react.

A giant dog, bigger than a house, made a high-speed swipe with claws like the arm of an excavator and kicked up a fierce blast of wind on the street.

How much time had passed since the giant, three-headed beast—Kerberos—began to attack the police?

Part of her felt like it had been just a few minutes, while another part felt like it had been more than half an hour.

Ayaka had followed Saber's instructions and taken shelter inside a nearby building, but the building's interior had begun to collapse in the aftermath of the massive beast's attacks.

The instant that she hurriedly fled outside, she found Kerberos blocking her path as if it had been waiting for her.

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Each of Kerberos' claws reminded her of a sharpened sword.

If they touched her, she would die.

By the time that fact sunk in, the claws were already just a few meters in front of Ayaka.

No matter what she did at that point, it was too late to dodge them.

Huh?

What am I...?

Could the reason that the fact that her name was Sajou Ayaka had popped into her head... been her life flashing before her eyes because her brain had sensed that she was about to disappear?

With her memories hazy, it had been just her name that flashed through her mind and not her whole life.

“...”

Her body stiffened.

But in front of her . . . not a memory of the past, but the indisputable present appeared to sweep aside the approaching despair.

There was a loud crash, and the severed tip of a sword-like claw went sailing through the air.

“Saber!”

“Are you all right, Ayaka?”

Saber was holding what looked like a halberd.

It was letting off an obviously unusual light. Even an amateur like Ayaka could tell that it was not a normal weapon.

But it was not the sword Saber had originally had with him.

His original ornate sword had been confiscated by the police, and he had lost the decorative sword from the mansion in his battle with the golden Heroic Spirit.

“Hey . . . that's mine!” A nearby policeman with a short afro shouted.

He stared wide-eyed from his own hands to the weapon in Saber's. Ayaka realized that Saber must have snatched it from him.

“Sorry! I borrowed it! It was an emergency, so I'd appreciate it if you'd let it go!”

Saber lightly tossed the weapon back to the policeman, who hurriedly caught it and shot a sharp glance at Saber. But, seeing Ayaka unhurt, he readied his weapon to fight again without another word.

“Just this once. Next time, I'll arrest you for theft.”

“How frightening! I wouldn't want to be hanged!” Saber laughed as he casually picked the demonic beast's severed claw off the ground at his feet.

“Huh? What do you . . .?”

Ayaka had barely opened her mouth before saber gripped the tip of the claw and swung it

like a baseball bat.

“Ex . . . caliber . . .!”

The demonic beast claw he had picked up glowed brighter for an instant and released a band of light.

The slash of light sliced through Main Street toward the intersection where the demonic beast held its position.

It plunged into the demonic beast’s flank and made its massive form stagger, splattering black blood.

“Did that do it?!”

“. . . No, it doesn’t seem to have had much effect,” Vera coolly answered John.

It was not just a matter of size.

Its toughness, the sharpness of its claws, and the intensity of the aura of death that shrouded it were raised far above what they had been when they encountered it in front of the hospital.

Almost as if to prove with that power that this world was the demonic beast’s proper home ground.

The nearby police officers and Ayaka expected Saber to follow up with another strike, but he stood the giant beast’s claw on the ground, still holding onto it, and, in a clear voice, asked the behemoth a question.

“O watchdog, guardian of the bottomless pit! Listen, if you have sense! And answer my question!”

“Huh?”

“. . .?!”

Ayaka let out a baffled exclamation, and Vera, John, and the other police officers stared wide-eyed at Saber’s face.

Saber paid them no mind and bellowed as if he were exchanging introductions with an enemy general on the battlefield.

“We are not souls who turn our back on the underworld and struggle against judgment and tranquility! We are living men who will one day meet our deaths as we walk the righteous path! You may judge me, a Heroic Spirit, to be a soul escaped from death if you will! The rest, however, are undeniably alive! If you are the sworn and loyal companion of the lord of the underworld, I ask that you do your proper duty! What say you?!”

He cut an impossibly majestic figure.

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Even the bewildered Ayaka was almost drawn in by his performance in an instant.

His bearing was just that regal. He was showing a different side of himself than when he had discussed whether to kill a little girl or when he had sworn to protect Ayaka.

If she had to compare it to something, it was closer to when he had given his speech on top of the police car, but the fact that he was giving a speech in such a dangerous situation and to a titanic beast that might not even understand words set it apart.

Despite that, Saber's attitude was so dignified that it almost forced Ayaka and the police officers to believe that it was the only proper thing to do.

“..”

Kerberos stared suspiciously at Saber and slowly brought its faces closer to him.

“Hey, it stopped attacking.”

“Don't tell me it really understands language . . .”

John and the other officers muttered to each other as they watched the situation play out. Kerberos brought its three faces close to Saber and began to sniff him.

Even with massive jaws that looked big enough to swallow a cow whole closing in on him from three sides, Saber continued to stand stock still, not moving a muscle.

Before long, Kerberos wriggled its three heads. No sooner had its heads exchanged looks . . . than its massive bulk reared back and its three heads pointed skyward and let out a resounding howl.

“Grrrrrrrooooooooooaaaaaa . . .”

The trio of howls conveyed as much heat as if it were breathing fire.

Ayaka could not help flinching. Strangely, however, she felt no urge to run.

She may have instinctively sensed that the safest place in the ward-world . . . was that intersection where the most “fighting strength” was gathered.

But she still could not shake her unease.

In fact, the scene that unfolded before her eyes an instant later threatened to overwhelm her with pure terror.

The howls rang out and the space around them shook.

Then, as if in time with those vibrations, “shadows” began to rise throughout the city.

Sunless back alleys, beneath parked cars, the underground spaces that spread below manholes.

Something like a black mist rose from everywhere and began to solidify into countless clumps around the intersection.

Soon, they collected in a few places. In each of those places, shockingly, they manifested as beings identical to the Kerberos that was already dominating the area.

“What the . . .”

John broke into a cold sweat as he surveyed his surroundings.

Where a moment before there had been a single massive, three-headed beast, now there were countless more. They towered on top of buildings and over streets, completely surrounding the officers, Richard, and Ayaka.

The city that had been quiet a few minutes before was suddenly shrouded in the presence of death.

The pack of giant beasts did not rampage. They just silently watched with eyes full of deep darkness.

And that was not all. The “shadows” created at the feet of the pack also writhed and became new black mist, covering the area like clouds of flies.

“...” “Z...” “r...” “... oh.”

“...” “... z... Ah.”

“...” “... —” “Z.” “... g...” “...”

A noise like buzzing insects reverberated through the intersection.

The black mist combined with the sound reminded all of them of a swarm of flies and brought out an even thicker atmosphere of death in that world.

The next instant . . . the noise became a meaningful “voice” that beat on the eardrums of the surrounded group.

“Living ones.” “You who were living.”

“Attention.”

“There is no life” “in you.”

Then.

The “shadows” began to spread through the city.

As if to reveal that world’s true form.

Or as if to conceal its truth from “someone.”

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“Oh, good. It’s started mixing nicely. . . .” The figure that had been watching events from the roof of a building a short distance away from the intersection where Saber’s group was—Jester Karture in the form of a young boy—muttered with a look of ecstasy as he watched the changing cityscape.

“The guard dog of Hades was a surprise. Tsubaki’s Rider made a real find.”

Jester spoke in childish tones with a twisted grin on his face that was anything but innocent as he turned his senses to the state of the city.

“. . . Hmm. So, that’s where you’re going, Miss Assassin.”

Sensing Assassin’s magical energy moving toward the building in the center of the city through his back, Jester twisted the corners of his mouth, exposing a glimpse of sharp canine teeth.

“I guess you haven’t given up hope yet.”

“Maybe I should give you one more push.”

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The City in the Ward, the Kuruoka Residence

“Who’s there? Where are you?”

As if in answer, an androgynous voice reached Tsubaki’s ears from somewhere in the house.

“Hehehe. Try to find me, young lady.”

As if lured by that voice, Tsubaki began to stumble awkwardly through the house.

“Actually, I do rather need you to find me.”

“?”

“What is happening in the present world? The fact that my consciousness, which ought to have dissolved into the world, has surfaced means that it’s something extraordinary. Zheng... must be in either the underworld or the land of the immortals, but is there no one left who knows me?”

The voice did not seem to be speaking to Tsubaki so much as analyzing the situation to itself.

“No. . . . I can sense several presences reminiscent of the Age of Gods. . . . In the sky is . . . oh, an incarnation of the ‘watcher,’ who is an ancestor, stranger, and dependent to me. Is another a god of the west? A nature deity . . . No, a part of one . . . ? I also sense an incredible volume of water approaching from far to the west, but is it all coincidence, or inevitability?”

“? ?”

“Do you mean to test me? Very well, world mingled with the Human Order. O world of man, incomplete yet flawless, I accept your challenge! Wait, myself—do not be hasty; do not lose! All things in heaven and earth, be elegant and refined as a burbling brook. . . .”

“??? Umm . . . I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Tsubaki was confused by the words. The “voice” fell silent for a moment, seemingly troubled by her lack of comprehension, before continuing.

“Oh, pardon me. . . . I’m in a fix. Would you help me?”

“Help you how?”

“Let’s play hide and seek! If you find me, you win. OK?”

“Hide and seek!”

“All right. One, two, three, four . . . I’m ready now. If you find me, I’ll give you sweet, sweet syrup, all right?”

“! . . . OK!”

From a normal perspective, it sounded like nothing so much as a shady kidnapper.

Tsubaki might not know much of life, but even she would normally have been frightened and gone to call her parents. For some reason, however, she obeyed the “voice.”

Tsubaki still felt certain that the voice was a “friend.”

It was a gentle voice that envelop her.

Almost like the voices of her parents that she had been longing for all this time.

Tsubaki walked around the house as she was guided and ended up standing in front of a wall.

“? But you sound like you’re over this way . . .”

Tsubaki perceived the “presence” of the voice’s owner by mistakenly believing that she could hear the voice coming from its direction. She came to a stop there, confused, when . . .

“Yes, it’s fine. . . . Try asking the wall to let you through.”

“Huh? Umm . . .”

“Don’t worry. Your mommy and daddy can use magecraft, can’t they? You can use it to.”

“! Yeah!”

Tsubaki gave a firm nod, then faced the “wall” and made a wish.

“Umm . . . Please, open sesame!”

She shouted words from a folk tale from a far-away land that she had read in the past few days.

Then, Tsubaki felt her whole body grow hot.

It ran along her back—right where she had felt intense pain a long time ago, when her parents had done something that they called an “experiment” with her. Tsubaki was surprised for a

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moment, but there was no pain, just a warmth like gentle sunshine that coursed silently through her body.

Magical energy began flowing out of Tsubaki and into the wall without her even realizing that the feeling was her Magic Circuits responding.

The next instant, the wall squirmed like a living thing and spread open, revealing a staircase down into the house's basement.

"Wow . . ."

Tsubaki's eyes sparkled at the mysterious scene before her.

"Now, do you think you can find me, princess?"

Guided again by the voice, Tsubaki slowly began to descend the stairs.

Then, after passing through several more wards, all of which were automatically lifted in the same way, she found . . . a mage's workshop decorated with numerous books and Mystic Codes and a variety of experimental apparatus.

"Ah . . ."

Tsubaki shivered with surprise.

No.

She remembered this place.

This place is . . .

Deep inside this room was where she had always gone to "help out."

No. No.

To "help out" with her mother and father's "experiments."

The memory of pain raced through her brain again.

"Eee . . ."

I have to hold it in.

I have to be a good girl. I have to hold it in . . . or Mom and Dad won't smile at me.

It was like a backlash.

For the past few days, she had experienced the “happy times” that she had childishly continued to dream of.

The pain that the young girl had only been able to forget because of those joyful experiences came back to her.

Tsubaki’s negative memories and emotions flooded out like a dam had burst and her eyes filled with tears, when . . .

“Hi.”

A voice.

A voice sounded in the room where she was on the verge of being consumed by her past trauma.

It was just one word.

But that one word was enough to make the fear welling up out of Tsubaki’s heart dissipate like mist.

It was the voice that, until just then, Tsubaki had only heard in her mind.

But now it was different.

The clear voice definitely making the air in the room vibrate.

“It looks like you found me. Here, have some candy syrup.”

The graceful hand stretched out to Tsubaki held something like honey stored in a bivalve shell.

The owner of the hand was . . . a beautiful being.

They had an androgynous appearance and Tsubaki could not tell if they were a man or a woman.

If she had seen Enkidu, she might have gotten a similar impression.

Unlike the plainly dressed Enkidu, however, this being was shrouded in an aura of opulence produced by their distinctive makeup and glamorous red clothing. The moment Tsubaki laid eyes on them, she wondered if they were the king or queen of some foreign country.

“Uh, umm . . . Are you an important person?” Tsubaki could not help asking in the face of the dazzling being who was so out of place in that room.

“Not quite,” the beauty answered. “I was important a long time ago, and I’m not a person, either. You see, I was in a place divorced from questions of social status and . . .”

“?”

“Oh, I started talking about difficult subjects again. I’m sorry. It’s been two millennia and a few centuries since I spoke with a human, you see. Actually, I’m something like an echo, so that’s not strictly true. . . . Oh, I said something you probably can’t understand again! Things like this

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are why I could never get along with humans and ended up being driven both from dreams and from the water and ebbing away . . .!”

The beauty made a show of collapsing in a corner weeping.

“U-Umm, are you OK?”

Tsubaki forgot her fear and rushed to the beauty and patted their back.

“Thank you, human child. You’re kind.”

The beauty regained their composure and steadied their breathing as they addressed Tsubaki.

“Oh, but you needn’t be so concerned. I can only speak with you for a short time. Still, it’s only you, the ruler of this world, with whom I can make a connection. . . .”

“What’s a ‘ruler of this world’?”

“It’s . . . something like the main character of a fairy tale. . . . Oh, this won’t do. The clumps of ‘death’ are becoming active. . . .”

Tsubaki stared worriedly at the beauty’s look of anguish as she continued to stroke their back.

The beauty forced themselves to smile at the young girl as they pointed to a section of the room.

“Don’t worry. You just need to get that thing.”

Tsubaki saw what their finger was pointing at and looked confused.

Tsubaki could not tell what it was for.

She thought it looked a lot like the “bows” that people used in picture books.

It had a more complicated shape, though. She thought that the hunter who beat the wolf at the end of her picture book of Little Red Riding Hood might have had one.

“That thing there is called the God-Felling Crossbow. It’s a scary, scary weapon that belonged to a whimsical human who was a very important king a long time ago. . . . Actually, he was the first one to call himself a king among kings, an ‘emperor.’”

“A weapon. . . . Did he beat bad guys with it?”

“I’m the one he beat with it . . . but I suppose he did, according to the values of humans at the time.”

The beauty answered, sounding embarrassed and looking away from Tsubaki, who was staring bright-eyed at the crossbow.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” they continued, as if to gloss over the point. “As long as you keep it with you, I’ll be able to help you for the brief time until a disappear. I just want to know what’s happening. If you bring me outside, I’ll grant you a wish as thanks.”

“. . . OK!”

Tsubaki did not understand what everything they had said meant, but she did understand that a strange person who made her feel safe, like family, was saying that they would grant her wish.

Memories of picture books like Cinderella danced through Tsubaki's head as she innocently tried to lift the crossbow . . . but it was heavier than it looked, and she staggered and fell on her bottom.

"Oh, that was a close one! You're not hurt, are you?"

". . . No," Tsubaki answered with a little difficulty.

She tried to stagger to her feet, but Tsubaki was small even for her age, and it looked like it was all she could do just to drag the crossbow behind her.

"You can't walk carrying it . . .? Ugh . . . I hadn't counted on how weak humans are. . . . Damn Zheng! He piled on too many Mystic Codes and decorations to shoot me! This is clearly overkill! Between this, the Great Wall, and the Epang Palace he was building, did he think everything needed to be big and showy? Honestly . . ."

The beauty was lambasting someone or other when they suddenly seemed to get an idea.

"Wait. In this world, you're the 'ruler' . . . so if you believe it's light, you should be able to carry it easily. . . . But still, does this girl not realize she's in a dream yet . . .?"

The beauty kept their last words to a whisper so that Tsubaki would not hear them.

"I know, you should call someone to help you. It can be your father or mother. I'm sure they'll help you if you ask them."

"Are you sure . . .?"

"Look, someone's here. Try asking them," the beauty proposed, hearing footsteps from the direction of the stairs.

"OK. . . . Ah."

Tsubaki expected her mother or father, who had been very nice to her for the past few days, and was ready to ask them . . . but the person who appeared on the stairs was neither of her parents.

"So, this is where you were. . . . Is this your family's workshop . . .?"

The mercenary dressed all in black, Sigma, first caught sight of Tsubaki . . .

". . .! Who are you?"

And then noticed the beauty behind her and assumed a defensive posture and watched to see if they were hostile. After seeing their magnificent red outfit, however, he doubtfully muttered:

"The inquisition . . .?"

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The City in the Ward, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

“Oh, hello, Professor! It’s me! You know, me!”

“Flat?! This response is . . . What’s going on?! Where are you calling from?!”

A cell phone rested atop a makeshift “altar.”

It was on speaker mode, and a man’s voice, in tones of mingled relief and confusion, emanated from it.

“Oh, sir! Sorry I took so long to call you. I’m, umm, not really sure. It’s almost like I’m in a dream, or . . .”

“. . . What? Don’t tell me you actually overslept and forgot to call me?!”

“What?! No! What do you mean?! That’s not what I meant! I meant I’m, umm, in a ward. Yes, I’m inside a ward! It’s kind of like the ‘repeat of the past’ you and Gray got trapped inside in that cemetery in Wales, only this one is a ‘repeat of the present.’ . . .”

“. . .? Wait, hold on a moment! Calm down and explain the situation from the beginning.”

Flat broke into a delighted grin when he heard the voice of the man—Lord El-Melloi II—return to the normal tone he used to reprimand students.

He smiled because he knew that despite the situation—or because of the situation—he would be able to hear an El-Melloi School “lecture” in top form.

He also smiled because he had faith that the lecture would lead to a way out of his current predicament.

Of course, whether Flat could make that way succeed or not would depend on him.

Once he had heard the whole story, the Lord of the Clock Tower made an enigmatic pronouncement.

“Most likely . . . an underworld.”

Flat was visibly confused by El-Melloi II’s statement.

“H-Hang on, sir! Wouldn’t that mean we’re already dead?!”

“Be quiet for a moment, Flat. And . . . may I take it that you will be cooperative with regard to escaping, overseer?”

“Yeah, although I won’t interfere in factional conflicts. Besides, the Holy Church owes you a few favors. You saved Sister Illumia, who I seem to be stuck with, and . . .”

“No, if we’re talking about personal debts, I was also saved by Father Karabo. But it would be unbecoming of both of us to discuss those as obligations between our organizations. In this case, I will be satisfied if you assist my student in your capacity as overseer. I have no intention of asking you to put yourself in harm’s way.”

Hansa answered with a wry smile and a shake of his head.

“Flat, the rumors about your teacher were right—he doesn’t act much like a mage. I can’t believe he survived in that den of demons you call the Clock Tower acting like that.”

“... I was simply blessed with good fortune and connections. I don’t need anyone to tell me how lacking my own powers are.”

“Excuse me, I didn’t mean to insult you. That was a compliment. That attitude of yours is probably what convinced some of my colleagues and predecessors to lend you a hand. A debt is a debt, even if you try to deny it. I’ll pay back what I can on my own. If you ever turn into a hematophage, I’ll try to look the other way as long as you don’t do any harm.”

“... I see you’re a bit atypical for a priest of the Holy Church yourself. Although of course, I have neither the inclination nor the ability to become a hematophage,” El-Melloi II answered in apparent exasperation before resuming his explanation.

“When I said ‘underworld,’ I of course did not mean that you really died. I was describing the nature of the area within that ward.”

“What do you mean? It doesn’t seem much like hell or heaven to me.”

“I’m well aware that you didn’t pay attention in class, Flat. Now, get rid of those commonplace preconceptions. Remember that this is partly guesswork, but I believe that area has its origins in the Magic Circuits and mind of the girl Kuruoka Tsubaki. If the demonic—or possibly divine—beast that Father Cervantes saw at a distance, that Kerberos, was invigorated in that world, then it probably has the ‘nature’ of an underworld.”

“You mean, they match each other?”

“When Flat it was like he was ‘in a dream,’ he hit the nail on the head. There are also cases in which dreams are perceived as an afterlife, in a mystical sense. The Servant of the comatose girl Kuruoka Tsubaki created a pseudo-underworld using her dreams as a catalyst. . . . There are other conceivable explanations, of course, but adding the information I’ve gathered to what you told me, I think it’s fair to say that that’s the most likely.”

At that point, Hansa, who had kept silent thus far, asked a question.

“Hmm . . . Given my position, I can’t discuss the plurality of ‘afterlives’ . . . but do you mean that this is an underworld that mirrors the real city?”

“There are any number of underworlds that resemble the living world. In fact, the tombs of pharaohs, emperors, and the like are themselves rituals to carry a city with them to the underworld. There are numerous accounts of people who saw their ancestors engaged in an identical way of life in identical locations after death. And the fact the creator of this ward-world made it an exact duplicate of the place inhabited by the living suggests that it is an extremely systematic entity, even for a Servant. The fact that it took Kerberos into that world suggests that it may be continuing

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to evolve as we speak.”

“Evolve? What do you mean, sir?”

“That Heroic Spirit is likely the concept of death itself. An embodiment of the underworld. A deity of the underworld such as Hades, Hera, Nergal, or Ereshkigal . . . No, it’s not possible to summon a Spirit Origin of that caliber . . . or it shouldn’t be. Besides, the ruler of an underworld would make that ward-world more closely resemble their own domain. It’s probably something less tied to an underworld . . . and closer to the concept of death itself.”

El-Melloi II then proceeded to dissect the ward-world he had never seen as smoothly as if he were reading a predetermined conclusion off a blackboard.

