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Intro

“ _ ”

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A lodge in the American mountains.

A luxury lodge deep into the natural boundaries of a mountain.

At its center, there was a conference room where a group of people distinctively not in tune with the vast greens outside gathered.

Men and women in high-brand suits or military uniforms decorated with medals one wouldn't find in normal society. Silhouettes together in a poorly lit room.

One man's presence and treatment clearly informed he was the highest-ranking general. He was indeed a man who didn't show his face in normal ceremonies and announcements.

Even so, people understood who he was at first glance.

Half of the people there, be it the ones wearing modern suits or the ones wearing military uniforms, had a mage's mindset.

Considering this place wasn't the Clock Tower, logically some members there weren't mages or spellcasters. Some didn't even have Magic Circuits in the first place.

Everyone in the meeting had a tense expression until a report finally put the color of relief in the participants' eyes.

"I see. The Clock Tower really has gone soft."

"Yes. Lord Trambelio's spokesman said he will handle the current incident as a formal negotiation, in a way no one owes anyone, be it materially or as a debt of honor."

"Oh, that's great to hear. Our greatest advantage is being a country with minimal mage interference, but on the flip side, that also means no Lord will trust us. Naturally, we wouldn't trust any of them either."

Numerous others voiced their agreement.

“Not that there is any form of true trust among mages.”

“Even more so when they disregard us as mere spellcasters.”

After that quite self-derisive comment, the main general raised a comment.

“But the Clock Tower signaled they’ll turn a blind eye to this incident. All Clock Tower men already in the city agreed it’s a fair compromise.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea? The mysterious disease Faldeus report about is clearly some kind of malediction, but under the current circumstances, no curse can leave the city, right?”

“Anyone who can’t escape the curses is considered unnecessary to the world of magecraft, I assume. Or perhaps the Clock Tower wants the mages in the city to be erased.”

“A conflict between factions, you say? So the stalemate between the Clock Tower’s three factions continues, huh...”

“And I hope it stays that way. Large-scale strife there would be a great opportunity for us to make a move, but the continued stalemate is still a better alternative to anything that unified the Clock Tower’s policies.”

His choice of words showed how wary and afraid they were of the Clock Tower. They needed to lurk and wait for their moment to strike.

“What did you tell the President?”, the tall woman commanding the business suit half of the participants asked the military man.

“I reported nothing. I intend to relay everything ex post facto.”

The business suit woman snorted at the general’s response.

“Are you insane? What explanation will you give him?”

“Just tell the president that we had with emergency switches in case the ritual’s magical energy

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goes out of control... We'll need a different cover story for the media and the other nations, but for the time being, everyone is believing the articles about the shockwaves of two clashing asteroids."

The military man glanced at his subordinate.

The subordinate nodded and put numerous TV programs on the conference room monitor. The news coverage in the most high-rating channels in multiple countries.

"One country is airing cartoons!"

"That's Japan."

"Well, it figures, considering how minimal the direct damage was there."

"The damage on our side wasn't just Washington. Russia was also hit, so any misunderstanding could lead to nuclear warfare."

With a nervous grin, the suited woman looked at the monitors again.

The vast majority of the TV shows displayed the same marks of destruction. The screen subtitles showed the words "meteorite" or "missile attack" in multiple languages.

"What a pity..."; the military dispassionately commented, looking at the images occupying half of the TV shows. A gigantic hole in the Arctic sea caps. "If only this power was something within our control, rather than arcane power manipulated by an individual's will..."

"Don't be stupid. The moment you think of weaponizing the arcane, you'll get the Clock Tower and the Atlas Institute knocking at our door and then it's over. Regretfully, we're still babies when it comes to magecraft, remember? Although this could change if we incorporate ancient ones like Tine Chelc's tribe into our ranks."

After rebuking the military man, the suited woman continued her semi-monologue.

"This is precisely why we had to go along with Francesca's plan... To choose the route of degrading

magic into magecraft. We failed this time, but from the start, we've been making plans on the scale of centuries rather than years."

The people around her started sighing.

"So the 1st American Holy Grail War ends in a no contest."

"Remember how Fuyuki had 4 no contests?"

"Maybe 5. Our investigation is still struggling to determine the outcome of the 5th one."

"Yes, we can't make any careless moves now that the Eulyphis are always there."

The leader of the military men raised his hand to contain the stir in the audience, then proceeded to his speech.

"We'll cleanse the city, but before that, we'll have Francesca carry the core system of the Greater Grail away to use as the cornerstone of the next edition. Most Heroic Spirits should soon vanish once we cut off the energy resources."

After this response, the military man checked his wristwatch and proclaimed something to all in the conference room:

"From this moment onward, Code 983, 'Aurora Fall', is in effect."

The suited woman closed her eyes in response. After opening them again, she glared at everyone present while she spoke.

"In 48 hours, Snowfield will be 'cleansed'... I won't say this is for the country's sake. Much less that it's for justice. It's a sacrifice necessary for humanity's long-term benefits. You have no reason to feel any guilt."

And so, it was decided that two days after the meeting, Snowfield City was going to disappear from the face of Earth.

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Along with its 800 thousand citizens.

Why did the masterminds of the Holy Grail War make this decision?

That was due to the events of the previous day.

The death of a young mage named Flat Escardos, and the consequential birth of a new lifeform.

Bridge

“Messara Escardos”

Bridge

Long ago, there was one mage.

Although he was below the level of the magicians, he was still a powerful and ancient mage obsessed with bizarre ideas.

The mage's name was Messara Escardos.

The mage built his small yet deep workshop in a place currently called Monaco. In his conversation with his magician friend and other big-name mages, a thought crossed his mind.

It all started in a conversation with an acquaintance.

There he heard his allegory about countless possibilities. Worlds that could have been, lined up in parallel with our world.

It was an idea most would dismiss as simple chatter, or perhaps a fable or a joke...

But the mage Messara found hope in his words.

His thesis as a mage had been unclear until that moment, and there he felt assured that his brain was simply waiting for that moment to start gushing out ideas.

Concealing one's research is a natural thought in mage society, but Messara was so flushed with excitement that he started telling other mages about his dreams and proposing everyone should do the same thing he was doing.

The majority laughed at the stupidity of what they considered to be an impossible dream.

Some also mentioned that what he wanted could be achieved by simply modifying someone's body, without the need to wait for such a long time.

Considering Messara's level of proficiency, that would indeed be a viable shortcut.

But Messara believed that his creation of actualizing itself through a process of evolution was the entire point of the project.

Two people listened to his thoughts in earnest, even if they didn't endorse them.

One of them was the man who inspired Messara's plan: the magician who would later gain multiple epithets such as Mystical Marshall, Kaleidoscope, or Old Man of the Jewels.

The other mage was a capricious dollmaker of peculiar descent, who would later gain multiple epithets such as Magical Castle, or Dark Lord of Finance.

The two men had different positions in life, which lead to different experiences, but both experiences led them to realize that, although the chances were low, Messara's ambitions were possible.

Though they didn't endorse it, perhaps because they knew perfectly well what the consequences would be.

But that was enough to Messara.

He had people in his circle who would debate his theories in earnest.

That alone told him that staking his life was worth it. With a smile on his face, Messara dedicated his remaining years to his plan.

No, his own life wasn't the only chip he wagered.

He instrumentalized the blood of his descendants for the next centuries, potentially millenia.

Most mages hearing this would answer "It's simply what every mage family does."

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Many families of ancient mages offer their blood for their ancestor's thesis.

But Messara's actions didn't follow that common sense.

When the ancient mage established the Escardos family, he set up one gimmick to further his research.

The longer his lineage continued, the more they would lose information on the family's purpose.

Messara couldn't trust the descendants he didn't know.

He could predict that when the goal was close to completion, someone would try to achieve its conclusion in their own generation instead of waiting for its maturation.

I can't let this happen.

Messara rejected his descendant's passion before it came to be.

My creation will naturally complete itself one random day. It must. There's no point in letting out in an imperfect state. If my theories are correct, my creation will spawn naturally and take away everything the Escardos clan ever had.

That's what it meant to instrumentalize his descendants' blood.

By the time that happens, his mage descendants will all be assuming that the Escardos were a family with no thesis, only a lot of history. Therefore, they would either find some new thesis that exploited their unique Magic Crest or would simply be trying to gain money and status in the world of magecraft.

Messara Escardos feared that his glory-hounding descendants could add their modifications to their Magic Circuit's evolution system or the Magic Crest in an attempt to "become" his creation.

To him, that would have been even worse than having the mages who laughed him off come

to steal the fruits of his research once they accepted that it was possible. Not that he was expecting any kind of results in the first 1000 years.

The Escardos family gradually forgot its purpose, as Messara wanted, and remained always part of the world of magecraft as an entity that did nothing.

With no faith in his distant future descendants, he set up a mad mechanism in his own child and Magic Crest.

The result: In what is almost a miracle, Messara Escardos completed his tightrope walk after 1800 years had passed.

While Messara was still alive, he couldn't know if the day would come or not.

At that time, he dedicated a soliloquy, not to the bloodline he was sacrificing, but to the one child in the distant future who would see it completed in their generation.

“Oh, oh, my distant child. Man or woman of blood whose name I don't know, if you're born before the end of Human Order, I won my gamble. You have my gratitude and my apologies. You'll be considered a prodigy in your distant future of minimal Arcane. Some may shun you for that. Such is the nature I'm granting to your body. Your life won't be an easy one. And to top it off, the moment you inherit your Magic Crest... you'll be erased. Not die, be erased. Just disappear, not reaching anywhere nor being engraved into the world. But in exchange, our planet will see the birth of a new prime species. Goodbye, descendant I'll never meet. I'm sorry, and thank you.”

Where no one could hear him, Messara thanked and apologized out loud to someone who hadn't been born.

One could say this was where he was at his least mage-like.

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“You’re a necessary sacrifice.”

And after a long time, a baby was born.

The generation he was talking about.

Flat Escardos, the boy meant to be sacrificed to the Escardos family’s ambitions.

Messara Escardos ultimately won his bet.

But he failed to predict many factors.

The first is that the boy’s parents feared him so much that they plotted to dump their Magic Crest somewhere from where it could never be retrieved.

Flat’s parents went to an underground casino famous among the mages of their region and lost everything they had on purpose, leading them to need to mortgage their Magic Crest as compensation for their gambling debt.

Messara would have appreciated the amazing irony, as the casino was run by one of his old friends, the one known as the Dark Lord of Finance.

But this miscalculation was trivial. In fact, Flat, with the help of his friends, took the Fem’s Casa challenge and got his Crest back.

The other two are factors that Messara never even came close to considering.

One of them is that Flat Escardos's talents were even more freakish than Messara had considered.

And the other is that the boy met someone who changed his life.

An ordinary mage borrowing the title of a Clock Tower's Lord.

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Present day, Clock Tower

"The Lord of Norwich is currently not accepting visitors. Please leave."

"Oh shucks."

Hearing the words of someone in a Department of Policies uniform, a boy dejectedly went away.

He was the private pupil of the dollmaker Rohngall and visited the Norwich building to relay an important message to El-Melloi II.

However, Policies members blocked the building's entrance.

He could see a group of protesters, presumably El-Melloi II's current students, in a heated argument against a plump young man commanding a guard of homunculi.

Seeing how all of them flocked at him instead of at the woman in kimono on the other side, he could assume that the boy was more open to conversation than her.

Rohngall's young private pupil observed the students, impressed at how much they cared about their teacher.

Most Clock Tower lecturers, especially Lords, were treated with more fear than respect.

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He doubted that even the notoriously friendly Lord of Creation would have students this passionate about her.

But that made perfect sense in the boy's mind.

Although many people from other faculties came for Norwich's lectures after El-Melloi II became its Lord, very few students were enrolled in the Department of Modern Magecraft beforehand.

And yet, El-Melloi II's Norwich was now seen as a major force capable of upending the Clock Tower's power balance.

The Department of Modern Magecraft is obviously not as powerful as any of the infamous Three Noble Families of the Mages Association, but the El-Melloi Classroom is said to have the weight to tip the scales on the delicate balance between the Neutral, Aristocratic, and Democratic factions.

The boy remembered the conversation he had with his mentor a few days prior.

– “Werner Ceasarmund, the heir to Butterfly Magecraft. Roland Berzinsky. Org Rum. The sisters Radia Pentel and Nazica Pentel. Fezgram von Senbern. What do these names have in common?”

He answered “They are mages who rose to Pride and Brand status in the past few years”, only to be met with a shocking response from his mentor.

– “They're all El-Melloi Classroom students.”

Back then he already reacted with shocked silence, but after seeing Lord El-Melloi II in person, he was even more surprised at how he didn't give off the impression of someone that amazing.

He looked nothing like a lecturer capable of producing multiple mages who would leave their mark on the Clock Tower's history, but the boy managed to convince himself that this was an act of camouflage to lower others' guards.

“What an incredible class. Maybe I should ask Mr. Rohngall to let me attend a lecture one day...”

He looked into Lord El-Melloi II later and found out he left numerous achievements.

The list of students he produced alone was already enough of a medal. It contained the names of several mages the young boy took as inspiration.

Svin Glascheit, the talented Beast Mage who reached the rank Pride still during his school years.

Yvette L. Lehrman, the mad genius who polished gemstones into high-end Mystic Eyes closely comparable to natural ones.

Caules Forvedge, the distinguished Electricity Mage who handled lightning as if it were part of himself.

Mary Lil Fargo, the shooting star of the Department of Astromancy, who made a name for herself by producing a whole new theory for her family in a single generation.

Sajou Ayaka, who didn't stay enrolled in the Classroom for too long, but nonetheless made notorious use of her mixed talents in the Department of Botany.

“And then there's... No, I wouldn't want these two as role models...”

He recalled a pair of female mages more infamous than famous. The boy was once a victim of one of the disasters caused by this duo, so he chose to forget the two ladies nicknamed Kischur's Nightmares.

And then, the boy remembered one last name.

Flat Escardos, the oldest student in the current El-Melloi Classroom. The one currently participating in the Holy Grail War in the United States. A previous topic of discussion.

He once asked his mentor Rohngall about this genius known as The Unwanted Blessing.

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After a moment of sullen silence, Rohngall confirmed that no one was around and started speaking.

– “Keep your distance from it if you can help it. One time, it requested me to build a doll in its image. I ultimately refused, but I had my interest in The Unwanted Blessing’s Magic Circuits. Looking into them, I noticed something... Lord El-Melloi must have also noticed, and so must have the genius dollmaker that once called it interesting... The child itself was already something akin to a doll created to be something’s receptacle. I’m morbidly curious to know what the Escardos ancestors intended to insert in it.”

Chapter 21

“Beings Shaped in Man’s Image”

Chapter 21

Those who saw the creature or learned of its existence by detecting its magical energy reacted in several different manners.

However, while some considered it a problem that could be saved for later, none of them could completely ignore it.

They realized something “extraneous” brought to the land.

Something equal in rank to a Heroic Spirit manifested.

The team closest to it at the moment of its birth was Saber, Richard the Lionheart, and his Master Ayaka.

“A-aaaaah... No... NO...”

In face of the brutality she just witnessed, Ayaka fell to her knees, covering her eyes so she wouldn’t have to look at the blown head of the young man’s corpse.

“...”

While Ayaka screamed in rejection of that reality, a different emotion welled up in her heart.

It happened again. Someone died because I stood there doing nothing. Again.

She felt this emotion akin to resignation, and the fretfulness and fear that formed to hide that under.

When confronted with the fact that the man she just met suddenly died before her eyes, she was assailed by several different emotions. So many that another version of herself showed up as a mental defense reaction to get her to calm down.

Tell me, why was he killed?

He seemed like he knew me... But I don't know him.

Wouldn't that because I am a Master?

Then you mean he's also a Master? That's why he was killed?

In that case, who is the next target?

“...!”

Having immediately understood the situation, Ayaka raised her head and tried to stand up.

She was still startled and unable to put strength in her legs. The shiver in her spine consumed all other sensations.

Before she noticed it, Saber was embracing her.

He carried her straight to a nearby building. Inside, he placed Ayaka back on the ground, at a spot that wouldn't be visible from any of the surrounding buildings.

“Ayaka. Are you alright?”

“...!”

Right. Now is not the time to be shaking.

“Yeah, thank you.”

What stopped her trembling was her memory of the contract she formalized with Saber.

– “Answer me. Are you my Master?”

She had answered Saber's question.

Not with the formal response nor with anything clever.

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Just a nod.

She simply moved her chin down. No other gesture could have been simpler. And yet, the amount of resolve contained in this gesture made it feel like the first time she took action in her life, as far as she could remember.

Becoming a Master was a path I chose of my own will.

With this reconfirmation, she regained the resolve she had at the moment of her choice.

Her shaking stopped and her loaded scream sunk back to the depths of her throat.

She still didn't have any clear idea of what the relationship between a Master and a Servant was like, but she knew that her whining about how she was an outsider roped into the conflict wouldn't cut it anymore.

She figured out that she wouldn't be able to escape the spiral of fate no matter what.

She would be pressured into making a choice, whether she wanted it or not. Her life was being targeted by someone she couldn't reason with.

But she wasn't alone.

If she let herself be crushed without a fight, Saber would be dust.

I can't let that happen. I haven't repaid anything I owe to this King... No, this isn't about owing him. I'm doing what I want because I want it.

She was thrown into a life-staking battle when she couldn't find a solid answer to the question of "why am I alive?".

If she wanted to surmount her grievances, if she wanted to walk side by side with Saber, this uninhibited busybody who was nothing like her, she couldn't run away screaming.

Her whole body regained strength as her blood started circulating again and she recovered her lost sensations.

She didn't know if this stir all over her body was that "magical energy" she heard so much of or pure bravado.

Besides... It's not the first time someone I know dies before my eyes...

After that out-of-place self-derisive thought, she was hit with confusion.

Wait...? Who died the first time again...? No, now is not the time to think about it.

A stir formed in Ayaka's heart, but she didn't give it enough attention that it would prevent her from standing up.

And then she assessed her situation to plan the next step.

"..."

A tragedy occurred less than a minute ago. Flashbacks to the color and smell of the blood left her nauseated, but she pushed it back down and questioned Saber about the situation.

"What happened?"

"A sniper attack. We're surrounded by numerous shooters. Normal bullets don't work on us Heroic Spirits, so they'll be aiming for Masters."

"Huh? You mean... that wasn't a Heroic Spirit attack? It was all guns?"

Ayaka gulped and ran her eyes across her surroundings.

She didn't think she would find any assailants, much less the snipers, but she couldn't go without checking.

"The guy who talked me is..."

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The Holy Grail War was a bloodshed without rules. She could believe that enemies would attack in broad daylight in a populated district.

Saber told her about the spirit of arcane concealment, but the same Saber responding to a TV interview didn't make it look like this law was taken seriously. The intensity of the battle in front of the hospital told her everything she needed to know about the safety of the masses in the city.

"I see... If they kill people with normal guns, that wouldn't even touch that arcane concealment thing."

"That's the idea. There should be a precedent set for that in past Holy Grail Wars. Well, any mage prioritizing efficiency would endorse that thought. And that's why you need a Servant."

She knew the city was ridden with armed mercenaries due to Sigma and the group surveilling the mansion in the marsh. In any other situation, John's squad of policemen with swords and spears would be a more concerning image, but when the firearms are trained on her, who can blame her for not thinking anywhere was safe?

With a chill running down her spine, Ayaka questioned Saber.

"So, they could blow this whole building up with a bomb if that's what it takes?"

"Perhaps. If killing was all that mattered, modern science has those missiles and chemical weapons to do the job. But one reason not to use them is their potential to destroy the city's ritualistic foundations. In other words, if the enemy didn't mind botching the ritual, they could blow a hydrogen bomb on the city and call it a day. This means they're trying to win the ritual and, well, even then, one or two buildings is not enough of a loss to get them to think twice."

After this whole preamble, Saber looked at Ayaka with a quite serious expression to deliver the final part.

"A colosseum full of people would be not a big deal for them."

"Gh... This is a literal war."

With a snide comment to lighten the burden of reality, Ayaka calmed down her mind and asked Saber the next question.

“Do you know what happened to his body?”

The boy knew something about her. More precisely, he knew about Sajou Ayaka, a girl with the same name and face as her.

In a mix of a wish for any crumbs of information she could get and the guilt from potentially getting the boy shot because he came to see her, Ayaka wanted to at least learn his name.

But with a sullen expression, Saber shifted his attention to the entrance he came from.

“? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... I was curious about the same thing, actually... Loxley told me the boy got up after the shots...”

“What...?”

Loxley was the name of one of the companions Saber carried as part of his Noble Phantasm.

He received a telepathic report, but Ayaka couldn’t understand the meaning behind it.

“Huh, but he got shot in the head... Did he survive? Don’t tell me magecraft can do that?”

“I can make quite a few guesses... provided I was right in assuming he wasn’t a Heroic Spirit.”

Saber listed his hypothesis, raising one finger at a time to count them.

“The first is that an illusion or a familiar took the bullets instead of him. That is possible, but if it’s true, there’s no point in him getting up immediately. The second is that he used the power of magecraft to revive his blown head... In the words of advisers more well-versed in magecraft, it’d take a considerably powerful Magic Crest or an arcanum close to magic, but it’s not impossible

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to bring someone nominally ‘back from the dead’. Let’s keep this one in mind for later. Third. He’s something other than a person. Perhaps a high-level vampire or elemental, a mythical being from the Inner Sea of the Planet, or a Foreigner from beyond the stars. If that’s the case, things won’t be pretty.”

“How bad are we talking here?”

“His presence would be a bigger concern than the arcane concealment. Non-humans care about toppling a human city as much we would care about toppling a sand castle.”

Saber had a complex expression, mixing drive and excitement with fear and curiosity as he was reminded of “something” he saw in the past.

But receiving a further report, he turned to Ayaka with a stern expression.

“The boy’s shooters were... already eliminated.”

“What do you mean, eliminated?”

Ayaka knew exactly what the word meant, but the situation was hard to swallow.

“Ayaka, what’s our plan? I personally would like to continue the battle, but without knowing if he’s an enemy or an ally, I recommend prioritizing your safety. You’re still fine in terms of magical energy, but your mental exhaustion could hamper our continued battle capabilities.”

Saber’s instincts let him pull through multiple battlefields and family conspiracy.

And those instincts were telling that the presence outside the building was more dangerous than the average Heroic Spirit.

“It’s possible this building will already be flattened by the time we decide if he’s an enemy or an ally.”

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The ones standing second closest to the incident were the policemen who returned from the Reality Marble together with Ayaka.

A few minutes earlier.

John and Vera heard the air razing and the asphalt shattering, and immediately realized it was a sniper attack.

They looked around and found Flat bleeding from the chest not too far away from them.

Next, they saw the moment Flat's head burst. Without waiting for Vera's orders, the group hid behind the nearby cars and buildings.

“What about Ayaka Sajou? Oh, it's fine, Saber will protect her.”

John worried about Ayaka since she was a civilian but to his relief, he saw Saber carrying her away, raising walls of water along the way. At the same time, indescribable anger and sorrow dominated his brain.

Shit, why Flat Escardos... Who did this?! Another Master?!

His first suspect for the sniper was a member of the Scladio Family, Bazdilot Cordelion's team.

But they were on Central Avenue.

Not only it's blocked off to prevent attacks on the police, but it's also directly under the jurisdiction of the Grail War's management.

It couldn't be someone from management, could it? Does the Chief know anything?

Some of his teammates had the long-range Noble Phantasm necessary to be the sniper, but what he saw looked more like a physical shot from a regular gun than a Noble Phantasm.

Then who did this?

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He couldn't take his time to speculate.

Vera was trying to call the chief, but the situation changed again before she could.

They saw movement close to their ally's destroyed head.

An eldritch monster was born next to Flat Escardos, almost ridding everyone who saw it of their sanity, and jumped to the nearby buildings.

It was the Heroic Spirit Jack the Ripper's last stand.

However, the Heroic Spirit let his emotions get the better of him and overexerted his power, crumbling to light dust before he could reach the building's rooftop.

His magical energy path was severed, so he couldn't maintain his form.

They didn't know if he was completely terminated or forced into spirit form.

Either way, with his Master dead, he was bound to die out unless he formed a new contract.

John's team only had one brief conversation with the boy in the church, but that alone gave them enough of an understanding of who Flat Escardos was.

His personality was not like a mage's, but it was far from an ordinary person's either. Regardless, they understood that he was not a bad guy.

Another factor to consider is that, although they were a group of mages, their unique position as magecraft-practicing police officers gave them values very separate from the Clock Tower norm.

– “You are justice.”

That's what their Chief declared when the Holy Grail War started. Those words circulated their bodies like blessings and curses.

That made it difficult for them to accept the sight of their ally, a very young man, losing his life like it was nothing.

The members of Clan Calatin had the resolve to put down the child Kuruoka Tsubaki if that was what justice demanded but when this brutal murder happened without giving them time to gather any form of resolve, they were furious.

Except said fury turned into confusion the next second.

“What...?”

John wasn't the only one to say it.

Vera opened her eyes wide and hung up her call before connecting with the Chief.

The other policemen also reacted with a varied range of bewilderment.

After all, when it looked like Flat Escardos's head was blown off, his body was encased in shadow, only to stand up the next second, with its lost head recovered.

For an instant, they were reminded of the “mud” worn by the bowman they fought, but they knew it was something else.

The “mud” they saw was a dark red that burned all to cinders. And the Kuruoka Tsubaki Servant that swallowed them later was a chilly gloom that dragged all inside it.

In contrast, what enveloped Flat was a perfect hollow.

A pure jet-black, seemingly sucking all light in. This black started converging to the bullet holes in Flat's abdomen until a person appeared deep in the hollow's interior.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Upon processing the image of the individual inside the hollow, many policemen screamed. Even John and Vera were covered in cold sweat.

They knew that wasn't Flat Escardos.

That it wasn't even human.

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The highest floor of Crystal Hill

Tine Chelc could feel the creature's birth. She mistakenly assumed the sensation was poison being poured all over her body, but despite this misunderstanding, she didn't slow down the magecraft preserving her Servant, Gilgamesh's body.

That's because she knew that if she lost focus for one instant, the Saint Graph body in front of her would crumble.

She kept hearing confused voices from her tribe subordinates gathered at the window to see what was happening outside.

Regardless, Tine wouldn't move.

Next, her subordinates' voices were filled with fear and panic.

"What's that?"

"A monster."

They exchanged dubious words across the suite room.

Despite the numerous yells, all too vague to be the words of mages, she didn't think her

subordinates went crazy.

Her magecraft drew energy from the land's dragonvein.

Therefore, she had a clear feel for what was happening.

Something not of this world was born on the land.

It was the advent of something beyond reason, with a power that wasn't that of a mage or a Heroic Spirit.

However, aware of all that, she didn't take her hands off her magecraft.

This signified that what was happening was simply trivial to her.

While she poured her magical energy, she continuously questioned her own way of life.

What did she lack?

What must she do?

Who is Tine Chelc?

The regretful girl searched for answers.

Gilgamesh.

What would make her worthy of being this exceptional Heroic Spirit's Master?

What would make her worthy of being the great Hero King's subject?

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Fate/strange Fake 6

West Snowfield, forest region

“ ... ”

The one inhabiting Folia's body turned around, letting her silver hair flutter beautiful like a winter lake's surface.

She looked in the city's direction. Haruri, Berserker Huwawa's Master, asked her about it.

“What happened?”

“Hm, nothing huge.”

She tried to say it casually but just hearing her words already agitated the magical energy in Haruri's body.

She was looking at a homunculus hosting a Saint Graph claimed to be Uruk's god of fertility Ishtar.

To be more exact, the personality in her body was a “blessing” the goddess Ishtar left in the world, but those details made no difference to Haruri. Talking to her was the same as talking to Ishtar's Divine Spirit.

Without paying much attention to Haruri, the homunculus possessed by the Divine Spirit's echo looked at the tall Crystal Hill at the center of the city and let out an intrigued mutter.

“Heh. So this kind of thing can be born even in this era.”

“?”

“Well, whatever. For now, I still don't need to decide if I should bless its birth or eliminate it. Getting things ready for Gugalanna's arrival is the bigger priority! It's boring work, but I can't go back on my word after I declared to him that I wouldn't lay a finger on the two before we were together.”

The Divine-possessed was interested, but changed subjects, indicating she would deal with it later.

Her words puzzled Haruri.

“The two”? She probably means those two people she mentioned a while ago as “the causes of her manifestation in this place”. And I think I already saw one of them, that Archer in golden armor from the battle in front of the hospital. But Huwawa already killed the Archer. What does she mean by “not laying a finger on the two” when she already got rid of one? I can’t understand the mind of a Divine Spirit. Is she glitching, or...

“That’s a pretty nice land. It’s going to waste with that bunch of junk on it, so I gotta show how to use it more effectively!”

Her next words sounded like a joke, but the Divine Spirit voice being used to deliver them shifted the tone to that of a divine message being relayed through an Oracle.

“I’m gonna make this land into the new Mount Ebih!”

“Excuse me?”

Haruri couldn’t help blurting out a reaction despite Fillia/Ishtar’s overwhelmingly arcane voice.

Mount Ebih... like the Jabal Hamrin from the Zagros Mountains? The one goddess Ishtar destroyed in Enheduanna’s epics?

In response to Haruri’s confusion, the beautiful homunculus showed a smile loaded with divinity, containing a charm the common people were unable to resist.

It was her way of emphasizing she was not joking.

“I’m going to build a temple here before my boy Gugalanna arrives... I’m counting on your help!”

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Fate/strange Fake 6

Snowfield's industrial district, meat factory

“ ... ”

A meat factory is being used as a workshop for Bazdilot's team.

Large chunks of it were destroyed by Haruri's Berserker Servant and patched together by Prelati's illusions, but the process to restore its functionality without illusions made a lot of progress in the past 24 hours.

During it, the Archer in spirit form, known as Alcides, manifested in front of Bazdilot, who was amidst the process of absorbing magical crystals to interact with the Mud.

“What?”, Bazdilot kept his question at the minimal word count.

“The mage who outwitted me... The man probably from a land related to me, he seems to have flipped inside-out.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I won't know until I see it. But judging by the quality of his presence... he might be one, not for us but for humanity.”

Bazdilot responded to Alcides's dispassionate words without slowing down his procedure or even looking in his Servant's direction.

“Then do what you think is necessary.”

After giving an equally dispassionate answer, Bazdilot regurgitated his magical energy and emotions to the interior of the rampaging Mud trying to corrode him from the inside.

It was as if he was trying to raise this pack of human malice as a cherished son.

“The enemy of our enemy isn't always our friend, but the more failures we can exploit, the better.”

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North Snowfield, strath

“Are you okay, Master?”, said Rider Hippolyte in a concerned tone.

Through the magical energy link that connects Masters and Servants, she could feel her Master intensely unsettled.

She didn't ask why.

That was because she already had a pretty good idea of their reason.

A natural workshop was built by altering the very land and space in part of the ravine.

Inside it, one could see a broad image of what was happening outside. Nonetheless, the space was sheltered from all external interference, as it was highly removed from the world.

While she was impressed by how advanced the technique was, Hippolyte braced herself and focused her attention on the cause of her Master's disarray: the otherworldly presence that appeared in the city.

“I can go whenever you're ready. I'm here as a Servant, but even if I were here as the queen of the Amazons, I still wouldn't hesitate to risk my life for the sake of a friend and equal.”

“Oh, I'm fine... Sorry for worrying you, Rider.”

Deep inside the workshop, a young man's voice reverbed.

Hippolyte believed his words and didn't pry any further.

Her Master was trustworthy.

Fate/strange Fake 6

There was one thing she was sure about, as a Servant, as the queen of the Amazons, and as Hippolyte the individual: she was lucky to have what was probably the best Master in this Grail War.

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I considered “me”, Flat Escardos, to be a lovely neighbor.

I’m hearing... something.

We’re not exactly siblings.

Much less split personalities.

Flat and I have different souls and different foundations of existence, after all.

What am I hearing?

It’s like the sound of gears grinding.

Something inside my body is breaking, tearing, and snapping.

I was the first of the two to become conscious, apparently.

But I can’t say for sure.

Well, since Flat’s brain activity was a stepping stone for the development of my consciousness, it’s pointless to ask who came first, I guess.

The sound, the sound, my body, I can’t mo- Ah, it’s me.

The sound, inside me. My spine. It’s hot. It hurts. It’s cold.

What’s? Happening? To my body?

At the moment the Magic Crest is inherited, the consciousness of the provisory proprietor... Flat's consciousness concludes its role and is supposed to vanish from inside me completely.

That was the plot written 1800 years ago.

Flat's ancestor, Messara Escardos, was a proper mage, despite his romanticism.

He was a mage like the ones you know.

Does that give you some peace of mind?

A v-v-v-voice voice. Whose voice?

I can't see anything. Who where? Where?

Flat was an unwanted child, a soul despised by his own parents. He was meant to be deleted, as needless data I wasn't going to absorb anything from.

But guess what? Flat noticed me.

He found me in there. Can you believe that?

Ever since he was conscious, he could tell I was living under the circuits that composed him.

His genius has nothing to do with me... I think.

He had my body in its perfected state but it was through his own sharpness that he managed to manifest my abilities, even if only my eyes. And that's not even the most amazing thing about him.

Where did my eyes go?

Remember. My finger. That monster. The monster plucked my finger off.

Flat, Flat.

Right. Flat Escardos.

That's the target's name.

The brat I, the brat we shot dead.

Faldeus said he was regular mage.

Then why we couldn't kill him for real?

Did the Heroic Spirit do this? No.

I was incomplete until the start of the transplant of Magic Crest, which contains my program.

So he could have erased me if he wanted to.

I've heard of this one vampire who can reincarnate by printing his soul into others, but unfortunately, my existence isn't as firm as his.

I was arranged to first reach completion when combined with the Magic Crest Messara designed.

If I was discovered before this stage, I'd be the one deleted. When that happens, whoever had my perfected body would be running Messara's Magic Crest instead of me, giving a chance to the next generation. That's his idea of settling for the second-best outcome, I guess.

Expect Flat didn't erase me.

Not even when he was old enough to understand what I was. Not even when he gained the means to eliminate me.

Flat extended a friendly hand to the one who was planning to delete him.

Fully aware of everything.

Perhaps a mage who understood of what his ancestor was trying to accomplish would offer themselves, but... Flat wasn't like that.

Well, I'm also sort of special... or I should say Messara was. The data recorded in the Magic Crest contained no algorithm demanding that I be like a proper mage.

Messara only demanded that I stayed alive. That I kept existing.

He didn't want his continued existence, only the continued existence of his creation.

He wanted me to, if possible, find a way to stay alive on this planet after the end of Human Order or after humanity detached itself from the planet.

What is this voice?

Is it talking to me?

Oh? You're conscious of me? Took you long enough.

Or is it that your mind finally got used to the situation?

I guess it was weird of me to expect you to zone in any sooner.

After all, it only has been three seconds since I accelerated your thoughts, if I had to count in terms of this planet's standard time flow axis.

Accelerated thoughts? What have you...?

It's too dark, I can't see anything.

Is this telepathy? What's going on? I can't move!

Fate/strange Fake 6

It's not dark at all.

Our world is brimming with radiant light... It's really a place worth living in.

Flat told me it was. If he said it's bright, it can't be dark.

It's just... not visible to you right now.

Might be because I gouged your eyes out.

That said, Flat wasn't talking about light in the visual information sense. He meant it in the emotional sense.

Well, you won't be able to sense that light either, considering you're about to die.

Unless death is a source of hope for you.

Ah, that reminds me, Flat always dreamed of having something called the Mind's Eye.

Gouged my eyes? My eyes, eyes?

Who? Who are you? What are you?

The last thing I saw...

Was like...

Flat's... other personality?

That's not what I am. Did you already forget the first thing I told you?

I am... hmm, let's see.

I believe the answer is too complex for you, so just think of me as something like a devil.

Not a devil. Something like one. Important distinction.

Nowhere near as major of an entity as the True Devils lurking on this planet.

Think of a more abstract kind of devil. The kind that appears in your human society allegories.

The kind that appears in the cartoonish hell invoked by Jack the Ripper's Noble Phantasm. Yes, that might be the closest analogy.

After all, that's the exact idea Messara Escardos was going for when he created me.

Messara? Who? What are you talking about?

Aaah, Aaah, eyes! My EYES!

That Heroic Spirit... The man calling himself Dumas knows I exist.

But he ignored me.

He avoided my domain almost completely when he mixed Flat and Jack the Ripper.

I have nothing but praise for his finesse, but it disturbs me a little how I have no idea why he did that.

Still, I couldn't exactly take my time to ponder his objective while the process was happening.

While my emotions have no real equivalent in human emotions, I guess it'd be somewhat accurate to say I was jealous.

Oh yeah, that's right, I envied that serial killer Heroic Spirit.

His soul was mixed with Flat's in a much truer sense than mine.

If it was me instead of him, I wouldn't have let Flat die.

Fate/strange Fake 6

I could easily have reflected your lead bullets.

This very Holy Grail War could have been...

...

No, forget it.

The Grail War was Flat's, not mine.

It's not a place for someone like me, who doesn't have a wish for the Holy Grail.

I just helped him do his analyses sometimes.

Flat is enough of a genius to do it on his own, but he's lazy, so I'm often helping.

Think of me as his navigation system.

What are you talking about?

What are you making me listen to?

Sorry, I've gone off-topic.

I didn't mean to get this emotional.

Flat had a mostly positive view of everything, but I'm more of a negative person.

I'm a fan of poetry and melodrama.

That's the reason.

This is why I'm accelerating your thought channels and taking turns talking to you one by one.

Flat would never do something like this. He's too efficiency-minded for it. If he were in my place, he'd have laughed this whole thing off.

But I can't be like that.

I've existed for a long time, but this is the first time I can go out and talk to people.

I wished I knew how to talk like Flat's mentor.

What a fascinating teacher, that man is.

His speeches are clever but clear, irresolute but strong-willed.

And most of all...

...oh, sorry. Off-topic again.

The most relevant and important thing here is the first thing I said.

I considered "me", Flat Escardos, to be a lovely neighbor.

Everything I said about myself so far has been a preamble to emphasize this main point.

After he recovered the whole Magic Crest in the Casa and I gained all of my knowledge, I became sure of my mission and tried to delete Flat. When I did...

That hopeless genius smiled at me.

Flat saved my heart.

Flat swore the two of us would live together.

And you killed him.

A, ah!

Fate/strange Fake 6

I remember I remember I remember.

M-m-my bod-d-d-d-dy-y-y-y.

He fol-ded-ded me.

I heard the creak. It was my spine.

Crushed? Torn? No, which? No, no, NO.

Don't get me wrong.

This is not revenge. My goal is not to extend your suffering.

Well, me killing you is obviously your just deserts for killing Flat and also a means to fulfill the mission engraved in me.

But this part about accelerating your thoughts to get this whole telepathic speech across is because I wanted you to know the motive behind your gruesome deaths.

I don't think Flat would kill you if you killed me.

One time, I told Flat he needed to kill someone. His answer:

"I won't say murder is NEVER okay, but if you have to kill someone, I think you should tell them your reasons first. I'm sure both of you will feel better about it that way. Even if you can't get them to agree with you, the fact that you took your time to tell them is important."

What an idiot, don't you agree?

Why waste a chance to kill for a parting rant?

You'd think someone who refuses to kill because it's inefficient wouldn't advise me that not

carrying any hard feelings when I kill is a long-term benefit.

Even in his last minutes, he was wasting his time with concern for *that thing*.

He made his excuse that the thing looked like Sajou Ayaka, but why should we care? Our eyes can tell at first glance that it was someone else... *Not even human*.

That's why he died.

You ended Flat and I began.

And I told you the whole story, as a tribute to Flat.

That's all I wanted to say.

Sorry for wasting your time.

There's no stopping what's happening to you, so I'll turn off the mental acceleration.

Sto

He lp

My bad. One thing I said was a lie.

You have no idea how much I'd love to make you suffer for a long, deep, hollow, and eternal time.

You should be grateful that I'm not.

Not to me but to Flat Escardos.

...

...

Ah, ah.

Look at how easily a human dies just from being folded to the size of a kitten.

You people need sturdier souls.

The Holy Grail could fix souls into a material state, was it?

...Well not with the Grail here.

Snowfield's vessel doesn't have the Third's essence.

But what about the real one?

Could Fuyuki's Holy Grail do it?

Does the famed land still have the Holy Grail? Its vestiges? Its corpse?

...

No, don't get any stupid ideas.

It's too late to materialize his soul. It won't turn back time.

That's the domain of another magic. One far distant from the third one.

I'll just do what I must.

Human malice took Flat Escardos away from me.

It was an attack against my reason to live. Against my very life.

Then I'll strike back.

To prolong my survival.

To continue my survival.

I'll live the long life my friend couldn't. This is for the only one who understood me... The sole human I meant to protect.

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The best way to describe the creature was as a torrent of power.

A huge clump of energy, like a Heroic Spirit but somewhat different.

Like a living tornado of Elements, repeating the cycle of compressing the Elements of its surroundings, accelerating them, and immediately bursting them back out.

Taking water as a metaphor, it could be described as a hydraulic jet cutter shaped to a specific form.

Its amount of water is nothing compared to a giant waterfall, but with enough speed, its spray becomes a fluid blade capable of splitting rocks.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Likewise, a torrent of magical energy whirled in the skies above Snowfield, circulating with enough intensity to crush souls.

The otherworldly creature did nothing but circulate magical energy at high speeds. Like a momentary glimmer turned permanent. The “specific form” it was shaped to was none other than the human form.

A grotesque humanoid figure, close yet distant in shape to what once was Flat Escardos.

The young Master of Jack the Ripper’s clothes were stained with his blood and had a large rifle bullet hole in the chest.

Nothingness and light could be seen from the gaps in the red fabric.

The bullet hole in the chest revealed an open scar composed of crack-like lines, reminiscent of punched glass.

An elongated slant ran through the hole, and jet-black darkness could be seen from inside it.

It was like a mass of dark, dim shadows sucking in all light.

Despite being in the center of a human body, the hole felt deep as an infinite corridor. Its apparent absorption of light made it the most prominent part of the entity.

And a giant light source can be seen from the gaps of the hole, assumedly the final destination of all the absorbed light.

It was a light source, but the darkness in the hole wasn’t illuminated by it.

The light source emphasized only its own existence - a Core resembling a giant eyeball, covering only its own body in radiant light.

A third party has no way of knowing if this “eye” too massive to be a real human eye is the Core controlling the darkness or a Core domesticated by the infinite hollow enveloping it.

And what was above this hole and eyeball?

A head. The most important part in the composition of a humanoid figure. Contrary to the grotesqueness of the center of its body, its head looked quite peaceful.

Like a young human's head, at first glance.

But anyone who knew Flat Escardos could tell from a distance that that was not him.

Short protuberances appeared on the sides of its head, barely visible from the gaps of its hair, which is longer than Flat's.

Bizarrely shaped horns or antennae, like a mix between the luminescent crystal wings of an insect and the leaves of a tree, wiggled upwards, in a struggle against gravity.

It might look like a boy dressed as some kind of mystical creature for Halloween, but the almost arcane harmony of its design let anyone tell at first glance that what they were seeing was real.

The face on it looked perfectly human, molded as a more refined version of Flat's now blown-off face.

But contrary to Flat's peaceful, innocent, and boyish eyes, the figure had the lonely eyes of someone who disdained, pitied, and detested all in the world. Around those eyes, there were marks that could be interpreted as either scars or tattoos.

Its face looked even younger than the already babyfaced Flat.

Its body was also quite deaged. The clothes that fit Flat perfectly rapidly became too big for the new body, and the holes in them started to expose skin.

But what was inside the clothes is still as hollow as before.

Like a broken ball-jointed doll, it was missing most of its hip and elbows.

The shot portions of Flat's body could be seen crumbling in real-time.



The hollow shadows leaked out of the cracks in an attempt to prevent that and hold the human body in place.

Its limbs floated in the air despite the lack of knees and elbows, making the world assume its silhouette was one of someone with a complete body.

Despite taking the appearance of a young boy, the otherworldly creature had a mature figure and grotesque shape. It set foot at the tallest peak in Snowfield -the Crystal Hill rooftop- and took a slow look at its surroundings.

It no longer showed any interest in the folded cadavers atop the other buildings' roofs.

Instead, it borrowed one of their sniper rifles and gracefully placed its finger on the trigger.

But instead of pulling it, it just stared at the gun with uninterested eyes before tossing it away.

With a loud metallic noise, the gun hit the heliport floor without ever going off.

The otherworldly creature in the shape of a boy in his midteens mechanically spun its head to observe the city's sceneries.

It found the central park where Flat Escardos first summoned Jack the Ripper.

Next, it turned its eyes to the police station where the Executor fought the bloodsucker.

The motel they were using as a base, the opera house where he was called for a TV interview...

Its eyes eventually passed through the hospital where they fought that powerful Archer... and locked at its final destination, the spot where Flat was ultimately shot.

Once his eyes were done tracing the steps of the young Master in this land, the boy close them and stopped moving as if it was making a silent prayer.

It's possible he was indeed making a silent prayer.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Though he will never tell what he prayed about in this silence.

The boy opened his eyes and saw a fast-moving figure.

Richard the Lionheart, a Heroic Spirit with a Saber Saint Graph.

The otherworldly boy's eyes sharpened when he saw what Saber was carrying.

The special Magic Circuits connected to these sharpened eyes understood everything.

He knew what the Ayaka Sajou in Richard's arms was.

He knew the tremendous size of the magical energy swirling inside Ayaka.

He didn't learn it now. He understood it the second he first looked at Ayaka Sajou through Flat Escardos's eyes.

Ayaka was the opposite of him. A vast still lake of magical energy.

Massive amounts of unmoving magical energy. It will never go active of its own volition, but in exchange, it can become a giant source of power without needing to make any moves of its own.

Knowing that, he had to accept a fact whether he wanted or not:

Ayaka Sajou was not one of his own kind, but she was exactly as otherworldly to human society as he was.

“That creature... will be a problem later.”

The words he whispered could have been his true opinion, but they could also have been part of his farewell ritual to Flat. The boy didn't know.

And without looking for the answer, the boy circulated magical energy in his hand.

With the sound of grinding gears, shadows seeped out of the hole in his chest and enveloped his arms.

Magic circles appeared where his missing elbows should be and his chest started sending magical energy through his floating forearms to their focal points in his fingertips, amplifying the energy throughout the travel.

The shadows enveloping his arms form further magic circles as they expand, adding second and third layers to the elbows and in front of his palms.

Furthermore, the shadow stretching from his back collected crystalline shards from the atmosphere to grow into a pair of wings, then started drawing a tridimensional emblem in the air.

Flueger, a mage observing the scene from a distance, reported it to his employer as follows:

*Common sense tells me I'm probably wrong
But I think that thing was... Magic Circuits... no, an externally expanded Magic Crest
This thing's on a level beyond those monstrous Magic Crests from ancient houses
The Magic Crest broke out and is now one... no, countless independent living beings
Real-time Magic Crest growth... Nah, sorry man, I gotta be jumping the gun with these theories*

A report that made its sender question his own sanity.

Magic Circuits and Magic Crests are two very important substances to mages.

Magic Circuits are an essential “organ” for the use of magecraft, spread through the body in the form of a fixed number of pseudo-nerves. One reason behind the mages’ *jus sanguinis* doctrine is that they strive to increase this number, even if by just 1.

Likewise, the Magic Crest is a symbol of the accumulation of experience in a mage’s bloodline. However, normal Magic Crest are not provided with biological functions like the one you’re currently seeing. Instead, they are “artificial hearts” designed by each family to be passed from parent to child.

Fate/strange Fake 6

The Crest's creation is supposed to span centuries or millennia with each holder adding their own contribution to it. It suddenly proliferating outside the holder's body is normally unthinkable.

But the boy immediately figured out what was this thing constructing himself around him and *what was it for*.

The magical energy in the city's rich air, or perhaps the land's dragonvein resources allotted to the Holy Grail, were assembling themselves together around the boy in a frantic speed.

Borrowing Holy Grail War terminology, the sheer of magical energy concentrated in one place could plainly be described as a "Noble Phantasm".

The boy's sharp glare aimed his arms and the magical energy they controlled at Ayaka and Saber, ready to shoot.

And then, at the moment of the fallout...

"Hi."

A soothing voice echoed, dissipating all tension.

After the boy stopped his movements, he skillfully put the concentrated magical energy to circulate around himself and turned back.

There he saw someone appeared behind him before he noticed it. They spoke, still in the same soothing voice.

"Nice to meet you, friend."

He saw a forest, an ocean, a mountain, a city... one world standing before him.

The boy's special "eyes" made him more aware of what he was facing than any other person.

A being unlike himself or Ayaka, who did nothing other than blend their power with the world's.

They weren't concealing their presence.

They were assimilated into the wide world with no efforts to hide their powerful presence.

Mother Nature in human form. Confronted by the questioning eyes of this being somewhat similar to Divine Spirits or Elementals, the boy opened his mouth.

"A Heroic Spirit...? The protectors of Human Order are here to erase me?"

"Right now I'm just a Servant walking the land with my Master. Besides, the planet doesn't seem to have decided its opinion on you yet."

"Then what are you here for?"

The boy spoke with maximum caution, but not out of suspicion. He decided from the first moment that he was talking to an enemy.

The Heroic Spirit, this beautiful figure with green hair flowing in the wind, responded with a soothing smile.

"You know this girl you were just trying to obliterate?" Still with no hostility in their smile, the Heroic Spirit -Enkidu- gushed magical energy around themselves with the elegance of vegetation fluttering in the wind. "I'm on an alliance with her team. I can't ignore the signs of an attack when I see one."

" 'this girl'? You're seriously counting that as a person, Servant?"

"Yeah, she's a person. Just like you are."

The boy glared and grit his back, displeased with Enkidu's unpretentious response.

"Fine... This is a good time for a test.", whispered the boy. In the next instant, he skillfully manipulated the high-speed energy circulating around him and started forming a whirlpool of raw magical energy with Enkidu at its center. "To test how big of a hole I can bite in the world

Fate/strange Fake 6

now that I'm not with Flat."

Magical energy manipulation bypassing chants, formulas or any kind of procedure.

This image alone would be enough for the Lords of the Clock Tower or the high-ranked engineers of the Atlas Institute to figure out what the boy was.

No matter how outlandish the answer may seem to them, nothing changes the fact that he exists.

Perhaps one of the Lords, a lecturer who observed Flat's abnormalities for a a long time, already knew about the creature for years.

"You want to compete against me? Heh, that would have been so enjoyable, had we met in a different place under different circumstances..."

"..."

Enkidu silent spread their arms opens at the same time the boy activated his magecraft.

The violent whirl of magical energy around them twisted space.

But almost at the same instant, countless chains sprouted from the floor Enkidu was stepping on, drawing a spiral spinning in the opposite direction as the space distortion to fill up all the space that would have been dislocated away.

With a bursting noise, the dense magical energy in the area dispersed.

However, it was immediately absorbed into the Hole open in the boy's body. The eyeball visible from its gaps scowled at Enkidu.

Enkidu flashed a smile to that eye while they continued their previous sentence.

"Sorry, but protecting Master is my priority now."

Next, Enkidu grabbed a chain they sprouted from the ground.

The chain entangled them and permeated, as if being absorbed by their body, until it was assimilated into their clothes.

“A serious battle between us would take this whole area as collateral damage. I’d like to avoid that.”

Enkidu slowly approached the boy, still with the chain in hand. With a slightly lonely smile.

“I had this ready, but it was for round 2 with Gil...”

With the elegance of a bloomed flower, Enkidu was holding their open arms above the ground.

And with powerful words, they started chanting the name their Noble Phantasm.

Now is the time to sing of the scars and splendor that marked the planet.

The boy tried to make his move before they could finish the sentences, but noticing the massive magical energy approaching from the building floors below him, he redirected all the accelerated energy toward defense.

Wisdom of the people

Age of Babylon

This was the Noble Phantasm Enkidu was regularly using without a chant.

An equivalent to Gilgamesh’s Gate of Babylon. It uses chains to connect to the planet and reproduce Human Order’s creations from the ground.

This Noble Phantasm can be considered Enkidu’s basic weapon, the primary form of attack they’re always using, but since they placed a fragment of their Saint Graph into the words they spoke to exercise it, the Noble Phantasm shows signs of its true nature for the first time.

At first, Enkidu’s usual blades -swords and spears- spawned out of the rooftop floor in large

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amount along with the chains, charging at the boy's body in quick succession.

Faced with the tyrannical attack of a thousand blades, the boy was deep in thought.

What can his perfected form do?

Now that he's freed from Flat Escardos, his beloved shackles, he fully became what Messara Escardos wished for.

Everything past this was uncharted territory.

But he already had the knowledge he needed.

Everything was recorded in the Magic Crest passed down through generations of the Escardos family, in a form only him could comprehend.

For that reason, the boy didn't feel threatened.

He could see countless blades coming in his direction.

Each of them was a reproduction of the greatest weapons in Human Order and could erase a poorly built Saint Graph with a touch.

One or two hundred of edges that sharp approached him faster than a falcon flying after its prey.

The boy calmly watched the glimmers in the flock of blades.

He accelerated his own consciousness to the limit and stagnated his subjective perspective of the world's flow, just like he did to the snipers before.

Naturally, time wasn't truly stopped, so the boy's movements were slowed down accordingly, making the air around him feel viscous like an ocean of tepid muck.

But the boy accelerated the od running through all his Magic Circuits, propelling the mana around him into sudden acceleration and putting it in circulation.

Magical energy accelerated ludicrously, as if it had an external rocket engine placed in addition to its own internal combustion engine.

And yet, the magical energy flowed with perfect artistic elegance, spreading to its surrounds in the shape of a pair of shadow wings and drawing magical formulae that couldn't be found in any paper about magecraft.

What the boy did may have looked a brand new form of magecraft created on the spot, but in reality, it wasn't.

It was an impromptu orchestra of numerous magecrafts, from basic to advanced.

This was Flat Escardos's preferred form of magecraft. A most troublesome system that could improvise ideal results but made it nigh impossible for the user to faithfully reproduce them a second time.

What the boy was doing is essentially the same.

By combining numerous magecraft systems, the boy can explosively accelerate his nerves and limbs and constantly regenerate the cells and joints destroyed by this sudden bursts of speed.

He applied layers upon layers of magecraft on his own body with no signs of burdening it, seeming as if the boy's very body was a form of magecraft.

If Flat Escardos and this boy here use the same kind of magecraft systems, what makes them different?

The answer couldn't be simpler.

Frame and engine.

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The difference in their specs was simply the difference between heaven and earth.

If Flat was a minicar with the latest digital controls, the boy was a fictional mobile weapon: a never seen before drive machine with the resistance of a tank, the energy reserves of a battleship, and the propulsion of a jet.

Working backwards from this “fictional weapon” example, Flat’s geniality could be described as what would happen if a computer built for the sole purpose of processing a simulated object was suddenly able to operate this object.

The world of humanity lost a man of genius insight, and the advent of a catastrophe that loss incite.

All concluded as Messara Escardos dreamed.

As Enkidu’s blades approached, the boy displayed his ability.

The magical energy in high-speed circulation around the boy expanded, repelling them all.

Not literally repelling. The boy created a mana barrier that pulverized the weapons on contact, turning the products of Enkidu’s power and Earth’s ground to dust.

By immediately reading and hacking the magical energy in Enkidu’s Noble Phantasm, he absorbed it into his circulation of energy.

Not only that, he also manipulated the magical energy in some without destroying them, sending them flying back to Enkidu’s body.

But the barrage of counterattacks didn’t reach Enkidu.

The rampart floating in front of Enkidu blocked all of them.

Laced with powerful magical energy, this golden wall could serve as a strong boundary.

Each brick in the three layers of the wall had the words Nabû-kudurri-usur engraved in cuneiform.

The wall was only about two people tall, but it could effortlessly defend against the magically propelled weapons.

But the otherworldly boy didn't lose his calm.

He flew higher and kneaded his energy in the form of the attack he tried to use earlier on Ayaka.

The black shadows once again spread behind the boy's back and from around them, beams of energy in high-speed rotation were shot.

There is a power limit to a raw beam shot by a human mage, but through some kind of process, the beams he shot were hundreds, thousands of times above this ceiling.

But in response, the rampart changed into a dome, protecting against attacks from above.

But this was trivial to the boy now that he finished preparing his attack.

Countless beams of light converged instantly to the space in front of the boy, forming a monster made of magical light. The monster charged at Enkidu.

Two bites was what it took to open a hole in the seemingly impregnable multilayer rampart, and after few rounds it was completely taken apart.

“...!”

But the boy flinched at the sight of what appeared behind the bricks and the cloud of dust.

Enkidu's soothing face was surrounded by objects completely misfit with their expression and what he fought with thus far.

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“What...? What the hell are you...?”

Still floating in the air, the boy dropped a shocked question out loud.

Any modern mage knowing Enkidu’s True Name would have reacted the same way.

The objects deployed around Enkidu were clearly associable with ancient Babylonia due to the symbols engraved on them and the mixture of clay and shining gold.

But those weapons clearly didn’t exist back in the days of ancient Babylonia.

Flat Escardos was an avid fan of movies and manga. Through him, the boy gained the knowledge necessary to understand what they were. Though not to accept his conclusion.

A past memory the boy had seen through Flat’s eyes flashed back.

It was a memory of Flat taking an acquaintance’s Mystic Code - Trimmau, a mercury maid-without permission to watch a movie.

The boy didn’t have the movie’s title memorized since that wasn’t an important memory for him, but it was about a giant mantis monster coming out of an iceberg, attacking an American city, and fighting against the army.

One scene in the movie.

The army started attacking the giant flying mantis from the ground. Flat was commenting the scene as they watched.

This is so freaking cool! See if you can transform into it, Trimm!

An application for a new shapeshift pattern requires an official name.

Flat had an “I was waiting for this moment!” reaction to the mercury maid’s mechanical response.

Don't worry! I imagined this would happen and made sure to ask my gun nerd friend what it's called!

The boy extracted the weapon name from the file in his memory.

This weapon is called a...

Remembering Flat’s words, the boy let the the formal name slip out of his mouth.

“...M1... 120mm anti-aircraft gun...”

8 units.

The number probably wasn’t much of a factor in this, but it’s a cold, hard fact that the boy needed to recheck his vision in other accept that the image before his eyes was real.

Albeit inorganic, their form was dignified enough to resemble a guardian statue with an over 7 meters long barrel.

While they were indeed repainted in the style Enkidu’s home Babylonia, what they were was plain to see.

Modern weaponry from this American land, discontinued only 5 decades ago.

Enkidu’s eccentric line-up dominated the space of Crystal Hill heliport.

The beautiful rows of anti-aircraft artillery around Enkidu filled up with golden energy, in a display of color that harmonized surprisingly well with Enkidu’s own.

It looked as if they were defensive weapons installed on Babylonia’s walls.

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Or perhaps as if even this modern weaponry was part of the planet's natural decoration.

Something as central to the current civilization as modern weaponry could be made to resemble a great beautiful tree. This powerful scene manages to resemble a painting of a historical moment, despite the inherent irony of its composition.

Wisdom of the people

Age of Babylon

This Noble Phantasm has the special property of constantly "updating" with Enkidu's every summon as a Heroic Spirit.

The ability to draw from the planet's memory and produce various objects.

The very act of copying human history.

Therefore, the longer time passes, the denser, higher, and deeper is the data they gain.

The Heroic Spirit Enkidu can expand the range of civilization they can replicate by connecting themselves to many different eras.

Think of a hypothetical situation where someone could summon Enkidu to multiple different eras. If Enkidu was summoned to the ancient Babylonia from their lifetime, they would be limited to reproducing only the weapons they came to know in life or other weapons men had already created in that era in that land.

Conversely, were they summoned to a future beyond the Holy Grail War in Snowfield, they would be summoning numerous that can only be considered impossible fantasies nowadays.

Although that's not necessarily a good thing.

Much like the greatest modern firearm can't compare to the radiance of a Holy Sword, in a

battle of Noble Phantasm newer doesn't necessarily mean stronger.

It is known in the world of magecraft that the closer something is to the Age of Gods, the more pronouncedly arcane it is. And even on more realistic terms, it's inadvisable to face a 16th-century grapeshot cannon with a 21st-century pistol.

However, this Noble Phantasm belongs to Enkidu, whose very foundation is already arcane.

Every individual bullet in a Gatling gun would be boosted with magical energy to destroy enemy Saint Graphs. The latest model of fighter jet would be empowered enough to compete in a flying race against a mid-level dragon.

Gilgamesh collected the peaks of human potential in his Gate of Babylon. One of the articles stored there is Vimana. Replicating that would, needless to say, require being summoned either in a far distant future, the era when humanity reaches its peak, or in the opposite extreme, the era when humanity was ruled by the star-crossing gods. And replicating key elements such as the bodies of these alien gods or the planet's Holy Sword would require using parts of world itself or treasures of equal value from Gilgamesh's treasury as ingredients.

Nevertheless, there's a reason why this Noble Phantasm is comparable to Gate of Babylon: the number of weapons Enkidu shapes from dirt is the number created by Human Order after parting ways with the gods. That means they use the land as a means for mass production.

Enkidu managed to create numerous weapons considered state-of-the-art half a century ago, just one step below the current standard of weaponry.

One of those is this giant anti-aircraft gun and its every shot is boosted by Enkidu's magical energy.

And now is the moment the weapons started their operation.

Enkidu mercilessly unloaded the anti-aircraft artillery on the boy watching them from above.

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With loud explosions, the arcane gunpowder made of earth rhythmically detonated inside the cannons.

“...!”

The boy judged it would be easy to dodge cannonballs that flew in a straight line after looking at their trajectory, but this naive thought didn't survive being put to the test.

Even after being fired, the shells are still Enkidu's arcana.

They may not be able to make full turns, but they still could take tricky trajectories that defied the laws of physics. The boy immediately determined this was the case and chose not to dodge but to completely neutralize the projectiles with his defenses.

He accelerated his mind once again until his vision was in slow motion and search for a gap he could attack from.