“That Servant’s personality has likely continued to learn since the moment it was summoned by adapting to its Master Kuruoka Tsubaki’s reactions. It’s possible that it could become a completely different entity each time it’s summoned. Given that the summoning of a Ghost-Liner is already a rare event, however, we have no basis for comparison. But now that you have entered its world as new, foreign entities, it may display a different type of learning.”

“But why aren’t we brainwashed, sir?” Flat interjected.

They had passed people in an apparently brainwashed state on their way to that building.

Both Flat and Hansa had been wary of them and prepared defensive measures, but there was as yet no sign of a brainwashing spell being directed at them.

“There must be some difference. There are so many different methods of brainwashing that it’s impossible to guess, but we can narrow it down by focusing on the question of why it doesn’t brainwash you.”

“Yes! A whydunit, right?! It’s your catchphrase!”

“Oh, a ‘whydunit,’ huh? True, we already know ‘whodunit,’ and as long as magecraft is involved, ‘howdunit’ is pointless. Still, if that’s your catchphrase, you sound like more of a detective than a mage.”

El-Melloi II stammered for a moment at Hansa’s remark, then coughed and continued:

“Don’t. I’m simply using the knowledge I’ve acquired for analysis. If I had a detective’s insight or inspiration, my life would be rather different. . . . In any case, I believe that the reason you haven’t been brainwashed lies in the reason you were taken into that world.”

El-Melloi II proceeded to highlight the phenomenon of people who left the city returning while behaving strangely, the mysterious disease infecting animals, and other strange occurrences.

According to information from Flue, a mage of his acquaintance, while there were individual differences, there were cases of symptoms resembling internal bleeding among both humans and animals.

Based on that information, El-Melloi II theorized that there was “a distinction between those infected with a disease-like curse, who had only their minds brought to that world, and those who were dragged into it by force, body and all.”

“It’s highly probable that the latter is the result of treating you as enemies. The former also appears to be a hostile act . . . but those affected suffer no physical harm, and there’s no indication that it’s using them in the Grail War. It’s probable that it’s simply using unusual means and has no hostile intent.”

“Oh, you see that all the time at the Clock Tower. People who think they’re doing the right thing when, from everyone else’s perspective, it’s just a huge nuisance.”

“I’d like to yell that you’re one to talk, but I’ll refrain for the time being. In any case, there are several conceivable ways to exit that world . . . but I suppose waiting for it to run out of magical energy isn’t realistic. Judging from the circumstances, defeating the Servant and Master should be the quickest option. But given that you’ve formed an alliance with the police to take the girl Master under your protection, you can’t do anything that would endanger her.”

Even if there weren’t an alliance, wouldn’t he have found some excuse to eliminate that option? Both Jack and Hansa wondered. Even if they tried to point that out, however, they felt certain that El-Melloi II would just dodge the question, so they simply shrugged and continued to listen. Half of the nuns, on the other hand, were wondering, far more logically than El-Melloi II, why they didn’t just eliminate the Master.

“Negotiating with the girl Tsubaki without harming her and convincing her to open a way out for you herself . . . is a possibility, but the question is whether she’s even aware that she’s a Master. If you use suggestion or other means to force her, her Servant may perceive it as a hostile act and make a more active attempt to eliminate you.”

“Should we negotiate with the Servant, then?”

“I already told you—it’s mostly likely closer to a system than a being with a distinct personality. Whatever it is, it would be best to avoid making contact with it before we can be certain of the result. That also applies to combat, of course. You got a good look at how frightening that Servant can be last night.”

After reminding them not to be reckless, El-Melloi II was far more wary of the being that controlled the space Flat and the others currently occupied than anyone actually present.

He had, after all, accompanied the Heroic Spirit who had once fought alongside him into his Reality Marble, and the awesome sight was seared into his memory.

“If that world corresponds to the underworld and the Servant is something associated with it, then you have nowhere to run, at least within that ward. Death is everywhere, not just in the land of the dead. Mystically speaking, the concept of death exists even in air, water, stone, and earth.”

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That room is no exception.”

Once he had finished that grave pronouncement, El-Melloi II drove his point home by urging Flat and the others to be cautious.

“In other words, that place has always been inside the Heroic Spirit’s body. You’re like Pinocchio swallowed by the whale.”

“In a whale’s belly, huh? That’s great!”

“What’s ‘great’ about it?!”

Flat’s wild remark drew a shout from El-Melloi II, but Flat continued, his eyes sparkling.

“Didn’t you tell us in class that a hero’s return from certain death is a kind of return to the womb? And about the ritual themed around death and rebirth that everyone goes through when they reach the rank of Pride. And about someone who got eaten by a giant fish then spit out and awakened to faith and became superhero and saved a city . . .”

“Don’t tell me you mean the prophet Jonah and Leviathan. It’s true that heroic tales such as giant fishes, labyrinths, and the land of the dead have frequently been linked to return to the womb . . . but I hope you don’t plan to turn in a report with that sloppy understanding! Oh well, your supplemental lecture on that can wait.”

The exasperated El-Melloi II changed the topic to concrete examples of escape.

“The fact that the room you’re in is linked to the outside probably means that there’s something that harmonizes well with that world in the same location in reality. The most likely possibility is a corpse, but I doubt the influence of an ordinary corpse would extend inside the ward. It must be a corpse under some kind of mystical influence . . . or else the conditions must be right to make it harmonize better with the Servant that’s creating this world. You said that room looks like a workshop. What are its characteristics?”

“Well, there are a lot of decorations and things that look Mesopotamian.”

“. . .! I see. If that workshop does belong to that Heroic Spirit’s faction, then asking the chief of police to go there for us would be asking him to go to his death. . . . In that case, we should investigate the Heroic Spirit’s characteristics from within. I don’t like using them as decoys, but if you’re right that a hero from another faction is doing battle with Kerberos in the city, then I suggest you take the opportunity to visit the girl’s hospital room or the home of the mages called Kuruo—”

When the voice from the speaker reached that point, one of the nuns keeping watch in all directions shouted:

“Hansa!”

“What is it?”

“Something’s climbing from below! I think it’s a Servant!”

An instant later . . .

One of the glass walls shattered into tiny fragments and a figure stole into the room from outside.

“Uwawah?!”

“What is it, Flat?! What happened?!”

A frantic shout came from the speaker.

Hansa neatly cleared away the flying shards of window glass by striking with his arms at high speed, then addressed the figure that had appeared through the window.

“Whoa there. . . So, you ended up here too.”

“I saw you in the guardhouse. . . Are you a foreign priest?”

The newly arrived Assassin shot a glance at Hansa, then surveyed her surroundings as if to say that she would deal with him later before focusing on Flat, who had what looked like Command Spells on his right hand.

“I ask you.”

“Oh, um, hi! Oh, are you a Servant, by any chance? Wow!”

“Are you another of the mages who seek the Holy Grail . . .?”

The question puzzled Flat for a moment. He pondered briefly before answering.

“Hmm. I’m not sure. At first, I wanted it because it was cool, but now . . . my Servant is in trouble, so I guess it would be nice if I could use the Grail to fix that. I wonder what I should do in the end. It’s supposed to be valuable, so do you think I should donate it to a museum or something?”

Getting a question for an answer, Assassin narrowed her eyes and scrutinized Flat.

“ . . . ”

He did not look like he was lying or trying to provoke her.

It was difficult to believe, but he appeared to be genuinely wondering if he ought to donate the Grail to a museum.

“Are you . . . a mage?”

Assassin glared at Flat for a short while with an expression that said she could not decide if she ought to eliminate him.

As if to help Flat out of that predicament, Hansa loudly clapped his hands and drew her attention to him.

“I believe you seek the way of another faith than mine. I’m here to oversee this Holy Grail War, but it doesn’t look like they have any intention of fighting it. Not until we make it out of this ward-world, at least. I told you that to mediate in my role as overseer, but of course that

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doesn't limit your actions," Hansa said with a shrug.

If Assassin seriously came after him with the intent to kill, then he was probably doomed. He could take on hematophages due to affinity. Against a martial Heroic Spirit, however, he would be the one at a disadvantage.

Nevertheless, he made no move to shrink or hide. He boldly addressed Assassin in order to carry out the orders of the master who had been like a father to him and do his duty as overseer.

"..."

Assassin eyed Hansa warily, but not with enmity.

Fortunately for Flat and Hansa, she currently felt indebted due to having manifested using the magical energy of an "evil fiend" and had made a pact with someone who was not one of her brethren—with "The Lionheart" of all people. Those circumstances must have made her view other with greater tolerance than she had on the first day.

Even so, there was a line that she was unwilling to cross.

"... One question: How do you plan to open a way to the outside?"

Her question was posed in a solemn tone.

Even Flat sensed that, "Oh, this is one of those questions that raises a death flag if you get it wrong." He hesitated to answer for a moment...

But the answer came from the phone on the altar, which had been left on speaker mode.

"We had just agreed on a policy of avoiding violence as much as possible. If you want to escape even if it means harming a young girl, we have no means of stopping you, but allow me to explain that there is another way."

"... Who are you?"

"Something like that boy's guardian. I realize that it's selfish of me to ask you to believe what I say when I'm not there myself, but..."

"..."

Assassin considered for a while, then, still somewhat warily, asked:

"If there is a way for her life to be saved, then that is the Lord's will. I will at least hear you out."

Flat and Berserker, who was in his wristwatch form, were relieved to see that Assassin was willing to listen.

But as if to smash that atmosphere, a young voice wafted into the room on the mild breeze.

"It's hopeless, Miss."

"!"

They all turned to face the voice.

They saw a cloud of smoke, like a black mist. It soon began taking the shape of a human figure as a variety of colors emerged from it.

“That ‘way’ doesn’t exist in this world that little Tsubaki made.”

It was the slight form of a young boy.

The sinister magical energy that surrounded his body, however, showed that he was not what he seemed.

When Hansa saw that, he affectedly clicked his tongue and then raised the corners of his mouth.

“What have we here? Are you sure you don’t want to hide your magical energy, like you did at the hotel? You must be confident to come here in person and spoil your trick.”

“I had a feeling I was being watched earlier. I won’t let down my guard with you, executor. I doubt the same trick would work twice. Besides . . .”

The boy stifled a sinister chuckle and shifted his gaze to Assassin before continuing with a look of ecstasy.

“I want to see all sorts of looks on Miss Assassin’s face as soon as possible. . . . See?”

By the time he said that, Assassin was already in motion.

One look at his expression and the magical energy that surrounded him told her that he was the hematophage who had summoned her—Jester Karture.

Her black cloak glided around the ground. A knife-hand shot out of its folds, aimed at the boy’s neck.

But while her blade-like fingertips did indeed pierce Jester’s body, she could feel no resistance.

“?!”

The boy’s body dissolved into mist and reformed a short distance away.

When it reformed, however, it was no longer the boy, but the young man hematophage who had appeared at the police station and in front of the hospital.

“Hahaha! Did you really think I’d come to meet my enemies in person like a simpleton? You’re adorable, Assassin. Of course, I did want to come myself! You’re correct! You might even say our hearts are in sync. I’m sorry to let you down, my dear Assassin! But can’t you understand that heartache it cost me to send a false body to see you?”

Jester continued to ramble narcissistically with a mixture of ecstasy and sorrow.

Hansa guessed that it was not just provocation—he probably meant it. From behind him, the concerned voice of El-Melloi II sounded over the phone.

“Oi, Flat, what am I hearing right now?!”

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“I’m not really sure . . . but I think it’s a confession of love!”

Jester did not seem to hear the banter between teacher and student. He kept his attention fixed on Assassin as he excitedly spread his arms wide with the broken window behind him.

Jester bowed deeply with the air of a conductor greeting his audience before a performance. Just then . . .

Behind him, the world twisted.

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A Closed-off World, Central Intersection

“What happened?!”

Surrounded on all sides by Kerberos and black grotesqueries, Saber and the police officers found themselves locked in a stalemate.

They had been holding the line against the beasts that repeated what sounded like an eerie chant, now advancing, now retreating. Ever since Saber had asked his questions, however, the things had stopped actively attacking them and shifted to preventing them from leaving the intersection.

But less than a minute earlier, that situation had changed.

It was not just their circumstances—the whole world seemed to be starting to transform.

Hordes of rats burst out of every nook and cranny in the brand-new concrete cityscape, and what looked like clouds of black dust became visible in the gusts of wind between the tall buildings.

Murders of crows flew around the area. Symbols of death were overtaking not just the intersection, but the entire cityscape.

At the same time, the demonic beasts’ attacks intensified . . . and the groups of words chanted out of every shadow in the city was becoming a deafening roar in Ayaka and the other’s ears.

It was as if that whole world were screaming in pain.

Or as if it were a newborn letting out its first cry.

“This is” “the path of death.”
“The underworld.” “The road to Hades.”
“Its judgment,” “Its gospel,”
“is eternal peace.” “is suffering.”

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A Closed-off World, in the Sky

The ward-world linked to Kuruoka Tsubaki.

It was a closed-off, limited space on the scale of a city. Even its sky had a boundary.

The blue of its sky was merely the real world projected on the border of the ward. Anyone on the ground who attempted to escape in an airplane or helicopter should have been turned around by the same distorted space that stopped anyone who tried to leave the city on foot.

But that “sky” was being silently invaded.

Like a stain spreading on the ceiling of an old house with a leaky roof, that “abnormality” continued to spread slowly but steadily.

Soon, a section of sky was cut away . . . and a man and woman emerged from it hand in hand.

They immediately entered freefall.

“Oh! Were we a smidgen late? Hurry up!”

“True, true! It looks like the party’s already underway!”

The two new figures—the True Caster faction, Francesca and Francois—were clasping each other’s hands like lovers as they continued to plummet upside down.

Before their eyes was a Snowfield recreated like a mirror image.

But that world was already in the process of becoming completely detached from Snowfield.

Beginning in the city center, it was gradually losing its color, and a jet-black darkness was beginning to spread across it.

Black shadows that rose from the ground became black clouds that began to cover the city.

The two Prelatis continued to laugh with delight as they plunged into the midst of the rising jet-black cumulonimbus clouds.

As they laughed within the cloudbank, instead of thunder, they heard the cries of the ward-world itself.



“Be at peace.”

“Suffer torments.”

“With the road to Hades in my thrall.”

“I shall defend my master.”

“The Holy Grail.”

“The Holy Grail.”

“Deliver it to my master.”

“To my friend.”

“The Holy Grail.”

“Isn’t it wonderful?! This sounds like a world worth tricking!” Francesca shouted amid the clouds, her eyes blazing.

Before long, the pair’s fall abruptly slowed until at last they were floating lightly in midair.

Using the highest caliber of illusion wielded by Heroic Spirits, they had performed the nearly rule-breaking feat of fooling the world’s physical laws.

“Ahaha! Fooling this world’s a piece of cake! I knew it must be built on a dream!”

“But you’d better not get careless,” Francesca answered Prelati with a smirking word of warning. “If it’s based on a dream, then that means it can turn into anything depending on the girl who’s having it.”

They burst out of the clouds, and Francesca laughed with the face of a child looking forward to an event as she looked down on the night-dark world below.

“I hope the Lionheart’s still alive and kicking! That big King Arthur fanboy!”

The pair spoke their last lines in perfect unison.

“Will you just despair, or will rage consume you? . . . We can’t wait to find out!”

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A Closed-off World, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

“I am swords.” “I am beasts.” “I am thirst.” “I am hunger.”

“I am the bearer of death.” “I am the player of death.” “I am death.” “I am death.” “Death.”

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“Death.” “Death.”

The emotionless screams completely filled the space around the top floor.

The world itself was screaming as if it were a single organism and dyeing the city in black.

Assassin’s eyes widened. Flat’s eyes sparkled as he kept up a shouted conversation with the wristwatch and the cellphone. Hansa directed the nuns into formation with gestures as he grimly muttered:

“The way it talks . . . I can’t believe it, but . . .”

Given his position, Hansa could not help but think of a certain passage from *The Book of Revelation*.

He also considered that it might be a historical person associated with a similar anecdote, but what El-Melloi II had just said about “concepts” flashed through his brain, and he arrived at a guess.

“An embodiment of death . . . Could it be the Pale Rider, one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse . . .?”

Assassin, meanwhile, shouted at Jester’s double, who continued to laugh happily.

“What did you do . . .?”

“Hm? Oh, this isn’t something I did. You must realize by now. I didn’t create this world. Therefore, the one responsible for this beautiful transformation must be . . .”

“I’m not asking about that!”

Assassin already knew what Jester was getting at.

The fact that he was there naturally meant that he understood and wanted to provoke her. Even knowing that it was provocation, however, Assassin could not help directing her rage at him.

“What did you do to that girl?!”

At the sound of her angry roar, Jester touched one hand to his chest and made a respectful bow, his eyes brimming with desire.

“Oh, thank you. . . . I am truly, truly delighted! Your emotions, your true feelings as a human being, were in that cry. It doesn’t matter that it was hatred. Right now, beyond a doubt, you are looking at me. You seem to be glancing at Kuruoka Tsubaki, but I’m sure that won’t

last much longer.”

“I’m asking you what you did!”

“Nothing much,” Jester told Assassin with an unpleasant curl of his lips.

He delivered his answer with all the emotion of a declaration of love. All the while, he watched her every movement.

“I just gave her a little encouragement.”

“To help her chase grand dreams, like a child should.”

Interlude

“A Beauty and the Sea; A Girl and a Mercenary”

Interlude

Ten Minutes Earlier, A Closed-off Town, The Kuruoka Residence

Sigma was perplexed.

He had gone to find Tsubaki, hoping to speak with her before taking action. It appeared that she had woken up from her nap, however, she was gone from the living room.

Sigma had been searching the first floor while her father Yūkaku went to search the second... when he spotted a mystically concealed door left open and went through it.

As a result, he caught sight of Tsubaki in the underground workshop, but there was a strange being in the room with her.

A being dressed in a red costume that was clearly out of place in the present-day United States.

“... The inquisition?”

He wondered if this could be the true form of “Mr. Black,” but the impression it made could not have been more different, so ended up saying the first word its red appearance brought to his mind.

Once he had said it, Sigma was reminded of the face of one of his childhood fellows.

Lambda.

Sigma remembered that he had seen that comedy film that dealt with the inquisition after killing Lambda, who had called him “best friend.” He ran his hand over the Mystic Code on his right hip, feeling uneasy, as if there were sand in his heart.

“... Who are you?”

“Oh, I see you aren’t ‘captured.’ Tell me one thing—Are you this girl’s friend or foe? Naturally, the two can’t be neatly divided into Yin and Yang, and your answer may change depending on circumstance . . . but if, for instance, I were to go berserk, would you protect this child or not?”

“... At present, I intend to protect her,” Sigma answered honestly, but remained wary.

He mentally reaffirmed that his reason was to maintain a smooth alliance with Assassin and slowly maneuvered into a position where he could guard Tsubaki.

At that, the red-clad beauty let out a relieved exclamation.

“Oh, thank goodness! I was nervous because, if I had to say, you have the eyes of one who kills rulers rather than defends them, but you’ve set my mind at ease! Have no fear; I am her friend as well. Now it will be smooth sailing. I was actually more associated with sinking ships, but don’t let that bother you! Some sunken ships reach the temple of the sea god. Or is the Dragon

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Palace better known now?”

Something about seeing the beauty talk with the speed and energy of a comedian inspired a sense of kinship in Sigma.

If this were a normal job, I'd either eliminate them just to be safe or make my escape at this point, Sigma thought, *but right now, my mission is to act freely.*

He decided to hear the beauty out without completely relaxing his guard.

He thought that he would need more information if he wanted to act freely.

“I’ll hear you out. Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m glad you’re wise! Unfortunately, however, it’s about time for me to submerge again.”

“?”

“A monster will come here. When he does, the embodiment of sickness will automatically focus its attention on Tsubaki. Once that happens, I won’t be able to conceal myself completely.”

Sigma started to ask the beauty what this string of bizarre statements meant . . . when he noticed that they had begun to fade like a mirage and drew in his breath.

“What’s wrong?!”

“Oh, I’m all right,” the beauty assured the shocked-looking Tsubaki with a comforting smile. “We’re just going to play hide and seek for a little bit longer.”

After reassuring the girl, the beauty turned to Sigma, pointed to the crossbow in Tsubaki’s arms, and continued.

“Either carry that crossbow yourself or get someone else to do so and keep it with Tsubaki at all times. You must not take it away from her. As for myself, call me . . . Yes, call me ‘Jiao.’ As long as that crossbow is with that girl, I may be able to come to her defense if something threatens her in this world.”

“I don’t understand. Who are you?”

“It’s a long story, but put simply? Wait, why can I sense traces of its presence from you? Do you by any chance linked to that thing fluttering in the sky in the outside world?”

“!”

Sigma drew in his breath again.

Do they know about Watcher . . . ?

“Oh no, I’m at my limit. Try showing that crossbow to an intelligent mage. Do that, and you . . . will . . . Oh, yes, I’m relying on you! Fulfill my request to keep Tsubaki safe and . . .”

Before they could finish their sentence, the beauty who called themselves Jiao vanished without a trace.

Tsubaki stared around the room in puzzlement, but Sigma looked troubled and wondered:

Who were they? They seemed to know something about Watcher, but . . .

Interlude

Sigma thought that he might have been able to obtain important information about his Servant, who even he did not really understand, but there was no use crying over spilled milk.

I guess I should hold onto this crossbow for now. . . .

Sigma flashed a forced smile at Tsubaki, offered to carry the crossbow, and took it from her hands.

He did not know that it was the catalyst that the Kuruokas had prepared for the Holy Grail War . . . or that it had been one of the triggers that summoned Tsubaki's Heroic Spirit in a very different way than the mages had intended.

Snowfield was now densely packed with a diverse assortment of entities. Fates there were complicated and sometimes became entangled.

“What's this?”