However, in this slowed-down scene, the cannons' firing speed hadn't decreased as much as the speed of everything around it. It was out of pace. Mismatched.

He knew from Flat's knowledge that one anti-aircraft gun can normally fire 12 shots per minute, but those were getting gradually faster than that.

“They're... accelerating?”

The 8 anti-aircraft guns had reached the pace of 1 shot per second.

The advantage provided by the boy's thought acceleration was being mitigated by the unfair power of a Servant's Noble Phantasm.

Below the boy, there was a curtain of cannonballs capable of exterminating the average phantasmal beast in one hit.

But the protective wall created by the peacock wing-like shadow symbol behind his back

was equally on the level the laws of the world would deem unfair. Enkidu's arcane ammunition shattered against it.

"I see... I didn't think a temporary being would be able to sink its roots that deep into the planet.", dispassionately whispered the boy. "Great learning experience. Show me more."

He quietly took control of his breathing and coldly kneaded his magical energy while defending with precision.

He fully grasped the rhythm of the barrage and switched to an offensive spell that would pass through the gaps in the firing pattern. That instant, the moment the blast's flame dissipated, Enkidu appeared by surprise directly under him.

They had merged with a bundle of countless chains sprouting from the floor and fired themselves as a high-density magical energy shell.

"I saw that move coming.", the boy declared dispassionate as ever. He unleashed his magical energy as a counter to Enkidu's main body.

High-density magical energy adjusted for the sole purpose of destruction.

If Enkidu dodged it, the tallest building in Snowfield would have been reduced to bricks in an instant.

The boy, fully aware of that, shot without hesitation. He had zero reasons to care about the concealment of magecraft. Enkidu also temporarily dropped their principle of arcane concealment.

Not that Enkidu's Master, a silver wolf, ever put any thought into the arcane concealment in the first place.

Countless chains rose from the ground below, enveloping the whole building.

It didn't stay that way for more than a few seconds, so a civilian watching from a distance could assume they saw Crystal Hill testing a special light setup for some event. And every

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mage watching the situation would make a face begging for mercy.

That is because they would know they're dealing with a Heroic Spirit, someone who requires a fair deal of power to stop.

After reaching the rooftop, the swarm of chains kept stretching higher to the skies, becoming a gigantic heavenward tree.

"Haha..."

Verifying that the attack he fired was absorbed into the great tree of light, and its energy used to stretch the chains even further, the boy sneered.

"I wish Flat could see this. He would have loved this over-the-topness."

Enkidu approached from below for a chop, which he blocked with a pitch-black blade extending out of the Hole in his chest and countered with several blades that pierced the divine doll's abdomen.

Even then, the Heroic Spirit maintained their pressure, pushing the boy's body further up and above.

Crystal Hill and Snowfield City were disappearing further and further into the distant background below.

Somewhere along the way, the boy and Enkidu noticed their energy scraped on a blimp under concealment magecraft, partially destroying it.

But neither of them had the time to care.

The great tree of chains involving the building had already disappeared and its energy was all poured into Enkidu's body.

Enkidu morphed their arms and part of the clothes into bird wings and kept rising higher with bursts of magical energy from their feathers.

This is not how real birds fly. Enkidu did this to incessantly attack amidst their powerful flight, perhaps imitating the flying phantasmal beasts of their time.

To counter that, the boy spread his own “wings” further and gathered the vestiges of mana in the skies above the planet.

The boy caught a random glimpse of a giant something swimming in the sky but was too busy to identify what it was.

Enkidu, pushing his body further up, opened their mouth.

“I knew you were a threat to my Master.”

Their words expressed concern but still had a soothing tone to them.

As proof, Enkidu’s next words were spoken with a tranquil smile.

“But I’m glad you were born. If no one else will celebrate your birth, I will.”

“...? Oh... Thanks...”

The boy thanked before thinking, flustered by the unexpected words.

His words and expression showed confusion, but he never left his battle stance.

The same goes for Enkidu. With their body overflowing with magical energy, they took a look at the land expanding below them and spoke with heartfelt relief.

“It’s proof that our planet still hasn’t given up hope.”

After trading remarkably powerful blows, the two opened up the distance between each other as they kept flying higher.

“Pretty late to this question, but what should I call you?”

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Their surroundings suddenly grew dark and the stars above them more prominent.

Both the boy and Enkidu knew that the sun wasn't setting ahead of time.

Until this moment, the boy's eyes were filled with suspicion, but now they had a hint of the curious tone of Flat Escardos's eyes.

"Thia. Thia Escardos. My friend named me that. I won't go by any other name."

And so, the boy who used to be Flat Escardos a few moments prior spoke his name.

In this place dozens of kilometers above the ground, this altitude past the stratosphere but still not yet in the mesosphere, the boy spoke his name.

The air was 10 times thinner than it was on the surface.

Regardless, the two of them remained as capable of holding a conversation as ever, either because they loaded magical energy into their voices or because their hearing is abnormal. Enkidu heard his name clearly.

But their conflict didn't end there.

The lack of oxygen and the cosmic radiation didn't matter to the Heroic Spirit and the otherworldly boy.

The surveillance satellite registered their extended battle as gorgeous aurora lights... but since the data satellite observed only Snowfield for management purposes in Faldeus's organization, the footage never went public.

Though perhaps it would be safe to let it go public.

Any non-mage would dismiss it as a sensationalist video heavily edited to provide a made-up justification for what happened later.

Even the mages unaware of the Holy Grail War would come to the same conclusion.

Light.

Pure, overwhelming light contrasted with hollow shadows extended around Thia.

Another light shared the space of the stars and another shadow shared the space of the dark sky.

If Enkidu was the embodiment of nature, the boy had now become the embodiment of light and shadow.

With the spell that put the high-density magical energy in circulation, he twisted space, bending the light of the sun to form a new magic circle with it.

Meanwhile, the completely light-absorbing shadows produced a different spell, forming a multi-layered magic circle around the boy.

Enkidu was surprised at the image of the boy's Magic Crest seemingly starting to corrode the world itself.

“Are you trying to connect yourself to the world...? You really can see everything, huh...”

“ ... ”

With this silent confirmation, the boy launched himself up with a sudden burst of speed. He placed himself precisely above Enkidu as he activate his new magecraft.

“ ... ”

Modding
Cheat on.

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His short words contained faint hints of grief and homesickness.

These words seemingly in tribute to Flat Escardos caused the boy to temporarily rewrite the laws of the world around him.

Unlike a Reality Marble, this was an attempt to permanently overwrite the real world. The rules of the world around him grew unstable.

With that momentum, he permeated himself into the world using magically compressed words that could be interpreted as either a chant, a confession, or a manifesto.

I am without the protection of Human Order.

Earth!

I support the current prime species' right to hate, pity, forgive, scream, and pray to its Counter Force

People!

In this crevice, I shall ingest all good and all evil to demonstrate who I am.

Sing! Dance!

My eyes sing praise to all human creation and for that very reason I take the challenge to overcome the human intellect.

Eternal doom comes.

Through this destruction, I'll be celebrating the prosperity of human intellect until the time the planet withers completely.

Do your best to survive!

These final words triggered an explosive expansion of the space distortion, taking Thia even higher as his magical energy spread to cover the area above the entire United States.

And the distortion started producing its own gravity, gathering together the objects above the planet's skies.

"Those things are human creations, huh.," Enkidu whispered.

The remains gathering around Thia are called space debris.



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Dangerous fragments of dreams, sweat poured from steps in humanity's walk toward the sea of stars, floating in the skies at ferocious speeds.

By the year of Snowfield's Holy Grail War, the amount of space debris in the sky is estimated to be over 2000 tons.

From discarded satellites to detached spaceship implements to iron microfragments scrapped off with the attrition between two objects. Pieces of many different metals are drawn into the swirl, gathering and compressing around Thia.

The vortex also drew minuscule meteors and the microparticles left behind by comet trails. Those all combined into numerous tiny planets rotating around Thia.

Spheres of varying sizes orbited Thia like he was the sun in the Solar System.

He covered them in dense mana to make them as energetically large as they could be. Their rotation accelerated as abruptly as their magical energy circulation.

“...!”

Predicting what would happen next, Enkidu explosively unleashed the magical energy they brought with them from Earth's surface and prepared to intercept the attack.

The next instant... In an attempt to activate his magecraft before Enkidu had the time to deploy their Noble Phantasm, Thia yelled powerful words.

Hollowed Hearsay/Oblivion turns to festivity

“A Clockwork Abbadon!”

Numerous “moons” with masses ranging from 500 kilos to dozens of tons rained on Enkidu and Earth much beyond the speed of sound.

Due to a spell to ignore air resistance, the projectiles he continuously fired with the high speed of a railgun shot would never burn or slow down. It was clear that if they reached the

surface, they would cause major harm to the land and all the life on it.

At that moment, the energy levels in Enkidu's body skyrocketed. Thia couldn't tell where all this power was coming from but all of the Heroic Spirit's parameters got a temporary boost.

People, let us bind the gods

“Enuma Elish!”

Enkidu unleashed their Noble Phantasm without a moment's delay.

The power to turn their Saint Graph into one all-piercing lynchpin weapon by borrowing power from the planet and Human Order.

Enkidu charged with the golden chains deploying around them, forming a spiral in attempt to crush all the numerous approaching malignant stars.

They collided.

And then there was a flood of light.

An enormous flower of magical energy bloomed in the upper limits of the stratosphere, with each of its petals holding the shattered asteroids.

The impact's rebound reached the Kármán line, which represents the border between the planet and the universe, where it became a pseudo-aurora gaudily decorating the space above Snowfield.

Thia's greater magecraft was possibly perceived as a threat to the planet or Human Order.

Through the power of the Counter Force poured into their Noble Phantasm, Enkidu managed to block the massive attack on Snowfield.

Which doesn't mean they perfectly neutralized the whole attack, however.

Its shockwaves were tremendous.

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Quite a few star pieces slipped through the magical petals and landed on Earth, although scattering during their fall.

The smallest fragment slipped east, in Washington D.C's direction, falling where the Anacostia River meets the Potomac River.

The impact of the fragment falling in the center of a 1 km wide river instantly sent its water flying and was felt in the White House as an earthquake accompanied by heavy rain.

Another fragment pierced the ground of Yellowstone National Park, almost giving some geologists a heart attack by temporarily exciting the dormant magma.

Another fragment flew far west, crossing the Pacific Ocean and falling on Japanese maritime territory.

The fragment's uncontrollable magical energy generated heat, instantly evaporating a large volume of water on the oceanic surface.

The kilometers-tall splash and evaporation pillar was witnessed from the nearby coast and ships, generating online speculation about an underwater volcanic eruption, a long-ranged missile landing, or an alien invasion.

Another fragment fell on Russian land, raising an alert for an attack from another nation, which left the whole world in a tense state.

But it was the second large fragment that caused the biggest worldwide impact.

The fragment flew north preserving all of its tremendous magical energy, making the impact of its fall to physically obliterate its surroundings.

It didn't cause visible geographical changes, but its mental shock on humanity was large.

As the observation satellites suddenly showed that

12% of the Arctic ice caps vanished from one footage clip to the next.

Had this happened to Antarctica's ice, it would have had a tangible effect on Earth's oceanic levels.

Eventually, it was discovered that the fallen fragments were pieces of space debris, artificial satellite parts, leading to rumors that a space station fell off or that something caused all satellites around Earth to drop, but that was only many hours after the fact.

From a mage's point of view, the most significant fragment was the largest one.

It was less of a fragment and more of an asteroid still in its original form.

Thia used all other asteroids as decoys as he sent this one in a different trajectory with concealment magecraft hiding it from sight and magical energy detection. It was set to fall on Snowfield.

Did he do it for the sole purpose of eliminating the girl Ayaka Sajou?

Or maybe he was planning to take down Enkidu indirectly, by destroying either their Master or the land the Holy Grail was rooted on?

The answer was yes for both, but while they were correct answers, they weren't THE correct answer.

Don't try to fool yourself. I hate the Holy Grail War. I hate this ritual and the guys who killed Flat for it. Humans... Human cities... Honestly, I quite liked London... But I don't care about this city. ... Flat, there's one thing I never told you about. The reason why you summoned that serial killer. That Heroic Spirit... couldn't possibly be brought out by a toy knife. It was because of me. Because I have the potential to be a serial killer for humanity... and I'm not anyone yet.

This inner monologue was just a fraction of a second in the real flow of time, done amidst the fluid movement of dropping this asteroid on Earth.

But it didn't escape Enkidu's Presence Detection.

The tactic of perfectly concealing its magical energy backfired. In this space Thia and Enkidu made so turbulent with magical energy, one neutral spot becomes too conspicuous to go unnoticed.

Enkidu stretched their chains in an attempt to apprehend the egg-like asteroid of magical energy but Thia followed up his magecraft to prevent that.

This resulted in the magical asteroid flying toward Earth almost intact, although Enkidu managed to shift its trajectory.

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Instead of Snowfield, it went to the largest city on the West Coast, Los Angeles.

Goodbye, City of the Angels.

Goodbye, Long Beach.

Goodbye, Griffith Observatory.

Goodbye, Hollywood.

Once he finished calculating the mark of the magecraft he fired, Thia noticed Hollywood was there and felt sad about it, remembering it was a place Flat wanted to go to, while simultaneously canceling the sadness with resignation, as he didn't care because there was no Flat in him anymore.

Direct contact with the malignant star's destruction and atomic decay spells would return the city named after the angels to light.

The magical energy contained in it could erase all life within a few kilometers' radius. And the decay that comes after the destruction would cause a chain of cataclysms by stimulating the land, the dragonveins, and the underground magma.

Not even Thia himself was able to stop this. This impact would define the future direction of humanity, on a physical level far beyond the arcane concealment.

Keyword: would.

Thia line of sight took him to a dense swirling cumulonimbus.

Supposedly a western hurricane that passed Los Angeles on its way to Nevada.

The giant cumulonimbus might seem like just a grotesque mass of giant clouds taking up space on Earth's troposphere but Thia always felt an unpleasant presence inside its dense clouds.

It felt like all the magical energy of the land and air around the cumulonimbus was trapped inside the cloud.

Some major unknown threat was inside it but he knew he was in no condition to do anything about it.

That's why he didn't give it any attention until now.

His magecraft would activate on impact, regardless of what was inside the cloud.

The boy wondered if the malignant star would get to ravage America's west metropolis.

But then something abnormal happened.

“ ... ”

Thia was taken aback by what he saw.

Part of this over 500-kilometers-diameter swirling cumulonimbus wriggled like an animal raising its head, and from it, a pair of tornados grew pointing up.

The tornado system operated with a clear disregard for the laws of physics. It extended its whirls with beautiful symmetry, looking almost like the horns of a giant beast.

No.

Thia was sure.

They weren't "almost like horns".

Those were the real horns of a real colossus.

His magical energy sight could precisely confirm its arcanelly concealed figure.

The pair of whirlwinds covered a deep yet lustrous blue.

The sea and the sky combined into a solid mass of azure made from pure lapis-lazuli in seemingly larger amounts than all minerals on Earth combined.

Adorned gold bones could be seen between the rifts of the giant typhoon cloud.

Each bone in the golden and blue beast was the size of a large city. It roamed the world with

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violent winds as its flesh.

Its magical energy levels spiked...? I didn't see it draining the energy from the planet. Is that creature from... somewhere else...?

Thia's mind was full of questions, but the biggest one was why it moved.

He immediately learned the answer.

The malignant star of atrocity and destruction zooming across the troposphere was going to hit one of its peninsula-sized azure horns.

The horn wriggled.

More precisely, the vast magical energy covered in divine aura gushing out from deep inside the horn did.

Unlike Thia's magical space distortions, the horned colossus used its divine aura to crush and swallow space, breaking the concepts of range and direction.

With its energy vector distorted, the malignant star began falling long before it hit Los Angeles, plunging in a straight line towards the colossal cumulonimbus face.

An egg of ruin and destruction, charged with enough power to cause a widespread earthquake when it hit the ground.

Is it more powerful than the hurricane then?

Obviously, comparing different forms of calamities is comparing apples and oranges, and cataclysmic earthquakes are inherently more damaging to the world than giant tornados, but looking only at their energy numbers, the bulky hurricane had the power of a hundred magnitude 9 earthquakes.

What would happen if all this energy walked like a beast?

The answer is what he sees.

A large hurricane made of dense cumulonimbus.

It was the textbook image of a typhoon, a beautiful rift separating the clouds from the sky. Almost a perfect circle when seen from above.

Nonetheless, for someone capable of seeing the dense magical energy it contained, it was a typhoon-sized colossus slowly walking in his direction.

Its bellows are gales.

Its veins are torrents.

Its huffs are lightning.

The dense cumulonimbus is its very meat while also the armor guarding the whole divine beast.

Not a zoomorphized cyclone. The opposite of that, in fact.

This appearance is the direct result of attempting to make a beast of the gods descend to the world without changing its shape. Thia knew exactly what the monster truly was.

The beast with the golden skeleton visible inside the cumulonimbus slowly raised its head.

No, it only seemed slow to Thia and Enkidu because of the distance between them. Considering its massiveness, the speed its chin opened and closed should have been amazing.

The malignant star slipped straight into the colossus' mouth, which closed soon after.

It would have immediately formed a dust cloud of destruction had it reached the ground.

But it never happened.

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He waited for it, but it showed no signs of happening.

Gold and azure light shone in the hurricane's interior, explosively increasing its energy level without changing its size.

The 50m/s winds became 80 m/s, momentarily approaching the historical wind speed world record of 100 m/s.

The colossus could easily break the record if it dedicated all of its power to raise the wind speeds.

Was it just coincidence or did the divine beast has a reason not to do so? Maybe someone ordered him not to do it.

But these questions were trivial to Thia and Enkidu.

They were sure of it.

That this colossal cumulonimbus beast with a length in the triple digits of kilometers was looking at them.

And that this colossus hosting enormous calamity mocked them.

The boy reacted with a curious smile... while Enkidu lost his smile and gazed at the divine beast with a sad expression.

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West Snowfield, forest region

The duo flying high above had no idea that someone on Snowfield was observing the colossus' behavior.

The observer was Filia... Ishtar. Feeling what happened to the divine beast that is her property, she sighed.

“Oh, my boy never learns, does he?”

She wasn't bothered by the sudden power increase nor worried about the land's destruction.

She merely shrugged at her divine beast's appetite.

“Don't go complaining to me if the trash you ate gives you a stomachache.”

Interlude

“Audition”

The past, in a certain country

“Sigma, have you ever thought about living a different life?”

When Sigma was asked this question by a girl in the same class of the same training facility where he was being raised to become a spellcaster spy -a girl assigned the name Tau- he couldn't come up with anything.

He had the will to give her a response, but couldn't think of any.

No matter how seriously he tackled the topic of a different life, he didn't have a reference pool to pull any ideas from.

His head contained only what he had seen with his own eyes. He lacked the bare minimum knowledge and experience necessary to imagine the world unknown.

While waiting for Sigma's answer, Tau continued.

“See, the teachers made a promise to me. If I'm the number 1 in this drilling grounds, they'll give me a dad and a mom. People very important to the country will take me as their daughter!”

“Important people?”

“They said they're 'seniorstaffs' on the factory that makes our food. People who make food must be the second most important in the country, only behind the sovereign!”

“Are they? ...yeah, sounds right.”

Tau and Sigma were children who didn't even know the meaning of “senior staff” at the time.

It was before his 10th birthday.

They spent their days training to forcibly run their Magic Circuits and learning how to use basic Mystic Codes, handle weapons such as knives and firearms, and survive in harsh environments.

Fate/strange Fake 6

The children were thoroughly drilled with the knowledge and experience necessary to be a spellcaster, aside from being sometimes forced to take practical lessons on how to kill a living being.

Although the instructors' way of talking was always kind, the training was always brutal.

A large number of children, Sigma included, learned to read their situation like machines, but sometimes they had someone like Tau, who still had a sparkle in their eyes.

"They say that when you have a dad and a mom, you can sleep tighter. They sing you this thing called a lullaby, make you good food, and take you to parades to celebrate the sovereign!"

"What's a lullaby?"

"When you hear it, you sleep tighter. Can you believe it? It makes mom and dad guard you during your sleep!"

"Now I'm a little jealous."

Sigma finally found an emotion he could verbalize.

Sleep was the greatest pleasure in the boy's life. He was indifferent even to the flavor of food, but to him, the moment he fell asleep, the sensation of falling into the giant night's embrace was not only his one hobby but also the one source of hope that kept him going.

"Oh, Sigma, you really only think about sleep. Your magical energy path switch is the only one different from everyone else."

"Is it?"

Most mages use the mental image of an on/off switch to open and close their Magic Circuit paths to circulate magical energy. Almost every child in this drilling facility forces theirs open with this mental image as instructed. Sigma, however, is the only one that uses the moment he falls asleep as his mental image.

“I bet you want to believe that the world is a dream. Both when you’re using magecraft and when you aren’t.”

“...”

Sigma couldn’t answer.

Because he didn’t know if what she said was right or not, but beyond that, because he didn’t think finding the answer would amount to anything.

He thought only about how Tau sounded so much more mature than him despite being a year younger.

He was sure she would become the best student in the facility and accomplish her dream.

Confident things would go well, Sigma felt a hint of envy over how she would get to hear a lullaby.

He didn’t take long to forget this minor emotional instability.

Eventually, Tau was gone.

She was seriously injured during training, damaging what little Magic Circuits she had.

He didn’t know what happened to children who had to leave the facility.

The only concern in his mind was whether not she was able to sleep well after leaving.

It didn’t take long before she was replaced by a new Tau... and so the life-threatening training uneventfully resumed.

Fate/strange Fake 6

This past didn't hold any greater meaning to Sigma.

Tau's name and face sunk always deeper into his pile of accumulated memories.

The process was identical to how the memories of a dream fade away after one wakes up.

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The present, in a Snowfield back alley

While a Servant was fighting a mysterious demon in the skies far above the city

Sigma, still unaware of what was happening, suddenly remembered a past conversation.

The babyfaced mercenary thought further about the memory, an attitude he considered unlike himself.

He was now enough of an adult to understand it.

Senior staff in a food factory was far from the position of social authority she thought it was, and the whole story about her adoption was a trick the instructors were employing to evolve her further.

Regardless, the timing of the memory resurfacing might be tied to how much Tau resembled Kuruoka Tsubaki.

I'm going... to destroy this system, the Holy Grail War.

Minutes ago, he made his decision in the Kuruoka residence and announced it to the Shadows serving Watcher. Remembering that, he thought about his words as he checked his surroundings.

No... I think the one that looked like Tsubaki was the new Tau that came after her...

His memories were no longer clear.

Nonetheless, the significant refrain repeated in his brain.

Having parents doesn't make a difference, Tau. Is there anything we people born as mages can do...? Yeah. I admit. My goal in destroying the Holy Grail isn't saving Kuruoka Tsubaki. That's the means, not the end. Is it because the red-clad Elemental entrusted me with Tsubaki? No, that's another secondary reason. Can saving Tsubaki even free her from her fate? Would changing the world for Tsubaki make any difference if she's trapped in her fate to sleep forever? And most importantly, will I be satisfied with this in the end? I don't think I can change the whole world. I'm not important enough for that. I only want to know if I can change my and Tsubaki's subjective worlds. Yeah, I just want an answer. It's for that selfish reason that I started my Holy Grail War.

Sigma's thoughts were interrupted by a voice coming from the osteophonic transceiver in his ear.

"Cattle calling Famine."

"..."

"Cattle calling Famine. Famine, do you copy?"

In this back alley unlit by the sunset, Sigma heard the voice of his superior on the transceiver.

Faldeus Dioland.

Only a temporary superior, but still one of the masterminds of the Holy Grail War. A dangerous man with heavily armed forces under his command in addition to his skills as a mage.

Yet Sigma wasn't responding to the transceiver.

Since the transceiver was magically converted into a Mystic Code, he didn't need to worry about being wiretapped.

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But long-range telepathy is obviously beyond what it can handle, so Sigma thought Faldeus wouldn't know his circumstances as long as he ignored the call.

He came all the way from the Kuruoka residence to this back alley by using the Shadows' information to choose the paths unobserved by any cameras.

But the timing of this call was still worrisome.

Did he notice I escaped the isolated world? No, actually, did Faldeus even know I was dragged inside it?

Regardless, the question now was whether or not to take the call.

His idea of destroying the Holy Grail War ritual was something Francesca might like since she enjoyed unpredictable developments, but Faldeus was guaranteed to oppose it.

Feigning obedience to gain Faldeus's trust is a valid strategy, but if Faldeus knew how Sigma neutralized the Kuruoka couple, Sigma could be jumping into a trap.

Sigma was a mere spellcaster with no real ancestry. He had no Magic Crest capable of resurrecting him from a fatal wound.

I'm laughably powerless in comparison to Faldeus.

This thought naturally crossed Sigma's mind despite his awareness that he never had an honest laugh in his life.

What he meant to say is that someone else would laugh about it.

But his path was already chosen.

He wasn't following anyone's orders. If anything, his client for this job was himself.

He lived thus far completing life-threatening missions because his life had no meaning.

It took him long enough to start his first reckless fight.

But...

The faces that crossed his mind were Kuruoka Tsubaki, who sacrificed herself to stop Rider's rampage, and the nameless Assassin, who reacted to that fact with genuine rage.

Now it's my turn to choose to be reckless. I don't want any regrets after this fight.

Now, more than ever before, any missed move would seal his death.

But Sigma has grown devoid of impatience.

He was immersed in his own world with more calm and depth than ever, slowing down time to search for the best move.

Faldeus. Should I take the call and probe his intentions?

While Sigma thought, a considerably emotionally charged voice reverbed from his transceiver.

"Famine, do you copy? Answer me, Sigma"

?

The radio transmitted his standard designation instead of the codename chosen for this operation.

Sigma was puzzled by Faldeus's uncharacteristically fretful delivery.

In reaction to his doubt, a Shadow appeared behind his back. A man wearing an old-fashioned captain outfit let out a jolly giggle before addressing Sigma.

"I won't tell you whether or not you should pick up this call, but I'll give you a hint."

"...?"

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“If you play your cards right, this is your chance to fake your death to that Faldeus fellow. Ever thought about that, kid?”

“What do you mean?”

Sigma asked him to explain his logic upon confirmation that he didn't press the pick-up button. Another silhouette took the captain's place to answer this question -a knight with the appearance of a child.

“It means the board changed. You can't afford a shred of carelessness moving forward.”

Faldeus's cold voice echoed in the transceiver, as background noise for the boy knight's words.

“...from this moment onward, this line is frozen. We are cutting our support to you. Over.”

“!”

After a short static cut, Sigma's transceiver went fully silent.

Did I confirm my betrayal to him?

The boy knight shrugged as he denied Sigma's thought.

“Not really... He concluded you were eliminated by the monster.”

“You mean the Cerberus in the dream world?”

In reaction to Sigma's question, a boy with a snake staff manifested and answered pointing at the sky.

“Wrong... A completely different kind of monster. Although I'm struggling to describe it in words because it's a kind Watcher is not used to detecting.”

This indecisive silence was rare for the Watcher's silhouettes.

After sorting out his thoughts, he eventually nodded and slowly delivered his carefully chosen words.

"He... or it... is probably the scar resulting from an ancient mage's struggle to sink their claws into the world. At the same time, he's something with the potential to be new prime species... born too late into a planet that can break down at any moment."

"Wait a second. Who is this 'he or it'?"

His question caused the boy with the caduceus to disappear, and a woman with an aviator suit to appear above the alley, sitting on an emergency exit handrail.

"You were lucky, Master. If you were in the main avenue, you would have been collateral damage."

"What avenue?"

Presumably the central street in front of Crystal Hill.

Sigma felt a chill down his spine, considering how close he was to whatever was it.

Most of the time with the Shadows, they only warned Sigma of danger of their own initiative when he was one step away from death. Sigma still hasn't pieced together what Heroic Spirit Watcher was, but he had a great deal of trust in the information provided by her silhouettes.

But even then, the next piece of information he received made him doubt his ears.

"Your coworkers were exterminated. All 38 members of the 3rd squad... By what once was Flat Escardos.

"... That's that Heroic Spirit's power... Jack the Ripper?"

"No, the Heroic Spirit didn't do anything here. He tried, though."

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“ ... ”

It was getting hard to believe.

He never interacted with these so-called coworkers, but he knew they were a team of very individually capable combatants under the leadership of Faldeus, a strategist far more clever than Sigma.

He could understand if they were taken down by a Heroic Spirit.

He had no doubts after witnessing the extraordinary abilities of Assassin and Tsubaki's "Mr. Black". But here she said they were taken out by Flat Escardos, the young Master instead of the Heroic Spirit.

Flat?

Hearing that name, Sigma reviewed his information about the young man involved in the battle in front of the church. One of the jokers in the El-Melloi Classroom deck, although that deck has more than a dozen jokers shuffled into it. Epithet: The Unwanted Blessing.

Sigma saw him as a person that demanded special caution, although not as much as the Red Evil or the World's Most Elegant Hyena.

Most Clock Tower mages studying in the El-Melloi Classroom are famously remarkable, countless of them serving as subjects of horror to a mere spellcaster like Sigma.

One Japanese Bajiquan fighter formed a pirate organization of allegedly tremendous magical and military power in the Singaporean coasts, and in response to it, a noble lady created a private military company of rivaling magical strength and remarkable capital strength. Those two risk figures are known by the two monikers above.

And one rank below them on the scale of absurdity, there were Flat Escardos and the equally dangerous "Beastclad" Svin Glascheit.

It's common knowledge among spellcasters that they must never fight Flat with magecraft, they have to hit him physically. And for Svin it's the opposite, they must never fight Svin physically, they have to kill him with a trap. So the standard tactic for when Flat and Svin are together is retreating immediately.

Actually, many spellcasters go beyond and say "attacking Clock Tower people is not always a bad idea, but never lay a finger on someone from the El-Melloi Classroom".

After a few seconds of running the compressed information in his head, Sigma asked a question to reconfirm something with the silhouette.

"Are you sure Flat Escardos did it? He wasn't using the Heroic Spirit's power?"

Sigma's question was like double-checking a map. He didn't doubt it was the case but needed to make himself sure.

At that point in time, Sigma no longer held any suspicion for the Shadows. He trusted them as a reliable combat tool he'd be dumb not to use.

But naturally, even the most regularly maintained gun can still jam.

Sigma already saw discrepancies with reality coming from the most accurate informant, and betrayal coming from a spellcaster who grew up eating from the same pot as him. To him, it never hurt to be cautious.

A mage's battlefield is a crossfire of illusions and Charm magecraft. Not even his own eyes and ears are trustworthy there.

But even then, entrusting his life to them had more value than trusting the magecraft he can do with the little magical energy he has or the conveniently selected information he received from Faldeus.

Sure enough, he already stepped into the battlefield at this point, so it was already too late to

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think about trading the cards in his hand.

Those circumstances led to Sigma's semi-rhetorical question, but...

The old captain silhouette returned with an answer he wasn't expecting.

"No. Pay more attention to what you hear, don't miss the keywords. This kind of mistake can be fatal sometimes, got it?"

"?"

"She said 'what once was Flat Escardos, did you forget? Flat is dead. This a completely separate individual."