Good fates and bad fates alike.

“Tsubaki, who's that guy?”

An innocent voice came from the direction of the stairs.

Sigma turned to look and saw a young boy.

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Who's he? He doesn't look like he's under mind control. . . .

Sigma warily observed the boy.

Someone not being under mind control in this world was enough of a reason to be cautious of them.

Tsubaki, in contrast, sounded relieved.

“Oh, Jester! You came to visit!”

Shudder.

Sigma's accumulated experience as a magecraft-user sent a tremor through his body before his memory could catch up.

An instant later, a voice echoed in the back of Sigma's mind.

A voice that he had heard the night before, right before he had been dragged into the ward-world.

“My name is Jester, Jester Karture!”

The boy's voice and appearance were different, but Sigma was not optimistic enough to dismiss it as a coincidence.

By the time Sigma remembered that name, which had been announced to Assassin, the boy

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was already right beside him.

“You’re lucky. I can’t just kill you in front of Tsubaki,” Jester whispered in a voice that only Sigma could hear. His smile never faltered.

“Keep your mouth shut, OK? I’m that girl’s ‘friend.’ If you attack me, ‘Mr. Black’ will eliminate you immediately, and who knows what I’ll do,” the smiling, young Jester warned Sigma while listening to Tsubaki introduce Sigma and explain the course of events.

“...”

Sigma kept silent as his whole body broke out in a cold sweat.

Watcher had given him advance warning that Jester could take the form of a boy.

Now that he actually saw it, however, the “transformation” was more complete than he had imagined. If Tsubaki had not called Jester’s name, it would have taken him time to make the connection.

That single detail was enough to bring home how much the boy outclassed him.

What is he after?

Sigma could not guess young Jester’s intentions. Jester surveyed the workshop with a fresh-faced smile.

“Wow, this place is cool. It’s like a secret base.”

“Y-Yeah, it’s my mom and dad’s room,” Tsubaki answered bashfully.

The sight puzzled Sigma.

Hasn’t she been placed under suggestion to stop her from talking about the workshop?

Was it removed because she fell into a coma, or is there another reason?

He felt that his thoughts were wandering, but also resented that thinking was all he could do.

This situation would not affect the outcome of his mission, but it would significantly affect his chances of survival.

Sigma wished for sound sleep and food—in other words, a pleasant existence. He wanted to avoid being brutally murdered by a hematophage.

Even so, he was convinced that he could not afford to make a move when he was not even sure what Jester wanted.

The hematophage’s actions, however, were extremely simple.

He talked with Tsubaki.

Purely in terms of the results, that was all he did.

And the results of that simple action guided that world to an end.

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What did Mr. Sigma stop talking for?
Where did that pretty person hide?
I know; I'll go look for them with Jester later!

"Hey, Tsubaki."
"What is it, Jester?"
"My dad told me that your parents are really important mages."
"!"

What should I do?
What's the right thing to do?
Oh, "magecraft" was supposed to be a secret, wasn't it?

"Don't worry. I know it's supposed to be a secret. It'll be just our secret, Tsubaki!"
"... Really?"
"Yes, really. Don't worry about him, either. He knows about magecraft."
"Thank goodness!"

Mr. Sigma said, "Yes."
Of course. He seemed like he was good friends with Dad.
Mr. Sigma must be a "mage" too.
Still, I knew Jester was nice.
He's the first friend I've ever had.
I wonder if Jester is a "mage" too.

"Hey, Tsubaki."
"What is it?"
"You want to help your mom and dad, don't you?"
"Yeah!"
"What do you think would make your parents the happiest?"
"!"
"You got them to be nice to you, so you have to be a good girl for them."

That's right.

I have to help out Mom and Dad.

I was sleeping for ages and ages. Do they mind?

They read me picture books and baked me tasty cakes.

I have to be good. I have to be really good. I, I . . .

"Let's think together, OK? What was it your mom and dad always said?"

"Umm . . ."

"Someday, we'll become _____."

"Yes, Tsubaki. That's our great ambition."

"That's right. Like the Old Man of the Jewels, we'll become _____ . . ."

"That's hardly realistic. Isn't the accepted theory that there are no openings left for that?"

"Come on. Words have power. Even if it's impossible, it's worth aiming for."

"Like suggestion, then?"

"Yes, that's right. Tsubaki, this is the first suggestion we're going to place you under."

"Your mommy and daddy both wish that, one day, the Kuruoka family will produce a _____."

What was it?

Mom and Dad were using difficult words.

But . . .

That's it! I remember!

Someone more amazing than a "mage"!

The one who turned Cinderella into a princess!

"Oh! I know!"

"What, you already figured it out? You're amazing, Tsubaki."

"Yeah. You see . . ."

"I want to become a 'Magician' for Mom and Dad!"

"Really? That's a great idea. I'm sure everyone will love it."

Wow. Jester sounds happy.
Thank goodness. I got it right, then!

“I’ll do my best and become a ‘Magician’!”
“Yeah. I’m sure you can. You’ve got ‘Mr. Black’ to help you.”
“Yeah!”

... Huh?
I wonder what’s wrong.
Mr. Sigma is making a scary face.

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It was a system without a will.
A machine that simply utilized its capabilities for its Master, with no wish of its own.
It was a Heroic Spirit that behaved as a tool should. Opinions on it as a familiar would be divided.

But precisely because it had no will of its own and was an embodiment of a portion of the world’s logic, it was capable of wielding immense power, and it had just formally received a wish from its Master.

I want to become a Magician.

The Heroic Spirit that protected Tsubaki registered that wish.
That was the long-term wish of its Master, Kuruoka Tsubaki.
I want to live happily with my parents.
I want to spend time with animals.
I don’t want anyone to leave town.
I want to help the people caught in the fire evacuate.
The Heroic Spirit had been able to address such short-term “wishes” using its own power.
“Becoming a Magician,” however, was a wish that far exceeded the capabilities of its systems.
Magecraft would be possible, but Magic was a different story.
An ordinary familiar, no matter how intelligent, would have answered, “That’s impossible.”

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But the Heroic Spirit that was Tsubaki's Servant and guardian—Pale Rider—was different. Because it had been given knowledge as a Heroic Spirit, it possessed a possibility.

The possibility called “The Holy Grail.”

It was hardly a certain method.

No matter how low the probability, however, Pale Rider, the Servant of the concept of death, would present that method.

The Third Magic, which had been lost to the world with the creation of the Greater Grail.

Magic was outside natural law and was therefore impossible to reproduce using a wish-granter within the bounds of natural law.

But in the case of the Third Magic, which was linked to the Grail, and only in that case . . . there was a possibility.

By incorporating the Holy Grail into Tsubaki via itself, it would cause a flux in natural law.

If it could recreate the Magic Circuits of the “vessel” that had become the blueprint for the Greater Grail, then perhaps . . .

The chance was infinitesimally slim.

Practically a pipe dream.

But Pale Rider registered it.

As a “pipe dream” of Kuruoka Tsubaki's.

And from that moment on . . . Pale Rider used every resource at its disposal to recompose a world founded on “Tsubaki's wish,” which had fused with itself.

For a means to its end.

Win the Holy Grail War and obtain the Greater Grail.

That first Heroic Spirit to descend on Snowfield . . . finally signaled that it was joining the battle.

All the while enveloping the entire world in the presence of Death.

Chapter 20

“Dream Becomes Reality”

Chapter 20

Fantasy Becomes Reality

Francesca Prelati first became involved with the Holy Grail War after an American organization commissioned her to analyze it in the midst of the Second World War.

A member of the Dioland family, who had already embedded themselves in the Clock Tower, entered the war, and although he was defeated, the resulting report concluded that the Holy Grail War was far too unique to be merely a local ritual in the Far East. There was a plan underway to build a city on a plot of land that had been requisitioned for the nation's mystical development. After the report on the third Holy Grail War, that plan shifted into an attempt to recreate the ritual there.

In order to carry out concrete investigations for the sake of that plan, a group of mages who were both skilled and had no ties to the Clock Tower was assembled, and Francesca ended up working with them due to a recommendation from a person she could never seem to cut ties with.

“You bombed Fuyuki from the air for your investigation. Talk about overdoing it. You're really going to go that far?” Francesca had griped at first. She had not been enthusiastic. Once she—he at the time—actually observed the Holy Grail War in Fuyuki, however, her attitude had changed completely.

The fourth Holy Grail War.

An event with a dubious history which saw the brutal murder of a Lord of the Clock Tower and the loss of several assets unrelated to the world of magecraft, such as fighter jets. The Holy Church had a hell of a time covering it up.

Francesca's “hobby” was observing places where interesting things seemed likely to happen through her far-reaching information network and then hurling that information into events unfolding in other places to cause chaos. Even among the data that she (or he, depending on the body) had spent many years accumulating, that Far-Eastern ritual was exceptionally out of the ordinary.

One Ghost-Liner after another was observed.

There were schemes that involved mages, magecraft-users, and even the Holy Church.

And there were two beings with “familiar” faces.

One was the figure of the king said to have been guided by her teachers' teacher, the incubus-man who the spirits who had taught her magecraft had taken an interest in. Francesca had never had anything to do with her, but she had seen her in her teachers' water-viewing whispers.

That one, however, had been of no particular interest to Francesca.

She had been surprised that the ritual could even summon the wielder of the Holy Sword of the Planet. Given that the being would vanish when the ritual ended, she had not been able to confirm whether her personality had really been reproduced as well.

When she spotted her other acquainted—Gilles de Rais, the “noble knight of Bretagne”—through her far-seeing spell, however, Francesca was bowled over and set out on a trip from Antarctica to Japan with only the clothes on her back.

She dropped all her other projects to rush to the scene . . . but paid for her lack of preparation. The Grail was apparently destroyed before she had a chance to intervene. In the end, Francesca never got a chance to meet her sworn friend face-to-face.

The fact that she had underestimated the power of the head of the Makiri family and the insects he commanded might also be to blame.

Her familiars had probably been deliberately overlooked. Numerous insects had been stationed along her route, and Francesca had ultimately been forced to discard her body at the time after being intercepted by a fiend in the form of an old man.

“Illusions don't work too well on bugs.”

“If only I'd had more time to prepare, I could have fooled the whole region and slipped in that way. . . .”

“Oh, Gilles, Gilles, I hope you managed to enjoy the War.”

She had been spotted grumbling by Faldeus before he made his way to the Clock Tower.

She was determined to interfere in the fifth War, but a number of factors coincided to prevent her.

First, Matō Zōgen, who had obstructed her during the fourth War, had strengthened his wards against outsiders, meaning that she could not observe the War at all.

Second, the priest from the Holy Church was extraordinarily skilled at handling external threats.

Third, when she had tried to investigate Fuyuki during the preparatory period, she had sensed the uncanny presence of at least seven Mystic Eyes focused on the same line and could not afford to approach the city carelessly.

The last straw was that she had been in the middle of having her bodies repeatedly murdered by a Grand mage named Aozaki Tōko.

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As a result, Francesca did not know how the fifth Holy Grail War ended.

Word of the result had leaked out, but she had been unable to learn what sort of “war” had taken place in Fuyuki, or what factions had met with what fates.

But that had been enough.

Francesca had patiently observed the workings of the Grail, brought together a variety of components, such a fragment of the Greater Grail’s magical energy that she had barely managed to obtain before the start of the fifth War, or the “mud” she had unearthed from the ruins of the “Fuyuki disaster” that had occurred during the fourth, and constructed a fake Holy Grail in Snowfield.

But a fake was still a fake.

Without the complete, intact Magic Circuits of Justeaze, the founder of the Holy Grail War, as a component, perfectly recreating the Greater Holy Grail was impossible. No matter how close she came, it would never be more than a fake.

And yet . . . Heroic Spirits, Servants, Ghost-Liners.

By some miracle or caprice, the land on which the fake Holy Grail War was built had reached the point of manifesting several of those “forces” know by many names.

In which case, Francesca thought, the rest would be simple trial and error, relying on pure chance.

If she repeated it thousands, tens of thousands of times until the human race went extinct, she might eventually achieve the results her employers hoped for in addition to her own wish—the elimination of Magic through the advancement of human technology.

It could be said that Francesca Prelati was more of a demon than a mage, with no thought to spare for logic.

That was why she had the idea.

Since she was going to summon Heroic Spirits, she had better have as much fun with them as she could.

And right now, she was thrilled.

She had heard that for some reason, the legendary wielder of the Holy Sword had manifested in the Fuyuki Holy Grail War several times.

In this fake Holy Grail War, a king who idolized that hero had appeared in her place.

Francesca Prelati was therefore dying to taint his adoration.

When she stole the light from someone radiant, what exactly would be left?

Just to find that out, the Prelatis continued to fall in a dream.

However ugly, pitiful, or wretched the result turned out to be . . . they at least were determined

to love it as a form of humanity.

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The Past, 1189, Western France

“Oh, you’re one of those. You really like King Arthur, right?” The man in the out-of-place outfit asked as he tinkered noisily with the bizarre horseless carriage under which he was lying.

Richard responded with a boyish grin.

“You’re wrong, Saint-Germain! I don’t just like King Arthur; I also like the Knights of the Round Table, and I love the legends of Charlemagne! King Beowulf slaying Grendel thrills me to my core, and I’ve wanted to go train in the Land of Shadows more than a few times!”

“Don’t forget Alexander the Great. I bet he’d fight you to the death on the battlefield with a smile on his face.”

“Truly?! That would be an honor! . . . Still, it’s true that if I pledged myself to any legend, it would be to the songs of King Arthur, the first king of my heart.”

“Even though he gets betrayed by his kin and overthrown in the end?” The man—Saint-Germain—asked sarcastically, poking his head out from under his carriage.

“Of course,” Richard answered nonchalantly. “I love Sir Mordred too, you know? He’s a great knight who slew the great King Arthur. He who ends a legend deserves to be a legend in his own right.”

“Oh, I see. I suppose you’re right,” Saint-Germain surveyed their surroundings and agreed with a wry grin.

Amid the well-ordered rows of knights and foot soldiers, the con man, whose position was akin to that of a court mage, muttered too softly for Richard to hear:

“And it’s because you’re like this . . . that you’re on your way to slay your own father.”

The life of Richard I “the Lionheart” was spent in adoration of King Arthur.

The episodes demonstrating his attachment to legends were too numerous to mention, and his wild disposition aside, it would be no exaggeration to say that the standard called “chivalry” was fostered among those numerous legends.

He often set out in person to collect relics of bygone heroes. There is no way of knowing whether the Excalibur he is supposed to have discovered at Glastonbury or a mirage that his

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obsession with legends showed him.

Whatever the blade inside was, however . . . he did at least find the genuine scabbard. Or so someone told the royals and aristocrats of the French court several centuries later.

According to them, Richard had paid his respects to that great scabbard which had kept the holy sword safe from the world's corrosion by placing the greatest of seals upon it and restoring it to a site associated with King Arthur with his own hands.

That story went out into the world as just another rumor, and several more centuries passed. . .

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The Present, A Closed-off World, Central Intersection

"Hey . . . They've got a new look in their eyes," one of the officers said, cold sweat running down their back.

"Calm down. That doesn't change the plan. We're going to look for an opening while shoring up our defenses."

Vera was the one holding them together. Her face was calm, but even she realized how dire their situation was.

"An opening? That's easy to say . . ."

Another officer put Vera's anxieties into words for her.

"But is there anywhere to run?"

Every part of the city they could see had already been corroded by the black mist. Swarms of rats scurried over the ground while black-winged crows blotted out the sky.

And the Kerberoses, which had been on the defensive up to that point, went on the attack.

The fact that the police officers were still intact in the face of the ferocious onslaught was probably due to the fact that John was still able to use the "power" that Caster had given him to fend them off bare-handed, and to the fact that the Kerberoses and other demonic beasts took little notice of them.

The demonic beasts' attacks seemed to be focused on the Heroic Spirit Saber. Up to that point, their attacks had been robotic, but some were now charged with obvious hostility.

"Something must have happened! I hope that the girl is unharmed!"

Saber fended off the grotesque creatures attacking him from all sides with the Kerberos's claw.

The gigantic beasts' jaws closed in, looking for an opening.

Jaws far larger than his whole body snapped shut with incredible speed, but Saber dodged them by a hair's breadth.

But Kerberos had three heads.

A series of three deadly guillotines.

Saber kicked a log-thick fang to avoid the second, and then changed direction in midair to slip past the third set of jaws.

Another Kerberos, however, seized the chance to approach from behind and sent Saber's body flying with a swipe of its claws.

“...!”

Saber's body slammed into a building shrouded in black mist. Chunks of glass and concrete flew in all directions.

“Saber!” Ayaka yelled.

This is wrong.

Saber is moving slower than usual!

I knew it! He's still hurt from last night!

Ayaka cursed her own carelessness.

She knew that Saber had been able to keep dodging the Noble Phantasms that the golden Heroic Spirit had fired like a machinegun, but his movements were obviously stiffer than they had been then.

He said that he had been healed using magecraft, but he must not have been able to fully recover from nearly fatal wounds.

Ayaka was unfamiliar with magecraft. She had not really understood, but she had assumed that it had healed him completely.

Now that she thought about it, Saber had not sounded quite like himself earlier when he had offered to do the dirty work if it came to that. Was that because he knew that he did not have much time left?

Ayaka linked one negative thought to another as she started running through the swirling dust toward the building that Saber had been flung into.

But the next thing that the Kerberoses—or that “world”—focused on after Saber was his source of magical energy. In other words, Ayaka.

“What...?”

One of the titanic beasts closed in on Ayaka.

Its jaws, however, were stopped by police officers who cut in between the beast and Ayaka

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with shield and halberd Noble Phantasms.

“Don’t stop! Keep moving!”

“Why . . .?”

Truce or not, she was still supposed to be their enemy. Why would they save her?

“This sort of thing is our real job,” one of the officers answered the question in Ayaka’s eyes.

“. . . Thank you!”

Ayaka forced out a reply at the last second and kept running into the building.

She shot a brief glance behind her . . . and saw the officers being mowed down by the monsters.

Some of the had sustained serious injuries, while others were lying collapsed on the ground.

In the few seconds that Saber had been gone, the balance had collapsed.

John and Vera were putting up a fight, but at the rate things were going, they would all be dead within a few minutes.

Having seen that, Ayaka raced up the stairs into the dark interior of the building with tears in her eyes and made for the floor that she thought Saber had been flung into.

Why me . . .?

I can’t do anything.

I’m not even one of those “Masters,” or whatever they’re called.

I could never be a . . .

No. No, no, no.

It’s not that I couldn’t be one. I chose not to.

I ran away again.

But there’s nowhere left for me to go!

Infuriated by her own cowardice, Ayaka just kept running, ignoring the protests of her leg muscles.

Ayaka knew that she was just a weakling compared to Heroic Spirits or mages.

She also knew that she was weak even compared to other humans, and she knew why.

Sex and age had nothing to do with it.

Ayaka understood that differences like those were irrelevant to what strength meant here.

The reason she was weak was simple.

I never tried to become strong. . . I never wanted to be strong. . .

It was so, so much easier to run away.

Then . . . just as Ayaka was about to reach the floor she thought Saber must be on, she caught sight of a red figure on the stairs.

Ayaka gasped.

This was an ordinary building.

Of course, *it had an elevator.*

Every inch of Ayaka's body trembled in the face of "Little Red Riding Hood." Was she a hallucination? Was she a ghost? Ayaka did not know.

I'm scared.

Scared, scared, scared, scared, scared, scared. No, no, no, no, no.

Her bones creaked. Her insides twisted like they were burning. Nausea rose from the back of her throat.

But . . .

She still did not stop.

“. . . Move.”

Ayaka's legs were at their limit, but she forced them up one stair at a time as her joints and muscle fibers groaned.

She shed tears as she glared upward at "Little Red Riding Hood."

"You can kill me or curse me if you want. I'm sure you have the right to."

This world within a ward had filled to bursting with every kind of death in an instant.

As a result, it's excessive atmosphere of death may have numbed the fear that had driven Ayaka to keep running.

"I'm afraid of you, but . . ."

"__"

The one bit of face barely visible under the shadow of the hood—Little Red Riding Hood's mouth—opened tried to say something to Ayaka.

Ayaka, however, kept advancing in spite of that and tried to pass right by Little Red Riding Hood.

"Right now, I'm more afraid of running away from Saber."

The next instant . . .

Little Red Riding Hood's mouth moved and whispered in a voice that only Ayaka could hear.

“. . . _____.”

"What . . .?"

Ayaka turned to look in spite of herself, but Little Red Riding Hood was no longer there.

After a moment's hesitation, Ayaka clapped both hands to her face and directed her steps toward a shattered wall in search of Saber.

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“Oh . . . What, you came all the way here, Ayaka?”

Saber was there.

He was standing majestically, like he had when she first met him at the opera house.

Unlike then, however, he was covered with blood.

He had not fallen on his face like he had in the church, but part of his armor was split, probably torn by Kerberos claws, and fresh blood was dripping from the gash.

“Saber . . .!”

“Please, don’t look at me like that. This is only a scratch. . . .”

“We’ve had this talk three or four times already. I’ve made up my mind, so shut up and listen!”

“Certainly.”

The sight of Ayaka’s ghastly appearance made Saber forget his own injuries and nod in spite of himself.

“Saber . . . you’re hesitating to use my magical energy and holding back, aren’t you?”

“ . . .”

“I won’t run from you or the Holy Grail War anymore. I’ve made up my mind to fight with you! I only made up my mind just now, though! Sorry about that!”

“Oh, yes. . . . Certainly.”

Ayaka somehow managed the trick of angrily delivering a sincere apology, and Saber responded with another instinctive nod.

Ayaka had been thinking it over for the past few days, but now she understood.

She understood what running in fear from everything would lead her to.

That question was meaningless in the situation she found herself in. This was the place she had run away to.

If she were going to find anything at the end of her flight, she would have to find it here.