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

"Should I consider Sigma also out of combat? ...No, he's Francesca's pawn first and foremost. I can't discount the possibility he cut communications with me on her orders."

Sigma's provisory boss Faldeus theorized about his loss of contact with him.

But he never reached the idea that Sigma could have rebelled of his own volition, and ultimately held off his final judgment until he was able to get in touch with Francesca.

"The central surveillance system was physically destroyed... and in all other sectors, the cameras were magically hacked and had their spells destroyed... Who would have thought processing the surveillance cameras with magecraft would have backfired like this...?"

Faldeus was impressed with how calmly he read the surveillance system's damage report.

Perhaps a major factor behind his composure is the presence of Assassin - Hassan-i-Sabbah. Assassin could perfectly hide his presence if he so chose, so if he was intentionally letting Faldeus feel it, there was a reason behind it.

He's watching to see if I won't misspeak... That's what he's trying to say, maybe.

The murder of Galvarosso Scadio, boss of the Scadio Family. When Faldeus passed this order, he was reminded of a question. *"Have you the resolve to see that faith through, even if it means ending another's life?"*

Faldeus considered it a hypocritical question but never made light of it.

No matter what nuance the words concealed, it was an agreement with his Servant. Even unofficial pacts could potentially rebound as a form of curse if broken.

And questioned or not, his faith was unshakeable.

He can still confidently say eliminating Galvarosso wasn't a mistake.

It caused political and financial damage to America, but it prevented the greater future damage that would be caused by the Scadio Family's schemes.

But he needed to be careful in how he utilized Assassin.

After all, he couldn't verify what skills and Noble Phantasms he had. He could force him to tell with a Command Spell but he couldn't carelessly use that, as it was possible he would be inviting a betrayal on himself with that act.

But the results confirmed Assassin was wonderfully skilled.

Being asked about his faith might have subconsciously strengthened Faldeus's mental state. Otherwise, he would be humiliating himself in this sudden situation.

"The first order of business is to get the surveillance system back online. Please call Head Officer Orlando for it. Request him to forward us the footage from the normal, non-magical

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city cameras. We'll have three systems up: the repaired form of the one we've been using, one for digital images, and a network of surveillance familiars for magical images."

Faldeus gives order after order, restoring a semblance of order to the situation.

"...? Francesca's workshop was damaged? She's doing... an emergency landing on the south desert? Was this also Flat Escardos...?"

For convenience's sake, he gave his orders on the assumption that the one who attacked the snipers was Flat Escardos.

He always thought of Flat as someone with the potential to be as dangerous as the Heroic Spirits depending on the circumstances, but he had no idea how right he was.

The magical energy splashes from his battle with Lancer in the skies were tangible from where he was. Faldeus's instincts screamed that Flat was without a doubt a greater threat than a low-tier Heroic Spirit.

In fact, he had caused more damage than any Servant.

"I demanded the general sent a replacement squad immediately but I don't think they'll make it still today."

Washington was apparently facing its own set of problems, so Faldeus was unable to get in touch with the general he answered to.

Considering the timing, Faldeus found it hard to believe the two cases were unrelated, and this thought further strengthened his wariness of Flat Escardos or whatever was possessing his body.

"We'll receive a decision about this from the outside before we come up with our own... Though I wish the control was in my hands until it's all over... With how ridiculous this got, I can't make fun of my predecessor in Fuyuki's 3rd..."

As Faldeus grumbled these almost complaints, Aludra returned from another room and

handed him a document.

“The analysis team’s report, sir.”

“Thank you. I was waiting for it.”

He took the file with a shrug and skimmed it.

The data was so good it could be considered unfair for the Holy Grail War.

It contained the result of a system analysis for spells set in advance all over the city, displaying all signals of magical energy from Heroic Spirits, the individuals linked to them, and their general location.

A mage specialized in magical energy detection could somewhat locate enemy Masters, but having that as an information network large enough to link with the city’s surveillance system was a feat only possible with the cheat that was building the city for the sole purpose of the Grail War.

A Master with a fortified workshop wouldn’t mind their location being detected, but some Masters prefer the strategy of lurking in the city and not letting the opponents know where they are.

If, for example, an Archer team receives this data, they could potentially snipe a Master from a distance too long for their magical energy to be detected.

This is not even hypothetical. Bazdilot’s Archer shot at the Master of the other Archer, Gilgamesh, from outside the city.

Under normal circumstances, this priceless information would be enough for him to go for the win with his Assassin, having all he needs to plan how to assassinate all Masters.

But one piece of data made Faldeus squint.

“I see. Looking back at the older data, I assumed that was the case.”

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As Faldeus confirmed his correct guess, Aludra, who had previously read the documents, raised an indifferent question.

“The number of Masters doesn’t fit the number of Servants... What could this mean?”

The data listed all beings with high enough energy levels to be assumed to be Heroic Spirits, as well as all linked individuals with magical energy, but the numbers didn’t match.

The majority of these individuals entered the city by unknown means, and the surveillance cameras couldn’t identify them.

Someone could be hiding their face with illusions but the idea that it was a single person disguising themselves as multiple individuals couldn’t answer every question the report raised.

“One possibility is that a stray Servant cycled through multiple Masters after losing their original one...”

Reading the next page, Faldeus’s mouth twisted into a pained smile.

It contained the Class list of Servants who switched Masters.

The first was Fake Assassin.

The Servant who attacked the police station. She was receiving her energy supply from a different Master from the one she initially connected to.

The surprise was that her new Master was the outside mage assumed to be contracted to Saber.

Faldeus found himself weirdly intrigued by the girl when he first saw her through the cameras, though even now he still fails to get an idea of what she could truly be.

“She’s... contracted to multiple Servants with no external support? And not any two Heroic Spirits... those two Noble Phantasm spammers? I can’t say that’s unprecedented, but if she has

this much magical energy, then...”

Faldeus’s system could detect magical energy put into action, but it couldn’t estimate the amount inside one’s body.

“She might have the same qualities as Lord Trambelio... an abnormally high Od recovery quotient. We’ll need to raise her place in the threat ranking. Please redirect any surviving squads to her surveillance.”

After passing his order, Faldeus turned his eyes to the next concerning file.

“And the other Heroic Spirit trading Masters multiple times is... oh.”

After reading the whole file, Faldeus whispered with a serious expression.

“Doris Lusendra... Could she have lost when I wasn’t looking?”

The Heroic Spirit listed there was the Rider manifested by the true summon.

If his information is correct, this Servant claimed her name as Hippolyte, queen of the Amazons.

Countless mages were gathered in the city.

It wouldn’t be farfetched to assume some among them are trying to steal Master rights from others.

“I don’t believe there was any fight involving Heroic Spirits, but it is possible her new Master killed the old one in a magecraft battle while Rider was away.”

“It’s possible. In fact, her magical energy became untraceable by our sensors the day before yesterday.”

“To be able to defeat her, the new Master must be another heir candidate of the Lusendra family or some powerful figure in town... That reminds me, Flueger has been spotted in Snowfield. Someone with his level of power could do the job, though only if teamed up with a fellow

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conspirator.”

“Will you dispatch a surveillance squad to locations where Hippolyte’s signal was detected?”

Faldeus paused to think about Aludra’s words.

It was obviously a good idea.

But now he found himself in a sudden shortage of pawns. He shouldn’t spread his forces until the backup squad arrived to refill his numbers.

With that in mind, Faldeus sighed and ordered Aludra.

“One more thing to mention when calling Orlando. We’re leaving her surveillance in Clan Calatin’s hands.”

“Will they accept this?”

“They don’t like elements of uncertainty either.”

Confident that Chief Orlando Reeve would accept his request, Faldeus skimmed the rest of the information.

“Someone moved Kuruoka Tsubaki away from the hospital... I’m curious as to what happened to her Heroic Spirit. Let’s stay vigilant on her case.”

Lastly, he sighed as he saw the image on a figure in front of the hospital: the pawn that had just refused to report.

“Sigma... All the way from the moment of his summon, there were no clear signs whatsoever of the magical energy from the Heroic Spirit he was connected to.”

And then Faldeus remembered that the Servant contracted to Sigma was the comedian Charlie Chaplin.

“That explains the barely noticeable magical energy trace...”

Faldeus was assuming this was some kind of misunderstanding on Sigma’s part, but now his mind was dominated by the idea that maybe Sigma did indeed summon the Comedy King. As this thought took root, Faldeus expressed his unattached condolences to his lost subordinate.

“Well, without a doubt, he wouldn’t last one second against Flat Escardos. Regardless of his skill as a spellcaster, he clearly wasn’t cut out for the Master role.”

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Back alley

“...is what he said. Oi, lad, we ain’t getting any respect in here.”

The captain’s silhouette repeated Faldeus’s words in real-time.

It was the most convenient ability imaginable, but Sigma didn’t know how to deal with it being used to convey someone’s badmouthing of him.

“Don’t look so down on yourself, mister. He valued you enough to hire your mercenary services, did you forget?”, said a muscular warrior shadow to bring some positivity into the conversation. “This your big chance, get it? You’re seriously got the chap thinking you’re dead.”

The shadow said “thinking” instead of “convinced” because Watcher can’t read minds to be sure Faldeus believes it.

Sigma agreed.

Faldeus was not the kind of man who would call something confirmed just because it was highly likely.

His creed was there is no kill like overkill when it comes to eliminating a target.

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But the more important piece of information to Sigma was what the Watcher shadows told him about the fight between “what once was Flat Escardos” and Lancer Enkidu.

“Tell me your honest opinion. Do I have any chance against either of those two?”

“Right now, none. Trying would be dumber than flying to the sun,” spoke the young man with mechanical wings.

Hearing his self-derisive laugh, Sigma started thinking.

“I guess my only hope of winning the Grail War really is targeting the Masters. But my goal is to destroy the ritual. I’m better off avoiding all enemies while I destroy the base foundation of the Holy Grail.”

“Ah, but the foundation is deep underground. As Watcher is now, you could get a bit of static if you go down a step too deep, so watch out. Though you could improve our signal quality by making some progress on your evolution.”

Heeding the returned captain’s words, Sigma lightly shook his head.

“I can’t make a plan with uncertain elements. I guess really need more secret alliances.”

“And what’s more uncertain than an alliance? Most other Masters want the Holy Grail. I don’t think they’ll agree to the ritual’s destruction.”

Sigma asked a question about what the boy knight silhouette said.

“Most? What teams aren’t after the Grail?”

“First there’s Francesca Prelati, Faldeus, and the police. They’re more intent on analyzing the ritual than on getting the Grail, so if they get it, that’s just a lucky bonus.”

“Rejected. You didn’t even need to list them as candidates.”

“Saber and Ayaka apparently found their will for it in the dream world. It’s still possible to persuade them, but it’s highly likely they’ll ultimately oppose you.”

“I won’t discard them as a possibility just yet. What are my other options, though?”

He was surprised by the sudden change in their situation but didn’t let the shock show on his face.

The boy knight continued, despite noticing his internal state.

“This one goes without saying, but Assassin. Her goal always has been destroying the ritual.”

“Yeah, she’s worth to keep cooperating with. I was planning to wait for the night and re-group with her where the cameras can’t see us.”

Hearing his own decisiveness, Sigma was surprised by how much he trusted Assassin.

He knew this was a dangerous omen for a spellcaster mercenary.

“Also... Hippolyte’s team was a possibility until a few moments ago... Things changed for them. They’ll probably change directions and go after the Grail.”

“Ok.”

He never had any points of contact with Hippolyte’s team, so the low hopes of allying with them were no big deal.

That said, “things changing for them” was a curious tidbit he kept in mind to ask about after he was done sorting out alliance candidates.

Tine Chelc’s team and Bazdilot’s team are out of the question... Who is left? Haruri?

Haruri Borzak.

He had no direct points of contact with her, but her mentor, the mage with the moniker

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“Yatagarasu” was a recurring employer of his.

“I would not recommend Haruri. The girl herself is not a problem but if you do anything that displeases the person with her, you’re dead. Although I won’t say it’s impossible, and besides we are mere silhouettes. We have no right to stop if you still want to try.”

“Got it, I’ll stay away for the time being.”

“However, if your only goal is to destroy the ritual, supporting her team from the shadows is a valid option. Though said option has a high chance of incurring major changes on the city.”

“Thanks for the completely hopeless information.”

Sigma’s words cause the boy with the caduceus to appear next.

“Oh, good to see you learned sarcasm.”

“Me...? Sarcasm?”

“I can’t say if it’s a positive change or not, but if sarcasm is what doesn’t let the despair get to you, then it’s good. Your mental health affects your physical health. Ah, it’s such a shame that I’m summoned as a shadow. If I contracted with you in my prime Servant form, I could thoroughly heal both your body and mind. Oh, what a real shame. After a good diagnosis, I could even combine Age of Gods and present age techniques to operate on you if necessary.”

“I’ll... pass.”

Uncomfortable with the silhouette’s heated rant, Sigma politely refused the offer.

They’re just shadows, but their unique personalities are quite faithfully reproduced.

It once again hit Sigma how little he knew about Watcher’s abilities. Fluctuating between trust and caution, the thought about his next move.

“First of all, I need a safe base. Do you know anywhere that isn’t surveilled?”

“A building in this area has an underground performance stage. The security system ain’t finding you there. The main avenue is locked down thanks to the scuffles in the past few days, so you won’t find a soul in the place.”

Sigma nodded to the old captain and stood up from the road bump.

“Yeah, now that the cameras are broken is the best time to move.”

Seeing Sigma’s attitude, how much he changed in the past few days, the old captain shadow appealed to his Master with a short laugh.

“You’re behind the curtains, waiting for your chance to take the stage. Don’t you forget to learn how to use the thing on your back before the time comes.”

The captain pointed to the ancient arcane crossbow resting on Sigma’s back.

He brought it with him from the Kuruoka house but since then, whatever was assumedly possessing this crossbow never appeared again. When he asked Watcher about it, her only response was “This was here before we manifested, so we can surmise what it is, but can’t say for sure”.

“You place a lot of importance on something you don’t know what is.”

“If Watcher’s guessing right, that’s a bona fide trump card you got. Though only if you can see your growth through.”

“Ok.”

Seeing how Sigma was intending to act in pure cold rationality, the captain made use of stirring words to fire up his Master, trying him with a daring smile.

“This is an audition. I can’t tell if your play will end as a tragedy or a comedy, but... You gotta be careful as you’ll choose the actors who will share the stage with you, got it?”

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He sounded like a theater director trying to determine Sigma's right to take the stage. Said Sigma's only reaction was scanning the main avenue to see if it was safe to leave the back alley.

"This is another one of Watcher's trials."

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At the same time, in a deserted building outside Snowfield City's perimeter

An old hotel built outside Snowfield's urban perimeter.

The building is currently abandoned, as far as the public knows. In reality, the place was made to be used as a provisory base for Faldeus's subordinates during operations.

It's boundaries constantly drive people away, and on top of that, the entrance is locked shut to prevent youngsters from coming in as a test of courage.

However, the lock was currently broken, and two figures stood in a room where the sun wouldn't reach.

"Yikes, you're persistent. Look, I totally get the thrill of chasing the subject of your passions, but give me a break. Love needs some time to breathe. Can you hold your urges for just a moment?", spoke a large werewolf covered in fur red like the sunset. "I promise it won't take long. You know how long it takes for a person's body to collapse after their lopped off head hits the floor? How long a body takes to understand it's over for them? If you close your eyes for just that long, I promise I can make both of us happy."

He was one of Jester Karture's multiple "faces". The one specialized mainly in speed and rushdown combat.

But he was far from his top speed after being weakened by Flat Escardos's attack. He had no chances of winning against the Servant in front of him - the Assassin girl.

“...”

Meanwhile, the Assassin in front of him was no longer hearing his words.

Because by this point, she already knows his words are nothing but poison to her, not to mention the possibility of a spell or curse being mixed in them.

All she sees is an impurity she must exorcize.

She polished her mind to specialize itself in this one purpose and deployed her Noble Phantasm to crush her debilitated prey's Spiritual Core.

Delusional Heartbeat

“Zabaniya”

A red hand covered in magical energy sprouted from Assassin's back, approaching Jester to imprint doom onto him.

As this same Noble Phantasm already crushed one of Jester's Existence Cores before, he predicted he might need to sacrifice multiple other Existence Cores to escape this situation.

Another option was to use one of his remaining Command Spells like he did when he transported her far away from the police station, but he couldn't immediately commit to that idea because he didn't know if that would still work now that her magical energy path was connected to someone else instead of him.

His Existence Cores or a Command Spell?

Without the time to make a more well-considerate decision, he went with throwing away his Existence Cores.

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Before Assassin's eyes, the red-haired werewolf's claws pierced his chest... and then gouged his heart out.

“!?”

This forced a choice on Assassin, as her aim was locked on the werewolf's heart.

Should she make her Noble Phantasm's curse eradicate the gouged-out heart or should she consider this a discarded Spiritual Core and aim for the next one that appears?

Assassin already knew the unique properties of the vampire Jester but she moved through instinct rather than through calculations.

And her instinct chose the path of further extermination: to chop the heart away with her right hand and save the Noble Phantasm for the next body.

But Jester saw her rush-in move coming.

As such, the dying werewolf figure smiled.

The cylinder-shaped emblem in his chest spun and Jester started morphing into his next form, all with a peal of eerie laughter mixing attachment and lust.

It was a humanoid mass of steel. Not human... not even organic.

Perhaps some form of golem.

The only things the current form shared with the previous one were the smile on its mouth-like hole and the cylinder-shaped emblem on its chest.

The next thing Assassin saw was some kind of magical symbol appearing in the werewolf's heart.

...! He's offering a tribute...

It was already too late by the time she realized it.

As the spell was already active the moment Jester gouged his heart out, Jester's victory was determined more by his own resolve and less by Assassin's misjudgment.

One second later:

a giant explosion flashed in the abandoned hotel, engulfing part of the building in its blinding light.

"Kehe... I wasted two bullets on this... Goodbye for now, beautiful Assassin, my beloved."

A few minutes later.

Jester could be found within Snowfield's urban area, wandering the back alleys, concealed.

The sand or the shades of the forest trees are no places to hide from my dearest Assassin. It has to be among a human crowd. Her treachy sweetheart couldn't exterminate humans to weed me out.

That was the thought process behind Jester's choice to make it back downtown.

His current appearance was the one he fought Hansa Cervantes at the police station with.

He offered the werewolf's heart as a tribute for the self-destruction spell, which he activated point-blank using the golem figure as a shield for his escape.

Fate/strange Fake 6

He took a huge gamble, not knowing if that was enough to shake Assassin off, but since she already had an offensive Noble Phantasm active, he managed to run away in the time it took her to switch Noble Phantasms.

If the Noble Phantasm she had active at the time was the search one, she would have immediately given pursuit no matter how thoroughly Jester hid.

Shaking her off was easier than I expected, though... Maybe my dearly beloved is more damaged than I imagined. Ah, that's worrying. Someone might kill her before I do...

For all Jester was concerned about Assassin's health, his male vampire form was doing worse.

His wounds from Hansa's consecrated howitzer shells weren't healed and his face had a burn mark.

"What's my next move? Thanks to that brat's spell, the Cylinder is almost unusable."

Jester walked dragging a leg.

He took one more step into the deep darkness.

The uniformly concrete-colored back alley walls started to mix with an aged stone wall.

Something was wrong but Jester didn't notice it.

One more step.

Eerie vines started creeping on the wall, but Jester didn't notice them.

One more step.

A pumpkin-colored cartoon spider started building a heart-shaped web above his head, but Jester didn't notice it.

One more step.

The asphalt street was suddenly replaced by a gravel road.

That's when Jester noticed the discrepancies and raised his head.

"What...?", he reflexively voiced his shock.

He thought the back alley he went into would still continue for long, but that wasn't the case, as the whole alley disappeared and in its stead, a completely different scenery was unveiled before him.

In the distance, his eyes saw the birth of an aged European castle atop a hill.

He could recognize the castle.

He never went there, but he knew a lot about it, as by following his Ancestor's example, he developed the hobby of studying humanity's culture and history.

The castle where the noblewoman nicknamed The Vampire Countess committed her atrocities. Csejte.

Not even its ruins.

The colors in the castle sitting atop the hill far above Jester were as vibrant as they were the day the castle was built.

Furthermore, no normal civilian could be found on the streets, only several plushie animals roaming around the castle with movements resembling stop-motion animation.

Many plushies carried ukeleles and trumpets to play indescribably annoying music, and at the center of this parade, there was a starfish plushie dressed up as a clown juggling skulls and eyeballs.

"What's this? How... No, don't tell me..."

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Jester immediately figured out the truth of his current situation.

Previously, an abnormal weather phenomenon occurred in Tsubaki's dream. The pastry rain.

This level of illusion is easy for someone with enough skill to cause that rain.

Meaning he was trapped in an illusion world created by someone else.

If I were unhurt, I could have instantly rejected and escaped this pathetic illusion...!

Jester grit his teeth.

A light flashed on the castle's rooftop and a voice only he could hear reverberated in the center of the world to mock him.

"Sup! Are you ready for some obnoxious nonsense? The festival is about to begin! Countdown: 9, 8, 7, 6, 1, 0, DON!"

"AH, AH! Mic check, mic check! It's time to have a blast on the most fun pirate radio station in Snowfield, All Days Blackbeard & All Nights Bluebeard! From the Caribbean seas all the way to Orleans, we deliver heartbreak from dusk to DON! (Dawn.) Kehe! Great fun, great times! ... Hey, are you sure this is how you do radio? For real? Is this script really okay to go on record? Also, who is Blackbeard?"

First, a female voice blasted into Jester's right ear, followed by a corresponding male voice on his left.

The sudden event left Jester dizzy despite him being a vampire.

The voice on Jester's left ear addressed him with remarkable cheer.

"We finally caught you! Welcome to our jolly parade! May I see your ticket? Oh, you got the free pass, which means you can go on any ride and eat all you want with no restrictions! The only catch is that you can never leave! What a deal, huh, Jester?"

!!

Jester reacted with dread to the fact he was addressed by name. Nonetheless, the male voice continued its overblown speech.

“Oh boy, do you have any idea how much work it takes to trap a high-rank hematophage in an illusion? I thought it would take my Noble Phantasm at full power to catch you, but weakened as you are now, I can easily get the job done with just my base power! Funny how many hoops I have to jump through for something that would have been effortless if I had Mystic Eyes of Roses. Thank you, whoever weakened him! As a symbol of my gratitude, you can pick either one of us as your lover!”

“Sounds more like a punishment than a reward.”

“Oh, how can you know? Some people enjoy having their lives worn down by trickery little by little... Oh, but I’m more devoted than you’d think, so if you seriously want to ruin your life, I’ll be with you to the very end, got it? That’d be because I’ll be the cause of your death, but pay no mind to this detail! Though in Gilles’s case I was more of a friend than a lover.”

The nonsensical dialogue filling his left ear made Jester want to scream, but he gritted his teeth, letting out only a quiet groan.

“What do you pests want? Why are you making me see this castle?”

The girl responded with a visibly puzzled voice.

“Huh? Uh, you didn’t like it? Hmmm, it took me forever to decide what was the best Romanian castle to use here, but then I remembered, ah, you’re actually Dorothea, the one who was in Van-Fem’s place a long time ago, no? And that settled it, Elizabeth Bathory’s castle was the best pick for you. Oh, before you ask, no, this choice is not a gender thing. I just thought blood baths were more your thing than the impaler stakes!”

Dorothea.

Hearing this name made Jester creak his teeth even harder, but the male voice completely ignored his reaction, talking instead to the female voice.

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“Yeah, I was also not feeling it either. The castle decoration is pretty low-effort. I also feel like it’s lacking something really important... We need to stack another castle on top of it... Maybe the Teutonic Castle of Malbork...”

“...? What the hell are you talking about, François? Was I doing alright back then?”

“...??? Oh, sorry, I don’t know either. What the hell I was talking about indeed? I just get this weird feeling that the picture would look perfect if you stacked the other castle on top of Csejte, and then stacked the Lighthouse of Alexandria on top of the other castle...”

“Does becoming a Heroic Spirit gives you some extra loose screws...? If so, I’m looking forward to being one!”

Jester screamed after exhausting his patience with the voices’ stream of non sequitur.

“Pick a better audience for your jokes, you insect husks staining the planet! You, the two are nothing more than Earth’s waste-”

“... look, it’s the Assassin girl.”

“!”

The girl’s words soothed Jester’s anger.

Any conversation about his dearest Assassin is not one he can bring himself to listen to with turmoil in his heart.

“Wow. The way this immediately restores your temper is immensely creepy. But that’s exactly why I ship it! Don’t worry, my bloodsucking monster friend. She and I support you in your love endeavors.”

“Ignore the popcorn in my hand! He and I are on your side, gotcha?”

With what proof do you expect me to believe this bull...?

Before Jester could say this thought out loud, he realized it.

When exactly was I caught in the illusion world?, he asked himself.

“Oh, you realized it? You finally figured it out?”

“Yup, we hid you in the illusion world... during the explosion.”

“In other words, we helped you get away from Assassin! Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fish for gratitude by spelling it out! That came out bad, let me rephrase it.”, said the female voice before lowering her tone for the next part. “You still... haven’t moved a single step from the place where you blew up your heart, you know?”

“...!!”

I underestimated them! Could the origin of this illusion be old enough to approach the Age of Gods...?!

Raising his caution several levels up, Jester studied his opponents’ attitude.

It’s possible that once they undo the illusion, Assassin is still right in front of him in the real world.

Meaning the voices weren’t there to force a debt of gratitude on him, they were there to threaten him.

“Don’t be so on edge. Did you forget what we told you? We are rooting for you on your one-sided crush. We only have one thing we want you to do for us in exchange!”, she told him in the laxest tone possible. “See, there’s this nasty workshop in the west forest... No, that goes beyond a workshop. Some scaaaaaary god is trying to mess with the laws of the world to make a temple and its sacred grounds!”

The insides of the plushies squirming around Jester and Csejte burst out all at once, spilling large amounts of flesh and blood instead of cotton.

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The flesh and the blood were phosphorescent pink rather than red, and after they were done gushing out, they converged at the center of the parade.

Then they gathered around the skulls and eyeballs that the starfish was juggling and formed a humanoid blob of oversized slime mold engulfing the props.

The next thing Jester saw was the bright pink recoloring itself into bluish-white to manifest a beautiful young woman where the blob was.

“We made this Grail War for the humans, you know? So when we get you gods and Dead Apostles messing with it, it’s kinda ruining the point. Our first plan was to get Saber to do the job, but that was not the best idea. Having the human slay the gods and the monsters all the time gets boring and predictable, right?” said the girl with a curtsy and an umbrella twirl.

With a hedonistic smile, she -Francesca Prelati- asked Jester a favor.

“So, to shake things up... can you go bust the god and her temple a bit?”

“ ... What are you saying...?”

Her unexpected claim made Jester squint.

He’s been devising plans to escape this mess, but the magical composition of his surroundings transformed faster than his head could keep up with.

In reality, it wasn’t changing at all but the illusion was making him think it was changing.

Not that it makes a difference for an illusion of this high level.

There were only two things he was sure of.

First: he had not a shred of trust in the girl’s claim about supporting his love life.

And second: he couldn’t ignore any talk about his beautiful Assassin, no matter how un-

founded.

The girl cackled at Jester's teeth-gritting.

"The timing here is super important. Ideally, we'd want to you lay low for a day and go wreck the temple the day after tomorrow."

"...?"

"Yeah, with him already this close, I think this will work.", said François watching the western sky.

"Right, if he gets too close, the Grail's foundation is not making out in one piece.."

The owner of the male voice had appeared while Jester wasn't looking. He whispered his comment from Csejte's rooftop as he watched the distance.

Jester could also faintly feel what was coming.

A giant mass of magical energy assumedly not directly associated with the Grail War slowly approached from the west. Whatever this was, it's so grand that its presence still could be felt even within this world made of illusion.

The boy and the girl -the two Prelatis- shifted their attention away from Jester and into the mighty energy cluster approaching from the distant west. With malefic yet enchanting smiles, the two say the same phrase.

I wanna mix that into the Grail...

I wanna mix that into the Grail...

But there's one thing the masterminds still don't know.

The collateral damage from the battle occurring in the stratosphere roughly at the same time as this conversation started spreading chaos into the world. Whatever is approaching from the west has grown even more powerful because of that, but that's a fact they'll only come to learn a few minutes later.

Chapter 22

“The First and Last Breather Day”

The following day

The next morning in Snowfield was so calm you could doubt that yesterday's tumult really happened.

Though that's only on a surface level.

New tumults ensued in the world outside the city.

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West United States, news broadcast

--Our special coverage continues today. The government stated the following interpretation regarding the river explosion in Washington D.C.: "Undetected asteroids collided, and the falling scraps carried discarded satellites with them as they dropped."--

--This is footage from the Arctic Circle, where the largest flying object has fallen. Take a close look. The object, believed to have been launched from the south, iced as it crossed the frontier between Alaska and Russia before landing on water. It traveled from the Chukchi Sea to the North Pole, opening a large crater on the sea ice! It's estimated that 500 thousand square kilometers of ice were lost. That's a block of ice the size of Spain, evaporated in minutes. Further examination...--

--If the one from the North Pole had fallen in an urban area... No, this problem would not have humanity's alone. If that thing had fallen anywhere other than the North Pole, it would have had an irreversible effect on Earth's rotation, causing...--

--Defective sensors misidentified the object fallen on the city's outskirts as man-made, temporarily raising tension between nations. The American and Russian governments will announce their projects to resolve the situation later at...--

--Next, a weather report. The large whirlwind designated as Hurricane Inanna advanced straight northeast, with multiple accounts of serious damage caused by its offshoot tornados. Inanna's temporary acceleration seems to have settled down for now, but it continues to intensi-

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fy at alarming rates. Unbelievably enough, numerous giant sequoias grown about 70 meters tall in the Sequoia National Park were taken away by the winds. The experts are still analyzing what caused the hurricane to increase so much in scale in a matter of minutes. Many theories circulating online peg this as a consequence of the asteroid clash minutes before it, but the speculation surrounding it remains completely unsubstantiated. Beware of unreliable sources. Next, the government's statement: --

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4th morning, west Snowfield, forest area

The forest wriggled.

The winds were getting stronger due to the giant hurricane approaching Snowfield but the trees in the forest systematically warped their foliage to resist those winds.

The trees wriggled more and more systematically, forming a giant spiral spinning in the opposite direction to the wind when seen from above.

In the center of the forest, there was someone who simultaneously matched and mismatched the abundant nature.

While her appearance was an aggregate of Mother Nature's beauty, it was covered in high-brand fashion produced by modern society.

Next to her, there were a girl wearing an outfit too urban for forest camping and a restlessly squirming building-sized mechanical doll.

The dozens of meters tall puppet was surrounded by a floating circle of uniformly cut rocks and clay bisque-fired by her power, and the ground flattened by her steps was covered in stone paving as if manipulated by presumably her magical energy.

“But wow... The accomplishments with lightning showed up really prominently on you, girl.”, said the woman in the high-brand outfit -Ishtar possessing Filia’s body- looking at the mechanical doll-like Berserker. “Does she always get like this when she’s summoned to this present era, I wonder? Or did you use anything weird as a catalyst to summon her, Haruri?”