“I won’t even mind if you’re going to suck up all my magical energy and kill me! I mean, I would mind, but it’d be way better than dying with you in a place like this without even knowing what’s going on! So, I’m going to do what I can!”

Ayaka seized Saber’s hand and pressed it to one of the Command-Spell-like marks on her body as she listened to the sounds of the battle outside.

“If you’re willing to give me something in exchange for my magical energy . . . I want you to teach me how to fight. I don’t care if it’s just how to throw rocks. If you think I’ll get in your way, it can even be how to make more magical energy or how to use it!”

Saber lowered his eyes from Ayaka’s earnest expression for an instant, then answered with an earnest look of his own.

“I appreciate the sentiment, and you’re strong. However . . . right now, it’s me who can’t

respond to you.”

“?”

“You’ve resolved to fight for me, but I still haven’t found a reason to seek the Grail if it means risking my life and my chivalry and trampling the wishes of others. Therefore, this life of mine isn’t for winning this war. I should use it to keep you safe. Until yesterday, I thought that I could balance that with my own curiosity . . . but that gaudy fellow taught me better.”

I knew it, Ayaka thought, Saber did get hurt. Not just physically, either. His fight with that golden Heroic Spirit drove a wedge into his heart.

Saber was not afraid of others. Defeat certainly had not made him afraid that that golden hero would kill him.

Even Ayaka could understand that, and she doubted it had changed.

But even if he were not afraid, without a wish for the Grail, he had no reason to turn his lion’s heart to the Holy Grail War.

He must not be able to fight with all his passion as a result.

Ayaka had only known Saber a few days, but she had been forced to learn more than she would have liked about his temperament.

“Therefore, I don’t care if I vanish. I got you involved, and your survival is my prime objective. Although ideally, once I’ve ensured your safety, I’d like a chance to challenge that golden king again with whatever magical energy I have left.”

“It doesn’t matter what your wish is! I wouldn’t care if you wanted to sell the Grail for cash! Didn’t you say you were going to take music back with you to heaven or “the Throne” or wherever? A childish whim like that is good enough!”

Saber lowered his eyes again and flashed a wry smile.

“. . . The Throne is one thing, but you won’t find me in heaven.”

“?”

“I’m a Heroic Spirit—just a shadow burned into the world—so I don’t know the truth, but if there’s a heaven, then my soul must be . . . burning in purgatory until the day the human race comes to an end.”

“. . .?”

She was about to ask what he meant when more of the wall of the building collapsed.

“!”

The pair turned to see a row of three massive, bestial mouths.

Kereberos had grown again while they were not looking. Its appearance recalled a three-headed beast out of a giant monster movie.

Poisonous plants sprouted wherever droplets of its drool hit the floor.

“Sleep. (Die.)”

All three heads spoke in unison. They seemed about to bite off the whole room with Saber and Ayaka inside it. Before either had a chance to move, however, a tiny fragment tumbled between them and the beast.

“?”

Ayaka was puzzled.

All three of Kerberos’ heads had suddenly frozen in place.

All six of the monster’s eyes were fixed on the little lump that had tumbled to the floor.

When Ayaka realized what the thing was, she could not hold back an exclamation. It was just so out of place with the life-threatening situation.

“... A cookie ...?”

It was a single cookie, sweetly redolent of honey, that might be found for sale in any supermarket.

Everything fell silent, Kerberos included.

“Taking in Kerberos was neat, but it was a bad move.”

Cheerful voices rang out. They were definitely out of place.

“I mean, it’s weakness is just so famous!”

The boy and girl sounded like they were having the time of their lives, like an audience watching Ayaka and the others’ predicament as a scene in a slasher movie.

When they actually appeared, they were indeed munching on store-bought cookies and chocolates like popcorn.

A gaping hole opened in the ceiling, and through it two figures descended with an open umbrella like characters out of a movie.

“Hi there. Should I say nice to meet you? Mr. Lionheart and ... I don’t know who you are, but you’ve got some impressive magical energy!”

The girl in a gothic-Lolita dress flashed a smile as she twirled her umbrella.

Beside the spinning, open umbrella, a boy with similar features made a polite bow.

“... I have a lot of questions,” Saber asked the pair as if he spoke for the bewildered Ayaka, “but tell me, what are you holding up an umbrella indoors for?”

“Is that really important?” Ayaka frowned when the question failed completely to speak for her.

The girl twirling the umbrella, however, puffed up with pride, her eyes gleaming.

“I’m glad you asked! I knew you were a real find! I love people who give me reactions like that!”

“The answer is simple,” the boy continued for her, spreading his arms wide.

“It’s about to rain here!”

The next instant, a downpour of cookie and candy packages began inside the building, painting over the gray floor in a deluge of pop coloring.

It was an unbelievable scene out of a fairy tale or comic book.

Ayaka found herself at a loss for words amid scenery that was divorced from reality in a completely different sense than the pervading atmosphere of death a moment before had been.

The candy packages falling in place of raindrops began to grow larger. Mountains of sweets was piling up toward the room’s high ceiling like piles of scrapped cars in a junkyard.

And the most surprising thing of all was that the immobile Kerberos sniffed loudly and then immediately began to wolf down the now-gigantic sweets packaging and all.

“Who are you . . .?” Ayaka asked the boy and girl from her position beside Saber, unable to process the situation.

“You know, we’d like to ask you the same thing,” the girl answered while deflecting the rain of sweets with her umbrella. “We’ve been wondering where Filia managed to dig up someone like you.”

“! You know her?! Where is she now?!”

The white woman who had led her to this city against her will.

Ayaka grew warier at the revelation that the pair had something to do with her. They, however, answered her question with a statement she could make no sense of.

“Ah ha ha! I don’t think she’s anywhere anymore. Her body’s still around, though! You’d better be careful you don’t talk to her by mistake. She might turn you into a gemstone for being insolent or shabby or something!”

“?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m Francesca. This is Francois. In this Holy Grail War, we’re the True Caster faction, the masterminds, the bookies, and the troublemakers all rolled into one. . . . Is that enough for you to go on? It is, right?”

“???”

Ayaka was more confused than ever, but Saber nodded.

“I see. I don’t understand at all, but thank you for rescuing us. I had heard that Kerberos is fond of honey cakes, but I had none to hand.”

“Crazy, isn’t it? People have kept on telling stories about a guard dog who lets criminals go for sweets all this time,” Francesca guffawed and looked outside.

Ayaka gave a start and turned to look at what was happening while keeping a cautious eye on

the Kerberos gobbling sweets.

Outside, the same rain of sweets was falling, and every Kerberos was glued to a mountain of cookies.

“Oh, I almost forgot. No need to thank us.”

“After all, we’re here to defile you.”

The mysterious pair announced with cheerful smiles.

“What?”

Ayaka frowned, watching to see what they were up to.

“Oh?” Francesca said, watching Ayaka right back. “You’ve gotten a whole lot tougher since Cashura almost killed you on the first day.”

“... Cashura... Are you friends of that guy at the opera house?!”

“You got it. Back then, you had a look on your face like you couldn’t even be bothered with living. Did getting dragged around by a hero like Mr. Lionheart here toughen you up? Or are you a little vixen who got full of herself once she cozied up to someone strong? Which is it?”

“Wha—”

Ayaka stammered at the sudden change of subject. She could not be certain that she was not the latter.

Saber, however, voiced his honest, unvarnished opinion in her place.

“What do you mean? Ayaka has been strong since the beginning, and it’s natural to get a big head when you’re close to someone you can trust, no matter how strong or weak you are. Also, while Ayaka does have imposing eyes like a fox, she doesn’t disturb gardens or farms, nor does she deceive people by pretending to be a cat.”

“You can say that from the heart? Great! I knew you were a real find!”

“I see, I see. He’s a fine king indeed! He acts entirely on his own principles in the moment!”

Francesca’s sarcasm had missed its mark, but for some reason the pair sounded satisfied.

They turned their attention back to Ayaka and said, with twirling, dance-like movements:

“Lucky you. I’m jealous. Ayaka, right?”

“You managed to bump into a good king! No wonder you’re toughening up! No wonder you can trust him!”

“That’s why we’re going to apologize while we have the chance. Sorry!”

“Well, not that we mind if you hold it against us. Let’s be friends if you don’t, though! Oh, we’re not going to hurt your bodies, so don’t worry about that. Yay!”

Ayaka could not help being irritated after that string of provocations and started to say something to the pair.

“Hey, what the hell are you talking a—”

An instant later, however . . .

“We’re just going to trample on His Majesty’s adoration a bit.”

Francesca brandished her umbrella, and the world turned inside out.

It was a beautiful castle.

It was not policed like a tourist attraction, but the nearby doors and the gardens visible within showed signs of being well maintained. Its time-worn stone walls lent it an air of solemn grandeur and harmonized fantastically with its location in the deep forest.

“. . . Wh-What?”

The cry that escaped Ayaka’s mouth were high pitched and quavering.

She knew that they had been inside a building until a few seconds earlier.

Now, however, the cold concrete, the glass shards, and most of all the mountains of sweets and the monsters feasting on them had vanished without a trace.

It was as if none of those things had ever existed in the first place.

But Ayaka’s voice was not shrill because the scenery around her had been replaced.

She had only just seen the world turn inside out, after all.

Why was her pulse skyrocketing and her whole body breaking out in sweat?

Because she recognized this scenery.

“Now way. This is . . . the castle in Fuyuki. . . .”

“Where?”

Ayaka startled at the voice from beside her and turned to look.

She found Saber standing in exactly the same position he had been until a moment before.

“! . . . Thank goodness! Are you all right?!”

“Yes, but I am surprised. This is . . . even more incredible than the ‘projection mapping’ that rascal Saint Germain showed me. It’s an illusion. It’s perfectly fooling our perception—not just what we can see, but even the smell of the breeze and the temperature of the soil.”

“Illusion . . . ? Not teleportation, or anything like that?”

“No, I doubt we’ve gone anywhere physically. The police aren’t here, so they must be deceiving our senses, not the space itself. My mage companion knows a lot about this sort of thing.”

“Oh really? I’m interested in this mage friend of yours.”

Ayaka heard the voice of the boy who introduced himself as Francois and looked around.

But while she could hear his voice, he was nowhere to be seen. Next came a jibe from Francesca.

“Rats. I wanted to make you think it was teleportation and have a little fun. What a letdown.”

“Oh, it’s quite a feat. I certainly never saw an illusion of this caliber while I was alive. I’m impressed. How would you like to be my court mage? It’s supposed to be Saint Germain’s job,

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but I called him, and he wouldn't answer, so I could appoint you as his replacement.”

“... Hey, I thought my ears were playing tricks on me, but I keep hearing a name I don't like.”

“So do I. You know, this king does seem like just the type that no-good, deviant con man would visit.”

Francesca and Francois sounded obviously less delighted than they had moments before.

“Oh, I wouldn't go that far,” Saber continued matter-of-factly. “At worst, he's the oddest of layabout petty aristocrats.”

“Isn't that worse?”

Ayaka, who had seen “Saint Germain” in her dreams, did not press the point further, but it relieved her nervousness just enough to think calmly.

“I see. . . . What are you showing me a hallucination of my hometown for?”

“Huh? Oh, so you're from Fuyuki.”

“Huh?”

Since they seemed to know Filia, Ayaka had assumed the illusion was targeted at her, but apparently not.

In which case, why Fuyuki?

As Ayaka wondered, a change occurred behind her.

No sooner did she hear the sounds of something massive approaching than “it” passed by Ayaka and Saber, trampling through the forest with a peal of thunder.

The thing speeding straight toward the large doors that led into the castle was a cart pulled by large oxen.

“Cart” was the only way Ayaka could describe it, but Richard recognized what it was at a glance.

“Was that . . . a chariot? Oxen surrounded by lightning . . . Could those be the divine oxen?! Then, that must be King Gordias. No . . .”

Saber, who had a fondness for numerous hero tales, instantly realized what that chariot was and who must be driving it.

Two men were riding in that chariot which had raced across ancient battlefields.

“I don't believe it. . . . Saint Germain told me that he was far larger than his legends say, but I assumed he was exaggerating. . . .”

“You recognize him?”

“Yes. . . . If I'm right . . . that's the conqueror who began in Macedonia and went on to dominate the continent—Alexander the Great . . .!”

Alexander the Great? I think I've heard of him. . . .

Ayaka did not know much about legendary heroes. She was only aware of Alexander, like

Richard the Lionheart, as a name she'd heard of before. The sight of Saber beaming with childish delight, however, told her that he was a historical figure and a hero who had lived even longer ago than Saber.

Then, is he a Servant too . . . ?

Ayaka had sensed an extraordinary presence from the red-haired man, but the memory of the shrieking young man beside him made her feel a little relieved.

That may have been sympathy, because she sensed that the black-haired, baby-faced young man was, like her, "un-mage-like."

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A Closed-off Town, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

"Did you say it's raining packages of sweets . . . ?"

El-Melloi II's confused voice echoed from the cell phone speaker.

He had heard about what was happening from Flat, but he quickly grasped the situation and voiced an opinion.

"I see. . . . Kerberos is a foreign element in that faceless underworld. They must have taken advantage of its characteristics. . . . Still, whatever school of magecraft they employed, it would take quite a high level of mage to cause such a ridiculous phenomenon over such a large area. . . . There's a strong possibility that we're dealing with a Servant."

In contrast to El-Melloi II's calm analysis, Jester's grimacing double was shouting angrily.

"Illusionists?! Damn them! This is none of their business!"

That divine beast ought to get closer to its original strength if it takes in multiple dead people, Jester mused to himself. *It depends on the magical energy resources available in this ritual site, but if I'm lucky, it's combat abilities could be a match for a high-ranking Servant. . . .*

The corners of his mouth crept upward again.

"After all this effort to set the table, I suppose I'll lend a hand. Just a little."

"What are you plotting, fiend?!" Assassin bellowed as she cut through the grotesqueries that had come through the windows.

"Nothing fancy. For starters, I'll just murder all the cops at the intersection down there, then

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stuff them into Kerberos' belly instead of all that candy."

"I won't let you . . . Ngh . . ."

Assassin rushed at Jester, but the countless smoky, black grotesqueries blocked her path.

"Oh, it looks like these things—this whole world, really—are going after Servants first. Be careful, now. And the same goes for the renowned murderer over there," Jester added, looking at Flat's wristwatch. There was a hint of something like respect and affection in his voice, but Jack himself was the only one to notice it.

". . . I appreciate the warning."

What's our next move, Flat? Can you do it? Jack called out telepathically to Flat, mentally clicking his tongue over having been discovered.

Hmm. I've almost got it.

Jester, who had no idea what Berserker and his Master were saying to each other telepathically, continued to taunt Assassin with a look of ecstasy on his face.

"Hee hee. Would it bother you if I killed those cops? Didn't you fight them yourself, at the police station? So, why try to stop me from having a little fun with their lives? It doesn't look like your problem is with me giving Kerberos a power-up."

". . . I won't let you have your way. That's all."

"No, I don't think so! You found out that those cops are trying to protect Kuruoka Tsubaki, and now you show them some respect, even if they are your enemies. Am I wrong? Yes, I know. I know everything about you. You, however, don't understand mages yet."

"Silence!"

She threw a concealed dagger, but it just passed through Jester's body like it had before, serving only to reconfirm that Jester's main body was not there.

"Mages are the ultimate pragmatists. In the end, they'll choose to kill Kuruoka Tsubaki. But that's the right choice, Assassin. This ward-world is out of control, and before long it will spread outside the ward . . . into the real Snowfield! Any hero that sides with humanity ought to choose the option with the fewest sacrifices, and quickly! Sacrificing just one girl could save 800,000 people—maybe even the whole human race!

"Yes," Jester's double continued gleefully, "that mercenary you had your eye on might kill little Tsubaki before anyone else gets the chance! That has its charms! I'd love to see you bound for anger and despair, betrayed by the man you trusted!"

". . ."

She was already showing him anger, Assassin's murderous glare seemed to say as she hurled the last of the grotesqueries clinging to her out a broken window.

The wrathful, silent Assassin and the gleeful, loquacious hematophage faced each other. The two of them were almost in their own world.

Hansa, however, disregarded the mood and broke his silence.

“Hey, corpse.”

“... What, executor? Stay out of this. It’s just getting good.”

“Back at the police station, you said you’d deny the human order,” Hansa continued in spite of Jester’s obvious irritation. “That Dead Apostles exist to defile human history.”

“? And? Something that obvious should be common knowledge to an executor like you.”

“That Assassin’s part of human history. Aren’t you going to deny her? You are defiling her, but that contempt doesn’t come from denial. You’re trying to defile her with that twisted lust of yours because you were charmed by her, because you couldn’t deny her. You’re trying to corrupt her. Am I wrong?”

“... What’s your point?”

Jester erased all trace of expression from his face. Hansa ignored his question and coolly changed the subject.

“By the way, I told you before that bringing down you high-level Dead Apostles takes consecrated weapons, a singularity-user, or a high-level mage. . . . Remember that?”

“So what? What are you buying time for? You’re the ones who are short on—”

A Black Key sailed through Jester’s double.

Just as it embedded itself in the wall behind him, Hansa said:

“My consecrated weapons can’t reach your main body when it’s not here . . .”

“?”

“But luckily . . . I’ve got a high-level mage to help with that, Dorothea.”

“__”

For an instant, time stopped for Jester.

Flat slipped into that momentary blank and activated his magecraft.

“Begin interference!”

The next moment, magical energy raced through the room in all directions, reflected off the Mystic Codes of the nuns hiding in scattered positions, and created a simplified current of magical energy.

It finished by concentrating into the Black Key that Hansa had thrown, and the spell activated.

“Gah?! . . . Wha . . . Gwaaah!”

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In an instant, Jester shuddered from head to toe. He was supposedly just a double, but he groaned with a look of agony on his face.

“?!”

Assassin was the one confused.

Not by the spell itself, and not by its ability to actually damage Jester.

The moment the priest called Jester “Dorothea,” the hematophage had taken his attention off her completely with a look of obvious shock.

Jester fell to his knees and glared at Hansa with bloodshot eyes.

“Damn you. . . . What did you . . .?”

“Oh . . . Flat, give us the rundown.”

“Right! You’re a double, so I just followed the currents of magical energy and attacked the real you!”

“Impossible,” Jester spat at the nonchalant Flat, his face still contorted in pain. “My doubles are no ordinary . . .”

“Oh yes, I know that! You prepare a soul, or maybe I should say a core, for each one and transform by wearing them on your real body like Mystic Codes, right? So, you also make each double think and act independently, right? Then, you switch between them in a complicated way while basically running jamming—or you do something like jamming to confuse us, and . . . Man, I had a hard time spotting the pattern! It took a while, but it was really fun!”

“You . . . saw through it? In this short a time . . .?”

Consternation trumped pain on Jester’s face.

“Who the hell are you? No mage should be able to . . . Damn it. First that mercenary knew about my transformations, now this. . . . I guess I shouldn’t expect a Holy Grail war to be easy. . . .”

If the double’s in as much pain as he looks, Hansa decided, the real one might be immobilized by now.

He was curious about what kind of spell Flat had sent the main body, but it was not the time for questions. He held his peace and observed.

As he did so, Jester shifted his attention to him.

“But that’s not important. . . . What matters now is you, priest.”

“What did I do? It’s an honor to get such a shocked reaction just for calling your name. Oh, you don’t have to hide it anymore: You were getting just a little full of yourself, weren’t you?”

“Don’t play dumb!” Jester roared in a voice deeply tinged with hatred and agitation. “You bastard. . . . How did you know . . .?!”

“So, that info was legit,” Hansa answered with a sigh. “Will I have to give official thanks for this? . . . That wouldn’t look good if it got out, considering my position.”

“...?”

Jester looked confused. A moment later, however, a different voice filled the room.

“We have no need of your gratitude, bitter foe of ours.”

The voice came from the pocket of Hansa’s cassock.

He reached into it and pulled out a cell phone.

It was not the phone connected to a Lord of the Clock Tower; it was Hansa’s own.

It must have been taking a call on speakerphone the entire time, and the caller whose voice issued from it must have remained silent throughout.

The owner of the voice, which was elegant but gave an impression of incredible depth, stated their reasons for working with Hansa.

“I merely invested in a descendent of an old friend, not in you.”

“That voice . . .”

A dizzying array of expressions flashed across Jester’s face.

Confusion, agitation, anger . . . and then despair.

“As compensation, I request the disposal of waste. That’s all there is to it. You have no cause to thank me.”

Mentally breaking out into a cold sweat at the “voice” that paid him no attention whatsoever, Jester could not help muttering:

“Why . . .?”

“Let me introduce you,” Hansa coolly explained by way of pouring salt in his wounds. “This is the ‘high-level mage’ who agreed to lend me a hand.”

“I don’t believe it. . . . Why would you do this . . .?!”

Jester groaned at the agony coursing through every inch of his body, his face a mask of confusion.

“Oh, that’s simple!” Flat answered without a hint of tension on his face.

“What . . .?”

“I figured a hematophage as strong as you must be pretty famous among other hematophage people, so I figured I’d ask one I know!”

“... Huh?”

Jester let out a dumbfounded exclamation. Flat’s tone was carefree that he even forgot the pain he was in.

“And there was only one hematophage I know that I’d exchanged phone numbers with.”

Flat gave a thumbs up, delighted that his prediction had been correct, and announced the

name of the person on the other end of the phone call.

“And . . . bingo! I just knew Mr. Van-Fem would know about you!”

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The Same Time, Fuyuki (Illusion)

“? . . . What could that be? I had a feeling I just sensed something nasty.”

“Sure it’s not just your imagination?” Prelati chimed in from beside the confused Francesca as he stuffed his face with sweets.

They had activated two illusions inside Kuruoka Tsubaki’s ward-world using the Noble Phantasm Grand Illusion.

First, they had tricked the ward-world itself in order to trap Saber and Ayaka in an isolated space.

Second, they had cast an illusion to trick Saber and Ayaka’s five senses.