“I d-did! Uh... I was planning on summoning Berserker Edison... so my catalyst was a Mazda lamp...”

“Hmm? Mazda as in Ahuramazda? Was that why...? No way, the system can’t be that arbitrary. If it were...”

Ishtar/Filia gently touched Berserker’s hand.

Just touching the surge of magical energy coming from her hand was enough to make Berserker’s Master, Haruri, feel her mind being devoured.

No, maybe this sensation is truer than I thought. Maybe it will really corrode and burn off my Magic Circuits when I’m not paying attention.

The magical energy whirling inside the body of the Einzbern homunculus was dense enough to genuinely do so. Such is the overwhelming power of the ether from the Age of Gods.

Ishtar used her power for a simple search and returned from it with a most satisfied smile.

“Yeah, it was just what I thought. Your melammu got adjusted to this era. Now that humanity learned to control electricity and gunpowder and whatnot, their own civilization became a new form of calamity... if I’m understanding this right.”

“Adjusted...?”

“She’s a compilation of everything humans consider to be calamities. Well, she obviously can’t reproduce everything since she’s limited by the Servant container, but... once I reach my definitive form, I can take her off those awful shackles.”

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Shackles.

With a daring smile, Ishtar referred to the Berserker-classed Saint Graph currently manifesting the Heroic Spirit as nothing more than shackles.

“When my temple is complete, that will raise the level of the Divine Core in this body... When that happens, I’ll be able to freely redesign this planet’s removable floorboards. Oh, can you feel the dream coming true? I get to watch over humanity for as long as I want, and humanity gets to have me watching over them until the day they go extinct. A perfect win-win situation! This modern era came up with some really useful expressions! Loved this one!”, Ishtar self-importantly nodded after speaking a term from either Filia’s knowledge or knowledge drawn from the world itself.

“...”

But then she swiftly wiped that smile off her face and glared at the city with displeased eyes.

“I can feel the piece of junk looking in our direction... I wanna grind it until it becomes laterite dust and sprinkle it on the ocean, but I’m patient. I’ll grant it some more time to live.”

And then the goddess vestige inside Filia turned to the giant puppet laying the groundwork for her temple’s construction.

“Though it’s not looking at me, it’s looking at you, its childhood friend.”, she whispered.

“?”

Ignoring Haruri’s doubts, Ishtar talked to Berserker in an attempt to get over her frustration.

“Are you still sentient? Is your consciousness completely gone... or is it just hidden? Well, either way, the piece of junk will never cease its fruitless struggles.”

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Crystal Hill, top floor

“Are you still there... Huwawa?”

Tine Chelc clearly heard Enkidu’s whisper.

Not too long ago, the enemy Lancer returned to her hotel room.

Tine had felt their presence climb higher to the sky in their violent battle against whatever appeared last afternoon.

She didn’t directly visualize the events since she was busy constantly using up magical energy to hold off the collapse of Gilgamesh’s Saint Graph, but she knew from her followers’ reactions that a series of extraordinary events occurred the previous day.

But even then, she didn’t take a step away from Gilgamesh.

Even if the end of the world was visible from her window, nothing could free her from the feeling that she needed to stay in the room using magecraft on Gilgamesh.

Tine was almost at her limit when Lancer returned, but they extended her life by tying a magical energy connection between her and their Master, the silver wolf.

Their help brought her gratitude, humiliation, and most of all, shame of her powerlessness. Those were the emotions she was processing when she heard the whisper.

Huwawa... The name of a monster King Gilgamesh defeated... !! That steel beast...?

The dots start to connect in Tine’s head.

The demonic beast pierced Gilgamesh’s body with the rainbow-colored halo it wore.

Considering it was not one halo shining in seven colors but seven halos overlaid on each other, the candidate list for its identity was very limited.

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All pieces would connect if it really is that beast.

Gilgamesh.

Blinded by the radiance of the Hero King, Tine forgot something.

There was a beast the king feared.

Huwawa.

The guardian of the cedar forest. Alternatively spelled Humbaba.

A monster that Gilgamesh and Enkidu only managed to defeat with god Shamash's assistance in the Epic.

“...”

Tine kept pouring magical energy into her recumbent Servant's Saint Graph. As she continues to send her energy into the humanoid husk of Gilgamesh, she reflected on her heedlessness.

If I knew everything in advance... I could have readily provided a way to defeat that steel beast. How could I forget that King Gilgamesh didn't win every battle in the Epic alone?

“Awoo.”

The chimera sat next to Tine, sensing the shade in her heart. Enkidu's silver wolf Master abruptly raised its head and let out a concerned whine.

“Thank you... You saved my life.”

Seeing the silver wolf's genuine concern for a weaker animal, Tine thought:

That's right. I can't afford to let the misery get the better of me now. For as long as I'm alive, I'll fulfill my duties as the descendant of the keepers of the land. And also my duties as King Gilgamesh's follower...

If said Gilgamesh was in a good state hearing this, he could have mocked the arrogance in the idea that she could handle his necessities as a side job. Perhaps he could even judge this insolence as a capital offense.

But strangely enough, Tine didn't fear that.

If the king sentenced her to death, she would have been at peace with her preordained fate.

However...

Tine knew she couldn't stay the way she was.

What Gilgamesh told her in this hotel's casino resurfaced in the young girl's head.

—I do not mind you showing me deference. It is only natural. But do not put faith in me blindly. If your eyes can shine, use them to see your way. No, not only me. Be it 'God,' or this 'Nature's blessing' you speak of, or the cherished wish of generations of ancestors, it makes no difference. Abandoning thought to revere or depend on something means letting your soul fall into decay.

These words repeated themselves in Tine's head time and time again, always stimulating her soul.

Think. Continue to think. Never let your thoughts come to a halt.

All she could do was send magical energy to Gilgamesh's Saint Graph at the cost of her life, and she could not allow herself to feel satisfied with only this.

She could not allow herself positive thoughts about her situation.

The time she could use for poor excuses such as "I did everything I could" is time that would be better spent continuously thinking about what a Master can do, what a mage can do, and what Tine Chelc can do.

Tine's nerves sharpened in their attempt to break out of their shells. Her Magic Circuits are

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progressively assimilated into the land.

The people of her tribe are absorbed by the land when they die.

Tine herself is also synchronized with the dragonvein for her whole life and is fated to eventually become part of it.

That's why she can tell.

Tine the keeper of the land can clearly sense it being majorly altered.

Her very land is being repainted a different color.

It's not necessarily a malignant change. I can tell the land is... restoring an ancient time. But... should I accept it? What must I do?

She was supposed to be furious, recognizing this in the same vein she does the invasion of her land by the foreign mages.

But indecision bred inside her.

Tine Chelc's hesitation came for one reason: she could feel the new power of the land, only ever slightly, flowing into Gilgamesh.

But it showed no signs of accumulating in Gilgamesh's Saint Graph.

Mysteriously enough, the power seemed to use Gilgamesh's corpse as a gate to some other dimension.

Or perhaps it dropped through him into a bottomless hollow pit.

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In a dream

Kuruoka Tsubaki was alone in the deep, deep darkness, hugging her knees in shadowy slumber.

She no longer dreams.

She no longer desires anything.

That's because she learned the price of her dreams coming true.

She would have felt better if everything was fake. If she could simply wake up at the end to learn it was all a dream.

But reality was cruel.

Unbeknown to her, many were sacrificed for her dream.

The young girl doesn't have a concrete understanding of everything that happened.

But there's one thing she's sure of.

She made many suffer.

She thought she became friends with the older men and women in black clothes, but then she learned she was inconveniencing them.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

The longer she repeated those words, the less clear it was what she was apologizing for, until the apologies became just a meaningless deposit of self-rejection for the girl drifting in the void.

Under any other circumstances, she would have been immediately absorbed by the void, leaving no trace of her empty apologies or the shape of her soul. Nonetheless, Kuruoka Tsubaki's consciousness retains its form due to her heavily debilitated Servant. Because Pale Rider made a membrane out of its own Saint Graph to envelop and defend the girl.

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However, the foundation of this Servant's existence is no other than this girl's soul.

If her mind continues to blend with the hollow world, she will be completely and irreparably gone. If that comes to pass, the Servant will lose the magical energy connection coming from the Command Spells and will be completely erased.

Rider didn't fear its own erasure.

It never had this kind of ego.

But due to either the Servant role granted to it by the Grail or influence from continuedly constructing of the world of Tsubaki's dreams, its Master protection program was still visibly active when nothing else was.

The protective membrane created by the Servant form of death itself looked like an egg, a symbol of life.

Tsubaki and her Servant were both bound to remain drifting in the hollow sea until they both vanished in a few days.

Except that didn't happen.

A minor phenomenon began to take shape around the girl and the Heroic Spirit.

Land appeared on the hollow sea that had no heaven or earth.

It started shapeless like mud or flowing sand.

When it eventually became firm soil, the Pale Rider egg containing Tsubaki slowly landed. The main difference between this place and the world of Tsubaki's creation was that here she was not the center of the world.

There was no light.

Tsubaki and Pale Rider were both yet to notice the change.

Pale Rider perhaps did notice the situation, but its ego is not developed enough for it to care.

And from there, time passed.

A blue lantern began to flicker in a place distant from the two.

The quiet light wandered the dark ground, eventually reaching Tsubaki and Pale Rider's egg.

That was when Pale Rider first reacted.

It stretched into a humanoid form blocking the blue light's path to protect Tsubaki.

But after confronting this blue lantern, Pale Rider seemingly decided it was not an enemy, returned to its previous Tsubaki-encasing form, and stopped moving.

Flickering with what seemed to be hesitation, the lantern slowly intensified its light and formed an elongated cage around the egg. At first glance, it might seem made to incarcerate a sinner.

But without any signs of malice or hostility, the lantern continued to shine its warm light on Tsubaki.

The 'cage' gently surrounding Kuruoka Tsubaki was like a cradle tending to her scars.

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Snowfield's underground facility, Dumas's workshop

Under the police station, there is a web of underground tunnels connecting to several downtown facilities.

Further within it, 20 meters below the ground, there is the workshop of the Caster of the police force, Alexandre Dumas Pere.

Dumas was in the back of the room working on some project. The others beside him were Orlando Reeve, his Master and the Chief of the Snowfield Police, and his subordinate Vera Levitt, both in the center of the room.

Dumas's cheerful voice contrasted with Orlando's sullen face.

"Crystal Hill had some fine restaurants, I gotta tell ya. I had no idea a good bouillon's supernate could work as a frying oil. The inside of the meat was left in a prime state."

"I give up on complaining about your unauthorized excursions... Binding you here with a Command Spell would only make your work even slower."

"Hoh, I'm glad you're getting a better hang of how I roll, brother. C'mon, you look like you're about to roast me. Don't be like that. It's a miracle that the cop squad escaped that situation with no casualties at all. There was a mass murder going on around them, not to mention whatever was up with the dream world."

"..."

The chief silently thought about Dumas's words.

Whatever appeared after Flat Escardos's death didn't attack the police. Does that confirm that that creature is Flat Escardos and that our truce is still in effect...? In that case, is it possible to stay in touch with him?, he examined his group's next course of action, careful not to get his hopes up too much.

"Kuruoka Tsubaki's biolevels are a stage lower, from what I can tell. The situation's looking

highly unpredictable...”, said Vera.

From the corner of his eyes, he could see her pair of eyes clouded by impatience as she spoke, which was unusual for someone who always carried herself like a cold blade.

“We received no further updates. My sister will be with her night and day, but she’s unsure if the girl will last 3 more days.”

“I see. If it comes to that, her Servant won’t be able to maintain its Saint Graph after the Master’s death. I’m sorry for your sister, but that thing can lock an immense amount of people and Heroic Spirits within its Reality Marble. After seeing that much power, I cannot approve of the idea of saving someone who endangers the city and its people.”

“... Yes, sir.”

“The most dangerous outcome here is that the Heroic Spirit forms a new contract with someone else... but a hero this powerful should disappear the instant its power supply is cut. Although we shouldn’t lower our guards until we have confirmation.”

Vera didn’t argue against the chief practically telling her to abandon Tsubaki.

She was among the ones who personally experienced her Heroic Spirit’s power.

Without Saber’s help, she would have lost many allies, if not the whole squad.

To still want to save her knowing that meant abandoning everyone else in the whole city.

Nonetheless, thinking about how her sister clueless about the world of magecraft would risk her life to save this girl inevitably left her dreary.

This was not how a mage should think, but the chief taught her not to think like a mage, and she knew many others in the police force would think the same way.

In a sense, most of them were where they were precisely due to their inability to abandon normal human morals and philosophies as a mage ought to.

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That aside, as someone who has been with Orlando for a long time, Vera knows this decision frustrates the chief more than it frustrates any officer.

Considering his logical mage mind and his position as the chief, the ideal answer for him would be not to abandon Tsubaki, but to actively eliminate her.

Or to promptly conclude the Holy Grail War to see if her health would improve by being released from the Command Spells.

What am I even trying to get at here...?

Pained by the naivete of the convenient delusions she was investing her hopes in, Vera tried to reorganize her thoughts discarding the emotional aspect completely.

Her attempt was interrupted by a soothing yet striking smell stimulating her heart by tickling her nasal cavities.

“...?”

When she lifted her head, she saw Dumas coming from the back of the room carrying a large tray.

The appetizing smell came from it. The chief next to her looked at Dumas with a raised eyebrow.

“Yo, it’s done.”

Ignoring the eyes in his direction, Duman placed the tray on the meeting table.

Strangely enough, the cheap work desk had its color and shape overwritten, turning into a luxurious dining table that could only be found in a noble castle or a very traditional restaurant.

The tablecloth fluttered with the breeze and the scene was softly illuminated by all the cand-

lestands that appeared out of nowhere.

The contents of the tray were so finely decorated that Vera felt satisfied just looking at it.

The meat dish formed a model of a royal court garden with its pie crust, sauce, vegetables cut into specific shapes, and mousse. Even the thin slices of truffle served as a side dish contributed to the “landscape” constructed atop the plate.

Even disregarding the decorative vegetables, this was a product of technique polished by devoted study, far beyond the level that could be achieved by a gourmand who only consumed without creating.

It was practically a complete sculpture, but its rich aroma made the will to eat it as soon as possible overwhelm the feeling it would be a waste to eat this piece of art. The most vivid color in this piece was the color of flavor that stimulated the tongue and the stomach.

“What’s this...?”

“Huh? It’s the same thing I did to your weapons. Just embellished the table’s history a tiny bit. You know Projection magecraft? It’s sorta like a variant of that. Your stuff will be back to normal once you finish your dish.”, Dumas responded to Orlando’s grumble.

“No, that’s not what I meant... Did you prepare this meal?”

“Oh, yeah, there were some leftover weapons and some trinkets no one was using, so I rewrote them all into cooking utensils. No worries though, I wouldn’t turn a venom dagger into a kitchen knife.”

The Servant spoke without a shred of guilt, but the chief was more overcome by surprise than by anger or annoyance. He knew Dumas was so meticulous of a gourmand that he would personally hunt the meat he cooked, but his level of skill was several stages beyond his imagination.

“Did you use your magecraft for this meal?”

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“Nope. My amateur magecraft ain’t no reliable tool for someone trying to create flavor.”

“I see... You view your cuisine above your Noble Phantasm’s productions, and so you... No, I won’t complete this sentence. I was wondering what you were doing back there, but I’d never have guessed you were cooking. Were you concealing the smell?”

“Wouldn’t want you two stopping me halfway through. I found a good pheasant in town, so I couldn’t let this chance slide.”

Dumas remained always unrepentant.

Seeing the chief’s exasperated sigh, Dumas opened a speech, turning the other way to ensure his saliva wouldn’t fall into the dishes.

“At first, I was going to make galantine fond accompanying a Lucullus-based remix of something in Tete Noire’s menu, but I didn’t have the ingredients I wanted. I also wanted to try this era’s pie crust while I’m still here, so I tried my hand at fowl breast with pie borders. Pheasant is by far the best-smelling bird to me, so I held back on the aromatic legumes for the sauce. But if pheasant is not your thing, I can give the recipe a quick fix, brother and miss. Not something I normally do, but I wanna serve you the very best on this special occasion.”

Vera looked at the plate with even more surprise in reaction to Dumas’s most fluent commentary yet.

“What a surprise. Your first order after your summon was hamburgers, so I didn’t see you as the kind to cook this kind of food.”

“Heheh. Is that something someone who read my novels, plays, or biographies would say, miss Vera? If you really wanna know me, you gotta read my writing about food. The Three Musketeers and La Comtesse de Salisbury are not the only places to find my essence. If anything, my cookbooks are where I’m at my most Dumas.”

After this cheerful remark, Dumas returned to the back of the room and came back with three plates.

“Since the day of my summon, I’ve been eating everything, from those hard general store jellies and dollar hamburgers to high-class meals that practically took our whole war funds. I tried adapting myself to this era’s table manners, and well, it’s been a great time. Can’t say I got no complaints, but that might be just me being antiquated, so I gave everything a fair shot.”

Encouraging the two to sit down, Dumas cut the meal in three and took each slice to each plate.

Contrary to usual rustiness, Dumas’s gestures on the dinner table were completely refined.

Vera and the chief looked at each other confused by this random development, but neither could bring themselves to say it was not the time for this.

There was a hidden meaning to Dumas’s behavior.

His past attitude shows he was the kind to throw these kinds of hints, but much more importantly, the gastronomic charm of the dish was enough to fill even the straight-laced Orlando and Vera with hunger.

Long story short, this dinner was unquestionably the absolute best Orlando and Vera have ever experienced.

After the meal, Dumas brought his full wine glass to his mouth with a burst of stifled laughter.

“Man, nothing beats the progress of history research. I got to learn that what I wrote back in the day about Chef Taillevent being Charles VII’s cook is now seen as bullshit. It’d be fine if I said that in a novel or play because him working for Charles VII makes for a more interesting story, but of all things to get my facts wrong, I did it in a cookbook. Though the next advancement in that research might prove I was actually right, who knows?”

Dumas showed no signs of caring about his supposed mistake.

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“But man, I feel blessed to learn culinary research is still making its breakthroughs. Can’t fucking believe we already learned how to eat ox kidney in the present day. I can say with absolute confidence that cooking is one of the energy sources fueling humanity’s evolution. Like, I know eating’s one of our three major physical needs, but I really think this one is the most fundamental of them all.”

Dumas’s eyes were half-closed, but his eyelids couldn’t hide the passionate glimmer in his pupils as he continued.

“We want to evolve today’s dinner beyond yesterday’s dinner. Evolve in what direction? Make it tastier? More digestible? Cheaper? Lighter? Healthier? Doesn’t matter. As long as there’s at least one man trying to take cooking to the next step, this culture will never see stagnation.”

At this point, he quickly shrugged. The next part felt more like a self-reminder than something said to others.

“But don’t get me wrong, dude. I’m no believer that newest is always best when it comes to food. The best sheep roast I ate in my life still beats anything you can with the latest big city stove. When I was visiting a ruin in Djem-Djem and got treated to a whole wood-roasted sheep. Real desert cuisine.”

“Wood-roasted? Not what I would expect to be best.”

“Just ‘cause something is roasted under ash and dirt, it doesn’t make it rustic or messy. The pre-cooking process is very meticulous and based on ages of history and experience. Even now I look back to it as better than any mutton I found in any European restaurant. Well, I don’t know how things are looking now, though... Ah, now I wanna eat that again. Book us a ticket to Tunis, brother.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, we still haven’t settled the matter preventing people from leaving the city.”

The phenomenon presumed to have been caused by Kuruoka Tsubaki’s Servant still hadn’t fully stabilized.

They presumed the Servant only spread a “disease” of unusual qualities, without actively manipulating the infected.

The patients in the hospital already regained their sanities and were presumably freed from the dream world, yet they still feel pressured into not wanting to leave the city, and half of the people who did leave soon returned after experiencing bouts of terror and anxiety.

“By now, the mental domination should be considerably weaker, no? Pretty sure any mage with a half-decent Mystic Code should be able to escape the city.”

“Wait, Caster... What do you know?”

Offput by Caster’s wording, the chief switched mental channels, immediately eliminating the dinner’s aftertaste.

“C’mon, you figured this was coming. Those meteorites or satellites or whatever that fell all over the world yesterday... Anyone can tell this city is ground zero, yet your mastermind buddies didn’t even call to say hi. You came here ‘cause you want answers. More exactly, you wanna go to a floor below here, to check if that sham Greater Grail of yours was taken somewhere else.”

“...Exactly.”

“I got you, brother. After that much of an effect on the world, it’s obvious you’d wanna know what your ‘bosses’ decided. Your goal is to regulate the ambient surrounding the Holy Grail War... the human society here. Screw up and everyone’s dead. RIP. You don’t want that, do you, brother?”

“Be concise. What do you know?”

For the longest time, Caster could gain information through a network that not even Orlando could identify.

Judging by his subordinates’ accounts and general conjecture on Dumas’s abilities, Dumas most likely modified stories about his computer, radio, and internet, elevating them into pseudo-Mystic Codes, objects with parameters lower than his usual Noble Phantasms.

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The chief was certain of his speculation and thought today was the day to put it to the test, but just when the time was right for the big reveal, he came across a more important question he needed to ask first. What does Caster know?

The chief's question was more serious than ever. After averting his eyes for a moment, Dumas answered choosing his words carefully.

"The dudes said... Code 983 [Aurora fall]. You know what that means?"

"...! When will it be executed? How long do we still have left?"

"Oh, you ain't doubting me?"

"I don't know what that dinner was supposed to represent, but I can't imagine it being a build-up for a poor joke. No man is as faithful to cuisine as you are. Having tasted your cooking, I can tell!"

The chief's declaration erased all emotion from Dumas's face for an instant before refilling it with a delighted smile accompanied by a shrug.

"Man, you're a real square. That's fine. The order was issued at 16:23 if we're going by our timezone. To be executed 48 hours later. Miss Francesca and Faldeus should've already gotten the news."

"15 minutes ago...? Caster, you started cooking because you predicted this development?"

"My bad, that was just your typical Heroic Spirit self-indulgence. I had this prediction I was hoping would be off the mark, but I didn't tell you about it before the dinner 'cause I knew you wouldn't take your time to savor it if I did. 'sides, brother, I wasn't thinking your 'bosses' really were this messed up in the head."

"..."

Dumas reacted to the chief's silence by wiping his smile and asking a question.

“Brother, weren’t you half-sure this was going to happen yourself?”

“Yes, I won’t deny. That’s why I assumed Francesca would be here hiding the Greater Grail... or is she planning to do it later?”

After hearing the two talk, Vera asked her chief a question with a raised eyebrow.

“Chief, pardon the intrusive question, but what is Code 983... [Aurora fall]?”

“It’s the codename of an operation to erase everything in this city, including the land’s magecraft foundation... by launching a special warhead of the highest degree.”

“...!”

“This 48 hours countdown is to give them time to prepare this event’s concealment. It will have to go in history as a major calamity on a global scale... I believe the public news will say that a part of a planetoid fell directly on the city.”

Vera was shocked from hearing the specifics.

She was warned this could happen.

She was ready for the worst if it came to it.

But hearing concrete confirmation that it would happen, Vera’s heart grew tenser than ever before.

All in her mind were images of her fellow officers, the city’s landscape, and her sister fighting day after day unaware of what was happening behind the scenes.

Vera’s face remained expressionless but her body was drenched in sweat. Her chief made a dispassionate comment.

“If our internal treatment was ever deemed incapable of processing the situation, the city

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could be obliterated on Faldeus's command. That was Code 982... [Abyss rise]. This one is a program to overcharge the Grail and the dragonveins, triggering abnormal activities on the magma deposits to make the city's erasure look like an eruption. [Aurora fall], on the other hand, comes from outside... In other words, it's a device set in case our superiors deem the Holy Grail War to be unmanageable. To be used before a destructive seam is torn in the world."

"Can we request the operation to be canceled?"

"If we forcibly destroyed the Grail, Heroic Spirit activity will become almost impossible. The remaining Heroic Spirits' rampage is something we have a high chance of managing to keep under control. However..."

For this last part, the chief tried his best to keep a neutral face, but his voice betrayed his frustration.

"The problem is that new variables besides the Heroic Spirits have been added."

"You mean Flat Escardos and... the Einzbern homunculus?"

"Both were initially included in the Holy Grail War system. Flat Escardos was one of the multiple mages chosen for the unspecified Master slots... and the Einzbern homunculus was lured here by Francesca to serve as the Lesser Grail's vessel.

But now both of them had turned into something else entirely.

According to Francesca's and Faldeus's reports from the last few days, the Einzbern homunculus was possessed by something completely extraneous to her original personality. And whatever is possessing her (Francesca showed strong hints that she knows what it is) is stronger than a lower-grade Heroic Spirit.

"In a normal Holy Grail War, the energies of the Heroic Spirit who leave the competition are accumulated in the Lesser Grail... Does this mean whatever is inside the Lesser Grail homunculus will benefit from this power?"

Even with a fake Greater Grail that can't hope to reproduce Third Magic, the total amount

of magical energy accumulated is enough for it to function as a wish-granting device without a hitch.

When the Grail War reaches its last stages, the Lesser Grail shifts from human to vessel... Is this what's happening with her?

If the power of the Grail accumulates in someone with free will and this someone leaves the city unrestrained, whatever she does will be extremely difficult to conceal.

Whatever used to be Flat Escardos demonstrated better than anyone why Orlando was worried about power being directed outside of the city.

Nations with shallower knowledge of magecraft are either buying the idea that asteroid fragments and space debris fell down or suspecting it was some other country's missiles exploding or an intentional destructive act.

But magecraft organizations, chiefly the Clock Tower, and the greater nations connected with those organizations already figured out the truth.

That destruction was caused by the power of an individual.

They could conceal the desert crater from the beginning of the Grail War by sacrificing a gas company, but there's nothing they can do beyond that.

Things could have been so different if we had the Holy Church's full cooperation...

The police chief recalled the face of the eyepatched priest.

In the past, his hometown was turned into hell overnight by high-grade vampires. A group of monsters of incalculable power: an Ancestor accompanied by superior Dead Apostles.

Every time something like this happens, the Holy Church manages to successfully cover it up with its connections and arcane knowledge. Despite its continued successful streak, they have been excluded from the Holy Grail War in Snowfield, being complete outsiders to the ritual.

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That Hansa Cervantes was using the precedent of the Fuyuki's overseers to forcibly butt in, meaning it was hard to tell how willing to cooperate he was.

That said, the arcane concealment is as major of a principle for them as it is for us. Shameless as it may sound, it might be worth it to invite him to fight alongside us. Although considering the Church's policies, his answer might be "48 hours is too long, explode the city in 3 hours"... That would be a huge gamble.

"Hah... Nice eyes, brother. They show you haven't thrown the towel. You don't want to make my treat your last supper," happily said Dumas.

"Of course not. If Faldeus is cutting us off from his group, then I won't care about him either. As a chief of police loyal to the United States of America, I'll act taking the safety of the citizens as my utmost priority," replied Orlando.

"Are you sure? You might be getting other cities trampled by the monsters coming out of this one, y'know? Ain't that why the bigwigs are trying to quash them?"

"I won't allow that either. Not to mention that I don't believe that destroying the city and the Grail in it will disperse that mutated Flat Escardos or... as much as I hate to admit, that dangerous hurricane that's blatantly running in our direction."

"So knowing everything coming your way, you still plan to fight to the very end? Nice! You're a real brother! If you chose to quit and drown your sorrows, I'd have rewritten your whole life."

Dumas rose from his chair, grinning.

"Clan Calatin is about to get busy. But when it's their lunchtime, bring them to me. One by one if you need to. I wanna treat the whole team to the same dinner you just had."

"Does this act have any magecraft significance?"

"Nope. None. It's just that since you want the whole team to survive, I should give them something to remember me by."

Vera and Orlando were dumbfounded at this nonchalant confession.

“Remember you?”

“I told ya, it’s just self-indulgence. The novels I wrote are now something anyone can have, and writing a new one just for them doesn’t feel like enough of a gesture of gratitude. So I just thought I should hit the bunch with my cooking and one day get them to look back and say ‘Ah, that food Dumas treated me to that day was the best I’ve ever had. No, I must prepare greater delicacies with my own hands! Run, to the peaks of flavor!’... That’s my way of providing material support.”, Dumas joked. But the next part of his line was far more genuine. “Did you know? The pheasant is a species that was introduced to Europe when Captain Jason’s Argonauts brought them from Colchis to Greece. Doesn’t that make it a great shot of energy for someone trying to be a hero? I could tell you more about it, but we’re on a time limit. Go do your thing. If you have any Noble Phantasm you need, I can help you choose the right thing while the bouillon is boiling.”

“Caster.”

“What?”

The serious Orlando bowed to the humming Dumas to thank him.

“As a mage and a police officer, I’m under no obligation to humor your illogical sentimentality... but as a chief, I’m grateful for your appreciation of my subordinates.”

Dumas saw his Master’s face looking surly as ever, but this time he felt a tinge of honest optimism in it.

“I’ll have less time to eat and sleep in the next two days, but I can’t afford to collapse on the job. Please, make me something nourishing.”

With these final words, Vera and the chief left. After watching them on the way out, Dumas monologued with a stifled burst of laughter.

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“Shit man, today might be the last breather day with no clashes among Heroic Spirits, and here I am this busy. Well, we are walking the tightrope to see whether or not the city will be dead in 2 days... Depending on how things go, that might have actually been my last supper.”

I really wonder if we aren't biting more than we can chew. I don't have many cards left in my hand. I'm definitely getting to watch the interesting real story I initially wanted, but it sucks that those guys are so willing to sacrifice themselves in a blaze of glory.

A deep sigh.

“I got a bit too attached to brother's team to stay purely a spectator... Am I losing my edge?”, self-derisively spoke Dumas.

After cleaning up the dishes, Dumas felt like checking the collection of books lined up on a shelf in the corner of the workshop.

They took notice of the English version of his own *The Three Musketeers* which he bought in the local bookstore.

The shelf contained many books by other authors of his era, not only his own.

He took one of those.

An illustrated edition of a fairytale written by an author he was friends with in life.

“Can't believe kids these days still read his books. *The Tallow Candle*. Ain't that one he chose not to put on sale? He made excuses that he was too immature back when he wrote this one, but it was honestly my favorite...”

He made comments to himself as he flipped the pages, but then his eyes stopped at an illustration of a girl lighting a match.

“Her memories are drawn inside the match's flames. I don't think that's what he envisioned, but this arrangement kinda resembles the way we Heroic Spirits work...”

With those self-derisive words, Dumas flipped the next page and...

“Hm?”

Noticing something wrong, he reread the page.

“Ah?”

The page he had open showed the final scene of the fairytale about the girl who sold matches.

He immediately realized what was wrong.

The ending was completely different from the original version of the fairytale he was familiar with.

The end where the girl freezes to death immersed in her beautiful memories was replaced by an ending where she was saved by a wealthy family and lived a happy life.

“Hey hey hey... Wait, wait, wait, is this shit for real?”

This picture book was one of the regionally published versions that rewrite the tragic endings into happy endings.

“You... Godamnit...”

He rechecked the author’s name in disbelief, and after doing so, his hand started trembling.

“Hahahaha...! Good Lord! How is this even allowed?”

He burst out in laughter.

“I thought the guy who genderbent Aramis in his version of my *The Three Musketeers* was onto something, but this is on a whole other level... They completely changed the core fundamentals of a masterpiece by the man with the most unremovable stick up his ass! They comple-

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tely changed his very life!”

With stars in both eyes, he raised his fairytale anthology up high and continued yelling.

“No freaking way! One of my main jobs was adapting stuff into theater scripts, but I sure as hell never flipped an established narrative back on its head like this! Old Mr. Ducis’s Shakespeare localizations got nothing on this! They just wanted to put that ending there, coherence be damned! I always thought things would turn out very different if were to write a story on the same themes... But then you just change the end and sell the thing keeping the original title and author’s name! Unbelievable! Well played, modern publishers! This is hilarious! I’m dying to see the face he would make! What would I do to say ‘But y’know dude, this happy ending surely took some people out of their dark places, and they’ll be thanking you for it’ right to his sullen face!”

It’s hard to judge if he was on good or bad terms with the original from this long-winded cackling speech.

That is, until his smile turned considerably softer.

“Well, with this much provocation... he’ll probably just insist this is the one story he’ll never talk about... Of all potential new endings to include, they put one about being saved by a rich family. It’s how the quote goes... Life is a series of ironies. Every man to take foot in this world is hideous, yet nonetheless beautiful are their fates!”

He closed the book with nostalgic eyes, reminiscing about his lifetime.

“And that’s why you gotta read the books you buy instead of just letting the pile grow!”

Dumas closed his eyes. Not a hint of a previous melancholy. The moment of his summon was the only other time he ever felt this alive.

“Ok, now that he got me motivated, let’s put this brain to work.”

The phone behind him rang.

He figured it was the police chief calling to inform him how many officers would come for dinner.

He headed to the phone, still devising the secret spices of his recipe, but while also redirecting part of his thoughts into plotting a new script.

“Time to devise a way to deck the faces of the dudes ignoring us before we freeze to death.”

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“Should we not inform Orlando of the higher-ups’ decision?”

“It’s unnecessary. Cutting off Chief Orlando’s line of command has always been part of the procedure for this case. The only worry here is Francesca doing something she shouldn’t.”, Faldeus indifferently answered the secretary named Aludra.

After receiving the notice that the city would be incinerated, Faldeus showed no noticeable signs of anxiety.

The Holy Grail War has been a series of complications, but this specific possibility was finally one he had considered before the start.

Therefore, the national staff’s only source of concern was Francesca doing anything unnecessary.

She wouldn’t be that big of a deal alone, but she was with her Servant.

Seeing the scale of the illusion they pulled off in the industrial district, it was possible for them to prevent the city’s incineration entirely with their illusions.

Francesca’s illusions may not be able to brush off a destructive effect engulfing the entire city, but they could easily deceive the bomb’s sensor and the pilot to make them miss the landing spot.

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“All we need her to do is use her illusions to take the Greater Grail system away... but she shows signs she’s enjoying this whole complication. We never know what she can do if she starts feeling it would be regrettable to put an end to it.”

“What will be our course of action?”

“We retreat tomorrow. The remains of Kuruoka Tsubaki’s Servant’s curse still haven’t faded away, but in their current state, a regular Mystic Code can overcome them. This is actually playing to our benefit, as the unequipped civilians won’t be able to escape from the city. We’ll completely isolate Snowfield from the radio and internet in sync with the Hurricane’s arrival. We won’t have to worry about anyone inside that storm observing what will be happening in the sky.”

“But the Hurricane is also being recognized as one of the abnormalities.”

“Assuming the Hurricane was lured here by a Heroic Spirit’s power or the Holy Grail’s activity, we’re speculating that it will lose intensity with the city’s destruction. And well, our calculations tell we can still burn the city down even under the full force of the storm.”

Feeling nothing about the sacrifice of innocent civilians, Faldeus headed to his workshop after giving Aludra some instructions.

After confirming no one was around, he talked to the darkness behind his reflection in the mirror.

“Are you listening, Assassin?”

The darkness intensified and Faldeus felt a faintly blinking presence deep inside it.

“...I have two concerning variables in mind. Flat Escardos is missing. It’s possible he already left Snowfield... If that’s the case, there’s nothing we can do. We’ll make the Clock Tower and the El-Melloi Classroom take responsibility for their student.”

That Lord's role is to be used when this sort of trouble occurs, from what I hear.

He chose not to verbalize this snide remark because there was no point in telling Assassin that.

What mattered to Faldeus was the order he was about to issue.

“That’s not the case for the other concern. Something is possessing Filia’s body, which we brought to use as the Lesser Grail... We presume it’s the remains or a curse of a Divine Spirit. This one is taking root on the land and currently working on altering its magical energy circulation... Assassin, I’d like to ask you to investigate them.”

The darkness didn’t respond. But Faldeus continued, certain that he was listening.

“With your most optimal class of Presence Concealment capabilities, you’re probably the only one who can run a search on that Divine Spirit possessing Filia and escape alive. She’s customizing the very land to suit her needs... In the worst-case scenario, the altered land will increase her power... to the point she can block an attack with enough firepower to erase the city.”

Faldeus didn’t tell Aludra, but his analysis marked Filia’s daily magical energy increase as the greatest concern.

“I hope the approaching storm is caused by a Heroic Spirit or an effect of the land... but if the Divine Spirit is the one calling it here, things will get extremely bad. If the Lesser Grail is disconnected from the Greater Grail and the magical energy composing all Heroic Spirit, you included, flows into her... this world is bound to be seeing regional gods once again.”

“...”

The presence moved.

Having confirmed that he was listening, Faldeus erased his emotions and regarded himself as a puppet whose body and mind he could holistically manipulate.

This wasn’t meant to deceive. What he was about to say were his honest feelings. He just

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thought that he shouldn't show any form of emotion when talking to Servants.

"If you want to end the ritual with you and I winning the Holy Grail War, you're on a two-days time limit. To overturn the upper echelon's decision, we'll need to at the very least exorcise the Divine Spirit's remains. Although I don't even know if that would be enough to overturn it."

"Thou needn't palliate thy words, contractor."

"!"

He thought he heard the darkness talking.

Faldeus separated his emotions from his body and waited for the next phrase without a sweat.

"Thy heart hath decided the time has come to spend my Saint Graph."

"Yes, exactly."

He could lose his life if he misspoke.

It'd make sense for a regular Heroic Spirit to kill him for that answer, but Faldeus's continued observation of Assassin revealed that he wouldn't do anything this short-sighted.

He went a step further.

"As your Master... I'm sending you to die. But this is not an order to commit suicide. I'm only giving you a command with a high likelihood of death. After you're done with it, you're free to do whatever you want."

"..."

The Servant didn't display any form of emotion.

No hostility, no malice, no resignation.

The flickering shadow was waiting silent, certain that his Master had more to say.

“You don’t need to return here after this last command. As the person in charge... and to stay true to that faith you spoke of, I’ll never back down from my management position, but I’m no longer a participant in the Holy Grail War.”

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East snowfield, mansion in the marsh

“In the end... they didn’t come back. Not Sigma, nor the Assassin girl.”

Ayaka looked at the aged pendulum clock, reclining on the chair in the back of the room.

Anxiety rose in her heart, and her chest felt inescapably cramped.

Normally it would be better to breathe the fresh air outside, but only a day after seeing someone get sniped, I can’t bring myself to do it. “Only a day”? Yes, a whole day already passed. But yesterday... No, not only yesterday. Since I met Saber, everything felt so chaotic, unreal, and simultaneously stressful and calming.

Saber said “I wish I could head to battle immediately but you must have spent a lot of magical energy, so your recovery comes first.” and spent the whole day fortifying the mansion’s defenses.

Saber himself probably also needed time to recover from his injuries in the battle against the golden Heroic Spirit.

Sigma told Ayaka before that most mage battles take place at night so she stayed alert the whole night, but ultimately morning came before anyone appeared to attack her.

Ayaka fell asleep when the sun rose. But upon noticing she was crashed until the evening, she finally had to accept that she was far more tired than she imagined.

Should I be glad that I’m still alive?

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With this question in mind, she thought about what was coming later.

Ever since she became an official Master, she got the impression that her magical energy link to Saber increased somehow. Sometimes she could feel the pounding of an organ other than her heart deep inside, but she assumed it was Assassin deploying whatever Noble Phantasms she had and it had nothing to do with Saber.

Wait... That means the Assassin girl is still alive...

Ayaka sighed in relief over someone who almost killed her.

After several misunderstandings, they were now in a solid alliance.

They didn't know each other for long, but Ayaka could tell Assassin would never deceive or backstab anyone.

That reminds me...

She recalled her reencounter with Assassin in Enkidu's forest.

She called Saber "fearsome"...

This brought Saber's words from the previous day back to the surface of her brain.

"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."

Words unsettling beyond belief.

Ayaka wasn't clear on what's the difference between hell and purgatory, but she figured it was still a harsh place of punishment.

At the very least, Saber's phrasing didn't make it sound fun.

Saber felt so sure that was where he belonged... Yeah, I still don't know anything about what Saber did in history.

This line of thought led Ayaka to realize how bad it was for a Master to remain always ignorant about her Servant.

She found a giant pile of books in the mansion.

She wasted no time, getting up to look around the room in search of a Western history book or an encyclopedia until...

She froze in her tracks.

A tiny figure clad in a red hood stood still in her line of sight.

“Ah...”

She gulped.

The phenomenon occurred in this house with no elevators. This meant that, as indicated by multiple portents, this phenomenon which she didn't know if it was a hallucination or a supernatural curse finally rose one step above.

However, strangely enough, she didn't feel as much fear as she usually did.

It never stopped being scary and she definitely didn't want to look at it if she could help it, but—perhaps due to her becoming Saber's Master or due to the words they exchanged in that building—the fear was no longer shutting her down.

—Good luck.

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I was in the building running towards Saber. Why would the hallucination... say that to me? No, wait, couldn't my brain have hallucinated those words too? Was I so on edge that I put convenient words in the hallucination's mouth? Amazingly shameless of me if true. I don't deserve those words... Because I... ..?

“Huh...?”

Her head felt awfully heavy.

The moment she tried to remember the past, her thoughts became hazy and disconnected.

This never happened before.

What's going on with me...? Is this another effect of becoming a Master? No. I have to remember... something... very important...

The more she tried to think about her state, the foggier her head got.

Up to this point, she was only trying to repress her memories of the red-hooded girl out of fear.

But now her head would stop working properly every time she tried to confront the issue.

It was as if her whole body was against retrieving that memory.

Is this also... an effect of the magecraft that Filia woman cast on me?

A chill ran down Ayaka's spine as she remembered the beautiful woman who cast the hex that cursed her into coming to this city.

This lack of control over her own thoughts filled her with anxiety. An inescapable fear that this could grow into her soon being unable to remember the past few seconds or even lose her identity. What pulled her out of it was...

“Are you alright, Ayaka?”

“!”

Hearing Saber call her name, she felt her body return to reality.

“Y-yeah. I’m fine...”

“There’s one thing I’ve been meaning to say for a long time... If you have any big problems, you can tell me about them. I mean, well, I guess our current situation is the biggest problem you could have...”

Ayaka tried to answer Saber’s kind words with “It’s fine, it happens all the time” but...

“It’s fine, it happens all...”

“Do you really want things to stay the way they are?”

“...”

“It happens all the time? If something is constantly putting you through this much palpable distress, that only makes me more worried. I can agree if you say it’s none of my business, but I believe that if I can offer any help, it’s my duty as your Servant to do so.”

“Saber...”

“It’s not only for your sake. I know self-interest doesn’t look good, but this is basically some internal administration I need to do to win the Grail War. I caused a lot of problems during my life... Mainly to my brother. That’s why in this second life of mine, I absolutely don’t want to step on the same pitfall.”

Ayaka reflexively blinked, as she had never seen Saber this serious before.

Right. Being a Master means that... it’s no longer my problem alone. Saying he got nothing to do with this won’t cut it anymore.

With some hesitation, Ayaka decided to say everything she had to say about what troubled her.

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“...thought you might say I’m making a huge fuzz over nothing.”

“Yes, I can’t promise I won’t belittle your problem. I might! I don’t have any excuse other than “that’s who I am”! I’m sorry!”

“Is this really the time for brutal honesty?”

“Please, wait. Think about it the other way! Your problem being nothing to me means I’m confident I can solve it without breaking a sweat! You have nothing to lose telling me about it, no?”, Saber puffed his chest with pride.

Ayaka needed a moment to think. And so...

“Good Lord, I’m so jealous of your optimism.”

After some pained laughter, she finally opened up.

“The thing is... I sometimes hallucinate. I’ve been running away from this hallucination for the longest time.”

“Yeah, that checks out with what I’ve seen.”

“But it used to be only sometimes. Now I’m seeing her all the time. The girl with the red hood...”

A few minutes later.

“Not trying to doubt you, but I’m gonna need you to be more exact. Are you seeing this hallucination girl now? As we speak?”, asked Saber, contemplatively scratching his chin as he finished hearing the whole story.

“Well, yeah. I was expecting her to disappear while we were talking, but she didn’t.”

Ayaka took a peek at the corner of the room.

She could see the red-hooded girl was standing there with her head down the whole time.

I knew it. Since I came to this city, the hallucination has been growing gradually more real.

Half taking it as a sign she was finally losing her mind for good, she timidly checked Saber's reaction.

Saber's response was asking a serious question.

"Where exactly?"

"Hm... There, in front of the leftmost shelf."

"Here?"

Saber walked to where Ayaka pointed and tried to pet a head he couldn't find.

Saber's hand overlapped with the red-hooded girl but naturally phased through it, to no reaction from either her or Saber.

"Your hand just passed through her head."

"That's where her head is? So short. She really is a kid."

"Well, yeah."

"...ue, is there anything... and... ?"

Saber started talking to someone too quietly for Ayaka to hear.

Probably one of those "Retinue" companions of his.

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“Really? Gotcha. Thanks.”

After thanking the void, he turned to Ayaka, still standing where he was.

“I asked a friend who is an expert in magecraft and she said she found no signs of anything arcane or residual thoughts here.”

“So... that confirms I’m hallucinating because I’m sick in the head?”

“It’s a possibility, but not the only one. It could also be that some hex or magecraft was cast inside you, or some form of spiritual possession.”

“A ghost... Well, Saber is also a ghost, pretty much...”

Quite a few mages would have yelled at her for comparing residual thoughts to a Ghost Linner. After getting away with saying that out loud, Ayaka looked at the ceiling with a self-derisive smile.

“In the end, all I can do is find an exorcist or a psychiatrist.”

Exorcism...? Do I want that? That red-hooded girl... never did anything bad. It was all me getting scared without asking what she wanted. All me feeling guilty because I... Ah... I can't remember who she is.

Feeling the fog in her head spread, Ayaka gave up on diving deeper into her memories and joked to herself.

“Hallucination or ghost, all I want is for her to be a problem I can solve by talking.”

Maybe having Saber by my side will give me the courage to get closer!

When she returned her line of sight to Saber, he was doing something strange.

“Huh? Saber?”

Magecraft made several water orbs of different colors float around him, decorating the pointed location of the red-hooded girl with a fantastical pop style.

The rainbow-colored lights inside the water illuminated the place and Saber started playing a cheerful tune on an old string instrument he found somewhere.

It was the theme song of the movie Saber watched a few days ago in the show house.

Ayaka was momentarily impressed at how thoughtfully he could adapt a song he only heard once to the strings.

Momentarily because she immediately took notice of how random this situation was.

Flabbergasted at how the room suddenly became the set of a TV commercial, Ayaka addressed the elephant in the room.

“What are you doing...?”

“I mean, since you’re scared of this Little Red Riding Hood no one else can see, I just thought you would feel better and get things sorted out if I surrounded the girl with ornaments to make her look funnier, cuter, and more approachable!”, Saber firmly nodded as he played the melody with a sunny smile yet completely serious attitude.

Ayaka’s jaw dropped at all the confidence Saber had in his idea.

“I appreciate you doing things for my sake but... Can I be blunt?”

“Absolutely! I can already imagine what you’ll say, but hit me!”

“Are you stupid?! Seriously, thank you, but sorry, having this kind of idea is actually not that weird, but what kind of person goes ahead and tries it?!”

It checks out, though. I've seen many crazy moments like this in the past few days. Saber is the kind of guy who hops atop a police car to give a speech...

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“Hahaha, I’m Richard of the Plantagenet dynasty... the one called Lionheart. There is no challenge I fear!”

“Please develop some fear! I’m begging you!”

After this yell, Ayaka held her head exhausted.

...and as she held her head, she noticed the fog dispersed completely when she wasn’t looking.

“...”

Before she realized it, she could no longer find the red-hooded girl. Her anxiety was replaced with a question:

Don’t tell me she disappeared because she got embarrassed? No way, that can’t have been it. Wait, no, it’s not time to relax. Next time I see her... we’ll have our talk. Though it won’t be easy if I’m alone...

Ayaka looked at Saber.

A smile formed on her face, although she didn’t know why.

“What? Did the red-hooded girl start dancing to my music?”

“I wish she had.”

As Saber approached Ayaka, she knocked on his chest with a pained smile.

“Well... thanks. I’m feeling better now.”

“Really? That’s great to hear.”

Seeing Saber’s confident yet nonetheless childish smile, Ayaka determined herself.

I’ll fight.

Ayaka knew violent and chaotic battles were ahead of her.

She knew nothing of proper Master etiquette. She merely wanted to face her every personal challenge, down to last, with her eccentric partner by her side.

Her momentary respite came from ignorance.

Her sliver of happiness came from ignorance.

From ignorance to the fact this city was going to be wiped off the face of the world in 2 days.

From ignorance to what the secret inside her is making her forget.

At that moment, Ayaka Sajou had the most human smile among all the Holy Grail War participants in Snowfield.

Interlude

“The Warrior’s respite and the Assassin’s dash”

4th night, Snowfield, show house

The veil of night fell over Snowfield.

It was the time the mages crawled out of their holes.

Sigma was vigilant in worry that any team would take this opportunity to strike, but according to Watcher, everything was eerily peaceful.

“41 hours left...”

Seeing the wall clock’s hands approach 11:30 PM, Sigma checked his own wristwatch.

Sigma spent almost 24 hours holed up in this underground show house.

He only left once to procure water and food, which he did following the shadows’ instructions to avoid being found by Faldeus.

But remaining unnoticed didn’t make Sigma any careless.

It was always possible that the situation would change faster than Watcher can talk.

Therefore, his initial plans of playing the long game and winning a war of endurance didn’t come to fruition.

Because the silhouettes informed him that the city would be bombed in two days.

Running away would have been his best option if he didn’t have an objective, but he recently gained one.

And to fulfill it, he decided to spend the next twelve hours—the time until the next dawn—gathering information and preparing himself.

“This question is no suggestion or Watcher’s will. Just the curiosity of the pseudo-personality allotted to this shadow,” asked the old captain silhouette amidst Sigma’s thinking. “Why aren’t

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you booking it? The explosive's gonna grant you your wish to destroy the Holy Grail War. All you gotta do is hypnotize Kuruoka Tsubaki's doctress, jack an ambulance, and get out of town. Pale Rider's hex is a faint vestigial curse at this point. You got the magical energy to deal with it."

"Remember Watcher will leave this sky if the bombs destroy the Greater Grail... or if Prelati's illusions fully conceal it before the strike. So if a special squad chases you after that, you gotta deal with it on your own.", the female aviator took the captain's place to tell Sigma.

Sigma reacted by squinting and telling his reason not to follow their plan of action.

"You're the ones who told me Kuruoka Tsubaki's vital levels were dropping."

In response to his words, the silhouette transformed into the boy with the caduceus and expressed his sadness and frustration.

"...I won't deny. I feel ashamed. If only I was manifest as a Heroic Spirit instead of a crappy shadow... I'd never let her life be in danger. I'd treat her no matter what it took. I'd do anything. My personality would be completely different from my current one, but I'm sure this part would stay the same."

"In your current form, can't you tell me how to treat her?"

"It'd infringe the rules of the shadows. We can tell you anything Watcher observes from this city's skies, but it's a lot harder for us to relay excessive knowledge from our lives. And even if I could, treating her would require my techniques and magical energy. We don't have enough time to teach you medicine from scratch."

"I see..."

In that case, I really need to prevent the bombing.

Sigma spent the next few hours studying his possibilities.

Would the upper echelon refrain from pointless sacrifices if the Grail War is settled before the bombing?

The answer is no.

Judging from the intel he got from Watcher, the problem wasn't the Heroic Spirits.

It was the two non-Servant individuals with power equal or greater to a Heroic Spirit.

The boy who introduced himself as Thia Escardos to Lancer in the distant skies.

And the woman who was quite literally modding the forest region in the west part of the city: the Divine Spirit Ishtar possessing the body of the homunculus Filia.

Those two won't disappear once the Grail War is done with.

So the only option the upper echelon is left with is to take them both out in one shot while they still have an attachment to this city.

"...Will it take them out? Your talk made them sound like they could withstand a direct hit from a nuclear missile."

The man with bird wings answered Sigma's question.

"I'm not sure. Ishtar decided that this is where she would build her temple, so I don't see her running away. Thia Escardos is a free man, but he hasn't been seen in the city after his fight with Lancer. It didn't seem like the Lancer fight reached any conclusive end. He didn't get injured to the point he couldn't move, as far as I know."

"He's still not back?"

Sigma asked a question he had just gotten the answer for.

From what he could see on the show house's TV, the world was in major chaos over yesterday's meteor buzz, but there were no signs of any additional magecraft incidents occurring beyond that.

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Naturally, there was a huge chance something did occur and was concealed, but that at least showed that nothing else beyond the scope of the concealment of magecraft happened.

“Honestly, he has no reason to come back,” the old captain shadow answered Sigma. “Though even if he won’t come back, you have no way to prove that to the gents wanting to blow up the city, lad. But well, I’m talking only if he’s never seen active elsewhere... Either way, there’s nothing we can do about what’s going on in the western forest, since she’s physically and magically altering the land.”

“..”

“Lad, this is another trial. Though can you defeat Ishtar and Thia? That’s another story.”

The captain continued since his Master was silent.

“You used our power and learned what you were better off not knowing, lad. That this city is on the edge of destruction. No one’d believe you if you tried to tell the world about it, and even if they got to believe it, the non-mage humans can’t escape while the curse remains.”

“Probably not.”

The silhouette became a boy knight and chose his words to test Sigma.

“Looking from another angle, it’s a situation where you’re the only one who can escape. You just have to choose your own life over Kuruoka Tsubaki’s or the citizens. No one will blame you. To face this alone is too tall a hurdle. So..”

“I’m not running away.”

“What?”

“I choose... to fight.”

As Sigma answered, his eyes were quiet like a soothing night yet still hiding extraordinary determination deep inside.

The words of the nameless Assassin who he contacted a few hours ago resurfaced in his brain. He made a point to go through the holes in Faldeus's observation network despite most of it being still under repair.

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A few hours earlier, a back alley in Snowfield

“This city... will be destroyed?”

“If I got my information right, the higher-ups want to wipe the town clean with all citizens in it.”

“How... foolish...”

The unnamed Assassin clenched her fist tightly as her face contorted.

Sigma relayed all the information he gained without telling her that his source was Watcher.

He felt bad about hiding his ability. He couldn't tell if he was doing it because the spellcaster mercenary habits drilled into him told him this was information he shouldn't be telling even trusted companions or because he already lied before about “his Heroic Spirit being Chaplin”.

“How can we impede this atrocity? Kill all those who ordered-”

“That probably won't stop anything. This could have changed with the times, but when a general dies after issuing march orders, the soldiers keep moving until the next order comes. Besides... this is not a war where the general is the one leading the frontlines. The chain of command is too branched nowadays. Finding and killing the assigned pilot and all spares in only 2 days is an unrealistic expectation.”

Maybe Faldeus's Servant, which not even Watcher can properly observe, could do it, but they had no way to contact him.

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Besides... I only have Faldeus's words going for it, but if that Assassin really is Hassan-i-Sabbah, I don't know what effect he could have on the woman from the same Order of Assassins.

“We don't even know where the commanders are and what base the bomb will fly from, to begin with.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I'll look for a way to save Kuruoka Tsubaki even if the city gets destroyed. But as I told you, first I want to find a way to prevent the destruction. If that's an option, it's the best one.”

Saving Tsubaki.

Assassin's eyes were colored with relief the instant she heard those words.

“Alright... Tell me if you find the means. I won't spare any efforts to help.”

Assassin's nod conveyed to Sigma that she thought this was the best choice, perhaps because she was never after the Grail and because she can't protest against saving the city.

This Assassin really is a good soul, despite being a killer by trade.

Calling someone who resorts to assassination “good” is questionable, but since Sigma's subject of comparison was himself, he'd naturally see her as “someone better than him”.

Sigma respected her for having the standards he lacked.

But he failed to notice something: that the person he was before participating in the Grail War could never feel what he was feeling.

Sigma was unaware of his constant changes.

“Until you find anything, I'll pursue the hellspawn.”

“The vampire?”

“I must eliminate that hellspawn. If the city really is going to be wiped clean, he will try to use his demonic teachings to escape. His kind denies human feats. There is a chance he could negate even the most vicious power, as long as it was born of man.”

“Isn’t he already out of town?”

Assassin shook her head at the obvious question.

“No... He’s still nearby. I can’t tell where without using my Noble Phantasm to observe it... but I can confirm I remain sullied by the stain of my connection to him.”

After looking at her own hands with repulsion, Assassin remembered the collaborator replacing him as her current energy supplier.

“Tell Ayaka Sajou to leave the city. I don’t want her involved in my self-cleansing. I can handle it with only my remaining magical energy.”

“Got it. I was planning to contact her tomorrow, so I’ll pass your message.”

“Also tell her... I’m grateful.”

“Copy that.”

Saber is now going for the Grail, but from what I know of their personalities, they wouldn’t be okay with the city’s destruction.

“He might be a Dead Apostle, which is a fairly high rank of vampire. Are you sure you can do it alone?”

“That is why I can’t let this chance go to waste. He’s currently weakened. You need to focus on what you must do.”

Assassin closed her eyes for a moment before raising her head and making direct eye contact with Sigma.

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“Sigma... You’re determined to save a girl. This is your source of faith.” she used his name directly to get the point across. “I am immature by nature, and on top of that, I’m sullied by the hellspawn’s ill will, so I cannot be your guide... but you found something worth believing in.”

After those final words, she left the back alley.

But the look on her face when she did remained marked in Sigma’s brain.

The face she made to Sigma at the end was—

A human smile of heartfelt joy. A smile she never had before.

“I’m glad it turned out to be a prayer for good.”

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Present time, show house, underground

“To fight or to abandon?”

Sigma monotonously responded to the shadow’s question.

“If this choice is a trial, it’s the easiest one so far. My life doesn’t have much value. So just making the choice is no big deal. The real important trial to me is whether or not I’ll manage to follow through with my decision.”

“I see, so you choose the path of honorable defeat and no surrender.”

“Defeat is not part of my plans. Just because my life is not worth anything, it doesn’t mean I want to commit suicide or die in vain.” Sigma gallantly declared to the shrugging boy knight silhouette.

The shadow responded by changing into the caduceus boy with a somewhat sad smile.

“So you’re going to defy Ishtar, even if just a vestige of her, confront this unreasonable destruction, fight the manmade systems and the embodiment of gale and thunderbolt made into a beast of calamity... to ultimately overturn a girl’s fated death?”

“I don’t know if I can overturn it... I just feel like I have to. If I dump everything and run away here... I get this feeling I’ll never get a normal night of sleep again. That would be worse than death to me.”

“I get it.”

Sigma’s words made the shadow understand everything.

“If you can topple this wall... you’ll be accomplishing something we couldn’t. I’m rooting for you. When you do it, we’ll walk away from your life on a literal road of light.”

“? What are you talking about?”

“Huh?”

The silhouette was puzzled at Sigma’s puzzled reaction.

“We’re on a joint operation. When I overcome this wall you’re talking about, you come with me... There’s no logical reason for the shadows to walk away.”

“... Is this your idea of a joke?”

“What part of it was funny?”

Sigma was expressionless as always. The old captain’s silhouette returned.

“Lad... Ain’t you forgetting we’re Watcher’s shadows, not yours?”

“Oh...”, Sigma awkwardly averted his eyes for a moment. “Sorry, it completely escaped my

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mind.”

Sigma expressed his honest feelings with a bitter smile, something very rare for him.

“Turns out I grew pretty fond of your nagging.”

Chapter 23

“The Age of Gods and the Modern Age <Daybreak>”

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West Snowfield, center of the forest region

Snowfield's winds started getting stronger thanks to the unprecedentedly gigantic hurricane approaching.

However, the sun rising from the east illuminated the forest, unaffected by the incoming storms.

The clouds clustered around the center of the hurricane to an abnormal degree. No clouds defied the intense winds to occupy the skies above the forest.

In the center of this forest blanketed by warm sunlight and intense breezes, a voice filled with a divine aura reverbed.

“Haruri. I’m naming you this place’s head priestess. Good luck!”

“...?”

What did she just say?

Haruri stood still atop the smoothly polished stone floorboards, too confused to say anything back.

She could hear the distant winds, but neither the wind nor the sunlight would reach her.

She was surrounded by porcelain-white walls with gold ornaments. Furthermore, the altar, chairs, and some other pieces of furniture were made with lavish amounts of an azure rock she presumes to be lapis-lazuli. At first glance, the room resembled an art museum exhibit hall.

But Haruri knew for a fact this was the middle of a forest.

Two days prior, this place was filled with deeply rooted trees.

Several orders from Ishtar to Haruri’s Berserker Servant later, this place was fully built in a mere day and a half.

She didn't understand why was this construction speed necessary, but before she could ask the many questions in her head, Ishtar called her.

A person would need to be impressively accustomed to unreasonable absurdity to be in her shoes without feeling confused.

Ishtar's heart was running a marathon and Haruri's heart couldn't keep up with the goddess vestige's pace.

"Looks like I got you speechless! Well, I can understand feeling overjoyed by the honor of being named head priestess, but watch out not to grow arrogant like that one idiot Huwawa took out before, ok?"

"L-Listen! I'm not fit for a role this majo..."

"You're allowed to be modest once. If you do it a second time, I'll assume you're doubting my judgment. Be careful about that.", Ishtar flatly stated with an unwavering smile.

Haruri's mouth froze when she heard that.

Because she understood Ishtar meant her statement as a cold fact, not as a threat.

What Ishtar really meant to say with those words was "Did you know that you would die if I ripped your head off and used it as a ball?"

Regardless, the goddess was always uninhibited and emotionally driven.

Haruri accepted that a god's arrogance and austerity were inseparable from their ability to be their natural selves.

Haruri was trembling and speechless. Seeing that, Ishtar reacted with an awkward smile.

"Listen, I know it may look like I wasn't thinking, but I named you head priestess for a good reason, ok?"

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“Must have been a truly deep reason...”

“It was! Uruk had a long history of faith in me back in the day, and one of the head priestesses in that history was a cut above the rest. And believe it or not, her name was kinda similar to yours. I’ll never get why she put so much work into supporting that obstinate goldie’s stupid government, but otherwise, she was a good and pious girl! So I knew you were the one because your name rhymes with hers... Am I right?”