Saber and Ayaka were currently seeing a vision of Fuyuki. It was as if they were decked out in VR gear from head to toe.

The Prelatis chatted happily as they watched Saber and Ayaka in Fuyuki through a mirror.

“Come on! What do you like to eat while you watch movies, popcorn or churros? Whichever it is, you’d better get it ready now! Donuts and hotdogs are good choices too! Don’t you think so too, me (Francois)?”

“Now you’re just showing off, me (Francesca). You know we didn’t have any of those back when I died.”

“I hear popcorn’s been around way longer than we have. On this continent, anyway.”

“You’re kidding! Couldn’t that have been the Age of Gods? Popcorn’s incredible! Divine, even!”

“This ‘popcorn’ sounds impressive. . . . I’d like to try any dish with such a history.”

Saber swallowed to keep his mouth from watering as he healed his wounded belly with his “companion’s” healing magecraft.

“I’ll treat you to as much as you want if we ever make it out of here.”

Ayaka had given up on playing the straight man to Saber and was surveying their surroundings.

The large, red-headed man and the black-haired youth who seemed to be his Master who

had charged into the castle still showed no sign of emerging from the door they had smashed.

Given that even the nearby flowers had stopped swaying, Francesca and Francois must have paused their illusion.

“Oh well,” a voice came from overhead again. “You might be better off skipping the snacks so you can focus! I mean, you’d never get a chance to see a show this good while you were alive!”

“Oh? I can hardly wait! Are you going to have me fight Alexander the Great in this illusion of yours?”

“That would be fun too, but it loses a lot of the impact when you realize it’s an illusion. Of course, I can guarantee you an even more entertaining performance. I mean, the whole point is to show you something you’ve never seen before.”

As Francesca’s voice spoke, the scenery began to move again.

After a short wait, the towering, red-haired man emerged from the large, broken door with a big barrel on his shoulder.

After him came the young man, who did indeed look nervous. Other figures followed.

“Is that . . . Filia?!” Ayaka could not help exclaiming. “No, she looks a little different. . . .”

One was a beautiful woman with the same swaying, snow-white hair as Filia.

Beside her was a smaller woman a stern expression dressed in silver plate mail over a blue dress.

“? Who’s she? . . . She looks like a Heroic Spirit, but . . . a lady knight . . . Jeanne d’Arc, maybe?” Ayaka turned and asked Saber, suggesting a name she dredged up from somewhere in her memory.

“What . . .?”

She gasped in spite of herself.

Saber’s usual, nonchalant grin was gone from his face. It was suffused with pure awe that precluded any other emotion, like he had just witnessed the beginning of the end of the world.

“ . . . Is this . . . a dream?”

“No, it’s an illusion. You said . . . Huh? Do you . . . know her?”

Don’t tell me she’s his wife, or sister, or daughter, or something. . . .

Ayaka worried that she might be someone close to him. Saber gave a little shake of his head without ever taking his eyes off the woman.

“No, I’ve never seen her before.”

“? What do you mean?”

“Wait,” the dumbfounded Saber managed to answer the confused Ayaka. “I’m checking with my companions. . . . Oh . . . I can’t believe it. Oh . . .”

Saber stood rooted to the spot, his fists clenched.

“There are only two reasons I’m still on my feet and not on my knees right now,” he told

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Ayaka.

“What would you kneel for . . .?”

“First, for all my faults, I’m still a king myself. It wouldn’t be fair to the people who acclaimed me if I bent the knee so easily.”

Ayaka could not tell if Saber was speaking calmly or not. The next instant, however, she settled on “not.”

“Second . . . I don’t want to take my eyes off the legend I’ve spent my whole life chasing, even for a second.”

He did not even want to lower his gaze for the time it would take to kneel.

Saber’s attitude told Ayaka who the girl in blue and silver was.

It told her, but she had trouble accepting it.

As far as she could remember, that hero, who even she had heard of, was supposed to be a man. But Ayaka failed to think of any other solution and said the name aloud.

“Don’t tell me . . . that’s King Arthur . . .?”

The central hero of the legends of the Round Table who Richard’s mother had told him so many stories about in Ayaka’s dream, and who Saber had called “the first king of my heart.”

It was not easy for Ayaka to believe, but she could sense the woman’s majestic bearing, and she exuded a quality that was not overshadowed by the massive Alexander the Great walking ahead of her.

“Huh? But she’s a girl. . . . Why?”

“Artoria Pendragon,” a voice that only Ayaka and Saber could hear rang out from the sky, as if in answer to her question. “That’s King Arthur’s real name, you know. Make sure you never write it on a history test, though; you won’t get credit for it.”

“Could this be . . .?”

“Yup. Part of the Holy Grail War that happened in Fuyuki. It was about 15 years ago, though. Man, you wouldn’t believe how lucky I am! You see, that lightning chariot just happened to break the castle’s wards back then. I got a look at three kings all together!”

“Three?”

Did that mean yet another king would be coming?

Ayaka only had a moment to wonder before that final king appeared before King Arthur and Alexander the Great with an air of displeasure.

“ . . .!”

It was the golden hero who had beaten Saber in the church.

“Ah ha ha! Don’t be afraid!” Francesca laughed at Ayaka’s caution. “I’m just recreating scenes my familiars saw!”

“What for? . . . Why are you doing this?!”

Ayaka glared angrily at the sky, and the boy and girl’s voices answered.

“We just want to show you.”

“Yeah! And then we want to see how His Majesty reacts! It’s what you call fifty-fifty! A win-win relationship!”

“We’ll fill you in as a show of respect for the Lionheart who was so popular with the masses. You’ll get to know what the great ‘King Arthur,’ more famous than the Lionheart and above all his mental support and the foundation of his chivalry, is really like.”

For an instant, noise ran through the world.

The scenery blurred in a way that made Ayaka imagine she could hear the buzz of static, and the world was instantly repainted.

No.

It continued to be repainted.

There was a view of the large bridge in Fuyuki.

There was a view of King Arthur fighting a spearman at the harbor.

There was a view of Heroic Spirits battling a giant monster in the river and a bizarre knight fused with a fighter jet.

There was a view of a mage mowing down a man in a wheelchair with a gun.

There was a view of a collapsing hotel.

Fantastic scenes set amid scenery that Ayaka recognized were flashing by in few-second increments.

But none of the humans or Heroic Spirits noticed Ayaka or Richard. Some of the figures even passed right through them.

They probably really were just “spectators”—unable to interfere or to be interfered with.

The dizzying, shifting scenery simply unnerved Ayaka.

The scenes included views of the Kurokizaka area, which she did not want to see.

She caught a glimpse of the Semina Apartments out of the corner of her eye for just an instant. That glimpse was enough to make Ayaka hallucinate that her heart was being crushed, and her breathing spontaneously grew ragged.

Just as she instinctively looked down, Francesca’s voice rang out.

“That was just the preview! Don’t you just love previews?! OK, time to show you our feature presentation! It’s a fragmentary record of the fourth War . . . but we’ve edited it into a nice documentary for you to enjoy! Well, spoilers, but it doesn’t have a happy ending!”

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The footage shifted again, and this time it lasted more than a few seconds.

The woman who looked so much like Filia was getting off a plane at the airport, accompanied by a black-suited King Arthur.

It was like the opening scene of a movie. Letters floated in the air so that Ayaka could see them.

It was a charming logo that read, "Editor: Francesca Prelati," in both Japanese and English.

The poor taste made Ayaka's cheek twitch, but a glance to her side revealed that Saber was still expressionless and still intently watching the scene unfold.

Saber . . .

Is that girl really the King Arthur you look up to so much . . . ?

Saber's tense attitude was infectious, and Ayaka decided against looking away from the illusory world.

"I hope you enjoy seeing your dear King Arthur's true colors," Francoise announced maliciously, perhaps realizing that his audience was hooked, as he played the unnatural sound of an intermission bell in the illusion.

"And the moment her Master betrayed her and trampled on her wish."

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A Closed-off World, Crystal Hill, Top Floor

"That was a fascinating listening experience, Flat."

Flat responded to the voice from Hansa's cell phone speaker with a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness! You never said anything even though you were on speakerphone, so I thought you might be bored. . . ."

"I even got to hear a lecture from a Lord of the Clock Tower while I was it. It was a deal with no downsides."

"Wait, Flat," the Lord in question's voice came from the cell phone on the altar. "Whose voice was that? Unless my ears are playing tricks on me, I heard a name that came up a lot in connection to your hometown. . . . Did you call him even before you called me?!"

"S-Sorry, sir! I took turns calling both of you, but the connection to Monaco stabilized before the one to London, and . . ."

"It was an excellent lecture, my Lord. It seems my fate is entwined with your students."

“ . . . My apologies for that occasion.”

That was all El-Melloi II managed to say before he fell silent. The man on the other end of Hansa’s phone, meanwhile, addressed Flat in a rich, deep voice, as if reminiscing about the past.

“Still . . . this reminded me of the first time I heard an audio drama on the radio, about 80 years ago. I believe it was Le Comte de Monte-Cristo. Of course, today’s villain was terribly stale in comparison.”

“ . . .!”

The voice was all Jester needed to realize that the last words were aimed at him.

That much was clear from the meaning of the words, but Jester had felt the speaker’s gaze on an even more basic level.

He might not actually be watching, but he could probably grasp Jester’s every move. Jester knew that he was dealing with a being on that level.

That being made a single request, as casually as he might order a morning coffee at a hotel.

“Flat. This is a good opportunity, so dispose of it for me while you’re at it.”

“ . . .!”

Jester’s nerves froze.

He could immediately tell what the “it” he could hear from the phone referred to.

That realization melted the shock and awe gripping his heart, and he finally spoke to the man on the other end of the call.

“Are you . . . Are you really going to get in my way, Lord Vandelstam?!”

“ . . .”

Jack was inwardly a little taken aback by the conversation.

I see.

It’s not as though I doubted Flat’s word . . . but he really does seem to be a hematophage of importance.

He speaks like an amiable old gentleman, but behind that is the intimidating air of a powerful king.

Valery Fernand Vandelstam.

Alias, “Van-Fem.”

He was the “hematophage acquaintance” that Flat occasionally mentioned to Berserker, but it seemed he was a far more important figure in the underworld than Jack had imagined.

According to Hansa, he had been designated as one of just under thirty special, high-ranking Dead Apostles and also possessed a “human face” as the head of one of the world’s leading corporations.

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He was a unique creature who had built up powerful connections to human society not through hematophage or Dead Apostle abilities, but through economic power and influence—a terrifying hematophage who was powerful both as a human and as a Dead Apostle.

Of course, as far as Flat was concerned, he was just “a super-rich, super-strong hematophage who runs a casino on a fancy cruise ship back home.”

That Dead Apostle, who had earned the nickname “The Devil,” fell silent for a moment. When his voice came from the speaker, it sounded as if he were talking to himself more than answering Jester.

“Dead Apostles are those who deny human history. . . . Is that it?”

He may have already decided that Jester was not worth talking to.

“I see. That’s quite right,” he continued dispassionately, as if for Flat and Hansa’s benefit. *“That’s precisely why you’re repulsive. You say that you deny the human world, and all the while you’re in love with a Ghost Liner—a Heroic Spirit—arguably the apotheosis of human history. It’s what they call a double-standard.”*

“. . .!”

“I don’t mind you having your fill of humans in bad faith. Conversely, you might fall for a fanatic with beautiful convictions, and it’s only natural that you would treat individuals differently. But changing your stance as a Dead Apostle—your way of being—based on who you’re dealing with? That’s an unnecessary bug in the world.”

Hansa was certain.

If Jester had defiled Assassin purely out of warped desire without making any claims to “deny human history,” this Dead Apostle called Van-Fem would not have done much, if anything.

He had no idea what Van-Fem would have done if Jester had claimed to seal away his nature as a Dead Apostle for the sake of love, but for the moment, at least, that was purely hypothetical. Hansa decided to shelve the question.

When Flat had told Van-Fem about Jester before he made contact with Lord El-Melloi II, Van-Fem had initially spoken warmly of him and called him a fellow affirmer of humanity. He might be decadent and inclined to destructive doctrines, but he was a Dead Apostle who at least saw humanity as worthy enough to plan a murder-suicide with.

But as soon as Hansa described the events at the police station—how Jester had used his power to deny human history while claiming to love Assassin—Van-Fem’s demeanor had abruptly cooled.

That was when he had said Jester’s true name, Dorothea.

It seems clear that this high-ranking Dead Apostle governed himself according to strict rules and that Jester had broken them.

If Jester hadn't done that, I guess Van-Fem might have sided against us. This is why I hate dealing with Dead Apostles.

Van-Fem was the kind of big name that the Burial Agency, the organization that Hansa held in such high regard, would take on.

Hansa remained on his guard, not knowing when Van-Fem might intervene, but the Dead Apostle seemed to see right through him.

"Hansa, I believe you said your name is? Have no fear. Like the Lord of the Clock Tower, I'm merely a spectator speaking on the front lines from a safe place. You have nothing to worry about."

"Much obliged. Speaking for the Church, I eagerly await a contribution from you."

"Do you take checks?" The champion of finance replied calmly, unmoved by Hansa's jibe. *"I've grown ecologically conscious lately. I'd rather not consume any more energy with this long phone call."*

Van-Fem said a brief goodbye and ended the call before Hansa was even sure if he were joking.

He had never conversed with Jester directly, and that more than anything showed that Van-Fem had severed ties with him.

"..."

"Uh, umm . . . Mr. Fem seemed really angry. Are you OK? If you're going to make up, I think you'd better start with an email. Even if he won't take your calls, I'm pretty sure his secretary checks all his emails."

Flat landed a critical follow-up hit on Jester, who was still on his knees and motionless.

Hansa concluded that this double was no longer a threat and directed the nuns with a gesture.

"It's too bad, but if you've got the time to write emails, write the Church a confession. We're about to go hunt down your main body."

That was one of the fiends' leaders.

I could tell just from his voice. He's a dreadful enemy . . . but I'll worry about him later.

Assassin briefly hesitated about her course of action, then apparently decided that she did not have the time to fight a double and made to leave out a broken window—toward where Kuruoka Tsubaki was.

But a massive form covered the broken window, standing in her way.

It was neither a smoke-like demonic beast nor a Kerberos; it was an even more pure symbol

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of death: a complete skeleton scorched and carbonized by jet-black flames.

One other notable feature was its height, which rivaled the building's.

"Whoa! A giant's ghost?!"

Flat was startled like an elementary schooler. Jester, meanwhile, slowly rose from his knees.

"Whoa! A vampire's ghost?!"

Flat was even more startled.

"The spell should still be effective," Jack chimed in, still in wristwatch form.

Jester might be a double, but that did not necessarily mean that he could not attack them.

The people around the room tensed while Jester remained downcast and silent. Then . . .

". . . Hee hee."

A soft chuckle escaped him.

"I see. . . . So, I've been scrapped as a Dead Apostle."

Jester's face was still ghostly pale as he broke into a grin with more than a hint of madness in it.

"Then we're a perfect match now, my dear Assassin."

"What do you mean?"

Assassin furrowed her brows, sensing something ominous.

"You were abandoned by your chiefs despite holding the strongest faith of anyone, and I was abandoned by the mainstream of the pro-humanity faction because I turned toward a stronger love than anyone. Yes, I see! So, this is the view you saw! Now I understand it in my soul! We truly were destined to be drawn to each other!"

"Stop. You sound like a stalker who lost his job after the he got the cops called on him."

Hansa looked disgusted, but he did not have time to listen.

He turned his attention to the giant skeleton and considered whether he ought to destroy it or make his escape.

Then, a loud shock shook the building.

"?!"

It was obvious what had happened.

The giant skeleton had raised its arms and begun to punch the building.

"Oh! This is beyond my wildest expectations! That's a world built on dreams and death for you; it's as if there's no end to its nightmares!"

Jester became even more excited as he continued to smile through the pain wracking his body.

"Have it your way, Lord Vandelstam! I'll prove it to you! I'll seize the Grail with my beloved Assassin, and we'll use its power to wake up the spider and wipe out the human race! I'll go back to affirming humanity when Assassin is the last remnant of the human order! When that time comes, I'll have you throw a party to bless us, Lord Vandelstam!"

“Is it me, or has this guy stopped making sense?! Maybe I made the spell too strong. . . .”

“Don’t worry,” Hansa answered Flat’s shout. “He was always like this.”

Assassin, who also knew how Jester had been broken all along, planned her counterattack on the skeleton without hesitation.

Suddenly, the flames that spilled from the giant skeleton’s mouth leapt toward Assassin.

“ . . . !”

She deflected them with one of her Noble Phantasms, Capricious Fleeting Shadow: Zabaniya.

She held it at bay with writhing blades of hair, but then realized that another, equally gigantic skeleton had appeared on the opposite side of the building and her escape routes were almost totally cut off.

“Ha ha ha! Well now! It’s on course to bring the whole building down! Oh, don’t worry; no matter how much of the city it destroys, one wish from the master of this dream, and it will all go back to normal! Of course, that only goes for the buildings. . . . Oh, what a shame. This poor priest and nuns and mage are all going to die just because you came here!”

“Damn you . . . !” Assassin snarled. Jester basked in her animosity and contentedly screwed up his eyes.

“Oh, not good, not good! The altar!”

“Hey, Flat?! What’s—”

Lord El-Melloi II’s voice cut off. At the same time, the building let out a loud creak.

Before long, Crystal Hill tilted, and the skyscraper, a symbol of the city, loudly collapsed.

And Flat and the others on the top floor were . . .

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Fuyuki (Illusion)

The collapse of the Fuyuki Hyatt hotel was lavishly depicted within the illusion.

The event had taken place in the early stages of the fourth Holy Grail War, but thanks to Prelati’s editing, it was overlapped with visuals of its climax, the “Great Fuyuki Fire,” to close out the illusion with a more disastrous presentation.

“..”

The illusion came to an end, and the visible world reverted to the Fuyuki forest.

No one else appeared, and there was no sign of anyone in the castle.

As a cold wind blew, Ayaka felt that she had to say something, but she could not even turn to face Saber.

The “illusion” that the boy and girl had shown them had been a series of comically staged scenes, prankish in the extreme, but even she could understand that the presentation had been calculated to grate on the viewer’s nerves.

She did not know about King Arthur the person.

But when she looked at Richard, whose upbringing had been founded not on King Arthur but on stories of him, she could sense how noble, brave, and majestic a figure he must have been in those legends.

Ayaka had only heard Richard speak about his admiration over the past few days and did not actually know the legend of King Arthur, but even she had begun to develop a mental image of him as someone who “must be pretty incredible,” even if she did not really know why.

But that was precisely why . . .

Ayaka had not been able to bring herself to check the look on Richard’s face when he saw King Arthur in that illusion.

All in all, you could say that it had not been made to idly slander “King Arthur.”

It had not depicted King Arthur as a vicious murderer or a cowardly weakling. Even Ayaka had been able to grasp that she really must be noble.

But what they had ultimately been shown was the reality that even with her nobility and aspirations to justice, some things were still beyond her.

The other kings had refuted her principles, and she had major disagreements with the Master in whose hands she placed her fate.

Ultimately, she had destroyed the Grail using her own holy sword in a betrayal by her Master.

As a result, the city of Fuyuki had suffered an unprecedented disaster.

Ayaka had been unable to bear the final scene of the illusion, which placed them standing in the center of a mountain of charred corpses, and had no choice but to keep looking down.

Ayaka thought about one scene that the illusion had rubbed in their faces.

The words that each of the three kings had said when they drank together.

The golden King of Heroes said:

“A king’s principles ought to be the laws that he himself laid down.”

The red-haired King of Conquerors said:

“A king is someone who conquers and overruns all riches and all reason, starting from his own body.”

And the blue and silver King of Knights said:

“A king should be someone who sacrifices himself to the path that leads to righteous ideals in order to grant his people salvation.”

The King of Knights went on to declare her own wish for the Grail.

“I will turn time back to the ritual of the sword of selection, and if there is a more fitting king than me, I will start British history over again by entrusting it to them.”

She had heard about that ritual at the beginning of Richard’s mother’s bedtime story. It had supposedly decided that Arthur would be king.

It seemed like the King of Knights had thought that since she had ultimately destroyed her kingdom, if there were anyone better than her, that person should rule it.

But when they heard her declaration, the King of Conquerors grew quietly angry, and the golden king laughed at it.

The King of Knights said that she would “answer her people’s prayers for salvation.” The King of Conquerors had angrily disagreed, saying, “A selfless king can’t lead his people. The people will never admire a slave to righteousness.”

“Sacrificing everything you are on the altar of righteousness is no way for a human to live.”

“King of Conquerors, how can you be so certain that a reign that abandons humanity is worse than a human one?”

“Hehe. King of Knights, someday that attitude will uplift you from humanity to divinity.”

“Why do you laugh, King of Heroes? If that were humanly possible, why hesitate?”

“You think so? The goddesses I know were unreasonableness personified, always forcing their own ideas of righteousness onto the people.”

“Listen, King of Knights, I know I’m one to talk, seeing as legend has it I’m a descendant of Zeus . . . but chasing godlike righteousness is a path that ends in culling your people.”

Fate/strange Fake 6

The debate had continued for a little longer, and then assailants had appeared, signaling an end to the discussion before the King of Knights had a chance to make a final retort.

The argument had actually gone on longer, but Ayaka did not remember all of it.

She had been beside herself, overwhelmed by pressure from the red-haired king and a strange terror of the golden king.

If there had not been an attack, maybe the King of Knights would have made an effective retort.

Ayaka and Saber had not been able to see her face from their position.

They could only imagine what her expression had been.

They had no way of knowing if Francesca and Francois had deliberately hidden it from them, or if they had not been able to see the King of Knights' face either.

Had she been bowled over by the King of Conqueror's angry speech like Ayaka?

Or had she been unperturbed, convinced that there was no flaw in her kingship?

The golden king had said, sadistically, that he "enjoyed the King of Knights' look of agony," but had she really looked distressed? And if so, what had she been distressed about?

Ayaka did not know.

Would Saber know?

As she wondered, the scenery changed. In the end, Ayaka would never be able to learn if the King of Knights could have said something to the other kings in her own defense.

But Saber's words about living for the people had seemed right to Ayaka, so she had been more than a little shocked to hear the other kings meet them with anger and scorn.

It felt like a rejection of the Lionheart, who had saved her, although she was not one of his people.

The scenes conjured up in the illusion really were recreations of events observed by familiars.

They also included reproductions of information obtained from a master of Mystic Eyes that could see the past, who had been hired at great expense.

Nevertheless, the Fuyuki Holy Grail War was overseen by the Makiri, and the ward created by their insects was powerful. Francesca had not been able to see everything.

Of course, she could not see what each participant felt about it in their own minds.

On the other hand, there were many parts that she had known about but deliberately kept from the Lionheart.

Francesca knew that Fuyuki's Grail had been contaminated by "mud."

She had not been able to observe events immediately before or after its destruction, so she did not know what had been going through the mind of Saber's Master.

She could, however, guess that destroying the grail had, in a sense, been the correct decision.

And the illusion she had edited together gave no hint of that.

The Lionheart and Ayaka had only seen a film.

The flash at the moment the Grail was destroyed, seen from the perspective of a familiar far outside the city, and the vision of hell that had overflowed into Fuyuki as a result.

The detail that Command Spells had been used for the destruction of the Grail was only narration, inserted as speculation.

But given that it was hard to imagine King Arthur choosing to destroy the Grail voluntarily, there was no reason not to accept it.

And Ayaka's honest impression was that the "path" King Arthur had just walked was a frighteningly raw vision of "war," a far cry from the "tales of chivalry" that Richard's mother had told him.

She had seen fierce sneak attacks.

She had seen the king rejected by her Master.

She had seen the king's allies take a woman hostage and gun down unresisting opponents.

And . . . she had seen the king lop off the heads of those half-dead mages.

You could say that that was normal in war and leave it at that.

But even so, it had been far from Ayaka's mental image of a "battle of heroes" and rubbed her nose in just what kind of fight she was currently caught up in. It was all she could do to resist the urge to vomit out of fear.

Are you telling me that someone about my age fought through that kind of horrible treatment . . . ?

What expression had King Arthur worn as she raced across that battlefield?

Her face had not been shown in any of her difficulties, and Ayaka could not tell if she had been shocked or totally unfazed.

But . . . she thought that either one might distance her from the hero tales that Richard had admired.

Wavering in the face of a cruel fate would be one thing, but if she were calmly accepting a cruel fate . . . then, as the other kings had said, that would not be human; it would be a mechanical "system."

And even though she had gone that far, in the end she had been betrayed by her Master and failed to gain anything.

"All this happened in Fuyuki . . . ? I've heard about the great fire, but . . ."

It was certainly a tragic sight on its own, but what concerned Ayaka was that it had been

edited to look as if King Arthur were a pitiful loser.

That was why, even as she fought her growing urge to vomit, Ayaka glared at the direction the Prelatis' voices had come from even before she tried to say anything to Saber.

"Yeah, OK. For starters, I've learned that you two are the worst."

"Ah ha ha ha! Hold back on the praise; you're embarrassing me."

". . . Don't let them get to you, Saber. It's an illusion, right? I bet they made it all up! That argument between the kings is all lies for sure!"

"Oh? Are you sure?" Francesca teased. "If it's all lies, then everything the King of Knights had to say for herself is made up too."

Ayaka was at a loss for words.

"W-Well . . ."

"Well? How about it? What do you think? They say people only believe what they want to . . . but you never even had an image of King Arthur you wanted to believe in to begin with, did you? If you had to say, I guess it'd be a perfect, cool, irrefutable King of Knights that wouldn't disappoint your bodyguard Lionheart. Am I wrong?"

"That's not . . . Anyway, that ending makes no sense. Her Master had no reason to destroy the Grail! Maybe the King of Knights did get the Grail! And such a great king would never wish to redo history and make someone else king in the first—"

"Oh, that's good! I love that reaction! That's the kind of opinion you can only get from a complete outsider who doesn't know the first thing about the Holy Grail War! Talk about exciting! But that's true. . . . I'd love to find out what would've happened if Artie had gotten her hands on that Grail! Worst case scenario, the mud would time slip and . . . No, that could never . . ."

Francesca started mumbling incomprehensibly. Ayaka was irritated but fell silent for a little while.

Then, she looked Saber, who had kept silent up to that point, in the face.

Just then, Francesca and Francois started jeering tauntingly at Saber.

"So, what'd you think, little Lionheart?! The heroic king you idolized all that time wanted a redo of her legend going all the way back to the start of her kingdom. . . . How'd it feel to find that out? How'd it feel to see that she was a tyrant who would've tried to scrap your history if she'd gotten the Grail?"

"What's your impression of the pitiful story of how your precious, legendary King Arthur kept fighting and winning but still couldn't get anything in the end?! How did you feel seeing the other kings completely deny her?!"

"Shut up! You set it all up! You can't fool Saber with . . ."

Ayaka was frightened.

Frightened because Saber, who was always so talkative, had not said a word since the appearance of that king in blue.

No cries of admiration or surprise. She could not even tell that Saber was right next to her.

He had been shown a king who failed to gain anything, who had been treated as a mage's tool, had slaughtered helpless people on the verge of death, and ended up having even the wish she had gone that far for betrayed.

When Ayaka thought about the state his heart must be in, she felt like she had to say something to him, but she had never managed to find the right words.

But while she worried, Saber broke his silence.

"Francesca Prelati."

Ayaka instinctively looked over at Saber's face and found it completely expressionless. But was it her imagination, or was there a gleam in his eyes?

Or maybe, Ayaka began to think, he was so shocked that he had been crying in despair . . .

But it was actually the opposite.

Without moving from his spot, Saber honored the illusory world with his finest bow.

"If you are the compiler of this illusion . . . then you must know how much it means for one who calls himself a king to bow to another."

"Saber . . .?"

While Ayaka stared at him in bewilderment, Saber delivered a ringing speech straight from his soul.

"But I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for telling me . . . a new tale of the great King of Knights' heroism . . .!"

When they realized what emotion that growing flow of words was charged with, not only Ayaka, but even Francesca and Francois showed signs of confusion.

It was overwhelming delight.

If the gleam in his eyes had been tears, they must have been tears of gratitude and joy.

"Saber . . . what are you . . .?"

"Ayaka . . . did you see that King of Knights . . . and think that she was not a hero?"

"Huh . . .?"

"As far as I'm concerned, Ayaka . . . I know all about the king being betrayed, or unreasonable, or ending up battered and losing everything in the legends of the Round Table. But I adore it all, including that."

Fate/strange Fake 6

Richard slowly began to explain to the confused-looking Ayaka like a little boy talking about his favorite baseball team.

“And . . . in that argument at that drinking party, the other two didn’t reject the King of Knights.”

“Huh? But . . . the way they shouted and . . .”

“Think about it. Alexander the Great just shouted. I’m certain he doesn’t reject the King of Knight’s kingship. He called her a figurehead, said that she was tied down by an idol of a king, and more besides, but he never actually rejected the idol. He was just saying, ‘I recognize what you accomplished, but I don’t like it.’”

“Really?” Ayaka said, surprised that Saber, far from losing his cool, was speaking more calmly than usual.

“I’m just parroting my mother, but ‘a king doesn’t walk a noble path; his people call the path he’s walked noble.’ It’s easy for right and wrong to shift depending on time and place and the moods of subjects and vassals. So, that argument never had a right answer, and the three arguing must have known that better than anyone. They were trying to gauge sense, not righteousness.

“But you know, our King of Knights did lag behind the other kings in one thing!” Richard, still standing proud, joked to Ayaka. “Her voice just wasn’t as loud! I agree with all the kings, and I disagree with them too! It’s only natural for kings who lived in different times and different places from me to each have their own ideas about kingship! But people who loudly declare that they’re the one who’s right in the end are strong. Phillip was like that on crusade.”

“Oh, you’re taking it that way?” There was a hint of confusion in the Prelatis’ voices. “I was sure you’d either lose it and trash-talk the other two kings or lose hope in Artie and have to drop the happy-go-lucky act.”

“. . . Hang on, is he even surprised that King Arthur was a girl?”

The pair dropped the emotion from their tones and asked:

“. . . I knew it. You know, don’t you?”

“Somehow or other, you found your way to the real legend of King Arthur—I mean Artoria Pendragon—involved with magecraft. . . . Am I wrong?”

Richard ignored the Prelatis’ questions and did a big stretch in place.

“I thought so. So, that’s what you were really after. You wanted to find out how deep I penetrated into the King of Knights’ history, didn’t you? Well, I’m sorry to say that I never managed to find the tower Merlin was imprisoned in.”

Then, he made his expression blank and lost himself deep in thought, staring up at the sky.

“Oh . . . but they truly were magnificent. . . . Alexander the Great, and that gaudy one, and our first king were all ‘kings’ beyond anything I imagined.”

“Saber?” Ayaka called to him, concerned that he was talking to himself and worried that he might be in shock after all.

At that, Saber slowly lowered his face and said, with downcast eyes:

“Ayaka.”

“Wh-What?”

Ayaka looked confused.

“I’ve decided . . . to accept the resolve you showed earlier after all.”

“Huh?”

Ayaka stared blankly at Saber, who spread his arms wide in front of her, making no attempt to hide his damaged armor.

“Please . . . allow me to try meeting you one more time.”

Richard made a theatrical bow and smoothly took Ayaka’s right hand.

“I ask you:”

The king and girl harmonized beautifully with the magnificent castle in the forest behind them and blended into the scenery.

It was just like a scene out of a tale of heroism recounted in numerous legends.

“Are you my Master?”

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A Closed-off Town, Central Intersection

“Hang in there! The Kerberoses aren’t moving! Push through!”

Now that the Kerberoses were pinned down by the rain of sweets, John and the other police officers were making a desperate effort to regroup, but their situation was dire.

The smaller grotesqueries kept coming from somewhere in the city no matter how many they took down.

Some of the officers were trying to cast healing spells on their seriously injured comrades, but rats swarmed the open wounds, hindering their efforts.

And as if to add insult to injury, a sound like the earth shaking engulfed the area.

Fate/strange Fake 6

“! What the . . .”

Vera looked up and spotted them.

Giant skeletons as tall as Crystal Hill had pushed the building over, collapsing it with sheer brute force.

Fragments of the building rained down. The officers who could still move did their best to fend them off, but it seemed that they could not keep that up forever, and one by one they collapsed to the asphalt.

“Shit. . . . Is this it for us . . .?”

“Not yet! Don’t throw in the towel while you can still move!” John answered another officer with a shake of his head.

It was true that that world had been undergoing one metamorphosis after another for some time. If they could hold out a little longer, something might change again.

Although up to that point, everything but the rain of sweets had been a change for the worse. . . .

A shadow fell on John and the other officers. It was cast by the foot of one of the giant skeletons that had just toppled the building.

“ . . .”

So, this is it.

John and the other officers glared disappointedly up at the jet-black skeleton shrouded in black flames.

Above their heads, the skeletons gargantuan foot stamped down . . . when a band of light shot out from somewhere and blasted the bony foot to smithereens.

“?!”

The band of light fired through the gaps in the buildings a second and then a third time.

Just a few seconds later, the skyscraper-sized skeleton had been reduced to black bone dust on the wind.

And some of the officers recognized those bands of light.

They came from the Noble Phantasm that Saber had used in his battle with Gilgamesh on the church roof.

“ . . . Sorry, I took a little nap.”

With that, Saber appeared from behind a building.

At the sight of him, John cracked a wry smile and said:

“You sure look like you’re in a good mood. Pleasant dreams?”

“Yes, and I’m sure they’ll come true,” Saber replied with a shrug, then called to Ayaka, who was walking behind him.

“Isn’t that right, Master?”

“Ayaka’ is fine,” Ayaka said with a shrug. “So, what is it?”

“I’m truly sorry,” Saber explained. “I’m about to make a childish demand.”

“Selfish how?”

The pair looked up at the sky as they talked.

Their eyes were locked on the towering, jet-black skeletons that had appeared to replace the Kerberoses busy gorging themselves on sweets.

More skeletons than the city had skyscrapers, all every bit as gigantic as the one Saber had just blown away, had appeared and were closing in on them.

But Saber was beaming, and even Ayaka, although visibly nervous, showed no sign of running away and stared down that swarm of monsters head-on.

“I want to use the Holy Grail for something incredibly selfish.”

“Go ahead. Is it bringing songs back with you to that ‘Throne’ place?”

“No, not quite.”

Saber shook his head, and then announced in a clear voice:

“There’s a place that I want to use the Grail’s power . . . to fill with song.”

John and the other officers, who were watching Saber from behind during the conversation, widened their eyes in surprise.

Before they knew it, there were five figures following behind Saber and Ayaka.

Two of them were the lance-wielding knight and the archer that they had seen earlier.

Another was a man dressed like a hunter hiding his face with a hood who must have been hiding in the shadows at that time.

There was also a strangely dressed knight carrying countless swords on his back and a sphere of water floating close beside him.

“Who are they . . .?”

They were slowly walking toward the grotesque swarm, ignoring the police officers’ questions.

“Sorry, I used up the Kerberos fang just now. . . . Would you lend me a sword?”

At Saber’s request, the knight with countless swords on his back gave a listless shrug and tossed him a decorative sword that was beautiful that but seemed well-worn, sheathe and all.

“Thank you.”

Saber caught the sword, and as he drew it, said:

“We’re probably up against the Grim Reaper, and this whole world is his forces.”

Saber grinned broadly and broke into an energetic run.

“It will be a worthy opponent!”

As if in answer, the knights and archers behind him fanned out, and the hooded man vani-

Fate/strange Fake 6

shed before anyone knew what was happening.

The sphere of water floated lightly around Ayaka, looking as if it were guarding her. And then . . . their “war” began.

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“Wow! It’s getting crazy down there! Do you think those are all Heroic Spirits?!”

“Pipe down. You’ll defeat the purpose of the concealment spell.”

Watching Saber’s group fight from the air were Flat and Jack, who had supposedly been left behind on the top floor of Crystal Hill.

Flat was wearing something like a bizarre parachute and falling at a much slower rate than a normal parachute would allow.

Beside him, Hansa and the nuns were descending on identical parachutes. If not for Flat’s concealment spell, it would have looked like a midair show.

“Still, Hansa, it’s a good think we searched the room in advance.”

“Yeah,” Hansa answered one of the nuns, “I can’t believe there were so many parachutes in there. And these aren’t ordinary commercial models; they’re practically Mystic Codes with special magecraft built in. They needed charging with magical energy, though. . . . Did the faction using that workshop plan for the whole building getting take down?”

The parachutes were copies of objects in the real-world suite.

The King of Heroes, who had once said, “I shall at least lend you a parachute,” had put his words into practice and had outfitted the suite with enough for Tine and her subordinates in addition to his furnishings and decorations, but of course Flat and the others had no way of knowing that.

Then, surveying the battle between Saber and the swarm of “death” unfolding below them, Hansa calmly stated:

“. . . We’d better land a good distance from them so we won’t get caught in that.”

Noting that the cityscape he could see from the air was being steadily overrun with darkness, he added:

“Of course, it doesn’t look like anywhere in this city is ‘out’ of that anymore. . . .”

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As he raced through the city full of “death” made manifest, Saber’s heart was filled with delight.

I knew that King Arthur would be just as the legends said.

If he relaxed at all, his trembling heart would bring tears of joy to his eyes.

Her conduct is praiseworthy. Whether she was entrusted the thread by another or spun it herself, she would spin it over again as many times as it takes to raise a flag that will never fall over her land.

His body moved instinctively, cutting down a second skeletal grotesquery and then a third.

It’s true that I might have taken a different path, and that I might not choose to start over.

His movements picked up speed with each one he dispatched. By the time his body count passed ten, he had already reached his top speed from his battle with the golden Heroic Spirit.

But what does that matter? Those are trifles. We just have different values.

Matching pace with Saber’s struggle, his retinue of knights and archers were bringing down the surrounding monstrosities one after another.

“When you praise conviction, it doesn’t matter if it’s right or wrong!”

Before he knew it, he was shouting.

Unable to contain his overflowing emotions, he gave voice to his joy as he raced up buildings at high speeds.

“That’s why I praise her! No matter how the King of Conquerors shows his anger! No matter how the oldest King of Heroes scoffs!”

To be frank, Richard did understand why the King of Conquerors had been angry.

He had a good impression of Alexander as well, but that did not mean he objected to King Arthur’s intentions.

After all, the Lionheart had walked a completely different path of kingship from all three.

That was why he celebrated.

Celebrated the King of Knights’ ideals and convictions that had shaped his own chivalry.

“I approve her chivalry, her drive to realize her own ideals even if it meant undoing what her subjects accomplished! That tyranny is just another proof of kingship!”

Richard declared that the King of Knights’ desire to sacrifice herself for an ideal was “tyranny” and that he approved of it for that very reason.

The police officers who heard him looked confused. Ayaka heaved a big sigh and grinned that it was “just like him.”

“. . . But great King Arthur, you’re caught in one misconception,” Saber said, his face clouding slightly with anxiety.

Then, he expressed his feelings as if advising someone who was not there.



“First king of our chivalry! You can’t see! The country built by the Round Table and destroyed by the Round Table doesn’t need a fresh start!”

“King Arthur really did lead us to Avalon!”

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“Ugh. Just listen to him rattle on. Artie has it rough with people piling expectations on her even after she’s dead. What would our teachers think?”

Prelati poked his head out of a building whose sides had partially collapsed and stared at Saber in exasperation.

“Darn. Still, I figured he’d show us something uglier, but it’s hopeless; he’s incurable,” the girl who popped up beside him said cheerfully, twirling her umbrella. “He’s the type that’s seriously convinced he’s living in an epic. If he were set on one goal, he might end up like dear little Jeanne.

“But what’s the problem? I get a kick out of that king! I bet he’ll keep stirring up all kinds of trouble! It’d be no fun if he got crushed by gods or whatever and this turned into a one-sided slaughter! As promoters-slash-spectators, we’ve got to keep things entertaining and provide a top-notch bloodbath!”

“I never said I don’t like him. That’s why I wanted to see his face crumple up as he bawled his eyes out.”

“Oh, I’m with you there!”

Francesca narrowed her eyes and stared raptly with a devilish grin.

“Besides . . .”

Stared not at Saber, but at Ayaka Sajou, who had accepted her position as his Master.

“I bet it’d be fun to switch things up and go after that girl next time . . . right? ☆”

Prelati looked at Francesca, shrugged, and then looked up at the sky with a grin of his own.

“So, what now? The hematophage’s presence is weaker now; want to go finish him off?”

“Good point. Either way, no matter how many big skeletons they beat up, it won’t get them out of this . . .” Francesca began to say, looking out over the dark-stained world, when she spotted a change and trailed off in mid-sentence.

“Hmm? What’s that?”

Fate/strange Fake 6

“No way! Oh wow! I know it’s just one city . . . but don’t tell me Lionheart’s gonna overwhelm a ‘world’?”

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Having raced up to the roof of the tallest building in the city after Crystal Hill, Saber paused to catch his breath.

“Great first king of ours! I will prove it!”

An especially large, jet-black skeleton stood blocking his path.

It was the product of multiple skeletons fused together, and countless bones sprouted wildly from its back like a thousand-armed Kannon.

Faced with that grotesque monster, Saber continued carve his panegyric to King Arthur into the world without the least fear.

“The path of kingship you walked was no mistake!”

Then, Saber kicked the roof and soared high into the air.

“The kingship and pride that the Round Table left behind gave birth to us! Tragedy and ruin polished our souls! I will show you and the Round Table that the splendor of humanity—of chivalry—will never fail!”

Slipping past the jet-black flames that closed in on him, Saber unleashed a shining slash with all his might.

“It was you we saw something to admire in! And we’ll go on seeing it, Arthur, our first king!”

All the while singing out the wish he held up at the top of his lungs.

“I’ve already lost the right . . .”

Then, after smiling in self-mockery for just a moment, he set a radiance that sent hope to some unknown person in his eyes and in his voice as he shouted:

“But someday, someone else will reach you in paradise! I know they will! The planet’s history that you wove will send a wind of peace to you! I have only to play notes to bless it!

“With the power of the Holy Grail . . . I will sing a song of human triumph to the farthest reaches of distant Avalon!”

Interlude

“A Mercenary is a Free Man II”

Interlude

“You there, you there. Listen closely, my little brothers and sisters.

“You must destroy anyone who tries to take something from us.”

When Sigma tried to remember his past, the words of his “foster parents” always came to mind. Even now that he knew they were totally meaningless, a tool for brainwashing, he could not forget them.

He felt neither hatred nor sadness for them.

Only the simple fact that those words had been repeated to him over and over remained in his memory.

But when Sigma thought that they were his oldest memory, he always wondered: Were those words influencing the way he lived?

Every time he remembered, he asked himself: Did he currently have anything to lose but his life? Anything important enough to make him want to destroy anyone who took it?

Sigma could not find anything. He just continued to passively exist.

He never considered trying to put himself forward. He just continued to crawl on and on behind the curtain of the world’s stage.

Even when he was caught in the middle of a Holy Grail War.

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A Closed-off Town, Kuruoka Residence

A short while earlier.

“Jester! Jester! What’s wrong?!”

Tsubaki ran over to the young Jester when she saw him suddenly collapse.

Sigma, who was looking on, inspected Jester’s body.

Is this a mystical attack?

It probably disrupts the target’s Magic Circuits directly by unleashing out-of-control, foreign

magical energy inside their body.

He had not noticed any projectile spell like Gandr. What had happened?

“Ngh . . . Ah . . .”