She heard the “Am I right?” at the end overlapped with an illusory “Don’t you dare let me down, ok?”

But in reality, the idea of Haruri not living up to Ishtar’s expectations never even crossed the goddess’ mind.

She thought “My instincts couldn’t possibly choose the wrong person” and nothing else.

And for that reason, the moment she lets Ishtar down, she’ll be Ishtar’s enemy.

But... still...

Several memories hit the Grail War participant’s mind.

She almost lost her life when she confronted Bazdilote Cordelion and when she summoned Berserker. What stuck out with her the most from these moments was not the color of her blood or the flames consuming the meat factory. It was the shining image of Ishtar remaining true to her convictions no matter the circumstances.

At this point, I should also be ready to put everything on the line. Even if that makes me an enemy of humanity, I will... My life is a small price to pay... to flip this world upside-down.

Perplexed as she was, Haruri still replied to the Divine Spirit that saved her life with words voicing her complex mix of gratitude and fear.

“I humbly accept this honor... It’s thanks to Ishtar that my life was saved. You can do to me

anything you wish.”

“Huh? For real?”

“What?”

“Anything I want? Are you sure about that?”

Ishtar’s unexpected response only furthered Haruri’s confusion.

Seeing that, Ishtar slightly dropped the tone of her voice.

“I warned you once before, remember?”

“!”

“I told you I don’t mind you sacrificing yourself, but at least have fun doing it.”

Saying that, Ishtar gently grabbed Haruri’s shoulders.

“..”

She had forgotten the warning.

She could be killed. She could see Ishtar snapping her body from her current position.

But despite Haruri’s fears...

The goddess of beauty pulled the frightened girl closer and embraced her trembling body.

Ishtar’s chest softly and warmly enveloped Haruri’s heart.

Haruri was encased in dense magical energy clad in a divine aura, but unlike any of the previous times, she couldn’t feel the magical energy’s pronounced pressure corroding the core of her being.

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She felt a sense of tranquility similar to the hugs she received from her late mother in her childhood, and in this tranquility, Ishtar's magical energy would enter every pore of her body.

“What...?”

She could feel something passing through her Magic Circuits and changing their color.

Yet this didn't feel unpleasant to Haruri. On the contrary, she got the impression that she became part of something bigger, or that the world acknowledged her presence for the first time in her life. Before she noticed, she was covered in tears.

“Ah... Aaaah... I... I...”

Haruri wouldn't believe how much water her head could hold if she wasn't aware of how much she cried. Her heart was agitated, telling her that she learned the truth of the world, that she was finally aware of the meaning of her life. And with that epiphany, she entrusted herself to Ishtar's arms and magical energy.

Haruri stopped her movements and emotions, but Ishtar's voice was nonetheless calm, as if that was no big deal.

“Giving you that warning was the same as saying you'll be sacrificed to me. And I don't need the pointless life of a lost defeatist discarding her own value.”

“Is... Ishtar... my goddess...”

“Are you still afraid of me?”



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I already got over this before...

She remembered throwing away her life once facing Bazdilot in the industrial district.

But her resolve to die back then was ridiculed by the overwhelming power now hugging her.

I'm so... weak...

“I a-am.”

Haruri believed what escaped her mouth to be the truth, but at that point in time, the fear inside Haruri had already begun to be replaced with a different emotion.

“I'm... terrified. I'd have already, escaped if I, could.”

Haruri's paused breathing ruined her enunciation. Ishtar smiled to put her at ease, then whispered to her ears.

“That's great to hear. It's proof that you're still afraid of losing something. Proof that you still want to live. It's true that when I kill you, I'll do it without any hesitation. But I will bless the life you lived, no matter who is against it.”

“I... don't deserve...”

“What's your reason to be here? You didn't come here just to be afraid, didn't you?”

“I...”

She could see her brain melting in a pool of corrosive divine energy.

The divine aura started pushing to the surface the emotions she was trying to keep out of her sight. At that instant, she was filled with memories.

Memories of the mages killing her parents.

Images of unfair destruction. Screams. All that made her happy being smashed to pieces.

“Ah... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah...”

The torrent of memories in her brain brought forth her true self.

“I, I just wanted, revenge...”

“Yes, this is the groundwork you were built upon. It’s not my blessing. This is yours and yours alone.”

“I don’t care about how the world is supposed to work... Nothing needs to be arcane, as far as I’m concerned...! I just wanted to give them a little taste of what I felt! They forgot that what’s lost never comes back, so I’d remind them! Their lost arcana would never come back... just like my family never will... I wanted to teach them what that felt like...”

Haruri felt the “heat” being quickly drained from her emotions as she spoke.

She realized how insignificant the streaming power of her emotions was compared to the power of an actual god.

She never made light of the life she was offering for her revenge.

But the moment she entered the flow of Ishtar’s magical energy, she felt like the world she knew was a tiny fish tank and she had just jumped from her home tank to the ocean. It was like she was being shown the sea of stars.

“I really... ugh... can’t do it...”

Her second display of modesty meant death.

Knowing that, she voiced her honest feeling, with no attempt to humble herself.

Ah, that’s right, the goddess before me is a terrible judge of character. She shines so brightly that

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she can't possibly see me right.

“You, are, radiance.”

Haruri's whispers were tight and cutting off.

“A minuscule... minuscule human... like me... can't stand by your side!”

In the end, Haruri screamed all of her self-hatred. Ishtar pretended she didn't hear that scream, overwriting Haruri's heart with her calm yet powerful voice.

“You're not minuscule. Trust me.”

Ishtar closed her eyes to look at her past for a moment, keeping her boiling emotions locked behind those eyelids.

“Revenge... Destroying to recover one's wounded pride is a natural providence. Every being with a will should do it.”

Involved in the immense divine aura, Haruri couldn't realize that Ishtar was directing those words to herself.

“Ishtar... my goddess.”

“Struggle. I'll be watching over you. All of you humans. No matter what outcome you reach. I'll be watching where fate will take you. Be it to beautiful destruction. Or ugly squirming,” declared the goddess. Her beautiful fingers wiped off Haruri's tears before lowering to her cheeks. “You have permission to enjoy life, celebrate joys, and love the world. Polish your joys and sorrows with your own hands... and holding on to everything that has value, offer your everything as tribute to me, will you?”

With the voice of a comforting mother, Ishtar said something no mother would ever say to her child and quietly let go of Haruri's shoulders.

Even now, Haruri's tears wouldn't stop.

She immediately lowered her head and kneeled. The stream of tears continued even then.

Ishtar, ever neutrally, watched her from aside, as Haruri's state wasn't laughable or unexpected.

"Use every dirty trick in the book if that's what it takes for you to keep dancing in this world. I promise you I can find something to enjoy even in the most awkward of dances, as long as you never abandon your humanity."

Like a loving mother.

"I can't teach you how to dance... but I can treat you to some nice dress and shoes."

Or a harvester watching the golden wheat grow.

"In the form of a blessing that lets you stomp anyone who dares try to stop you."

Nothing special happened.

She didn't save Haruri's life again, nor did she fight alongside her as she did in the factory the previous day. Nonetheless, Ishtar's blessed or cursed words incurred great change in Haruri's heart.

All she did was cast words coated in magical energy.

That's all it took to irreparably change a mage's outlook on life in a matter of minutes.

This fact is the greatest possible proof that the temple's construction was making her recover her divine status.

Though another possible cause is Heroic Spirit Gilgamesh's magical energy being poured into the Lesser Grail Folia.

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Less than an hour later.

“I’m truly sorry for losing my composure.”

After finally regaining her calm, Haruri made a formal statement to Ishtar.

“It’s fine, I was going to bless you once the temple was completed no matter what. Now you just have to do your head priestess job.”

“Certainly. But what exactly does a head priestess do?”

“Let me see... Back in the day, they used to manage the tributes... But the main part is taking care of the temple while I’m away. And we’ll have to build a ziggurat eventually... Modern architecture seems cool despite its addiction to verticality. With the amount of blessings I can afford to pay, I can finance a lovely skyscraper, over 2 kilometers tall! Look forward to it!”

Ishtar was speaking like an innocent teenager until her voice suddenly dropped.

“Oh, but before that...”

“?”

Ishtar turned her eyes to the temple’s entrance.

Haruri checked to see what she was looking at, but couldn’t find anyone.

Ishtar made an announcement to the priestess sharing her divine aura, but her attention was beyond the entrance—deep into the forest.

“I know it’s sudden, but our temple is receiving its first visitor in pilgrimage... You go greet him first, ok?”

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Outside the temple

“What the... hell?”

Jester Karture was astonished.

He was standing in the forest, taking the form of an attractive young man. The same form he displayed in the police station.

If his memory serves him right, this was just a forest back when he inspected the area before the Grail War.

But the landscape now was completely different.

A giant building resembling a small mountain appeared in the flatland forest.

In front of it, there was a large gate colored with the bluest lapis-lazuli, and after the gate, there was a stone staircase leading to the level of the temple.

Atop the staircase, there was a building designed to resemble the ruins of ancient Mesopotamia, and both sides of the top step of the ladder were decorated with gold and silver statues modeled after the Kokopelli dolls, American symbols that attract money and refinement.

So far so good. The real issue is the sculpture placed further outside the building.

The disturbingly-shaped object, presumably supposed to be a guardian statue, looked like a monster out of some East Asian fairytale.

“Am I still inside their illusion...?”

Hidden in the shade of the large trees, Jester inspected the temple.

As much as the landscape he was seeing looked like a joke, he could feel it was unarguably real.

That is because he knew the Prelatis' illusions wouldn't so easily be able to produce the inex-

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haustible divine aura filling this temple.

“What’s a temple like this doing here? It doesn’t fit its surroundings... not aesthetically and much in less in power magnitude.”

Jester openly praised what he saw when Archer and Lancer clashed in the desert on the first day of the Grail War, but this time his impression was that he didn’t want his beautiful Assassin to be part of this buffoonery.

Looking at the designs and the objet d’art in isolation, one could see it being an art museum in the middle of an orient-themed event, but the very real divine aura engulfing the temple made it feel like a repulsive joke to the bloodsucker.

I felt this divine aura before... in front of the hospital, before Kuruoka swallowed everyone. The Prelatis weren’t lying. There really is a Divine Spirit or someone really close to it outside town. Yeah, it can’t be a Heroic Spirit. It’s impossible to summon something this profoundly arcane within the framework of the Grail War. Then she’s indeed an outsider to this... Like me.

Jester meant this in the sense that they’re both non-humans. He was fully aware that the godly presence occupying the temple before him was leagues more noxiously rejecting of Human Order than he was.

Only Ancestors would be able to compete on an even level with this!

In his top condition, he could have done some level of damage.

But now he had several parts of his body’s foundation destroyed, on top of being abandoned by the Ancestor who served as his origin as a vampire.

The hunter became the prey. The manipulator became the puppet.

Jester couldn’t hold back a pained smile.

Huhu, I sought the Grail because I couldn’t stand the boredom, but I didn’t see myself feeling fear here. If this sham god is also here for the ritual, I must admit I made a mistake. It was very dismissive

of me to assume the Grail War was a mere human ritual.

A rare moment where Jester had an admirable thought in his heart.

With caution beyond caution, Jester hid himself to his maximum capacity and waited for a chance to pollute the temple. Until...

Raving Shadow Flash

“Zabaniya”.

He heard a sound.

A beautiful voice.

A beloved voice.

A fragrant voice instantly awakened Jester’s mind from the bottom of the well.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!”

With a delighted war cry, he jumped and twisted his body mid-air.

Countless strands of hair turned into black blades passed through the space between his limbs.

The blades of freshly washed hair swayed in their positions in an attempt to capture and dice Jester’s body but Jester danced in the air, dodging them with movements that defied the laws of physics.

“Wonderful! Gorgeous! Excellent! The world you rewrite is always more wholesome yet titillating! Your movements are the most beautiful and refined! Cutesy, that’s the word! Truly, truly cutesy!”

Jester danced to the lapis-lazuli gates of the temple, the word “stealth” completely deleted

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from his memory, and screamed, not for himself or for Assassin, but for the world to hear.

“It’s you! Just you! You’re the one! You taught me the joys of life! You gave me everything I have! You pulled me out of the sands of despair! Nobody else but you!”

“...”

To show his words were worthless, the owner of that hair—the nameless Assassin—continued the barrage of hair blades.

“You, beautiful zealot! Though I didn’t think you’d follow me to such a dangerous place... a place filled with the power of a pagan god!”, Jester proclaimed even louder as he dodged all attacks by the skin of his teeth.

After his joyous yelling, Jester jumped to the top of a large tree.

When his hand touched the trunk, the tree instantly transformed. It twisted, broke, and creaked until it became a giant wooden tentacle full of branches and leaves attacking Assassin.

“...!”

Assassin questioned where the supposedly debilitated vampire was taking all this power from.

But Jester’s reply would have been “it’s the power of love”, so she wouldn’t get any elucidating answer if she asked.

Jester’s movement did in fact go beyond what the laws of the world permitted. He was noticeably losing chips of himself every time he forced his power to activate.

The nameless Assassin kept her Noble Phantasm active, hitting the countless hair blades against the tree tentacle.

While she did, Jester extended his hand to a new tree, making a new tentacle. The cycle continued until,

“Silence!”

A gallant voice reverbed when no one expected it, stopping Jester and Assassin.

In the direction of the voice, the two saw a girl atop the temple staircase, standing before the inner entrance.

Because the girl looked too young to be considered an adult, and because her western outfit clashed with the temple’s decoration, she looked like the average tourist visiting ancient ruins.

But her voice was loaded with some modicum of divine aura, allowing it to reach the ears of everyone in the area, despite the loud winds blowing around them.

“This forest is the garden of the great goddess Ishtar. No further tumult will be allowed!”

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Snowfield Central Church

“The signs of the land are clearly different,” mumbled Executor Hansa Cervantes of the Holy Church while he watched TV in the back room of his chapel.

He had noticed yesterday that the west side of the land was altered and that change was spreading, but he interpreted it as just circuits being replaced, and now was the moment when the switch was flipped.

The turning point he’s thinking about was Ishtar naming Haruri head priestess, but from the church, Hansa had no way of knowing that.

Hansa generally used only the Sisters, but this time he was using all of the Church’s contacts in the city to gather information.

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He was ready to look for Jester Karture the moment he returned from the dream world, but immediately after it happened, he heard witness reports that Flat Escardos was shot, and that his corpse got up and killed all snipers.

“Flat Escardos... Not a bad man, for a mage... Considering he caught an Ancestor’s attention, the thing inside him could be pretty much anything.”

They only knew each for 1 day, but he quite liked the young oddball mage. With this in mind, Hansa silently crossed himself.

If he revived as a Dead Apostle, I should be the one to purify his soul. It’s the least I can do.

“Still... The way things are, I can’t convincingly guarantee the safety of the Holy Grail War losers when they come here.”

Large parts of the chapel’s roof collapsed in the battle between Saber and Archer, and the only thing done to fix it was slapping NO ENTRY tape.

After some pulled strings, the priest normally in charge of this church was called to Las Vegas, where Hansa’s teacher was. Hansa knew he would fall to his knees when he got back.

“If he still has a city to come back to, that is.”

Hansa Cervantes received a message from the Holy Church saying the city was at risk of being erased.

Considering one of the functions of the Holy Church is to clean up cities destroyed by Dead Apostles, the possibility of the Grail War masterminds wiping out the city with 800 thousand of people in it felt normal to them.

“Someone in the upper echelon of the public side of society thinks the Holy Church way” is what they’d think.

The lack of clearer information meant the process they’d carry out would not be public knowledge.

The TV screen before him showed looping satellite footage of the water of the river next to the White House exploding into an upward coil and the North Pole ice cap missing a perfectly spherical chunk. It made sense that the masterminds would want to erase the city.

“Though it looks like that hurricane will uproot the city before they do.”

Even Hansa, who is relatively uneducated compared to a mage, could feel the powerful presence approaching from the west.

Most mages in town were in a panic because they didn't know what the hurricane was but could tell it was a magical storm containing extraordinary amounts of mana.

Magecraft can make thunderclouds and cyclones, but something capable of freely manipulating a storm that giant is closer to magic than to average magecraft.

According to the Holy Grail War data in the Assembly of the Eight Sacrament's intelligence department, Fuyuki's Grail Wars also caused a disaster beyond what could come from a duel between Heroic Spirits.

He hears there was a huge ruckus on all levels of the Holy Church hierarchy when a giant demonic beast appeared in the river and fighter jets started dropping like flies. Add that to the collapsed hotel and the great fire that came immediately after the end of the ritual, and the typhoon destroying everything becomes preferable for how much easier to write off it is.

Hansa received a directive ordering him to stay away from the city and then sneak back in for the clean-up after everything was over.

He intentionally didn't read it.

I wish could make unemotional life choices like my teach. Unfortunately, Mr. Dilo's influence is not that easy to shake off.

Hansa had 3 people he considered to be his parents. The mother who raised him in the mountains; Bishop Dilo, who took him out of the mountains; and Delmio, who trained him as

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an Executor.

Hansa was taken out of a quite unique environment in the mountains and taught the common man's virtues. After all his Executor training, those virtues remained in him, even if twisted into a bizarre form.

This is why he remained in the city, and in this church.

Since the Sisters were with him, he had everything packed to leave if the situation called for it, but he stayed there, believing he'd need to be present down to the last second to hear the voices of those asking for protection.

It's also possible his light-hearted interactions with, and subsequent loss of Flat Escardos had some effect on him.

Hansa tried to come up with a plan to deal with the western forest, drinking coffee mixed with jolokia powder to dispel the softer side of his heart. But these thoughts were interrupted by

"Hansa, we have a visitor. She's waiting outside."

One of the Sisters in his Quartet came back and reported to him.

"A Master!?"

I can only see it being Saber's Master. Despite her abnormal amount of magical energy, she didn't seem to be a mage.

Considering the situation, she could ask for protection even if Saber was not dropping out of the competition.

But despite Hansa's speculation,

the Sister delivered an answer he would never have guessed.

"Yes. She says she's Rider's Master."

“Say what?”

Rider... the mounted Heroic Spirit? It can't be Kuruoka Tsubaki. Then that leaves... that one other Heroic Spirit... the one that isn't Pale Rider?

Hansa was the overseer, but he wasn't a Master, so he wasn't even sure if Pale Rider was a Rider.

Seeing how Hansa was full of questions, the Sister dispassionately continued.

Her words left Hansa wondering what took her so long.

“She says she wants to announce her participation in the Holy Grail War to the overseer.”

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West Snowfield, in front of Ishtar's temple

“These grounds are blessed by the radiant goddess under the name of Neo Ishtar Temple. Her Holiness welcomes those from different doctrines or species with open arms, so if you're here for pilgrimage, be quiet and stand in line.”

The woman spoke like a tour guide for ruins or an art museum, provoking indecision in both Jester and Assassin.

Though that indecision lasted but an instant.

Jester leaped the instant he felt sure the woman's presence was too faint for her to be the Divine Spirit the Prelatis told him about.

No one knows if his plan was to drink her blood to recover himself, to keep her a hostage against Assassin, or something else entirely.

Because, whatever his goal was, it was clearly beyond his reach.

Countless blue bullets appeared from behind the woman and pierced Jester's body.

"Gh...!?"

Jester assumed that even in his weakened state, he'd be able to shrug off any impromptu magecraft, so he was caught off-guard by the damage to his body going so much beyond what he expected. A second wave of blue bullets came, so he grabbed one from that.

Soon after he did, intense pain circulated in his right hand, and one dissolved finger fell off.

"...!"

The attack could not only inflict localized pain to a Dead Apostle but also damage his body.

No, that's not it.

He analyzed the mutation in his body and immediately understood it was not mere destruction.

What amazingly powerful hypnotoxin! The pain was actually my soul rejecting the venom!

The melted finger was presumably a rejective reflex to a direct attempt to put the soul to sleep.

Jester grit his teeth as he took a look at what tried to corrode him.

The bullet was actually a bee.

But not an ordinary bee.

Each and every bee had its exoskeleton dyed blue, making them look almost like intricate lapis-lazuli statues of bees.

Golems?! No, that's not it! It can't be... those are real bees!?

Lapis-colored bees don't exist.

Multiple species of bees, like the prettier variants of the cuckoo bees, are naturally blue.

But this bee was not like that.

Normally, bees this large are marked with a vivid combination of yellow and black tones. It looked as if these were those bees after evolving into learning to wear lapis armor.

I've seen the bee-controlling properties of this magical energy before...

"Woman! Could you be Odd Borzak's successor?!", yelled Jester as he took a big step back after swatting the bee away.

"!"

The woman's face lost composure for a second.

"You know my grandfather?"

"Sure do! He made quite a name for himself, both among mages and among our kind. Though I hear this fame was his downfall, as the humans put a bounty on his head."

"A Dead Apostle..."

"Don't be so on edge. I wasn't his enemy."

Multiple thoughts crossed Jester's mind all at once while he conversed with the woman before him. And through all of this, he still didn't distract himself from Assassin's threat.

Odd's successor.

But she's not one of our kind.

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Command Spells on her left hand.

She's a Master?

Where is the Servant?

Did she inherit the Dead Apostle bees?

If she did, can she use them?

I'll bet on no.

Wait.

It doesn't matter if she inherited them. With my power, I can turn her current bees into Dead Apostle bees!

The only Borzak mage Jester knew was a fellow Dead Apostle. A man who controlled venomous bees with the power to turn humans into Dead Apostles.

If he uses the bees' venom to increase the number of his Ghouls in Snowfield, he could both recover his strength and breed hesitation in Assassin's heart.

I was avoiding spreading my kind while there are swarms of mages out and about everywhere, but if I use these bees, I can avoid the issue—

His head rolled backward.

A blade of dark hair shot through the place his head once was.

“HAHA! Jealous, my beautiful Assassin? You don't need to worry, I'm not making any moves on that woman! I'm just trying to raise some funds to be able to love you more!”

“...”

Assassin continued her attack without a word, but Jester's words only got the beemaster girl warier of the two.

“Assassin...?! What's a Servant doing with a Dead Apostle?!”

“...!”

Those words made Assassin realize that the beemaster woman atop the stairs was part of the Grail War.

She obviously never doubted the involvement of anyone in that temple, but that confirmation also intensified Assassin's wariness of the mage woman.

But that's a problem for later. The hellspawn comes first and foremost.

Assassin turned to Jester, her priorities unchanged.

However...

“Being a Servant doesn't make you an exception.”

Since Ishtar's magical energy invaded her, Haruri's mind is in the process of changing to make her a better conductor of rites.

She always thought of the Holy Grail as merely a tool to destroy the world of magecraft, so now protecting Ishtar's temple became a priority above the Grail. Meaning that working for Ishtar was gradually becoming her core goal.

“My name is Haruri. The high priestess granted her life and her role by Her Holiness goddess Ishtar. As such, I cannot tolerate further use of violence within these grounds.”

That is because painting the world in Ishtar's colors would have the exact same effect of des-

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troying the world as many mages know it.

There was a major contradiction in her thought process, but she can't notice it while her soul is getting charmed by Ishtar's magical energy.

Not that it matters. Even if there wasn't a hint of Charm involved, Haruri would still say the words she was about to say out of gratitude for Ishtar saving her life.

The first thing she was supposed to say, with or without a Dead Apostle and a Heroic Spirit causing a ruckus.

“By my Command Spell, I order you:”

A Command Spell on Haruri's left hand shone brightly.

She'd use a precious Command Spell just because a Servant and Dead Apostle appeared here? Is she going to pull all stops to make sure Assassin and I are eliminated?

Jester's doubt lasted only until he heard her command. Once he did, everything made sense.

She used hers the way any Master offering their whole being to this temple would.

“be the watcher of this forest and temple, and such, defend them for eternity!”

The three marks on her left hand shone and one of them was lost.

The land shook for an instant.

A monumental, obscenely gigantic steel beast appeared from inside the forest.

What shook the land wasn't the creature's steps.

The creature had its form and presence hidden by some form of concealment magecraft, so

when its magical energy was finally released, its shockwaves provoked a tremor in the forest's essence.

Its magical energy was not only gigantic but also dense.

Jester immediately could tell.

“That’s... the thing that was in front of the hospital back then!”

Its very presence made Jester doubt it was something the Grail was capable of calling.

It was expanded dozens of times bigger than it was back in the hospital.

“ -----
----- ”

Its roar resembled the one he heard before.

Jester couldn't tell one roar apart from the other, but Assassin noticed the difference.

The previous one sounded like a roar of resentment cursing all there is in the world. In contrast, the current one felt like a scream of delight blessing something.

The roar caused every winged animal in the forest to take it to the skies, casting a shadow over the woods as they flapped against the powerful winds.

“What the hell...”

As a Dead Apostle, Jester could comprehend the creature before him and tried to reject her.

“My body can reject the presence of any product of man... but not this.”



By feeling the magical energy on his skin, Jester analyzed all substances inside the creature and voiced a hypothesis.

“Impossible. This is a person... and at the same time, a weapon made by the gods...?”

“Wrong guess.”

A voice from inside the temple denied his supposition.

With the clicks of human heels, a woman appeared at the tallest step of the staircase where Haruri stood.

“Our pantheon didn’t make her to be a weapon.”

Haruri kneeled and lowered her head in reverence.

Likewise, the colossus in the forest lowered its body and offered what seemed to be its head, like a knight taking an oath of fealty.

“They birthed her through methods that go against my principles, but that’s no reason not to bless her once she’s born. I’m having her be the watcher of my sanctuary, and look how happy she got from having the same role again. Gotta wonder what’s so nice about that. What a cute girl.”

The beautiful woman directed an earth mother goddess smile to the creature as big as her temple.

Jester quickly figured out that she was an Einzbern homunculus, since one of his masks was that of a mage.

But at the same time, he figured out something else:

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The magical energy in what was inside the homunculus was different in nature from the creature but equally powerful.

“What are you?” Jester reflexively asked.

“Oh, you don’t know? Are that dumb?”, the woman with the body of a homunculus answered.

Hearing this response, Jester gritted his teeth before opening his mouth again.

“Ok, fair, that was a stupid question. That high priestess girl already gave me the answer before. She even said whose temple this is.”

Jester was perfectly frozen in place and even then Assassin couldn’t bring herself to follow up on her attack.

She wouldn’t be allowed any careless move.

She wouldn’t be allowed to ignore the woman to act.

The pressure taking hold of the air in the whole area felt like the world itself ordering her not to do anything.

The only one able to flash a cynical smile in defiance of this air was Jester, who was a denier of Human Order, and who was already charmed by Assassin before the goddess’ divine aura could charm him.

“I didn’t think you’d really build a temple in this land... goddess Ishtar.”

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“She showed her face?”

Faldeus located the Lesser Grail—an Einzenbern homunculus—through a familiar equipped

with long-ranged sight. He blurted orders with no expression on his face.

“Well, I’m sure this is a waste of time, but let’s do what we can.”

With a self-derisive smile, he reached his hand for the microphone.

“It takes an AMR to kill off a mage with a mercury Mystic Code, and missiles for a mage extending his life by transferring his consciousness to countless worms. Nothing within the realm of our laws can kill Heroic Spirits, but how about a homunculus possessed by a Divine Spirit?”

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West Snowfield, forest region

“Modern humans really love wasting their time.”

Standing atop the temple, Ishtar let out an exasperated sigh.

Haruri, Jester, and Assassin initially didn’t know what she was talking about, but the answer soon came.

Snowfield City was not the only thing the Grail War organizers set up.

They secretly build several installations in the areas surrounding it.

On a 150 kilometers radius from the center of Snowfield, there were pieces of equipment set to protect, or partially destroy the city.

The north and west rocket launchers were operating on Faldeus’s orders, firing missiles loaded with hundreds of bomblets.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Dozens of missiles flew to the west Snowfield forest from the north and the west.

They were concealed by a magecraft system, rendering them invisible to civilians.

The warheads burst open mid-air, raining down bomblets on the target, each bomblet capable of tearing steel. If they had exploded.

But what did Ishtar do to the flying balls of bloodshed?

She only waved at the sky and smiled beautifully.

That was enough.

The hundreds of bomblets flying off the incoming missiles instantly fell to the ground, deprived of their function.

Some other missiles landed in the forest without even opening their warheads. And the strange part is that those missiles didn't explode either. Not a lick of flame spread anywhere.

“Impossible...”

Unlike Haruri and Assassin, who had no clue what they just saw; Jester was pinching his cheek as he summarized the witnessed phenomenon out loud.

“Those are freaking modern weapons. Not humans or wild animals... not even Saint Graphs with personality.”

Jester picked up a bomblet next to him, confirmed that it lost all its functionality—lost even the law that says that gunpowder explodes—and shivered.

“Are you telling me you charmed every last grain of this gunpowder?”

For a Dead Apostle to pull off a feat like that, they'd need to be on a level much above Jester's own. Specifically, the level named Ancestor.

And considering this goddess pulled it off so casually, she was already beyond the level of "a goddess' echoes and remnants left in the world".

A new god was upon them.

Her character may not be identical to the original, but judging only on the simplest terms of raw power, her pseudo-apotheosis was unambiguous and undeniable.

Is this even possible?, questioned Jester, the denier of Human Order. *She must have a limit to how much power she can exert. Otherwise, the cumulative strains are bound to make this very world reject her. Although... This monster of a god probably doesn't mind the rejection.*

While he was deep in his thoughts, a second and third wave of long-range missiles flew to test the goddess again.

But those weren't even allowed to reach the skies above the forest.

Even if the bombs didn't explode, Ishtar's reaction made Haruri's Servant and the "hurricane" coming from the west both recognize that as an attack against the goddess.

The colossus of steel shone her halo toward the swarm flying from the north.

Not too long later, the whole swarm detonated midair, still 50 kilometers away from them.

"Quick on the uptake as always. Thank you, girl.", Ishtar watched the scene with a shrug and a smile. "See through with your duty this time, Huwawa."

The steel beast answered by joyfully shining the seven colors on her halo.

Fate/strange Fake 6

The missiles coming from the west experience a different form of abnormality.

The giant hurricane cloud next to Snowfield slowly moved its head, causing the numerous flying objects to lose control and disappeared straight into the cloud, as if that was where they flying to.

This was not a metaphor.

They literally disappeared.

Upon entering the dense cloud, the missiles were gone without a trace, as if they fell into a midair pitfall.

As if something gigantic swallowed them in one bite.

“Boy, I told you not to eat anything weird... Did it at least taste good?”, Ishtar turned west and asked the giant cluster of clouds. “Always the little brat, aren’t you, Gugalanna?”

The hurricane answered by producing loud thunder from the gaps between his clouds.

He had no voice, so instead, he used powerful winds to say that all those who defy the goddess’ will shall be erased from the land.

The hurricane advanced a few dozen of kilometers straight east, towards the outskirts of Snowfield, so that his spine was perfectly lined up above Ishtar’s spine.

The abnormal hurricane took the form of a towering wall of cumulonimbus and galestorm covering the region, something a normal hurricane could never do.

Ishtar magnanimously watched over the city. The background behind her looking as if Niagara Falls were falling from the sky.