The sight of Jester groaning in pain had Tsubaki looking panicked and on the verge of tears.

. . . Could I finish him off now?

But it would be better to move Tsubaki somewhere else first.

It was less that Sigma did not want to show Tsubaki anything gruesome and more that if she perceived him as a murderer, “Mr. Black”—presumably her Servant—might target him.

“Tsubaki,” Sigma told her, “call your mom and dad.”

“O-OK!” She answered, trembling, and dashed off up the stairs.

“ . . .”

Once he had watched her leave, Sigma took a mystic tool from his belt.

It was a syringe of a liquid drug useful only in encounters with hematophages and certain summoned beasts.

The drug’s effects were on par with holy water. It would normally have no effect on a hematophage of Jester’s level.

But in his current state, Sigma decided, it was worth a try.

He looked over the boy Jester as if giving him a medical examination and placed a hand on the nape of his neck.

“ . . . Heh . . . Ha ha ha. It won’t work, mister. That stuff will only kill this child’s conceptual core.”

“Maybe, but it’s worth a try.”

“Hang on. New child appearances are a pain to get ahold of. I can’t force it. . . . I need full consent to load them. . . .”

Jester explained his own magecraft through his pain, but Sigma doubted that any mage would show his hand. The information was probably either nonsense or nearly worthless.

Sigma decided that Jester must be playing for time and coolly began to stab the syringe into him, when . . .

“__”

A young child’s scream rang out from the room above.

“?!”

The young Jester took advantage of that brief opening to kick Sigma in the gut as he continued to groan.

“ . . .!”

Fate/strange Fake 6

Sigma put distance between himself and Jester, but the scream had not sopped.

He saw that Jester was on his feet, although he appeared to be in pain, and decided that he could not finish him off at present.

Sigma immediately changed course, grabbed the crossbow off the table where he had left it, and leapt straight for the stairs.

If push comes to shove, will I be able to use it?

The crossbow was well-maintained, but he did not know if he could fire it immediately.

Even so, the strange beauty in red had made a point of entrusting it to him, so he thought that it would be useful for some future decision and decided to take it with him.

It could be a trap . . . but the more information, the better.

It was partly a gamble, but most of his jobs from Francesca had included an optional objective to “bring back stuff that looks like it might be fun if you see any,” so he did not feel much reluctance.

It doesn't look like it contains any spells that curse the holder to death.

. . . Still, I'm packing a lot of Mystic Codes now. . . .

Sigma reached the top of the stairs without stopping.

There was Tsubaki, staring out the window and unable to stand.

“What is it? . . .?!”

He was able to spot the change immediately.

The world he could see outside the window had changed completely since he had last seen it.

The blue sky was covered by dark clouds, and giant, monstrous skeletons were striding through the city.

The vibrant, green lawn and trees had withered, and sinister black steam was rising from the ground in some places.

“What's going on . . .?”

“Monsters . . . Monsters . . .”

Tsubaki had not been frightened by “Mr. Black,” but the swarm of giant skeletons terrified her.

Is she not involved in all this?

The next instant, “Mr. Black” rose out of the garden and enveloped the girl like it was trying to embrace her.

“Mr. Black . . .?”

Tsubaki sounded relieved. The shadow that seemed to be her Heroic Spirit did not answer; it only swayed as it hid the “scary world” from her eyes.

“ . . . I thought so.”

“I want to become a Magician.”

He remembered that Tsubaki had said that.

According to Kuruoka Yūkaku, the Servant was something like Tsubaki's protector.

What if it had responded to Tsubaki's wish to become a Magician?

He had had a bad feeling ever since Jester had started asking questions that seemed designed to lead her in that direction.

Sigma ground his teeth at the fact that his feeling had been spot-on as he asked Tsubaki:

"Hey, Tsubaki, you're not feeling under the weather at all, are you?"

"Huh? N-No, I'm scared, but I'm fine."

"I see. . ."

It seemed like the situation had nothing to do with her magical energy running dry.

Just then, Tsubaki's father, Kuruoka Yūkaku, emerged from the garden.

"Oh, Tsubaki. What's the matter?"

"D-Daddy! There's lots of monsters outside and . . . Oh, no, I almost forgot! Jester! Jester is . . .!"

Tsubaki ran to her father with tears in her eyes.

"Don't worry, Tsubaki," her mother, who had arrived later, told her with a calm smile. "All those big, big skeletons are your friends."

"What . . .?"

Tsubaki stared blankly up at her mother.

"That's right, Tsubaki," her father responded to her confusion. "Those nice skeletons are the same as Mr. Black."

"B-But they're not like Mr. Black. Mr. Black wouldn't do anything that scary. . ."

Tsubaki was looking at the giant skeletons fighting with something as they smashed buildings. Given that Sigma could see what looked like slashes of light from time to time, there was a good chance that it was a Saber-Class Heroic Spirit.

"Yes, they're the same as Mr. Black. Mr. Black's job is to keep you safe, but those skeletons are weapons. It's normal that you'd be scared of them."

"Huh? . . . What?"

"Hey . . ."

Sigma saw Tsubaki's confusion and tried to stop her parents from saying anymore, but his protest died on his lips.

A figure had rocketed down from the sky.

It was Assassin, and she was covered in injuries.

"Assassin!"

"Is the girl safe?!" She shouted, ignoring her wounds. "Is that hematophage here?!"

"Yes, but he suddenly collapsed in pain, and . . ."

Fate/strange Fake 6

“So, those mages’ spell succeeded. . . . Where is he?”

Assassin sounded ready to go to finish him off immediately.

“Are you Miss ‘Assassin?’” Tsubaki called to her, under the impression that “Assassin” was a name, and tried to approach her, looking worried.

“Are you OK? You’re hurt. . . . There’s blood and . . .”

Assassin saw that Tsubaki was on the verge of tears and spoke to Tsubaki in a gentle, reassuring voice as she shifted her clothes to hide her injuries.

“Yes, I’ll be fi—”

She was sent flying by a shadowy grotesquery that appeared from beside her.

“Ngh . . .”

Assassin fought back using the shadows that stretched from the gaps in her clothing, but the monsters appeared one after another and attempted to overwhelm her with numbers.

If her enemies had had a main body or a core of some kind, Assassin would be able to turn the tables on them using the appropriate Noble Phantasm.

But Sigma had already realized that the entire ward-world was fused with their enemy’s main body.

Meaning that its “core” could only be Kuruoka Tsubaki.

“Miss!”

A panicked Tsubaki tried to run to Assassin, but her parents’ arms held her back.

“It’s not safe, Tsubaki.”

“That’s right. You wouldn’t want to be caught up in that.”

Their voices were kind, but their expressions were clearly out of place in the situation around them.

That sense of discomfort drove a wedge deep into Tsubaki, who was after all a child.

Her unease grew, and she looked like she was about to cry as she shouted:

“Why?! Aren’t they Mr. Black’s friends?! Why are those monsters hurting Miss Assassin?!”

“Well . . . that’s because she’s trying to kill you.”

“!”

A boy’s voice came from behind the group.

It was Jester, who had climbed out of the underground workshop.

He was still in the form of a young boy and tormented by Flat’s spell, but he forced himself to smile and speak to Tsubaki.

“That lady says you being alive is a problem.”

“What . . .?”

“Stop,” Sigma quietly ordered.

But Jester continued, even as his whole body shook with pain.

“Yes! That goes for Mister Sigma there too. . . . They’re bad people who want to kill you to help themselves.”

“. . . You’re wrong.”

“Me? . . . What for?”

“You don’t have to care. You’re the queen of this world; just do whatever you feel like. You want to become a Magician and get your parents to praise you, right? Don’t worry; you can do it. I’m on your side.”

Jester was taking every opportunity to emphasize that he was a “friend.”

He was probably trying to avoid being attacked by making Tsubaki see him as an ally.

Assassin was currently not drawing on magical energy from Jester, but from a Master called Ayaka via Saber. Taken another way, that meant that it was hard for “Mr. Black” to identify Jester as Assassin’s Master.

“I’m a queen?”

“Yes, you are. People who are jealous of you are trying to bully you, and Mr. Black is going to protect you from them. Forever and ever.”

Jester tried to stroke the girl’s ego and indulge her childish sense that she could do anything. But he made one miscalculation.

Maybe if he had not suffered Flat’s attack and the shock of being abandoned by his superior as a Dead Apostle, he might have been able to understand and control Tsubaki’s feelings with a cooler head.

He did not realize.

He assumed that Tsubaki was a typical, simple-minded girl of her age suffering from illness. In a sense, Tsubaki really was simple-minded.

In this world, Tsubaki was the very picture of a typical girl of her age.

But he failed to realize that Tsubaki’s simple-mindedness was really the product of her struggle through a plethora of suffering.

And because that was what it really was, even though she did not understand why everyone was upset, even though she was afraid, even though she was on the verge of tears, even though she wanted to be happy, she had a revelation.

“Oh . . .”

The experience she had spent her whole life accumulating lead her to a single conclusion.

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“I ‘failed’ again. . . .”

Tsubaki sadly hung her head, then slowly raised it again.

Then, desperately fighting back tears, she said to everyone around her:

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry . . . Dad, Mom.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, Tsubaki. You should just relax. You don’t need to do anything.”

Nothing to be sorry for.

Even as young as she was, Tsubaki instinctively understood.

That did not mean, “You didn’t fail; nothing is your fault.” It meant, “You failed, but I’m not angry.”

So, it really was her fault that Sigma and Assassin were in trouble. Most importantly, it was her fault that those black skeletons were smashing things.

Tsubaki heard the noise of the city still being destroyed as she practically sobbed:

“B-But . . . if there are people in the buildings, everybody in the city will . . .”

“It doesn’t matter how many people die in the city. They’re just like batteries—consumable.”

“That’s right, Tsubaki. Those nice skeletons will kill all the people who are mad at you.”

“Yes, and it’s your world, Tsubaki, so Mystery will stay concealed no matter how many people die.”

“That’s wonderful. Now we just have to think about how to hide the effects on the outside world.”

. . . What?

What are they talking about?

Assassin could not help frowning as she fended off grotesqueries.

They were supposed to be brainwashed to protect Tsubaki.

There was no sign that they were under Jester’s control.

That would mean that they normally talked to their daughter that way.

After hearing what her parents had to say, Tsubaki looked imploringly at Sigma and Assassin. But they did not know what to think, and the only answer they could give was silence.

Then, Tsubaki realized that she was not mistaken.

She could not help it.

“It’ll be okay.”

Tsubaki was shaking, but she still smiled at the “grown-ups” around her.

“I’ll do my best.”

Just like that, “Mr. Black’s” smoke clung to her body like it was being sucked into her.

“What?”

Even Jester was confused, unable to read Tsubaki’s intentions.

But first Assassin and then Sigma guessed what she was trying to do and shouted to stop her.

“Stop!”

“Wait, you don’t—”

But their words never reached her. The monstrosities that sprang out of “Mr. Black” blocked their attempt to run to her.

As a result, Tsubaki was able to carry out her whim.

“Please, Mr. Black.”

The girl’s Command Spells glowed faintly.

“Please, put everything back the way it was.”

“Wha—”

Ignoring the young Jester’s look of shock, Tsubaki made her Command Spells shine.

“Please make me all alone forever and ever.”

For just an instant, it looked like “Mr. Black” made a gesture of surprise.

“Think this through!” “Stop!”

Assassin and Jester shouted at the same time.

Sigma could do nothing but watch the scene play out.

Soon, “Mr. Black” shook intensely, like it was screaming.

The next instant, the world turned over again.

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Snowfield, the Kuruoka Residence

“Ngh . . .”

When Sigma woke up, he was exactly where he had been before he lost consciousness.

He was in a corner of Kuruoka Yūkaku’s house that connected to the garden.

But the sky was blue, and the lawn was lush and green. The destroyed buildings were also

completely restored.

Sigma realized that he was not in the ward-world. He had been returned to reality.

As proof, only Kuruoka Tsubaki had vanished from the house without a trace.

When he looked around, he saw that Assassin appeared to have come to as well. She was clenching her fists and shouting:

“Would that little girl choose that here, in the midst of all this?!”

She staggered to her feet and glared at the Kuruokas, who were also struggling to rise, with unmistakable rage in her eyes.

“What kind of life did that child lead—did you force her to lead—for her to choose that?! What . . . What did you do to that child, to your own daughter?! What have you done?!”

“ . . . I don’t know what you’re talking about, but can you afford to waste time on us?” Kuruoka Yūkaku chuckled, holding his head, and looked at what was behind Assassin and Sigma.

“What a spoilsport. . . . I never guessed she was that broken. I was looking forward to Miss Assassin sobbing as she lopped off Tsubaki’s innocent little head while Tsubaki screamed that she wanted to live. . . .”

The irritated-looking boy opened the front of his clothes, revealing a tattoo reminiscent of a revolver’s chamber near his heart.

When he brushed a hand over the design, which appeared to be inked onto the flat surface of his skin, the tattoo spun, and a different design was loaded into the uppermost chamber.

Instantly, the boy Jester’s body swelled into a redhaired werewolf over two meters tall and leapt.

“See you, Assassin! I’ll have fun tormenting you with my love next time!”

The creature, whose speech had become coarser, climbed straight onto the roof of the house and flipped, speeding through the air away from Assassin.

“ . . .! You won’t escape me!”

Assassin kicked off the ground and vanished in pursuit of Jester, ignoring her own injuries.

That left only Sigma and the Kuruokas.

“We’ve had a rough time of it. I can’t believe the Command Spells ended up in our daughter instead of us.”

“Yes, but we should see that as proof. The Command Spells chose Tsubaki because, as young as she is, the quality of her Magic Circuits has surpassed ours.”

The couple’s matter-of-fact conversation made Sigma uneasy.

? What’s this feeling?

Were they still being manipulated by Tsubaki’s Servant?

No, Sigma decided, what felt out of place to him was nothing like that.

“Oh, you’re . . . Sigma, right? You’re supposed to work for Faldeus. Can you get in touch with him?”

“Dear, we have to get to the hospital first.”

“. . . You’re right. I guess we’ll pick up something to cut her right hand off with over there.”

“Yes.”

“Cut off . . . her right hand?” Sigma could not help asking.

“Yes, that’s right. It looks like that little brat Tsubaki went and used two Command Spells, but as long as there’s one left, we can reestablish a contract with that Heroic Spirit. With a Heroic Spirit that powerful, we’ll be able to secure a considerable advantage if we cooperate with Faldeus.”

Sigma understood.

This couple remembered everything that had happened while they were being controlled.

In spite of that, the first words out of their mouth were not concern for Tsubaki but plans to cut off her right hand and steal her Command Spells.

Oh, that’s right. This is how mages are.

The Magic Crest must still belong to one of the parents. I doubt they’d be too disappointed even if Tsubaki died. All that they care about is a blood-related individual to make inherit their magecraft.

Blood-related.

“. . . You’re going to cut off Tsubaki’s hand?”

“Yes, it will be fine. She’s unconscious anyway; we don’t have to worry about her screaming. Of course, we wouldn’t want her to lose the ability to bear children one day, so we’ll need to take the utmost care with her heart and nerves. Ask Faldeus and Chief Reeve to handle the hospital staff while we work. I don’t want to ask Francesca, but in a worst-case scenario, her magecraft would make it possible to preserve at least Tsubaki’s reproductive capabilities even with her head removed.”

Yūkaku seemed to be speaking dispassionately, without exaggeration or sarcasm.

Then, Sigma realized.

His strange feeling did not come from without.

It was an “emotion” welling up from deep inside him.

“You there, you there. Listen closely, my little brothers and sisters.”

Inside Sigma, a voice echoed.

“You must destroy anyone who tries to take something from us.”

Fate/strange Fake 6

A voice from the past. Words that no longer meant anything.

But it was that voice that stirred Sigma's heart.

Oh.

I see. Is that it?

I thought that . . . Kuruoka Tsubaki and I lived in different worlds.

She's a mage, but she has parents. Blood-related parents.

That had nothing to do with it.

Tsubaki's smile, the way he and the others had been treated in the past, and the face of the brother he had killed with his own hands flashed through his brain one after another.

What is it? What is this weird feeling?

Suddenly, Sigma realized that he was holding something.

It was the crossbow he had carried out of the basement in the dream.

"Hmm? . . . Why do you have that? It's difficult to use as a weapon, and now that all the Heroic Spirits are assembled, it can't be used in this War. Would you return it to us?"

As he listened to Yūkaku speak, Sigma suddenly had an idea.

". . . I said I'd protect Tsubaki, didn't I? With my own lips?"

And that mysterious being in red had trusted him immediately.

"He's mumbling something. . . . Dear, is this mercenary safe?"

"Oh, he can't do anything inside the house."

Tsubaki's father must have had a lot of confidence in the house's defenses, because he seemed entirely unafraid of Sigma.

But He was not careless or conceited either; Sigma could tell that his fingers were ready to cast a spell that would be the end of Sigma at any time.

Sigma drew in a short breath and resumed the inhuman expression of the magecraft-using mercenary as he said:

"Excuse me. Mr. Kuruoka Yūkaku, I will report the particulars to Mr. Faldeus."

"Yes, please do. I won't mind if you tell him about our Heroic Spirit—as much as you were able to understand, anyway."

"Yes, sir. And one more thing, Mr. Kuruoka. I ought to notify you."

"Notify me?" Yūkaku looked suspicious.

"This is a Holy Grail War," Sigma stated dispassionately, "and I am one of the participants."

"And? I assume that Assassin is your Heroic Spirit?" Yūkaku asked suspiciously, unaware that he was making a fatal error.

He was under the mistaken impression that Sigma was a low-level magecraft-user separated from his Heroic Spirit.

That even if something went wrong, all he had to do was finish Sigma off before he could use a Command Spell to recall Assassin.

“My direct superior is Francesca, not Faldeus . . . and I’ve been given permission to conduct the War as I see fit.”

“Hey . . . Don’t get any funny ideas.”

Before Yūkaku, who sensed a threatening atmosphere, could move his fingers, Sigma finished his last sentence.

Even going out of his way to say it was part of his plan to incite Yūkaku to act.

“This is a declaration of war from me to you.”

“I’m impressed. True, we told where the spells were, but I didn’t expect you’d manage to intercept them all.”

Several minutes later.

One of the “shadows”—the elderly captain—grinned from where he stood beside Sigma.

“I managed it because your information was accurate. Otherwise, it would have been me who went down. . . . Thank you.”

“Don’t be so quick to thank your Servant. It’s give-and-take between us,” the captain chuckled and looked at the two masses lying on the floor.

“Ah . . . Ngh . . . Gah . . .” “How . . .?”

Human-shaped lumps of meat, their eyes rolled back in their heads, that simply continued to groan meaninglessly.

“What’re you going to do with them? If you leave them be, they’ll recover thanks to their Magic Crest.”

“I’ve blocked their means to recover. Given the quality of their Magic Crest, they should remain in this state for half a month.”

They were Mr. and Mrs. Kuruoka, their arms and legs numbed and the majority of their Magic Circuits burned out using a specialized Mystic Code.

Faced with the couple, who were just barely able to breathe but nothing else, Sigma said:

“I’m hesitating. If I had orders to kill them, I wouldn’t hesitate, and if I had orders not to kill them, I wouldn’t,” he continued expressionlessly, without any feeling for the couple lying in front of him. “But I don’t have orders this time. I don’t even have a long-term goal.”

“But you have decided where you should go. Am I wrong?”

“I said that I’d protect Tsubaki,” Sigma answered the “shadow” with artificial wings tonelessly as ever, “but I think she would be sad if she learned that her parents were dead after she woke up. . . . She might even blame herself for it and commit suicide. But if I let them live, the same thing

Fate/strange Fake 6

will just happen again.”

“So, you leave them technically alive? Honestly, that technology’s incredible. It paralyzes every Magic Circuit and nerve in the body. It’s definitely more of a magecraft-user’s approach than a mage’s.”

“Francesca made me learn all about this kind of thing.”

Then, he looked at Kuruoka Tsubaki’s mother and told the shadow:

“My mother is gone. Francesca told me that she died in a Holy Grail War in Japan.”

The “words that no longer meant anything” ran over and over through Sigma’s head.

“Your parents were taken by people who came from outside.”

“All of your fathers were killed by invaders filled with outside corruption.”

“Your mother was kidnapped by a terrible demon who came from outside.”

“So, destroy. Destroy anyone who tries to take from us.”

“So, fight. Fight so that one day we can take your mother back.”

When those voices had dwindled, the shadow spoke, as if he had gauged the timing.

“Yes, you were saying that before.”

The boy with serpent staff and half his face petrified looked at Sigma’s face, stepped a little closer to him, and asked:

“. . . Do you have any thoughts about parents?”

“I just thought . . . that I hope my mother wasn’t like them.”

Sigma knew that it no longer meant anything, but he still wished for it.

“So, what are you going to do now?”

Sigma looked up at the sky as he answered the female “shadow” dressed like an aviator.

“I was told that I could act freely. That’s all I’ll do. Faldeus will probably try to kill me, but I think Francesca will be happy.”

“But ‘being happy’ is all she’ll do. I doubt that monster will do anything to help you.”

Sigma answered the captain with a silent nod.

“I know. But if it makes her happy, that should pay her back for taking care of me until now.”

Still holding the crossbow, Sigma made a declaration to himself and to his Servant “Watcher.” A declaration that he was about to take center stage.

“I’m going . . . to destroy this system, the Holy Grail War.”

Bridge

“Clink, Clank”

Bridge

Clink Clank

“... Huh?”

The next thing Ayaka knew, she was in the middle of an intersection.

It was the intersection in front of Crystal Hill, near the hospital and the police station.

The nearby asphalt was badly torn-up, and in the distance, she could see blockades indicating no entry as well as police cars and construction vehicles parked to hide the street from view.

Nearby, police officers were looking around like she was. She could not see Saber, who had gone a considerable distance away to fight, but at least the orb of water floating around her was still there.

“We came back...?”

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“Oh...? So, they made it back in one piece. It’s a good thing I had the street cordoned off,” Faldeus said with a shrug, then informed his trusted assistant Aludra while he watched the footage through the surveillance cameras placed throughout the city.

“Now, we’ve had one nerve-wracking day after another, but there are only a few more to go. We’ll have to start arranging events in earnest...”

“What first?”

Faldeus answered her with a wry smile and a wink.

“For now, let’s see about getting some stomach medicine.”

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Central Intersection

“Oh! There she is! That’s her, Jack! That girl is Saber’s Master!”

Flat was excited that he had found Ayaka.

“Approach with caution,” wristwatch Jack admonished him. “You saw how much power Saber wields. We won’t last a second if she turns out to be hostile.”

“That’s true, but I just can’t stop thinking about that Master. . . . I know. Jack, can you turn into a white flag?”

“I was able to become a watch thanks to the inanimate object theory, but I’ve never heard anyone suggest that Jack the Ripper was actually a white flag.”

“They’re out there if you look! I just know it! Human possibilities are kind of close to infinite, so you must have about five thousand true identities!”

“That’s considerably fewer than infinite. . . .”

That typical exchange helped Jack to feel that he and his Master really had returned to their original world.

“But,” Jack told Flat again, all the while keeping an eye out so that he could protect Flat if a mage or Servant attacked as they approached Saber’s Master, *“I doubt I’ll be much use in combat from now on. The Bowman in front of the hospital stole my Noble Phantasm, and he’s not the only Heroic Spirit to show how great the difference in our capabilities is.”*

“Don’t worry. I told you, if we think of it as hard mode, we can work around the difference in stats somehow.”

“. . . I suppose I should be grateful that you put concern for me before yourself when that Assassin questioned you about the Holy Grail.”

“What do you mean?!” Flat exclaimed, his eyes bright. “I want to find out who Jack the Ripper really was too, you know!”

“. . . You might just end up disappointed,” Jack continued. *“There’s a good chance that some piece of trash just happened to not get caught. . . . In any case, stop idolizing a thing like me. When my identity is finally revealed, I’ll merely gain the right to atone for my crimes. Learning my true identity would be salvation for me, but not atonement. And it’s not healthy to idolize a criminal in the first place.”*

Once he was done lecturing Flat, Jack’s tone softened.

“But the days I spend like this with you . . . What remains in your memory will be undeniably ‘me.’ If I settled the question of my identity with the power of the Holy Grail, I will most likely disappear, and that genuine Jack will stand before you. If they try to kill you, show no concern. Kill them or escape them at once and forget them as soon as you can.”

Fate/strange Fake 6

“Jack . . .”

“But . . . I’d be grateful if you would remember the ‘me’ who is talking to you now.”

Jack spoke like they were his last words. He must have been certain that it would be difficult for him to win through the battles to come.

Flat turned to him with his usual smile.

“I’m the same way. Whatever your identity turns out to be, it’s a separate issue. As far as I’m concerned, Jack is the Jack that I’m talking to right now. If someone told you to atone for the crime of murder, I’d testify for you! I’d tell them, ‘This Jack is a genuine fake; he doesn’t need to atone for anything!’”

“. . . Hehe . . . Ha ha ha! You’ve got that backwards in more ways than one!”

Jack laughed out loud.

The un-mage-like young mage and the serial killer laughed cheerfully together.

They walked with a spring in their steps, as if they were not afraid of anything, and decided to make contact with the girl who was Saber’s Master immediately.

“Hey there, Ayaka!”

“Huh?! Who are you?!”

Ayaka turned to look in the direction of the sudden greeting and saw a young man in his late teens, maybe almost twenty, standing and waving to her.

“How do you know my name . . .?”

“Oh, so you really aren’t the same person,” the young man said, seeing Ayaka’s wary reaction. “That makes sense. I mean, your flow of magical energy is totally different! But is your name really Ayaka too?”

“Huh . . .?”

Ayaka stared at the young man, confused.

“Who are you?! Do you know about me?”

“I’m Flat. Nice to meet you. There’s another girl with the same name and face as you, and I’m friends with her. But . . . your magical energy currents. I thought so . . .”

The young man looked at Ayaka and started saying something to himself.

“Wait,” Ayaka asked, nervously backing away. “Tell me! If you know about me—if you know who Ayaka Sajou is—tell me . . .!”

Flat answered Ayaka’s strange request with a nod. He looked serious.

“Sure. . . . I understand. Like I thought, you don’t really know what you are, do you?”

“. . .”

Ayaka fell silent.

Flat took that as a yes and started to say something to comfort her.

“You see, your body—”

First came the whistle of something slicing through the air.

An instant later, just as the red that blossomed from the torso of the young man who called himself Flat tinted Ayaka’s view, came the crash of shattering asphalt.

“Huh?”

Did the sound come from Ayaka, or from Flat?

Flat thudded to his knees on the spot.

“. . . *Flat?*”

Jack’s voice filled the area.

He had been wary of the mage called Ayaka.

He had also been on the alert for attacks from Saber and other Heroic Spirits.

Both Flat and Jack trusted the nearby police officers, their allies, but this was still their first contact with Saber.

But Flat had been pierced by a long-range attack that did not rely on magical energy from a faction that had nothing to do with Saber.

Jack, having lost the greater part of his strength, had no way to defend his Master from that kind of modern warfare.

“Ah . . .”

As Flat looked at the hole torn in his gut, he was able to analyze with complete calm that he had probably been shot from diagonally upward—from the roof of a building.

He raised his head to look.

“It’s so bright. . . . I can’t quite see,” Flat instinctively raised a hand and muttered as if nothing was out of the ordinary. The sun, which had begun to sink westward, was in his eyes.

“Sorry, Jack. . . . I screwed up.”

He thought he could hear Jack shout.

He felt him trying to turn into something incredible and do something in the direction the bullet had flown from.

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But Flat knew.

He was probably already too late.

Flat's reinforced eyesight had spotted multiple snipers stationed on buildings in multiple directions.

"... Sorry, Professor."

Then, with a faintly lonely smile, he said his last words.

"Sorry ... everyone ..."

A second high-pitched whistle sped in front of Ayaka, and another red flower bloomed.

It bloomed about a meter above the first one.

In other words, where the young man who called himself Flat's head had been.

"Eee ... Ah ..."

It was not the first time she had seen a person die before her eyes.

But It was the first time she had seen the head of a person who had been smiling and talking to her until a few second before disappear.

While Ayaka Sajou screamed, the body of Flat Escardos collapsed in the sea of red it had poured out.

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Somewhere

"What is it, Svin?"

The young man questioned by the mage walking beside him looked confused and sniffed several times before speaking with a sense of unease that he could not explain.

"No. I just had a feeling like ... a smell that was all over disappeared. ..."

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“Confirmed destruction of target’s head. Beginning additional assault.”

“Good. Don’t hesitate to destroy the Magic Crest as well. It belongs to the decrepit Escardos family.”

Faldeus sipped black tea and checked his monitors as he listened to the reports over his radio. Additional gunfire was making the young man’s corpse lying on the asphalt dance.

Unlike Rohngall, it was not a puppet but a real body.

“You know, I think that people who inspire others are the most dangerous of all,” Faldeus told Aludra as he elegantly sipped his tea.

“In this case, I’ve been wary of Flat and Saber, who have been making one new ally after another. If there’s any chance that the two of them made contact in the world inside the ward, we have to eliminate them immediately or my stomach will be the one to die.”

“Saber’s Master as well, then?”

“After Flat if possible . . . or so I’d hoped, but that’s no longer an option.”

The girl who was Saber’s Master was already surrounded by a water-like dome of magical energy, and Saber, who had rushed to her side, was carrying her indoors in his arms.

“I’m also interested in that Master’s identity. We’ll investigate her a bit before we eliminate her.”

“Is this your ‘stomach medicine’?” Aludra asked as the gunfire on the monitors finally came to an end and the sound from the radio died down.

“Yes, that’s exactly what it is,” Faldeus answered with a shrug and a smile.

“The best cure for stress is to eliminate each of its causes.”

Just as Faldeus was about to finish the last sip of his tea, one of the monitors in front of him went dark.

“...?”

At the same time he realized that it was the camera showing Flat Escardos’ corpse, he received a radio message from his sniping team.

“... *Please respond. This is Spade. . . . om . . . ard!*”

“What’s wrong? Has something . . .”

When he tried to respond, the radio went dead.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Then, another monitor surveilling the central intersection went dark.

“...!”

Faldeus decided that this was an attack and automatically switched to mystical communication with his teams scattered around the scene, but . . .

“What is it?! What the hell is it?!”

“Come on, fire!” “Oh . . . It’s hopeless.” “Damn it! Why is this . . .”

“It’s a monster!” “Just shoot it! Hurry up and kill it!”

“No . . . Why . . .” “A mage . . .?”

“Stop! Sto . . . Aaagaaaaah!”

“Help m . . . Gab . . . Bwah . . .” “It’s not hu . . . Aaah!”

The monitors continued to go dark one after another, and the screams of the sniper team continued to ring out, as if in harmony.

Soon, a team that had been monitoring the situation from a short distance away reported in.

“Jackal here! Faldeus! What the hell is that thing?! You never told us about this. . . You told us Flat Escardos was a mage! What the hell is going on?!”

“Please calm down! A monster . . .? It could be Flat’s Servant transformed. It should run out of magical energy and dissipate soon. Please hold your ground!”

“No! Something I think was a Heroic Spirit did transform, but it disappeared, just like you said! That thing’s a different . . . Shit! Oh, oh, that thing’s not human, and it’s not a mage either! What the hell is it?! Forget hematophages and Heroic Spirits! It’s an honest to God m . . . m-m . . . maaararaarabyah!”

With an ensemble performance of screams and sounds like something being folded, the line went silent.

And it did not stop there. One after another, the surveillance systems that Faldeus had installed throughout the city were going dark.

In just a few dozen seconds, every surveillance camera in Snowfield had stopped working.

Faced with that situation, Faldeus dropped his teacup. He did not even hear it shatter on the floor as he muttered:

“What in God’s name is going on . . .?”

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Somewhere in Monaco

“I see. . . . So, Flat Escardos has come to an end.”

That man, the owner of a certain casa who had until recently been conversing with Flat over the phone, offered a silent toast to someone who had long since vanished from the world.

“I will give my blessing to the great achievement of my old neighbor, Messara Escardos.

“However . . . if the thing you gained at the cost of a young man with a future is ‘the past,’ then I certainly don’t consider it cause for celebration.”

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Clink, clink, clink.

When I realized that was the sound that accompanied the end of everything, I thought, Oh, it’s begun.

I soon realized what the clinking and clanking was.

It was the sound of empty shell casings ejected from the sniper rifles that had put an end to Flat Escardos falling from the tops of buildings to the ground.

It was a sound that tumbled dozens of meters down through the air to finally arrive beside the flesh that had been Flat Escardos.

“I” kept waiting for a long, long time.

The time had finally come for “**me**”—born for the sole purpose of “existing”—to be meaningful.

Oh, that’s right. “**I**” have to move. “**I**” have to move on to the next phase.

I already understand.

I understand what **I** ought to accomplish.

The greatest and final purpose bestowed on **me** by the Escardos family.

The purpose for which **I** was born.

Isn’t that right, Flat?

Fate/strange Fake 6

Oh, yes.

It's over.

It has come to a close.

I have fallen to ruin.

I have arrived.

I am complete.

Loss was always the final piece.

Following the principles of **my** birth, I rebooted myself.

I recalculated the duty **I** had been tasked with.

Would **my** path be difficult or easy?

There was no point in speculating.

In either case, **I** had no choice but to see it through.

Nothing else would give **me** meaning.

Continue to exist. Continue to exist.

I need only become a true human and continue to exist in this world.

Yes, **I** promise you, Flat.

I'll do your share of continuing to exist in this world as well.

Even if that means . . . wiping the species defined as “humans” from the face of the earth.

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The Clock Tower

“Shit. . . I still can't get through. . .”

An area of the Clock Tower.

In the preparation room of the School of Modern Magecraft, Lord El-Melloi II was muttering impatiently as he made call after call on his cell phone.

Since their last call had abruptly cut off with the sounds of shouts and what might have been a building collapsing, he had been completely unable to get in touch with Flat.

“Should I try calling the chief of police instead . . .? No, I don’t know his personal number. . . I doubt I could reach him by calling the stations, but . . .”

He laid his hands on his desk and considered for a short while, then stood up as if he had come to a decision.

“I have no choice. . . . This really does call for—Gwah.”

No sooner had he opened the door than his body was thrown shoved into the room.

On closer inspection, he saw that there was a powerful ward modeled on a white snake over the entrance.

“. . . The obstinate weave of this spell . . . It’s one of Adashino’s wards! Damn the School of Political Science and Law. . . . They never know when to stop!”

He looked out the window and saw that several homunculi in the service of Goredolf Musik of the School of Political Science and Law were standing watch. It was apparent that they meant to keep Lord El-Melloi II under house arrest.

“What now? . . . Should I contact Reines or Melvin to . . .”

El-Melloi II was pondering the issue when he realized that there was an unfamiliar noise in the room.

It came from a small vanity case lying in a corner of the preparation room.

The case ordinarily held his spare cigars, but there was an electronic sound coming from inside it.

“. . .?”

El-Melloi II suspiciously opened the case and looked even more confused when he saw what was inside.

“What’s going on . . .? This wasn’t here a moment ago. . . .”

The thing that had appeared inside the case while he was not looking and was playing an old ringtone . . . was a cell phone colored a blue deeper than even lapis lazuli.

Next episode [Fake07]

CLASS Rider

Master: Kuruoka Subaki

True Name: Pale Rider

Gender: The concept does not apply

Height Weigh: Varies based on infection and diffusion (roughly equivalent to a parvovirus at minimum)

Alignment: Neutral Evil

STR  E

M.E  A

END  A

LCK  C

AGI  B

NP  EX

Personal Skills

Infection: A

The ability to expand its territory by infecting other organisms with parts of itself in the form of bacteria or viruses. The minds and bodies of the infected are under Pale Rider's control, and their minds are drawn into the world created by its Noble Phantasm. Their magical energy may sometimes be absorbed as well.

Inocent World: EX

A skill that reflects conceptions produced by human fears of "death" and "pestilence." Because these conceptions are so varied, Pale Rider is a nondescript entity when it is first summoned and the tendencies of its very being change depending on those it draws into the "underworld" of its Noble Phantasm.

Guidance of the Underworld: EX

The ability to grant a variety of blessings to allies that Pale Rider has drawn into the territory that has become an underworld due to its Noble Phantasm. Because Pale Rider is not itself the ruler of the underworld, this skill differs slightly from a certain deity's "Protection of the Underworld" skill.

Class Skills

Anti-Magic: C

Riding: EX

Noble Phantasm

Come, Dark Path, Come: Doomsday Come

Rank: EX; Classification: Anti-World Noble Phantasm; Range: —; Maximum Targets: —

A Noble Phantasm that creates a ward-world that becomes an artificial "underworld" with Pale Rider's Master as its starting point, which acts as a receptacle for the "deaths" that Pale Rider bestows. Because it is strongly influenced by the Master's conceptions, it can become an archetypal heaven or hell, but it can also become a space that acts as absolute nothingness and destroys souls. In extreme circumstances, Pale Rider can pull its target's body into the ward as well as their mind. The ward is typically smaller in scale, but as a result of connecting to the land itself and other factors, Pale Rider is currently creating a larger ward than it would when summoned normally. Because it takes the form of a demon that humans envision as their own natural enemy, it inflicts particularly effective damage on humans.

Sword, Famine, Death, Beast: Kagome Kagome

Rank: A; Classification: Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: 99; Maximum Targets: 999

The ability to manifest and utilize the power of numerous objects that impart "death" to others within Pale Rider's ward. In an ideal environment, it is also capable of recreating a mythical "doomsday" to the extent that magical energy will permit. It did not reach that level because Tsubaki lacks knowledge of the Apocalypse or Ragnarök and did not wish for a hell. The pronunciation of this Noble Phantasm's name varies from Master to Master.

CLASS

Watcher

Master: Sigma

True Name: _____, or _____

Gender: Supposedly female, but her current Master (Sigma) is unable to confirm

Height Weigh: Unable to manifest as an entity with mass

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

STR —

M.E. EX

END EX

LCK —

AGI —

NP EX

Personal Skills

Watchman: B

A skill that represents the unique form of a Watcher's contract with their Master. In this Heroic Spirit's case, that means communicating with her Master via "shadows."

Trials of : B

A variant of a certain anti-humanity skill. Watcher is able to bestow trials on lifeforms born from wombs by altering their luck. Because it is not powerful enough to manipulate fate, this ability is primarily used on Watcher's own

Overlook All Creation: B

The ability to comprehend events taking place in the set area where Watcher was summoned. At rank B, it is limited to events observed via sight, hearing, and sensing magical energy.

Denizen of a Different Phase: A

A skill that indicates invincibility except under certain specific conditions. Watcher contradicts the current state of the world and therefore can never manifest with a body like other Servants. Conversely, Watcher is able to manifest only a portion of her body for less than 0.00001 seconds only in the moment that the conditions are met and she is destroyed.

Class Skills

Overrun Territory: B

Anti-Magic: EX

Noble Phantasm

Afterword

(Contains major spoilers; reading after finishing the main story is recommended)

Hello, Narita here. It's been a while.

So, I delivered a new book of *Strange Fake* for the first New Year's of the Reiwa era.

I somehow managed to get two books out in fiscal year 2019! I hope I'll be able to maintain this pace. . . .

I hope that those of you who watched the end-of-year FGO special enjoyed seeing *Fake* in motion, hearing the beautiful music, and most of all getting to hear Saber speak. . . !

A variety of circumstances led to the decision to produce an animated ad for the novels. As I write this afterword, it's still in production and waiting for Saber's voice actor, Ono Yūki, to record his lines. . . but the character designs, storyboards, music, and other information I keep getting already has me convinced that it's going to turn out great, so I hope you get to enjoy this book before the excitement dies down!

Now, first of all, I'm sure that fans who have read the original *Fate* and a lot of the other spinoff series were quite surprised by part of this book.

Yes, the "Holy Grail Debate" that was depicted in Urobuchi Gen's *Fate/Zero*—The exchange I depicted in this book doesn't exist in *Zero*.

I already decided to stage an "encore performance" of the fourth Grail War in front of Saber when I started writing. Mr. Urobuchi graciously gave me permission, but I was worried that writing too much would turn into spoilers for *Zero*, and I was wondering how to handle the different nuances of the slightly different worldlines that all the spinoffs take place in (except for *The Lord El-Melloi II Case Files*, which is set in exactly the same worldline as *Fate/Stay Night*) when I got a heaven-sent blessing from Mr. Nasu.

Mr. Nasu: "Ryōgo, that's because you're trying to make all the worldlines consistent. Think about it the other way around. Think, 'I can write a Holy Grail Debate just for the *Fake* worldline.'"

Mr. Nasu spoke with the air of an English aristocrat in a horror tale full of crimson secrets.

Me: "What?! An original conversation with the same kings, just for the *Fake* worldline?!"

I wavered for a little while, and then, without thinking too hard about it, shouted:

Me: “Done!”

I wrote the scene in the heat of the moment, but I originally made it longer before it hit me: “Oh no! Forget Zero; this will spoil a ton of other books.” Then, I shortened it quite a bit. So, it ended up as a conversation with a hint of the King Arthur who sometimes turns into a bunny and so on, but I hope you’ll look at it as one of the elements that makes of the Fake worldline!

There’s also a scene in which a pro-humanity character that I think long-time TYPE-MOON fans will be familiar makes an appearance. It was Mr. Nasu who showed me the guiding principle of “what will he do when he hears about Jester,” and he also supervised all of his lines . . .!

That said, I was extremely nervous! I couldn’t help thinking, “Wait, what? Am I really allowed to write this?”

By the way, the Stay Night and Case Files worldlines don’t have the framework of the Twenty-Seven Ancestors, so he ends up having a slightly different atmosphere . . . but I’m sure TYPE-MOON will show how he’s different when they show his casino one day! (Killer pass.)

On the subject of the Twenty-Seven Ancestors existing or not, the events in Wales that Flat mentions played out essentially the same as in Case Files, except that one particular character might have been replaced by someone else. At this point, I’ll leave that to your imaginations!

Now, with book six, the Holy Grail War in Snowfield has hit its second half. I’ll do my best to keep it going at this pace, so please bear with me . . .!

I’d like to thank the following:

First, Aniplex, TYPE-MOON, and Kadokawa, for planning the animated commercial. Also, A-1 Pictures and all the animators who produced the incredible animation, Ono Yūki who narrated it, Kiwano Hiroyuki who created the music, and Yosh who provided the vocals. And everyone involved with the ad as well.

My editor Anan, whose life I made harder by letting this book get so thick. Also, everyone at the publisher and everyone at II V who adjusted their schedules for me.

Mr. Urobuchi, who gave me permission to incorporate the “Holy Grail Debate” and all the other writers and manga artists involved with Fate.

Miwa Kiyomune and Team Barrel Roll, who researched the backgrounds of certain Servants for me.

Sanda Makoto, who checked the Case Files-related characters, looked up setting details, and gave me advice about a lot of things. He really helped me out this time by supervising the dialogue for El-Melloi II’s long “lecture” . . .!

Morii Shizuki, whose comic book adaptation is on its fourth volume and who also provided more incredible illustrations for this book. (The quality of the comic really is incredible. Please

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check it out!)

And most of all, Nasu Kinoko and everyone at TYPE-MOON, who created Fate and supervised my work, all the Fate/Grand Order staff, who allowed me to be involved in Enkidu's interludes . . . and all of you who picked up this book and read it.

Thank you very much!

November 2019, while re-watching Kinōbi P's "Bonnō Jihen", Narita Ryōgo