She no longer cared about Jester and Assassin. Her attention was on the center of the city—

the top floor of Crystal Hill. She meant to taunt the fluttering green-haired Heroic Spirit dressed in golden chains.

The steel colossus looked in the same direction as her, excitedly raised her arms, and roared.

Perhaps venting her anger to the world.

Perhaps asking for someone to save her.

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center

“And... physical attacks prove ineffective.”

Faldeus verified that the results of the attack operation were exactly what he expected.

“I should leave [Abyss rise] ready to fire... just in case tomorrow’s [Aurora fall] fails to destroy the temple.”

“What will happen if it fails to destroy the temple?”, emotionlessly asked Aludra.

“Nothing major. Just the end of a world, at worst.”, mockingly answered Faldeus.

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At the same time, in the desert region

The desert region, normally dominated by quiet, was temporarily pestered by the noises of loud workers and car engines.

Several trucks branded with the logo of a gas company were parked, and the workers in them began their task of disassembling the airship that served as Prelati’s workshop.

“Why a gas company?”, asked François as he watched the cars.

Fate/strange Fake 6

“We were posing as the gas company’s advertising blimp. In reality, we’ve been concealed the whole time, using illusions to assimilate into the sky, but going with that idea paid off now that we crash-landed.”, answered Francesca, sprawled on a poolside chair, sipping on a cola float, under a beach parasol planted on the arid ground.

The winds were also stronger in that area, heavily slowing down the disassembly procedure, but the sand and wind were avoiding a circular area around Francesca and François as they passed by.

“I wish I also knew how to enjoy modern culture.”, complained the Servant boy to his Master wasting resources on pointless magecraft. He followed up with a suddenly serious question. “So, what’s the big plan, Francesca?”

The Holy Grail War mastermind girl answered her past self’s question with a faithful glimmer in her eyes as she rose her right hand to the sky.

“I wanted my Grail War to be a clash between Heroic Spirits. I’m not a fan of that outdated intruder acting like she owns the place.”

“Are you sure we should be calling the kettle black, pot?”

“We’re the most qualified to call it.”, giggled Francesca.

She jumped out of her chair with glittering eyes.

“But think about everyone teaming up before they have to kill each other... that can be a nice extra spice!”

“I’m not so sure.”

“What was that? You’re disagreeing with me? With yourself?”

The boy responded to Francesca with an awkward smile.

“I agree for the most part. It’s just the ‘before they have to kill each other’ part that gets me.”

“Uh-huh, elaborate.”, curiously asked Francesca.

That’s where François smirked and spoke as the alchemist who met his end executed alongside Gilles de Rais, someone who lacked Francesca’s long life in modernity.

“They won’t be working together before the big kill-off. They’ll do it DURING the kill-off.”

“Oh, I get you.”

“Everyone teams up to fight the intruders and trade some backstabs. Can’t have a good free-for-all without some of that, can we? That’s why.. I want to get EVERYONE participating if we can!”

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Meat factory

“Are you going?”, asked Bazdilot.

“Indubitably.”, answered Alcides.

The avenger may have sounded dispassionate, but his Saint Graph was not the same as it was 2 days prior.

The magical energy crystals were the product of over 20 thousand human lives.

Numerous lives and energies were compressed into “mud”, which absorbed the majority of those crystals. The hero clad in this mud takes his bow to fulfill his purpose.

“Had she chosen to remain an echoed curse, I would have not personally hunted her. But since she chose to climb to the rank of god, she will live and die as my prey.”

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Fate/strange Fake 6

The vicinities of the Neo Ishtar Temple

The shadow lurked in the forest.

Since when was he there? Was he already blended into every shadow in the city before his Master ordered him to? Only the shadow himself knew the answer.

The second coming of the goddess didn't distract the shadow. He simply blurred further into his own darkness.

While the nature of the very land changed with every flicker of the world, only the shadows remained unaltered.

However, while it didn't last long, there was one time the shadow quivered.

It flickered in a manner very unlike the flickering shape of the world.

It was when a petite shadow appeared behind the vampire man and performed many feats he had seen before.

But his sways remained with the margin of error. They never happened again. The shadow remained in position.

What will the shadow do?

What did the shadow think of the assassin girl?

All dissolved into the darkness and disappeared into the bottom of the world.

Only one thing was certain: the shadow remained where he was.

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The skies above America

Thia Escardos stood far above in the skies.

From distant heights, he watched the surface below him but did not look down on it.

Neither physically nor figuratively.

At the tallest heights of the stratosphere, he stood upside-down, silently raising his head to see the grounds of Snowfield below.

“...”

He could see the land changing colors in real-time.

A special hurricane was about to hide the land from him. The transfiguring land was encasing itself in some of the finest arcana the world has to offer, and the hurricane was part of it.

“Is the world really going to change?”

Will the transfiguration starting in Snowfield end with the world's rejection or approval? Should I wait for its conclusion or do everything in my power to stop it at the current stage?

“This has nothing to do with me.”

After involuntarily voicing his decision, Thia ground his teeth.

Because his need to say his answer out loud for confirmation made him aware that he was indecisive.

“What would Flat do?”

Thia was surrounded by a series of small circulating “asteroids”.

Asteroids identical to the one that caused massive damage to the North Pole two days before.

Fate/strange Fake 6

But those weren't loaded with any spells. The reshaped balls of space debris were just there, doing nothing. Continuing to exist.

To continue existing.

That is his only purpose and waiting where he was is an adequate way to fulfill it.

But is it truly the best choice?

His battle against the powerful Heroic Spirit was disengaged by the sudden appearance of the beast in the form of a giant hurricane.

That battle allowed Thia accurately comprehend his own power. Since then, he has been observing Snowfield—the land on the verge of a transformation—to find the best possible way to fulfill his purpose of continuing to exist.

However, he found himself unable to figure out whether or not he should make a move. All he could do was produce more asteroids of debris around himself while he remembered a person in his past.

As if he was a loose fragment of Flat Escardos debris.

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In a dream

It happened the moment Ishtar named her new head priestess and truly changed the land into a metaphorical part of Mt. Ebih.

The dim light of the blue lantern began to grow brighter.

Tsubaki slowly began to regain her consciousness in reaction to the light.

“...”

Unable to clearly tell who or where she was, the girl looked around her, her eyes following the light.

The girl eventually found a blindingly golden light.

The flickering blue flame guided the golden light. The golden light brazenly walked amidst the darkness, until it stopped next to Tsubaki.

Tsubaki took a look at the golden light and asked the first question in her mind.

She didn't know why that was her question, considering the light wasn't even human-shaped.

“Who are you, mister?”

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This is no recreation of the Epic.

Mesopotamia's famed Epic of Gilgamesh. The world's first story.

In it, the Hero King and his clay doll companion defeated the watcher of the forest, refused the goddess' proposal, and later put down the Bull of Heaven.

But the Hero King fought the watcher of the forest and the Bull of Heaven separately.

The watcher of the forest, the goddess, and the divine beast. Those three being in the same place at the same time never happened in the myths.

The False Grail pulled together all the strings of fate and ultimately manifested a cataclysm beyond the myths.

And so, the all-star spectacle begins in Snowfield.

Bridge

“Beginning of the end”

In the ???

When Ayaka Sajou came to her senses, she stood unable to move in a place had never seen before.

What...?

She was confused at the suddenly open area she was at, but on the other hand, she could tell her presence was ambiguous.

And so she knew that what was happening was something she had already experienced multiple times before.

Oh, ok... I'm dreaming of Saber's past again.

Her point of view moved against her will.

She questioned when she was going to wake up, while at the same time, she found herself curious to learn about Saber's past: Richard I's life.

What kind of life must he have lived to be so positive?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of an unconventional man.

“Sup, Richard.”

A different voice rang in Ayaka's ears in response.

“You came to stop me again?”

“No, never again. I already missed my chance. At this point, you already set things in motion.”

He wore a gaudily decorated bowler hat, steampunk goggles, and a gas mask.

After seeing this young man whose outfit would feel out of place in any era of history, Ayaka

Fate/strange Fake 6

instantly remembered that the man's name was Saint-Germain.

He appeared in a previous dream glimpsing into Saber's past. There he appeared in a car despite the era. Ayaka found this period-disregarding introduction very memorable.

And another thing she found memorable was,

"Sorry to interrupt on such a busy moment, but I have to cast that important incantation on you. Relax and listen. The great conman has things to tell about the latest situation, but a little later... After you've finished today's job. I'll just tell you in advance that it's going to be an off-putting conversation, I'm not here to comfort you."

"..."

"And you inside his eyes, can you hear me? It's your friend Saint-Germain."

!!!

"If you're still following the Lionhearted against your will, you won't see the rest of the dream. Just close your eyes, cover your ears, and wait until it's time to wake up. But if by any chance, you decided to walk alongside this excessively brave king, I won't stop you from watching the next scene. Though you're free to pretend you saw nothing."

Right. This happened before. This weirdo can see me here...

Ayaka tried to say something out loud, but it didn't work because she didn't have a body.

Ayaka was only a spectator watching Saint-Germain's daring smile. He continued.

"Now here's Saint-Germain's unsolicited request: You can turn your eyes away from what you're about to see, I don't mind that, but no matter what you see, when it's all said and done, I ask you to please accept him as he is. It means nothing if I, someone who lived his time, do it. It must be you, someone who lived a different time. It's going to be a huge step toward your own salvation. Thank you for listening to Saint-Germain."

Saint-Germain stepped away, without ever rising from his reverent bow.

“He did the incantation. That means today will be one of those days.”

The voice reaching Ayaka’s ears came from the owner of the eyes she was borrowing: Saber himself.

“Well... I figured it’d be. Even I can tell.”

But something about his voice felt off to Ayaka.

Hub? He feels less emotive than usual... I’m kinda scared.

Her hands felt sweaty, despite this being a dream.

She could vaguely hear a second voice in her mind.

“Don’t look. You mustn’t look. You mustn’t take a step further,” it said.

But she was thinking the opposite.

That Saint-Germain guy was talking to me.

When she came to her senses, Saber looked down, revealing enormous blood stains on his armor.

That’s how it goes on the battlefield.

But he didn’t seem to be in the middle of a battlefield.

She was choked by the smell, despite this being a dream.

He was by the ocean. The smell of rust, carried by the sea breeze, filled her lungs.

If it were yesterday, I’d have closed my eyes.

Fate/strange Fake 6

Ayaka's thoughts never interrupted Saber's walk.

She had an increasingly bad feeling about this. Ayaka's instincts tried to force her eyes closed.

But I made my decision.

Saber walked by a tall-walled building and slowly climbed the stairs.

I'm Saber's Master now.

The birds cried.

A huge flock of birds together.

So I won't turn a blind eye to anything...

Atop the stairs, she saw red and white.

Red.

Red. Carmine.

Hundreds, maybe thousands.

The whole floor was covered in collapsed bodies dressed in white.

They were all painted red red red red

The red dripped straight to the floor, formed puddles, and melded together.

Faces. Faces. Faces.

Rows of faces plastered on heads connected to no torsos, showing expressions that will never change.

She watched intently the red silently slipping out of the cut section.

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East Snowfield, mansion in the marsh

Ayaka Sajou woke up with a scream.

“What’s wrong, Ayaka?! Are you hurt?!” Saber instantly talked to her.

That’s when Ayaka realized she was on a bed from the mansion she was using as her base.

Saber was reading a book in the room next door but since Ayaka jumped awake, he looked at her with a worried face.

“A... uh... Oh, dream, it was a dream.”

“Hey, you’re awfully pale, you know? Want me to grab some water?”

“No... I’m fine, thank you.”

Ayaka took deep breaths and tried to calm herself down.

She carefully looked around to confirm that she was in the real world before anything.

Nothing happened last night. In the end, I couldn’t talk to Sigma, and the Assassin girl didn’t come here either, so I just took a shower and went to bed.

Ayaka then remembered the sound of the shower, which she associated with the sound of the waves in the dream, causing her to flashback to the smell of the blood.

She crawled out of the bed, nauseated.

She adjusted her displaced glasses, disappointed at her own lack of attention when she figu-

Fate/strange Fake 6

red out she slept with her glasses on.

“You must have been really tired. You just collapsed on the bed and fell asleep right away, remember? I thought I shouldn’t wake you up, so I let you be. I bet you’re really hungry right now.”

“Yeah... a little. But before that, any major changes?”

“Well, yes. See it for yourself. I don’t think there are any snipers around but stay away from the window, just in case... You should be able to see it from where you are.”

“?”

Following Saber’s line of sight, Ayaka looked at the western window.

What she saw in the distance immediately snapped her awake.

“What the heck?”

A cloud wall covered the whole horizon.

The clouds stood far west of the city, tranquil and majestic, in stark contrast to the sound of a storm accompanied by loud thunder. It felt like the clouds were about to swallow the city whole.

“It’s a hurricane, although, well, clearly not a normal one.”

“Since when do hurricanes form cloud walls like that?”

“It sure looks like a twister trying to swallow a nation. If this is the work of another Heroic Spirit, this is going to be the greatest war since the Crusades.”

Saber’s words hit Ayaka with an instant chill.

Ayaka would normally dismiss this as another one of his stupidities, but the dream she watched was consuming her inside.

It would be easy to continue the conversation pretending she never saw that, but...

Wouldn't that be the same as what I've been doing to the red-hooded girl all this time?

Ayaka's anxieties rapidly expanded as she thought about the implications of what Saint-Germain told her in the dream.

"Hey, Saber..."

Thus, Ayaka tried to talk about her dream. However...

"Wait. Someone is here. Probably a Servant."

"WHAT?"

Pressured by the sudden tension in Saber's voice, Ayaka instantly switched gears and accompanied Saber. Their attention was focused on the mansion's front door.

Saber got one of his retainers to open the double door. The door revealed a remarkably petite woman.

"If you came from the front door... I assume you're not here to kill us.", tauntingly said Saber.

"I suppose you are Saber. I am someone manifested in a Rider Saint Graph. Do you mind if I talk to you and your Master?", said the woman with a gallant expression.

The woman was polite, but Saber could feel something else.

This woman—so young that maybe he should be calling her a girl rather than a woman—had more pronounced willpower than any other Heroic Spirit he had met.

Damn... Where had she been hiding this whole time?

Fate/strange Fake 6

Due to him being an experienced fighter, and due to one of the retinues he carries in his Noble Phantasm operating similarly to a Master, Saber had the power to see his opponents' attributes, although not as accurately as a Holy Grail War Master can.

His estimation tells him: the Heroic Spirit in front of him could easily surpass him in a physical fight.

Do I beat her at least in speed? No... If I give her the slightest opening, she can crush me before I move. This Heroic Spirit... is on the same level as the goldie and the other archer.

Saber involuntarily gulped at the amount of magical energy inside the visitor, and her noticeable combat prowess.

"I didn't think I'd still meet a participant as strong as you at this point."

Rider shook her head in response to Saber's honest impression.

"My Saint Graph is nothing special. I'm far from a poor combatant, but in terms of physical strength and magical energy quality, I was far from my peak at the moment of my summon."

Her words were filled with imposing confidence and dignity, yet not a shred of arrogance.

What is this arcane power inside her? Could she be Penthesilea from the Trojan War?

Saber took a guess at her True Name, sure that she was a famed queen or warrior. She ignored his studying gaze and continued her majestic speech.

"The reason why my power raised this far in so few days is that my Master is excellent."

"Heh, I'd love to meet this Master of yours."

Saber was really interested in knowing what kind of person would be a Master a Heroic Spirit speaks so highly of. Rider answered with a proud smile.

"You didn't have to ask."

“?”

Ayaka, watching from deep inside the hallway, tilted her head in unison with Saber.

Rider sonorously declared the reason for her visit to the two:

“My Master wishes for a temporary alliance with you. Please come talk to them.”

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At the same time, at the police station

“Chief.”

With only one and a half days left on his timer, Orlando worked nonstop. Vera, just returned to the station, called him.

“What?”

“It’s... we have a visitor to the station.”

“Who?”

Vera wouldn’t have reached out to him if it was a visitor unrelated to Holy Grail War.

The chief asked his questions because, seeing the confusion on Vera’s face, he judged that it was an important matter.

“It’s... a man claiming to be Rider’s Master.”

“Rider’s Master... the one we’re speculating to be an Amazon?”

Strange. Her Master is a man? I thought that Rider’s Master was Doris Lusendra.

Fate/strange Fake 6

While the chief filled his head with questions, Vera relayed the visitor's request word-for-word.

It was a subject the chief was unable to ignore.

"He's requesting we form a temporary united front to fight the god manifesting in the west."

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At the same time, on the top floor of Crystal Hill

"Chief Tine... and noble Lancer. Please stay calm and listen."

One of Tine's subordinates ran into the room and spoke as he caught his breath.

Tine initially kept focused on pouring her magical energy, as a signal telling him she had no time to listen.

But when she heard what he had to say, she couldn't help looking at him. Enkidu, who was meditating facing west, also reacted.

"Rider's Master... Chief must know Rider as Hippolyte... A woman claiming to be her Master is here... and... invited the two of you to fight in a united front."

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At the same time, Coalsman Special Corrections Center

"Mister Dioland. We received an intriguing report on a Master's movement."

"Aren't we past the point it matters?" Faldeus asked, quite surprised at Aludra's report. "Must have been something considerably abnormal, for it to intrigue you when we're discussing whether or not the city will be blown away."

“We confirmed something about Rider... Hippolyte’s Master. Multiple Masters are gathered in the strath region.”

“Hmm... So they noticed the abnormality and came out of their hiding? And, how many mages are in this cabal? If it really is the Zugzwang, we’re dealing with a big family of 9...”

But there’s no possible way to frequently transfer Command Spells between such a large group.

Faldeus laughed his own thought off.

But the answer he received sounded like a much better joke.

“Thirty people.”

“Excuse me?”

“Approximately thirty mages... uh, all simultaneously have a Command Spell.

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North Snowfield, strath region

“Ok, so you made arrangements to talk with Chief Orlando too.”

They were atop a bluff relatively taller than the rest of the strath.

A young man wore a high-class suit despite the location being inappropriate for business. He spoke through the latest model of Peligor-brand cell phone.

“Here on my end, the overseer has just arrived for a formal visit. Of course, I’ll give him your greetings too.”

After this cordial statement, the young man elegantly stored his phone in his breast pocket.

Fate/strange Fake 6

In the area around him flew butterflies not native to the region, but those dissolved into the air when he hung up his call.

At the same time, his phone's reception went from full bars to No Signal, but that didn't bother him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, dear overseer. Or do you prefer to be called Father Hansa?"

A beautiful young man with a daring smile and aristocrat conduct.

But the overseer priest he was addressing, Hansa, knew who he was.

The young man was presenting himself as a noble. He was literally, unquestionably, a member of the nobility.

"Call me whatever you want. Can't expect a first-class mage like you to still remember the name and the face of a random Executor by next week."

"That I can't deny. But whether I'll consider you mediocre or a great man worth remembering is not for you to decide. It's for me or our teacher."

Without a care for the man's strange wording, Hansa looked around him half-aghast.

"Let's get to business. I'm this Holy Grail War's overseer... technically... Now I understand. You had good reason to call me."

Hansa was asked to climb up a cliff in the strath region and what did he find there? A group of young men and women, with a total of approximately 30 people.

"Because there wasn't room for all of you in that half-wrecked church."

Hansa took a closer look at the group while making his snide remark.

It contained quite a few distinctive members, from an over 2 meters tall bespectacled power-

house of a man to an eyepatched girl in a pink gothic lolita dress.

But what was most distinctive about them wasn't their appearance, it was their collective title.

They were a famous part of the world of magecraft. So famous that even a member of the Holy Church like Hansa knew them.

"Still... Those Commands Spells on your right hands, are they all real?"

"Yes. I already used one of the three, and I used my magecraft to scatter one of the other two and had it infiltrate everyone's Magic Circuits. That said, all I did was based on the technique the previous El-Melloi used with his fiancée. I could only reproduce it because its secrets were deciphered by his successor: the great Lord El-Melloi II, pride of the Clock Tower. His merits deserve all the credit. I'm merely making use of my teacher's theory."

The cordial young man who first talked to Hansa was the successor to Papillio Magia and the genius who achieved the rank of Brand at the second youngest age after Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. Werner Ceasarmund.

"Fast-talking your admiration for the professor doesn't make for a great first impression, Werner. It'll have the opposite effect, even."

The bespectacled goliath was Org Rum, a famous user of Wheel Magecraft. A notoriously famous bibliomaniac within the world of magecraft, with a book collection comparable to his relative Jean Rum.

"Seriously worried about teach finding out about us, though."

"Doesn't matter if he knows. Reines said she'd pull some strings with Policies to make sure he won't go anywhere."

Fate/strange Fake 6

The sisters Radia and Nasica Pentel, skillful users of magecraft that can only be performed by twins.

“Yes... If the professor learns about this, he’ll crawl under the door if that’s what it takes to come here.”

Fezgram von Sember, the son of a first-class lecturer in the Mage’s Association and already a professor himself at this young age.

“If the man finds out Flat’s a goner, he’s gonna make himself an enemy of the USA... Honestly, I wouldn’t mind that... what about you? Huhu...”

Roland Berzinsky, rumored to have tens of thousands of snake familiars lurking all over the world to endlessly pursue and assassinate his mentor’s enemies.

“Only half of his smell disappeared. Don’t tell the teacher anything before I find the idiot.”

Svin Glascheit’s masterful control over his Beast Magecraft gives physical abilities beyond compare, allowing him to fight evenly against phantasmal species.

“More important question, why am I the only one without a Command Spell? What did I do to deserve this? Stop Command Spell discrimination!”

Yvette L. Lehrman is the descendant of a distinguished Mystic Eyes family and can polish jewels into new Mystic Eyes.

“Well, you know, Yvette... You tend to betray us whenever you think it’s funny.”

Caules Forvedge, a user of Electricity Magecraft. A pioneer in the fusion of magecraft and science.

“We really wish you could be part of this, but please understand that we can’t because if even one person betrays the group, the feedback Werner gets from interfering with other people’s Magic Circuits would kill him.”

Mary Lil Fargo, said to have run magical simulations of the sea of stars and to even know what happens in Earth’s interior.

The majority of the other members were also famous in the world of magecraft.

The image of 30 noted mages gathered in one place was solemn to look at. In his heart of hearts, Hansa quickly decided that this was a situation that he needed to report to the Holy Church but he’d pretend he didn’t see it.

And—on one edge of the cliff, there were two women looking southwest.

“I was wondering what measures they’d take, but just a half-hearted push with modern weapons? Preposterous. They should have prepared at least 10 times what they did. Don’t they know? The real battle starts with deciding how much resources you need to throw to put a definitive stop to your opponent.”

The woman clad in the blue dress-like piece was Luviagelita Edelfelt, the current head of the Edelfelt family, known as The Most Elegant Hyenas in the World. She was watching the Grail War mastermind’s military operations and their result.

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“...”

In contrast, the woman in the red outfit had her glare fixed on the center of the forest presumed to have been the attack target.

Hansa knew exactly who this woman was.

She was famous in the world of magecraft, no doubt, but she was one of the few specific people he had to study about in advance to become the Holy Grail War’s overseer.

Toosaka Rin.

A descendant of the Toosaka lineage—one of the three key families in Fuyuki’s Holy Grail War.

A remarkable character with compatibility with all five elements. She and Luvia are seen as some of the El-Melloi Classroom’s biggest guns.

“I see. All of El-Melloi II’s students came to take the Grail together to make their mentor’s dream come true... Is that what’s going on here?”, Hansa said to himself as he watched Rin’s back.

But Toosaka Rin, still glaring at the forest, denied his words.

“Sorry, but we don’t care about something we know is fake. We already convinced the Rider we’re contracted with about it, too.”

They all naturally turned their backs like Rin, facing the enemy presence that will clearly be a major obstacle to them.

Despite the tremendous distance between them, the enemy’s heart-pervading presence began to pervade the air. And yet, none of the youths there let themselves be pressured by the divine aura in place.

Acting as a spokeswoman for their unified sentiment, the Red Devil announced their objective.



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“We’re here to dismantle this Holy Grail.”

The El-Melloi Classroom.

A small faction with less than 15 graduates. Even counting the ones who left the course halfway and graduated in a different department, their number still falls below 50.

But despite their small numbers, they’re said to control the Clock Tower’s power balance.

The faction grows, moves, and entangles all, as if it was alive.

Now that they stepped into this Holy Grail War, what will they trample and what will they take for themselves?

No one knows the answer.

Not even the goddess in the middle of her second coming.

Next episode [Fake08]

CLASS

???

Profile Disclaimer: ??? is not a Servant and the stats presented are based on the supposition of "what if they counted as a Servant".

Master: ???

True Name: Thia Escardos?

Gender: The body he's built upon is a man

Height Weigh: Smaller than Flat. The height and weight are unknown due to the missing and detached organs.

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral



Personal Skills

Dweller of the Manasphere: A

A skill that represents being able to perceive the real world by its magical structure and interact (analyze, modify, absorb, etc) directly with its flows and sediments. He sees all forms of magical energy flow overlapped with his physical vision, similar to how it is with the phenomenon that makes electromagnetic waves visible. It's not Mystic Eyes, as it also affects his hearing and other senses. It's impossible to even walk appropriately for someone who didn't obtain this Skill from birth and didn't grow up accustomed to this kind of scenery.

Time Manipulation: A

He can freely speed up or slow down any concepts (including all magical energy, physical movement, thought speed, etc) within their area of effect for as long as he has the magical energy for it. However, the increase or decrease of speed stops at reasonable levels, meaning it's naturally impossible for him to produce perfect stasis, light speed, or time reversal.

Class Skills

Magic Resistance: EX

His technique to interact and negate magical energy is A+, but if you can find a way around that, it's only B.

Independent Action: A++

That much is obvious because he is a living being, but even if he was a Servant, he would still be able to operate for a long time.

Noble Phantasm

A Clockwork Abaddon
Hollowed Hearsay/Oblivion turns to festivity

Rank: A+ Type: Anti-Foundation Noble Phantasm Range: 2-within his field of view Max. Targets: ???

A magical accelerator cannon, done by imbuing an object with whatever form of magecraft, accelerating it to its limit, and shooting. For example, to use a simple high-damage version, he could compress molecular decay magecraft to its limit before imbuing an object with it, or for a mental effect, he could use hypnosis. The ability can adapt to a very wide range of situations. Due to a restriction that it can only employ magecraft usable on present-day Earth, it's obviously impossible for him to reproduce magic and imbue it into an

Hollowed Heresy/Loss turns

CLASS

Berserker

Master: *Haruri Borzak*
(the current stats are affected by Ishtar)

True Name: *Huwawa*

Gender: ???

Height
Weight: *Varying. Expands according to the amount of magical energy within her.*

Alignment: *Lawful Neutral*

STR	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	A++	M.E	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	A
END	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	A++	LCK	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	D
AGI	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	C	NP	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	A

Personal Skills

Mana Burst (Calamity): A

Emitting a variety of powers humanity associates with the word "calamity" (floods, earthquakes, etc.) through her halo. Depending on the circumstances, if she narrows down the direction of the burst, she can make it fly hundreds of kilometers. Whatever is hit with the calamity will take damage according to its type.

Roar of Fear: A++

A scream that inspires instinctual fear in any living being that hears it. When blessed by one specific goddess, it can affect even the famed Hero King. Master. Watcher's Master is extremely likely to die.

Guardian Colossus: B-

Her abilities increase when guarding a designated place. The rank is lowered to B- because her legend is that she ultimately failed to protect her place to the end.

Class Skills

Mad Enhancement: A

Noble Phantasm

Afterword

Hi, it's Ryougo Narita. It's been a really, really, really long time.

Before anything, I'll apologize for the wait!

The world has been through 2 very turbulent years, and it's been turbulent to me too on the professional, personal, psychological, and health departments, but regardless of my reasons, I'm truly sorry to have left you on that cliffhanger for far too long!

The Fake series started from me getting mind-blown by my first FSN playthrough on the PS2, and that Fate/ excitement was exactly what I needed to recover when I was at my most physically and emotionally debilitated.

Nasu: "I am the author fungus! I offer the FGO LB6 with the text size of multiple novels!"

Me: "The author fungus is offering the FGO LB6 with the text size of multiple novels!?
And aren't those the kinds of novel that can be used as a blunt weapon?"

Yes, we'll talk about FGO LB6.

It hit me really hard with its tremendous volume, dense ensemble cast, and violent climax that I won't spoil. The resulting hype explosion led me to largely rewrite and complete this 7th volume.

Here's an unembellished excerpt of Nasu's dialogue when I requested the supervisor check for the volume:

Nasu: "HE! IS! BACK! RYOUGO NARITA IS BACK! RYOUGO NARITA IS BACK!
RYOUGA NARITA IS BACK! Drink this bucket of energy drinks."

Me: "Wait, no, that'll kill me."

That's right, he was his usual self, and that made me really happy, after so long without hearing the usual Nasu. When I felt like I was about to reincarnate in Fairy Britain or Shin-Yokohama, the many people and stories I met along the way helped me on my way to where I am today. I hope my gratitude to all of them keeps my engine running all the way to the final volume, that's already fully planned out!

By the way, the damage to the North Pole happened because Sanda recommended me to

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make the battle more over-the-top and simplify the plot twists to compensate for how long the series has been without a volume. If someone later reveals that there's something really important on the North Pole and it's gone from this timeline, blame Sanda. (Escaping responsibility)

As you could tell from the final scene, all Masters are finally introduced. The final Master might've had you thinking "I know you're the ensemble cast guy, but aren't you adding too many characters?", but please don't worry. I'm confident to say that the group will be played out as a single Master with a unified will. I know very well that if I were to explore each member of the group individually, the series would last forever...!

And the group's role as the final Master was actually something I decided when working on the first volume, and I set them up as a key to end the Fake Holy Grail War.

That means this is the last volume you have to bet on who wins and who loses when. Next volume starts the Climax Phase, where teams will be quickly dropping out one after the other. I actually already wrote one team's loss to include as this volume's last scene, but the volume was getting too long, so I shifted the cut off point back some and pushed that to the next volume...!

Now for the special thanks.

First to my editor Anan, who had to suffer through my extended delays, among other personal problems. And the rest of the publisher staff, and II-V who helped me organize my schedule.

To the Fate/ series representatives, who helped me by answering my questions, like for example "Who would be the US president here? President Kiara? President Musik? No, there aren't any Musiks in America, are there?" Incidentally, they told me I didn't need to mention the president, so there's no established answer for that.

To Kiyomune Miwa's Team Barrel Roll, who did the research for the Servants and magecraft.

To Makoto Sanda, who supervised the lore and characterization for the Case Files characters. The final scene should tell you how much he helped me with this one.

To Shizuki Morii, for the wonderful illustration and the manga-original content in the newly released volume 5 of the adaptation. (Do check the new manga volume. It came out in February and looks gorgeous!)

And most of all to Kinoko Nasu and the Type-Moon staff for creating Fate/, and the Fate/ Grand Order staff for letting me do Enkidu's interludes. And to you, the reader who chose to pick up this book despite the long hiatus.

Thank you so much! I hope you'll stay with us until the series concludes!

Ryugo Narita, January 2022, holding back on the urges to write long form reviews of LB6 and TsukiRe.